

The Pennsylvania State University  
The Graduate School  
College of Arts and Architecture

**IN/FROM THE ART OF WENDA GU AND TRINH T. MINH-HA, TOWARD  
A TRANSNATIONAL MODEL OF ART EDUCATION**

A Dissertation in

Art Education

by

Yujie Julia Li

©2008 Yujie Julia Li

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2008

The dissertation of Yujie Julia Li was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Mary Ann Stankiewicz  
Professor of Art Education  
Thesis Advisor  
Chair of Committee

David M. Ebitz  
Associate Professor of Art and Art Education

Sarah Rich  
Associate Professor of Art History

Christine M. Thompson  
Professor of Art Education  
In Charge of Graduate Program in Art Education

Brent G. Wilson  
Professor Emeritus of Art Education

\*Signatures are on file with the Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

This research study aims to establish a transnational model of education and art education. Through interpreting and analyzing the artworks by two transnational artists, namely, Wenda Gu's *united nations* and *the forest of stone steles* projects and Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *A Tale of Love*, I explore how to read art for educational and pedagogical implications.

Objecting to the superficiality of defining transnational people on the basis of their act of physical border-crossing, I identify three qualities inherent to transnationality and transnationalism: multiplicity (heterogeneity), hybridity, and liminality. I argue that at root, transnationalism represents a different approach towards difference, an approach that negates binary thinking and promotes permeable subjectivity. Positioning myself simultaneously as an art critic and an art educator, I interpret the art by Gu and by Trinh from a transnational perspective, and analyze their common features, which include nomadism, dialogism, liminality, and border-crossing. Guided by three principles to approach artworks pedagogically, I propose that the pedagogy in a transnational model of education and art education needs to demonstrate these qualities: dialogism, hybridity, nomadism, reflectivity and reflexivity, fluid subjectivity, the view of difference as surmountable, and a goal to cultivate world citizens.

This study not only offers an alternative in defining transnational individuals and transnationalism and transnationality, it also introduces the transnational artists and their artworks into the art classroom and identifies the characteristics of a transnational pedagogy. Further, it exemplifies a way to approach artworks for educational and pedagogical implications and in the meantime greatly enriches art teachers' understanding of the art of the two contemporary artists on whom this study focuses.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ix
PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONALITY:	
ARTISTS, ARTWORKS, ART EDUCATION.....	10
Wenda Gu the Artist.....	10
Fake Characters, Human Materials, and the Art Products .....	10
Trinh T. Minh-ha and her Films.....	12
About This Research Study.....	14
Research Questions.....	14
Procedures of Study.....	15
Significance.....	16
Limitations.....	16
Writing of the Dissertation.....	17
CHAPTER TWO: DEFINING TRANSNATIONALISM/TRANSNATIONALITY, GUIDING	
ART INTERPRETING.....	22
The World Becoming Transnational?.....	22
What is Transnational?.....	22
Nation, Nationalism, and Transnationalism .....	26
Understanding the Transnational.....	28
Multiplicity.....	28
Hybridity.....	29
Liminality.....	30
Transnational Artists and Their Characteristics.....	31

Artists and Their Artworks Selected for Study.....	32
Artworks and Art Education.....	34
Definition of Pedagogy.....	35
Frameworks and Principles for Interpreting Art.....	36
CHAPTER THREE: READING WENDA GU'S <i>UNITED NATIONS</i> :	
THE TANGLED RELATIONS AMONG LANGUAGE, CULTURE (CULTURAL),	
NATURE (NATURAL), AND NATIONS.....	
Introduction.....	38
Positioning Myself beside Gu and Speaking Nearby.....	38
Dialogue One.....	42
CHAPTER FOUR: READING WENDA GU'S <i>FOREST OF STONE STELES</i> : TRANSLATION	
AND TRANS-NATION.....	
Introduction.....	70
Dialogue Two.....	70
CHAPTER FIVE: READING TRINH T. MINH-HA'S <i>A TALE OF LOVE</i> :	
WOMAN, NATION, OTHER ISSUES.....	
Introduction.....	90
Quivering In-Between Multiple Loves: Women and Nation.....	91
Janusian Looking: Gendered Senses, Re-humanized Camera, and Other.....	96
Re-appropriating Languages and Creating Liminal Spaces.....	102
Making Film Dialogically.....	109
CHAPTER SIX: READING ACROSS ARTISTS, READING FOR	
EDUCATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS.....	
Introduction.....	113
Common Features of the Selected Artworks.....	113

Differences between the Three Artworks.....	119
Transnational Art, Transnational Artists/People, and Transnationalism/Transnationality.....	122
Educational Implications from the Art of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha.....	123
Pedagogical Implications from the Art of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha.....	124
Suggestions on Reading Artworks Pedagogically.....	126
A Sample Classroom Teaching on Wenda Gu's <i>united nations</i> .....	127
A Reflection on the Imagined Teaching Practice.....	138
EPILOGUE.....	142
REFERENCES.....	148

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: hong kong monument: the historical clash</i> .....	6
Figure 2: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: african monument: the world praying wall</i> .....	7
Figure 3: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: temple of exoticism</i> .....	8
Figure 4: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: australia monument: epnagcliifsihc</i> .....	9
Figure 5: Wenda Gu: <i>the mythos of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo-characters in landscape1: sky-ocean</i> .....	20
Figure 6: Wenda Gu: <i>the mythos of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo-characters in landscape 2: free expression</i> .....	21
Figure 7: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: babel of millennium</i> .....	58
Figure 8: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: united 7561 kilometers</i> .....	59
Figure 9: Wenda Gu: <i>the mythos of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo characters in landscape (a-5): transcendence</i> .....	60
Figure 10: Wenda Gu: <i>united nations: china monument: temple of heaven</i> .....	61
Figure 11: Partial view of Wenda Gu’s <i>united nations: china monument: temple of heaven</i> .....	62
Figure 12: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu’s <i>united nations: china monument: temple of heaven</i> .....	63
Figure 13: Close views of examples of the Seal Script. Wenda Gu: <i>the mythos of lost dynasties—form c: pseudo-seal scripture in calligraphic copybook format</i> .....	64
Figure 14: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu’s <i>united nations: babel of millennium</i> .....	65
Figure 15: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu’s <i>united nations: temple of exoticism</i> .....	66
Figure 16: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu’s <i>united nations: australia monument: epnagcliifsihc</i> .....	67
Figure 17: Wenda Gu: <i>speechless # 2, performance within ink painting installation</i> .....	68
Figure 18: Wenda Gu: <i>confucius diary</i> .....	69

Figure 19: Wenda Gu: <i>forest of stone steles—retranslation &amp; rewriting of Tang poetry</i> .....	84
Figure 20: Wenda Gu: <i>forest of stone steles—retranslation &amp; rewriting of Tang poetry</i> .....	85
Figure 21: Partial view of Wenda Gu’s <i>forest of stone steles—retranslation &amp; rewriting of Tang poetry</i> .....	86
Figure 22: Close view of Wenda Gu’s <i>forest of stone steles—retranslation &amp; rewriting of Tang poetry</i> .....	87
Figure 23: Close view of Wenda Gu’s <i>forest of stone steles—retranslation &amp; rewriting of Tang poetry</i> .....	88
Figure 24: Wenda Gu’s seal .....	89



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shakespeare says: All is well when it ends well. I am glad this long journey finally comes to an end. During the nearly-three-year time of this dissertation research and writing, I have experienced many adversities including illnesses, poverty, relational problems, and spiritual warfare. Yet, the time that brings most difficulties often is also the time that makes one feel most loved and supported. Among many people to whom I want to say thank-you is Dr. Mary Ann Stankiewicz, who served as my thesis advisor and chair of the dissertation committee. On numerous occasions, her intellectual inputs excited me. In issues such as scheduling our meetings and reviewing my drafts, she has demonstrated great patience, flexibility, grace, and consideration. Yet her compassion and mother-like care touched me. She forwarded to me several times information to apply for grants and consistently supported me in my application efforts. Her attention to aspects of both my academic and personal life has brought me to tears. As her advisee and student, I feel deeply indebted to her.

This research study would not have happened if it were not because of the insight and encouragement of Dr. Brent Wilson, who has always been my strong support and genuine help. Time and again I ran to him for comfort and understanding when conducting this arduous, prolonged, and often isolated task. The conversations and collaborations we have had over the years will be a lasting memory cherished by me.

Equally important are support and intellectual inputs from faculty advisors including Drs. David Ebitz, Christine Thompson, and Sarah Rich. Their critical insights and professional expertise have greatly enriched this research. Their patience with my growth as a scholar and as a cross-cultural, trans-national individual is also much appreciated.

Meanwhile, my thanks go to other faculty members in the Art Education program at The Pennsylvania State University. Dr. James Rolling, Jr. and Dr. Charles Garoian have provided me with much information on issues and topics relevant to my research study. Dr. Rolling shared

with me examples he collected when he wrote his own dissertation; Professor Garoian offered copies of his publications for me to find a possible model for reading artworks pedagogically. Many professors as well as graduate students in and outside the department have helped me in numerous ways, including loaning me their personal books and forwarding to me information that is related to the artists or artworks under my study. I especially want to thank Dr. Graeme Sullivan, Dr. Wang Ying, and Dr. Yan Sun for having helped make connections with the artists and/or for having provided thoughtful comments on my ideas with regard to the dissertation research. Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd enthusiastically supported me in my research by kindly sharing exhibition information on Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Other academic friends who helped me include Dr. Christine Ballengee-Morris who referred me to some useful literature on the topic. Charollette Waltz, our Staff Assistant, also demonstrated to me great patience and support in helping me schedule meetings, register for courses, and meet the official procedural requirements of the university graduate school toward the submission of the dissertation.

I want to also thank artists Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha who have provided me with information on their own lives and their artworks. I am indebted to Wenda Gu also because he has readily accepted my request for an interview and generously allowed me to use the images of his artworks at no cost.

Finally, I want to thank God and my big family in Christ. Thank God for giving me grace, and teaching me to forgive and to love. At times I doubted, as a devoted Christian, the value of this dissertation and its content. But since I have decided to dedicate it to God, even though it may not be from a biblical perspective, I take comfort in the fact that I have persevered and relied upon Him in the process. I consider that the love and care shown by Christian friends have equally glorified God. As my support network has traversed many types of boundaries, this dissertation is indeed a transnational project. Without my faith in God, without the support from many people, inside and beyond the Church, including that of my own parents and brothers back in China, I would not be here and could not accomplish what I have done.

## Prologue

One day I entered a dream,  
Asked by 'em where I came from?  
Looking around, none native I found;  
Thus I said: "Friends, ask not—  
We're all strangers on this planet."

While studying at the Pennsylvania State University, one day I was summoned to a professor's office. He had just come back from his trip to Hong Kong as a visiting scholar. During his term he stopped by the First Guangzhou (China) Triennial of Experimental Art. It was there that he found fascinating the art by some contemporary "Chinese" artists—in his words—and especially that of a couple of artists who were China-born and raised but currently work in the United States—in fact, in the international art scene. My professor wanted to introduce this exhibition and the new types of "Chinese art" to me since I am also a Chinese.

Immediately I sensed many crossroads. My professor, I myself, (some of) the participating artists at the Triennial, and even images of the artworks, have all traversed borders and wandered in a world-village. In America, my professor considers me a Chinese; yet with five years of living in the United States behind me, I find my concept of self identification has gradually changed—that same year when I went to visit my parents in China, I felt most prominently the truth that I am now partly Chinese, partly American. I even began to doubt the legitimacy of using the classification of Chinese or American in the matter of identification. What is Chinese and what is American anyway? Maybe we are only right in saying that one is a Chinese or an American in the sense of his or her official citizenship displayed on a sheet of paper? With the experience of having lived in more than one country, I notice that I have developed another way of seeing people and seeing the world. I identify myself in a different way from before. Compared to my parents who have lived all their lives in a central area in China, I categorize people not by their color or what their passport shows. Instead, I am aware that in today's highly mobile world, one's official citizenship may only reflect part of one's life experience. With the assistance of technologies, isn't it true that one can easily live in a multitude of places while physically being

in one spot? “Where you are, is what your identity is” (Trinh, 2001, narrative line in *The Fourth Dimension*). What if one lives in multiple places in the world? If one is frequently traveling, like a nomad on the earth, will this life style bring us a new type of identity, a new way of identification? If yes, what impact does it bear on society and the world as well as our views of them?

Interestingly, people in China have a special name for those who have studied and/or worked abroad before returning to the country—the “Sea-Turtles (Hai-Gui, 海龟),” a homophone with “returnees from overseas (海归)” in Chinese pinyin. These people are referred to as a distinct group, apart from other individuals of Chinese descent. The name “Sea Turtle” alludes at once to two meanings. One is that such people lead a life in multiple places as the sea turtle does, which lives simultaneously in water and on the beach by laying eggs in the sand. The other meaning is denigrating, suggesting that such a life style for human beings is abnormal, as the sea turtle, being a reptile, is less than human. Thus, in the eyes of many “genuine” Chinese, the returned overseas population are the “abject,” something/body “as tempting as it is condemned,” repulsive but not entirely dischargeable (Kristeva, 1982, p.19).

Yet those who have moved to another country and stayed there are equally alienated. Natives in a place often regard immigrants only as guests and foreigners, no matter how many years they have lived in their new location—and in spite of the fact that they may have already been naturalized as citizens. In my own experience, I am constantly reminded during my time in the United States in myriad ways that I do not have a natural existence in the country. Often, people ask me “Are you a Chinese?” or “Where are you from?,” then exclaim “Your English is really good!” Such remarks imply that they consider themselves in a position to judge me and my language ability solely based upon the fact that they are natives whereas I am a foreigner. Similarly, Vietnamese-American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha tells an interviewer that people often evaluate her films not on the basis of their artistic qualities but more on her identity as an immigrant. Trinh deplores that the Other—in this case, international migrant artists including herself—can be otherized in every way, including how people criticize, evaluate, even praise one’s work (Trinh, 1999).

Such is the reality of people who live in-between, who have been immersed in more than one culture and are living in more than one place—in some cases, even within one country. This population has been addressed often as the Outsider, as a somehow exotic Other. Seldom are their cross-border activities and cultural productions examined from what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999) terms a “nearby” position (p. 216). As an individual having lived in both China and the United States, I consider myself one of those who live in-between, as the abject, or more specifically, as what I call *the transnational*. Both perplexed and enchanted by my experience with concepts such as place/space, language/culture, citizenship/nationality, identity/subjectivity, and the relationships among and between these concepts, I seek to understand the phenomena of transnationalism/transnationality by focusing on two migrant artists, Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha, and their artworks that were made during their transnational living. In the course of my quest, I attempt to find answers to questions including: What are the characteristics of people who live in multiple places at one time? Who are they? Who are such artists? How is their art made? What are the characteristics of their artistic products and processes? What do they teach us? Can such art be read for educational and pedagogical implications? If yes, what implications can we draw from it?

In China, people jokingly say that the living-in-between “sea turtles” speak neither a pure Chinese nor a genuine English, but a hybridized Chinglish. The making of new languages, in perhaps both linguistic and artistic senses, characterizes Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha. In his installation at the Guangzhou Triennial, whose exhibition catalogue I was shown by my professor, Gu created plausible languages by altering the Chinese and reversing the English characters (figure 1) as part of his then ongoing “*united nations*” project (1993-2005). The project comprises a series of monumental installations made out of human hair (figures 2, 3, and 4) which have been enacted in more than twenty countries in the world. During this over-a-decade long period, Gu moved fluidly around the world and dived into different countries and cultures in, through, and with his artworks. Wenda Gu is unmistakably one of those whom the Chinese people call sea-turtles, which refers to, in my terminology, the transnational. Yet, what indeed do the concepts of transnational and transnationality/transnationalism mean? How is a person transnational and how is an artist transnational? What significance do the transnational individual or artist and his or her art practice have for society and for us (educators and art

educators) in particular? These are the questions I attempt to answer in this research.

Though both transnational population and transnational activities have been discussed in various academic disciplines including cultural studies, social studies and political science, they have so far remained much under-studied in the field of art education. In this dissertation research, I endeavor to understand the characteristics of transnational people, particularly, transnational artists. I identify Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha as transnational artists, select one or two pieces of art made by each of them and interpret the works as an art educator and art critic. In the course of examining these artworks, I analyze and exemplify how artworks can be approached alternatively and read for suggestions in educational and pedagogical terms.

In writing this dissertation, I have positioned myself also as a transnational. Having lived in both China and the United States, and having witnessed the cultural change in China, which was influenced by Confucianism for a prolonged period but changed under the governance of the Communist Party into a planned economy, and now has opened-up like an Asian giant, I hold some pre-formulated beliefs which have led to my definition of transnationalism/transnationality and my own transnational stance. One is that culture is dynamic and ever-changing instead of static. Hence, there is no pure culture or an absolute definition of a certain culture. Culture changes over time. Its catalyst and source of change are often other cultures. One culture inevitably interacts with other cultures. This is especially true in our time, as the flow of people, information, and products, has been so intensified. The entangled relationship between culture and people—the interplay between the mobility of human beings, materials, and information, and the change of cultures—has contributed to my interest in the notion and phenomena of transnationality and transnationalism.

A second belief is about the concept of the self. On this matter, I agree with Julia Kristeva (1993), who in her book, *Nations without nationalism*, argues that each of us has a stranger within one's self. I believe that each self is an ever-changing self and that subjectivity is relational to its context and is permeable with other subjectivities. Therefore, it is possible that one person's current self may be another person's former or next self. In that light, the transnational personality is *not* a matter of either/or, but a matter of *degree*, for all or most of us. In my

understanding, one can avoid being a transnational only if one is entirely isolated in his or her whole life from people of/from another place or culture, away from people who are different in their ways of thinking and living, and away from those who have been influenced by such people. Therefore, I start the dissertation with an optimistic attitude: rather than intending to create yet one more dichotomy, I believe that the transnational spirit is more or less present in each one of us, that, through an analysis of the work of some transnational individuals/artists, we may recognize the transnational persona in us, and that we may embrace one another on still one more common ground.

Once I dreamed of a land;  
Where were people I left behind,  
And people I never met;  
All smile, waving their right hand,  
“Fellow traveler, we are all friends—would you come ‘n rest!”



Figure 1: Wenda Gu: *united nations: hong kong monument: the historical clash* (1997).  
Courtesy the artist.





Figure 2: Wenda Gu: *united nations: african monument: the world praying wall* (1997).  
Courtesy the artist.



Figure 3: Wenda Gu: *united nations: temple of exoticism* (2000).  
Courtesy the artist.



Figure 4: Wenda Gu: *united nations: australia monument: epnagcliifsihc* (2001).

Courtesy the artist.

## Chapter One

### **Transnational and Transnationality: Artists, Artworks, Art Education**

My hybrid background of having lived in both the Chinese and the American cultures brings me to the current dissertation research on transnational artists and transnational art. When I was browsing through the exhibition catalogue of the First Guangzhou Triennial, the image of Wenda Gu's installation especially caught my attention (figure 1). The reason, as I later reflected, is because the several areas where I was trained as an undergraduate student and amateur artist, namely, language, Chinese calligraphy and writings, are the most prominent components of the artwork. Immediately, its embedded notions, including locality/universality, language, culture, history, nationality, and identity, resonated with my personal experience as a Chinese citizen living in the United States.

#### **Wenda Gu the Artist**

That initial attraction led me to preliminary research on Wenda Gu as an artist and an individual. Gu was born in China in 1955 into a household of letters and arts. Beyond his well educated immediate family, which includes a sister who was trained as a professional cellist, Gu had a grandfather who established one of the earliest film companies in China (Cateforis, 2003). In his developmental years, Gu experienced the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) first hand. After that decade, he was recruited into a leading art academy to study Chinese ink painting with a well-known ink master in China. In 1987, at age 32, Gu emigrated to America in order to freely pursue his artistic interest. Beginning in the 1990s, Gu became increasingly known in the international art world. Since then, he is frequently invited to China for art exhibitions and social events. He now lives splitting his time between New York and Shanghai, and has several studios in both China and the United States.

#### **Fake Characters, Human Materials, and the Art Products**

Wenda Gu has been recognized as one of the few contemporary artists who play with the writing of Chinese languages, especially as the one who subjugates language and fuses Chinese characters with letters from other writing systems. Before his first move to America, Gu had already begun making fake Chinese characters. In the mid-1980s "New Wave" art movement in

China, Gu was a leader and was known for his practice of altering Chinese characters and blending Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting in innovative ways (figures 5 & 6) (Xu, 2003). Contrary to the practice in Chinese literati painting, which simply juxtaposes poem/calligraphy and landscape painting side by side in one piece of ink art, Gu placed the calligraphic writing into the landscape and rendered the former an integral part of the latter. Meanwhile, he also experimented with altering the calligraphic writing itself by omitting parts in one character, merging two characters together, or reversing the writing of characters. Such acts made the Chinese government of the time so nervous that in a 1986 exhibition the authority banned the artist's works from the general public (Cheng, 2005).

However, Gu's interest in manipulating Chinese characters and playing with languages and writings continued. His best-known art projects so far, *the united nations* (also referred to as *the un project*) and *the forest of stone steles* (also referred to as the *forest project*)<sup>1</sup>, have again drawn upon his training in calligraphy and literature. Both containing altered writings, these two projects were first conceived around 1993, and were both completed in 2005. Yet, compared with Gu's earlier art made before his arrival in the United States, his later art has demonstrated some new characteristics. First of all, such artworks, including *the un* and *the forest* projects, are often not made in a studio by Gu alone, but are each the result of the participation and collaboration of a number of people. Besides Gu, the production and exhibition of the artworks usually involve people including material donors, technical assistants, local artists from the country where the artwork is enacted who are invited to perform in the artwork, and friends from industrial, academic, and/or artistic realms who help in various ways. During the making of several on-site installations in *the united nations* project, support and/or approval from the national or local government was even solicited (interview with the author, May 8, 2006). Moreover, all these artworks have traversed national borders in one way or another, either in the course of collecting raw materials, producing parts of the artworks, or in exhibiting the final art products. For example, while the stone steles in *the forest* project were made in China, the project or part of it has been so far exhibited in Australia and the United States as well as China.

---

<sup>1</sup> The artist once jokingly stated that "artists are not capitalists" (in Gu, 2003, p. 31). Therefore, he has written all the titles of his artworks as well as his emails in lower case letters. Yet, to be consistent with the spelling by other authors on Gu and his art (and because the artist is playing in a capitalist economic system and in my opinion, he has played well), I have decided to spell the artist's full name as Wenda Gu instead of wenda gu. Still, in an effort to respect the artist's own choice, I have kept all the titles of his artworks as they are spelled out by the artist.



A second feature of Gu's current art is that it draws upon art traditions and practices that originated in a number of countries and places beyond China. Instead of centering on the playing of Chinese language, character-writing, and ink art (calligraphy), Gu's artistic practice now employs concepts and constructions from a variety of conventionally defined cultures. For example, his three *oedipus refound* pieces (1993) not only build upon the ancient Chinese medicine-making practice, but also allude to both Greek myths and Christian beliefs. While continuously exploring and exploiting Chinese cultural practices, as in his *ink alchemy* and *tea alchemy*, Gu also ventures to experiment with human excretions, materials that bear rich meanings across cultures. The use of living people's hair, which has been the building block of all the monuments in Gu's *un* project, has not only literally but also symbolically brought Gu into contact with a tremendous number and diversity of people, and with dozens of countries and cultures in the world. This art-making material also bestows the artworks with additional meanings associated with human hair generated in various cultures and held by different people. In his *un* project, Gu can be said to have worked as a cultural nomad, wandering from one place to another, critically observing, actively interpreting, and selectively absorbing elements of each of the conventionally defined cultures and societies he visited. Concurrently, in his *forest of stone steles* project, which was made during the same period with *un*, Gu seems to have been more devoted to the traditional Chinese art form and art-making technique of stone carving. On the whole, it appears that artist Wenda Gu has been moving freely among countries, cultures, and (art) traditions, not only in terms of the cultural references in his art products, but also in the techniques and materials he has used.

### **Trinh T. Minh-ha and her Films**

Such practices of Wenda Gu convince me that he is a transnational artist. In spring 2005, when the Berkeley professor and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha came to lecture and screen her film in Pennsylvania State University, I realized that there was also a transnational character in her work. Through Trinh's films, I learned even more about transnational artworks.

An immigrant from Vietnam who came to the United States at the age of 17, Trinh T. Minh-ha has been deeply immersed in both the Vietnamese and the American cultures. In 1982, after having lived and taught in Africa for three years, Trinh made her first well-known film,

*Reassemblage*, a documentary about Senegal. Since then, Trinh T. Minh-ha has traveled widely in the world, making and exhibiting films in countries on the continents of Asia, Africa, North America, Australia, and Europe. In addition to Vietnam and the United States, she has also lived in Senegal and Japan for considerable time (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999).

In her film-making, Trinh T. Minh-ha has interacted with a wide diversity of people in the world. Several of her films, including *Reassemblage*; *Naked Spaces—Living is Round*; *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*; *Shoot for the Contents*; and *The Fourth Dimension*, might be called documentary, but I hesitate to categorize them as such because, to a large extent, Trinh's films have the tendency to resist conventional classification, a quality to be illustrated in more detail later. The making of these films has brought Trinh into contact with many countries, peoples, and their cultures. Even when filming in the United States, Trinh has worked with crew and cast members from different cultural and ethnic groups and with diverse national backgrounds. For instance, the cast of *A Tale of Love* includes actors and actresses of European, Vietnamese, Chinese, and South American descent. Her films have also traversed national borders through distribution by several agencies in various countries.

Not only does Trinh T. Minh-ha physically interact with diverse countries and people in the course of making, exhibiting, and distributing her films, she also employs in her film the artistic and literary products originated from a country or the larger geo-political region to examine the culture and ways of life in that place. For instance, African sayings, proverbs, drumming, and chanting are omnipresent throughout both the films about Africa, *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces—Living is Round*. In *The Fourth Dimension*, a film meditating on Japan and the Japanese culture, numerous Japanese authors and philosophers are quoted in reflecting and commenting on the culture and people. Similarly, in *A Tale of Love*, a film focused on the life of a Vietnamese immigrant woman in the United States, Trinh has drawn heavily from Vietnamese literature and art forms to connect the contemporary female protagonist's life to that of other women who lived in historical times in Vietnam. In drawing on the various cultures and the art forms to illuminate the people and societies in the individual cultures, Trinh becomes familiar with and in many cases obtains first-hand experience in many cultures that are not native to her. Beside the culture and art practices local to the specific country or people addressed in an individual film by Trinh,

viewers can also easily identify traces of influences from other cultures in her films, such as in the forms of oil paintings and Chinese ink art in *Night Passage* and in *A Tale of Love*. In sum, Trinh T. Minh-ha has utilized without judgment art forms and literary works from various conventionally identified cultures in making her films. Just like Wenda Gu, she has traveled both physically and metaphorically among these countries and cultures with great fluidity.

### **About This Research Study**

Thus Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha have been identified as what I consider transnational artists. Both of them have moved in their art and art-making from country to country. They also freely utilize artistic traditions, art forms and/or techniques that originated in various countries and cultures. In today's world, such nomadic people, including those who are artists, have been continually on the increase. Intrigued by my encounters with Wenda Gu, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and their artworks, I intend to address and seek answers to the following questions in this dissertation research.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) What does the term *transnational* mean in addressing a particular group of people in today's world?
- 2) Who are transnational individuals? What are their characteristics?
- 3) Who are transnational artists in our time? What are their characteristics?
- 4) What features do the art and art-making processes of transnational artists possess?
- 5) What meanings do the selected artworks have? What interpretations do they allow?
- 6) How do the artworks and their making by each of the selected artists resemble and differ from one another?
- 7) Do the selected artworks have educational (in terms of goals and content of education) and pedagogical (such as the dynamics of teacher-student interaction) relevance? If yes, what educational and pedagogical implications can we draw from them?
- 8) In general, how can an artwork be approached for its educational and pedagogical implications?



## **Procedures of Study**

My research encompassed three phases: first, I interviewed the artists (as far as they were accessible) and interpreted selected artworks; second, I compared and contrasted artworks across artists in terms of both the meaning and the making so as to identify the characteristics of art and art-making by transnational artists; finally, with a focused intention, I analyzed what educational and pedagogical suggestions the artworks offered to us for teaching art in a particular time and social context in today's world. Along the way, I examined how my background and personal interests might have guided or limited my understanding of the works so that this dissertation research could be a more applicable example for other researchers to follow or discuss.

Following Holstein's and Gubrium's (1995) interview strategies, I interviewed Wenda Gu via email and over the phone. Initially through friends in academe who have curated Gu's exhibitions, I got in touch with Gu in late 2004. We have since kept in contact and become friends. The information I obtained from Gu largely came from our email correspondence. But some came from talks in person or on the phone. In keeping with the regulatory policies of the Pennsylvania State University on doing research involving human participants, I have applied for and obtained approval (IRB # 22178) for conducting interviews with the selected artists for the purpose of this dissertation. I tried to obtain a phone or face-to-face interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha in 2006. Unfortunately, the artist was too busy throughout that year and referred me instead to the books she considers to be most representative of her opinions, illustrative of herself, and informative about her film-making process. In both artists' cases, I read extensively in interviews by others and writings on their artworks written both by the artists themselves and by art critics. Such readings have provided me substantial knowledge of the artists and their artworks, and served as a secondary source of data in this dissertation research.

When interpreting the artworks, I blend my roles as an art critic and art educator. I approach these artworks not only from the art historical, and art critical but also educational and pedagogical standpoints. Based upon the assumption that an artwork teaches, I treat the works not only as some visual or multi-sensory representations which are of aesthetic significance, but also of educational and pedagogical value. As an educator, I investigate whether, what, and how

the selected artworks teach us with regard to classroom teaching. In particular, I examine how the artworks can be used to inform the content and pedagogy of art teaching in the twenty-first century, a time when humanity has entered the era of globalization and cultural hybridization. In keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) notions of dialogism and the dialogic relationship between the author and the hero, I attempt to understand the characteristics of transnational artists through an interpretative study of a selection of artworks made by Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Echoing Umberto Eco's (1992) notion of "the dialectics between the rights of texts [artworks] and the rights of their interpreters" (p. 23) and Richard Rorty's (1992) statement that "all anybody ever does with anything is use it" (p. 93) while taking an ethical stance and treating the texts [artwork] as "honorary persons" (p. 106), I endeavor to dialogue with the artworks and withdraw educational and pedagogical implications from them. Thanks to my background as someone having lived in both the Chinese and the American cultures, which gives me familiarity with both the socialist and capitalist ideologies, I position myself also as a transnational figure, and interpret the artworks in accordance with my knowledge of and experience in the multiple countries and cultures.

### **Significance**

This dissertation study identifies and introduces the transnational artists and their art to educators and more particularly, to art educators. Through my interpretation of the selected works, it also enriches the current art interpretative practices and theories. Furthermore, my reading the artworks for pedagogical and educational implications sets up an example to treat artworks as more than passive objects to be judged from a distance. Hopefully, this experimental effort may inspire other art educators and scholars to approach artworks in alternative and innovative ways. Finally, by means of analyzing and summarizing the purpose, content, and pedagogies of an art education in the twenty-first century, as implied by the art of the transnational artists, I propose a transnational model of art education which would better prepare our students to be world citizens in the era of globalization and increased world-wide cultural interaction as well as conflict.

### **Limitations**

I understand that since I am not interpreting the selected artworks—on-site installations or cinema—in their original forms due to their accessibility at the time of this dissertation research,

my interpretation may be limited or flawed. However, I suspect that most artworks studied by our students and art teachers in the classroom *are* only images or re-productions of the originals, which remain physically inaccessible. Therefore, my experience of encountering the artworks in this study through their images in books or catalogues and in their video format may actually more closely resemble that of the classroom teacher and students in real life. Thus, what I first considered a disadvantage may well turn out to be a merit—that my situation is true to the experience of the classroom teacher. Hence, my approach toward the artworks may be more exemplary and more ready to apply in the real-life classroom setting.

Another limitation resides in background knowledge I have with regard to the artists and the making of the chosen artworks. Neither artist in this study is easily accessible. To obtain a better knowledge of the artists and their art-making, I used a variety of means, including phone conversation and email interviews. I also successfully made the arrangement for Wenda Gu to come to lecture at the university of my program, and attended Trinh T. Minh-ha's guest lecture and film screening events (although she was not present at the screening). Besides, I visited Wenda Gu at his home and talked to him in person twice. Comparatively, Trinh T. Minh-ha granted me less chance for personal contact; hence, I have less direct knowledge of her. It may appear that the background information I have about these two different artists and the making of their artworks is uneven. On second thought, however, my different levels of personal encounter with them may well illustrate the varied experiences an art teacher may have with different artists when studying and teaching their artworks. Moreover, by various means I gleaned substantial information on both of the artists and about the making processes of their artworks. Therefore, not only is the limitation associated with the researcher's knowledge of the background information on the artwork minimized as far as possible, the different experiences I have had with the two artists can also better represent the real-life situation of art teachers, and my alternative means of information gathering can serve as more adequate examples for them in their teaching practices.

### **Writing of the Dissertation**

In this chapter, I have introduced the topic and the artists on whom I focus in my dissertation research. I have also listed my research questions to be explored in this study. Ideally, I would

like to create a rhizomatic dissertation, to put my ideas in what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as the “mapping” and not the “tree-trunk” structure (p. 23). I hope to see any node in the dissertation continue in to multiple other nodes and the entire dissertation thus form a web, with infinite possibilities pointed out by the nodes around its periphery. This periphery is not what people usually consider a periphery: not the opposite of the center, but only the edges where the dissertation has to stop because of the limits of available time and space. However, as far as the current academic establishment commands, and as far as my English proficiency allows for a person like me who speaks Chinglish yet has to write entirely in English, I have to compromise. I write this dissertation mainly in a linear manner, yet with some branches and twigs persistently stretching out, bending, twisting, and sometimes coming back in different places in the project: not like a map, as desired, but not strictly a tree trunk either. The materials I put into the dissertation text have to be arbitrarily selected; my understanding and articulation of them are necessarily trimmed to focus on the primary topic and concern of transnationalism and its implications. The rule is that if I say one thing clearly, the reader may thus continue to discover numerous things unspoken. So, what is written here may serve only as a start for your thinking and observation, and in the far end, the dreamed of rhizome-like writing may still be realized, only that it is not by my construction alone, nor is it this dissertation in itself, but the continued efforts of many of the readers in future.

Chapter two is a review of literature which discusses definitions of transnationalism and transnationality. In response to others’ definitions and observations, I propose my own working definition of transnationalism. I then explain my selection of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha as representative transnational artists. I give an overview of the artworks made by Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha respectively when they became transnational. Afterwards, I explain my definition of pedagogy and the interpretive strategies I employ in reading their artworks for educational and pedagogical implications for classroom art teaching.

In chapter three I interpret *the united nations* project by artist Wenda Gu. In its writing, I play an intellectual and psychological game by simultaneously taking on several voices and roles in the interpreting process. These multiple voices are presented not as oppositional, but as different. They are at times amenable and at other times disagree with each other. Such voices derive from

my inner realities as a person who has multiple sources of cultural and ideological influence, some contesting, others harmonious, with one another.

Chapter four is an interpretation of another of Wenda Gu's projects, *the forest of stone steles*. I continue the intellectual and psychological game by speaking in two persons. After the description and analysis of the project itself, I then examine from a transnational perspective what the two projects collectively mean to a contemporary audience.

Chapter five is devoted to the analysis of Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *A Tale of Love*. Against the backdrop of feminist readings of the film and Trinh's art practices, I interpret the work mainly from a transnational perspective. I contend that besides a concern for the fate and living conditions of women, *A Tale of Love* has also and even more so expressed a transnational stance.

In chapter six, I compare the artworks of the two artists in terms of both the making processes and the meanings of the end products. More obviously positioning myself as an art educator, I read the artworks for educational and pedagogical implications. I list some principles derived from the study of the artworks by the selected artists that are helpful to art educators to approach art education in today's world. In the end, I recall my interpretive act and provide suggestions on how artworks can be approached pedagogically and educationally.



Figure 5: Wenda Gu: *the myths of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo-characters in landscape1: sky-ocean* (1996-1997). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 6: Wenda Gu: *the mythos of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo-characters in landscape 2: free expression* (1996-1997). Courtesy the artist.

## Chapter Two

### Defining Transnationalism/Transnationality, Guiding Art Interpreting

#### The World Becoming Transnational?

The world we live in today is definitely different from the past. Among many happenings, one of the most significant is that everything seems to be on the move, and that both the scale and speed of such mobility are unprecedented. With advanced transportation facilities, people now can easily realize Alice's dream of traveling around the world within dozens of—and even a couple of—days. Assisted by the Internet, individuals exchange information and do business with one another without being intimidated at all by the physical distance in-between them on the surface of the earth. What used to be confined by national boundaries in the past, such as investment, commodities, service, human power, even elements in a country's refined or popular culture, is now going global. In different parts of the world, we see similar signs of MacDonald and Gap, or the same traditional Chinese or modern international styles of architecture. While the number of long-term international migrants (that is, those residing in foreign countries for more than one year) exceeded 105 million by 1985 and continued to grow at fast rate throughout the 1990s (Martin & Larkin, 2000), mass media brings cultural icons, rituals, practices, and news of people from afar into our daily lives even when we remain in one location. In short, our contemporary world is featured by the phenomenon of “moving images meet(ing) deterritorialized viewers” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4).

In this reality of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1990, p. 147), special attention has been given to the large population of international immigrants, or transmigrants, in several academic disciplines (Bernal, 2004; Brittain, 2002; Portes, 2003; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). The term *transnational* soon becomes hot in intellectual discourses. In our world of fast and frequent flow of people as well as of objects and ideas, is everyone transnational? Is transnational equivalent to global, and transnationalism to globalism?

#### What is Transnational?

The term transnational first appeared in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his article, *Trans-National America*, public intellectual Randolph Bourne (1916) stated that a trans-national America would treat the



cultures brought in by immigrants to the country in the spirit of cosmopolitanism, by which he meant to allow for the co-existence of different cultures instead of forcing others to assimilate to the Anglo-Saxon culture. In his imagining of a trans-national America, Bourne (1916) warned Americans against following the wave of the twentieth-century European nationalisms which are inclined to forge wars out of the spirit of national patriotism. From its inception, therefore, transnationalism is referred to in some sort of opposition to nationalism while simultaneously in association with the nation-state.

When used to describe activities or objects, transnational is commonly understood on the basis of physical border-crossing, especially the traversing of national boundaries. For example, in pointing out that not all international immigrants are transnational, some sociologists give as an evidence the fact that there is an absence of transnational activities like sending remittance or visiting the home country in the everyday lives of many migrants (Brittain, 2002; Portes, 2003). In accordance, such scholars note that there are two types of actors who conduct transnational activities: institutional and governmental organizations such as multi-centered and/or cross-national businesses and corporations and national states, and private, non-corporate entities such as international immigrants and activists for human rights, the environment, and other global causes who comprise the transnational from below (Portes, 2003).

It thus seems to me that there are roughly also two types of transnational activities according to the ideologies out of which they are conducted. Multi-national corporations with branches or offices in multiple countries and businesspeople who travel physically or virtually (by way of the Internet) to another country usually do business with people regardless of their nationality or citizenship. Such transactions are based upon a capitalist ideology. They take place between people with different social, cultural, ethnic, or nationality backgrounds yet may physically be completed within the territory of one country. By contrast, the transnational activities of sending remittance or visiting the home country by some international migrants, as mentioned above, necessarily happen involving multiple countries and locations yet only between people of the same ethnic or racial group. Such transactions are often conducted on the basis of kinship or ethnic and/or national affinity. Though they may engage more than one country or place in physical terms, these activities are based upon the same-ness rather than the difference between

their actors with regard to their racial or ethnic backgrounds. For this reason, I suspect that the afore-mentioned scholars may have wrongly over-emphasized the physical border-crossing in their identification of transnational activities. I further doubt their claim that the majority of international immigrants are not transnational because of the absence of transnationalism in their migration life in the form of such activities as sending money or visiting their relatives back in their original countries.

However, I consider it legitimate to distinguish the two types of transnational actors: multi-centered cross-national corporations and governmental organizations on the one hand, and independent individuals (by which I mean not being part of any multi-national corporate or governmental organization) and private, non-governmental organizations on the other. As noted above, there are different ideological frameworks behind different sorts of transnational activities. Some, such as those carried out by cross-national corporations, are aimed to optimize profit. Others, as conducted by international activists or advocacy groups, may strive for some social causes. Under controversy is the nature of activities by other transnational individuals, such as international migrants, who in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's eyes (1996) may come from three ways of diaspora—of hope, of despair, and of terror.

Appadurai (2001) refers to this level of transnationalism as “grassroots globalization,” or “globalization from below” (p. 3). He states that grassroots globalization is where the hope for an international civil society lies. He believes that actors of grassroots globalization “rely on strategies, visions, and horizons for globalization on behalf of the poor,” and considers this kind of globalization “strives for a democratic and autonomous standing in respect to the various forms by which global power further seeks to extend its dominion” (p. 3). Appadurai (2001) identifies non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a sub-group which has become known as transnational advocacy networks (TANs) as the primary institutions to globalize from below. He argues that these non-governmental organizations and individuals tend to break “the monopoly of autonomous nation-states over the project of modernization” and create modernity at large through a type of imagination (Appadurai, 1996, p.10). This imagination, which differs from fantasy and from the imagination required in the realms of art, myth, and ritual, becomes a part of the mental work of ordinary people through transnational individuals in the form of their

memory and desire. Once becoming collective, this imagination is capable of turning into action (Appadurai, 1996).

In this light, Appadurai (1996) suggests that transnational individuals function in counter to the hegemony of the nation-state. This view resonates with that of Homi Bhabha (1990a) who hails the practices and identities of transmigrants as “counter-narratives of the nation” (p. 300). However, some researchers argue that the alleged emancipatory character of individual transnationalism is questionable (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). They contend that transnational practices do not take place in a slippery “third space” as stated by Bhabha (1990b, p. 217), but rather “the fit between specific kinds of migrants and specific local and national contexts abroad shapes the likelihood of generating, maintaining or forsaking transnational ties” (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998, p.13). This group of scholars tends to define transnational activities as between migrants who move out of and people who remain in one original country.

In the meantime, there are different views with regard to the concept of subject and subjectivity corresponding with the different understandings of transnationality. Leading scholars in cultural studies such as Appadurai (2001) consider that the unstable type of subjectivity produced at the meeting of mass migrations and the rapid move of mass-mediated images is resistant towards the domination of the nation-state. By contrast, Slavoj Žižek (1993) argues from a psychoanalytical approach that “the dispersed, plural, constructed subject hailed by postmodern theory . . . simply designates the form of subjectivity that corresponds to late capitalism” (p. 216). Of the latter view is also Fredric Jameson (1984) who asserts that transnational capitalism is a purer form of capitalism, for capital by nature requires going global. In a similar vein, Ian McLean (2002) argues that the borderlessness of transnational postmodernism is in fact a border practice in that it takes up the function of the nation-state to “smooth over the myriad internal differences that slowed the conduct of business” (p. 28). Such scholars see no element of subversion at all in the transnational subject but consider instead transnationalism a continuation of nationalism and colonialism.

As a self-proclaimed transnational individual, I take as focus in this dissertation study transnationalism from below. I believe that there is difference between corporate and individual

transnationalism. I wonder: What does the term transnational mean when it is applied to the individual? Who are transnational? What are the characteristics of transnational personae? What is transnationalism? Are transnational people opportunists who reap the greatest rewards from economic and political structures of multiple countries, or are they agents counter-acting the dominating and hegemonic power of the nation-state? To answer these questions, we need to first understand the notions of nation and nationalism.

### **Nation, Nationalism, and Transnationalism**

Scholars have discussed the concepts such as nation and the origins of the nation-state and nationalism for decades. Discourses in this regard have grown bigger and become heated especially with the increase of national conflict and the re-proliferation of nation-states at a time of globalization and rising tides of transnationalism. Among those who have attempted to address the issue from a social historical approach, best-known are Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner. Setting his study on the nation-state in Europe, Gellner (1996) states that micro-units evolve into nations following a five-step path: from baseline to nationalist irredentism, during which ethnicity as a political principle prevails and old polities come under its pressure; to the emergence of nationalist states; then to the stage of *natch* and *nebel*, terms borrowed from the language of the Nazis to mean to apply nationalism by forceful practices such as mass murder; then finally, to cultural convergence which eventually leads to the diminishing of nationalism. This view echoes with Anderson's (1991). Taking the Southeastern Asian as his focus, Anderson (1991) asserts that modern nations grew out of the social political context of diminishing religious and monarchic power. Facilitated by print technology, nations came into being as a result of people's imagination—as he writes, nation is an “imagined political community” (Anderson, 1991, p. 6).

However, as Victoria Bernal (2004) points out, Anderson's analysis of the origin of nation is from the angle of the internal affairs of each single nation-state. In defining the nation as a cultural imagination of a national community of people, Anderson understands the nation-state as an internal cultural process rather than as a political struggle involving contestants and participants in the larger international arena. In my view, Zizek's psychoanalytic approach to nation and nationalism then comes to good service.

According to Žižek (1993), people relate to one another and form a nation via the “Nation-Thing” they consider they all have in common. “The bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing . . . . National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing” (Žižek, 1993, p. 201). In Žižek’s (1993) opinion, this “Thing” is not only connected to the way of life of a community, hence gives its members particularities in otherwise universal conformity, but it also makes all the members believe they share it. Looming yet indescribable, the “Thing” resembles Lacan’s notion of the Real. It is imagined as the producer of the community’s rituals, practices, and traditions. According to Žižek (1993), the “Nation-Thing” is the particular way a nation organizes its enjoyment. Therefore, nationalism derives from our fear of the loss of this “Thing”—we fear that the Other might steal our enjoyment, steal our “Thing” when the Other comes too close toward us.

Though as Finlayson (1998) analyzes, Žižek’s view of nationalism runs the risk of “being reducible to a notion of fundamental ‘lack,’ as if nationalism is to be conceived as a cultural manifestation of the given crisis of human subjectivity” (p. 156), I find it nevertheless useful in investigating the birth of nation and nationalism in the web of national relationships in the world. In other words, Žižek’s work on nation and nationalism points out how people perceive the relationship among one another—whom they relate to as the Self and whom they regard as the Other, and what is the relationship between the two.

Seen in this light, transnationalism then is not defined by the flow of objects, images, money, goods, information, or people, but by a new way of looking and thinking, a particular way to deal with difference. As Victoria Bernal (2004) states, “transnationalism means our frames of reference for our own lives are not constructed on a national basis but in terms of standards, experiences, and concepts that include a larger world” (pp. 4-5). It is “not simply another way of talking about diaspora, or one’s possession of deep ties to more than one nation” (Bernal, 2004, p. 4). She believes that transnationalism manifests itself not only in such things as consuming foreign media and goods and depending on remittances from abroad, and “in the experience, desire, or expectation of international migration as part of one’s life course,” but also “in the fact

that ideas about citizenship, rights, and entitlements, as well as visions of the good life generally are constructed on a broader scale with reference to international standards, concepts, and comparisons, such that any local discussion of such things automatically implies this larger context” (p. 5). This statement well represents my view of transnationalism.

Meanwhile, I also agree with Bernal (2004) that we all live in a transnational era now no matter whether we have migrated to somewhere else or remained in the same place. But the question is: is everyone a transnational today? What are the characteristics of transnational personae if transnational refers to a particular way of looking and thinking and of treating people with difference?

### **Understanding the Transnational Individual**

Based upon my view of transnationalism, I propose that an understanding of transnational people does not focus on their acts of physical crossing of national boundaries, either at the time of their migration (or absence of migration), or in their everyday activities such as sending money back to their original country. Instead, I suggest that we examine and define transnational people in their way of interacting with other people, especially with those who differ from themselves socially, culturally, or in other ways. I consider that a transnational individual possesses the following characteristics on which I will elaborate one by one: multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality.

### **Multiplicity**

Though disagreeing with other scholars on the necessity of a physical presence in more than one country over time or a physical border-crossing, I do believe that transnational people have experienced some sort of border-crossing. However, in my understanding, such borders may not necessarily be physical, but more in the conceptual domain. Either due to their physical living in multiple countries or places at different or the same time, or because of their contact with people coming from other cultures, a transnational individual has to have experienced what Vertovec (2003) terms the “conceptual cross-fertilization” (p. 651) when he reflects on his own stance on the issue of the definition of transnationalism/transnationality. In this light, contemporary technologies such as the Internet have greatly facilitated the cultural learning between people

from distant places, hence contributing to the advent of transnationalism of our time.

This cross-fertilization means that in his or her ways of thinking and valuing, the transnational individual possesses a mixture of elements from different places and cultures. They demonstrate the trait of multiplicity, or heterogeneity, in their cultural background and conceptual constituency. In this sense, therefore, a transnational individual lives in multiple cultures and places, not at different times, but simultaneously at any given point of time. According to this definition, international migrants have a good chance to be transnational, but are not necessarily so. In my understanding, those people who have physically crossed national boundaries but “carry their balloons everywhere they go,” as June McFee (1998, p. 86) describes when addressing multiculturalism, do not live transnationally. Instead, transnational people are ones who allow contamination, but not entire assimilation. In other words, transnational personae autonomously and selectively adopt and absorb from multiple places and cultures—from the other without capitalizing the word—at the same time as their equally autonomous resisting, appropriating, and discarding. They integrate things on the one hand and cast away on the other so that they are in a flux at all times. Because of this continuous and simultaneous taking in and taking out, transnationals do not transmute into a complete same-ness with one another, nor do they homogenize the world in some far end.

### **Hybridity**

In their multiplicity, transnational people make no hierarchical ranking, externally or internally, of the differences in the world. They view multiple ways of thinking and valuing as equally valid and thus advisable in different times and in different situations. Simultaneously in multiple places, the transnational constantly conducts cultural translation which requires that no culture is subordinated to another, or that culture is regarded as stagnantly pure and genuine. Like the couchgrass, the transnational also ceaselessly establishes connections between the social fabrics of different cultures and places, not to put into binary opposites or pluralistic juxtapositions, but to hybridize into a rhizome that allows no easy singling out or distinction of the center and the periphery. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) said of the rhizome, the interiority of the transnational is also “a map and not a tracing;” it exists not in terms of binary logic like a tree structure, but is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions” (p.12). Resisting dualism that ranks the world’s

cultures and nations hierarchically, the transnational make no claim to either end of the first-third, east-west, or any other binary opposites in the cultural discourse. They reside in-between, living not in permanent fixity, but as a changeable hybrid.

Indeed, there is no impervious line for the transnational. Such individuals do not think according to dualism. Their cultural interiority contains both “lines of segmentarity” according to which their being/becoming can be “stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc.,” and “lines of deterritorialization;” more importantly, all of these lines “always tie back to one another” so that one “can not posit a dualism or a dichotomy” within them (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Be/coming in multiple cultures simultaneously, transnational people constantly translate and create. It is precisely because of this translational act, the transnational “deny the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture,” and render all forms of culture “continually in a process of hybridity . . . the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). In the final analysis, transnational people are those who, in Bhabha’s (1994) words, “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” and “focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (p. 1). They are nomads who do not carry excessive luggage from their cultures of origin but transgress and make their tents on the spot whenever necessary. With fluid absorbing and disposing at both hands, they seek no ultimate homogeneity but engage difference tactically and in a pragmatic manner.

### **Liminality**

In fact, transnational people demonstrate a back-and-forth move in their interior territories just as they may traverse fluidly in the outside. Since they hold no hierarchical views but instead embrace hybridity and difference in the world, they do not prevent themselves from transforming into another state at any moment as they become contaminated through contact with different people and cultures. As Victor Turner (1969) describes people in the liminal stage of a ritual performance, a transnational individual also exists at the threshold where “a generalized social bond . . . has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (p. 96). As in this ambiguous moment, transnational people possess great potential to change because their cultural interiority, just like the rhizome, is also “detachable,



reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.12). Living in a liminal stage/state, the transnational operate between being and becoming.

### **Transnational Artists and Their Characteristics**

Such are the transnational personae addressed in this dissertation. They have crossed borders on conceptual terms and live liminally, with a hybrid background in multiple cultures. Though such people may have existed a long time ago, it is only after the world entered the postmodern era that the scope and speed of transnationalism have both become prominent. Among this rapidly growing world population of transnational individuals, a sizeable number are artists who live and work with great freedom to traverse borders. Many of them use their art to record their transnational experience and express their concerns as transnational individuals. Studying art by such people will not only contribute to our understanding of this particular group of people and issues related to transnationalism, but also provide us with a broadened understanding of the complicated postmodern world we live in today.

As part of the transnational population, transnational artists share the characteristics of the group and their art and art-making embody features corresponding with their nomadic fashion of self identification. Because of their multiple-cultural background, transnational artists often make art in various art traditions rooted in different cultures. They utilize their knowledge of and experience in multiple cultures and employ different art media and art traditions fluidly. They often blend, fuse, or hybridize various art practices from different art traditions together. In artist Renee Green’s words, though she was talking only of her own art-making, the transnational artists work “with a kind of fluidity, a movement back and forth, not making claim to any specific or essential way of being” (in Bhabha, 1994, p.3). However, unlike some modernist artists who plundered objects and artifacts from what they regarded as primitive cultures and subordinated the non-western art tradition and practices to the western mainstream ones, transnational artists explore various art traditions and art media from different cultures, usually the ones which they themselves have experience in.

The making of transnational artists’ art also involves people from different cultural backgrounds, and their artworks are physically enacted in or transported to a multitude of countries and places.

Thus, transnational artists interact with a diversity of people both literally and conceptually through their art and art-making. Instead of being “impersonal” or carrying “free-floating feelings” like some other art and cultural products of the postmodern time (Jameson, 1984, p. 67), art by transnational artists has demonstrated a concern for the countries and people they have encountered and depicted in their work.

### **Artists and Their Artworks Selected for Study**

It thus becomes my task in this dissertation to analyze what and how such art articulates the transnational experience and perspectives of the world. I especially desire to investigate how the art and art practice of transnational artists help us to respond to transnationalism and transnational phenomena in this globalized world. Based upon my definition of the transnational, I have selected two artists, Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha, as my focus.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wenda Gu was born and raised in China and immigrated to the United States in his adulthood. He now splits his time between China and America, having studios in both countries. He also travels to many other places frequently to lecture or exhibit. His artworks have been enacted in over twenty countries in the world. Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha is also an immigrant. She grew to be seventeen years old in Vietnam before coming to America. Her films have been shown around the globe; she lectures and makes film in countries including Senegal and Japan. Both artists’ art practice has traversed national borderlines and involved a wide range of people with different cultural, ethnic, racial, or social backgrounds. More interestingly, both artists were trained in several art domains in a broad sense of the word, and work in various art media. Wenda Gu was educated in the Chinese literati art tradition, learning literature, painting, and calligraphy simultaneously during his artistic training years. He also practiced oil painting and performance art out of his own interest (Cateforis, 2003). Trinh T. Minh-ha was first a French literature major in college, then studied music and composition. She is a drummer and often writes her own music and film scripts (Trinh, 1992). In more than one sense, both artists are versatile and have worked in multiple media in their artistic pursuit.

Among all the artists who might fit with my definition of transnational artists, I pick Gu and Trinh and their respective works as the focus of my investigation for good reasons. First,

between these two artists there is a gender balance. Second, these two artists come from different prior national and social backgrounds. Whereas Trinh T. Minh-ha was from a small, less wealthy country, and a former colony, Wenda Gu came from a fairly big country which is nowadays gaining incredible political and economic power in the international arena. This selection implies the spectrum of people's experience even within the transnational category. Thus, by choosing these two artists, I strive to explore both generality and diversity of the experience and perspective of transnational people, and the variety of messages embedded in their art.

Of course, my own artistic and academic trainings as well as my cultural background serve as additional reasons in choosing these particular artists and their artworks. For example, Chinese calligraphy is a common artistic interest for all three of us. Whereas Wenda Gu's artworks build upon Chinese calligraphy, literature, and elements of the traditional Chinese culture, Trinh's selected films demonstrate the artist's familiarity with both the Vietnamese and the traditional Chinese cultures. Thus, by choosing these artists and focusing on their respective artworks, I take advantage of my experience in and knowledge of both the Chinese and the American cultures. Such choices are made with no intention to imply that transnational activities take place only between the East and the West, or that transnational people must have switched from the Communist to the Capitalist ideological camp. Instead, I would like to stress that by definition, transnational personae are beyond binary thinking, and that I did not decide on the two artists because of any supposed binary opposite in their background or between them. They are selected because there is much difference within and between them, but they are not necessarily opposites.

When deciding on specific artworks, I selected works that are, in my viewpoint, most effective to illuminate the transnational issues in our time. For the convenience of my analysis, I take into consideration my knowledge of the country, people, or culture(s) the artwork directly addresses. Other criteria include the availability and accessibility of digital or paper images of the work, and its current relevancy to contemporary audiences who work in the field of education, for the purpose of this dissertation. With these points in mind, I have decided to focus for this study on two artworks, *the united nations* series, primarily the *china monument: temple of heaven*, and *the forest of stone steles: rewriting and retranslation of Tang poems* project, by Wenda Gu, and one film, *A Tale of Love*, by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

## **Artworks and Art Education**

In today's 21<sup>st</sup> century, most people acknowledge that our world is different from what it was in the past. Many refer to it as a postmodern era. As noted earlier, though international migration is not a new phenomenon, it is only in this postmodern time that transnationalism has become a prevailing trend. As the world has produced a large number of transnational artists, and as these artists make art that is informed by their cultural and artistic backgrounds and life experiences as transnationals, what are the characteristics of their art and what does such art tell us of the world and/or of our time? Does it teach us something specific about our present or future and how we shall prepare for it? If we are to introduce such art in the classroom, how should we approach it? How can it be used, especially in art classes?

When deploring the reality that many art teachers indiscriminately accept any interpretation their students propose about a piece of art and hence “trivialize” artworks, art educator Brent Wilson (2000) indicates that artworks can and do teach (p. 4). Wilson (2000) states, “As an educator, I was deeply concerned because I saw artworks, which had enormous potential to teach students about so many things, being utterly diminished through inane interpretations . . . . At the very least artworks were being deprived of their potency and their unique power to educate” (p. 4). In past decades, many educators and art educators have acknowledged or assumed that art teaches. Among them, Edmund Feldman (1970) advocated back in the 1970s a humanistic education through learning in the various domains in art. More recently, the Getty Educational Institute conducted much research and was an enthusiastic supporter of discipline-based art education for people's artistic and cultural learning (Smith, 1989). Project Zero, a long-standing research program at Harvard, tends to confirm that an education in arts can facilitate the cognitive development of the human being (Gardner, 1990). Some other educators also argue that art can be used to foster critical inquiries (Wolff & Geahigan, 1997). However, such educators have focused their attention on the function of art and the benefit of an art education primarily through using art (in the form of art making or art criticizing) as teaching objects instead of as a sort of a subject. That is, educators have seldom explored how art may teach us what and how to teach—the educational and pedagogical implications art-making or artworks may offer.

In this latter aspect, artist and art educator Charles Garoian (1999) has made a significant contribution by developing a performative pedagogy based upon performance art. Using performance works of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and some other artists as examples, Garoian (1999) analyzes how art, especially performance art, can function as a site for cultural reflection and as means of critical inquiry. He also illustrates, through sharing lesson plans, how this performative pedagogy actually happens in his classroom. In this dissertation research, I also would like to investigate how artworks can be read pedagogically—how the selected works by the transnational artists can be used for educational and pedagogical implications in the classroom.

### **Definition of Pedagogy**

Here “educational (implications)” is used by me to refer to the goals and content of an art education. By “pedagogical (implications),” I mean the way the content of a written curriculum is delivered and the concrete interaction that happens in the process of the delivery of the teaching/learning curriculum in the classroom. Simply put, I regard pedagogy as the relationship between the teacher and students, and even the classroom and the outside world as well. This definition echoes that of some European theorists. When analyzing how advanced technologies in the postmodern time have altered children’s conceptions of time and space, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence (1999) propose a new perception of the relationship between the Self and the Other. They argue that “responsibility for the Other is the central feature of postmodern morality” (p. 38), and call for responsibility to children in an education which respects Otherness instead of assimilating the Other into being the same. In the contemporary context, these theorists define pedagogy as “a relation, a network of obligation, a radical form of dialogue with the Other” (p. 41). A similar definition is offered by Readings (1996) who writes that pedagogy is “to think beside each other and ourselves to explore an open network of obligation that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus of debate” (p. 165). Readings (1996) further remarks that pedagogical relation is “dissymmetrical and endless” with the parties in a “dialogic web of obligations to thought . . . [which appears as] the voice of the other” (p. 145). Correspondingly, my definition of pedagogy refers to the interaction within the classroom, including the listening, speaking, and doing—the dynamics between the teacher and students and among the students.

## Frameworks and Principles for Interpreting Art

Yet dialogue in the art classroom exists not only between the teacher/students and (other) students, but also between viewers and artworks. To paraphrase Umberto Eco's (1992) statement, interpretation is to read the viewer's story into the story of the text/artwork—and it is here that Richard Rorty (1992) finds it necessary to re-iterate that texts/works have their own rights and should be treated as “honorary persons” (p.106). In this light, artworks can function somehow as subjects that teach and tell stories. This view can be strengthened through Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism. According to Bakhtin (1981), the relationship between the author and the hero in a piece of literature is dialogic. The author operates as the aesthetic consciousness, and the hero operates at cognitive and ethical levels. The aesthetic consciousness is higher than the cognitive and ethical consciousnesses. That means that the author necessarily stands “outside” the hero while he “consummate[s] the hero aesthetically” (p. 125). Though Bakhtin meant to apply his notion of dialogism only to literary works, I find it also helpful in my encounter with visual artworks as an interpreter. Further, I believe that this dialogic relationship between the maker or the viewer and the artwork takes place through another of Bakhtin's concepts, the *chronotope*, that is, the time and space of the individual or the artwork. In my view, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism supports Eco's (1992) opinion of the “dialectics” between the rights of texts/artworks and the rights of the viewers/interpreters (p.23), and chronotope is similar to what Eco (1992) refers to as the story of the artwork or of the individual. In keeping with such theories, therefore, I look at the stories and contexts of both myself and those of the artworks as well as the artists whenever relevant as I approach the works.

In practice, some art educators have found the practice of dialogue between the viewer and the artwork. For example, in his book, *The Visual Dialogue*, Nathan Knobe (1980) remarks that much as an artist “dialogues with the artwork” at the time of its making, the art interpreter also needs to dialogue with the artwork (p. 296). In the meanwhile, however, just as neo-pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty (1992) states, “all anybody ever does with anything is use it . . . . Interpreting something, knowing it, . . . and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work” (p. 93). I therefore admit that in my interpretation of the selected artworks, I attempt to dialogue with them with a focused interest in mind—to withdraw educational and pedagogical implications from them for art teaching and teaching in general in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Simply put, my interpreting practice of these artworks will observe the following principles:

- understand my own intentions, interests, and backgrounds as a viewer/interpreter;
- understand the artists' interests and intention as individuals in making art in general; and understand their personal and artistic backgrounds;
- respect and critically examine the artists' articulations regarding their own artworks, including the making as well as exhibiting, distributing, and so on, of the artworks;
- understand the contexts of the artworks at the time of interpreting; understand what Baxandall (1985) refers to as the intention of the artworks once created; and
- make a balanced interpretation by taking into consideration all the different voices—the stories and contexts—surrounding/in the artworks as they are brought into dialogues with one another through me in this dissertation project.

## Chapter Three

### Reading Wenda Gu's *united nations*: the Tangled Relations among Language, Culture/Cultural, Nature/Natural, and Nations

#### Introduction

Guided by the principles listed in the previous chapter, I endeavor to interpret a well-known art project by Wenda Gu: *the united nations* (1993-2005). My analysis focuses especially on one piece from the series, *the china monument: temple of heaven* (1998). Before turning to the artwork itself, I first recall my own life experience and hence position myself “nearby” Wenda Gu as a transnational individual. In my self-reflection, I recount Wenda Gu’s cultural and personal background in relation to his art making practice and to the particular artwork under the study. I re-articulate what I mean by the term transnational, and point out that my interpretation of Gu’s work, *the united nations* project and later in the next chapter, *the forest of stone steles* project, is conducted from my idiosyncratic point of view as a transnational.

In correspondence with the multiple views and my life experiences in multiple cultures and countries/places I have had as a transnational individual, I write my interpretation of the artwork in the form of two voices in dialogue. These two voices are indicated by different fonts, one regular, and the other italicized. Just like the numerous cultural influences I have had in my own background, or like some cultures when they meet together, these voices overlap and contend with each other at different times. Though both speak from a transnational standpoint, they represent different expertise and knowledge in various areas of art and art education, especially pertaining to *the united nations* and *the forest of stone steles* projects by Wenda Gu. As revealed below, one voice views Gu’s work more often in connection with the conventionally categorized Chinese art and culture. By contrast, the other voice shows familiarity more with art history and aesthetics in general and relates Gu’s art with other artworks that are made outside the Chinese context per se. These differences between the voices are illustrative of the multiple voices and areas of knowledge I possess as a person who has lived in both China and the United States.

#### Positioning Myself beside Gu and Speaking Nearby

Wenda Gu and I have many similarities in our cultural, artistic, and educational background. As



mentioned before, Gu was born and educated in China, and immigrated to the United States in his adulthood. Similarly, I was also born to two Chinese parents and only came to the United States after I had already finished my college education and worked full-time in China for two years. More significantly, our move from China to another country is a choice of our own—for me, I intended to come to America for graduate study; for Wenda Gu, he wanted to freely pursue his artistic aspiration (Xu, 2003). Due to our life experiences in multiple countries and cultures, I regard both Gu and myself as transnational. However, rather than focusing on the physical movement of national border crossing, transnational for me stands for a type of thinking and looking, a way of life, that is, possessing multiple perspectives *often but not necessarily* as the result of being nomadic in one's living/physical being.

Besides the common experience of autonomous international migration and relocation, Gu and I both can be said to have had a literati-style (art) education. While in China, Gu studied ink painting from one of the last few literati ink masters, learning literature alongside ink art in an art academy (Xu, 2003). As for myself, I was a literature major in college, and my father tutored and supervised me in learning Chinese calligraphy and classic literature and poetry in my young childhood. I was also influenced by one of my uncles who is an art teacher in a vocational school and who specialized in ink art (though later broadened his art practice to various other mediums). Furthermore, in addition to a fondness for traditional Chinese ink art, both Gu and I also developed an interest in contemporary art.

Ideologically, both Gu and I have had a kind of mental switch or transformation. Though we both received the communist/Marxist, and/or socialist education (a Chinese-styled one), the two of us in our adulthood became “westernized.” I myself was born into a Chinese family with both a grandfather and a great-grandfather who were Red-Army revolutionaries under the leadership of Mao and who participated in the Chinese Revolutionary War (1931-1945) and/or the Civil War (1945-1949). But I converted in my early twenties to Christianity. In comparison, Gu, as a person born in the mid-1950s, was greatly influenced by the socialist/communist ideologies and the experience of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). According to an interview, Gu was invited by the Red Guards to paint Big-Character Posters for the revolutionist camp during the Cultural Revolution; even today, he still expresses his admiration at the genuine zeal of the

revolutionists and the common people of that time for lofty utopian ideals (Cateforis, 2003). In the viewpoint of a well-known art historian on Chinese art, both a longing for a utopian ideal and a rebellious and revolutionary spirit were present in those artists who participated in the 1980s' Art New-Wave movement in China (Wu, 2002). Before coming to America, Gu was a leader in that movement (Xu, 1993). However, he has undertaken a significant change in his beliefs and life style around the time of his migration.

As Gu confessed, he learned the capitalist operation after he came to the United States (interview with Zoe Feigenbaum, in Weintraub, 2003, p. 295). Today, as a renowned and financially successful artist, Gu has a manager and hires several assistants who do the manual and/or technical part of the art-making work for him. He also obtains and utilizes commissions to help fund his projects (personal communication, May 8, 2006). Most recently, in his proposed *Heavenly Lantern* project, Gu even plans to cooperate with the “multinational corporations and local corporations” by putting their trademarks in and as part of his art which will enable the trademarks not to “just be glimpsed at in passing” (retrieved on April 15, 2006, at <http://www.wendagu.com/home.html>). In return, these corporations will donate money through Gu to support charity organizations (personal communication, May 8, 2006). Gu has now accepted the reality of a capitalist contemporary international art world, and has also learned to practice his art-making within this system—and is playing it well. In this light, Gu obviously has abandoned the socialist or communist economic and political ideal he and his Red-Guard peers advocated during the decade of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

However, just as I have chosen for many reasons to attend a Chinese church instead of an English-speaking one, Gu may have an ambivalent attitude toward capitalism. This is above all implied by the fact that he has so far never committed himself to any commercial galleries, nor does he consider himself a boss or an entrepreneur of any sort (interview with Zoe Feigenbaum, in Weintraub, 2003). Neither has Gu made any advertising art; nor has he responded to interviewers that his primary purpose to produce art was for monetary gain. Instead, Gu regards art-making as a means to serve a public and thinks that it is his way of contributing to society and to the culture (interview with Zoe Feigenbaum, in Weintraub, 2003). Such wording sounds as if some residues of the socialist ideology still linger on in Gu. Nevertheless, Gu's caution or

hesitation in identifying himself as a capitalist—even when explaining his practice of not using any capitalized letters in his writings (Gu, 2003)—indicates that he does not like the idea of being a capitalist, or at least does not want others to consider him as one. According to Gu, throughout his artistic career, he has never refrained from taking the risk of funding his own work first, even when there was no commission foreseeable. For example, several pieces in his *united nations* project were personally funded (personal communication, March 18, 2006). In an interview, Gu remarked that he “was totally dedicated and sacrificed everything for the art” he wanted to do and that the commercial side “only came gradually” to his awareness; but “it’s still secondary” and he “would never do art just to sell it” (interview with Zoe Feigenbaum, in Weintraub, 2003, p. 303). In several of our conversations, Gu expressed his disapproval of both capitalism and Christianity (or at least some deeds of some Christians), which he thinks are the economic and cultural exportation and hegemony of certain powerful countries, especially the United States in contemporary times.

In sum, I think that in different ways, both Gu and I have, on the one hand, denounced some things we once believed in, and on the other, maintained some other things that are allegedly “Chinese”—a “Chineseness” as defined by those who believe in a static, genuine culture. We also both have *selectively* absorbed things from people different from us, especially with such changes in life as moving to another country. More importantly, in this mixed inheritance from the so-called Chinese and American cultures, there is no hierarchy between them—neither the Chinese nor the American side is regarded or used in a way that diminishes or glorifies the other. Such people, who possess and demonstrate a non-hierarchical blending of cultural heritage, comprise what I consider today’s transnational people.

Thus, there are simultaneously quite a few commonalities and differences between Wenda Gu and myself. While we both are transnational people having migrated from China to the United States, we also differ in many aspects such as age, gender, social status, profession, religious belief, and the significant social events witnessed or experienced by the two generations we respectively belong to. Therefore, I am aware that my chronotope—the time and space I have carried over and still live in—overlaps and only overlaps with that of the artist Wenda Gu. Following the dialogic relationship proposed by Bakhtin (1981), I speak nearby rather than for or

about the artist and his work when approaching *the united nations* and *the forest of stone steles* projects.

### **Dialogue One**

The *united nations* is an on-going project composed of a series of installations enacted in different countries in the world. Among them, the ones that are dedicated to a specific country/locality are referred to as national monuments by the artist, such as *hong kong monument: the historical clash* (1997) (figure 1), *african monument: the world praying wall* (1997) (figure 2), *australia monument: epnagcliifsihc* (2001) (figure 4). The rest are universal monuments and are devoted to the whole of humanity and/or to our time, such as *temple of exoticism* (2000) (figure 3), *babel of the millennium* (1999) (figure 7), *united 7561 kilometers* (2003) (figure 8), and so on. All the installations in the project are site-specific.

*Being site-specific usually means that the physical appearance of the installation is adjusted to the exhibition space.*

But for those that are attributed as national monuments, site-specificity also refers to the fact that the theme of the particular installation is geared to the specific country or the people and the history of the land where it is enacted.

*In every installation made after 1996 (starting with the africa monument), Gu fabricates pseudo languages and writings by scrambling and re-assembling characters from Arabic, Chinese, English, Hindi, and/or other languages so that none of the words or characters is legible. Gu also uses human hair as his primary building material for the artwork, including for the making of the writings.*

The hair is collected through barbershops from *living* people all over the world. In accordance with the issue or issues an individual piece of art addresses, some or all of the hair used in it comes from the country or region where the artwork is erected. In some installations, there is hair scattered on the floor or ground; in others, it is braided, pressed into bricks, or made into carpets. In many installations, the hair is first immersed in glue, let dry, and then hung as walls and

curtains with thickly-woven fake characters in them.

*Hair and language; one being natural and one being cultural, these two elements seem to summarize the components of our humanity—in other words, they indicate the universality, or some commonalities, throughout all human beings and societies: universality with diversity.*

Hair and language in these installations have certainly formed a thought-provoking contrast. Equally, the illegible languages compose another phenomenon of unity with diversity: While viewers can easily recognize that the fabricated writings derived from different languages, they are united on the term that all are universally unreadable and meaningless at the surface level.

*It is frustrating when, attracted by the beautiful calligraphies, I attempt to read them out but only find that these are fabricated and unreadable characters. In fact, to either literate or illiterate speakers of the languages from which these writings are re-created, they are universally illegible. On the one hand, this fact humbles me as a viewer; on the other, I suspect it has also created a sense of connectedness among all viewers, because we are rendered equal in front of the writings.*

We are humbled not just because of the illegibility of these pseudo languages—aren't they symbolic of real-life languages? Aren't real-life languages also human constructions and in a strict sense, all are fabricated? What indeed is the difference between these fake languages in Gu's art and the so-called real languages in our daily lives? Don't we often feel misunderstood when employing languages to communicate? Indeed, Gu's pseudo languages and writings have exposed the absurdity of our human construction and particularly, language as a means of communication in our lives!

*Such a distrust in language as a means to communicate may arise from the artist's life experience of migration to another country. Just imagine how difficult and absurd Gu felt of English when he first arrived in the United States as a native Chinese speaker who barely studied any English! The dissatisfaction at language may suggest Wenda Gu's deep suspicion toward language, culture, knowledge or human construction in general.*

However, Gu actually started faking characters and subjugating established language systems early in the 1980s, when he was still a professor in an art academy in China. During the time, Gu was a leading figure in the “New Wave” avant-garde art movement, which aimed to change the art traditions in the country (Xu, 1993). Often synthesizing landscape and calligraphic art directly into one painting (instead of just juxtaposing calligraphy with the landscape, as ancient literati painters did in the Chinese art tradition), Gu also experimented to create fake Chinese writings by omitting parts or changing the positions of different parts of the character or merging two characters together (figures 5, 6 & 9). This practice was so innovative and unconventional in the Chinese art world of the time that the government banned his solo exhibition of such works on suspicion of anti-governmental political messages (Xu, 1993). But Gu, as an avant-gardist in the New Wave movement, only intended to revitalize the Chinese culture and ink art (Wu, 2002).

In fact, merging or fabricating Chinese characters and writings has been practiced frequently by the common people in modern China. Yet, before Gu’s time, such a practice had never been employed by Chinese fine artists, nor was it ever considered acceptable by the orthodox Chinese art world. By contrast, Gu has not only appropriated the practice of the common people and fabricated words in his own art, he also openly expresses his admiration and respect for their creativity (interview with Cateforis, 2003). In the sense of his identifying with the common people instead of allying with the elite or the orthodox, perhaps the Chinese government’s suspicion and criticism of Gu and his art of that time was justified.

As a matter of fact, in China, manipulating written language for political purpose has had a long history. During the thousands of years of feudal governance, the official written form of the Chinese language changed nearly every time a new imperial family came to throne. Feudal emperors used the change of colloquial or written Chinese as a gesture of breaking away from the political, economic, social, or cultural systems of the previous dynasties. During the Qing dynasty, which was governed by a family from a minority group in China, the imperial court even imprisoned many Han-majority scholars under the excuse of their mis-use of the official language. Even Mao Zedong, the first Communist president of modern China, mandated simplification of the Chinese writing system in the 1950’s. It is well known that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, one faction of the Chinese population, commonly known as the

“Red-Guard”—a term created in imitation of the Red Army since both pledged their loyalty to Communism or its leading Chinese representative Mao Zedong, invented fake Chinese writings and put them on walls to denounce and rebuke those in the opposite ideological camp. These writings are remembered by people even today as the “Big-Character Poster.”

That is how the big-sized hair characters strike me in many of the *un* installations. Gu, who was then a teenager during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was hired by the Red Guard to make big-character posters because of his skill in calligraphy (Cateforis, 2003). Yet, Gu’s own grandfather was a scholar and was accused by the Red Guard as a member of the opposite ideological camp. Therefore, the old man was persecuted during the Revolution and died lonely in his deathbed, with none of his children or relatives daring to be with him toward his death. In an interview, Gu confessed that his complicated involvement and experience in the Cultural Revolution had stayed in his memory and contributed to his interest in exploring language and writings, including the making of fake characters (Cateforis, 2003).

*Yet, people tell that the mis-writings in the Chinese Big-Character Poster were written in such a manner that viewers could still read and understand them. The stories in them, usually fabricated and untrue, were used to accuse and rebuke individuals who differed in their ideologies and beliefs from the authorities. In contrast, none of Gu’s scripts is readable to any speaker of any currently existing language in the world—unless people read them not literally—including the artist himself. By obfuscating the languages, Gu’s art actually renders all people equal and brings them together through the tolerance of ambiguity. In this light, such pseudo writings de facto subjugate the purpose and function of the Big-Character Poster and only parody that practice of Mao’s time.*

Not only is the Big-Character Poster an unprecedented historical invention which happened in China under Mao’s leadership, Mao also mandated cutting people’s hair during the Cultural Revolution. At that time, people were forced to cut their hair into certain styles; even young women had to wear short hair in order to show their willingness to follow Mao. Gu’s use of human hair as the primary material in the *un* also reminds viewers of that episode.

*Hair contains rich political and social allusions throughout human history and across cultures. In European histories, many British and French aristocrats followed King Louis XIII and wore wigs in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later, people in different professions even wore different hair styles so that you could determine a person's occupation and social status just by how he wore his hair (Li, 2000). For example, doctors and lawyers powdered their hair white at a certain time in history; the Hippies did their hair differently from other people—from the so-called mainstream. Hair style often indicates one's political, social, or religious stances, as in the case of the Hippies. At the same time, hair is also individualistic and idiosyncratic. Each individual's hair contains that person's DNA. In addition, the texture, length, and color of one's hair can roughly tell one's race, gender, and age. Therefore, as Weintraub (2003) remarks, Gu's use of human hair as the primary construction material for the united nations project "contributes more than merely the means of transcribing nonsensical script, but unites samples of different people's bodies" (p. 300). By weaving all the hair together in each of the installations, Gu has symbolically achieved, as the project's overarching title indicates, the unification of all of humanity, people in all categories and divisions.*

Furthermore, a number of emperors in Chinese history commanded their subjects to do their hair in a certain way, each making that as a political statement. For example, the Qing emperors required all the males in their country to wear long plaits during the first centuries of that dynasty; but when one young emperor intended to reform the feudalist regime, the people were ordered to cut their hair short (Li, 2000). Mao's command for the Red Guards to cut pedestrians' hair short during the Cultural Revolution might have come from the same mentality. Using living people's hair in his art means that the hair donors necessarily cut their hair short; in this sense, the *un* project has suggested the consistent revolutionary spirit associated with short hair or hair-cutting in Chinese history.

*Prisoners in many countries even today are usually forced to wear short or no hair on their heads. The difference between them and the donors of Gu's art material is that people have had their hair cut out of their own free will and have willingly donated it to Gu. In this sense, the revolutionary spirit embedded in Gu's art is not a top-down authoritarian one, but a grassroots democratic one. Furthermore, hair possesses rich religious associations in many cultures. For*



*instance, both the Jewish and the native-American people consider hair the source of strength or one's root of life. The Bible tells that the reason the famous judge Samson has great strength is because he never cut his hair.*

In ancient Chinese cultural practice, people cut their hair as a symbolic act of taking one's life. If one gives one's hair to another individual, for example, if a woman cuts some of her hair and gives it to a man, that means she is swearing loyalty or declaring to be faithful to that man (Li, 2000). In this light, isn't Gu's using and taking away many living people's hair an act of tyranny? At least it can be read as an indication of utilizing other individuals to build a kingdom/world for the fulfillment of one's own ambition.

*Yet, speaking from another standpoint, will it still be tyrannical if the hair is autonomously given to Gu by other people? Can it be considered building one's own kingdom at the expense of other individuals if those donors share the same vision as the idea initiator? Besides all those social, political, or religious references, hair entails an important psychological effect on the viewer. As a common bodily part, hair helps close the psychological gap between the artist and the audience, local viewers and viewers from elsewhere. Moreover, the line between the art object and the viewing subject is blurred since the building material of the artwork is a bodily part of human beings. Bodily materials such as hair bear an individual's DNA. They can be called the "silent selves" (Gu, 2003, p. 36). Along with the presence of those suggestive languages and writings in the work, this silent persona of hair seems to speak to the audience. Rather than being a distanced, passive object to be judged, the artwork thus assumes subjectivity. As a critic points out, not only is the psychological gap the viewer usually feels with artworks instantly diminished, the conventional relationship between the artwork and the viewer/artist is also altered (Golden-McNerney, 2004).*

But hair is also "the abject" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 19), something to refrain from. It is a bodily material that is constantly rejected, thrown away, yet resists to be entirely discharged. The situation of hair in relation to the body parallels the relationship the artist has had with China and perhaps the United States as well. These two countries both simultaneously invite/utilize and alienate/reject the artist and his art. Yet, Gu nevertheless participates actively in the art scenes of

both societies and has studios in both countries. Aware of his abject status, Gu intentionally has left his hair uncut since he first left China for America, so that he now jokingly states that his hair is half socialist and half capitalist (public speech at The Pennsylvania State University, April 19, 2005). According to the ancient Chinese culture, hair is the symbolic self; so when Gu enacts hair installations in over twenty countries in the world, he builds and “inhabits several global homes with both fluidity and ambiguity” (Golden-McNerney, 2004, p. 20).

*On the other hand, the use of hair also helps the audience to empathize with the artist, and helps other viewers to relate themselves to those local people who have donated their hair into the artwork. After all, hair is a common bodily growth of all human beings regardless of their country, nationality, culture, age, or other divisions. As a bodily part, it easily makes the viewer quickly think of the people from whom it comes. Moreover, audiences can find their shared humanity in such common growths and bodily parts. As the artist describes, the audiences’ responses to the hairy installations “range from severe ‘repulsion’ and ‘disgust’ to puzzling queries, and ultimately, they recognized that ‘it is us’” (Gu, 2003, p. 37).*

*Further, hair grows both outside and inside the skin. Constantly rejected by people, it resides in a between-and-between space. Therefore, hair is between subject and object, interior and exterior, self and other. When cut off from the body and used as the medium for the artwork, hair ruptures and extends the traditional boundaries of the body, disrupts the viewer’s subjectivity, and collapses the concept of the Other—indeed, it negates the Self-Other binaries. As one scholar points out, through the use of hair, Wenda Gu has dislocated the subject and “situate(d) the viewer in a liminal space” (Golden-McNerney, 2004, p. 15). Taken together, the pseudo writings and the use of human hair express an idealistic goal: the universal reconciliation among all humanity, including between the artist and the viewer of his work.*

That may be the meaning of the creation or use of the pseudo languages and hair in Gu’s *united nations* project. Within the project, in the specific context where an installation is enacted, each individual artwork has its own meanings and concerns. For example, the *united nations: china monument: temple of heaven* (1998) (figure 10), in my opinion, expresses the dream of the Chinese community to pursue freedom and equality in the United States, or overseas at large.

*china monument: temple of heaven* is a national monument in the *un* project which was first enacted in the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York. It was made on the occasion of the “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” exhibition in 1998, sponsored by a New York-based nonprofit organization, the Asia Society (Gu, 2003). Interestingly, Gu has used human hair collected from Chinatown, New York, to make this installation (personal communication, April 19, 2005). In the *monument*, different colors of hair are woven and glued together, and hung as walls and the ceiling to form a room-like enclosure with two doors opened in two of the walls. Fake characters and non-readable writings from the Arabic, Chinese, English, and Hindi languages are made prominent in the walls and the ceiling. These four languages symbolize all the languages existing in the world, and allude to the speakers of these languages, hence to the entire population of today’s world. In the center of the room, there are two Chinese Ming-styled tables and twelve Ming-styled chairs, arranged as if in a meeting room (figure 11). In each of the chairs, a video monitor is embedded and a poem is written on the screen: <sup>2</sup>

Ancient wisdom says,  
life is as fleeting as clouds  
you shall sit  
you shall listen  
you shall be silent  
you shall meditate  
you shall be free from gender, nationalities, races, politics, cultures, religions . . .  
you shall fantasize while you ride on running clouds  
you shall have moments of transcending . . . .

Animated clouds are running leisurely on the screen, as if inviting viewers to slow down and meditate. As the poem states, the chairs and the meeting-room-like space seduce audiences to sit down to relax and/or reflect.

*It is interesting that the installation, located in New York, is called a “china monument,” and*

---

<sup>2</sup>The poem is made in Chinese and then translated into English by Gu; both versions are present on the screen.

*named after a tourists' site in China, the Temple of Heaven. The title sounds reminiscent and implies a nostalgic feeling of the artist and of Chinese people who have migrated to elsewhere from China—the transnational and the diasporas.*

Yet, the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, China, was not a tourists' site in Chinese history. It used to be the place where feudalist emperors made sacrifice to Heaven. It was then only accessible to the emperor and his high-ranking attachés—perhaps only a couple of visits in a period of several years. And generally speaking, as a common practice in feudal China, women were forbidden to appear in such places. By contrast, then, Gu's temple in the art project is open to all people, regardless of their background, gender or social status. It is also made, metaphorically, by people of all ethnicities and races and regardless of their age, gender, or religious affiliation—people who visit Chinatown and have donated their hair through barbershops. More significantly, the barbershops are credited with symbolic authorship through a poster which lists their names and stands side by side with the installation itself. This is compared to the fact that artisans, craftsmen, and laborers who designed or built the Temple of Heaven or any other historical buildings for the imperial court in Chinese history always remained invisible and unknown. Gu's practice has obviously subverted the hierarchical, exploitive, and exclusive practice associated with the original Temple of Heaven in Beijing.

*Therefore, this monument contains a democratic spirit.*

This anti-elitist spirit is embodied also in the use of the Ming-styled furniture in the artwork. In China, Ming furniture is regarded as a source of cultural pride. It used to be available only to people with wealth or of noble birth, and represented a refined art in the country (Wu, Wang, & Feng, 2002). Yet, Gu has used this style in the artwork, and surrounded the furniture with hair from people who frequent Chinatown—usually the grassroots people in society.

Ming furniture is also associated with the Ming Dynasty, one of the times China was the most powerful country in the world. During the Ming Dynasty, China produced the biggest ship of the world of that time and sent out a high-ranked official to navigate as far as to the Persian Gulf to spread Chinese culture and commodities (Levathes, 1994). The Ming-styled furniture in the

artwork more or less reminds me of the cultural exportation and imperialism of that dynasty and the country at large—perhaps people from the countries which were influenced by the Ming Dynasty and its culture and arts would feel this even more keenly. By any means, the Ming-styled furniture embodies not only the cultural and artistic achievements of the Chinese people in history, but also the cultural domination of a past dynasty.

More interestingly, Ming is also the only dynasty in the Chinese history that is both preceded and succeeded by a court ruled by a minority in the country. Therefore, people from the majority ethnicity fought fiercely for generations to try to restore the so-called orthodox regime when the minority people took power (Struve, 1998). The transformation of the Ming-styled furniture in the artwork is symbolic: With the video monitors embedded into the chairs, each piece now becomes a hybrid. This time, the hybridized are not between the majority and the minority in Chinese society, but between the ancient and the contemporary, the refined and the popular, and between something generated in China and something born outside China.

*This combination/integration is representative of the situation in today's China, where people can see buildings of different historical and cultural/artistic styles standing shoulder by shoulder, and customs originated in different parts of the world and rooted in different cultures are equally observed. This phenomenon is not unique to China alone; I feel confident to say that it has become the contemporary reality of human societies all over the world—not only does the United States issue a special stamp in honor of an animal each year according to the Chinese lunar calendar, I hear that people native to the northwestern Europe nowadays also celebrate the Chinese new year! Of course, holidays such as Valentine's Day, Christmas, and so on, have gained wide popularity in many parts of the world. In this light, the transformation of the Ming furniture, a cultural and artistic pride of China, signals a change of ideologies from cultural imperialism and hegemony to cultural pluralism and hybridization.*

The quality of hybridization exists also in the pseudo writings in the artwork. Not only are languages originally from different cultures juxtaposed side by side with one another, those in the ceiling are rendered to appear as if simultaneously containing both Chinese-like and English-like letters/characters (figure 12). Though the Chinese language has a variety of writing styles,

Wenda Gu has chosen an ancient style—the Seal Script—to make the fabricated characters. Seal Script is not widely used in today’s China. It is only fairly popular with artists who practice traditional Chinese art—those people are inclined to use this style of writing in seals to sign their artworks. Seal Script (figure 13) is considered elegant and beautiful; yet very few contemporary Chinese can read it. On the other hand, most Chinese can tell whether a writing is Seal Script or not because of its distinctive style. Therefore, as Gu has made the fake letters/characters after the style of the Seal Script, people of Chinese and non-Chinese background alike are equally unable to read them, though they may suspect that such writings are Chinese, or Seal Script writing. The ordinary viewer, whether Chinese or not, may very likely mistake these characters as literally meaningful. Yet, even if one knows that these hybridized Chinglish writings are fake ones, just like the altered writings made from the Arabic, Hindi, Chinese or English alone, their unreadability has only set the viewer’s imagination free. In other words, the pseudo writings in the installation have created a “third space” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211) where different kinds of understandings and fantasies become possible.

*After all, as said earlier, the universal illegibility of these writings has rendered all viewers equal. People are on the same footing not only in their (in)ability to recognize the writings literally, but also in the opportunity to make sense of these writings at their free will.*

Meanwhile, the obfuscation of the writings, especially the seal-styled fake Chinese, implies the absurdity of such human constructs. In the Chinese history, Seal Script was first invented and came into popular use during the Qin dynasty, a short-lived yet the very first feudal empire in China. All Chinese people and even many who are not of Chinese descent know of Qin Shi Huang, or Shi Huang Di, as he called himself. That name means in Chinese that he is the very first emperor, with the implication that his descendants will succeed him one generation after another and that their imperial family will remain on the throne forever. Qin Shi Huang was the first Chinese emperor, and the one who established for the first time in China a nation-wide hierarchical administrative system. Other feudal emperors after Qin largely kept this system, so that it was almost the basic scaffold that sustained feudal governance in China in its two-thousand-year-and-over imperial history. Qin Shi Huang is the emperor who unified China for the first time and mandated the use of the Seal Script as the only writing style of Chinese

throughout the entire empire. Shi Huang also ordered the building of the famous Great Wall and the terra cotta soldiers and horses, the former to defend against his national enemies during his lifetime and the latter for his after-death life. From a nationalist or feudalist point of view, Qin Shi Huang is a super hero. However, today's Chinese people only remember him as a terrible despot. Countless people were killed in building those defensive works for him. In addition, he also buried people of letters alive and burned books and writings that were not in support of his political ideologies. Thus, the Seal Script is closely associated with the conduct of Shi Huang Di and of the Qin feudal dynasty, which represent the ideologies of nationalism and imperialism as well as cruel authoritarian governance. The employment of the Seal-Script style in Gu's art parodies the arbitrary conduct of the emperor; the obfuscation of such writings then unfolds and satirizes the absurdity and atrocity of his policies and efforts of homogenizing the languages and people, suggesting a rejection of the ideologies initiated by the first emperor of China.

*Indeed, in contrast to the Great Wall constructed during the Qin Dynasty, the hair walls in Gu's installations are all thin and light, so semi-transparent as to allow mutual perception from both inside and outside the walls. Compared with the Great Wall, which was built for the purpose of protecting the interests and security of the emperors and their subjects, these hair walls imply a transnational stance, allowing for porosity and permeability instead of isolation and mutual exclusion. If the Great Wall of stones and bricks meandering in China stands for the nationalist ideology, the hair wall in the china monument in Gu's art enacted in the United States symbolizes then a trans-nationalist vision.*

*In china monument: temple of heaven, people are invited to sit down and meditate. However, I believe that the tables and chairs in the center of the installation are meant not only for visitors to rest, but to negotiate and dialogue. The twelve chairs and the meeting-room-like arrangement tend to remind me of the first twelve disciples of Christ, who would pray and share their ideas and experiences before going out to undertake their missions. Thus, the tables and chairs represent the liminal stage, the interval between actions as suggested by the open doors in the wall. In other words, the meeting-room-like center of the installation has formed a space where people can speak out and listen to each other, exchange views and negotiate roles. Rather than containment or exclusion by force, the artwork thus alludes to engagement and transaction, acts*

*preceded and protected by dialogue and negotiation.*

In Chinese culture, twelve represents fullness and totality. For example, each year contains twelve months; each day has twelve *geng*.<sup>3</sup> In China, before the adoption of the use of Christian year, each year is marked by a combination comprised by one of the twelve earthly branches and one of the ten heavenly branches. Therefore, the Chinese people generally think that twelve is a propitious number.

*That may be one of the reasons the artist took twelve years to accomplish his united nations project—it extends a good wish for humanity and implies a desire for this wish to be materialized in reality! The poem on the video screen embedded in the chairs urges people to reflect, to rid themselves of all those human-made boundaries, and to transcend all artificial divisions. In this sense, the artwork is proactive and evocative. I also notice that in almost all of the un installations, the hybridized type of writings, the so-called Chinglish, has been highlighted, by way of their larger size and through more prominent positioning in relation to other types of characters in the work (figures 12, 14, 15 & 16). Taken together, the artwork depicts the linguistic and cultural hybridization of our time, disseminates a transnational stance and perspective, and encourages dialogue and engagement among differences.*

Beyond the content, the artistic strategies the artwork employs have in themselves also embodied the three major characteristics of transnationalism: multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality. In the *un* project, Gu has drawn on his training in the Chinese ink art, and brought particularly his skill in calligraphy into the artwork. However, this traditional Chinese art form of calligraphy has been transformed by Gu. Rather than being made on paper, it now forms an integral part of the walls, ceilings, or curtains of the installations. Originally a two-dimensional art, the calligraphy in Gu's art practice becomes three-dimensional. Like the writing content itself, Gu's calligraphy in the installations is now a hybrid, the child born by the mating of the modern and the ancient, the conventionally considered Chinese and the western.

Similarly, in keeping with the practice of the Chinese literati artist, Gu has integrated multiple art

---

<sup>3</sup> *Geng* is a measure of time in the Chinese culture. One *geng* equals two hours. But this measure system is seldom used today since the country adopted the western measure of time earlier last century.



forms into the same piece of art in the *un* project, such as calligraphy and poetry, and in some cases, even painting as well.<sup>4</sup> However, again, the placements of and the relationships among these individual art forms in Gu's installations differ greatly from the traditional Chinese literati art. In the *un* project, Gu has employed multiple art traditions and artistic or cultural practices originally generated from different places or practiced by different people. For example, the semi-transparent curtains and walls made of hair braids or panels in Gu's installations echo the architectural principles of interrupting and connecting the interior and the exterior spaces of the traditional Chinese gardens located in East China, especially in Hangzhou and Suzhou.<sup>5</sup> However, at the same time, Gu is inclined to transform those traditions and practices in his artwork. In this sense, Gu has created a hybridized art that resides in-between the myriad conventional art traditions and art forms. Because the original art forms and traditions are apt to change and be transformed in Gu's art practice, the new form created by Gu can be said to be in a liminal stage, as Victor Turner (1969) describes, containing both structures—the conventional forms and practices—and anti-structures—the alterations of such forms and practices.

In short, Gu's *un* artworks contain a synthesis of many different art forms and practices that originated in various cultures/places and in different historical times. His art practice has traversed not only national borders but also a variety of cultural and artistic boundaries. For example, a number of installations in the *united nations* project have each included several art forms, such as calligraphy, video installation, performance, and so on. Moreover, the numerous art forms in Gu's art are often not simply juxtaposed side by side but instead fused together, just as some of the Chinese characters and English letters in his *china monument* are fused (figure 10).

This practice is also visible in the art of some other contemporary Chinese-American artists. For instance, Xu Bing often fuses Chinese writings with languages from other cultures and integrates calligraphy or print into installations (Wang, 2004). Another example is Zhang Hongtu who has fused Chinese ink landscape and Impressionist oil paintings together (Wang, 2004). Such practice means that the original art forms often have to experience a transformation when coming

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, the artist claims that the different shapes in his *africa monument: world praying wall* (1997) (figure 2) resemble the continents of the world in an atlas. Another example is the painting of the Union Jack in his *hong kong monument: the historical clash* (1997) (figure 1).

<sup>5</sup> Gu lived in Hangzhou, a city very close to Suzhou, for nine years before he migrated from China to the United States (personal communication, January 20, 2005).

into touch with one another and, at the same time, the art forms become hard to classify.

*Even though people tend to call his artworks in the united nations project installations, the category “installation” itself implies the quality of hybridity. In Euro-American art history, installation as an art form has grown out of the influences of a multitude of activities, including architecture douce (soft architecture), set design, the Zen garden, land art, earthworks, spectacles, world’s fairs, happenings, bricolage, Arte Povera, multimedia projections, and the visionary environments of “folk” artists (Suderburg, 2000). Installation has characteristically disregarded sanctioned systems of classification. Therefore, for convenience’s sake, the classification of Gu’s united nations as installations can be justified.*

The hybrid feature of Gu’s art, as demonstrated in the *un* project, derives from his living condition of residing in multiple cultures/places. Before he immigrated to the United States, Gu’s art was mostly Chinese calligraphy and ink landscape paintings, even though he invented new ways to integrate these two traditional art forms in the Chinese culture. When he did do oil painting or performance, each piece usually referenced specific myths, anecdotes, or practices in one single Western or Chinese culture, not multiple. For example, his performance *speechless* (figure 17), in which he laughed three times and cried three times, imitated some historical figures in the Chinese history. However, after Gu came to America and began to live in-between China and the United States (while also making frequent trips to other parts of the world), his art practice became unconfined by the divisions that exist between nations, cultures, or art domains. During this period of Gu’s artistic career, even one single piece tends to allude to practices in a multitude of cultures or countries, and the cultural and artistic practice in China has become only one part of what his art refers to or is concerned with. For example, Gu’s 1998 performance, the *confucius diary* (figure 18), in which he rode on a donkey and meandered through the streets of Vancouver, Canada, in a costume made of half a Chinese scholar robe and half a Western tuxedo, referred to both Confucius in Chinese history and Jesus Christ and Don Quixote in other cultures. In one word, after Gu has become a transnational, he often practices art in-between the ancient and the contemporary, and the western and the Chinese traditions.

*His art is simultaneously traditional and innovative, conventional and non-conventional,*

*rational and irrational, serious and mischievous, refined and popular, political and apolitical. It tends to blur the lines between art domains and often demonstrates ambiguous and ambivalent feelings toward the cultural or artistic practices employed in itself. Perhaps this is how Wenda Gu lives and feels as a transnational.*

Wenda Gu is obviously deeply concerned with the postmodern realities of our world, including the many transnational issues and phenomena. As a global project that involves more than twenty countries and millions of people, the *united nations* art series has addressed issues of both local and global concern. Though the reconciliation between nations, cultures, and groups of people as represented by the different languages, has been the overarching theme of the entire project, each individual installation is started in close association with the local people and place by way of the use of human hair and the historical events referred to in the artwork. In this light, the *un* project has not only solved the conflict that often arises between the local and the global concerns, but also negated many binary opposites such as the self and the other, the subject and the object, the personal and the communal or universal. In sum, Gu's *un* is an art project created both through and for the transnational in our contemporary world.

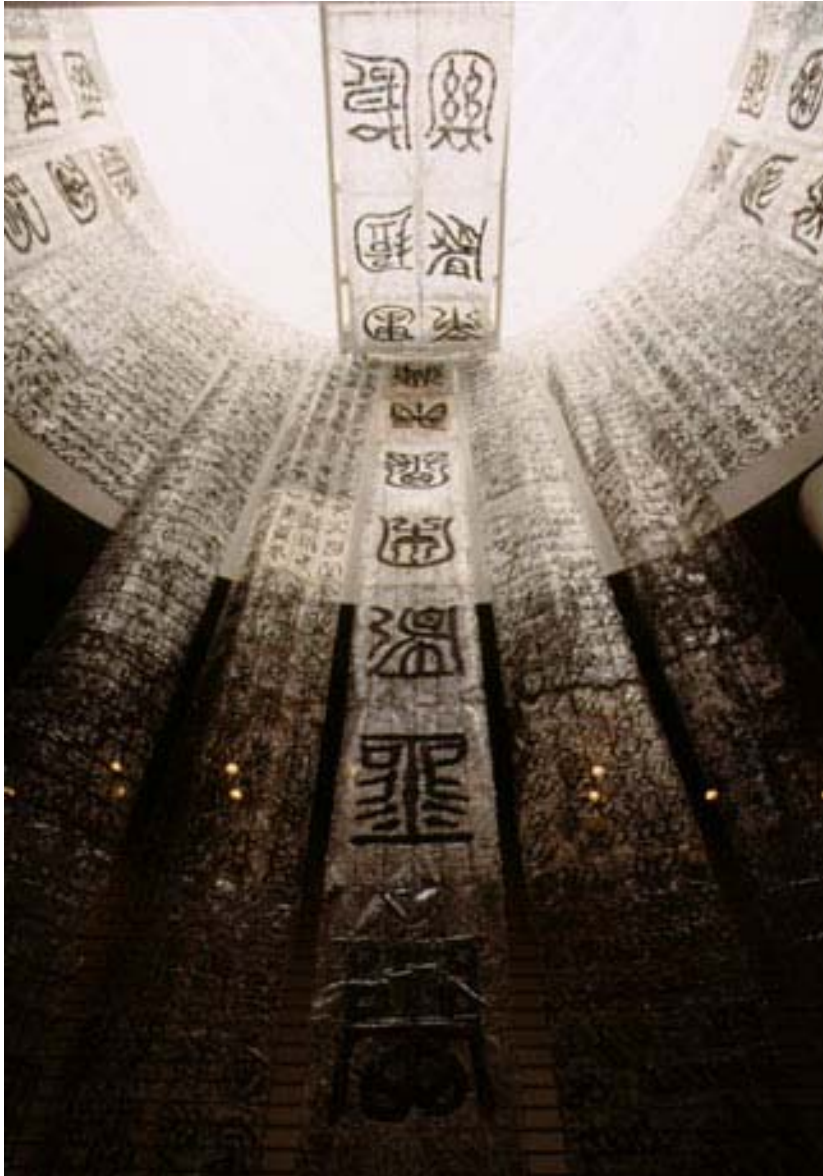


Figure 7: Wenda Gu: *united nations: babel of millennium* (1999). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 8: Wenda Gu: *united nations: united 7561 kilometers* (2003). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 9: Wenda Gu: *the myths of lost dynasties—form a: flying pseudo characters in landscape* (a-5): *transcendence* (1996-1997). Courtesy the artist.





Figure 10: Wenda Gu: *united nations: china monument: temple of heaven*, site-specific installation at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, U.S.A. (1998). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 11: Partial view of Wenda Gu's *united nations: china monument: temple of heaven* (1998). Courtesy the artist.





Figure 12: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu's *united nations: china monument: temple of heaven* (1998). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 13: Close views of examples of the Seal Script. Wenda Gu: *the mythos of lost dynasties—form c: pseudo-seal scripture in calligraphic copybook format* (1983-1987). (upper: single sheet; lower: installation view). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 14: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu's *united nations: babel of millennium* (1999). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 15: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu's *united nations: temple of exoticism* (2000). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 16: Hybridized Chinese-English characters highlighted in Wenda Gu's *united nations: australia monument: epnagclijsihc* (2001). Courtesy the artist.





Figure 17: Wenda Gu: *Speechless # 2*, performance within ink painting installation, Hangzhou, China (1985). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 18: Wenda Gu: *confucius diary*, performance in Vancouver, Canada (1998).  
Courtesy the artist.

## Chapter Four

### Reading Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles*: Translation and Trans-nation

#### Introduction

This chapter is a continued conversation between the two individuals from the previous chapter. The main focus, though, is another of Wenda Gu's twelve-year projects: *the forest of stone steles*. It was first exhibited in its entirety in 2005 in Shenzhen, China, one of the most modernized cities in the country. In the eyes of most Chinese people, Shenzhen is also the most westernized, capitalist city in China. That the debut exhibition of Gu's *forest of stone steles* took place in the Oversea Chinese Town in Shenzhen may not be just a coincidence.

#### Dialogue Two

The *forest of stone steles* project is made up of 50 stones carved with Chinese and English writings on each of them (figures 19-22). According to Gu (2005), the conception of the project started in 1993, almost simultaneously with the afore-discussed *united nations* project. The carving of the 50 stone steles was finished in 2001, but the whole artwork was not completed and did not make its debut in its entirety until in 2005, in the year Gu celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*Is that just a coincidence? Or is there some significance in the number itself that Gu decided to carve 50 stones?*

As a Chinese scholar tells, for an artist as thoughtful and meticulous as Wenda Gu, the number of carved stone steles and even the occasion of the project's first exhibition cannot be completely accidental (Peng, 2005). Though Gu has never explained his intention or reason for choosing to make a total of 50 steles, this number is regarded as very special and significant in Chinese cultural and literary traditions. For example, a bundle of well-known Chinese classics are composed of a hundred or a thousand times this number of Chinese characters. *Lao Zi*, the book by Lao Zi, founder of the native religion in China, Taoism, has 5,000 characters; the *Confucian Analects*, the canon of Confucianism, counts 50,000 characters (Peng, 2005). Throughout history, Chinese people have considered 50 years of age a very important landmark for an individual, a



country or a dynasty. When Confucius studied *The Book of Changes*, he was also aged 50. He claimed that he had by then obtained a keen insight into everything (Peng, 2005). When Wenda Gu intentionally produced 50 stone steles and exhibited the entire project in the year of his fiftieth birthday, the work can be read as a hint that the artist believes that he has gained some insights with age and is trying to share them through the artwork with his audience and the world.

*What is the content of the project? What is written on the stone steles, as you have mentioned above?*

Well, the project's full title is *the forest of stone steles: retranslating and rewriting of tang poetry*. Gu might have gotten inspiration for it from a museum in Xi'an, China, named the Museum of the Forest of Stone Steles. After all, Gu's first and only solo exhibition held in China before his migration to North America, the one that was banned by the Chinese government, was presented in a gallery opposite to the Museum of the Forest of Stone Steles (Cheng, 2005). Some eighteen years later, Gu utilized stones from the same mountain where the Xi'an Museum usually obtains its carving materials, and carved his stone steles in a studio only 20 miles away from the museum (Gu, 2005). The Museum of the Forest of Stone Steles in Xi'an has long been well-known in China for its collection of some 3,000 stone steles dated from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) to the Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) (Vine, 2006). These steles bear either historically important imperial doctrines or decrees, or famous philosophical, calligraphic, and/or literary writings by high-profile scholars and calligraphers. Many were actually tomb stones for emperors and aristocrats made by themselves or their relatives or friends to pay tribute to their lives with flattery inscriptions (Cateforis, 2005; Peng, 2005). All of the steles in the Museum have been regarded as canonic in one sense or another throughout Chinese history, especially when people had to rub the writings on them and use the rubbings as history and literature textbooks or calligraphic models before the invention of printing (Cateforis, 2005; Gu, 2005). These steles are all placed vertically—in almost all cases, on a pedestal—so that they look like trees in a forest and thus the name for the museum.

In comparison, Gu's *forest of stone steles* both resembles and differs greatly from the steles in the Xi'an Museum. Laid horizontally without any pedestal on the ground or floor (figure 23), Gu's

stone steles resemble coffins. On the surface of each of these steles, there are carved four somehow interconnected poems. The poems are written in either Chinese or English, and arranged alternately between the two languages (figure 22). To the far right of the surface (directions are described with reference to the position of the viewer standing at the bottom, short side of the stele) is the first poem in Chinese characters, with the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the dynasty in which it was made. Following that text immediately is an English translation of the poem with this phrase: “Witter Bynner: The Jade Mountain F.S.G. New York USA,” indicating that it is from Witter Bynner’s book, *Jade Mountain*, in which he translated the original Chinese poem based on its meaning to English in 1929. Coming next is Gu’s own phonetic (re-)translation of Bynner’s English poem back to Chinese—the third poem—written in Gu’s self-invented script which I will describe and analyze later. On the left side of the stele surface is the fourth poem, (post-)translated by Gu from the prior Chinese poem back to English again on the basis of its meaning. Altogether there are on the surface of each stele four poems: two in Chinese—one is in standard script, the other is made up by Gu himself—and two in English. These four poems involve three times of translation, two based upon meaning and once based upon sound. In addition, the fourth translation, which post-translates the second Chinese poem back to English, in one sense symbolizes that such alternate translations between sound and meaning and between Chinese and English can keep going on. In practice though, information on the title (*forest of stone steles-retranslation and rewriting of Tang poems No. X* [sequence of the poem in the project]) and date of the project and the like (e.g., “This project began in 1993 and completed in 2001 in Xi’an, China.”) in both English and Chinese, and a Chinese explanation of the method of translating Bynner’s English back to Chinese according to sound, complete the text on the stone surface. With this additional explanation in Chinese only, Gu’s Chinese-speaking audience seemingly has a better chance than other audiences of the artwork to understand Gu’s translating method. As another sign of Gu’s connection to Chinese culture, the starting and ending years of the carving of the stones are recorded by Gu according to the Chinese lunar calendar instead of the solar one, which starts with the birth of Christ. Gu has also put his own identification seal (figure 24) at the left hand corner on the surface of the stele, as a traditional Chinese ink artist would do on a sheet of paper.

Interestingly, all the Chinese writings on the stele surface are placed vertically, which follows the

writing fashion in the ancient China; by contrast, all the English writings are arranged horizontally, in keeping with the common practice in the West. The change of the placement of various writings reminds the viewer of the transnational mobility of the artist and many other people in today's world, people who live in-between countries, language groups, and cultures. In fact, it has also encouraged the viewer to move back and forth at the two sides of the stone stele in order to read the different writings with more ease. In this sense, the artwork resembles the *united nations* project, which invites people to sit, meditate and dialogue, and encourages its audience to be flexible, mobile and transnational.

*And they both contain pseudo characters....*

Not exactly. True that Gu has faked characters in his *united nations* project. Those characters are all nonsensical, unreadable to any viewer. But in this *forest of stone steles* project, the characters are still somehow legible. They are not mal-functional but can be recognized as a new invention and innovative writing script. According to Gu (2005), these characters are a result of shifting, omitting, or re-formulating the radicals in the original Chinese language ones. However, they are written as a synthesis of several writing styles that originated in both the ancient and the modern and contemporary time periods. As a result of the synthesizing, each character looks in some places masculine, or "hearty," as Gu says of the Fang Song style, and in others feminine, or "mellow," as Gu remarks of the Seal Script style (Gu, 2005, p. 31). This fusion reminds one of the poem in Gu's *united nations* project: "you shall be free from gender, nationalities, race . . . and have moments of transcending . . . ." In several senses, again, these characters are hybrid.

*And it also echoes the message of being transnational embedded in the united nations project, for this hybrid writing script occupies the central space on the surface of each stone stele, and just as those fused Chinese-English characters in the former project, such characters in this artwork are also bigger in size than other types of characters.*

Yes, it looks like that the artwork is emphasizing hybridity through highlighting this synthesized type of characters. It gives the viewer the impression that values such as changeability, flexibility, hybridity, and transformability, shall be advocated.

*What is the content of the poetry then? What type of poems are they and what are their meanings and the meaning of their translation and re-/post-translation?*

Well, the first poem on each stone stele is a Tang poem, written more than one thousand years ago. Tang poetry is considered one of the highest cultural and artistic achievements in China—in fact, the ones made during the high Tang period are cherished by Chinese throughout history as a most refined art and the best of the Chinese literary legacies (Cateforis, 2005). In his *forest of stone steles* project, Gu has chosen 50 of the most popular Tang poems along with Bynner's translation of them as his basis for re-/post-translation. These 50 original Tang poems cover all the common themes addressed by Tang-dynasty poetry. These include: lamentations in the minds of women who have lost favor in the eyes of their men, or of men who feel frustrated in their political pursuit; odes to and memories of love and friendship; worries for the destiny of one's country and other nationalist concerns; and nostalgic feelings toward the past and longings for a hermitage or a leisurely life and a peaceful world (Peng, 2005). Interestingly, the poem series in Gu's *forest of stone steles* project starts with a love-sick poem and ends with one expressing the longing for peaceful co-existence and universal reconciliation, as if they were a record of the feelings Wenda Gu had toward his loved ones left in China when he first came to the United States, and his current dreams and thoughts as an individual living in-between the world.

However, the poems re-translated by Gu according to sound from Bynner's English translation back to the altered Chinese appear surrealistic and funny. Typically, the re-translation, that is, the third poem in the text on the surface of each stone stele, results in a poem similar in style and meaning to the following one:

My brother secretly visited guests at Zhemeng mansion, just for soup and buns. My father knows that I stole candy. Don't make any noise! He knows that he is happy when with girls. His wife is not stupid, so she doesn't let my brother be frustrated. He is disloyal, impolite and has bought two concubines. His wife vomited and fainted so Sister De gave her some milk, drew her a bath and put her to bed. He is fond of beating things to death. The one who cursed and disturbed the public now

lives in seclusion at Mang village (A retranslation by Gu of the No. 20 Tang poem in *the forest of stone steles* project).

Yet, the original Tang poem which the above re-translation came from is actually a rather heroic one: 出塞 (Over the Border): 秦时明月汉时关, 万里长征人未还. 但使龙城飞将在, 不教胡马度阴山. The English translation by Bynner based on meaning reads:

The moon goes back to the time of Ch'in, the wall to the time of Han,  
And the road our troops are traveling goes back three hundred miles....  
Oh, for the Winged General at the Dragon City—  
That never a Tartar horseman might cross the Yin Mountain!

Worth noting is that Gu has used both the Mandarin Chinese style pinyin, such as in the spelling of the dynasty and names of the poets, and the international style pinyin, which is widely used by westerners, Taiwanese, and some other Southeastern Chinese populations, in the texts on the stone steles. For example, the Ch'in in the above poem refers to the Qin dynasty established by Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor in China as we have mentioned; it spells as Qin in Mandarin-Chinese but Ch'in in international pinyin. While Gu has utilized the international-style pinyin in the text of his second poem, he has employed the Mandarin style in spelling the names of the Tang poets, such as Li Bai, beside Bynner's poem, and in his fourth poem, i.e., the post-translation of the original poem. The shift and mixture of spelling styles may also testify how Gu moves freely in his ideological map and in the world.

By contrast, the original Tang poem hails the warring troops by addressing them as the “winged general,” and expresses the army's determination that they would never allow the Tartars, a minority bordering on the Han majority during the Tang dynasty, to come across the national border. This ethnicity-based nationalist goal is most explicitly articulated in the last two lines in the poem: “Oh, for the Winged General at the Dragon City—That never a Tartar horseman might cross the Yin Mountain!”

*So, Gu's re-translation of the Tang poetry—the way he translates and transforms the poem into prose, including his alternate use of the international and the mandarin pinyin, has negated the nationalistic and ethnocentric ideologies?*

That is true. To a large extent, Gu has transformed a highly hailed Chinese fine art into the mundane, into a type of visual culture.

*Indeed, the serious are changed into the playful, almost hilarious, and the elitist into the commonplace, the everyday. Some critics also observe that this forest of stone steles project is concerned with the “possibilities, problems and paradoxes of cross-cultural translation and communication, especially between the Chinese and English- language worlds” (Cateforis, 2005, p. 312). What do you think?*

In one sense, it is. But in fact, even people from the same language world encounter difficulty in communicating with one another. In my understanding, Gu's project has illustrated not only the paradoxical realities of cross-cultural communication and translation, but also the “possibilities, problems, and paradoxes” of communication and understanding among same-language speakers, such as the Chinese of today and the Chinese of ancient times. For example, poem No. 2 in the 50 poem series states: 床前明月光，疑是地上霜。舉頭望明月，低頭思故鄉。 That poem was made by the famous Tang poet Li Bai nearly one thousand years ago. According to Gu in his *forest of stone steles* project, Bynner's translation is:

So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed—  
Could there have been a frost already?  
Lifting myself to look, I found that it was moonlight.  
Sinking back again, I thought suddenly of home.

Obviously Bynner has translated the term 床, which referred to the desk Tang scholars used to place their stationery or music instruments on, into the English word “bed.” This is a blatant miscommunication and misunderstanding across cultures and language worlds. However, Bynner's translation was actually facilitated by a late-Qing Chinese, Kiang Kang-hu (1883-1946),

who orally explained and interpreted the poem to Bynner to allow the latter to put it into poetic English (Watson, 1929). Bynner's translation implies that the Qing scholar must have misunderstood and wrongly interpreted the Tang term. Moreover, millions of Chinese people today understand the poem just as Kiang Kang-hu did. Therefore, countless Chinese—common people but also scholars including Kiang—have to some extent misunderstood the meaning of the original Tang poem and created a new one for it. If this (mis-)reading is still minor, a much bigger and more prominent mis-understanding and re-creation occurs with the No. 1 poem in the series: 相思 (One-hearted) by 王维 (Wang Wei): 红豆生南国, 春来发几枝. 愿君多采拮, 此物最相思. Translated by Bynner, it reads:

When those red berries come in springtime,  
Flushing on your southland branches,  
Take home an armful, for my sake,  
As a symbol of our love.

Gu's re-translation according to sound becomes:

晚作詩來得拜睿寺,客目迎斯頗令嘆。  
婦樂形昂猶, 受似攬得菩蘭妾色。  
太闊泓岸啊! 暮賦而福邁賽珂。  
愛思啊, 心波翻浮, 謳舞而樂福。

Translated according to meaning back into English again, it now becomes prose:

Come to Bairui Temple for poetry reading at dusk, welcome and appreciated guest,  
gleeful lady, high spirited feeling, like having orchid and sensual concubine. Vast  
heaven oh! deep shore, poetizing at dusk is a higher blessing than jade, oh! love,  
floating and soaring waves of the heart, sing and dance my happiness.

The original Tang poem has almost been a household poem in China, cited by both old and young, to describe the love between a man and a woman. But in fact, it was originally made to

express the love-sick feelings of the male poet toward his male friend as well as the love of the subordinates for their afflicted emperor who escaped to the south of the country during a civil rebellion (Peng, 2005). However, none of the translations listed above, including the second Chinese poem, has articulated this special context and political implications. Therefore, Gu's serial translation reveals not only the intranslatability between different languages and cultures, but also the communicative dilemma among speakers from the same-language world, or among human beings in general.

*So, if we jump over the English translation by Bynner, and look directly at the first and the third poems in Gu's project, the two Chinese poems have actually illustrated the misunderstandings between people and the malfunctions of language, or its incapability of communication, even between same-language speakers! Isn't this suspicion of language and human construction similarly expressed in Gu's united nations project?*

Yes, I agree. Taking into consideration the political allusions of the stone steles, I think this project actually points to the creation of a third-space in-between traditions, conventionally defined cultures, and the conventional and unconventional in today's postmodern world.

*Why do you think so? What are the "political allusions of the stone steles"?*

Well, as we have mentioned, Gu's solo exhibition of his experimental ink paintings of pseudo characters and blended calligraphy-landscape was banned by the Chinese government for fear of political implications in 1986. That event actually happened in a gallery just opposite to the Museum of the Forest of Stone Steles in Xi'an, China (Cheng, 2005). Years later, Gu used the same type of stones and employed the same stone-carvers who carved many of the steles for the Museum to make his *forest of stone steles* project, in a location not far from the museum.

Mimicking the name of the museum but placing all his stone steles flat on the ground, which makes them look more like dead bodies or coffins rather than a forest, Gu thus has mocked the canonized position of the Museum along with its canonic stone steles and the writings on them. This practice almost signifies Gu's denunciation of the canon and its authority after the Chinese authority had denounced his art years earlier.



In addition, in Chinese culture and artistic tradition, the stone stele is the carrier of a highly respected fine art and has been loaded with rich political and social meanings. At its inception, stone carving was a privilege of emperors and aristocrats, who utilized the stones to record imperial doctrines to perpetuate the feudal and hierarchical social and political order, or to inscribe flamboyant writings to pay homage to their ancestors and friends, or to recount and trumpet their own achievements (Peng, 2005). They are objects to be saluted and looked up to, and, therefore, are usually made higher than a human being and placed vertically on a pedestal. This is especially true of those that bear imperial court documents, or serve as tombstones for emperors and feudal officials. Such tombstones are usually inscribed with flamboyant and exaggerated statements of the achievements and virtues of the deceased. They do not only represent power and status, but also imply the values of servility and obedience.

Throughout China's history though, there are two most noticeable yet blank stone steles. One was made for the first and the only woman ruler of China, Wu Ze Tian, who seized the throne from the Tang dynasty, and the other by the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, who ushered the feudalist governance and established China for the first time as a unified nation. These two stone steles are blank not because their makers or owners intended to be humble, but because they considered that no words could ever describe their virtues and achievements (Peng, 2005; Wang, 2004). Such "wordless steles" and stone steles in general represent thus the authoritarian, hierarchical ideology and the egotistic concept of self identity.

*And the horizontal placement of Gu's stone steles in the project, which recalls Duchamp's "Fountain" to me, has changed the relationship between the steles and the viewer.*

True. Gu's steles are placed flat on the ground and with no pedestal. The viewer now does not need to look up to look at them.

*As Duchamp blatantly criticized the pretentiousness of the art world and raised the question of what art is by his "Fountain," Gu's flattened steles may also have subjugated the values and ideologies represented by the traditional stone steles in China.*

I agree. As art historian Wu Hung (2005) observes, the two artworks by Gu, the *forest of stone steles* and *the united nations*, have both demonstrated an anti-monumentality. Wu states that in comparison to monuments, monumentality refers to the integral elements that lend a building, statue, or any large-scale structure a commemorative meaning to the public. Put in another way, monuments are physical objects and monumentality is the collective memory contained in these objects. Wu (2005) further points out that, typically, official monuments are grand, solemn, and impersonal; they have embodied the shaping and controlling of collective memories of the public by political or religious authorities. However, Gu's *united nations* project, which is light in weight and lacks substantiality, has constituted an anti-monument in both its physicality/materiality and its obfuscation of the languages/writings, hence it has subjugated the social order and political principles represented by them.

*And Gu's forest of stone steles, though solid and enduring, has also overturned the traditional concepts of monument and monumentality in obfuscating the canonic Tang poems and altering the standardized writing styles.*

That is true. The anti-monumental nature of Gu's artwork also lies in the fact that it has deconstructed art itself, especially art forms that are regarded as elitist fine arts, such as Tang poetry, calligraphy and stone-carving in China. As Wu Hung (2005) has asserted, it is not rare for avant-garde art to be rebellious and counter traditional monuments, but it is not so easy or common to subjugate the monumentality through art itself. However, Gu's two projects, *the united nations* and *the forest of stone steles*, have achieved both.

*As I understand it, monuments are generally used for commemorating events or people of the past; therefore, they might be considered a symbol of the ending to something. In that light, aren't the stone steles in Gu's project symbolizing the end of the elitist position of fine arts, the social and political orders associated with them, and the conventional thinking of culture as stagnant and pure and the binarism between the high and the low, the refined and the popular?*

I definitely agree! And maybe the end of the cultural pride of China as well—since now many of

the so-called “cultural legacies” of a country are moving across national boundaries in the world. In our era of globalization, artworks and art forms as well as scientific and other cultural achievements are rapidly becoming internationalized; they have actually constituted what can be called “legacies of humanity.” But especially because the steles are laid flat, they remind people more of death, such as that of the past events or people recorded by them, rather than of life, such as that associated with a forest. If there is anything with life and vitality indicated in the artwork, it should be the struggling birth of the hybridized writing script—the transnational type of characters and hybridized communications on the stones.

*Yes, and, if considered together, the two projects, which were conceived by Gu almost at the same time, can be summarized as celebrating a birth and lamenting a death. It celebrates the birth of a new mode of existence, the transnational, mobile and transformable existence. Meanwhile, it laments the death of the stagnant, the certain, the absolute, of the hierarchical social and political orders, and of nationalist ideologies and conventional concepts of culture.*

Indeed the artworks both celebrate and lament. They also have demonstrated an ambivalent feeling and attitude toward tradition, especially the conventionally defined Chinese culture. We have already mentioned a few in the previous conversations, but let’s just add a couple more details from *the forest of stone steles* project to testify to this inherent ambiguity. First, Gu’s hybridized writing style is partly created on the basis of the seal script, one of the most commonly employed scripts by stone carvers in China and the official writing script on stones and bronzes before and during the Qing dynasty (Wu, 2005). While the imitation of the Seal Script indicates Gu’s reverence toward the stone-carving tradition, its synthesis with other, and more modern or contemporary writing styles implies that Gu is equally interested and determined to innovate and change tradition and conventional practice. Second, as the artist has said, though stone-carving can be easily and speedily completed by modern technologies, Gu has chosen to follow the traditional methods in every step, from the collecting of the stones to the carving and rubbing of the characters (Gu, 2005). Gu was extremely critical in selecting stones, even discarding those that were already in the process of being carved only because hidden clefts were found (Cheng, 2005). All the stone-collecting and carving work was done manually by qualified stone-carvers who had a family history of stone-carving, and Gu required every aspect

of the art of stone-carving in his project, except for the content of the carved poems on the steles, to be faithful to the Chinese tradition (Gu, 2005). Such meticulousness has demonstrated his deep respect and love for this traditional art form in China and for traditions in general.

*I guess such details also include the use of the dragon-scale-shaped carvings around the stones—because the dragon is conventionally a well-known cultural icon of China in most people’s minds.*

True. But traditional Chinese stone steles often use the turtle as a pedestal, not dragon scales as decorations. Similarly, though Gu has put his identification seal in the lower left corner on the surface of each stone stele, such seal usage is actually a practice of Chinese ink art, such as landscape painting, not of stone-carving.

*So, Gu has employed and borrowed many symbols and icons from the conventional Chinese culture, but he has also fluidly adopted and adjusted them for his own purpose, including mixing practices from various art domains to blur the lines that define traditional art forms.*

I agree with you. And Gu has done one more thing that is not typical of stone-carving in China—he has video-recorded the entire process of carving the stone steles and the ink rubbing of writings on them. Furthermore, through the video and his writings in books and websites, Gu has also acknowledged those unknown people who have participated in various phases of the art-making progress.

*This practice is similar to his putting up posters alongside the installations in the un project.*

It is. As art historian Wu Hung (2005) has remarked, Gu’s video recording has not only functioned to preserve the traditional methods of stone-carving and rubbing, which again is a manifestation of the artist’s love and respect for this traditional art, but also lent his art a degree of transparency and democracy.

*That echoes another critic’s view that Gu’s art has explored “the complex relationship between*

*the sense of self and the sense of place,” or, between the self and the other* (Golden-McNerney, 2004, p. 15).

I agree. And such factors, especially the transparent and democratic characters in Gu’s art, are not present in traditional (stone-carving and rubbing) arts in China. In sum, in more than one sense, Gu’s art has built on tradition but altered the tradition. His art practice and the two art projects in particular are more about the birth of new things, such as new artistic and cultural practices, new ways of personal and communal identification, new styles of living and being, rather than imitating or mechanically preserving the commonly accepted and conventionally defined, or repeating and re-creating the old and traditional.

*I think we may summarize that by focusing on the human constructions of language and writing, the two projects by Gu, as we have discussed here, have explored issues about art, culture, tradition, self and other, and identity and place and human relationships in a changing and changed world. Among all other things, these artworks have benignly yet perseveringly alluded to a transnational attitude and perspective toward life and existence in the postmodern era, that is, a be/coming in a third space.*

Yes, his art has tackled issues of social, political, philosophical, and aesthetic nature. While it has deconstructed art itself and asked questions such as “what is art,” Gu’s art also demonstrates a serious social and political concern, that is, how we may live peacefully in this globalized yet diversified postmodern world. Sometimes apolitical at the surface level, the two projects may well be suggesting ways to solve some issues and problems of a political kind. Speaking from another angle, his art has also set up an example on how conventional binaries, such as tradition and invention, self and other, art maker and art viewer, and the divisions between different art domains, can be reconciled.



Figure 19: Wenda Gu: *forest of stone steles—retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*, Contemporary Art Center of Hexiangning Art Museum, China (2005). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 20: Wenda Gu: *forest of stone steles—retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*, Contemporary Art Center of Hexiangning Art Museum, China (2005). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 21: Partial view of Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles—retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry* (1993-2005). Courtesy the artist.





Figure 22: Close view of Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles—retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry* (1993-2005). Courtesy the artist.



Figure 23: Close view of Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles—retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*, Contemporary Art Center of Hexiangning Art Museum, China (2005).  
Courtesy the artist.

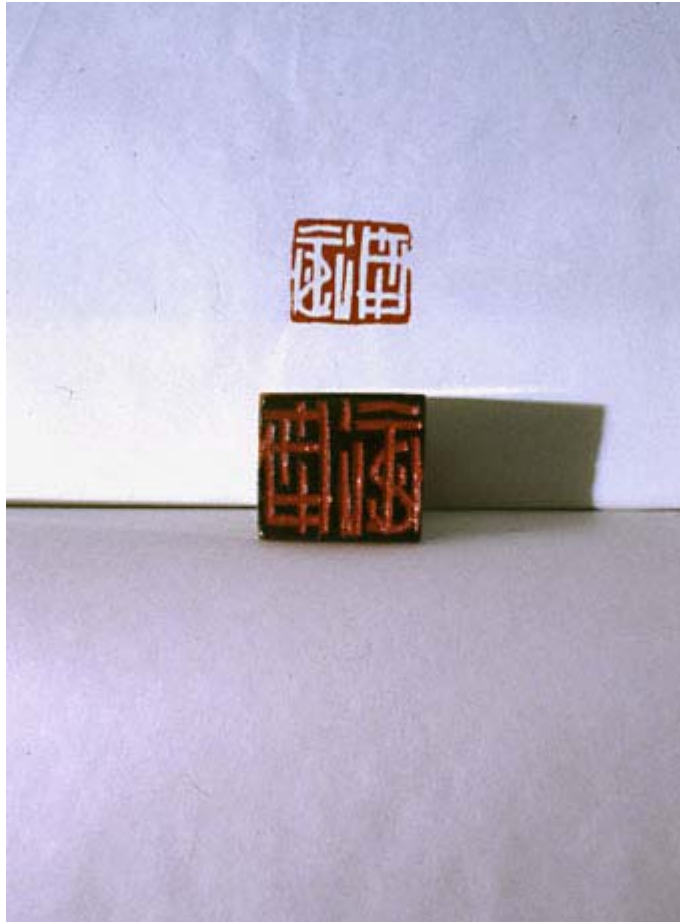


Figure 24: Wenda Gu's seal. Courtesy the artist.

## Chapter Five: Reading Trinh T. Minh-ha's *A Tale of Love: Woman, Nation, Other Issues*

### Introduction

From *Reassamblage* (1982) to *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) to *Night Passage* (2004), Trinh T. Minh-ha's films often have featured women as their main characters. With a demonstrated concern for the fate of women and women's living conditions in different parts of the world, Trinh T. Minh-ha is widely perceived as a feminist filmmaker (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999; Foster, 2005). Yet, a thorough study of her films reveals that there are more aspects than feminism inherent to her art, such as her self-conscious gaze when observing and re-presenting other people and cultures, and her fluid employment of various art traditions and languages in a single work. I also believe these dimensions of her art derive from the identity of the filmmaker as an individual and artist who has migrated from Vietnam to the United States and has been traveling widely and freely in the world—in one word, as a transnational.

At the superficial level, there are several characteristics that may have been overlooked or understudied by scholars who regard Trinh T. Minh-ha primarily as a feminist artist. First of all, the films she has directed or co-directed have not simply used women as protagonists or informants. Of equal significance is the fact that all the identified women characters in her films are international migrants who straddle at least two cultures. This is true with both *A Tale of Love* and *Night Passage*, two fictional films by Trinh. In the “nonfictional” *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, the latter part of the film reveals that the interviews are staged and that the interviewees are actually Vietnamese in the United States, not Vietnamese in Vietnam. The same happens in the documentary *Shoot for the Contents*. Toward the end of the film when members on the filmmaking team talk to the informants in their “real life,” viewers realize that both the female informant and the male calligrapher in the film are Chinese immigrants in America. Interestingly, both these characters articulate mixed feelings towards the Chinese communist ideology, as represented by Mao, and the ideologies and politics they have encountered in the country to which they have migrated. It is notable that some of their remarks, made in “real life” conversations in the latter part of the film, are contradictory to the statements given in the earlier

part of the film by either the informants in disguise or an invisible narrator. It is evident that the film has presented multiple, often contesting, perspectives on the same person, the same country, or a conventionally defined culture, as if one is standing at a crossroads and looking in different directions.

A second feature of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films is that they repeatedly depict traveling, journey, mobility, and allude to notions of time, nomadism, and border-crossing. For instance, *The Fourth Dimension* (2001) opens with a train running in foggy weather, with an off-screen voice announcing "It's time!" Women Make Movies (2001), one of the main distributors for many of Trinh's movies, describes *The Fourth Dimension* as "an elegant meditation on time, travel, and ceremony in the form of a journey" (retrieved on May 25, 2007 at <http://www.vietfilmfest.com/trinh.html>). Similarly, the first presentation of the film titled *Night Passage* as *Night-Pass-age* also illuminates her concern with time. In *Night Passage*, again, the stories and activities of the main characters take place during their journey on a train. Other films by Trinh T. Minh-ha, such as *Naked Space—Living is Round*, imply time and travel by juxtaposing scenes and events observed by the filmmaker in different countries and places. I wonder: What does time have to do with Trinh's films? Why does she frequently depict the practice of travel?

In this chapter, I endeavor to understand Trinh T. Minh-ha's film, *A Tale of Love*, from a transnational perspective. I illustrate that the art and art-making process of Trinh T. Minh-ha demonstrate qualities that correspond to her identity as an individual and artist who has come from multiple cultures and who has lived in or been to many parts of the world. I argue that beside many other things, *A Tale of Love* also investigates issues of globalization in our contemporary world, and conveys a transnational stance which emphasizes the traits of multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality and the embracing of difference.

### **Quivering In-Between Multiple Loves: Women and Nation**

*A Tale of Love*, a 108-minute film written, directed,<sup>6</sup> and edited by the Vietnamese-American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, tells the love stories of a Vietnamese woman, Kieu, in the United

---

<sup>6</sup> Like many of her other films, this film is co-produced and co-directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier. But because of her deep involvement in many aspects of its making, Trinh is generally regarded as the primary author of the film.

States.<sup>7</sup> By naming the protagonist after the leading character of a national poem of Vietnam, *The Tale of Kieu*, the film also refers to a multitude of stories and loves simultaneously. Through Kieu's senses, the film describes the multiple facets of love by smell, sound, sight, and touch.

The protagonist, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu in America, is a 30-something freelance writer. In the film, she is researching, re-writing, and translating the national poem of Vietnam, *The Tale of Kieu*, from Vietnamese into English for a women's magazine. In order to support her parents and sisters back in Vietnam, Kieu keeps house for her aunt in San Francisco and works part-time for a photographer, Alikan. As a double-minority—that is, as a woman and as a non-native, Kieu straddles two cultures, lives in-between two countries, and juggles three jobs at the same time.

In an elliptic manner, the film narrates Kieu's three love affairs, which happen respectively as past, present, and future. In the opening scene, Kieu receives a letter from her mother in Vietnam. When Kieu tells her aunt that her mother is urging her to get married, the film immediately cuts to a frame of Kieu working with Alikan, as if Kieu is thinking of Alikan when being reminded of the marriage issue. However, throughout the film, these two people even hardly look at each other at the same time. Instead, both of them only look when they are not being looked at, knowingly or unknowingly. When the film shows a triumphant smile on Kieu's face after she cannily avoids Alikan's stalking of her on the way home from work, Kieu's claim seems being confirmed that what she loves is Love itself, not a particular human being.

Kieu's past romance is introduced to the viewer when Kieu mistakes an Asian-looking man in the library for her former lover Anh Minh. As Kieu states in a voice-over: "When a forgotten scent hits you, it coils up in you, . . . You're hurled into the dark corridor of buried memories" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 113). Another Vietnamese in America, Anh Minh perhaps reminds Kieu of her Vietnamese origin. As Kieu tells Minh in a scene on a rainy street: "When it rains, the smell of earth and grass always makes me homesick" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 113). Away from Vietnam and her parents' home, Kieu quivers in a nostalgic longing ignited by the rain. However, Anh Minh cannot fully understand her in her ambivalent feelings as a living-in-between person. "Don't talk rubbish!" He exclaims (Trinh, 1999a, p. 113). As Kieu throws her head back to enjoy the rain—a

---

<sup>7</sup> A video of the complete film is available at call number E184V53T35 through the Pennsylvania State University libraries.

symbolic act of simultaneously retreating from and taking delight in her nostalgia, Anh Minh obviously cannot do as she does. This small detail well illustrates the difference between the two in their identity and self-identification: Kieu, a transnational; Anh Minh, a de facto Vietnamese who nevertheless pretends to be without any relationship with Vietnam. The anecdote also hints at the inevitable ending of the romance between the two. When it later turns out that Anh Minh actually has a wife and a daughter in Vietnam (though he does not think his family can ever obtain enough money and board the plane to get to the United States), Kieu resolutely bids him farewell.

If Kieu's love experience with Alikan is mainly through the gaze, looking or being looked at, and her relationship with Anh Minh focuses on smell and touch, then the romance between Kieu and Java starts with a sound. Once when Kieu is trying to call her friend Lynn, unexpectedly, a man named Java answers the phone: "She [Lynn] is not here . . . You have a beautiful voice!" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 101). Days afterwards, Java's voice rings again: "Do you know that for some people living in the Philippines, love begins with touching . . . and kissing the ear, and not the mouth? . . . before doing anything else together, they listen to each other very carefully and very intimately" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 134). As the conversation goes on, a voice-over singing in Vietnamese with an English caption on the screen rises: "To passion sorrow clings and won't let go" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 134), as if confessing to the ambivalent feelings in this romantic relationship as well.

Thus, the film describes the multiple love experiences of Kieu through the multiple senses: smell, touch, sight, and hearing. At the superficial level, it explores the question "What is love?" and the nature of a loving relationship between men and women. This concern is explicitly expressed as Kieu asks herself whether it is love in the relationships she has had with the different men. The film also includes an elaborate discussion between Kieu and her friend Juliet on love and romance. Kieu and Juliet, as well as Alikan, Java, and Kieu's aunt, have all given their opinions on the topic. Yet, the film provides no universally agreed-upon answers. As a reviewer rightly comments, as far as the discussion on the nature of romantic love goes, the film excels in having "asked the questions without bludgeoning a series of answers in response" (Mullin, 1996, p. 19).

However, the love in *A Tale of Love* refers to more than romantic love. Kieu, the name of the film protagonist who is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century woman who migrated from Vietnam to work in America, is also the name of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century character in the national poem of Vietnam, *The Tale of Kieu*. For centuries, the Vietnamese people have tended to take their communal image from this legendary figure Kieu, as is foretold by the film-maker in her other film, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, and re-articulated in the conversations in *A Tale of Love*. Interestingly, in the national poem of Vietnam, the fictive Kieu, who offered herself as a prostitute in order to save her parents' family from disgrace, also had three lovers at the same time. Through the coincidences in the lives of these two female characters and through film protagonist Kieu's work and reflection on that piece of literature, the film intricately weaves the lives of the two women of two different times and locations together. Further, because of the Vietnamese people's identification of their country with the fictional Kieu, Kieu's love stories also allude to the "love life" of the country of Vietnam.

This allusion is made more explicit when the film depicts a prolonged discussion on the future of Vietnam between the protagonist and her aunt. As Kieu mentions the lifting of the United States embargo upon Vietnam and complains that for many Westerners, Asia means either China or Japan and no other countries, viewers are well reminded of the political events in Asia in the passing century and the marginalization of Vietnam in the international arena. "All the businessmen here claim that the future of economics doesn't lie in America or in Europe, but in Asia. People aren't slow to say that the twenty-first-century man will be a Chinese," Kieu's aunt remarks (Trinh, 1999a, p. 125). In the aunt's opinion, or in many people's opinion as she observes, the three continents are represented in the Post-War era by the three leading countries respectively: China, Russia (the former U.S.S.R.), and the United States. As the aunt compares the economic and political standings of the three giants in the international arena, audiences can easily recall the complicated relationships Vietnam has had with each of them, especially during the Vietnam War. The fictional Kieu's multiple love stories then coincides also with Vietnam's foreign diplomatic ties with these three countries.

There is more meaning involved in this country/nation-woman allegory. Though *The Tale of Kieu* is used to teach people the values of obedience and familial loyalty, and the fictive Kieu is



regarded by generations of Vietnamese as an example of female piety and purity (Trinh, 1999b), nobody seems to have questioned her improper behavior and impurity. As an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman, Kieu not only loved improperly by having simultaneously loved three men, but also pursued other misconduct (according to nineteenth-century Vietnamese culture) such as visiting her lover at night. Moreover, she was actually a prostitute and worked in a brothel for fifteen years. Under the pressure from her parents and her aunt to get married, the film protagonist Kieu, the freelance writer in America, decides to translate and re-tell the story of *The Tale of Kieu*, not from the angle to stress the endurance of that woman or any other woman who is under oppression, but to tell it with an emphasis on Kieu's resistance and her ability and determination to choose her own path.

Thus, nineteenth-century Kieu's having three lovers at the same time gains new meaning. Seen in the light of gender politics, it is then no simple act of promiscuity, but an act of resistance—resistance against the patriarchal oppression from both her parents and male-dominated society (Verhoeven, 1998). Taking into consideration the parallel between the love stories of Kieu and the foreign relationships of Vietnam, the practice of resistance of Kieu is also referential of Vietnam's efforts of countering hegemony in international affairs. Therefore, as Kieu constructs her subjectivity through her multiple loves, the peripheralized country/nation has also exercised its sovereignty and autonomy by forging subtle diplomatic ties with a multitude of countries simultaneously. The common practices of negating purity and resisting singularity then characterize the fictional Kieu, the film protagonist, and the country of Vietnam.

However, there is also a fundamental difference between the fictive Kieu and the film character. While the fictional woman cried her eyes out at her fate of displacement and exile, albeit within the same country, the film protagonist in the United States has demonstrated more ambiguous feelings toward Vietnam and her kin in that country. As shown in the film, Kieu smells and caresses the letter from her mother written from Vietnam. She also confesses on another occasion that when it rains, she is reminded of her native country. Yet, she nevertheless chooses to stay in the North America while faithfully sending money to Vietnam to subsidize her relatives there. However, at another time, Kieu wears “an annoyed expression” from a day-dream and “mouths words almost inaudibly: ‘Mother, get off my back’” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 140). Obviously, compared

to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu holds ambivalent attitudes towards her native country as well as her kin. She autonomously decides to live in a host country and prefers an in-between lifestyle. Kieu's ambivalent attitudes and mixed feelings characterize her more as a transnational who possesses the qualities of multiplicity and hybridity than a nationalist who pledges loyalty to one nation-state. More importantly, Kieu is not absolutely loyal to either Vietnam or America. In her criticism of the politics of both countries, she again testifies to her claim that she loves Love itself, not a particular individual—or by extension, a particular country/nation. Thus, *A Tale of Love* demonstrates through Kieu a fluid transnational stance rather than a nationalist ideology. Moreover, by casting the role of Kieu as both a woman and a transnational immigrant, and bestowing the name Kieu with multiple references which emphasize the trait of multiplicity in each one of them, the film intricately blends the feminist and the transnational stances together.

### **Janusian Looking: Gendered Senses, Re-humanized Camera, and Other**

Paralleling the love affairs of some women, especially women who are re-located, with the love-hate relationships a marginalized country has had with certain political and economic powers in the world arena, *A Tale of Love* blurs the boundaries between the public and the private, the communal and the individual. Kieu's assertion that the fictional Kieu, as well as herself, is "in love with Love, not with a Prince Charming" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 148), is a political stance declared and practiced by the transnational and the oppressed woman. Therefore, under the disguise of a romantic movie, Trinh T. Minh-ha actually conducts "abstract political criticism" (Foster, 2005, p. 180) in *A Tale of Love*.

This practice illustrates what Trinh T. Minh-ha means to "make films politically" (Spangler, 1993, Retrieved on May 26, 2007 at

[http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent\\_image/issues/1993-12/print\\_version/trinh.htm](http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent_image/issues/1993-12/print_version/trinh.htm)).

According to Trinh, making films politically and making political films are different. The latter happens when a film explicitly addresses political themes through the depiction of the life of a political figure or significant events in history. But a film can be made politically even when it is about the most mundane or intimate practice in the daily life. As *A Tale of Love* analyzes the nature of the relationship between Kieu and her lovers and that between Vietnam and other

countries, the film is politicized to an extent far beyond conventional romantic movies can reach. As a film-maker who is widely labeled, willingly or unwillingly, as a feminist, Trinh demonstrates a particular sensitivity to the gender issue in *A Tale* and politicizes the film on a number of fronts.

*A Tale of Love* investigates gender primarily from the point of view of how different genders understand and approach love. It is interesting to note that even the senses through which men and women experience love are roughly divided according to gender. Men who are of the patriarchal mindset, as represented by Alikan the photographer, describe and conceive of love exclusively through gaze. “Every story of love is a story of voyeurism,” Alikan declares (Trinh, 1999a, p. 99). Furthermore, he commands, “Don’t let me see you watching me while I shoot” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 99). Though there are men who are not aggressive in their gaze, the film implies that patriarchal men describe love only through the eye. It is also worth noting that Java, the only male depicted as not objectifying women by the gaze, shares his name with a place in the Indonesian islands. Like the meanings derived from the association of the name Kieu with the country in Vietnamese culture, the episode about the name Java may as well suggest that some marginalized people and groups are capable of respectfully feeling, presenting, and representing others through alternative means instead of objectifying them as the Other.

The film also illustrates that, as men look and require not to be looked at, women, instead, experience and remember love mostly through smell and touch. “Behind every perfume lies a love story . . . .” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 142). “Some break into your life whether you like it or not . . . . Others pass with time, you forget the fragrance, until one day, it returns as the trace of a relationship, blurs past and present, makes time stand still,” Juliet states poetically in the film (Trinh, 1999a, p. 118). Meanwhile, we see Kieu smell Alikan’s clothes when nobody else is present. In keeping with her propensity for experiencing and expressing love through other senses than the gaze, Kieu says satirically in a conversation with Alikan, “She’s all flesh and body. He is the head, the mind, the thinking eye. That is not new, is it?” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 130). Such remarks demonstrate that Trinh T. Minh-ha intentionally genders the senses in the film, and that her depiction of how the women approach love serves as a negation of the male gaze. Kieu’s words resonate strongly with the well-known statement in Barbara Kruger’s art, “Your gaze hits

the side of my face” (Barrett, 2000, p. 89). Clearly, the film takes up a feminist stance that criticizes and resists the objectification and oppression of women by men through the gaze, as analyzed by film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989).

Besides the male gaze, *A Tale of Love* describes or implies several other types of gaze. In the film, there are places where women are depicted looking at other women, or looking at men. When Kieu one day unexpectedly walks into the studio, Alikan happens to be working with another female model who is posing naked. Kieu hides herself behind the curtain and looks without being looked at. Interestingly enough, in the stalking act mentioned before, details show both Alikan and Kieu putting on a pair of sunglasses. Evidently, Alikan did it in an attempt to stalk Kieu and to look without being looked at. But, Kieu, who put on the sunglasses after she had successfully rid herself of Alikan’s stalking, may be parodying Alikan’s behavior and celebrating her victory over him in the stalking game. But it could, the film suggests, also be that she donned the sunglasses out of self-conscious guilt of having acted as the voyeur, albeit in revenge. Again, Kieu displays ambivalent feelings, this time toward her own act.

The difference between Kieu and Alikan in their attitudes toward their own exploiting gaze at others derives from their different identities. In the film, Alikan represents the privileged male who occupies the social space as the boss, the thinker, the unchallengeable observer. Kieu, instead, is a female. She is the hired hence the one to be observed, monitored, and judged, as is the rule held in society. Therefore, as Trinh T. Minh-ha states (1989), when the slave steals away the master’s privilege, a doubled sense of guilt occurs. However, Kieu’s keen self-awareness also results from her status as an individual living in-between. As an immigrant in America, Kieu no longer comfortably lives in a self-satisfied single culture. She is now a hybrid of the Vietnamese and American cultures. Standing at the threshold of the two cultures, she is more aware of the differences between them and she can more soberly observe which part of her is more Vietnamese than American, or vice versa. Faced with the different norms and values generated in the two societies, she observes how her subjectivity metamorphoses in correspondence to the social and cultural settings she operates in. Yet at the same time, as an intruder who steals away others’ culture, Kieu develops a stronger sense of guilt, just as the slave does.

Other gazes described in *A Tale of Love* include Kieu's aunt watching Kieu taking a bath under the moon. The aunt is also looking without being looked at. In another scene, a neighbor (who is a woman) secretly peeps from behind the window at a teenage girl who slides down a ladder to meet with her boyfriend. If we understand Kieu's avoiding Alikan's stalking and wearing sunglasses as an act of women's resistance against male objectification and oppression, then, the depiction of all these additional gazes by various female characters illustrates that not only men but all people are capable to objectify another human being by the repressive gaze. Together with Kieu's looking at Alikan, the featured gaze of the women in *A Tale* not only parodies but ultimately subjugates the particular male gaze.

Yet, the most disturbing gaze for the viewer is none of the above types. It comes instead when Kieu, or sometimes a young Asian-looking girl, who is supposedly the child Kieu, looks directly into the camera, into the eyes of the moviegoers. Looking directly at us—people who are watching the film in the theater—the woman/girl wears a mysterious, mischievous smile. What is she smiling for? Why the look? Perplexed for a while, viewers may realize that in her gaze, our privilege as the audience to “look without being looked at” is taken away. Instead, the observer now becomes the observed, just as in the stalking game between Kieu and Alikan. As Kieu self-consciously looks at others in the film, her direct look at the camera also forces the audience to look at him- or her- self while looking at her. Suddenly, we become self-conscious just as Kieu does, and we may even find that the fixed, self-sufficient subjectivity we assume we possess is not true.

Another scene is even more unsettling. Two characters, one man and one woman, are both blindfolded by pieces of cloth. The man is caressing the woman. The scene is cut into a narrow strip, as if one is watching the act from behind a door. As the man's hand moves slowly on the woman's breast, the rest of the screen remains blacked out. From time to time only the red color of the cloth that blocks the characters' eyes appears prominent on the screen, which inevitably reminds the viewer of the absence of the characters' ability to gaze at each other. Meanwhile, there is no background sound or any voice during the caressing act. The silence only enhances the nerve-tingling effect, as if one is holding one's breath while watching. But, who is watching? Both characters are blind-folded; there is no male or female gaze whatsoever in the film for the

moment. By contrast, only the audiences—you and me—are watching. “Every story of love is a story of voyeurism,” Alikan’s remark returns to our ears. It is then not too difficult for us to realize that we, the movie viewers, are the very “voyeurs” the film critiques.

Therefore, I believe that *A Tale of Love* examines the gaze of people at one another and, at root, investigates the relationship between the Self and the Other. When conversing on the issue of voyeurism and photographic representation, Alikan remarks “Show them and look at them, and we all become *voyeurs*” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 99). Clearly, Alikan’s comments are made not only in front of Kieu, but also directed to the audience in the cinema, the team filming (including the cast), and even the people who read magazines with posed images of women like Kieu. Through Alikan’s comments, many people, those who “show (produce)” or “look at (consume)” objectified images of women, are de facto the “voyeur.” Since the film equates the role of the woman with that of Vietnam, and by extension, any nation being observed, such critique on gaze also applies to the ethnographic eye. Given Trinh T. Minh-ha’s earlier work in the field of ethnography and her first documentary, *Reassemblage*, we can conclude that the filmmaker also comments the objectifying gaze in conventional approaches of ethnography, and at large, the way one culture or individual looks at another culture or individual.

Furthermore, when Kieu looks at the camera and when Alikan makes his above-mentioned remarks, they are both first of all targeted towards the shooting staff—the cameraman, the film director, and other crew members. That means, the gaze of the filmmaker is not exempted from the critique and criticism by the film itself. From Trinh T. Minh-ha’s standing point, such examination in and by the film then constitutes an act of self-reflection. Just as Kieu looks at herself and ponders on her own gaze at others in the film, Trinh T. Minh-ha also problematizes her own gaze in making the film and re-presenting others. Therefore, instead of treating it as an either/or issue, the film investigates and problematizes all types of gazes involved in the film, which also alludes to the many gazes in everyday life, especially when cultures or people come together to look at each other. In short, *A Tale of Love* has embodied what Rothenberg (1979) refers to as “janusian thinking” (p. 55)—the practice of looking simultaneously in multiple directions like the Roman god Janus.

This reflective and reflexive janusian thinking most likely occurs when one stands at a crossroad and has the need and the chance to choose. This is the case of the transnationals who are faced with multiple cultures at one time and are willing and able to choose freely from the multiple choices offered by the different cultures or societies. At the juncture of these differences, the transnationals necessarily look in multiple directions to judge the compatibility and decide on whether or how to adjust the self or move on to another station. Therefore, in relation to the multiple cultures, a transnational necessarily positions him- or her- self as an insider-outsider, looking simultaneously at both the societies/others and the self. As Richard Schechner (1982) states, “Sometimes we’re in. Sometimes we’re out of it. Even when we’re out of it; and even when we’re in it, we’re out of it watching ourselves in it” (p. 122). In the film, Kieu looks at herself looking at Alikan. She also looks at herself examining the fictive Kieu. Both relating to and distinguishing herself from the fictional Kieu, the writer Kieu constantly reflects on her own life when re-writing and reflecting on the life of another woman. Analogously, while commenting on the gaze of others, Trinh T. Minh-ha also reflects on her own gaze as a filmmaker. In that sense, she is similarly engaged in janusian thinking, simultaneously watching others and watching herself watching others.

With this reflexive gaze, Trinh T. Minh-ha problematizes her own position as a film maker. When the cinema audience is confronted by Kieu’s gaze looking directly at the camera, not only is the exploitive, repressing gaze of the audience subverted, but the magnetic illusion of a *revealed* world in the film, accelerated by the darkened theater, is also shattered. As Peter Lehman (1984) points out, the looking-back of film characters alludes to the process of production and projection, hence, it uncovers the *constructive* nature of the fictional world on the screen. Using Leni Riefenstahl, director of *Olympia* and *Triumph of the Will*—two films that express the beauty of the Aryan ideal developed by Adolf Hitler and the ruthless power of the Third Reich—as an example, Judith Redding and Victoria Brownworth (1997) remark that filmmaking “is, inevitably, intensely political” (p. 5). They further state that by searing the images of the experiences of the film characters into the visual memory of the audience in the darkened theater, the film director “presents a vision so complete that the viewer is immersed” (Redding & Brownworth, 1997, p. 5). In contrast, in making the film character look back at the audience in *A Tale of Love*, Trinh T. Minh-ha intentionally brings the viewer to a self-awareness

and an awareness of the existence of the camera and the film director. While the look of the character at the audience shatters his or her autonomous self-sufficient subjectivity, it also transforms the audience from a passive viewer into a reflective and reflexive thinker. Once becoming a reflexive and reflective subject, the audience then possesses the opportunity to judge and decide whether or not to adopt the vision presented by the filmmaker. As a result, the manipulative power of the filmmaker is undermined.

In that light, *A Tale of Love* intricately alters the hierarchical and exploitive relationship between and among the film director/cameraman, the actors, and the audience. In fact, viewers can notice that at times, as in the dancing scenes with Kieu and Juliet, the actors are coming in and out of the frame while the positions of the objects in the background remain unchanged. This means that the actors and the camera are performing independent of each other. On the one hand, the camera (lens), rather than stalking the actors or being subordinated to their movement, is placed in a pre-designed position, and works at its own pace. On the other, the actors, rather than being circumscribed by the camera lens, act on themselves as well. Unlike the conventional positioning of the camera and the actors in commercial movies, these two elements in *A Tale* have formed an equal and mutually respectful relationship. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1984) points out, the use of filming technologies is not ideology-free. On the surface, the re-positioning of these elements in the filming process resonates with the ideology embedded in the scenes of the film in which Kieu resists Alikan's stalking and subverts the male gaze. It represents another strategy of Trinh T. Minh-ha to make films politically. At a deeper level, I believe that the dynamic among the camera, the film director, and the actors in *A Tale* is suggestive of the relationship Trinh T. Minh-ha would like to advocate as a transnational individual and artist when different cultures and groups of people encounter one another.

### **Re-appropriating Languages and Creating Liminal Spaces**

Besides the changed interrelationship between the camera and the actors, Trinh T. Minh-ha also politicizes *A Tale of Love* in numerous other aspects. As a film claiming to be a tale of love, which indicates that it is a movie about romance, *A Tale of Love* is unexpectedly devoid of love-making scenes that characterize conventional romantic films. Moreover, *A Tale* features no scene of Kieu and her lovers looking each other in the eyes at the same time. In Hollywood movies, in



contrast, romantic love is frequently depicted through such acts. Julia Kristeva (1977), when stating that the medieval concept of love can be defined as “coming together to gaze narcissistically into each other’s eyes” (p. 63), suggests that the gaze of lovers into each other’s eyes is, at root, a narcissistic type of gaze. Derived from the mythological figure Narcissus, one who can only look at either the self or the world but not both at any one time, the narcissistic gaze represents, therefore, a counter-act to more transnational janusian thinking. The annihilation of such a gaze in *A Tale* then is not only consistent with the thinking the film itself demonstrates and with its criticism of various types of gazes, but also enables the film to part company from commercial romantic movies.

Meanwhile, again unlike commercial romantic movies, *A Tale of Love* has no clear storyline. As Gwendolyn Foster (Trinh, 1999c) notes in her interview with the film-maker, toward the middle of the film, the narrative becomes increasingly less linear with Kieu being depicted as writing and daydreaming, thinking about her writing and fantasizing. At times, viewers can hardly even tell whether one scene is from Kieu’s memory or is her fantasy. With a number of jump cuts, Kieu’s three love stories unfold in an intermittent, elliptical, and surreal manner, creating a tangled web of past, present, and future events. Such a way of telling the story disrupts the traditional narrative order. When commenting on art films, David Bordwell (1985) suggests that questioning the classical mode of storytelling is key to film art. He writes, “In the art film . . . the very construction of the narration becomes the object of spectator hypotheses: how is the story being told? Why tell the story in this way?” (Bordwell, 1985, p. 210). Indeed, the discrete narration of *A Tale* corresponds to Kieu’s life as a woman living in-between her multiple lovers and working on multiple jobs. But at root, in my viewpoint, the difficulty in straightening the narrative line of Kieu’s love experiences derives from the difficult position Kieu occupies simultaneously in America and Vietnam. As a transnational figure, one is necessarily faced with both opportunities to resist and negotiate and the challenge to remain un-totalized, un-flattened.

However, such an unconventional narrative frustrates the viewer who expects to watch a Hollywood-type romantic movie. For example, a reviewer writes that, though *A Tale of Love* has a visual grace, it is “singularly lacking in drama” and is “a decidedly uncinematic venture” (Klady, 1995, p. 11). Unlike in commercial movies, Kieu’s plausible romances start and develop

quietly and uneventfully. Even worse, her love stories, as the film protagonist confesses herself, are all without “a proper climax and ending” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 147). As Kieu tells Juliet, a friend who believes only in great love as between Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, she prefers “the less definite ending of *The Tale of Kieu*, which blends love and friendship” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 148), not the typical ending in marriage or death as in Hollywood movies. Therefore, in an indirect way, both in terms of the trajectories of the film protagonist’s love life and the narrative style of the film, *A Tale of Love* critiques commercial romantic movies and the various conventions they have established. At the same time, it questions the viewers’ expectation of romantic movies and their understanding of the conventional formula of commercial cinema. Much like the alternate use of the camera and background objects in relation to the actors, which challenges the perceptual system of the viewer, the narration and atypical endings of Kieu’s love stories alter the viewers’ perception of themselves as movie-goers and of the world, including the world of the cinema.

As mentioned before, Kieu’s work on *The Tale of Kieu* emphasizes the fictive woman’s resistance rather than her obedience. Through her re-telling and re-writing, the film protagonist actually re-appropriates that literary work. In an interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha, Homi Bhabha states that many feminists and other activists have employed re-inscription in their social pursuits. He further explains re-inscription as “re-writ(ten) differences without totalizing them” (Trinh, 1999d, p. 20). In agreement with Bhabha’s definition of the term, I consider that Trinh T. Minh-ha has re-appropriated and re-inscribed film/ing, especially romantic film, to advance a combined feminist, transnational cause. In *A Tale of Love*, Kieu re-inscribes the classic literature of Vietnam by re-writing and re-interpreting its ending and problematizing the fictional Kieu’s status as “a proper wife” after marriage (Trinh, 1999a, p. 148). Kieu interprets love, the legendary Kieu’s love, not as “a resting place” (Trinh, 1999a, p. 148) but a location where both loyalty and betrayal dwell. The facts that the fictional Kieu simultaneously loved three men and that she also had other misconduct become prominent in the protagonist Kieu’s translation. However, such aspects of the traditional literature are highlighted only to stress the fictive character’s spirit of resistance and self-determination. In such light, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu appropriates the 19<sup>th</sup>-century figure and re-inscribes the literature to her interest.

Likewise, in *A Tale of Love*, Trinh T. Minh-ha tells the protagonist Kieu's love stories in a manner different from commercial movies. As mentioned earlier, the film contains no love-making scene or the narcissistic gaze. It also narrates Kieu's multiple loves in a fashion different from the conventional romantic movies. Equally true, none of Kieu's loves ends in the conventional manner—in marriage or death, as depicted by commercial movies. In fact, the film ends all of a sudden with Kieu singing sillily in the middle of the night while her aunt commands off-screen, "Kieu, that's enough!" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 149). Just as Kieu says of her re-writing of *The Tale of Kieu*, there is no "happy ending" in the film itself (Trinh, 1999a, p. 148). In her politicizing of various aspects of the film, Trinh T. Minh-ha actually appropriates the medium to her own purpose. Even, the title of the film results from her act of appropriation, because love in the film is obviously used to refer to more than romantic relationships. According to the film, love, Kieu's love, is "not just a strong feeling" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 147), but contains ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes. Kieu implies that her definition of love encompasses both loyalty and betrayal. As illustrated by the film, such a relationship exists between different types of entities, including human beings and countries/nations or cultures. Perhaps the title *A Tale* is not simply an imitation of the title of the literary work, *The Tale of Kieu*; it may also imply the difficulty in realizing and/or maintaining a certain type of relationship, between people or between nations. Yet, whatever the meaning or purpose in such a title, Trinh T. Minh-ha has cannily played with the words and re-inscribed the genre of romantic movies to conduct political criticism.

Similarly, such appropriation exists in the making, distributing, and exhibiting processes of the film. As a movie, *A Tale of Love* borrows from the filming techniques and distribution system of the film industry. However, through its different use of the camera, the altered relationship between the cameraman, the director, and the actors (and even the viewer), it subverts the hierarchical relationship involved in commercial movies and critiques the deceptive nature of the cinema. Employing the art form of the film, *A Tale of Love* questions viewers' consumption of the film and exposes the manipulative power of the dark theater itself. This practice, as the reverse gaze of characters at the viewer, is not only an act of reflexivity of the film as an art form, but also a re-inscription of this art by the filmmaker (Trinh, 1999d).

As Trinh T. Minh-ha informs, she tends to use actors who are not well-known, or are just

amateurs. However, she also recruits those who participate in the commercial film industry and charge the regular pay to work for non-monetary purposes for independent movie makers. Kathleen Beeler, the director of photography for *A Tale*, is such an example. She is active in the commercial realm, yet is willing to work almost for nothing for Trinh (Spangler, 1993, Retrieved on May 26, 2007 at [http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent\\_image/issues/1993-12/print\\_version/trinh.htm](http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent_image/issues/1993-12/print_version/trinh.htm)). In the sense of making use of the practices typical of either commercial or independent films, it can be said that Trinh T. Minh-ha has created a liminal space and stands in-between these two realms in her filming practice.

In his book, *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner (1969) identifies three stages in many tribal rituals. The middle stage during which the entity is ready to transform into another state featured with established norms and values is the liminal stage. It is the transitional state. Turner (1969) explains that during this stage, the entity contains both “structure” and “anti-structure” (p. 162). It is marked by the co-existence of different types of social relations, norms, values, and practices. In the filming process and product of *A Tale of Love*, this trait of liminality is prominent. The film is made independent of commission or supervision from such entities as the Hollywood. Yet, it takes advantage of people who also work in the commercial movie industry. It similarly invites consumption, though not of a passive type, by the public. And, it employs various filming and editing techniques such as lighting, background design, sound track, and cutting to stimulate the multiple senses of the viewer. However, it also involves a great deal of alteration and invention in its use of such techniques and in its visual and audio representations. For instance, at times the sound track is rendered intermittent in order to create and reinforce a sense of nervousness and unease, as if this is how the protagonist feels living in the particular time and social space as an immigrant. The partially blocked lens and silence are other examples of alteration in the film. In short, *A Tale of Love* contains features and techniques which are respectively characteristic of independent and commercial movies. In that light, *A Tale* operates in the liminal space between these two types of films.

In the meantime, *A Tale of Love* blurs the division between the genres of narrative and experimental movies. As a viewer comments, it “follows an explicit narrative structure . . . and at the same time, relies upon formal experimentation” (Moum, 1999, p. 1). On the whole, *A Tale of*

*Love* narrates the love stories of one or several characters. In the course of the story-telling, however, it qualifies as an experimental film because of its exploration and employment of many filming strategies—as Verhoven (1998) observes, such strategies include partial views, elliptical narratives, multiple cutting and connecting techniques, and the disconnection and intensification at different times of the visual and aural vernacular. In so doing, I believe, the film not only makes a unique contribution to the cinema and the story-telling of romantic movies, but also illustrates that it is possible to traverse boundaries established between genres and other classifications.

This notion of border-crossing is also embodied in other aspects in the film. For example, the film contains a variety of images and objects that allude to the concepts of fluidity and nomadism. These include, among many, water and the flight of stairs. Water has a frequent appearance in the film, in a multitude of forms such as river, lake, bathing water, and rain. On the one hand, the multiple forms of water remind the viewer of its quality of metamorphosis. On the other, since it always appears in the film in the company of Kieu or the child Kieu, an association between the two is thus established. In fact, the quality of fluidity of the object parallels the mobility of the protagonist, who comes from Vietnam to the United States, and implies both her physical border-crossing as an immigrant and her constantly changing subjectivity in the different social settings she operates as an individual with multiple loves and cultural backgrounds. Even the image of a flight of stairs may refer to Kieu's role as a cultural and linguistic translator. As Kieu and Juliet walk up and down the stairs moving books from one floor to the other, they reflect upon Kieu's work on *The Tale of Kieu*. As the stairs connect the two rooms, so does the translator bridge the different cultures, languages, people, and in Kieu's case, historical times as well. Through Kieu's translation, the cultural and linguistic borders between Vietnam and America can be crossed by many individuals who read her work.

Furthermore, *A Tale of Love* demonstrates the trait of liminality in its employment of multiple languages and cultural and artistic traditions which are generated originally in different countries and places. The film alternately uses Vietnamese and English,<sup>8</sup> and contains a great deal of Vietnamese literature and arts, especially the lines and songs from *The Tale of Kieu*. Interspersing

---

<sup>8</sup> All conversations between Kieu and her aunt, and between Kieu and Anh Minh, are in Vietnamese. All sung verses from *The Tale of Kieu* are also in Vietnamese. All Vietnamese dialogues and song lyrics have English translations on the screen.

the narration of Kieu's own life in San Francisco with the Vietnamese poem and Kieu's reflection on the life of the fictive Kieu, the film tactically recounts multiple stories of a multitude of women: the protagonist Kieu, the fictive Kieu, an old woman who claims herself to be a real-life Kieu, Kieu's aunt and her neighbor, the women who write to the women's magazine from all over the world, and others. Their similar sufferings as women give the film a transpersonal touch. But more significantly, the employment of the two languages and the juxtaposition of the experiences of women, especially the love stories of the San Francisco Kieu and the fictive Kieu, connect countries, cultures, people, epochs, and social spaces. In its multiple cultural references, the film also presents itself as an artistic creation in-between the art traditions originated in multiple places and countries, especially in Vietnam and the United States. In short, it occupies a liminal space in terms of the linguistic and cultural practices it employs.

In sum, *A Tale of Love* traverses borders on two major fronts: as cinema and as a specific artistic and cultural product. Such border-crossing, I think, is consistent with the transnational attitude demonstrated by the film protagonist and the film director as transnational individuals. In my opinion, the film clearly conveys a transnational stance in the face of globalization in our contemporary world. Rather than intimidated by the perceived Other when different cultures and groups of people come into contact with one another from afar, the film exemplifies that difference can be utilized beneficially. When not regarded as a threat, differences can lend material to new creation and new forms of existence. At a time of fast transportation and advanced technologies that characterize our world, the film suggests that we need to employ janusian thinking, adjust our voyeuristic gaze, and allow the qualities of multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality. As globalization compresses time and space in today's world, *A Tale of Love* problematizes the nationalist ideology both in itself as a medium and through its protagonist. Indeed, the fact that the Vietnamese people build their concept of their nation upon a fiction and that a whole nation takes a fictive character (Kieu) as their communal image already alludes to the artificiality of the concept of nationhood and of the ideology in nationalism.

The film's revealing of the fictive nature of the nation-state resonates with anthropologist Benedict Anderson's (1991) assertion that the nation is an "imagined political community" (p. 6), or Slavoj Žižek's (1993) idea of the "Nation-Thing" that consolidates members of a community

(p. 201). Because of the dual reference of the name Kieu to both a country and a woman, the film protagonist Kieu's questioning of "love" in *A Tale* may well be interpreted as a query about romantic relations as well as a search for one's national loyalty and identity. *A Tale of Love* then alludes to more than the relationship between Kieu and her three lovers; it also refers to the unique attitudes the transnational individual has towards the multiple countries and nations, or by extension, the type of relations and feelings any transnational cherishes with a nation-state.

### **Making Film Dialogically**

Therefore, I believe that through the narrating of Kieu's multiple loves and the describing of her mixed emotions, *A Tale of Love* depicts a transnational reality in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century world. The foreground of the historical time, again, is a crucial feature of the film. Not only does it elevate the sense of time by juxtaposing the two time periods during which the two Kieus respectively live and their stories take place, it also alternately presents the protagonist Kieu working in daytime, at night, meditating at dawn or at dusk. Moreover, the film implies the general age in which Kieu's idiosyncratic love occurs by displaying two industrial scenes. Further, the sounds of manufacturing machines in the background at both the opening and the ending of the film highlight the social context and keep bringing the critical sense of time to the viewer. In addition, traveling is indicated in the film by the sound of the train. The reality of mobility in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century world is intensified through the fact that the overwhelming majority of the characters in the film are immigrants from somewhere outside America. Thus, I believe that *A Tale of Love* is a film devoted to the investigation of the transnational issues as well as gender relationship in our time. In other words, *A Tale of Love* is made dialogic with the contemporary time and world we live in. As our world today enters the age of globalization, the film examines in a timely manner such issues as consumption, migration, cultural and national relationship, identity, and language.

Dialogism, a term first coined and used by literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1990) in referring to the inside-outside relationship the author has with the hero in literary works, exists at several levels in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *A Tale of Love*. Above all, there are numerous dialogues between multiple entities in and around *A Tale of Love*. The protagonist Kieu constantly speaks to her multiple selves as an individual operating in the liminal space between multiple cultures, countries, and lovers. While writing and thinking of the life of the fictional Kieu and thinking

about her own (re-)writing of the stories of the legendary woman, Kieu compares and contrasts herself with the other Kieu. Her work on the piece of literature brings her into a dialogue with the fictive woman, and creates dialogues between the two languages and the two cultures. Moreover, Kieu finds that while bearing many similarities with the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Kieu, she is nevertheless not identical with her. “I feel like I’m living this *Tale* too”—but, “perhaps not all of it [*The Tale of Kieu*—I’m a woman of the nineties, after all . . . .” Kieu reflects (Trinh, 1999a, p. 147). In midst of the resemblances and specificity of their separate lives, the contemporary Kieu moves in and out of the consciousness of the fictive woman and consummates her aesthetically. Thus, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu has a dialogic relationship with the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kieu.

The relationship Trinh T. Minh-ha (the scriptwriter of *A Tale of Love*) has with her film protagonist is also dialogic. In an interview, Trinh answers that Kieu’s life does “speak to the lives of innumerable women,” including herself, yet that her “many selves” are not only in or behind Kieu alone but in all the images, characters, and objects in the film (Trinh, 1999b, p. 80). Identifying both the similarities and the particularities in their life experiences and cognitive constituencies, Trinh T. Minh-ha also places herself as an outsider-insider in relation to her film characters in this film as well as her other films, and by extension, to the cultures the film characters or informants come from. For example, a Vietnamese informant in Trinh’s documentary *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* confides in a staged interview, “Even you [one who was born in Vietnam but has moved out of the country and yet now comes to interview the Vietnamese in Vietnam],” she says, is considered a cultural Other and potential spy by the people and government in Vietnam (Trinh, 1992a, p.51). It is this sober awareness of the difference between hers and any other human existence, the culture(s) she comes from and other cultures, and her awareness of the spatial, cultural, and temporal specificity of each individual or group that leads Trinh to believe that she will only “speak nearby,” not speak for (Trinh, 1992b, p. 96). Through compassion for the sufferings of various groups of people in many parts of the world, Trinh T. Minh-ha aesthetically consummates them by her films and creates dialogue with and among them.

As Bakhtin (1981) remarks, in a piece of literary work that is polyphonic, the dialogism between the author and his or her creation not only necessitates a dialogic relationship of the author with



the social context in which he or she writes, but also means that the work is not finalized in itself but in an endless dialogue with society and with other works. This is true with *A Tale of Love*. Released in 1995, *A Tale of Love* comes at a time when globalization is intensified through mass media and new technologies. As noted in Chapter Two, globalization and issues surrounding transnationalism have become a major topic in several academic disciplines in our contemporary time. It is in this context that *A Tale of Love* is made. The issues and topics addressed in the film well illustrate Trinh T. Minh-ha's concern with the social reality of our world.

In addition, *A Tale of Love* is produced as one of the many films that depict and comment upon the life of the immigrant in the West. Such films include, just to name a few, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983), Paul Mazursky's *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), Taylor Hackford's *White Nights* (1985), and Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). Technologically, many strategies employed in the film remind the viewer of Jean-Luc Godard, the filmmaker who was most popular among makers of art films in the 1950s. It also emerges in the backdrop of the feminist movement and echoes with many other films made by other female filmmakers of our time. For example, Mira Nair, an Indian-American woman director, made a film with the same title as *A Tale of Love* which tells the revenge story of a discouraged lesbian. Another woman filmmaker, Safi Faye, shares strategies in her experimentation with documentary filming. In addition, *A Tale of Love* is in direct dialogic relationships with Trinh's other films and cultural or artistic products. As mentioned before, *A Tale of Love* builds much of its meaning upon the association between a woman, Kieu, and a nation, Vietnam. This association is foretold in an earlier film by Trinh, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*. Besides, as my quoting of Trinh in this article demonstrates, Trinh's own writings often illustrate, support, and justify as well as critique her films, which include *A Tale of Love*. In return, Trinh's films, including *A Tale of Love*, shed light on her theoretical writings.

In sum, I think that *A Tale of Love*, is a stimulating presentation of the life of a transnational woman in the contemporary world. Through examining the various types of gazes, questioning love, and employing multiple artistic and linguistic languages which originated in different countries and places, the film motivates us the viewers to re-think the relationship between genders, nations, and between different cultures and social groups in a globalized world as we

have today. It also challenges us to reflect upon our own habits of consumption, as movie-goers and as customers in general in society. Both within and through the film, many dialogues and dialogic relationships are formed. This, among many contributions the film has made, may be the most significant one it offers with regard to cultural/national/individual relationship in the globalized world, that is, a transnational ideology. Put more explicitly, *A Tale of Love* illustrates how we can live in the era of globalization: with a positive attitude toward difference, internalized traits of multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality, and a gaze that is both reflective and reflexive.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Reading across Artists, Reading for Educational and Pedagogical Implications**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I analyze the common features of the artworks studied and compare the art made by the two artists. I then summarize the characteristics of the art of transnational artists and the characteristics of transnational individuals. Afterwards, I draw educational and pedagogical implications from the art of the transnational artists and offer suggestions on how to approach artworks in general for pedagogical and educational insights for classroom teaching. Finally, I present a dialogue in an imagined art classroom and reflect on how it illustrates the pedagogy in the transnational model of art education.

#### **Common Features of the Selected Artworks**

Varied as they appear in form and medium, the three works of art that are under the current study possess common features in many respects. First, they all seem to bear in their meaning and theme great relevancy to life—the social contexts the artists live in or the social contexts they observe other people living in. As migrants, both Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha have experienced the dilemma of cultural and linguistic translations in their everyday lives so that their art has both described and tackled with this topic. However, in correspondence to her identity as a woman and an immigrant who came from a former colony to a developed country, Trinh T. Minh-ha has also addressed, with much more prominence and straightforwardness than Wenda Gu, issues of women's status and the binary thinking that has contributed to the first-third world opposition. Yet, all these artworks, Gu's and Trinh's alike, are socially charged and, in various degrees, politically concerned. None of them is made solely for art's own sake, either according to the artists' own statements or to my interpretations of them. Topics addressed in these works, such as language, culture, and the relationship between nations, are all issues experienced or witnessed by the respective artists and felt first-hand by many people today. Thus, these artworks are closely related to the daily realities of a vast population in our world.

A second feature shared by these artworks is the reconciliation of the local and the global, or the particular and the universal, issues respectively described in each of them. For example, while

the dilemma of cultural translation is universal, the *forest* project has localized this phenomenon into translation between the Chinese and English languages, and this localization is further enforced by the choices of the Tang poetry and Chinese calligraphy, both among the finest and the highest artistic and literary accomplishments in the Chinese culture. Likewise, when describing women's resistance against their assigned roles and the rules in society, Kieu's act of wandering in the street at night can only be understood as such against the backdrop of the traditional Vietnamese culture. Therefore, while addressing phenomena and issues that can be said of global or universal concern, the artworks have situated them in specific time and location and examined them without sacrificing the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts and histories associated with the place or people depicted by the individual artworks. In short, these artworks exemplify to us how universal themes and topics can be described locally and common concerns and experiences can be discussed without losing their particularity to individual group of people or historical time period.

A third common feature of these artworks is their utilization of a multitude of cultural references and practices. Thanks to the multiple cultural backgrounds of the artists as well as their training in multiple disciplines and artistic domains, these artworks have alluded to a variety of cultural and artistic practices and/or traditions from multiple places, countries/cultures/peoples, and time periods. In both the *forest* project and the *Tale* film, art forms generated from ancient and contemporary times and life stories of people from China, Vietnam, the United States, and elsewhere are woven together and enacted simultaneously. Similar phenomena also exist in the *un* project. One manifestation is the juxtaposition of the time-honored Chinese art of calligraphy and the modern video art. Besides, each artwork has contained multiple art forms, multiple languages, and addressed multiple issues. In short, multiplicity is a prominent character of these artworks.

This is paralleled by another common feature of the three artworks: hybridity. Not only has each of the artworks employed a multitude of art forms and artistic practices, but worth special mention is that these diverse art forms are often fused or overlapped with one another. For instance, the *un* project by Wenda Gu has synthesized installation, calligraphy, video art, and poetry. Similarly, the *forest* project has mixed installation, stone-carving, calligraphy, and poetry

together. And of course, as a film, *A Tale of Love* has combined a variety of art forms and artistic expressions that appeal to the different senses of human beings, including singing, music performing, poetry, story-telling, photography, and performing/acting. Thus, in addition to multiplicity, which refers to the phenomenon of the co-existence of multiple arts forms and the like, the trait of hybridity is also characteristic of these three artworks.

Another shared feature by the artworks is the ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes in them even toward the same issues relevant to each of the works, such as culture, language, and so forth. For example, the *un* and the *forest* projects have expressed both respect and ridicule at the conventionally defined Chinese culture and culture in general. *A Tale of Love* has conveyed such ambivalent feelings as love and hate towards the Vietnamese culture, and loyalty and betrayal towards the Vietnamese classic literature. Besides, each of these artworks as a whole is simultaneously serious and hilarious. They appear respectful in some senses and mischievous in other toward the traditional or what has been considered classic. Such ambiguity and ambivalence are a reflection of the multiple angles and perspectives of the art-maker or the characters in the artwork. Put in another way, these artworks have exemplified and by example also encourage perspectival multiplicity.

The sixth feature shared by these artworks is the speaking-nearby position of their makers. For example, while using hair, a common bodily part of all human beings, as the primary material in the *un* project, Wenda Gu has withheld from intentionally putting his own hair into the *china monument* he has enacted close to the Chinatown in New York City. (public answers in the lecture at the Pennsylvania State University, April 19, 2005). This fact can be interpreted as his simultaneous association with and distinction from the people addressed by that particular piece of art. Similarly, Trinh claims that she, though also a Vietnamese-born female artist in America, does not identify herself with the film protagonist in her *A Tale of Love* but instead is behind all characters, all images, and all aspects of the film (Trinh, 1999b). In general, the self-reflexive, at times multiple, narrating voice in Trinh's film illustrates that indeed the film-maker/narrator has spoken only nearby, not about and not for the Other. In sum, both artists have adopted an insider-outsider position and acknowledged their in-betweenness in relation to the multiple cultures involved in or described by the artworks, including the Chinese/Vietnamese and the American

cultures. In other words, a common feature of these artworks is that they have demonstrated the self-reflexive, speaking-nearby position of their respective artists in the face of the various cultures and peoples addressed by the artworks.

In addition, the art of both the transnational artists studied here tends to be proactive and motivating. Not only are the artists reflecting and self-reflexive, their artwork also calls for reflexivity and reflectivity on the part of the viewer. Strategies such as using hair from the local people in each national monument and hair from all over the world for the universal monuments, gazing at the camera and the audience by the actor, and openly discussing voyeurism in the film, all encourage reflection and reflexivity. Meanwhile, there are numerous aspects in all the artworks that provoke or invite physical action. Most significantly, for example, the alternating horizontal and vertical placements of the English and Chinese poems on the surface of the stone steles in Gu's *forest* project compel viewers to necessarily move and change their standpoints as well as viewing angles. The chairs and meeting-room settings in a number of installations in his *un* project seem to invite people to sit and negotiate. In Trinh's *A Tale of Love*, the mysterious smile and provocative gaze of the main character at the audience at the time her aunt commands off-screen: "Kieu, it is enough!" (Trinh, 1999a, p. 149), have created a lasting impression on the viewer. It is as if the character is contending that she does not think what she has done is enough so that she is expecting other people, particularly the viewer, to join her in her act of resistance. Thus, these artworks become public pedagogues which not only teach us about the contemporary world and comment on the various countries, societies, and cultures but also encourage and invite thinking and doing from the viewer.

Another prominent feature common to all the three artworks is dialogism. In his book, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) applies the terms *dialogism* and *dialogic* also to the intertextual relationship between a piece of literature and other literary works and by extension, between the work and the social context. According to that definition, the artworks by Gu and Trinh are not only dialogic with different societies and the contemporary postmodern world at large, but also with the art of many other artists, including Xu Bing, Zhang Hongtu, Cai Guoqiang, Marcel Duchamp, Godard, and Mira Nair. Meanwhile, and perhaps not common to most artists, the individual artworks within the *un* or the *forest* project, and each project as a

whole, which were made almost concurrently by the artist, can be viewed and interpreted as in a bigger or a smaller series, so that all the individual pieces can be considered also dialogic with one another. The same is true with Trinh's film, which is dialogic with films and arts by other artists who work in the contexts of the feminist movement and independent film, or who are interested in the lives of migrants and non-western cultures. In addition, *A Tale of Love* is also in a dialogic relationship with other films made by Trinh, most obviously, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. To conclude, the characteristic of dialogism has marked all the three artworks.

Moreover, the arts reveal the ethical stance of the artists on issues addressed by each of the artworks. For example, in such artworks as *africa monument: world praying wall*, *british monument: the maze*, and so on, artist Wenda Gu has identified himself and empathized with the people who were historically victimized by the conduct of imperialism, hegemony, or a certain type of capitalism. Meanwhile, it is also an ethical act when Gu records the names of the barbershops which have helped him in collecting human hair and places the names beside the artwork. Likewise, Trinh T. Minh-ha reveals the truth of the staged interviews and the artificiality of such techniques in documentaries in her own film, and criticizes the pretentiousness of objective film-making and all-authoritative ethnography. Furthermore, the speaking-nearby position of both artists might be counted as another example of ethical practices.

Besides, all the artworks demonstrate the trait of border-crossing in the literal sense of the term. This does not only refer to the fact that all of them have traversed numerous national borders physically (and by way of the Internet), which is equally true of many other types of contemporary art. However, more significantly, the making, distributing, presenting, and/or exhibiting of each of these three works of art involve a great number of people. Such people are diverse in their social, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds and nationalities. They also include both professional artists and common people, such as those laymen or amateurs who played the main characters in *A Tale of Love*. Therefore, they can be said as having crossed many physical, cultural, social and other types of borders.

Accompanying this feature is another one shared by these artworks: flexibility and spontaneity in their making and/or presenting. As site-specific installations, pieces in the *un* project have had to

necessarily adjust to the physical exhibition space. Also, because these installations use human hair, a material that is heavily loaded with meanings in different cultures and in the minds of different people, substantial negotiation has been involved with regard to whether, when, and where to enact the installations (personal communication, May 2006). In the case of *A Tale of Love*, the shooting required flexibility on the parts of both the director and other crew members as they collaborated with one another and sometimes improvised lines (Trinh, 1999b). However, compared to other types of art, these artworks have taken unanticipated events as opportunities and have built their meaning upon such accidents. For example, when the dog in the *Tale* movie got unexpectedly excited in the scene of an encounter with Kieu, the film director considered it not a flaw but a meaningful episode (Trinh, 1999b). Viewers, unaware of the spontaneity of this happening, can even interpret that as a sign of the felt excitement when the two wandering loners meet, which is entirely consistent with the general meaning of the film and the topic of friendship it addresses. Another example is Gu's installation: *united nations: sweden and russia monument: interpol* (1996). When a Russian artist unexpectedly tore down the installation, Gu called for an immediate press conference and took the accident into his artwork (Gu, 2003). Indeed, the event can be interpreted as a revelation of the tension felt by people when cultures come together; thus, it has nicely fit into the overall message conveyed by Gu's *un* project and the *interpol* installation in particular. Therefore, such artworks do not regard uncertainty and indeterminacy merely as something to overcome or cope with; instead, they value and desire such accidents to bring opportunity and enrich their meaning. In other words, these artworks allow spontaneous change, not at the expense of their overall meaning, but to their advantage in gaining or re-enforcing their meaning through uncertainty and indeterminacy. Thus, dealing with the accidental is an inherent character of these artworks as they correspond to their makers as nomadic beings.

Last but not the least, all these works of art have taken advantage of the capitalist economic system and the opportunities provided by the mushrooming international exhibitions and biennial/triennials world-wide. As mentioned before, the artworks by both the artists have been displayed in numerous international competitions and festivals—in fact, they first became well-known to the audience largely because of the international exhibitions and the awards they gleaned from such occasions. In the making of the artworks, Gu applied to commissions



(interview with the author, May 10, 2006) and Trinh recruited those who worked for independent filmmakers not for monetary reward but to earn a living by charging the usual huge amount for work done for the film industry (Spangler, 1993). While operating inescapably in a capitalism-dominated contemporary international art arena, these arts nevertheless remain critical of capitalism in one way or another. Therefore, they have demonstrated sophisticated attitudes and somehow ambivalent feelings towards the capitalist economy. In the context of globalization in our time, this aspect of the art perhaps comprises part of the message it conveys to the viewer.

In sum, the three artworks studied in this dissertation have these twelve characteristics in common, listed in the order of my analysis and independent of their prominence in the artworks: relevancy to life; localization of the global; multiplicity and hybridity in form, genre, employed artistic traditions and other elements or aspects; ambiguity, ambivalence, and perspectival multiplicity; reflectivity, reflexivity, and speaking-nearby position; proactive-ness; dialogism; ethical practice; border-crossing; flexibility and spontaneity; and a sophisticated relationship with capitalism.

### **Differences between the Three Artworks**

As noted before, as a woman and an immigrant from a former colony to the United States, Trinh T. Minh-ha has demonstrated more concern for the living conditions and social status of women than Wenda Gu, and is more *openly* critical of the oppressive gaze among human beings or cultures/nations. For example, *A Tale of Love* has devoted much of its conversation to the common practice of depicting headless women in magazines and artworks, including the naked female model's remarks to Alikan and Kieu's recounting of the story of the emperor's 100 concubines in Chinese history. In comparison, while Gu is aware of the mutually "otherizing" gaze of himself and the cultures and peoples described in his art (Gu, 2003), neither the *un* nor the *forest* project is overtly analytical of this gaze, even when video screens and projectors are being used in his artworks. For example, in the *china monument*, the poem on the video screen mentions to "sit," to "listen," to "meditate," and so forth, but never to "look" or to "gaze" or "see." More of a bit an irony, when visitors who do accept the invitation to sit on the chairs and to meditate, their bottoms will actually block the view of the clouds and the well-intended poem, thus somehow diminish the motivating force the device is meant to be. Therefore, in my opinion,

Gu's art is not as gender-aware as Trinh T. Minh-ha's in general. Meanwhile, while Trinh's *A Tale of Love* confronts the binary thinking and the all-knowing authoritative and exploitive gaze head-on, Gu's *un* and *forest* on the whole tend to generalize the dilemma of cultural and linguistic encounters without analyzing or pointing out the difference gender or the ranking of countries may play in it—yet, at a second thought, could this practice of Gu's art be an act of negating the binary thinking in itself, though?

Nevertheless, I can say with confidence that Gu's art is bolder than Trinh's in one other aspect, that is, the transforming of language or cultural and/or artistic practices. It is true that both Gu's and Trinh's art have employed language and the artistic forms, traditions, and other cultural constructions originally derived from China or Vietnam. However, Gu's art is inclined to change the traditional art forms and artistic/cultural practices, such as Chinese writing, calligraphy, and landscape painting. His *un* and *forest* projects as well as his earlier calligraphy-landscape ink paintings have all demonstrated this aspect. By contrast, Trinh T. Minh-ha's film has attempted to faithfully follow, present, or even preserve the original Vietnamese art in terms of its relationship to the traditional. However, this is not to say that Wenda Gu shows no respect for traditions or the traditional art forms while Trinh T. Minh-ha lacks in the spirit of innovation or revolution. Quite the contrary, the traditional stone-carving techniques utilized in the making of Gu's *forest* project testify that Gu has had a deep respect for this traditional Chinese art form, even to the extent of video-taping the carving process and displaying it in the exhibition as part of the artwork. On the other hand, Trinh T. Minh-ha is revolutionary in re-interpreting, re-writing, and re-inscribing the national poem and literature at large from the Vietnamese culture to emphasize its resistance instead of sacrifice or obedience. On the whole, the artworks of the two artists may be said to be innovative and subjugating in different ways—but I think I am being very *transnational* in my thinking and analyzing as such here.

In any case, I believe that the artworks of the two artists, though both transnational, have had different emphases while addressing issues related to transnationality and transnationalism. In my opinion, while the artworks of both artists have tackled the relationship between and among cultures, countries, nations, peoples, and languages, Trinh's *A Tale of Love* and some of her other films stress cultural difference and advocate resistance—against the regressive gaze and binary

thinking— whereas Gu’s *un* and *forest* foreground our commonality and emphasize reconciliation. However, as *A Tale of Love* reveals, resistance is perhaps a means to reconciliation and indeed transnationality/transnationalism contains both resistance and reconciliation. Besides the difference in their emphasis in the arts across the two artists, there are also differences between the two projects by Wenda Gu. To put them separately, through the readable characters yet hilarious poems whose meanings are beyond logical reasoning, the *forest* project has vividly and humorously conveyed the difficulty and paradox of cross-cultural communication. In comparison, the *un* project is more an artistic expression of the wish to unite humanity while exposing, through the entirely nonsensical writings in it, the absurdity of human constructions, including language and the concepts and divisions of culture and nation-state. In sum, each of these artworks has its own highlights while having described and discussed issues surrounding transnationality and transnationalism in a global world.

As implied above, the artworks are humorous while tackling with some solemn topics and concerns. Yet, the touch of humor in *A Tale of Love* is more a covert one except for the silly singing suddenly bursting out from Kieu’s mouth at night or in daytime. Otherwise, viewers have to consider the entire film and take all the plots and filmic elements into account to see the poignant humor involved. Comparatively, the “carnavalesque” spirit as Bakhtin (1984) terms it is more apparent in Gu’s art when the *un* and the *forest* projects render either the characters or the poems beyond recognition or reasoning. That said, however, humor is a common feature of the art of both the artists and it can be a strategy some transnationals use to reveal and to cope with the tension and conflict when cultures and people of difference come together with one another.

The last difference that is important to point out deals with collaboration. As all the artworks are large-scale, they all have involved collaboration. However, the nature of the collaborative relationship between Trinh T. Minh-ha and her many-time co-director Jean-Paul Bourdier differs from that between Gu and the barbershops, or between Gu and his friends in academic or industrial circles who have helped him in the various stages and aspects of his art-making. While Trinh and her other crew and cast members mutually depend on one another’s expertise, the relationship between Gu and his collaborators is largely one-directional, tilted toward Gu and his art-making alone. Further, they may also differ in the extent of their reflection upon this

collaborative relationship. For example, many of Trinh's films, such as *A Tale of Love, Night Passage*, and the films on Africa, openly describe and discuss friendship and team work. In contrast, Gu's artworks have shown the collaboration and team work involved only silently—by ways of putting a poster alongside the installation which has recorded the names of the barbershops or by playing among the stone steles a video clip demonstrating the stone-carving process. But it seems to me that the facts of collaboration and friendship are only acknowledged—even implied as an indispensable part of the transnational practice—but not discussed as a worthy topic in the artworks themselves. In this light, perhaps Trinh's art is more openly and more comprehensively reflexive than Gu's.

### **Transnational Art, Transnational Artists/People, and Transnationalism/Transnationality**

Given the similarities and differences I have analyzed and identified above, I will outline in this section the characteristics of transnational artists and people as informed by my understanding of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha. While much of contemporary art is transnational in the sense of border-crossing, either physically or virtually via the Internet, I believe I have come into contact through this dissertation study with a particular type of art and artists that are truly transnational as I define the term. Therefore, I will also re-articulate my own definition of transnationalism and transnationality here.

As pointed out already, both Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha have traveled among different countries and thus crossed many national borders. Yet beside this fact, I regard Gu and Trinh as transnational because they possess multiple cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in my opinion as stated in Chapter Two, more significant and defining traits of the transnational should be multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality in their ideological constitution. In addition, the transnational individuals are nomadic and changeable in their ways of thinking and viewing. They are not the ones that culturally and ideologically fully settle down in a country they have immigrated to, nor are they the ones that entirely refuse to be contaminated by a culture originally not their own. Instead, transnationals are dialogic with the environments they have moved in or out of—they exert impact upon and are impacted by the multiple cultures and countries/places they have delved into. In sum, I believe that these five characteristics would define a transnational individual: multiplicity, hybridity, liminality, nomadism, and dialogism.

Thus, for me, transnationality and transnationalism represents a type of thinking and viewing as well as valuing. At root, transnationality/transnationalism is an attitude towards difference. This attitude is not to contain or totalize difference but to utilize and thrive upon difference. The transnational individual regards difference not as a synonym with separateness, or the opposite of sameness, as Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it (Spangler, 1993). Difference contains similarity. Difference is hence also surmountable. Therefore, for the transnational, there is no absolute division or impermeable boundary. The transnational does not believe in binarism or dualistic oppositions. That is the reason the transnational remains nomadic—not only in his or her physical presence but even more significantly, nomadic, hybridized, and liminal in the individual's ideological department.

### **Educational Implications from the Art of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha**

As the world becomes smaller and cultures and people with different backgrounds come into increasingly close contact, the art of the transnational artists has great implications for us on how to prepare ourselves and our students for the postmodern world of globalization.

First of all, the art of these artists teaches us that if we were to abandon binary thinking, then we might develop a greater appreciation of the differences among peoples, nations, cultures, or other classifications. Today, as people with different backgrounds interact more frequently with one another, if we were to take our differences as opportunities to enrich ourselves and learn from others, then we might be less likely to see others as threats from which to escape.

With regard to the content of classroom teaching, the art and art practices of the transnational artists also suggest to us that if the content of a teaching curriculum, including an art curriculum, were made relevant to society and the world we live in, education would then fulfill its social and political purposes to develop students into responsible human beings and world citizens who are capable of making ethical decisions on social issues involving themselves and/or others. In the art in particular, if we study not only arts in our own culture—as conventionally classified—but also arts from other places and of other people, we might not only learn to appreciate the diverse cultural constructions and artistic achievements of all humanity and the quality of diversity itself,

but equally valuable, could come to create new artistic forms and traditions. However, when studying cultures or arts that are conventionally considered others', we need to take a nearby, side by side, instead of an opposing, judgmental position.

Furthermore, the arts of the studied transnational artists also imply to us that if our teaching were made dialogic with the social contexts and the larger and smaller worlds we live in, we would then be more likely to impact the environment surrounding us and to develop us—teachers and students alike—into reflective and self-reflexive beings. Meanwhile, the artworks of these artists demonstrate that when identifying and addressing concerns of global importance, we should still localize the issues and render the curriculum and the entry points relevant to the immediate student body.

Finally, the arts of the transnational artists show us that if our educational practices were more trans-disciplinary, we might then be able to understand many issues in and around art in a more comprehensive manner. This approach would then also help the development of the whole person for students in today's globalized world.

### **Pedagogical Implications from the Art of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha**

In an increasingly diverse art classroom, and with the goal to educate students for a globalized world in mind, I find the artworks and art practices of Wenda Gu and Trinh T. Minh-ha can offer us the following pedagogical suggestions:

Dialogism. Teaching in the twenty-first century classroom should be dialogic, facilitated by genuine dialogues—dialogues that feature multiple voices interacting on an equal footing. Voices in the classroom should build upon each other and none should dominate another. As Bauman (1993) states, postmodern ethics means each individual assumes responsibility to make his or her own decisions and be held responsible for them. This means that all individuals in the classroom should be given the chance to speak and to transform and be transformed by others. The dynamic of the classroom should be non-hierarchical and each person, including the teacher, is ultimately responsible for his or her own learning.

Perspectival multiplicity. Dialogic interaction often leads to different yet not necessarily oppositional perspectives and opinions. As the chronotope of each individual in the classroom is specific, students and the teacher can expect multiple views even on the same issue. On the one hand, because of their non-hierarchical relationship, no one can impose his or her own opinion upon other individuals; on the other, different individuals may agree or disagree freely with one another. Much like the multiple artistic practices and traditions employed in the art of the transnational artists, multiple perspectives can co-exist in the classroom without any one of them canceling another.

Permeable subjectivity. In a transnational model of education and art education, the roles of the teacher and the student should be fluid. In an art class, one can simultaneously or alternately be the maker, viewer/interpreter, critic, or historian of art. Moreover, because much learning happens through dialogue, all participants are simultaneously learners and teachers. There is no fixed boundary between the teacher and the student. In and through conversation, people influence one another in their views and receive new ideas from others. That means, not only subjectivity is situational, it is also porous as each participant can understand, empathize with, and affect the opinion of another participant.

Reflexivity and reflectivity. In order to participate meaningfully in genuine dialogues in the classroom, all individuals in the transnational model of education and art education should look in multiple directions, to reflect and be self-reflective, to employ Janusian thinking. This means that not only the teacher needs to evaluate the course and reflect upon the learning of the students as well as his or her own teaching and learning, but students should also be reflective and reflexive of the class.

Spontaneity and indeterminacy. In this model of education and art education, teachers and students need to remain flexible and able to embrace and even take advantage of the unexpected, as the transnational artists utilize the accidental in the making and presenting of their artworks and integrate such unanticipated happenings into their art. In a transnational art class, uncertainty should not be viewed as something to overcome or to have to be dealt with, but to some extent, as the end and goal of education itself—that is, the process/progress should be equally valued as

any end product.

Holistic development. Finally, a transnational model of education encourages the development of the whole person. As the art made by the transnational artist not only appeals to the multiple senses but also to the moral/spiritual, reasoning/cognitive, and other faculties of the viewer, I believe that a transnational model of art education should also foster the holistic development of the student/teacher as a world citizen. Teaching should be approached in a way not only to enhance a student's cognition, intellect, or aesthetics, but also the development of his/her emotions, spirituality, and interpersonal skills. The spirit of teamwork, favorable attitudes toward democracy, and ethical stances towards social issues should all be areas that the teacher encourages students to grow in through teaching and learning in the classroom.

### **Suggestions on Reading Artworks Pedagogically**

In reflection, I suggest these points to others who would also attempt to approach artwork for pedagogical implications:

- Approaching artwork for pedagogical implications requires that the making, presenting, and interpreting of the artwork be considered part of the work, that is, the employing of what Charles Garoian (1999) calls a “situational aesthetics” (p. 52).

- Reading artwork pedagogically is more or less a pragmatic use of the artworks. Therefore, the viewer/art reader needs to be self-reflexive and aware of his or her own interests, intentions, and expertise or weaknesses.

- One needs to realize that, once created, an artwork has gained independence, however contingent or limited, and that the viewer/interpreter has both agency and responsibility in front of a piece of art. Artworks, as Bakhtin (1981) says of the hero in relation to the author in literary composition, are the consciousness that functions on cognitive and ethical levels outside the author/artist's creative consciousness. That is, there exist a variety of dialogic relationships among the interpreter, the artist, and the artwork itself. Therefore, the interpreter/viewer needs to be willing to modify or change his or her opinion and intention



along the way as the encounter between the art reader and the artwork goes deeper.

### **A Sample Classroom Teaching on Wenda Gu's *united nations***

To exemplify what I have outlined as a transnational model of art education in the previous sections, I describe below an imagined teaching session on Wenda Gu's *united nations* art project. I, a Chinese immigrant to the United States, am the art teacher of this fifth grade class. I have three 11- to 12-year-old students: Brigid, a blonde girl of Irish descent, Kobie, an athletic African-American boy, and James, a Hispanic-looking adolescent. The purpose of including this teaching description in the dissertation is to illuminate, to some extent, what the pedagogy in a transnational model of art education may look like.<sup>9</sup>

Li: Good morning, everyone.

Students: *Morning, Ms. Li.*

Li: You all have had a good week so far?

Kobie: *Yes! (Raising his hand high) I went to a wedding!*

Li: That sounds wonderful.

Kobie: *It was! My cousin and her husband met in France.*

Li: Oh! Is her husband French?

Kobie: *No. Philip is American—but white. He went to France to study, so did Lisa.*

Li: That's interesting! So, it's an interracial marriage?

Kobie: *Yea!*

James: *My parents' too! My dad was from Germany many years ago. He went to Mexico when he was in high school; he met my mom there. They kept in touch, and they got married!*

Li: Well, that is *very* romantic. That is something I didn't know about your family, James. Surely people travel a lot these days. Artists do too. Remember the woman artist we mentioned last week when we studied Frida Kahlo's paintings?

Brigid: *Ana Men . . . .*

Li: Yes, Ana Mendieta. She came to the States from Cuba.

Brigid: *Yeah, my great grandparents came here from Ireland!*

Li (half-jokingly): Oh, and I am from China. (Seriously) Anyway, today we are going to study an

---

<sup>9</sup> Students' remarks are italicized.

artwork by an artist who was also born in China. But now he lives half of his year in China and half of his year in New York. He and his artworks travel widely in the world today.

Kobie (curiously): *Do you know him?*

Li: Kind of. But we don't need to know the artist personally to study his art, right? Anyway, this artist's name is Wenda Gu.

Kobie: *He also uses his body?*

James: *He paints himself?*

Li: Oh, no. But he does use his body to perform. Yet, the artwork we are to look at today is not a performance but an installation. A series of installations mainly made of the hair of living people.

Brigid and James (simultaneously): *Hair?*

Li: Yes, human hair. I will show you some images of the artwork (starting to show power point slides).

Kobie raises his hand while waiting for the slide show to start.

Li: Yes, Kobie?

Kobie: *What's installation?*

Li: That's a good question. Simply put, installation is an art form in which one installs things: found objects, self-made objects, video, stone . . . anything from candy to rubber to trash, all sorts of stuff you'd like to use . . . in order to make some meaning. It is an art form first developed some 50 years ago as a hybrid child of several other art forms, such as soft sculpture, set design, land art, and so on.

Anyway, here is one installation that artist Wenda Gu made in South Africa: *united nations: african monument: the world praying wall* (1997). (Figure 2). [Please refer to images in previous chapters.]

Kobie: *Wow, that is huge.*

Li: Yes, it is. You see (pointing to the image of the viewers in the installation), the human figures here look like small dwarfs compared to the size of the installation.

James: *How did he install those things there?*

Li: They are hung up to the ceiling or to the rails of higher levels in the museum.

Kobie: *Did he climb?*

Li: Yeah, (jokingly) I guess so— he climbed like a monkey. (Becoming serious) No, not really; I

am just joking. He actually used ladders and crane machines. And a lot of people helped and worked together with him. For example, some assistants first glued hair together and made it into large panels. Then they used thin cords to string all the panels up, and when the time came to install the work in the museum or somewhere else, more people came and helped hang the panels up. Altogether, the entire project took the artist more than twelve years.

Brigid: *Twelve years!*

Kobie: *He works too slowly!*

Li: Not really. I mean the whole *united nations* art project, not just this single piece in it. There are actually more than twenty such huge installations he made for the project. And they are installed all over the world, in more than twenty countries including South Africa, China, Britain, France, and more countries in Europe, and in several cities in America.

James: *Did the United Nations in New York support him? My mom brought me there last summer and we toured the place with my cousins and aunt when they came to visit us from Mexico.*

Li: No. As far as I know, his work is not financed or supported in any other forms by the United Nations organization.

Kobie: *Then why does he call his work the united nations?*

Li: Good question! That's also an important one. Or maybe we should ask what the title means for this piece of art? Does the title say something? Is it consistent with the artwork itself? Let's look a bit closer at the project, perhaps one piece in it and figure out the answers.

Li (showing next slide) (Figure 10): This piece is called *united nations: china monument: temple of heaven*.

Kobie and James: *I like this one!*

Li: Why do you like this one?

Kobie: *The space looks more open than in the other one, the African one.*

Li: Well, that may be because of the shooting angles. In fact, all pieces in Wenda Gu's *un* project feature an open composition. Some of them do not form an enclosure; others are accessible from outside to inside through doors in different directions. Plus, these hair panels are semi-transparent so that you can see through them (Showing images of various installations).

James: *I still like the China one the most! That's a better shot!*

Li (going back to the image of *the china monument*): Well, in fact, this one is perhaps the most talked about in the artist's *un* project. I personally like this one too. Perhaps because it is called *china monument*? (Students smile.). Should we all have a closer look at this one today? (All nodded their heads.). OK, let's talk about this one then.

Brigid: *Where was this one placed? Was it in China?*

Li: No. It was actually first installed in New York City, in 1998. Somewhere near Chinatown in New York—you know, where the artist lives part of the time each year. In fact, most of the hair used in this artwork was collected from hair salons in Chinatown in New York City. Wenda Gu used hair from the local people to make his hair installations when he worked on them in different countries.

Brigid: *So he has collected hair from people from more than twenty countries so far?*

Li: Yes. More than that number of countries. He sometimes used hair collected from other countries along with hair collected from the local people to make the artwork installed in one country; that really depended on the theme or idea he wanted to express in his work.

Kobie: *How about the hair used in this china monument then?*

Li: I once asked the artist. He told that all the hair used in this piece was from hair salons in Chinatown in New York, not from China.

Brigid: *Did he use his own hair?*

Li: I heard that he didn't intentionally put his own hair in it.

James: *Then that is kind of self-contradictory.*

Li: Why self-contradictory?

James (thoughtfully): *Well, he calls this china monument, and he is a Chinese. He put it in New York, where he lives; but he didn't put his own hair in it—I am confused.*

Li: It sounds like you suspect this artwork is a reflection of the artist's own life? You think the artist is self-reflexive, just like Frida Kahlo?

James: *Yeah . . . .*

Kobie: *But the hair is in different colors!*

Brigid: *Indeed. Is it all from Chinatown?*

Li: Yes, it is. But is it that only Chinese go to Chinatown? Only Chinese have their hair cut in Chinatown? Have you ever been to a Chinatown?

James: *Yes I did—when I visited New York with my mom that summer. I see, all (sorts of) people*

*go to Chinatown. So the hair is mixed together—it means all people come together?*

Li: That's a thoughtful remark. What do you all think the hair refers to in the artwork? Does it mean something special to you when hair in different colors is mixed together?

Kobie (raising his right hand high): *I know! I know! Hair refers to race!*

James (not wanting to lag behind): *Hair means people! Detectives use hair to tell people!*

Brigid (almost at the same time): *Hair carries memory.*

Li: Oh, one by one, please. Thank you for raising your hand before speaking, Kobie. Why do you think hair represents race?

Kobie: *Because Africans' hair is different.*

Li: Hmm. Not only Africans but different races of people tend to have different types of hair.

People can distinguish others' age or gender by hair too—so, hair is related to one's identity, in short. Then why do you say hair brings memory, Brigid?

Brigid: *Well, my grandma keeps some hair of my great grandma and she says that that hair helps her remember my great grandma.*

Li: That is true. That reminds me of my own experience. When I was a teenager, like your age, my mother forbade me to cut my hair because she liked my long and shining hair as hers when she was young. She used to do my hair for me every morning, till I was thirteen and my studies got too busy so that I had to have my hair done the night before. That meant I had to keep my hair tidy even while sleeping each night, so it would be ready when I went to school the next morning. So I was not happy about that. I requested that my hair be cut short. Yet, my Mom didn't agree. So, one day, when she was reading something and didn't pay attention to me, I picked up a pair of scissors and cut my hair short, in a very quick way—you can imagine the hair must have looked very bad on my head! So I took the hair to my mom's side and put it in front of her eyes. You know what, upon realizing what I had just done, my mom, stood up immediately and began to scold me harshly. That's really not much a good experience for me; but hair does carry memories. Oh, speaking of that, can you imagine, what would hair bring to the mind of the Jewish and Polish people? During World War II, many Jewish and Polish people died in concentration camps; before they were put to death, they were usually forced to have their hair shorn . . . .

Brigid: *It's sad . . . .*

Li: Yes, it is. Wenda Gu actually made an installation with hair in Israel (Showing images of *the Israel monument*). You know what, the Jews first protested against having the installation done in their country. But after some discussion in their parliament, they finally agreed to allow the artist to do it. Why do you think they agreed to display this piece of art? What could this artwork do for them?

Brigid: *It can remind them of their history, and help them to remember their sufferings . . . .*

James: *Yes! Like a photo that can remind people of the past and help them remember the happy or sad times . . . .*

Li: Hmm . . . . Remember the two women artists we learned last time? Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta. Besides using their body, they actually also used or painted hair in their art. (Showing images).

Kobie: *Is the hair Ana Mendieta used from some special people?*

Li: Yes. The hair in Kahlo's painting, of course, is her own. But the hair used by Ana Mendieta—which is also an installation—came from Cuban immigrants who live in America. So, it's kind of similar to Wenda Gu's practice—I don't know whether Gu learned his way from her example. But anyway, what did we learn and what did we say about the art of these two women last time?

James (raising his hand): *We see that the personal life experiences of those women artists influence their art. We see how art is tied to people's own life and to the social environment they lived in. Right?*

Brigid: *We also see that these artists use their own body to make art, to depict their own and others' sufferings.*

Li: Right. Those are the big ideas we have learned through studying their artworks. Are these points also true with Wenda Gu's art here? Can Gu's *un* be said of the same things?

Kobie: *Perhaps the first point is true—Gu's own life also influences his art, because I can see he has used Chinese writings in his work.*

Li (smile): Well, that is problematic—we have to talk about the writings in the artwork a bit later. But perhaps you are right—Gu is married to a white American woman and he has blended the different colors of hair together. This may represent marriage across lines.

Kobie (grin): *Yeah, like my cousin and her husband!*

James: *My Dad and Mom too!*

Li: All right. But is Gu's art here also about suffering?

Brigid (looking at the teacher): *Maybe not?*

Li: Hmm, it is not so obvious—we don't know just from the hair whether the work is about suffering or not. Chinese people did suffer in some instances as a result of their hair: in history, they were forced to wear their hair in certain ways by the emperor or the government; otherwise, they would be put into death for not obeying the authority. For example, all Chinese men were required to wear a long pigtail during the Qing Dynasty. Hair has special meanings and carries memory for the Chinese; they did suffer for reasons related to hair. But those are Chinese people in China, not Chinese immigrants in America who go to Chinatown to have their hair cut out of their own volition. So, since this hair in the artwork is from people in America, not in China, it may refer to something about the Chinese in America more than the Chinese in China, I guess. What do you think?

Students ponder.

James: *Maybe it means the suffering of the Chinese in America because they are immigrants?*

Kobie: *Or people who go to cut their hair in Chinatown, because it is cheaper and they are mostly the poorer ones in society . . . .*

Li: Hmm, those comments are very thoughtful. Let's take all things into consideration. What else do you see in the artwork?

Kobie: *Some writing. Looks like Chinese characters; but also some other types.*

Brigid: *I see chairs and tables.*

James: *And something in the chairs, because there are wires underneath them.*

Li: You are right. There is a video embedded into each of the chairs. But the writings you see, Kobie, the ones made of human hair in the ceiling and walls, are not really correct Chinese: they are fake and none is readable even to a Chinese person.

All: *They are fake?*

Li: Yes. Wenda Gu actually picked a very ancient Chinese writing style—the Seal Script—to make these Chinese-like writings; however, he changed each character in one way or another so that none is a correct writing and none is meaningful in a literal sense.

Kobie: *Why did he do that?*

Li: That is a good question. Perhaps that has something to do with the meaning of the artwork?

James (excited): *I see! I see! Perhaps the artist wants to imitate how the Chinese language looks to Americans in Chinatown! I felt similarly perplexed when I visited Chinatown in New York!*

Li: But Gu has not only altered the Chinese; he has also used and altered other languages in his artwork, such as English, Hindu, and Arab, beside Chinese here. (Li points to the other fake languages in the image).

Kobie (pondering): *Does Gu speak Chinese? Or English?*

Li: Yes, he speaks both. He lives in both countries for some time each year. He actually came to America when he was 32. He studied Chinese ink art. Before his migration, he was a leader in a modern Chinese art movement which aimed to reform Chinese traditional art.

Brigid: *Then it could be how he felt about English when he first came to America? He was inspired by that experience?*

Li: Hmm . . . quite an insight! Your comment inspires me, Brigid, to think that Gu is relating his own experience as an immigrant to other immigrants, or to anyone in the world who travels and encounters people and languages that are different from his or her own . . . . Scholars would call that person a *transnational*.

Brigid (a bit excited): *I am a transnational! When I visited France and Italy when I was on a tour with my parents last summer, I felt like I knew nothing about their languages—they looked similar, but none of them was meaningful!*

Li: Good example. So we can say that the artwork partly illustrates how life is when people come into contact with other cultures or other people who are different from themselves . . . including those people who go to Chinatown, or people who have come to America from China . . . .What else? What other things can the artwork be about?

Kobie (thoughtfully): *I think it tries to bring people together . . . .*

Li (appearing interested): How? Why do you think so?

Kobie: *Because he blended the hair together . . . .*

Brigid: *It seems to bring people together also because of the table and chairs! They look like a meeting place where people can sit and talk!*

Li: Wow, I am glad you said it! In fact, the artist has installed a video set in each of the chairs and the video screen shows clouds and a poem written in Chinese and translated into English which invites the viewer to sit.



All (curious): *What does the poem say?*

Li: The poem says:

Ancient wisdom says,  
life is as fleeting as clouds  
you shall sit  
you shall listen  
you shall be silent  
you shall meditate  
you shall be free from gender, nationalities, races, politics, cultures, religions . . .  
you shall fantasize while you ride on running clouds  
you shall have moments of transcending . . . .

Kobie: *Ms. Li, what does “transcending” mean?*

Li: It means “go beyond,” “not be bound” by something.

Kobie: *Oh, thank you. So the cloud is a kind of metaphor for “transcending” then.*

Li: Huh, that is something I didn’t think of before. But I agree with you. The clouds can be a metaphor for the transnationals who travel around and change shape or form without ever being fixed—I mean with respect to the shape of their cultural composition and their belief systems. A transnational can change his value systems and cultural practice as he travels and interacts with different people. His way of life is like the cloud, free, mobile, and changeable—some call that “liminality.”

Kobie (being pleased): *Liminality means changeable?*

Li: Yes. That is a word some scholars use to describe a transitional stage, a place or state where one is ready to change and transform into next state where things are more fixed and structured. So the transnational is so changeable that he is like living in the liminal stage, having the potential to change at any time as he goes.

Kobie: *That’s cool. I’d love that type of life also.*

Li: Maybe you already are a transnational. Movement can be figurative and not just literal. Don’t you move back and forth in-between your African and white American ways of life, like when you do things and celebrate some traditions?

Kobie (puzzled a little while then nodded his head): *Emm . . . I think I am. I am a transnational*

*then!*

Brigid: *Me too!*

James: *Me too!!*

Li (smile): Yes, I am one too. Well, people say that as the world grows smaller, many are transnationals . . . . I think many of us can be considered transnationals to different extents, or in different times in life . . . .

Brigid: *Then this artwork is about the transnational . . . .?*

Li (smile): What do you think?

Kobie: *He tries to bring people together and he invites everyone to sit and meditate . . . to be free from race, culture, religion, and the other stuff . . . . I don't like people hating one another because of race!*

Li: Right, Kobie. That may be the reason why this work of art is called “temple of heaven”—heaven is a good place, a place where people don't hate one another.

James: *Clouds also make people think of heaven. Clouds are peaceful too.*

Li: Wow, you just said something I wasn't aware of! Yes, clouds can also be a sign pointing to heaven, or a heavenly place where peace and freedom prevail. Wait. Do you know that there is a place—actually a temple—in China that is called “The Temple of Heaven”? The artist could have gotten this title for his art from that place too!

All: *Why??*

Li: Well, in China, the Temple of Heaven is a place where in ancient Chinese history emperors made sacrifices—such as goats and ox—to Heaven, to pray for peace and prosperity. But you know, the feudal rule was quite cruel and not democratic—people could be put into jail or sentenced to death just because they said something unpleasing to the emperor or to higher authorities. Also, at that time, only the emperor and his high-ranking officials whom he gave permission to could enter the Temple. They were all males and rich people. You see, the Temple of Heaven in China was a very exclusive place, like the Forbidden City—the residence of the emperor of China. So it was kind of sarcastic that it was called Temple of Heaven—unless it means that only rich males can get into heaven. But the place in this artwork, and the entire *un* project by Gu, are open to all sorts of people. (By the way, the *china monument* was installed in a museum near Chinatown which offers free admission on certain days each week or whenever you purchase a ticket for the Museum of Modern Art in

New York, which is quite affordable). Besides, the hair is from common people, and the languages represent all human languages on the earth—even though they may appear hard to understand to those who are not a native speakers (thus each is rendered to be fake). So . . . *this* may be the real heaven—where and when people abandon their own sense of superiority to others, and instead, acknowledge their own limitations and cross the lines between races, cultures, religions, and other divisions.

James: *I love what you just said!*

Kobie: *That's a cool artwork. I like it!*

Li: So what do you all think is the meaning of this work?

James: *It encourages people to come together to be mixed and talk with each other peacefully.*

Brigid: *Yeah . . . it encourages peace and freedom and inclusiveness.*

Kobie: *It also supports interracial, inter-cultural things such as marriage, and describes the life of the immigrant, or the transnational as you said.*

Li: Emm . . . . These are all good points . . . and I agree with you. I also think that the work conveys and advocates a type of thinking, a way to treat people different from oneself, and a new perspective to see mobility, difference, national affiliation, and so on. Anyway, there are many more things about the artwork and the project that we haven't discussed yet, such as the act of using fake writing and Chinese characters. But the time is almost there. So, next time we will start with a discussion of the use of writings in artworks and the meaning of fake characters in some artists' art. (Pause) So, please do some research at home before the next class: please find out which artists have used writings and characters in their artworks and how they have used them; also please read, perhaps by doing a Google search, what some art critics have said about the use of writing in visual arts and the significance of writing and the altering of writings. OK? (Students appear to be listening). I think we will begin next time with another Chinese-American artist named Xu Bing, whom I also consider to be a transnational. He uses fake characters as well and he once made an installation by writing the character "monkey" in different languages and hanging them all in a line over a pond of water in the Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. That artwork refers to a famous Chinese fable: monkeys picking the moon from the water. Please research this artist and let's consider how his art resembles and differs from the art of Wenda Gu. Alright?

All: *Yes, Ms. Li!*

Li: Ok, You are dismissed. Have a good rest of the week!

### **A Reflection on the Imagined Teaching Practice**

In this section, I reflect on the class conversation in my imagined teaching session as described above. I discuss how this teaching example illustrates the transnational model of art education I propose from two aspects: the content of the teaching, and the way of conducting the teaching, especially the interaction between the teacher and the students and among students.

First of all, in this teaching practice, I have brought to students artwork and artists that traverse cultural, national, and/or other borders. It is not that only such artworks can be studied in a transnational model of art education, or to discuss issues related to transnationalism and transnationality. But it is important for me or other teachers who teach in this model to introduce to students concepts such as transnational and liminality, and draw their attention to the reality of the mobility of artworks and/or artists, which is especially prominent now, more than in any other time in history.

Second, in the teaching example, I have also led the students to an awareness of the connection of art with life. By learning some background information on the art and the life stories of such artists as Wenda Gu and Frida Kahlo, students realize that the worlds and social contexts the artists live in and their personal life experiences influence their art and art-making. My hope is that once they understand the relevancy of art to everyday life, students will make their own art also in relation to their own lives and the world surrounding them. The relevancy of art to life, then, is of course an important feature in a transnational model of art education.

While I did not particularly highlight the word “difference,” or stress the attitude that a transnational model of education would cultivate towards it, my afore-described classroom conversation did point to the fact that many people of different racial, national, and/or cultural backgrounds and of different ages and genders were involved in the making and viewing of the artwork. While this attitude towards difference was implied through introducing the artist’s poem “You shall be free from gender, nationalities, races, politics, cultures, religions . . . ,” the idea of

embracing without erasing difference was also exemplified by the artwork through the practice of blending hair of different colors together. This approach towards difference, as mentioned before, is a defining characteristic of transnationality and is also a quality that makes an art educational model a transnational one.

Readers may notice that in my previous teaching practice, the interpretation articulated by me as the teacher is not complete, or identical with what I have written in Chapter Three. There are obviously some aspects which I have mentioned and analyzed in Chapter Three but did not articulate in the classroom conversation. For example, the significance of the use of Ming furniture in the artwork was not included in the imagined teaching practice. I, as the teacher, did not even mention the style of the furniture or point to its symbolic value in the Chinese culture. This is because I, as the teacher, did not want to dominate the conversation during the limited class time. And the students did not raise any questions related to the furniture. Rather than lecturing about the artwork, I wanted to give the students the opportunity to share their initial impressions and understanding of the work before I provided any further information. This practice, furthermore, also reflects my philosophy of relating the teaching content in the art classroom more closely to the personal background of the specific student body, as advocated in a transnational model of art education.

Besides, readers may also see that all the people in the classroom, the teacher and the students alike, expressed their opinions and interpretations of the artwork and that their interpretations emphasized different aspects of the artwork. Compared to the meaning(s) I made in Chapter Three of the artwork, the interpretations offered by the students here are either partial or different according to their perspective. However, I the teacher, did not dismiss such interpretations but instead affirmed their legitimacy as I saw them as addressing the different sides of the artwork and speaking to each individual's personal background and experience. For example, I did not overtly disagree with Kobie in his interpretation of the artwork as encouraging interracial marriage since I knew that he was very interested in the topic of race and had just witnessed a wedding between two people of different races. I also kept asking what other meanings other students might have after one of them had expressed his or her view. My practice in this conversation then, is not simply an act of adjusting the teaching content to the cognitive level of

the particular group of students, but a testimony to the quality of accommodating and developing multiple perspectives in a transnational model of art education.

The relationship in the imagined class was largely non-hierarchical. The students treated each other as equals. They listened to one another and at times followed up with others' comments or questions. More importantly, I the teacher, paid special attention not to impose my own opinion upon the students. While I did take the initiative from time to time to draw the students' attention to certain aspects of the artwork, I did not intend to simply give my own answer and then expect the students to conform to it. Instead, I sincerely sought the students' answers and genuinely listened to them. When helping the students to re-articulate or clarify their views, I spoke only nearby but not for them. During the conversation, both the teacher and the students expressed their ideas and also listened to others. We questioned each other and at times we modified our own opinions or interpretations accordingly. The relationship between us was thus dialogic. Whereas I shared with them the information I know of the artist and of the artwork, the students also contributed their own knowledge and thoughts to the class and we enriched each other's understanding of the studied artwork. Most significantly, in the conversation, I as the teacher, openly acknowledged the fact that the students thought of something I had not thought of before. This is not simply empowering to the students as some other models of art education also desire; distinctive to the transnational model of art education, it suggests the multiplicity of the role of each individual in the classroom as both a teacher and a learner.

In addition, I was self-reflexive in the conversation. Not only did I recall my own childhood episode in relation to hair in an effort to analyze its meaning in the artwork, I also thought about my own learning when admitting things the students had taught me. Meanwhile, I also encouraged the students to reflect on their own life experience and on their learning. For example, I asked what they had learned from a previous class. I also drew their attention to their own experience with languages or cultures that were different from their native ones. We were reflexive also in the sense that we discovered that we were at least in degrees a transnational. Further, we were also reflective. Not only did I reflect upon the students' learning, both the students and the teacher also reflected upon the world surrounding us, including its realities of global mobility and the suffering of some groups of people. In making the students empathize

with others in their suffering, this conversation also alluded to the permeability of subjectivity, which constitutes another characteristic of a transnational model of art education.

Last but far from the least, this teaching conversation has illustrated the trait of dialogism of a transnational model of art education through the intertextuality formed among its teaching units and among the artists and artworks under study. For example, the curriculum proceeded from the art of Kahlo to Mendieta because of their depiction of personal sufferings in their artwork, to Wenda Gu because of their shared status as immigrants in the United States as well as their use of human hair, and then to Xu Bing and some other artists whose work played with written languages and fake characters. Also, in the conversation, we compared and contrasted the artworks by the different artists in their common involvement of hair. Our understanding of the artworks studied later benefited from our experience with and understanding of previous artworks, while the understanding of latter artworks would also modify or enrich our understanding of the previous ones. Therefore, the units of the curriculum formed a dialogized relationship with one another.

In sum, I think that this teaching practice has demonstrated a number of qualities that characterize a transnational model of art education, even though its scope as only one session in a course curriculum has not allowed me to illustrate the model in its totality.

## Epilogue

Finally, this project has come to an interval, if not the terminus. Looking back, I grin at how my own experience with the dissertation attests to the difficulty a liminal being/becoming can encounter. Being ABD means that one exists in a transitional phase; but more particular to me is that I am also a transnational. As an international graduate student in the United States, I quiver in-between my original “Chinese” and adopted “American” ways of thinking, of approaching people, of doing things, and of writing the dissertation text itself.

That is why this piece of work warrants an epilogue to be complete.

At the oral defense, the committee asked why there were key words and points that were not introduced to the reader up front in the beginning but only showed up towards the end of the dissertation. I have to say that this may derive from the “Chinese” part of me, which prefers indirectness, that likes to be suggestive, and appears meandering along the way. Contrary to the “American” part in me, my Chinese-ness leads me to a more organic way of writing. That is, I wrote as I researched and as my thoughts developed, and in return, new ideas and concepts emerged as I wrote. This approach is perhaps not what some members of my committee would have preferred: writing in strict retrospection, and dividing the dissertation project into more clear-cut stages. But I am thankful that they are all open-minded enough to have tolerated the difference as a product/process of the fusion of Eastern and Western ideas and ways.

Deeply influenced by Chinese landscape ink painting, which features an aerial perspective that enables one to undertake looking and walking concurrently, and constantly change one’s viewing angle as one moves around, I found myself developing new roadmaps as I delved into new territories in the research. To be more specific, I started my dissertation upon initial encounters with the selected artists and their artworks with three key terms that I thought characterize transnationalism and transnationality: multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality. However, as I looked into the artworks more, other aspects came into my sight so that eventually, I identified more traits that are characteristic of the art and art-making of these transnational artists. To sum up, they are: nomadism, dialogism, and border-crossing.



On the pedagogical front, I argue that seven characteristics qualify a pedagogy to be transnational. Based upon the findings of my current research, which may be enriched in the future, these qualities include: dialogism, hybridity, nomadism, reflectivity and reflexivity, fluid subjectivity, the view of difference as surmountable, and a goal to cultivate world citizens.

A transnational pedagogy is first of all dialogic in the classroom and beyond. Participants speak and listen; they take and give freely; their opinions influence one another even though they don't necessarily agree with one another. The content of teaching and learning in the classroom is also dialogic with the outside world: people bring issues, concerns, and experiences they have or encounter in society into the class and take what they have learned or obtained in the classroom into the larger world. The education in a transnational class is both relevant to and based upon the experience of its members in their immediate and/or remote social environments.

A transnational pedagogy favors hybridity over purity. In fact, it questions the existence or legitimacy of absolute purity. In practice, teaching and learning in a transnational model of education can be trans-disciplinary, trans-historical-periodical, and the like. Materials can be organized and approached thematically, and/or across cultures, time periods, genres etc. But more importantly, this hybridity means that the role of the participant is not pure: one can be both a teacher and a learner, or an art maker and an art critic simultaneously or alternately. One can even be an artist and something not related to art, such as a social worker. Thus, this characteristic also implies multiplicity and heterogeneity.

As each participant speaks and listens, learns and teaches, each participant in the classroom is a speaker and a listener, a student and a teacher. Each is responsible for his or her own learning and yet all contribute to and, in the final analysis hold the responsibility for, the learning of the entire class. Thus, a transnational class is characterized also by the qualities of reflectivity and reflexivity: Each constituent needs to reflect upon his or her own learning and teaching as well as that of others in order to make the class successful. Peer learning is as important as learning from the teacher. In practice, the roles of the teacher and the student are not fixed. Such non-fixity suggests, on top of other things, that subjectivity is fluid and situational.

In fact, as one reflects upon the teaching and learning in the classroom in order to make the dialogue among the constituents more meaningful, a participant often projects into others' minds and thinks about others' thinking. Such a practice necessarily presumes a porous and permeable type of subjectivity. Furthermore, it alludes to a particular notion of difference characteristic of a transnational pedagogy: difference containing similarities, difference that is surmountable, and difference, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's (Spangler, 1993) words, which is not the opposite of sameness. Put it another way, a transnational pedagogy holds no dichotomy and is practiced not on binary terms. This does not only manifest itself in the trans-disciplinary or thematic arrangement of teaching materials, or the interchangeable roles between the teacher and the student, but also in the fact that it allows for multiple, different perspectives or opinions even towards the same issue. At root, it represents a both-and type of attitude and thinking habit. This quality also enables a transnational fashion of teaching to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity.

Additionally, a transnational pedagogy is characterized by nomadism. By this term I mean that the written curriculum may appear linear at one time, but not at other times; and that the course of dialogue in the classroom can be meandering and non-linear. This is not saying that the teaching materials of a course cannot be sequentially designed more or less ahead of time. However, it does mean that the development of the written curriculum and its implementation in the classroom do leave room for disruption and spontaneity. Of course, many other models of education and art education also encompass spontaneity and improvisation in the class. Yet compared to them, a transnational pedagogy expects and embraces these attributes. That is, the teacher desires for students to interject so that the class can capitalize on such occasions. In the transnational model of education, disruption is considered not as an annoying un-anticipated-ness for one to reluctantly deal with when confronted, but a surprising gift which provides opportunities to intensify the beauty of a garden one has entered. Here nomadism also means that there may be more than one way to relate one section, one teaching unit, or division, to another, and that there may be repetition—the coming back and going forward again—of the same issues, questions, concerns, or ideas which may take a different or similar format over time. As teaching materials are intended to be in a dialogic relationship with one another, a previous teaching and the perceived learning from it may result in significant adjustment of the following sessions,

transforming a pre-designed curriculum unit into another face. Thus, nomadism in a transnational pedagogy ensures that the blueprint for a course is changeable, that students and teachers live comfortably with this reality of uncertainty, in various degrees, of both the content and the result of their teaching and learning in the course, and that all elements involved, including the human participants, are malleable and submit to transformation.

These said, I want to allude back to my previously-described teaching scenario. In a second reflection, I think that this imagined teaching practice tells me that the interpreting of an artwork is un-finalizable, which again, echoes Bakhtin's (1881) concept of dialogism, and that in the transnational model of education the process is equally important and as valuable as the product. That is, while we strive to achieve some sort of final, comprehensive interpretation of an artwork, we have to recognize that no single interpretation, nor any single class, can ever exhaust the meaning of a piece of art. Thus, a transnational model of art education does not take the covering of certain materials or subject matters as the goal of a course curriculum or a teaching session, but the emphasis is equally if not more placed on the process of studying these artworks and subjects. Materials are not only the end but more the means, the instrument that can be used for the development of a transnational perspective.

Now, let me return to the last one on my list of characteristics of a transnational pedagogy. In my understanding, the ultimate goal of practicing a transnational model of education and art education is cultivating world citizens. Many have claimed or will claim the same goal as I just stated. However, I have a particular vision for world citizens in mind. To borrow Victoria Bernal's (2004) words, I envision that a goal of transnational pedagogy is to develop students into individuals whose "frames of reference for our [their] own lives are not constructed on a national basis but in terms of standards, experiences, and concepts that include a larger world" (pp. 4-5). In other words, I believe that a transnational pedagogy or model of education (art education included) can nurture students into human beings who respect and capitalize on differences among humankind rather than fearfully move away from them.

But why not the term transcultural?

At different stages of this research project, the word transcultural was suggested several times as a possible alternative for transnational. However, I insisted in choosing the latter over the former. My first argument is that transnational is more explicitly political and contains more dimensions than transcultural. Given the fact that the global mobility of this particular group of people and their activities have not only impacted the cultural but also the economic and political realms of different societies, I consider transcultural too narrow to describe the nature of this population and the scope of its influence upon the world. Second, as mentioned in my Prologue, I have a fundamental doubt at the legitimacy of culture as a category to classify people. Yet, on the other hand, I believe that nation is an arbitrary classification so that one either belongs to or does not belong to a certain nation on paper.

I find that this feeling about culture is shared by author Arjun Appadurai while I read his book, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. As Appadurai (1996) remarks, the ideas of culture allude to “substantiality” the term has been assigned to during the course of its use, and always attempt to make one “think of actual social groups as cultures” (p. 13). Instead, he endorses the adjective form of the term and takes delight in addressing the cultural dimension of phenomena and issues (Appadurai, 1996). In my opinion, since culture in most cases is associated with and pre-requires the existence of a social group, or a community of people, I thus object to the label of transcultural individuals or a transnational culture precisely because of the absence of a more-or-less fixed community of people who among themselves share certain sets of practices and rituals. In my understanding, the population I am concerned with in the dissertation research are nomadic individuals who possess the qualities of heterogeneity, liminality, multiplicity, and so on, so that they are in a state of continual flux, and too fluid to formulate a defined community. Instead, they largely exist in reality independent of one another. Theoretically, however, such individuals—among whom some are artists—are united by the shared characteristics of nomadism, hybridity, and so forth, or, by what I call in the dissertation text a transnational perspective.

Therefore, it is even unthinkable that a coherent transnational visual cultural community could emerge. However, in the meanwhile, I do think that the art of the selected artists presents to us the transnational dimension of contemporary visual culture. In other words, part of today’s visual

culture is transnational and the artworks studied in this dissertation shed light on our understanding of it.

Finally, who can teach in a transnational manner? Just as Appadurai (1996) has optimistically predicted that “globalization is not the story of cultural homogenization” (p. 11), I would like to declare and invite that whoever possesses a transnational perspective, that is, many people at different stages in life in today’s world, will be able to implement this transnational pedagogy and transnational model of education. Let us see.

## References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appadurai, A. (2001). *Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1990). Author and hero in aesthetic activity. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *Art and answerability: Early philosophical essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (translated by Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barrett, T. (2000). *Criticizing art: Understanding the contemporary* (2nd edition). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Baubock, R. (2003). Towards a political theory of migrant transnationalism. *International Migration Review*, 37 (3), 700-723.
- Baxandall, M. (1985). *Patterns of intention: On the historical explanation of pictures*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bernal, V. (2004). Eritrea goes global: Reflections on nationalism in a transnational era. *Cultural Anthropology*, 19 (1), 3-25.
- Bhabha, H. (1990a). DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation. In H. Bhabha (Ed.), *Nation and narration* (291-322). New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990b). The third space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207-221). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of cultures*. New York: Routledge.
- Bordwell, D. (1985). *Narration in the fiction film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Bourne, R. (1916). Trans-National America. *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (July 1916), 86-97.
- Brittain, C. (2002). *Transnational messages: Experiences of Chinese and Mexican immigrants in American schools*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.
- Cateforis, D. (2003). An interview with Wenda Gu. In M. Bessire (Ed.), *Wenda Gu: Art*

- from Middle Kingdom to biological millennium* (pp.143-155). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cateforis, D. (2005). Translation as transformation: Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles: retranslation & rewriting of tang poetry*. In Z. Huang (chief editor), 文化翻译: 谷文达 <碑林—唐诗后著> (*Translating visibility: Wenda Gu: forest of stone steles, retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*) (pp. 311-321). Guangzhou, China: Ling Nan Art Publishing.
- Cheng, Z. (2005). Four-eyed Wenda Gu—How Wenda Gu creates his steles. In Z. Huang (chief editor), 文化翻译: 谷文达 <碑林—唐诗后著> (*Translating visibility: Wenda Gu: forest of stone steles, retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*) (pp. 333-336). Guangzhou, China: Ling Nan Art Publishing.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eco, U., et al. (1992). *Interpretation and overinterpretation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, E. (1970). *Becoming human through art: Aesthetic experience in the school*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Finlayson, A. (1998). Psychology, psychoanalysis, and theories of nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 4 (2), 145-162.
- Foss, K., Foss, S. & Griffin, C. (1999). *Feminist rhetorical theories*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Foster, G. A. (2005). Safi Faye and Trinh T. Minh-ha: Experiments in ethnography. In J. Petrolle & V. Wexman (Eds.), *Women and experimental filmmaking* (pp. 179-191). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Gardner, H. (1990). *Art education and human development*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Garoian, C. (1999). *Performing pedagogy: Toward an art of politics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gellner, E. (1996). The coming of nationalism and its interpretation: The myths of nation and class. In G. Balakrishnan (Ed.), *Mapping the nation*. London: Verso.
- Golden-McNerney, R. (2004). A home of hair: Abjection and Wenda Gu's *china monument*:

- temple of heaven*. In Y. Wang & Y. Sun (Curs. & Eds.), *Reinventing tradition in a new world: The arts of Gu Wenda, Wang Mansheng, Xu Bing and Zhang Hongtu* (pp. 15-20). Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College.
- Gu, W. (2003). Face the new millennium: The divine comedy of our times. In M. Bessire (Ed.), *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to biological millennium* (pp. 30-41). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gu, W. (2005). *forest of stone steles: retranslation and rewriting of Tang poetry 1993-2005*. In Z. Huang (chief editor), 文化翻译: 谷文达 <碑林—唐诗后著> (*Translating visuality: Wenda Gu: forest of stone steles, retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*) (pp. 285-292). Guangzhou, China: Ling Nan Art Publishing.
- Guthmann, E. (1996). A talky `Tale of Love' by Berkeley director. *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 25, 1996, p. E 7). San Francisco, CA.
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Jameson, F. (1984). Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review*, 146 (3), 53-92.
- Klady, L. (1995). Review: *A Tale of Love*. *Variety Review* (December 31, 1995, p. 11). New York.
- Knobler, N. (1980). *The visual dialogue*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Kristeva, J. (1977). *About Chinese women* (translated by Anita Barrows). New York: Urizen Books.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1993). *Nations without nationalism*. Translated by L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lehman, P. (1984). Looking at Ivy looking at us looking at her: The camera and the garter. *Wide Angle*, 6 (1), 59-63.
- Levathes, L. (1994). *When China ruled the seas: The treasure fleet of the dragon throne 1400-1433*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Levitt, P. (2003). "You know, Abraham was really the first immigrant": Religion and



- transnational migration, *International Migration Review*, 37 (3), 847-873.
- Li, J. (2000). 无形墙界与无疆界--联合国计划之墙 ( Invisible walls and borderless -ness—the walls in *the united nations* project). In Y. Chen (chief editor), 墙 (*The wall*) (exhibition catalogue) (pp. 270-280). Taipei, Taiwan: National Museum of History.
- Martin, S. F. & Larkin, M. A.(2000). *World migration report 2000*. International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations.
- McFee, J. K. (1998). Interdisciplinary and international trends in multicultural art education. In J. K. McFee, *Cultural diversity and the structure and practice of art education* (pp. 79-96). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- McLean, I. (2002). Back to the future. *Third Text*, 57 (1), 23-30.
- Moum, B. (1999). Trinh T. Minh-ha's *A Tale of Love*: Documenting contesting realities. Paper delivered at the 1999 Visible Evidence Conference (August 19-22, 1999), at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA.
- Mullin, M (1996). Review: *A Tale of Love*. *VietNow* (December 31, 1996, p. 19). Irvine.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Peng, D. (2005). The true meaning of forest of stone steles. In Z. Huang (chief editor), 文化翻译: 谷文达 <碑林—唐诗后著> (*Translating visibility: Wenda Gu: forest of stone steles, retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*) (pp. 323-331). Guangzhou, China: Ling Nan Art Publishing.
- Portes, A.(2003). Conclusion: Theoretical convergencies and empirical evidence in the study of immigrant transnationalism. *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 874-892.
- Readings, B. (1996). *The university in the ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Redding, J. & Brownworth, V. (1997). *Film fatales: Independent women directors*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- Rorty, R. (1992). The pragmatist's progress. In U. Eco (Ed.), *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (pp. 89-108). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothenberg, A. (1979). *The emerging goddess: The creative process in art, science, and other fields*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago.
- Schechner, R. (1982). *The end of humanism: Writings on performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal.

- Smith, R. (1989). *Discipline-based art education: Origins, meaning, and development*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Smith, M. & Guarnizo, L. (1998). Introduction. In M. Smith & L. Guarnizo (Eds.), *Transnationalism from below*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Spangler, T. (1993). Interviewer interviewed: A discussion with Trinh T. Minh-ha. Retrieved on May 26, 2007 at [http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent\\_image/issues/1993-12/print\\_version/trinh.htm](http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent_image/issues/1993-12/print_version/trinh.htm).
- Struve, L. (1998). *The Ming-Qing conflict, 1619-1683: A historiography and source guide*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies.
- Suderburg, E. (2000). Introduction: On installation and site specificity. In E. Suderburg (Ed.), *Space, site, intervention: Situating installation art* (pp. 1-22). Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press.
- Trinh, T. M. (1984). Mechanical eye, electronic ear and the lure of authenticity. *Wide Angle*, 6 (2), 58-63.
- Trinh, T. M. (1991). *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender, and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1992a). Surname Viet Given Name Nam (film script). In T. M. Trinh (1992), *Framer framed* (pp. 49-91). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1992b). Reassemblage (film script). In T. M. Trinh (1992), *Framer framed* (pp. 95-105). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1999a). A Tale of Love (film script). In T. M. Trinh (1999), *Cinema interval* (pp. 93-149). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1999b). The veil-image: Interview with Margaret Kelly. In T. M. Trinh (1999), *Cinema interval* (pp. 75-89). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1999c). Character zone: Interview with Gwendolyn Foster. In T. M. Trinh (1999), *Cinema interval* (pp. 227-245). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1999d). Painted power: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In T. M. Trinh (1999), *Cinema interval* (pp. 17-31). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1999e). Speaking nearby: Interview with Nancy Chen. In T. M. Trinh (1999), *Cinema interval* (pp. 209-225). New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (2001). *The Fourth Dimension*. Film distributed by Women Make Movies.

- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Verdery, K. (1996). Whither 'nation' and 'nationalism'? In G. Balakrishnan (Ed.), *Mapping the nation* (pp. 226-234). London: Verso.
- Verhoeven, D. (1998). Love and country: *A Tale of Love*. *Metro: Media and Education Magazine*. 116, 58-59.
- Vertovec, S. (2003). Migration and other modes of transnationalism: Toward conceptual cross-fertilization. *International Migration Review*, 37 (3), 641-665.
- Vine, R. (2006). Lost in translation. *Art in America*, 94 (5), 166-171.
- Wang, Y. (2004). Four New Yorkers and their many worlds: The arts of Gu Wenda, Wang Mansheng, Xu Bing, and Zhang Hongtu. In Y. Wang & S. Yan (eds.), *Reinventing tradition in a new world: The arts of Gu Wenda, Wang Mansheng, Xu Bing, and Zhang Hongtu* (pp. 3-14). Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College.
- Watson, B. (1929). Introduction to the Jade Mountain. In W. Bynner, *The Jade mountain: A Chinese anthology, being three hundred poems of the Tang dynasty* (pp. 618-906). New York: A.A. Knopf.
- Weintraub, L. (2003). *In the making: Creative options for contemporary art*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.
- Wilson, B. (2000). *Whose rights should prevail? Contexts of uncertainty and conflicts of interest in art education*. Paper presented at the Asia-Pacific art education conference (December 28-30, 2000), Hong Kong, China.
- Wolff, T. & Geahigan, G. (1997). *Art criticism and education*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Women Make Movies. (2001). *The Fourth Dimension*. Retrieved on May 25, 2007 at <http://www.vietfilmfest.com/trinh.html>
- Wu, H. (2002). Introduction: A decade of experimental Chinese art (1990-2000). In H. Wu, H. Wang, & B. Feng (2002), *Reinterpretation: A decade of experimental Chinese art (1990-2000)*. *The first Guangzhou Triennial*. Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources, Ltd.
- Wu, H., Wang, H., & Feng, B. (2002). *Reinterpretation: A decade of experimental Chinese art (1990-2000)*. *The first Guangzhou Triennial*. Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources, Ltd.
- Wu, H. (2005). Monumentality and anti-monumentality in Wenda Gu's *forest of stone steles, retranslation and rewriting of tang poetry*. In Z. Huang (chief editor), *文化翻译: 谷文达*

- <碑林—唐诗后著> (*Translating visuality: Wenda Gu: Forest of stone steles, retranslation & rewriting of Tang poetry*) (pp. 295-300). Guangzhou, China: Ling Nan Art Publishing.
- Xu, G. (2003). Neo-Hexagram: Early work. In M. Bessire (Ed.), *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to biological millennium* (pp. 194-201). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Xu, H. (1993). Modern Chinese art. Translated by C. Roberts. In C. Turner (Ed.), *Tradition and change: Contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 117-127). St. Lucia, Qld., Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Zizek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel, and the critique of ideology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**Vita**  
**Yujie Julia Li**

**EDUCATION**

<i>Pennsylvania State University</i> , University Park, PA <i>Ph.D., Art Education</i>	2002 - Present
<i>Harvard University Graduate School of Education</i> , Cambridge, MA <i>Ed. M., Art in Education</i>	2000 - 2001
<i>Foreign Affairs College</i> , Beijing, People's Republic of China <i>B.L., Diplomacy</i>	1996 - 1998
<i>China Ocean University</i> , Qingdao, People's Republic of China <i>(formerly The Ocean University of Qingdao)</i> <i>B.A., English Language and Literature</i>	1992 - 1996

**SELECTED PUBLICATIONS**

**Li, Y.** (2007). Teaching visual culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century art classroom. *Translations: From theory to practice*, 16 (2), 1-8. Reston, VA: NAEA publication.

**Li, Y.** (2005). 视觉艺术教育初探 (The look of visual cultural art education). conference proceeding. The 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Cross-Strait Conference on Art Education in Taiwan and Mainland, Shanghai, China.

**Li, Y.** & Wang, X. (co-translators) (1999). *301 great ideas for using technology*, Grand Encyclopedic Publishing House, Beijing, China.

**SELECTED PRESENTATIONS**

National Art Education Association annual conventions, 2005, 2006, & 2007  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Graduate Research in Art Education conference, Columbia University, NY, 2006  
Pennsylvania Art Education Association annual conventions, 2004 & 2005  
Curriculum and Pedagogy annual conference, Oxford, OH, 2005  
Central Academy of Fine Art special conference on art education, Beijing, China, 2004

**SELECTED TEACHING**

<b>Art History</b> , Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA	8/2005 - 5/2006 & 9/2003 - 5/2004
<b>Art</b> , Saint Johns Elementary School, Bellefonte, PA	9/2004 - 7/2005
<b>Art Education</b> , Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA	9/2004 - 5/2005
<b>Mandarin Chinese</b> , Bunker Hill Community College, Charlestown, MA	1/2002 - 5/2002
Happy Valley Chinese School, State College, PA	8/2007 - 4/2008
<b>ESL</b> , Beijing University of Agribusiness Management, Beijing, China	7/1998 - 7/2000
Yanjing Overseas Chinese University, Beijing, China	9/1997 - 7/1998

**OTHER PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES**

**Juror**, 3/2005, 15th Annual Graduate Student Research Exhibition  
*Pennsylvania State University*, University Park, PA  
**Class Lead Teacher & Students Advisor**, 8/1999-7/2000, English Department  
*Beijing University of Agribusiness Management*, Beijing, China  
**Editorial Board Member**, 2/1997-1/1998, Foreign Affairs Youth Quarterly  
Foreign Affairs College, Beijing, China