IGNACIO ADRIASOLA

READING “IMPERIAL DESIRE AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY”

Critical Notes

Art historian Ikeda Shinobu’s important essay on the series *Kunyan of Peking* by the oil painter Umehara Ryūzaburō—made available in English for the first time in these pages—speaks to two interrelated scholarly concerns surrounding the history of modern art in Japan: first, the reevaluation of twentieth-century cultural production in light of its function in the context of imperialism and total mobilization, and second, the co-imbrication of gender and representation in modern Japanese art.¹ The following notes situate this essay in relation to such questions and highlight some of the key theoretical and methodological concerns foregrounded by the author.

“Imperial Desire and Female Subjectivity” considers the meaning of Umehara’s depictions of strikingly assertive Chinese women dressed in form-fitting *qipao*, which the painter created between 1939 and 1943, during extended sojourns in Beijing. Comparing this series to other visual and literary representations of women circulated in print media at the time, Ikeda places Umehara’s portraits within a discursive context marked by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and reflects more generally on the significance of representations of women created at this time. Contrasting Umehara’s *kunyan* (young Chinese women) to representations of colonial women and to the demure image of the woman of the home front, she reveals competing yet mutually reinforcing articulations of femininity at the height of Japanese imperialism. Through careful analysis, Ikeda accounts for the ambivalent desires and fears that informed the creation of *kunyan* as image, probing the network of prewar male intellectuals that generated and sustained such discourse—which in turn informed the reproduction of wartime female subjectivity.

The essay intervenes most immediately in a debate that over the past three decades has redrawn the contours of the category “war art” (*sensō bijutsu*). Initially defined *sensu stricto* in relation to patronage, genre, and subject matter, the category usually referred to academic-style paintings that portray battle scenes or otherwise document life on the war front and that were produced for and exhibited by the Japanese State under its cultural consolidation policies (*bunka tōsei*) during the late 1930s and 1940s. The current art historical debate focused on “war painting” (*sensō-ga*), in large part due to the fame of some of the artists involved in the

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production of these objects. Scholarly interest in such paintings was also in response to the contentious history behind them, particularly their confiscation by the US occupying forces in 1951, their rediscovery by the Japanese press in the mid-1960s, and their subsequent return to Japan as “indefinite loans” in 1970.² The turn to a broader definition of “war art” not only is more historically accurate, in reflecting the scope of patronage and diversity of media involved, but also has permitted a critical revision of the typology and function of these objects. Recent scholarship has expanded “war art” into a much more broadly conceived category that takes into consideration the discursive and visual contexts of which these objects were part, as well as their ideological function, situating them within the *longue durée* of Japanese modernity and the local development of the fine arts system.³ The redrawn category is expansive and better reflects the insidious nature of ideology as well as the active role that cultural production played in articulating and sustaining the Japanese State’s pursuit of war and empire. This scholarship has thus revisited canonical works such as Fujishima Takeji’s depictions of elegant women in Manchurian gowns, Yokoyama Taikan’s radiant views of Mount Fuji, and even Kawabata Ryūshi’s wartime paintings of pumpkin vines, all from the perspective of their function within the war’s visual economy.⁴ No longer reduced to the monumentalization and sanctification of war—and the chilling banality thereof—“war art” and “war painting” have been revealed to be not exceptional categories of art but logical outcomes of the ideology undergirding the fine arts system and the unfolding of modern Japan’s trajectory.

Studies of “war art” have reached beyond categorizing iconography and typifying the production and circulation of such objects. Recent scholarship has also considered the affective quality of formal experimentation seen in such works, returning—ironically, perhaps—to Tanaka Hisao’s problematic observations regarding their “rousing” power.⁵ Recent contributions to the Anglophone literature have foregrounded in particular the affective quality of depictions of the body, most evident in the gruesome “shattered-pearl” paintings of Fujita Tsuguharu, and the ways in which artists negotiated conflicting views on masculinity through such representations.⁶ But while the bodies of men became by default the subject matter most often portrayed in “war art,” images of women also played a key role in the development of its representational logic. It is important to underscore the crucial role played by the female nude—the veritable cornerstone of fine arts education—in preparing painters for the task of depicting human figures in combat. Moreover, the introduction of the fine arts system in Japan also entailed the introduction of conventions of allegorical representation that traditionally deployed the exposed female body as a tool of moral edification.⁷ Such images informed representations of women produced and circulated during the war that extol the “good wives, wise mothers (*ryōsai kenbo*)” engaged in the biological and cultural reproduction of imperial subjects as the feminine ideal.⁸ But, as Ikeda points out, woman-as-sign operated in an even more complex manner: she reveals the metonymic function of the image of *kunyan*, which stood in not only for land—China under Japanese occupation—but also as a site of displacement for the feelings of ambivalence that their producers held toward the Asian Other, as well as toward the Japanese State.

The essay thus connects to a broader problematization of the production of images of women in Japanese art, developed in recent decades by feminist art historians in Japan and abroad.⁹ The reflection on gender and the image has been, of course, one of the most exciting and fruitful innovations in Japanese art history of the past few decades, and one that foregrounds the concurrent reception and re-elaboration in Japan of the “new art history”—which has reevaluated art historical methods in light of social history and post-structuralist critique.

In terms of methodology, the key words at work in the essay are drawn from the Althusserian tool kit: ideology (*ideorogī*), representation (*hyōshō*), and discourse (*gensetsu*), all of which feature prominently in the writings of the art historian Griselda Pollock, whose work has been foundational for the Image & Gender research group of which Ikeda is part.¹⁰ One of Pollock's innovations on the Althusserian framework has been her focus on the question of the Other (*tasha*), a word loaned in turn from film studies (notably, the psychoanalytically inflected work of the film semiotician Christian Metz) although also implicitly present in Althusser's writing.¹¹

Such a focus on the structural mechanics of representation and, through its analysis, the unpacking of ideology—understood as the set of “common sense” ideas and assumptions shared by a group of individuals and only identifiable in action—has become an important tool for Japanese art historians examining prewar and wartime cultural production.¹² Ideology critique as a methodological approach has freed researchers to consider in broad terms how the artwork *works*: not only what a painting says but also how it is able to sustain itself as a representation. Crucially, ideology critique has provided a means for scholars to move beyond questions of intentionality or individual responsibility. This shift has been extremely important in the case of “war painting.” Famously, in the immediate postwar period, “war painting” was dragged into the intensely contested question of wartime responsibility. This debate hinged on criticism of the wartime activities of such prominent figures as Fujita Tsuguharu, who zealously produced highly accomplished works that glorify supreme sacrifice, for which he was publicly excoriated in the war's aftermath.¹³ However, many other artists benefitted from State patronage of the arts during cultural consolidation—and, indeed, some of them played the role of prosecutor against other wartime artists in the court of public opinion. Still others, however, were never scrutinized in such fashion—among them, some held a privileged position in the prewar arts establishment that made them unlikely “resisters” to the militarist State, and, like Umehara, they consequently were able to avoid actively engaging in propagandistic efforts, despite their prominence. The initial problematization of “war painting” in the immediate postwar period elided a more fundamental interrogation of the conditions that led to the production of these objects—a question that in turn calls for a more profound reflection on the function and ontology of cultural production within the fine arts framework.

One of the most provocative questions arising from Ikeda's study concerns the place of gender—or, rather, the production of sexual difference within representation—in considering the basic structure of modernity. In this regard, it is important to highlight the dialogue seen in this text with the late art historian Wakakuwa Midori, on the nature of Japanese militarism. Building on insights from the feminist philosopher and theorist of international relations Cynthia Enloe, Wakakuwa developed in her later work a searing critique of the culture of modern war, noting that Japanese militarism fundamentally relied on a patriarchal logic, whereby domination over women at home served a propaedeutic role in preparing men to dominate the non-Japanese Other. Domination over the bodies of women enabled the establishment of what Wakakuwa calls a “male alliance” (*dansei-dōmei*), which she places at the core of Japanese imperialism. Not only was domination over women a means through which Japanese men could learn how to exert power, it also introduced a type of simulacral gendering of the metropolitan-colonial relationship, in which Japan assumed a masculine role in relation to a feminized Asia. While largely sharing Wakakuwa's insights, Ikeda underscores the participation of Japanese women in wartime society; to both scholars, women in Japan were not passive victims but active participants who found agency within patriarchal domination and assisted in the reproduction of this system. The problem of female agency in wartime Japan raises the question

of whether the establishment and replication of such male alliances (and thus the reproduction of gender relations) function at an even deeper level, undergirding the very basis of modernity.

The blind spot of ideology critique has traditionally resided in two points: one of them is a difficulty in reconciling structural determinants and individual agency, and the second concerns how an emphasis on the demarcation of discourse has at times resulted in overly schematic characterizations of the operation of specific works, or, conversely, the extrapolation of representational dynamics identified in particular objects, taken by analogy to characterize a more generalized condition. Professor Ikeda creatively addresses these shortcomings. First, she delimits the object of inquiry to a restricted series of paintings—albeit, as we have seen, one with particularly expansive resonances. Second, she addresses agency by reframing the question of ideology in terms of how it informs the production of subjectivity.¹⁴

Here, the history of dress plays a key role. Costume provides a fundamental approach to the question of the enactment of ideology; Umehara's *kunyan* not only operate as signs within a given semiotic system but also inform particular modes of behavior: such representations had, after all, an impact on the ways in which women perceived and related to dress. The practice of dressing can be seen as part of a repertory of actions that enable an individual's assimilation of ideological positions—this is what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed *habitus*.¹⁵ Ikeda closes her essay by stating that part of the allure of the “woman in Chinese dress” among women on the home front resided in the transformation of costume as *habitus*. She observes that such “Chinese dress” instantiated the simultaneous desire and disavowal elicited by this image of Otherness; in their interest in the “woman in Chinese dress” Ikeda finds in Japanese women a conflicted identification with the women of the colonies, whom they viewed as signs of modernity even as they embraced beliefs of Japanese superiority. Such ambivalence was expressed, for example, in the admiration reserved for women who mastered the art of negotiating different dress codes (the author cites the case of the wartime film star Ri Kōran), the excoriation of lavishness in women's magazines, and the desire for modern and more functional clothing, which is related in the essay to the eventual embrace of the masculinizing *monpe* pantaloons as a de facto wartime uniform.¹⁶ In this sense, Ikeda's insight concerning the inherently transmedial nature of the circulation of representations of women is key—in terms of lending a plausible approach to a study not only of how ideology is instantiated in practice but also of how individual desires relate to and negotiate representation, and thus how they inform the construction of individual subjectivity.

Finally, an aspect briefly raised in this essay, and which merits further consideration, is the status of cross-cultural and cross-gender appropriations of the image of *kunyan*.¹⁷ Ikeda notes in passing that Yasui Sōtarō's model for his famous *Portrait of Chin-Jung* was in fact Odagiri Mineko, the Japanese novelist. She calls attention as well to the perverse identification of Umehara, an (Japanese, male) artist, and a (Chinese, female) model in Kobayashi Hideo's writings on the “woman in Chinese dress.” It is crucial to highlight here the importance of cross-dressing as a foil: a mimetic performance of alterity belies the inherent instability of the signs at work within a given representational logic. Ikeda has previously referred to such instability in terms of the generation of an image of ethnic ambiguity in the case of the “woman in Chinese dress.”¹⁸

It is also interesting to note—as Maki Kaneko has in the epilogue to her study of “war painting”—that the simulacral gendering of colonial relations underwent a postwar inversion during the US-led occupation. This was a point foregrounded by artists Shimada Yoshiko and Bubu's performances and photo-collaborations in the 1990s, which dealt with the legacy of the Pacific War. One such work shows the two female artists side by side in a composite photograph, reenacting—en travesti—the snapshot that commemorates the first meeting between General Douglas MacArthur

and a defeated and sartorially transformed Hirohito. Commentators often have remarked on the photograph's inevitable "feminization" of the emperor. Such feminization is effected in the awkward juxtaposition of bodies, the camera's inevitably high horizon, its angle, and, of course, the models' demeanor and costume: while MacArthur stands relaxed and larger-than-life in khakis, with a pipe in his mouth, the emperor has cast off his uniform of supreme commander of the Japanese Army and appears to be cross-dressing in civilian formalwear, appearing publicly in such guise for the first time since his investiture. In Shimada and Bubu's photograph, the simulacral inversion is revealed as serving a type of whitewashing that functioned to generate the myth of national victimhood to which the postwar State pandered, establishing a pact of convenience that exonerated citizens and State structures alike from the memory of complicity with militarism at home and aggression on the continent.¹⁹ Ikeda's essay similarly ponders the gendering of colonial relations, exposing the desires and fears of male intellectuals in confronting the Asian Other.

In closing her essay, Ikeda writes, "I am aware of my responsibility as a researcher to query the ways in which the production and circulation, as well as the interpretation, of images were implicated in providing a structure for the historical relations between Asian countries and Japan." But from where does the responsibility to engage objects in such a manner emerge? Upon my request for further explanation regarding the responsibility to which this sentence alludes, Ikeda provided an important supplement, which I reproduce here by way of conclusion.

I believe I have a multilayered responsibility to continue responding to representations of the past. This responsibility derives from being a member of a Japanese empire that once produced, circulated, and consumed Asian territories as representations. It also arises from the fact that such representations generated gender asymmetry and discrimination against women.

If we put these things together, we find that my own standpoint exists at the intersection of three distinct aspects: "the Japanese empire," "woman," and "representation studies [*hyōshō ken-kyū*]." Put otherwise, my position, my situation [*ichi*] belongs to these three arenas. It is because of these that I believe I have a responsibility to respond.²⁰

Two points are of importance here: one is the idea of a "responsibility to respond," which is evidence of self-reflection on the structural mediation of subjectivity (or standpoint). Second, and related to the first point, is the political urgency of research. While its partial institutionalization—at least within academic curricula—attests to the success of the "new art history," this acceptance has at times implied a reduction or containment that neutralizes the political urgency that originally animated this project. Circumstances around the globe today highlight the need for us to reconsider these concerns. Whether or not, as Antonio Gramsci once noted, this interregnum in which "morbid symptoms" thrive is a transitory step in the necessarily difficult birth of a new world, will also depend on our capacity as researchers, critics, and interpreters to successfully respond by shedding light on the ways in which cultural production mediates transactions of power.²¹

IGNACIO ADRIASOLA, PhD (Duke), 2011, is assistant professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory, The University of British Columbia. His articles on modern art in Japan have appeared in the journals *positions: asia critique* (Duke University Press), *October* (MIT Press), and *Archives of Asian Art* (forthcoming, Duke University Press). His book in progress, *Melancholy Sites*, addresses experimental art and politics in 1960s Japan. E-mail: ignacio.adriasola@ubc.ca

Notes

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- 1 The original exists in two versions. My translation is of the lengthier version of the essay, which was published as part of a grant-in-aid report for a research project on wartime culture and visual representation led by Professor Nagata Ken'ichi (now of Nagoya University of Arts). Ikeda Shinobu, "Ume-hara Ryūzaburō 'Kunyan' rensaku (1939–1943) wo megutte-sensō to josei hyōshō" [On Ume-hara Ryūzaburō's "Kunyan" Series (1939–1943): War and representations of women], in *20-seiki ni okeru sensō to hyōshō/geijutsu* [War and representation/art in the twentieth century] Heisei 15nendo-16nendo kagaku kenkyūhi hojōkin kiban kenkyū (B) Kenkyū seika hōkoku-sho: Kenkyū daihyō-sha Nagata Ken'ichi [Grant-in-aid report: Basic scientific research grant (B) for Heisei 15 and 16. Principal investigator Nagata Ken'ichi] (October 2005): 6–19. An abridged version of the essay was published as "Chūgokufuku no josei hyōshō: Senjika ni okeru teikoku dansei chishikijin no aidentiti kōchiku wo megutte" [Representations of women in Chinese dress: On the wartime construction of identity by imperial male intellectuals], in *Sensō to hyōshō/bijutsu 20-seiki igo: Kirokushū: Kokusai shinpojiumu* [War, representation and art since the twentieth century: An international symposium], ed. Nagata Ken'ichi (Tokyo: Bigaku Shuppan, 2007), 103–7.
- 2 Maki Kaneko, *Mirroring the Japanese Empire: The Male Figure in Yōga Painting, 1930–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 142–43.
- 3 The turning point for this line of research can be seen in two important milestones: a controversial symposium held in 1995 by the Japan Art History Society on the question of wartime art, co-convened by Tan'ō Yasunori and the late (and much lamented) Chino Kaori, and the subsequent publication of Tan'ō and Kawata Akihisa's foundational study *The War within the Image (Imēji no naka no sensō, 1996)*. Maki Kaneko provides a detailed overview of the development of this debate in her monograph on painting at the height of the Japanese Empire (Kaneko, *Mirroring the Japanese Empire*).
- 4 See, for example, Mimi Yiengpruksawan, "Japanese War Paint: Kawabata Ryūshi and the Emptying of the Modern," *Archives of Asian Art* 46 (January 1993): 76–90.
- 5 Tanaka Hisao, *Nihon no sensōga: sono keifu to tokushitsu* [Japan's war painting: Its genealogy and characteristics] (Tokyo: Perikan-sha, 1985).
- 6 Bert Winther-Tamaki has addressed representations of the body as a structuring axis for his study of oil painting in Japan. Maki Kaneko's monograph, on the other hand, focuses on the question of masculinity. See Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Maximum Embodiment: Yōga, the Western Painting of Japan, 1912–1955* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012); and Kaneko, *Mirroring the Japanese Empire*.
- 7 On the introduction of the female nude within the local fine arts discourse, see Kitazawa Noriaki, "Bijutsu ni okeru seiji hyōgen to sei hyōgen no gen-kai" [The Limits of political and sexual expression in the fine arts], in *Kōza Nihon bijutsushi 6: bijutsu wo sasaeru mono* [What makes art possible: Studies in Japanese art, vol. 6] (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2005).
- 8 Wakakuwa Midori's many studies on modern art and visual culture have highlighted this crucial function. See, for example, Wakakuwa Midori, *Sensō ga tsukuru joseizō: Dainiji Sekai Taisenka no Nihon josei dōin no shikakuteki puropaganda* [The image of woman produced by the war: The visual propaganda of women's mobilization during the Second World War] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995). On the role of images of the empress in propagating an idealized notion of femininity, see Wakakuwa Midori, *Kōgō no shōzō: Shōken Kōtaigō no hyōshō to josei no kokuminka* [The empress's portrait: Representations of the Empress-Dowager Shōken, and how women became citizens] (Tōkyō: Chikuma Shobō, 2001).
- 9 Professor Ikeda's research initially focused on narrative painting scrolls of the later Heian court, notably in illustrated Genji scrolls. This initial interest led her to explore the production of gender and ethnic differences in representation, extending her research to the modern period.
- 10 Founded in Tokyo in March 1995, the Image & Gender research group (*Imēji to jendā kenkyūkai*) holds periodic meetings and has published its own journal since 1999.
- 11 Of course, theories of the image (*eizō-ron*) were widely debated in Japan prior to their appropriation within art history as an academic discipline, as attested by the prolific theoretical production accompanying the rise of avant-garde photography and cinema in the late 1960s. Some of the figures involved in this movement (such as the photographer/critic Nakahira Takuma) had been exposed to academic training in art history and aesthetics, or eventually moved

- their main site of activity to the academy (foremost among them Taki Kōji). On Japanese theories of the image in the 1960s, see especially Yuriko Furuhashi, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 12 It is important to recall that Pollock published in the renowned journal *Screen*, which became one of the primary English-language venues for debates on feminism and the moving image. See especially Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état (1970)," in *Positions (1964-1975)* (Paris: Les Éditions sociales, 1976), 67-125.
 - 13 Critic Miyata Shigeo initiated the debate on artists' wartime responsibility (known in Japanese as "*bijutsuka no sessō*" *ronsō*), accusing a number of artists, including Fujita, of being wartime collaborators, an act which led to a heated exchange of letters in the press. However, the debate quickly dissipated without a clear outcome. See Kaneko, *Mirroring the Japanese Empire*, 127.
 - 14 The relationship of ideology to subjectivity has been a fundamental question in feminist debates—in large part arising out of the urgent need to account for women's complicity with patriarchal domination. The problem recurs in feminist philosopher Judith Butler's work and is addressed in depth in her study of theories of subjectivation. See especially Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
 - 15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une théorie de la pratique* (Geneva: Droz, 1972).
 - 16 Gennifer Weisenfeld, for example, has discussed the proliferation of images of gas masks at this time, arguing that while the deployment of the mask de-eroticized the body and assisted in containing the blending of genders in wartime sartorial practice, it unwittingly generated a type of "posthuman" fetish that condensed desires and anxieties over modernity. Gennifer Weisenfeld, "Gas Mask Parade: Japan's Anxious Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 179-99.
 - 17 Christine Guth's important essay on cultural cross-dressing is illustrative of the complex negotiations instantiated through the appropriation of dress: in the cases Guth approaches, Charles Longfellow and Okakura Tenshin share an attempt to create a type of transnational and de-ethnicized self-presentation—that was, however, reliant on colonial modes of consumption. Christine Guth, "Charles Longfellow and Okakura Kakuzō: Cultural Cross-dressing in the Colonial Context," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 8, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 605-36.
 - 18 Ikeda Shinobu, "The Allure of a 'Woman in Chinese Dress': Representation of the Other in Imperial Japan," in *Performing "Nation": Gender Politics in Literature, Theater, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880-1940*, ed. Doris Croissant, Catherine Vance Yeh, and Joshua S. Mostow (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 347-81.
 - 19 In a recent essay, I have addressed the way that cross-dressing functions also as a means of generating an uncanny sense in the viewer; in the case of the artist Morimura Yasumasa, eliciting this affective response serves to highlight the place of such ellipses in considerations of postwar Japanese history. Ignacio Adriasola, "Modernity and Its Doubles: Uncanny Spaces of Postwar Japan," *October* 151 (Winter 2015): 109-27.
 - 20 Private communication with the author.
 - 21 "La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati." Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 1 (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 311.