DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE, Hung Liu’s paintings address such diverse and complex issues as footbinding and Western art-historical tradition. The tension inherent in her conflicted personal identity as a Chinese-born woman artist living in the West informs her art. Liu’s images of women form a cultural critique, simultaneously referring to and challenging artistic and social traditions of East and West. In basing her subject matter on Western-influenced photographs of turn-of-the-century Chinese prostitutes, Liu further objectifies representations of women as a basis for criticizing both the way “we” (Westerners) view Chinese culture and the way Chinese culture has looked at women. She assumes the difficult task of critiquing China’s oppressive patriarchal system, alerting her audience to past transgressions in the hope that knowledge and awareness may serve as an impetus for change.

Political content notwithstanding, the artist’s work, as Lisa Corrin points out, “cannot be reduced to the cliché of an artist longing for democracy.” Liu’s painting style both reflects and subverts her traditional art training. Her canvases are deliberately flattened and distorted, simulating the photographic images she appropriates, while at the same time rebelling against stringent academic rendering. Forced to paint in a Social Realist style in China, she now eagerly embraces the techniques of collage, installation, and assemblage. Liu also mocks traditional Western portrayals of women by referencing the iconography and using the titles of canonical artworks such as her *Mona Lisa*, *Madonna*, and *La Grande Odalisque*.

Liu’s paintings can perhaps best be read as allegories, given their metatextuality: one text is read through another. She does not invent her imagery but rather confiscates or appropriates it from other sources. At times she may even project the photographic image onto the canvas and paint from there. In her hands, then, the image becomes something other than it was originally intended to be. Liu’s manipulation of the original images lessens their intent and authoritative claim to meaning. By generating images through the reproduction of found photographs, Liu alters their significance. The women in her paintings can be viewed as more than objects for the male gaze. Her representation of prostitutes and concubines and, more recently, Qing Dynasty court figures, allows for new ways of seeing.
Liu, writes Moira Roth, has “developed more fully and consciously her presentation of the interplay of gazes: European and Chinese, male and female, past and present, artist’s and viewer’s.” The struggle between opposing elements is continual. The artist explains, “Sometimes I feel more labeled than embraced, . . . labeled . . . as a minority artist, . . . an artist of color, a woman artist (feminist?), . . . I am an artist from China and in China the terms by which I am defined here make little sense.” She compares the process of her work to an excavation where there are so many layers that she is still trying to understand and analyze them all. Liu’s move to the United States and the shift in her work from Socialist Realism to Social Realism resulted in what she describes as “a crisis of cultural collision.” Perhaps out of necessity, Liu’s is an art of subversion. She is attempting to invent for herself a way to practice as a Chinese artist outside of Chinese culture. The shift from her classical training in Chinese art to contemporary Western art practice has in effect become the subject of her work. She challenges and reinterprets existing social and cultural conventions so as to forge her own personal and artistic identity.

Hung Liu was born in the city of Chang Chung in northeastern China in 1948. Her father, a military officer in the Nationalist army of Chiang Kai-shek, was captured and jailed by the Communists when she was only six months old. Liu’s mother was forced to divorce her husband, who had fought on the “wrong side” and was considered the enemy. Liu, an only child, met her father for the first time in 1994. Her mother still lives in China. Liu received most of her education in Beijing. In 1966, when she was just eighteen and looking forward to college, the Cultural Revolution began. For years the schools were closed. Considered an intellectual because of her high school education, Liu was sent to a military farm in the countryside for reeducation. There, with other “intellectuals,” a diverse group that ran the gamut from actors to junior high school students, she was forced to work in rice, corn, and wheat fields and to take care of horses as a means of ridding her of elitist thought. Later, as an artist she was perceived as too independent and was thus periodically subjected to reeducation programs aimed at eradicating politically unpopular ideas. She never stopped thinking about art, though. She made the best of her circumstances, befriending peasants who realized that she and other girls had been sent to the fields as punishment not for bad behavior but simply for being from the city. Ironically, her forced peasant status worked to her advantage. In 1972, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, she was able to enter the Revolutionary Entertainment Department at Beijing Teachers College under a policy that provided education to the working class.

As an art student at college, Liu had no creative freedom. Under Communist rule, art was not about individual expression or inspiration. The true purpose of art, according to Mao Tse-tung, was to serve the masses. The “rich legacy and the good traditions” from China’s past were to be reappropriated for the people and transformed into something revolutionary. Art has an assigned position in Communist Party politics. Cultural and artistic policy is still set by the Department of Propaganda. All art publicly exhibited or reproduced is required to meet current art policy standards. “When I was in China,” Liu explains, “artists were expected to be the tools of propaganda. Abstract and individualistic paintings are not acceptable in schools or for public exhibition.”

But Liu drew secretly using a small hidden paint box. She was subsequently criticized for paying too much attention to art and not enough to politics. Her first job upon graduation was teaching art at an experimental school where her young students were instructed how to paint the red flag of Communism. She wanted to continue her education, but only classes related to the revolution were offered. She studied books on Western and Chinese art history and criticism on her own, eventually making her eligible to attend the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

Once at the academy, Liu wanted to study mural painting. Because of its roots in Buddhist and Taoist traditions, mural painting seemed at first to allow for some measure of artistic freedom and individual style. However, the muralists, too, came to be considered a
threat to the officially entrenched styles of Socialist Realism and Chinese ink painting, and were forced to produce propaganda. Everybody hated politics because it meant we had to obey everything the government, the party said. We tried to get as far away from politics as we could,” Liu indicates. Although pressured to glorify party leadership, she instead produced a mural celebrating Chinese music—a little personal rebellion against authority that would come to characterize her later work. The mural still stands at the Central Academy. Unhappy with the People’s Republic of China’s requirements for art—that it be completely politicized, its messages blatantly obvious and propagandizing, and anonymous—Liu applied and was accepted to graduate school at the University of California, San Diego, in 1981.

It took nearly four years for Liu to get a passport and permission to leave. It was difficult for her Chinese friends to understand why she would want to go to the United States, since Western art was “degenerate.” But she persisted, saying that she just wanted an opportunity to look and learn. Meanwhile, in San Diego, the university waited for the “Chinese artist who never showed up.” Arriving at last in the United States in 1984, she found the transition somewhat eased because she had learned some English in elementary school. But once given the freedom of expression she had so wished for, Liu realized she did not really know what she wanted to do with it. She continued doing what she knew best—mural—and waited to see how her work would evolve. Liu credits her advisor, artist and critic Allan Kaprow, for changing the way she thought about and approached art.

Liu’s first major work in the United States was a mural and site-specific installation at the Capp Street Project art gallery in San Francisco. This 1988 work was a turning point for the artist. She had become interested in historical photographs of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco’s Chinatown and wanted to relate their experiences to her own. One result was *Resident Alien* (1988; fig. 22.2), a self-portrait constructed around a green card belonging to the immigrant “Fortune Cookie” (alias Hung Liu). Text accompanying the piece reads: “Five-thousand-year-old culture on my back. Late-twentieth-century
world in my face." The themes and styles she explored in this work, which combined the traditional medium of painting with the display of objects to create complete environments, were pursued through the early 1990s. Although this juxtaposition of elements is common to much postmodern art, in Liu's work it resonates with personal conflicts of identity. In Resident Alien the image on the green card appropriates her own identification card photo, and her ironic use of the name "Fortune Cookie" is sexually connotative and signifies Western manipulations of Chinese culture. Liu views the fortune cookie as an apt symbol of her status because "it is a hybrid—it exists between cultures... it's not Chinese and it's not American."9 (The fortune cookies reappear later, piled atop railroad tracks, in her 1994 mixed-media installation Jiu Jin Shan: Old Gold Mountain at the M. H. De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco.)

Resident Alien also signals the beginning of the incorporation of photography in her art. Working from photographs rather than live models was discouraged in China, and Liu views her use of photography as artistic defiance, a rebellion against the academy and her education. Liu's primary source of imagery comes from books of photographs. One such book, The Face of China, published in the United States, features images taken by foreign tourists in China between 1860 and 1912 (these pictures have never been seen in China). Two other books, which she found in China during a 1991 visit, contained images of famous prostitutes, a kind of catalogue of availability; they had amazingly survived the Cultural Revolution's book burnings. She mines the old photographs for information and insight: "I put them through rituals. I see it almost like research or some kind of scientific observation. I move from square inch to square inch. I find out a lot of things."10 Liu returned again to China in the summer of 1993, discovering more pictures, some from magazines dating from the 1920s to the 1940s. Her 1995 exhibition The Last Dynasty, at the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery in New York, featured imagery culled from historic photographs documenting Qing courtiers (1644–1911).

Liu's found images of China are reprocessed with contemporary Western materials and modes of display but at the same time refer to traditional Chinese art-making processes, such as copying as an act of homage. Her simulation of photography allows the works to preserve their documentary status even when they are being interpreted formally. Whereas the paintings of the early 1990s were often quite finished, truer to their photographic source, later pieces give increasing primacy to the painterly gesture. "Saturated with oil and mediums, my paintings sort of perform themselves," she explains. "They drip, they stain, and wash the images in a way that opens them to time, the literal time of gravity pulling oil to the bottom edge of the canvas."11

Liu seeks to amplify "the historical moment, bringing it into focus, exposing its... humanness" to ensure that the viewer understands that these images reflect reality.12 She feels that her images of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese women reveal the sufferings of those women through centuries of spiritual and physical oppression. Her desire is to expose the generations-old wounds of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. "Although I do not have bound feet, the invisible spiritual burdens fall heavy on me," she notes. "I communicate with the characters in my paintings, prostitutes—these completely subjugated people—with reverence, sympathy and awe. They had no real names. Probably no children. I want to make up stories for them. Who were they? Did they leave any trace in history?"13

Liu's desire is to give these women their place in history. Her paintings expose the pain of the traditional roles women were assigned, regardless of their status, according to the "three obediences" of Confucianism—to father, to husband, and to son. Before Communism, Confucianism had provided the model for proper family life. It prescribed a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system. The roles, privileges, duties, and responsibilities of the individual were dictated by sex, age, and generation. Confucianism officially sanctioned the dominance of men over women and old over young. Individual identity was virtually a nonissue: one's needs
were subordinated to those of the family group. Females suffered greatly under this system: often they were not named. Their lack of autonomy and their exclusion from public life were considered essential for the preservation of civilization itself. An ancient ode confirms this: “The wise man founded the city; but the wise woman destroys it. . . . Disaster does not descend from Heaven; it comes from Woman.”

Conditions were supposed to change under Communism. Although Mao once commented that “women can hold up half the sky,” women were granted little power or autonomy under the Communist regime. In Half of the Sky (1991; fig. 22.3), Liu responds with irony to the contradiction between what is said and what is actually meant. The Manchu woman, who appears to be a concubine, has bound feet and long fingernails and is garishly made up. Her formal attire immobilizes her—she appears unable to rise from her chair. The servant to her left symbolizes the woman’s wealth and status. Regardless of her social standing, she possesses no power or autonomy. She is as elaborately decorated and objectified as the vase to her left. The work’s monochromatic rendering in tones of blue adds to its status as a historical document. The blue is cold and distant, echoing the icy stare on the woman’s face.

Nowhere was women’s subjugation more explicitly expressed than in the practice of footbinding. Popularized in the Sung Dynasty (960–1279), footbinding is chilling in its associations of manipulation and confinement. Liu views bound feet as a vivid metaphor for both the shaping of women as objects of male desire and the distortion of the larger society through various forms of domination. Disturbing as the practice now seems, for centuries footbinding was easily justified. Initially, its appeal was purely aesthetic. Courtesans and wealthy women had bound feet, women who worked did not: it was a marker of class, a symbol of conspicuous leisure. But as the treatment of women became increasingly oppressive, footbinding was tied to a wide range of behavioral expectations. It was an indicator of good breeding and became necessary for obtaining suitable marriage proposals. Men were thus guaranteed subservient sex objects, while women were left with a pair of three-inch stumps that caused lifelong pain and
made even the simple act of walking excruciating.

Footbinding transformed woman into a fetish and thus a pure object of desire. Liu’s paintings of prostitutes or concubines with startlingly tiny feet (termed “golden lilies” or “lotus petals”) posing for clients document this phenomenon. Freud saw the custom of footbinding as a symbolic castration of women, a claim that, according to French philosopher Julia Kristeva, Chinese civilization was unique in admitting. Kristeva takes this idea further, explaining that “if by castration we understand the necessity for something to be excluded so that a socio-symbolic order may be built—the cutting off of one part of the whole so that the whole as such may be constituted as an alliance of homogeneous parts—it is interesting to note that for Chinese civilization, this superfluous quantity was found in women.” The various oppressive practices directed at the female population—female infanticide, filial piety, chaste widowhood, namelessness, lack of educational opportunities—sustained China’s long-established male hierarchical system.

Most of the women Liu depicts have bound feet. But in *Goddess of Love/Goddess of Liberty* (1989; fig. 22.4), she takes an especially rebellious swing at her country’s authoritarianism by showing a woman with her bound feet exposed. The two-paneled painting juxtaposes a Ming vase decorated with a nude couple making love on the left with a seated woman, solitary and complacent, as if resigned to her fate, on the right. The vivid red of the background is the color of fertility and of happiness in traditional China but also the symbolic color of Communism. The vase (or vessel) is a recurrent form in Liu’s work and is either incorporated in painted form or as an actual object placed near the canvas. For her, the vases/vessels
symbolize the fact that women, especially prostitutes, were treated as mere decorations, inhuman objects, beautifully made up, but empty and useless, placed passively in the corner of the room.” These containers are often empty, in keeping with the ancient Chinese proverb “To be empty of knowledge is a female virtue.” The objects that hang on the wall to the right of the canvas further affirm the position of women in China. A child’s chalkboard is blank—a symbol of the blank slate of female education. The small broom beneath it represents women’s work but can also be read as “a symbolic tool used to sweep away disorder and memory.” A figure with a broom was also a traditional Chinese character for wife. The woman is depicted in monochromatic sepia tones, again enhancing the historicity of the work. Clearly something about this woman resonated for Liu. Her image appears again in Virgin/Vessel (1990; fig. 22.1), her chest emblazoned with a symbolically charged scarlet square. Set within the square is a blue vase painted with an erotic scene. The woman is featured yet again in Bonsai (1992), juxtaposed against Liu’s re-creation of an ancient Chinese medical illustration.

The woman’s mangled feet carry the most profound message here. Never revealed, the bound foot was considered the most erotic part of the body. A special stocking covered it at all times—even during intercourse. Chinese artists might have depicted female genitalia but never a naked, crippled foot. Liu subverts this false sense of propriety by metaphorically unwrapping the bandages. In exposing the feet, she exposes the woman’s pain. Liu’s paintings are didactic in their efforts to inform the viewer of the roles and representations of women in Chinese history. “I’m glad I didn’t have to bind my feet,” she explains, “but inequality is still there.” Some viewers do not appreciate Liu’s efforts. An elderly Chinese man stormed out of an exhibition in San Francisco after inquiring at the front desk why Liu had exposed only the ugly aspects of old China and not its tradition of beautiful landscape and flower paintings. Liu was not surprised by this reaction. “I don’t expect the gentlemen of our traditionally patriarchal society, who are so used to treating women as inferiors, to be happy to see the pain that was caused those women.”

With their references to European art-historical tradition, Liu’s paintings also form a critique of the way women are represented in Western culture. Some titles, and the passive, reclining poses she uses, play on “masterpieces” such as Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, Ingres’s Grande Odalisque (see fig. 9.2, p. 188), and Manet’s Olympia. Such depictions of passive women are not part of Chinese tradition. Although women are often idealized, they usually are engaged in some activity—palace-style beauties swatting butterflies or enthusiastic Communist Party members working in the field.

The image of the woman in La Grande Odalisque (1992; fig. 22.5) is taken from the book The Face of China. Liu makes the photograph her own by her use of color, objects, and the gestural paint drips at the bottom of the canvas. She presents here an elaborate stage set, adding an element of theatricality to the work. The canvas rests on a painted platform with generic “Oriental” vases filled with gilt flowers at either end and a long-stemmed gilded calla lily placed in front. The inanimate objects contrast with the sexually animated woman, but parallels can be drawn between the two as well. Both the woman and the objects are viewed as possessions; both are used for decorative and utilitarian purposes. “These kinds of flowers don’t have a life,” Liu says. “They’re so highly polished and decorative, but cold and detached.” The same could be said for the young woman in the photograph. In Chinese culture, flowers are associated with women and beauty. Ellen Johnston Laing has described, for example, how butterflies (associated with males) landing on flowers became a way of choosing sexual partners during the traditional Flower Morning Festival. Flowers symbolize fertility and sexuality and often represent female genitalia. Prostitutes were frequently assigned “flower” names such as White Orchard or Sweet Lily. Most important, every element in this work—the vases, the flowers, and the woman—is put on display. Liu’s Olympia (1992) is similar to her Odalisque with its reclining subject and floral display. It makes
reference, of course, to Manet's scandalous study of Victorine Meurent, whose confrontational gaze caused an uproar in the staid French salons.

At first glance, Liu's passive images seem to cater to the male gaze, as did the paintings on which they are based. The confrontational expressions of her subjects, however, subvert that gaze, as does the fact that these works have been painted by a woman. Witness the confrontational sexuality of the 1995 painting Cherry Lips (fig. 22.6). "The women look directly at the camera, which means that when I look at them they look back at me," Liu explains. "A man put them there on a couch, a chair, with the intention to sell them as products. The women had no control. But now that man is gone, yet the imagery of these women is left. It has survived through time and space, even a revolution. When I felt the women looking at me, somehow I just wanted to empower them." In reappropriating or "taking" these images from the patriarchal gaze, Liu gives something back to the passive women who have been objectified throughout history. She catalogues past transgressions in an effort to avoid their recurrence.

Liu's work attempts to mount "a sustained and far-reaching political critique of contemporary representational systems, which have had an overdetermined effect in the social production of sexual difference," as espoused by Griselda Pollock. Ways must be discovered to address women as subjects rather than as objects of male desire, fantasy, and hatred. Sexual divisions have resulted from the construction of sexual difference as a socially significant axis of meaning. Pollock explains that these constructions are constantly enforced by representations created in the ideological practices we call culture. Pictures, photographs, films, and so forth are addressed to us, the viewer, in an attempt to win our identification with the represented versions of masculinity and femininity. These representations perpetuate existing roles. The need, therefore, is to deconstruct those roles and create new representations of gender and identity. I believe that Liu's work takes positive steps toward that goal.

A symposium titled "(re)Orienting: Self Representations of Asian American Women through the Visual Arts," held in New York City in 1991, raised...
the issue that for Asian women in a predominantly white society, it is race, not gender that is often seen as the primary area of conflict and concern. Panel members commented that the objectification of Asian women, based not just on gender but even more significantly on race, highlights the need for a feminist and multicultural agenda more sensitive to the needs of various groups. Liu has, of course, experienced this dilemma firsthand. In *Women of Color* (1991), she interprets the politically correct cliché literally. Three bust-length images of Asian women, one red, one yellow, and one blue, are placed frieze-like on the canvas. A shelf holding three vessels in the corresponding colors is installed below the painting. Color here becomes an arbitrary, meaningless distinction. Approaching such a volatile issue with humor challenges the viewer to consider the issue of multiculturalism as more than skin deep.

Just as Liu’s paintings examine how the concept of femininity is socially constructed, they also explore how the West has constructed “the Orient.” Edward Said explains that the outsider’s knowledge of the Orient consists merely of that outsider’s representation of it. The Orient has been presented in binary opposition to the Occident and has provided the most recurring images of the “other.” The relationship between the two cultures, like the relationship between men and women, has been one of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. By positing the Orient as “different” and therefore culturally inferior, the West assumed a sense of authority over it.

“The Orient,” Said writes, “was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” Numerous European artists, among them Gérôme, Delacroix, Ingres, and Manet, invented their own versions of an exotic Orient. Linda Nochlin has suggested that for Western artists, the Orient existed either “as an actual place to be mystified with effects of realness” or as “a project of the imagination, a fantasy space or screen onto which strong desires—erotic, sadistic, or both—could be projected with impunity.” The function of such representations was to assure the viewer that the “Orientals” depicted were “irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior to those who constructed and consumed the product.”

Liu’s found photographs further reveal this fascination with the exoticism and difference of “the Orient.” Depicted in the images are scenes of torture and field labor, veiled brides and rigidly posed aging dowagers. Everyday life is selectively filtered to distance East from West, voiding shared viewpoints. Present are images of “bad women” (the title of one of Liu’s exhibitions)—prostitutes or courtesans who also serve to reinforce the moral superiority of the Western photographer. Images of Asian women have long occupied a place in Western imagination, be they “exotic” sex object, Dragon Lady, or today’s submissive mail-order bride. Liu and other Asian Ameri-
ican women have attempted to respond to these stereotypical representations by finding alternate ways to "name" themselves in a culture unable to encompass the complexity of their experience. Liu's images do not always succeed on a visual and emotional level. At times the work is too didactic, weighted down perhaps by her anger and the sheer volume of information the viewer needs to process. At times, her message seems imperceptible, especially to those who know nothing of the artist's history. Her use of various mediums and modes of display is at times too referential to the works of other postmodern artists. But, in general, Liu has successfully fused Eastern and Western traditions, combining the graceful elements of traditional Chinese painting with Western style. The juxtaposition seems inevitable. "I am trying to invent a way of allowing myself to practice as a Chinese artist outside of Chinese culture," she explains. "Perhaps the displaced meanings of that practice—reframed within this culture—are meaningful because they are displaced."

Liu's work can be read as a struggle for artistic identity but, even more important, as a struggle to define her conflicted personal identity: "I often feel suspended between the two cultures, but I see this as a unique position, hopefully a situation that will energize me," she says. "I can look at things from multiple points of view. It is a position I embrace rather than feel bitterness about."

Liu's paintings of Chinese women focus on the persistence of memory. It is of paramount importance to her that the experiences of her subjects not be forgotten. Recovering the history of these women acknowledges their relevance both then and now in the female struggle for equality. It also aids in forging a place for contemporary Asian American women. Liu continues to work toward her goal of functioning "much as the ancient scholar-painters of my homeland did, so that my art is the consequence of a research process in which images from the past are recovered, re-evaluated, recognized, and re-presented in terms relevant to my own and I believe to our multicultural experience today."
24. Liu, SECA Art Award.
28. Ibid., 33–34.
29. See Margo Machida's summary of the event in "(re) Orienting," 42.
31. Ibid., 3–5.
34. Lucy Lippard, Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 137.
35. Interview with Hung Liu, September 1993.