

Patriarchy's Sewage: How a Murdered Student and a Dead River Became the Same Body in Li Xinmo's performance art

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Abstract: This paper examines Chinese feminist artist Li Xinmo's performance artworks *The Death of Xinkai River* and *A Ritual of Farewell* as critical intervention in ecofeminist discourse within the East Asian context. Through a semiotic analysis of polluted water as artistic medium—manifested in cyanobacterial blooms, toxic odors, and corporeal immersion—the study reveals how the work deconstructs romanticized "feminine-water" metaphors to expose the structural parallels between ecological degradation and gendered violence. Framed by Western ecofeminist theories (e.g. Vandana Shiva's "subsistence perspective", Karen Warren's "logic of domination") and East Asian "feminine waters" philosophies (e.g. the *I Ching*'s "Kan as water" cosmology, Ming-Qing "pond drowning" gender discipline), the analysis demonstrates how the artist's embodied engagement with contaminated waterways subverts the passive "Ophelia" trope while unmasking developmentalism's dual exploitation of women and nature. The paper argues that the work's anti-pastoral aesthetics reconfigure the Xinkai River as both "ecological corpse" and "patriarchal accomplice", thereby catalyzing cross-disciplinary dialogues on environmental and gender justice.

Keywords: ecofeminism; feminine waters; performance art; Xinkai River; pollution semiotics; gendered violence

1. Preface/Introduction

The Xinkai River, as a vital water system in the Tianjin region, historically played a crucial ecological supporting role in the city's formation and development. However, over the past decade, due to the large-scale discharge of urban sewage and industrial wastewater, the river's ecosystem has suffered severe pollution damage. The pollution exhibits distinct seasonal characteristics: under high summer temperatures, water eutrophication leads to excessive algal proliferation, with cyanobacteria forming dense surface layers, accompanied by the diffusion of foul odors caused by organic matter decomposition.

In the spring of 2008, a violent criminal incident occurred in this watershed: a female student from Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts was sexually assaulted and murdered, with her body discarded in the Xinkai River. Responding to this incident and the dual reality of the river's ecological degradation, contemporary Chinese feminist artist Li Xinmo performed a piece of activist art titled *The Death of Xinkai River*. In this work, the artist, dressed in white, voluntarily entered the polluted waters, slowly submerging herself into the cyanobacteria-covered river—a process that constituted a visually striking artistic statement. [1] (Li, 2008)

Following this, the artist extended the work into a subsequent creation. In October 2008, under the framework of the 6th *DaDao Performance Art Festival*, Li Xinmo presented a performance piece titled *A Ritual of Farewell*. In the preparatory phase, the artist systematically collected water samples from polluted rivers along the Tianjin-Beijing corridor as artistic material. During the exhibition phase, within the exhibition space of Beijing's 798 Art District *Rain Gallery*, the artist employed a large transparent glass container as the medium for the performance. [2] (Li, 2008)

In the course of the performance, the artist, dressed in white, lay horizontally inside the container. As the polluted water was gradually poured in, her body became progressively

submerged. Throughout the performance, the artist exhibited labored breathing and vocalized distress within the intensely foul-smelling aquatic environment, until her face was fully immersed—marking the conclusion of the act.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Trajectories of Western Ecofeminism and East Asian "Feminine Waters" Theories

2.1 Development and Core Theories of Western Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, as a critical theory emerging in the 1970s, seeks to reveal the structural connections between patriarchal oppression of both women and nature. Its central thesis posits that environmental exploitation and gender oppression share the same logic of domination, rooted in hierarchical binary oppositions (e.g., male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion).

1) Foundational Works: The Philosophical Framework of Ecofeminism

Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974) first proposed the concept of "ecofeminism" in *Feminism or Death* (French: *Le Féminisme ou la mort*), arguing that patriarchal expansion causes ecological crises and that women must become the agents of ecological revolution. [3]

Susan Griffin (1978), in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, employed poetic writing to deconstruct Western rationalism's objectification of both nature and women, emphasizing their isomorphic experiences of oppression. [4]

2) Critical Developments: The Intervention of Third-World Ecofeminism

Vandana Shiva (1988), in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, critiques Western developmentalism's exploitation of rural South Asian women, proposing the concept of "ecological imperialism" to reveal how globalized agriculture (e.g., the Green Revolution) destroys indigenous women's livelihoods and traditional ecological knowledge. She emphasizes the Hindu cosmological concept of "Prakriti" (Mother Earth), asserting that women and land collectively constitute the foundation of life reproduction. [5]

Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva (1993), in *Ecofeminism*, further advance the "Subsistence Perspective", advocating for a women-centered sustainable economic model to resist capitalist-patriarchal extractive logic. [6]

3) Philosophical Deepening: The Ethical Turn in Ecofeminism

Karen Warren (2000), in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, systematizes the "Logic of Domination" theory, demonstrating how oppressive ideologies rationalize exploitation through conceptual frameworks (e.g., "nature as feminine/passive/requiring domestication"). She proposes an "Ethics of Care", emphasizing relational and context-sensitive moral judgment as an alternative to male-centric abstract environmental ethics. [7]

Val Plumwood (2002), in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, critiques Western rationalism's "Human Exceptionalism", advocating for reconstructing "reciprocal subject relations" between humans and nature. [8]

2.2 Localized Trajectories of East Asian "Feminine Waters" Theory

In East Asian cultural traditions, the association between water and femininity transcends mere metaphor, embedding itself within cosmological frameworks, ethical systems, and social practices. This theoretical lineage provides the cultural foundation for interpreting the "water-female" symbolism in Li Xinmo's performance art.

1) "Water" and Feminine Essence in Chinese Philosophy *The Book of Changes (I Ching)* and Daoist Thought:

The *Xici Zhuan* commentary in *I Ching* proposes "Kan as water", symbolizing perilous depth, pliancy, and life source. Its trigram (☵) with two yin lines enclosing one yang line implies the feminine quality of "softness enveloping strength". [9]

Laozi's *Daodejing* (Chapter 8) correlates water's virtue with the feminine wisdom of "non-contention" and "flowing downward", constituting a critique of patriarchal rigidity. [10]

Five Elements (in Chinese: Wu Xing) Theory:

Water belongs to "yin", corresponding to north, winter, and blackness, while resonating with female menstruation and fertility (as documented in *Huangdi Neijing*). This forms a cognitive chain of "woman-water-life cycle". [11]

2) Hydraulic Violence and Gender Politics in East Asian Cultures

"Pond Drowning" and Patriarchal Discipline:

From the Ming-Qing period onward, the clan-administered "pond drowning" (in Chinese: Chentang) punishment for "unchaste" women (documented in *The Unofficial History of the Scholars*, in Chinese: *Rulin Waishi*) [12] transformed water bodies into tools for patriarchal purification of "pollution", reflecting gendered binaries of purity/defilement (cf. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, 1966).

In contemporary contexts, industrial pollution poisoning rivers (e.g., Xinkai River) constitutes a modernized continuation of this violent tradition.

Japanese "Aquatic Death" Aesthetics:

Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* employs the "Mirror Pond" [13] as symbolic of women's silent erasure, while contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama's water installations—with infinite mirror reflections and water flowing beneath viewers' feet—deconstruct the passivity inherent in traditional "drowned maiden" imagery. [14]

2.3 Theoretical Dialogues: Intersections Between Ecofeminism and Feminine Waters Research

Li Xinmo's performance art can be interpreted through these theoretical frameworks:

Dual Violence of Polluted Water:

The Xinkai River serves as both a site of ecological death and a witness to gendered violence (the corpse-dumping case), echoing Vandana Shiva's critique of "developmentalism sacrificing women-nature".

Subverting the "Ophelia" Narrative:

Through conscious self-objectification (e.g., performances in glass tanks), the artist disrupts the traditional fatalism of "women-passive death", actualizing Val Plumwood's concept of "resistant subjectivity".

Politics of Foul Aesthetics:

The stench-laden water challenges East Asian cultural ethics of "water's purity" (e.g., "When the Canglang's water is muddy, it may wash my feet"), forcing audiences to confront developmentism's consequences.

3. Semiotic Analysis of Polluted Water Bodies: Ecological Corpses, Gendered Violence, and Patriarchal Complicity

3.1 Cyanobacteria-Covered River Surface as Visual Representation of "Ecological Corpse"

Timothy Morton emphasizes in *Dark Ecology* (2016) that ecological crises are not distant "others", but rather "hyper-objects" that have permeated daily life—massive, viscous,

inescapable entities of pollution. [15] The cyanobacteria-infested Xinkai River precisely embodies this "hyper-object".

Putrid Skin:

The green mucous membrane formed by cyanobacteria coating the water surface resembles decomposing organisms proliferating on a corpse's skin, signaling the river's "ecological death". This death occurs not instantaneously but through slow asphyxiation—the continuous influx of industrial wastewater (excessive nitrogen/phosphorus) and sewage deprives the waterbody of self-purification capacity, transforming it into a "zombie ecosystem".



Figure 1. *The Death of Xinkai River* by Li Xinmo, 2008, in Tianjin, China
Website Source: <https://collection.sina.com.cn/zlxx/20120228/155157642.shtml>

Non-Human Mourning Ritual:

Li Xinmo's act of submerging herself in cyanobacteria while robed in white can be interpreted as a "non-anthropocentric funeral". Her body simultaneously serves as mourner (for the river) and mourned (symbolizing female victims), blurring boundaries between human and non-human. This resonates with Morton's "mesh" ontology that posits the interwoven existence of all life forms.

Anti-Pastoral Aesthetics:

While traditional Chinese landscape painting portrays water bodies as embodiments of harmonious "supreme goodness" (exemplified by Ma Yuan's *Twelve Views of Water* from the Southern Song Dynasty), the cyanobacteria-polluted river surface constructs an "anti-sublime" spectacle—it resists aestheticization and compels viewers to confront the ugly reality of ecological collapse.

3.2 Isomorphic Violence: Rape/Dumping and Toxic Discharge

The Xinkai River functions not merely as an ecological disaster site, but as an accomplice to gendered violence. The rapist's disposal of the female student's corpse into the polluted river and factories' discharge of toxic wastewater share identical patriarchal logic of "violation-abandonment".

1) Water as Complicit in Patriarchal Violence

Gendered Metaphors of Pollution:

Industrial wastewater's heavy metals (e.g., mercury, lead) possess reproductive toxicity, with long-term contamination elevating women's reproductive health risks—materially paralleling rape's violation of female bodies.

Ritualistic Parallels:

Both corpse-dumping and waste discharge discard "unwanted matter" (female corpses/industrial waste) into feminine-coded spaces (rivers), achieving ultimate expulsion of the "Other". As noted in Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), societies maintain boundaries by excluding "filth". [16] Here, the Xinkai River becomes patriarchy's dumping ground for "double pollution" (female bodies + industrial waste).

2) Eco-Gendered Intersectional Violence

Parallel Logics of Rape Culture & Environmental Exploitation:

Rape Culture	Environmental Exploitation
Female bodies as lootable "resources"	Nature as extractable "productive materials"
Victim-blaming rhetoric ("Why was she out late?"/"Why dress provocatively?" etc.)	River-blaming rhetoric ("Poor self-purification capacity")
Societal silence toward sexual violence	Governmental failure in pollution regulation

Aquatic "Secondary Murder":

The female corpse discarded in the polluted river undergoes "symbolic annihilation"—accelerated decomposition by toxic water and cyanobacteria enveloping the remains render the death "invisible." This replicates patriarchy's erasure of female victims' memory (e.g., "slut-shaming" silencing rape cases).

3.3 Semiotic Resistance in Li Xinmo's Performance Art

In *The Death of Xinkai River* and *A Ritual of Farewell*, the artist's bodily intervention reconstructs the semiotic network of polluted water.

From "Ecological Corpse" to "Resistant Medium":

By voluntarily submerging into cyanobacteria, she embodies the river's death-state, rendering invisible ecological trauma tangible. This "becoming-pollution" strategy subverts traditional environmentalism's savior narrative, instead acknowledging humanity's inherent complicity in contamination.

Exposing Patriarchal Complicity:

The visual transformation of white garments gradually blackened in polluted water symbolizes

the disintegration of the "pure femininity" myth—patriarchy simultaneously demands women's "purity" (moral discipline) while systematically thrusting them into defilement through institutionalized violence (e.g., rape culture). Li Xinmo's performance reveals: women's "filth" is not innate, but forcibly imposed.



Figure 2. *A Ritual of Farewell* by Li Xinmo, 2008, in Beijing, China
Website Source: http://art.china.cn/huodong/2009-12/17/content_3301598.htm

4. Drowning Metaphors: From *Ophelia* to Contemporary Performance Art's Female Death Narratives

4.1 The Aesthetic Genealogy and Gender Politics of Aquatic Death

John Everett Millais's 1851 painting *Ophelia* (1851–1852) and Li Xinmo's 21st-century performance art photography, though separated by a century and a half, form a striking intertextual relationship in visual composition. This trans-temporal dialogue reveals the enduring vitality of the "drowned woman" motif in Western art tradition and its underlying gender politics.

In Shakespeare's original *Hamlet*, Ophelia's death is framed as an "accidental mishap"—the lovelorn, mentally fractured maiden wanders singing strange songs, and while gathering wildflowers, "like ignorant life, sinks down singing". Millais, through Pre-Raphaelite naturalism, transforms this scene into a detailed visual allegory: floating garments, scattered blossoms, and slightly parted lips construct a romanticized death tableau where water serves as both gentle tomb and purifying medium. [17]

4.2 Passive Martyrdom vs. Active Performance: Reconfiguring Power in Death Narratives

The visual similarities between Li Xinmo's performance art photographs and *Ophelia*—floating bodies, water-encircled faces, limbs entangled with aquatic plants/cyanobacteria—

precisely underscore their fundamental divergence. Millais's *Ophelia* epitomizes the passive female archetype accepting her fate, her beauty lying in harmless dissolution; whereas Li Xinmo's performer is a conscious accuser, each staged suffocation a deliberate reenactment of violence.

This contrast reflects shifting conceptions of female subjectivity across eras: Victorian drowning imagery aestheticizes female death as the "eternal feminine" (*Ewig-Weibliche*), while contemporary performance art transforms it into political protest. Crucially, Li's polluted waters utterly deconstruct *Ophelia*'s romanticized clear stream—when cyanobacteria cling like blood clots to skin, all poeticization of death is disrupted.



Figure 3. *Ophelia* (1851-1852) by John Everett Millais
Website Source: <https://artincontext.org/ophelia-by-john-everett-millais/>

4.3 Hydropolitics of Gendered Space: An Archaeological Perspective

The contrast between these two drowning imageries reveals the historical evolution of water as gendered space. In Western painting traditions—from *Ophelia* to John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888)—water remains coded as feminine space: both life-originating source and woman-devouring abyss. This duality mirrors patriarchy's dual discipline of female bodies: demanding fluid docility while fearing flood-like uncontrollability.

Li Xinmo's practice pushes this cultural subconscious to its limit through polluted water intervention: when Xinkai River's filth ceases to be symbolic "feminine essence" but literal industrial waste, the romantic metaphor "woman as water" materializes into the political reality of "woman as sewage". This transformation gives tangible form to long-naturalized gendered violence.

4.4 The Thanatology of Performance in Contemporary Art

From an art-historical methodology perspective, Li Xinmo's performance art establishes an "anti-Ophelia" creative paradigm. Where Millais alleviated audience anxiety about gendered

violence through death's aestheticization, contemporary artists provoke that very anxiety by recreating death's visceral reality. This strategic shift reflects critical art's post-20th century epistemological turn: from "representing others' suffering" to "becoming suffering's medium".

When Li's face is finally submerged in polluted water, spectators witness not Shakespearean "sweet death", but "absolutely unaesthetic death"—one that refuses sublimation, demanding solely to be seen, remembered, and held accountable.

5. "Pond Drowning" in Chinese Tradition: Hydro-purification Metaphors and a Genealogy of Gendered Violence

5.1 The Social Fabric of "Pond Drowning" as Disciplinary Ritual

In traditional Chinese juridical practices and clan governance, "pond drowning" (in Chinese: Chentang) as extralegal punishment for female transgression was deeply rooted in Confucian ethics and yin-yang cosmology. This violent ritual of immersing living women in water constituted not mere physical elimination, but a comprehensive semiotic disciplinary system.

Local gazetteers and legal archives reveal how Ming-Qing era executions of "adulterous women" were performative spectacles: clan elders convened public viewings, victims were bathed and dressed before bamboo-cage confinement, with drowning sites strategically chosen at village fengshui ponds or ancestral-temple pools. Such ritualized violence transformed female bodies into moral warning media, performing disciplinary inscription of communal memory through public water burial.

5.2 Water's Dual Metaphors in Punishment Systems

In traditional Chinese "pond drowning" (in Chinese: Chentang) executions, water embodied contradictory cultural meanings: both purgative tool and defilement's destination. This paradoxical cognition stemmed from hybridized governance wisdom—the *Zhouli's* "using yin rituals to teach kinship" and Daoist "Great Yin refines form" concepts.

The Qing dynasty legal manual *Xing'an Huilan* discovered in Zhangzhou, Fujian explicitly records pond drowning's function to "cleanse filth with water, restoring primordial purity"—here water served not just as physical killing instrument but symbolic purification apparatus. Crucially, this "purification" logic carried distinct gendered targeting: male offenders received "dry punishments" (decapitation/flogging-to-death) while women suffered "kan punishments" (water executions), aligning with *I Ching's* feminine positioning of "kan as water, as abyss".

5.3 Historical Resonances in Li Xinmo's Performance Art

Li Xinmo's *The Death of Xinkai River* and *A Ritual of Farewell* engages in profound dialogue with the pond drowning tradition. The artist's voluntary immersion in polluted water simultaneously parodically reenacts historical lynching and radically deconstructs hydropurification metaphors.

When cyanobacteria-covered rivers replace clan ponds' clear waters, when environmental pollutants substitute moral stigma, the traditional violent logic of "cleansing through water" inverts into a critical language of "bearing witness through pollution". This artistic strategy not only exposes the epistemological isomorphism between patriarchy and ecological violence, but through symbolic bodily sacrifice, summons the historical ghosts of drowned women back into contemporary environmental justice discourse.

6. Conclusion: *The Death of Xinkai River* and *A Ritual of Farewell* as Ecofeminist Praxis

Li Xinmo's *The Death of Xinkai River* and its subsequent performance *A Ritual of Farewell* transcend individual artistic expression to become a radical intervention in ecofeminist discourse. By embodying the polluted waters of the Xinkai River—a site of ecological collapse and gendered violence—the artist exposes the intertwined logics of patriarchal domination and environmental exploitation. Her work dismantles the romanticized tropes of "feminine water" in both Western and East Asian traditions, replacing them with a visceral confrontation with the material realities of pollution and misogynistic violence.

The performance's semiotic power lies in its dual critique: it unveils the river as an "ecological corpse" suffocated by industrial waste while simultaneously framing it as an accomplice to patriarchal terror, where the discarded bodies of women and toxic effluent share the same fate of erasure. By submerging herself in cyanobacteria-infested water, Li Xinmo inverts the historical script of "pond drowning" (in Chinese: Chentang) —no longer a passive victim of patriarchal purification rituals, her body becomes an active agent of exposure, forcing audiences to reckon with the suppressed narratives of ecological and gendered violence.

Theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and East Asian "feminine waters" converge in this work to highlight the structural parallels between the subjugation of women and nature. Vandana Shiva's critique of developmental violence, Val Plumwood's "logic of domination", and Timothy Morton's "hyper-objects" of pollution all resonate in Li's artistic praxis. Her performance disrupts the aestheticization of female death (as seen in the *Ophelia* tradition) and the cultural amnesia surrounding "pond drowning" (in Chinese: Chentang), replacing them with a grotesque, unflinching spectacle of decay—one that refuses redemption and instead demands accountability.

Ultimately, *The Death of Xinkai River* and *A Ritual of Farewell* are not merely laments but calls to action. It challenges the binaries of purity/defilement, active/passive, and human/non-human that underpin both patriarchal and ecological violence. By occupying the polluted water as both mourner and mourned, Li Xinmo constructs a new ritual—one that mourns the river's death, memorializes its victims, and imagines a future where such violences are no longer submerged beneath the surface of history. In doing so, her work affirms ecofeminism's central premise: the liberation of women and the healing of the earth are inseparable struggles.

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