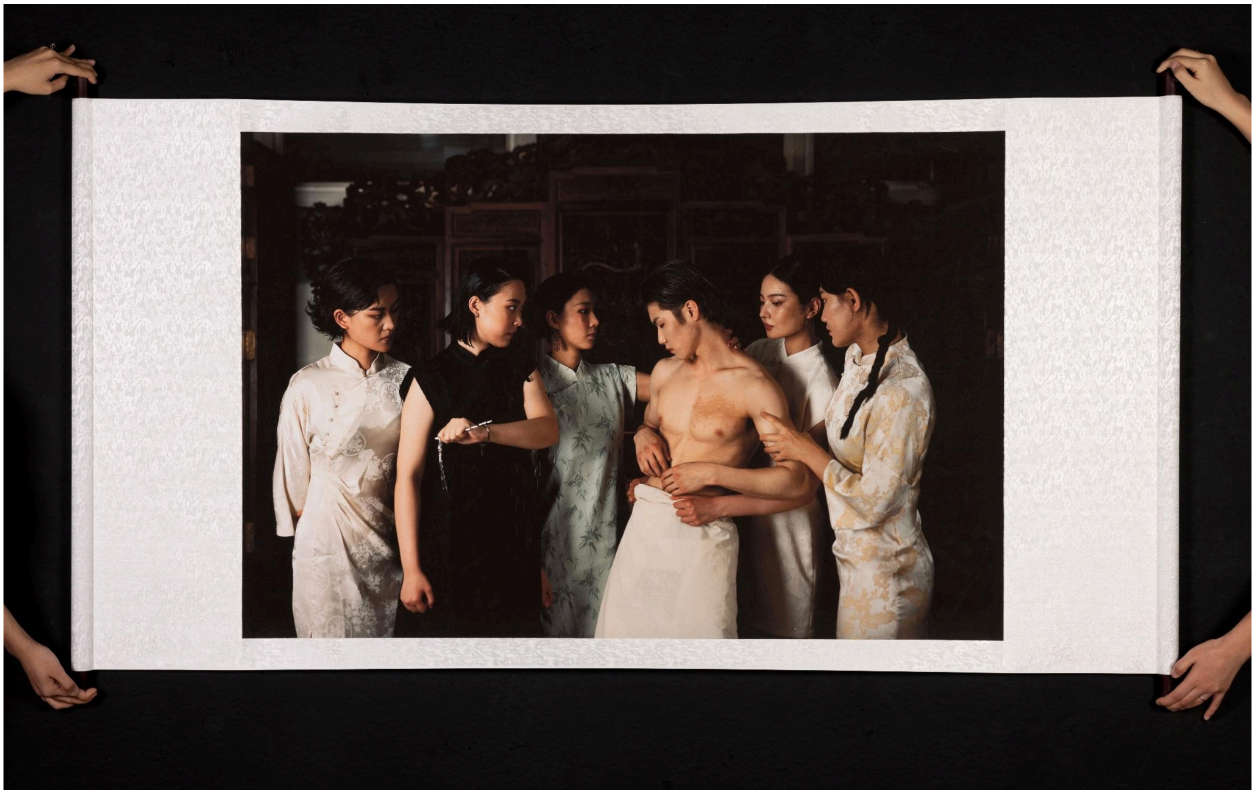


Palace scroll

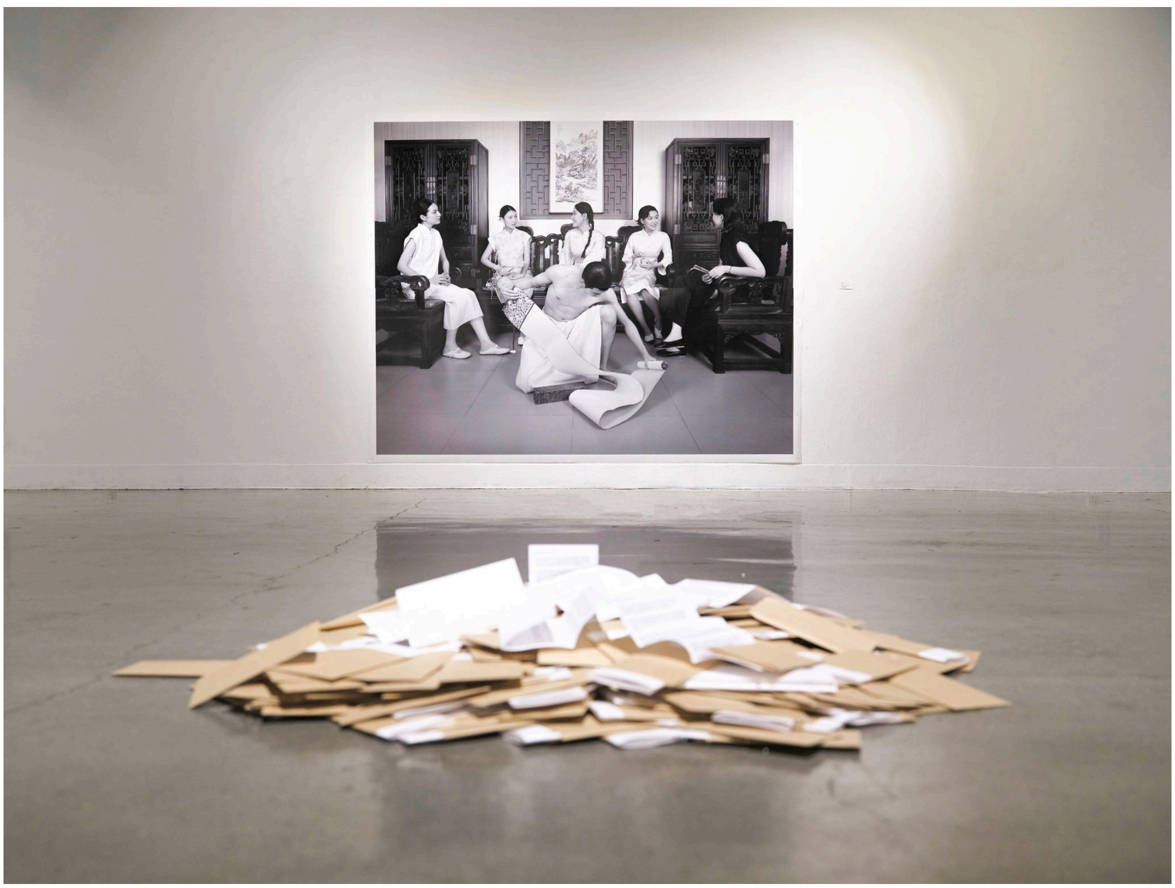
Zoe Congyu Liu

LISA: Your work often explores themes of female visibility and the intergenerational trauma of Asian immigrants. How do you integrate these themes into a single piece or series? What do you hope the audience takes away from it?

ZOE: I usually start from my own identity. When writing my artist statement, I begin with, "First, I am a woman, and then I am Asian." This is a significant part of my self-awareness, and I approach my work from these two perspectives, so they naturally come together well. Currently, I present my work as starting from a small point to examine historical archives. I hope the audience can view history from the perspective of an Asian woman and see the suppressed history of women. I believe it is crucial to uncover these hidden stories. Much of history and archives get buried over time, and women of other ethnicities experience similar situations. If these aren't fully documented in modern times, we will lose even more traceable information in the future. So, I hope to reveal a part of the disappearing history while also presenting a world that can be built, offering the audience a vision to imagine an alternative future.

LISA: You have exhibited your work in various places, from Los Angeles to the UK. How have these different cultural backgrounds influenced your artistic expression and the reception of your work?

ZOE: This is something I'm particularly curious about as well. Not long ago, during a talk I gave in San Diego, an audience member asked, "What kind of reaction would this series of works receive if exhibited in China?" My work has only been shown in the UK and the US, and generally, the reactions are from a Western perspective. I think that in an environment where people are accustomed to artistic critique, it's easier for them to empathize with the work. However, even without exhibiting these works in China, when shown in galleries run by Chinese people or in places with a significant Asian population, the discussions often reveal that many Asian women deeply resonate with them. One of the best feedbacks I've received was from someone who, upon seeing my work, said that even though we come from different ethnic backgrounds, she could still empathize with some very similar experiences depicted in the work, which was particularly moving for me. I also hope to exhibit in China and receive feedback from there.



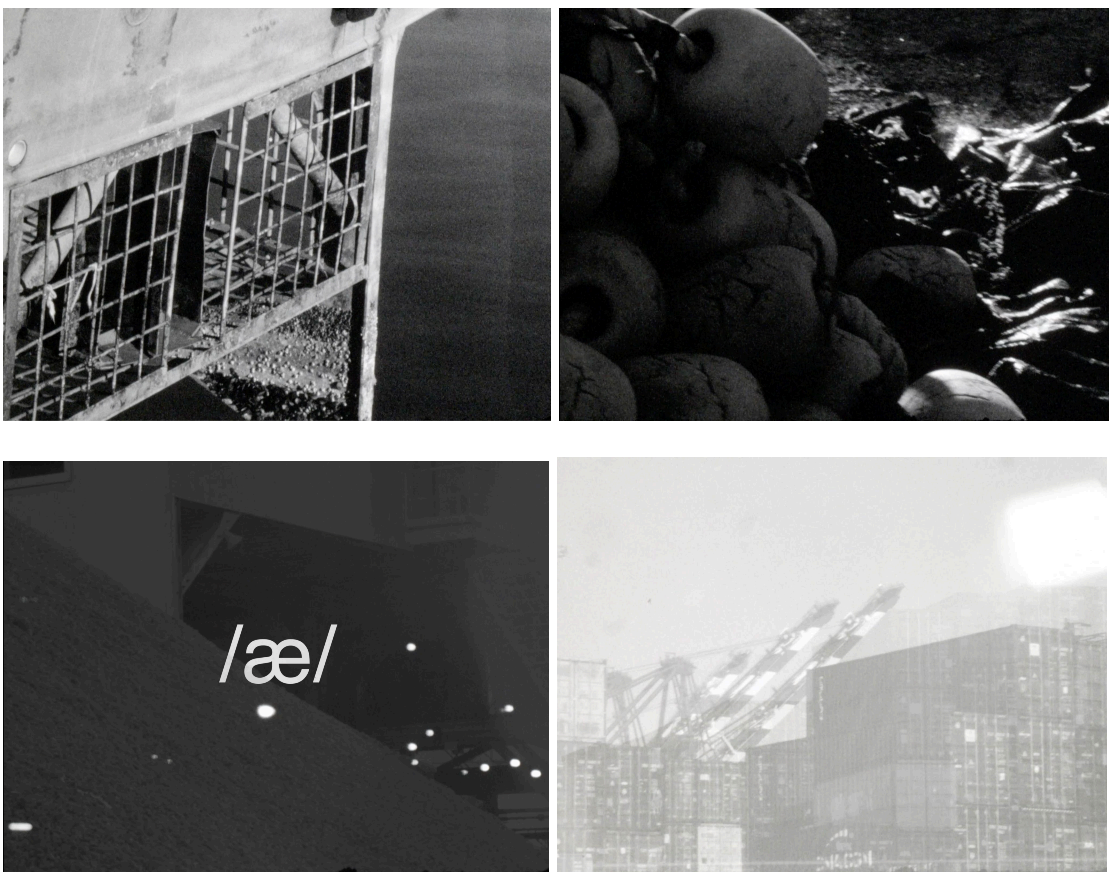
Installation View

LISA: Can you elaborate on these two recent video works, *Forty Third Congress* and *I Want to Be Her Bodyguard*?

ZOE: These two works are reflections I had after completing my thesis. While working on my thesis, my mindset was focused on presenting the exhibition as a whole, and I felt that how the exhibition was structured was particularly important at the time. However, I believe that when creating individual works, there can be certain biases or significant influences on one's mindset. Both of these works were shot on 16mm film, and I processed them by hand. Forty Third Congress discusses the early Asian immigrants who came to San Francisco before the Chinese Exclusion Act. At that time, San Francisco's immigration laws restricted female immigrants from entering the city. They could use an identification photo to determine whether a woman was a sex worker. If you were an unmarried Asian woman, they had the authority to say that you had improper motives for entering the country. I was curious about what gave an image so much power to stigmatize an entire ethnic group of women. In the video, I combined an image of a woman sold at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. I was very curious about her identity and the fact that her name was recorded incorrectly. This is a misrecorded archive, and I used my own language to recreate it, making this story known to more people. The video also reflects the history of Asian women being imprisoned and displayed like objects. I incorporated some of my own portraits of women, showing how the historical images recorded incorrectly contrast with the actual images of women I see, blurring the dimensions of the past, present, and future—it could be the present, the past, or the future.

Frames from *Forty third congress*

I Want to Be Her Bodyguard tells the story of the first sex worker who came to San Francisco. She opened a brothel in San Francisco and recruited 12 girls under her command. Because she was in a foreign country, she had to learn English herself to protect the other girls in her establishment. I found this story particularly moving, so I filmed the ports of California and narrated it with a poem that describes the situation of male preference over females, human trafficking, and the lack of autonomy for women at that time. At the end of the film, the subtitle "I want to be her" pauses for a few seconds before "Bodyguard" follows. It represents both my desire to become her and the awakening of modern feminist consciousness.



Frames from *I want to be her bodyguard*

LISA: How do the multilingual subtitles or audio you use in your video works help you explore cultural differences and communication barriers?

ZOE: I always tend to avoid giving the audience—especially those without an Asian or Chinese background—a full picture or a linear narrative. I want them to deduce the unknown information from the parts they understand, leading to a curiosity that prompts further exploration. Most of the time, people have only shallow curiosity about completely unknown information, but when they can't grasp the whole picture of a work, they want to dig deeper and ask what exactly happened. And when people understand something, there's a high possibility that their understanding is limited to surface-level observations. So, by using multiple languages, the audience won't resist unfamiliar cultural information just because it's presented in a language that's not their own, which helps them explore the cultural differences and question what story I'm really telling. What's the difference between the story they understand and the story I want to tell? Does the gap between them form a new narrative? This offers different interpretations for different audiences. While everyone has their own version of Hamlet, the amount of information one can grasp adds more complexity and interpretability to the work.

LISA: You also have some experience in education. When teaching art, do you tend to incorporate your own creative concepts into the classroom?

ZOE: I definitely do, aside from the foundational technical aspects. The school might want you to express what your perspective is as an Asian female teacher. To some extent, I'm more inclined to understanding and listening because, in much of the education I've received, teachers often unintentionally lean towards their preferred mediums and theoretical knowledge, giving advice that aligns more with their own artistic style. But when I teach, I tend to be more supportive rather than liking a student's work only if it aligns with my tastes. I prefer to help students analyze, offer my perspective, and then draft and build the work together. It's more of a guiding role.

Kylin Series

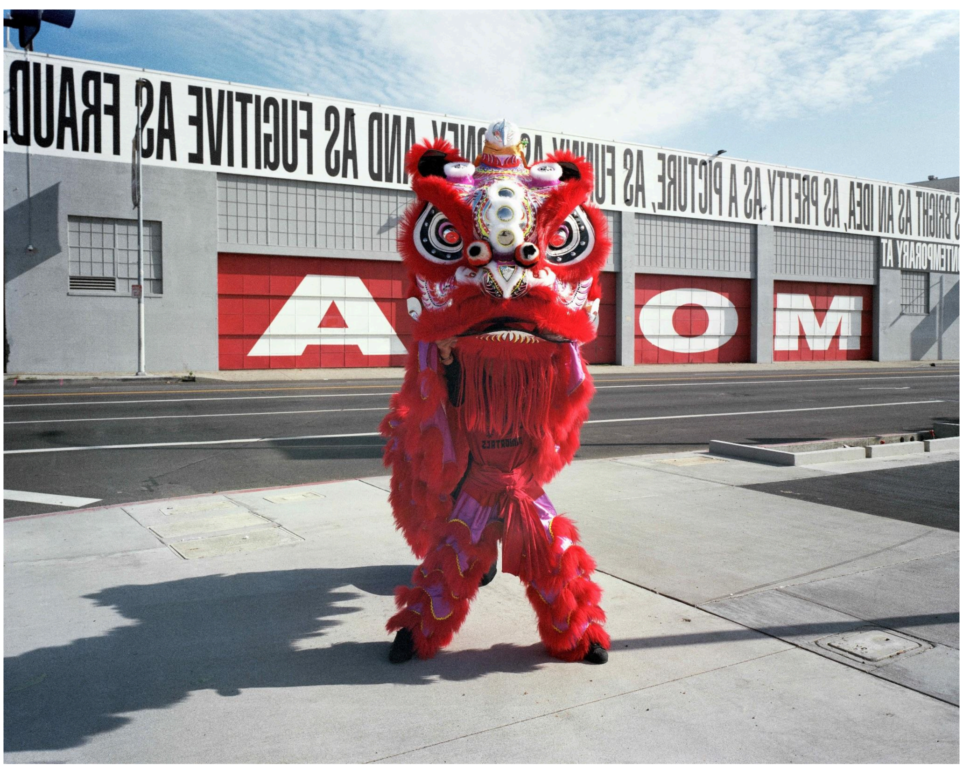
LISA: Your photographic work often subverts traditional power dynamics, especially those related to the male gaze. What challenges have you faced in art criticism, and how have you dealt with them?

ZOE: I still vividly remember my first critique at CalArts. It was clear that the men in the class were reluctant to speak or hesitant to comment for fear of saying the wrong thing. Sometimes, when I listen to feminist podcasts, male listeners are also more cautious when asking questions. I think the most significant challenge I faced was during an exhibition at the 4C Gallery when a male audience member said, "I don't feel provoked by your work." I later reflected on the purpose of my work—whether it was meant to provoke or anger anyone, which it was not. I simply wanted to present a perspective. He wondered if the lack of a strong psychological reaction meant the work was a failure. Later, I realized that our viewpoints weren't aligned. In the first year of my *Palace* series, I included comments made by the models in pink text on the images; in the second year, during the second iteration of the project, I wrote down the words this male viewer had said on the images. My teacher looked at them and said, "These words don't deserve to be on the images; they're not important to the work." After thinking it over, I realized that his challenge didn't affect me that much, and the work itself was the best response. He even came up to me after the exhibition, after questioning me for over twenty minutes in front of everyone, and said, "I hope you don't feel offended." I believe everyone has the right to express their opinions, and sometimes hearing different perspectives can inspire you to continue creating.

Palace series

LISA: How has your artistic perspective evolved in recent years?

ZOE: I feel that the resistance in my work has transitioned from being silent to vocal, and then returned to silence again. Over the two years of my MFA program, I could sense a significant change. When I first arrived in the U.S., the works I created were mostly silent, even when they were video pieces. In my first year, I produced many video installations, most of which included sound. Later, when I was working on my thesis project, I wanted to challenge whether people still have the ability to interpret a 2D image in this era dominated by visuals. I created a piece called *Kylin*, in which I filmed a static lion dance. This series itself is a silent protest, as many Asian women artists have not been recorded in the annals of history. Even in this era of advanced transportation, we are all part of the larger Asian diaspora. Many international students and artists who come to this country, whether due to issues of identity or economic reasons, might have had a brief presence here, but were never properly documented. Years later, when they return to their home countries, their existence during that time is erased. In a Western-dominated environment, it is rare for Asian artists' names or works to be seen in major museums. Even now, with the gentrification of Chinatown, it feels like it’s becoming increasingly 'white.' It's as if a creature with cultural history, with its own origin story and representation of a people, has had all its culture erased. During the exhibition, all the negatives were flipped, and in a certain sense, these images became part of modern history, becoming an archive of this moment in the future. I hope they will not only survive in the present and the past but also look forward to a new future and new possibilities.



Kylin Series