

New Media for New China: The Structure of Digital Art Production

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Project Overview:

The opening and reform period (改革开放) in China has not only ushered in greater economic and social freedom across the country, but has also provided more choices for the production of art. Art and artists can no longer be understood as extensions of state ideology, but rather reflect China's diverse range of economic, social, and cultural conditions.¹ This project explores **how information technology (IT)² – such as the Internet, cellular technology, and blogs – has influenced artists and the production of art in China.** Because the relationship between technology, culture and art is so extensive and chiasmatic, the focus of this study will be on academic programs that teach art and design, with special attention paid to how these art and design programs influence and are influenced by IT.³

¹ E.g., consider the artwork of Hong Hao, Luo Zidan, or Yang Fudong.

² IT, "Information Technology," includes the Internet and cellular technology in general, and more specifically BBS, blogs, firewalls, filtering, IM (including SMS and QQ), tagging, social software, WAP, the Web, Wifi, Wiki, and OSS. China joined the Internet in 1986 via an extremely limited 300Baud line connecting a Chinese government supported (academic) research center to a sister university in Germany. China's full entrance to the Internet and web did not occur until 1994, and even then it had limited bandwidth (Satellite hookup via Sprint Co.), few users in China, and IP access limited by other governments (led by the US and its lingering cold war fears). For recent statistical information see: CNNIC 2005. Finally, China expressed interest in developing its own Internet (or its version of ARPANet) as early as 1977. (Maier 1980)

³ While there has been no systematic exploration of this subject, several scholars have acknowledged its importance. cf., Andrews 1998, Clark 2000, Gao 1998, Huang 2004, Link 2002, and Wu 2001 and 2004.

Project Design:

Based on growing prevalence of the IT, my research centers around two questions that explore the complex factors that affect role of information technology and the production of art and artists in contemporary China.

The rapid growth of information technology in China can be traced back to the ideals of 改革开放. One of the key strategies of the state to facilitate economic growth was to build an IT infrastructure that would link China to the global market economy.⁴ Subsequently, IT became not only a catalyst for economic growth, but also an important part of daily life and powerful influence upon society.⁵ Changing social patterns indicate that people have begun to take advantage of IT, spurring demand and infrastructural support (e.g., mobile phone applications, internet cafes, Wifi transponders). Moreover, the growing use of IT occurs in tandem with greater reliance, as can be seen in the use of SMS (text messaging) in social mobilization, and the proliferation and importance of Blogs. The normalization of this technology is additionally paralleled by state regulation. The regulations are somewhat experimental and serve to expedite economic growth while pursuing an acceptable rate of cultural change (e.g., the proliferation of Blogs alongside the caveat of proper self-censorship, even as the notion of ‘propriety’ changes).⁶ Moreover, these factors impact the production of art in the issues that artists respond to, the choices artists have in forming communities, and the mediums they use.

Question 1: Since 1986 (the date China connected to the Internet) what is the relationship between art programs and IT?

China’s art academies have historically played a leading role in art production.⁷ Modern examples of the academy’s influence include non-state academies like the pre-revolutionary Lingnan School, and contemporary state supported academies like the Central Academy of Arts. While art is produced outside of academies, these institutions continue to be the primary source of contemporary art production. This is due in part to the academies’ organization, which enables it to receive institutional support (government or others), as well as maintain active connections to numerous regional, national, and international art circles. Academies also have

⁴ See Maier 1980.

⁵ cf: Castells 2000, Harwit 2001, Xiao 2004, Yardley 2005, Zhang J 2002, Zhang Q 2004.

⁶ cf. Cody 2005, and Kristof 2005.

⁷ For example, in the early Twentieth Century the production of art in China was strongly influenced by academies, and the state and artists played an active role in promoting social and cultural transformation. Croizier (1998) argues that art academies organized as a direct response to the Qing Dynasty’s waning involvement in China’s modernization; the artists viewed themselves as an exemplary part of China’s modernization and considered their art works to be capable contributions towards China’s national advancement. Andrews (1994) similarly suggests art and artists were drawn to academies in order to effectively promote the state’s political and cultural agenda. Thus, art academies were responsible for both the production of artists, and for the works that the artists produced. Academies (and by extension, the people within them) can also be understood as being both directly affected by and invested in social and cultural transformation. cf. Cahill 1982 and 1994, and Chang 1980.

the advantage of encompassing groups of artists, often promoting certain styles and techniques. This feature simplifies discussion of individual artists and art movements by associating them with specific academies. However, as a result of IT, styles and techniques may no longer be as dependent on particular academies. Furthermore academies may offer artists alternative resources for instruction and organization, including training in traditional mediums aided by IT, producing contemporary art using digital technology, and the integration of IT into the academic setting (both instructional and casual use). Thus, two hypotheses are:

(H1) In the last twenty years, China’s art academies have evolved in response to the growth of IT.

(H2) The influence of IT relates to the training artists receive, and the mediums, styles, and techniques of art production they are familiar with.

Evidence for evaluating these hypotheses is evident in several ways. On a program level, effects can be expected in the instruction of art history and theory, access to art reproductions and other visual aids, access to a wide range of relevant information (especially non-Chinese art resources; e.g., Biennials, exhibitions, art organizations), increases in networking (关系) both quantitatively and qualitatively, and dissemination and implementation of state policy. For artists these effects may result in a wide range of possible outcomes, including reactions to any of the above program-level effects, the range of issues and meanings addressed by artworks, the range of professional possibilities available to artists, and the production of the artworks. Additionally, it is expected that the academies will promote and encourage artists to use IT as the primary medium in their artwork. As such, it is expected that similar to other historical examples (most notably the US, EU, Japan, and South Korea) a growing number of artworks will use IT as a medium (e.g., internet art, lofi art, software art) in culturally specific ways.

Question 2: How do artists in the academy situate their work historically and in relation to China’s changing identity?

While the former hypotheses have focused on the effects of larger phenomenon on particular subjects, i.e., the relationship between IT, society and culture, and their interconnection to art production, the second question is intended to survey artist's attitudes. It is essential to temper an institutional analysis with this more 'bottom-up' approach, because the production of art begins with the artist. Thus it is important to assess how an artist understands her or his artworks in relation to a perceived history of art, as well as in what ways she or he views the impact of these changes on the individual process of art production.

Conventionally, “Chinese” art is often associated with Ming-Qing paintings and porcelains. While traditional 国花 painting continues, it has been altered and accompanied by a wide range of new mediums, from oil and photography, to digital video and performance art. In contemporary Chinese art most internationally recognized artists have adopted these ‘non-traditional’ mediums and styles. However, relatively few art historians have explored the cultural specificities of their use.⁸ Furthermore, there are at least three non-exclusive opinions concerning the function of IT in China, all of which belie the complex relationship between China’s technology, art and culture. The first opinion, primarily Western in origin, is the notion that China is a “sleeping dragon.”⁹ Accordingly, China’s use of IT poses both an imminent threat and a source of potential profit for the West. This holds true for the burgeoning international Chinese art scene, which often seems as novel and radical to Western audiences as it does to the Chinese.¹⁰ The second and third viewpoints hold that China’s culture is advancing and evolving, or it is being corrupted by the growing use of IT.¹¹ All three of these positions fail to specifically address how Chinese artists have adopted the use of this technology. This suggests four hypotheses:

(H3) Artists, especially those artists using IT, consider their artwork distinctly Chinese in both composition and medium.

(H4) These same artists consider their work distinctly Chinese, but regard their mediums as not yet assimilated (not yet or partially Chinese) or possibly unassimilable (completely not Chinese).

(H5) These artists consider their work and medium as part of a new “global” art community, with secondary national considerations.

(H6) First consider their work as Chinese, and then secondly as part of a new “global” art community (in possible conjunction with hypothesis three).

These four hypotheses may be present in a variety of ways. It is expected that in discussion with artists at each academy on the subject of relationships between their artwork and nationalism, and artwork and patriotism, the artists will self-describe their work and medium as being unequivocally ‘Chinese,’ with a strong secondary

⁸ Notable exceptions are Julia Andrews, Gao Minglu, John Lent, Perry Link, Michael Sullivan, and Wu Hung.

⁹ This expression (or wolf, or tiger) is used frequently by the Media when referring to China’s economic growth. See also Zhang 2002, and Castells 2000.

¹⁰ E.g., accounts of shock from Chinese visitors to the famous Stars exhibit “No Return.” See Wu 2000.

¹¹ See Hu 2004, Guan 2004, Xiao 2004, Feng 2004, Zhang J 2002, and Zhang Q 2004.

influence from the ‘global’ community. Moreover, identification with a ‘global’ community likely will be heavily influenced by a desire to increase recognition of China’s cultural legacy and contemporary reputation. A further expectation is that artists will consider their works ‘Chinese’, but global in the sense that China is global and therefore its cultural products are also global. The subtlety of how these terms are self-defined is important to the research (i.e., the definition of Chinese, global, etc.). Complications regarding any objective definition will be superseded by the artists’ explanations of these terms in their work. Other conclusions may also be possible and will be recorded as they occur.

Research Strategy:

No single research strategy can be employed to cover the diverse issues surrounding the relationship between culture, information technology, academies, and artists in China. As a result, this project draws on several methods from within art history, and from other disciplines. The primary research method will include four research components: interviews, content analysis, archival research, and extramural research (e.g., attendance at various academic, art, and information technology related events). All research, especially archival work, will be driven by disciplinary models firmly established by China scholars Julia Andrews, Maria Galikowski, Shen Kuiyi, and Wu Hung.¹² These Modern and contemporary art historians have been able to successfully combine archival research (e.g., records, periodicals, literature), and interviews with general cultural analysis. It is through their example that this research intends to form itself. Specific interview strategies follow a dialogic approach, based in part on a ‘standardized, open-ended’ method of questioning.¹³ A general sequence of questions encompassing the guiding questions and hypotheses will be used to ensure a degree of standardization across interviews.¹⁴ Participation and observation has been informed by symbolic interactionism and translation theory.¹⁵ An organizational element for contemporary Chinese art exhibitions (as a means of retracing production) follows Wu’s thirteen-type system, which is broken into two general areas of public and private art.¹⁶ The distinctions that Wu makes are not meant to validate different kinds of practices inasmuch as they point to the numerous ways that institutions and artists operate in contemporary China. Extra-disciplinary guidance also comes from Alberto Melucci’s ‘meaning-based’ systemic analysis of social

¹² These scholars are considered exemplary for this study. See Andrews 1994 and 1998; Galikowski 1998, Shen 2000, and Wu 1994, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2004.

¹³ See Patton (1990) on the “standardized, open-ended” approach to interviewing. On general tips for conducting interviews, see Briggs (1986); Kvale (1996).

¹⁴ It must be noted that this study is not intended to be an official survey and therefore does not have human subjects clearance. As a result, interviews are required to be conducted informally.

¹⁵ See Blumer 1969; Cronin 2003. Though Symbolic Interactionism has fundamental flaws, the usefulness of participant observation cannot be overlooked. The advantages of close contact and immersion in Chinese 关系 based culture will also aid interview depth. Cronin’s observation of ‘translators’ operating in a global context will also facilitate participation by providing initial points of reference for communities operating across cultural differences.

¹⁶ See Wu 2001: 163-164.

movements,¹⁷ and Saskia Sassen's investigation of globalization, networks, and their relationship to commerce and society.¹⁸ These diverse but complementary methods will act as general guidelines for this study, and help maintain research clarity and focus in each location and situation.

Interviews are the key aspect of this study, and are intended to discover and record a range of perceptions about the role of information technology in contemporary culture. Interviews will be conducted with professors and students in universities art programs in order to examine the perceived effects of access to information technology and the attitudes of those affected. Besides exploring numerous key hypotheses of this study (H3-6), these interviews will shed light on the position of the academy inside China's larger cultural context (H1 and H2). Other interviews will also be conducted with relevant technology departments, businesses, and community members. Interviews with people related to, but outside of the academy, are intended to elaborate the relationship the academies (and art production) have with the economy and the state, as well as offer insight into related cultural milieus (H1 and H2).¹⁹

At universities, interviews will be combined with content analysis of university and program course materials, and information technology resources and materials available to students and faculty (H1).²⁰ Such an analysis can offer insight into the university and program's modus operandi, and the degree to which the university supports access to this technology. This analysis will be joined with archival research at each university's library. Archival research is designed to establish the historical setting for the present circumstances at each program. Archival dating will begin roughly in 1994, the year China offered web access on its Internet; earlier dates may go as far back as 1986, when China first established an Internet connection. This research will be used to determine when each program had access to information technology, how it may have been used, and in what ways it was supported by the university (H1). Archival research will also involve cataloging university-based exhibitions of student and faculty work. Through examining art works since 1994, the issues, mediums, and techniques employed in art production can begin to surface (H2). Additional research will focus on these same issues, but on a national level (e.g., exhibitions, national biennials)(H1). The libraries in Beijing and Shanghai (北大图书馆 and 上海大学图书馆) will be especially useful for browsing periodicals, and collecting information on exhibitions located in parts of China that are presently not on the research itinerary. Furthermore, where possible, universities may record job placement statistics for program graduates, and offer access to other related programs and resources, such as the many important university run BBSs.

¹⁷ See Melucci 1996. Melucci's analysis attempts to move past state-centered approaches and conventional dualistic systems (e.g., structure versus agency, determinism versus agency), toward an examination of the complex factors involved in self-construction and social normalization.

¹⁸ See Sassen 1999 and 2002. Sassen is especially useful in countering the distanced network theories established by Manuel Castells with a network theory that is dependent on network connectivity and location; by using location (place) Sassen demonstrates the human factors involved in network theory.

¹⁹ For instance, the relationship between art production and employment, or the academy and pop culture.

²⁰ At this stage in the field I will collect data for later content analysis.

Placement statistics can offer a sense of how a program fits into the greater national economic and cultural picture (H1 and H2), while access to other programs offers a comparative perspective on the context each program is operating within, as well as provide an additional perspective on the effects of information technology access in China (H1 and H3-6).

It is also important to balance the study of academies with extramural research. This research offers a wider perspective on how universities function in a variety of contexts, including the state and economy. Visitations to biennials, art openings and local art galleries will provide information on connections between academies and the art market (H1-6). In addition, I will seek interviews with academy alumni. Such interviews can offer additional perspective about the academy, as well as to the changes in the culture in general (H1-6). Meeting with the regional OSDL²¹ liaison in Beijing, and other business leaders will complement perspectives on national trends in information technology and may lead to other resources and connections (H1).

There is no guarantee for the degree of access this study will be granted at each university, or to what extent interviews with subjects will be possible and profitable. With the help of personal contacts in local academies I hope to establish additional contacts beyond the immediate university program. In the event that access to resources outside of the programs is insufficient, in some cases it will be possible to fall back on state-supplied data of network resources (provided by CNNIC), and popular attitudes (provided by CASS).²² While not ideal, both sources directly address issues related to this study. To supplement these fallback resources, locally available periodicals (physical and online) will also provide an important source for tracking events and attitudes.

Finally, at each stage documentation will be taken for subsequent analysis. Whenever possible and permitted, interviews, information technology resources (websites, Blogs, etc.), periodicals, and other archival documents will be recorded or collected. This documentation will be used in part for performing qualitative data-analysis to help address systematic relations between persons, academies, and national trends.²³

Research Venues:

Field research for this project will last nine months and will examine three sites. The primary base of operations will be in Beijing (4 months). Beijing affords an unparalleled range of activities and possibilities. It is also home to one of the most politically charged art scenes, and is at the forefront of art discourse. Beijing will provide my initial institutional access, as well as access to a wide range of resources. Professor Kenneth Fields from the Department of Digital Art and Design at Beijing University (Peking University or 北大, 软件

²¹ Open Source Development Laboratories is one of the leaders in worldwide open source software development. While I am in Beijing I will meet with Masanobu Hirano, Director of OSDL Operations for Asia.

²² See CNNIC 2005; Guo and Bu 2002 (also at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/itandsociety/v01i01/v01i01a15.pdf>)

²³ Using the data-analysis program NUD*IST in collaboration with other related China studies. cf. Scolari, QSR NUD*IST 4 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Software, 1997).

与微电子学院) has generously offered affiliation and support for my project. 北大 is the most famous university in China, and regularly attracts many of China's most promising faculty and students. As a result of its location and status 北大 is also considered exemplary for the nation's education system and a trendsetter in pedagogy. Other schools in Beijing that are a part of this study include 清华, 人民大学, CAFA.

Shanghai offers cultural access different from but complementary to Beijing. As the largest, and among the wealthiest cities in China, Shanghai is the home to one of the most famous contemporary art scenes. Shanghai is also a major center for economic development and pop-culture. Shanghai will employ the same research model as in Beijing. Professor Wang Dawei, Vice Dean of the College of Art, Shanghai University (上海大学美术学院), will be my primary contact (3 months). Prof. Wang will assist me with connections to local art galleries and inside operations at the Shanghai Biennial. 上海大学美术学院 is the largest and most well-connected art program in the Shanghai urban area; it is also arguably one of the most influential programs in terms of international recognition. The college includes numerous disciplines, including architecture and art history, and has both undergraduate and graduate programs. In addition, I will visit the nearby cities of 广州 and 杭州, where I will continue my research at 广州美术学院 and 中国美术学院.

While Beijing and Shanghai are required for this study, Changchun (2 months) will provide an introduction to Chinese culture that will temper studies that focus only on Beijing or Shanghai. Situated in the relatively rural northeast corner of China, it is home to over forty ethnic groups and offers an important contrast to China's more recognized urban areas. As in Beijing and Shanghai, similar research will be carried out at Jilin University in the College of Art (吉大美术学院), under the supervision of Yang Jingmao, Dean of the College of Art. 吉大美术学院 has recently moved into new facilities with better equipment for its twenty-eight professors and over five-hundred total graduate and undergraduate students.

These three cities cover an enormous range of cultures and attitudes in China. Each city represents its own geographic region and offers its own unique experience of Chinese society. As a result, these cities act as an internal comparison and control for the hypotheses of this study. Were this study to focus solely on Beijing or Shanghai, its conclusions would likely be dominated by China's cosmopolitanism. Likewise, a study focused solely on peripheral urban centers would be deprived of the numerous activities present only in a cosmopolitan center. Other art events may be used for minor comparative purposes (e.g., art shows in Guangzhou).

Project Implications:

This project addresses how art has evolved through art academies in contemporary China in the past nineteen years. This focus is important because it concentrates on the cultural and technological evolution of art production in China rather than a conventional political or a strictly connoisseur study of art. Second, most scholarship on Chinese art is 'top-down' and focuses on individuals or groups of artists and their relation to

larger political shifts, thereby over simplifying the interconnection of culture, art and technology. Thus, by overlooking this interconnection it is difficult to explain how art production is influenced by cultural shifts, and how material culture is transformed by art. This is critical not simply because art production, culture, and technology continue to evolve together, but also because the rapid growth of IT impacts China's state, economy and culture. Finally, the role the academy in art production is often ignored in favor of international exhibitions and individual artists, thereby eliding significant social and cultural factors.

My conclusions will highlight current trends in art pedagogy, especially in relation to recently new media programs at numerous Chinese universities. As a key part of this, the conclusions will examine how new media operates within academic disciplinary boundaries, and how the programs act to reinforce, change, or otherwise underwrite cultural attitudes. By focusing on these aspects it will be possible to examine certain cultural assumptions operating both in China and in the West (i.e., the U.S. and Europe). Moreover, by incorporating additional viewpoints from various regional artists and communities, from well-established and internationally known artists and curators to local underground communities, my study will juxtapose and complement other recent scholarship that maps China's contemporary art scene. As such, my presentation will offer an historical snapshot of Chinese new media practice that looks beyond the relentless hype of Chinese digital boosterism, which will in turn lead to a better understanding of the needs and intentions of China's centers of cultural training and production.

Besides contributing to contemporary art history, this study's findings have a direct bearing on several other disciplines. My findings will be immediately useful to scholars in visual culture, media studies, and other cultural fields for the purpose of understanding a central factor in cultural production; similarly, this study will provide information for these fields on the subject of globalization, policy, and society. For this same reason, scholars in government, political science, and sociology can benefit from this study, despite differences in methodology. Lastly, this study will help scholars of foreign affairs, and other foreign affairs specialists and professionals understand a particular facet within the larger national and international framework.

Research Calendar January 2006 – September 2007:

DATES	LOCATION	RESEARCH PLAN	OTHER
1st Stage Fieldwork Research Dec 28 – April 30, 2006	Beijing, Shanghai, Changchun <i>Affiliations:</i> 北大, 上海大学, 吉大	Begin conducting preliminary investigation at 北大 with Prof. Kenneth Fields. Make initial visitations to institutes of affiliation. Other schools: 清华, 人民大学, CAFA, 中国美术学院, 广州美术学院. Establish extramural contacts; interview OSDL.	Creative Commons China Release (March 29, 2006)
April 01 – May 31, 2006	Volga Federal District, Russia <i>Affiliation:</i> Nizhny Novgorod Linguistic University	Continue investigation via internet (online library resources from 北大图书馆, 上海大学图书馆, and 吉大图书馆). Comparative research between Russia and China (for a paper in progress)	Accompany spouse in Russia
June 01 – Aug 31, 2006	Beijing <i>Affiliations:</i> Princeton-China; Peking Univ., School of Software and Microelectronics, Department of Digital Art and Design (北大: 北京大学软件与微电子学院)	Summer Language Training – continued Chinese training at Princeton-China program in Beijing (primary focus). Continue work started in December 2005 with Prof. Ken Fields at 北大.	Additional Language Training ISEA conference
2nd Stage Fieldwork Research Sept 01 – Dec 31, 2006	Beijing <i>Affiliation:</i> 北大	Continue conducting research at 北大. Supervised by Prof. Kenneth Fields, Department of Digital Art and Design.	Proposed 2 nd Stage funding begins 9/1; Shanghai Biennial
Jan 01 – March 31, 2007	Shanghai <i>Affiliation:</i> Shanghai Univ. Dept of Art (上海大学美术学院)	Begin conducting interviews at 上海大学美术学院 programs. Supervised by Prof. Wang Dawei. Archival Research at 上海大学图书馆. Extramural research: Biennial, Galleries	CAA Conf.
April 01 – May 31, 2007	Changchun, Jilin <i>Affiliation:</i> Jilin Univ. (吉大美术学院)	Continue interviews and research at 吉大美术学院, as well as in the region, under the supervision of Yang Jingmao, Dean of the College of Art. Begin Dissertation Write-up	Proposed SSRC-IDRF funding ends 5/31
June 01 – Aug 30, 2007	Ithaca, NY <i>Affiliation:</i> Cornell University	Synthesize research at Cornell University (East-Asia collection and the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media) Dissertation Writing.	
September 2007	San Diego, CA <i>Affiliation:</i> UCSD	Return to UCSD. Complete and defend Dissertation (final defense). Prepare for job search (CAA Feb 2008)	