

# The Differences between China and the Western World with Respect to New Media Art

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the development, characteristics, and challenges of new media art in China, comparing it with its Western counterparts. It traces the evolution of new media art in China from its emergence in the late 1980s to its current status, highlighting key movements such as video art, multimedia interaction, web-based art, and conceptual photography. The study examines the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that have shaped the trajectory of new media art in China and analyzes the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western practices in terms of artistic philosophy, technological integration, and institutional support. Furthermore, the paper discusses the shortcomings in interdisciplinary collaboration, funding, and academic infrastructure in China, while proposing strategies to strengthen its new media art ecosystem. Looking ahead, the article anticipates increasing recognition for Chinese new media artists and underscores the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustainable funding models to foster innovation and cultural identity in this dynamic field.

**Keywords:** New Media Art, Chinese Contemporary Art, Digital Art, Multimedia Interaction, Cultural Identity.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last century, the advent and popularity of new media, which was represented by computers and the Internet, marked the milestone of human information dissemination or art transmitting. New media as a carrier gives birth to new artistic patterns, arousing extensive attention across the world nowadays. Since the Reform and Opening Up Policy, the new media art has undergone rapid development in China while simultaneously, their western peers have entered into the stage of maturity (Dong, 2006). Currently, new media art in China has progressed from imitation to innovation but still exhibits much disparity and difference with the western community. This paper explores the intrinsic reasons for this by discussing the differences between China and the Western World with respect to new media art, and comes up with some personal advice and the development prospects for new media art in China. The challenges faced by new media art managers in China in next 3-5 years are also discussed.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Definition of “New Media Art”

The concept “new media art” has defied conclusive definition since the very beginning when it came into being, and its connotations are ever-changing as society evolves and science develops. For example, in China, the intervening years from 1979 to 2010 witnessed eight different synonyms emerging for “new media art”, namely, computer art, multimedia art, electronic art, digital art, information art, web art, interactive art and virtual art. The definition of new media art is extensive. In this paper, the new media art means all kind of art works created through new media (including new materials) and new technology. As Susan Acret, the commissioning editor of *Art Asia Pacific*, an Australian contemporary art magazine, said: “New media art has broad meanings whose principal character is to employ advanced technology in art works” (Zhang, and Xu, 2004, p.48). As new media art is evolving, its connotations are also changing.

New media art is real-time, interactive, experiential and

virtual. The new media art in earlier days includes video art and video installation art. During the development of digital technology and network technology, some new types of new media art were appeared, like experimental animation, multimedia interaction, web art, digital video and computer interaction (Huang, 2009). Today, a new media art form called moist media has appeared, which is a combination of dry silicon computer technology and moist biology relative to the biosystem (Huang, 2009). Therefore, the renewal of knowledge and application of new technology constantly refreshes the contents of new media art.

### 2.2. An Overview of New Media Art in China

The new media art was began in China at the end of the 1980s when China was suffering from a turbulence of politics, economy and cultural life, which support sources of artistic creation (Zhang, 2005). In the globalization, Chinese new media art had to meet the requirements of development, and catch the trend of international art development. The new media art had emerged in such an occasion, sending the message of internationalism and exhibition. Compared to traditional art forms, new media art is better able to survive social transformation.

Most creators of new media art in China were graduates of art academies, equipped with artistic insights and creative philosophies (Zhang, 2005). They had seen the changing times, and tried new things based on their own understandings. The audiences of new media art were usually ordinary people, who change their attitudes from curiosity to passion, and had built up the new media art into popular art morphology. The propagation of new media art had over the domestic art academies or planner clubs, and progressively extended its effects into the Internet. Today, new media art has a great impact upon society.

Firstly known as the avant-garde art, the new media art in China found its expression originally in fields like photography, video and performance. Later, the art had shifted to the reflection and critique of media methods and society. Currently, the new media art becomes more public and involved into society (Huang, 2009). The prevailing art at

present is conceptual photography art, video art, multi-media art and web art.

The video art consists of video installations, videotape works and video shorts. China began to know video art in 1990. At that time, the video art only meant a form of videos in China. It was in the mid-1990s that the first excellent, mature artists appeared, like Li Wenbin, Lin Liumiao and Zhu Jia. In 1996, there were held two spectacular exhibitions: one is "In the Name of Art" held by Zhu Qice and others, offering their latest video art works; another one is "Phenomena and Images" held by China Academy of Art, deemed by many artists as a milestone of contemporary art in China (Dong, 2006). Although the video art has faded off the stage of modern social life, it still makes one of the most influential art forms in the history of Chinese new media art.

In the mid and late 1990s, the new media artists in China began to explore the applications of multi-media and network technologies. Feng Mengbo is the first multi-media artist in China. In 1996, he created his interactive work *My Private Album*, which based on his old family photos since the 1920s, and the childhood graffiti, books and cinema shots and music, allowing audiences to choose contents by pushing buttons (Chen, 2006). Chinese new media art has benefited from the development of the Internet. For example, Bai Ding's *Not for Children*, Xiao Xiao's *Xiao Xiao Series* and Lao Jiang's *Rock 'N' Roll on the New Long March* were displayed by FLASH on the Internet.

Another significant type in Chinese new media art is conceptual photography. Unlike the traditional art form of photography, conceptual photography distinguishes itself from the traditional photography by challenging the objective authenticity and appealing to the infusion of passions and participation of audiences. The photography is not a means to record reality objective, it is a subjective means to express aesthetic appreciation and life revelations of heart (Zhang, 2005). In December 1998, Fine Arts College of Shanghai University hosted *Images Telling Stories: Chinese New Concept Photography Art*, an exhibition focusing on concepts and images and reflecting the ecological basis of inner self and environment (Zhang, 2005). In recent years, many excellent works have been produced in the club of Chinese conceptual photography, such as Wang Jin's *100%*, Qiu Zhijie's *Good and Gao Brothers' China News Series* (Gao, 2003).

### **2.3. Difference Comparisons of Sino-Western New Media Arts**

Western new media arts rose in the 1960s, 20 years earlier than that of China. However, the western video art boasts a history of 40 years. The conceptual photography represented by Halsman can be traced back to the 1920s and the 1930s (Jameson, F., 1998). Hence, the West preceded China by more than half century in new media art. Considering the different birth date and background of new media art, there is a sharp discrepancy between the Sino-Western new media arts, such as audience acceptability, promotion degree and the essence of artists' works.

#### **2.3.1. Difference between Promotion Degree and Development Process**

In the 1970s, many western TV stations like OQED in San Francisco, NCET (national center of experimental TV) and WGBH in Boston had tried to incorporate video art works of an experimental nature (Huang, 2009). In China, video art was never played on TV media. At first, video art in China

had to be displayed in underground traditional galleries, and showed a combination of plebification and business.

Moreover, supported by different parties, art galleries and exhibition halls dedicated to displaying new media art were founded firstly in the West, such as the Center for Art and Media in German, International Video Art Exhibition in Holland and ICC Center in Japan (Meng, 2009). Then, the various institutions and magazines have followed successively in the west. Frank Mimina, an engineer and dynamics artist, initiated the periodical *Leonardo* in 1982 as a communication channel for artists, technology professionals, scientists and people who were interested in arts. V2, the Holland Center of Media and Art which founded in 1981, was a small club assembled by young artists and developed into world-famous institution for technology, media and art activities (Meng, 2009). Meanwhile, large research and development departments like Microsoft, IBM and the Interval Research Center also join in the western new media art. So, new media art in China lagged far behind the West in research, development and promotion. Today, although most of Chinese colleges of higher learning set up new media art course in the syllabus, the systematic study has just embarked on its journey. Professional exhibition and communication platforms for new media art are in great demand, and the acquisition of most new media art information attaches on other art realms.

#### **2.3.2. Difference in the Essence of Artists' Works**

Whilst capitalism might be seen to encourage technological development, aesthetics might be seen – to some extent at least – to crusade against it. Therefore, the nature of Western new media art is modern self-criticism. Compared with the western, new media art in China can be seen in the light of a developing country with a thirst for modernity. Technology in China with respect to the arts is developing slowly. Because of this some Chinese can't yet see the negative effects that this can have on the arts and culture. As a result there is an overall lack of criticism with regard to the new media (Zhang, 2005). While, the criticism spirit is the essential spirit and existing significance of new media art.

On the other hand, "A general survey of new media application in Western art in the late 1990s indicates clearly that artists attempt to create personal interpretations in art forms; therefore, they relentlessly explore the potential of new media" (Rush, 1999, p.11). Western artists have adopted new media art as an instrument to express themselves and tap into personal potential. Video artist Peter Campos applied color separation synthesis to produce marvelous compound effects, such as effacing off face with hands, hands penetrating body and burning face on the paper, to show artists' self-exploration in his art work *Three changes* in 1973 (Huang, 2009). Although Chinese new media artists also look into inner selves, mostly focus on contemplates the social and the cultural phenomena (Dong, 2006). Since 1993, Huang Yan, an artist from Changchun China, has been using media art to document the destruction of traditional buildings in China (Dong, 2006). At that time, numerous valuable colonial buildings of architectural significance from the Ming and Qing Dynasties have been lost in this large-scale demolition. Through such activities, Huang Yan has focused his attention on the resulting social and cultural problems. He was acutely aware of how individuals were affected by social transition in China. His works are very important in new media art transition in China.

## 2.4. Reasons behind These Differences and Coping Strategies

### 2.4.1. Complex Social Background

Western new media art has a chronicled history, ranging from modernism and post-modernism and from conceptual photography to video art. By contrast, Chinese new media art is merely an umbrella name for new media experiments conducted in China since 1989 (Zhang, 2005). In China photography art and video art have occurred almost simultaneously. Unlike the West, there have not been distinct art genres in Chinese new media art initially, even have, it was appeared in similar period. Western new media art was based on technological progress (Huang, 2009). The invention of video cameras and PCs offered many opportunities in new media art, and promoted the development of new media art. While the new media art in China did not simply rely on the media and technology, it has a more complicated background on art and technology.

In the dawn of the 1990s, China began transforming from a planned economy into a market economy, and many artists were facing the dilemma of choosing art careers, because the choice of their jobs has a direct link with their life styles. Traditionally, an art practitioner would be dispatched to some institution after graduation in China. They would work in fixed posts, and their personal creations of art works were turn into an amateurish status for a long time (Dong, 2006). At that time, some Chinese artists, however, refused to be dispatched, and determined to dedicate themselves to the creation of art by renting a house in rural-urban belts. Today, in some places like Songzhuang of Beijing and Xiaozhou Village of Guangzhou, people can still see a group of “vagrant” artists who persevere in artistic creation on a tight budget without the support of a stable and fixed salary. It is clear to see that unlike their western counterparts, the new media art in China was not only hatched in technology, it also attached directly to the life styles of these artists; some of them recorded the social changes occurring in Chinese life through photography and videos (Zhang, 2001). It needs to be pointed out that the products of Chinese new media art was very Chinese – not Western.

### 2.4.2. The Defects of Discipline Construction

An apparent defect of new media art in China is the disconnection between theorists, artists and different art disciplines, and there is no multi-disciplinary, compound research team (Zhang, 2005). First, there is no tendency for integration and complementarity between different art disciplines, and these artists do not communicate and discuss with each other when creating. Furthermore, the training skills in Chinese colleges tend to be mundane and uniform. For instance, students in new media art centers within colleges only learn knowledge of new media, but have a weak command of knowledge about fine arts and music. Similarly, students from other art academies also have a poor knowledge of new media arts. In fact, new media art studies require compound art talents embracing knowledge and skills that cover various art disciplines, art theories and artistic creations. As a result, many Chinese art works are often innovation-absent, mediocre and dull.

### 2.4.3. Coping Strategy

Due to the backward situation of new media art in China, the priority is to solve the bottlenecks of funds and technology in order to boost the development of new media art in China. To some extent, the capability of technology can decides the

quality of art works, and the development of technology demands sufficient fund support. Due to the characters of media art, it needs high-tech experiments, which require numerous equipments, programming engineers and pecuniary resources. It seems that artists hardly can afford it by themselves. In western countries, plenty of funds for new media derive from the cultural foundation of high-tech companies, and the relevant technique has developed advanced (Huang, 2009). Therefore, new media art in China requires stable funding support and strong technology support.

Secondly, new media art studies in China are anxious for the completeness of discipline construction, integrates studies methods of various disciplines and art categories, trains compound talents of multi-disciplines and trans-art categories, and active promotes the interacted and cooperative study among compound study teams. Then, it is necessary to enhance the studies of local Chinese ‘style’. New media art in China has its unique elements and creation techniques. It is different with foreign counterparts by displaying its local character. So, Chinese new media must choose a new media path with the local characters to demonstrate the individuality of Chinese new media art whilst keeping abreast of western new media art.

## 2.5. Development Prospects

Gao Shiqiang, the spokesman for Chinese new media art, hosted his personal exhibition, STORY, in New York in 2007. In the exhibition, Barbara London, the curator of Museum of Modern Art, spoke to Gao: “The main problem of Chinese artists presently is how to win the recognition from western community. Now, fewer Chinese artists has been accepted by the mainstream of western art community” (Chinese new media art in New York. 2007, para.5). Nevertheless, the 2008 Beijing Olympics proved many people wrong. The production team behind the opening ceremony employed high-tech methods to unleash the majestic splendor of the nest. The world was stunned by the perfect unfolding of “scroll”. The opening ceremony can be appreciated not only shows the “original” fashion (Benjamin, 2006, p.55) through the time and space of the Bird’s Nest, but also allow audience feeling the simulated atmosphere through different media (TV, the Internet and cell phones). In the World Expo hosted in Shanghai on 1st, May, 2010, new media technology and art were simulated the future living cities space of human. The elements of new media art are covered every aspect of the World Expo from room demonstration to forum conferences and performances. It is shows that new media art will be playing a ruling role in cities and human life in the future. In recent years, relevant celebrations like new media art festive and electronic art festive have subsequently been hosted in Beijing and Shanghai with an aim to afford a platform for Chinese artists to reveal the latest achievements and progress in the new media art community. New media art in China not only retains its own local characters but also begins to be recognized by the Western world. As Mr. Gao (2007) has commented, artists should not worry about whether they are approved, or how they are described and even the market situation; instead, they should pay more attention to finding the logics and meanings of life, as well as the relationship between oneself and the world (Chinese new media art in New York. 2007).

## 2.6. The Challenges of Chinese New Media Art Manager in the Next 3-5years

Depending on the situation and development prospects of Chinese new media art, the first challenge for new media art managers in China is: how to encourage dialogue between different kinds of new media artists. The managers need to be in contact with different types of new media artists to form a multi-disciplinary team. The artists can exchange ideas and academic knowledge, and learn from each other. So, their art works can be more comprehensive and creative, which is what Chinese new media artists really need now.

Another challenge is how to help artists deal with issues of funding. To some extent, the artists cannot personally afford the production costs associated with new media art. In many foreign countries there are special new media art foundations or comprehensive art foundations that provide funds, and new media art centers to provide production equipment and engineers to help artists complete their works – but this is not typically the case in China. Although some artists' new media works have been marketed already, and received sponsorship from foreign art foundations, China has not set up any new media art center and foundation of its own. Therefore, Chinese new media art managers need to help artists to complete their works of art in this situation.

## 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, since the new media art has come into China, it has gradually got rid of the overly strong influence of Western new media art, and has experienced the process from deconstruction to construction. Although it has completed the imitation stage, the development of Chinese new media art still lags behind the West in general. This paper has explored part of reasons for this to reveal the differences between Chinese and Western New Media Art, and give some personal advices. Overall, Chinese new media art has not loss self-

awareness under the influence of Western culture. It not only marked by globalization, but has also retained its native characteristics well.

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