

Hungarian University of Fine Arts

Doctoral Programme

Three generations of Chinese video art  
1989–2015

DLA theses

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# Three generations of Chinese video art 1989–2015

## DLA thesis

My thesis explores the development of Chinese video art in light of the work of three artists, Zhang Peili, Yang Fudong and Cheng Ran.

I decided to study the work of these three artists primarily because I was intrigued by their artistic position, attitude and mindset, and the process of my explorations naturally involved comparisons with my way of thinking. How did these artists move and work in cultural and political space that emerged in the course of an immense historical and political change? A change that had an impact on global politics as well. In a sense parallels can be drawn between the changes that took place in China from 1978, in the post-Cultural Revolution period, and those that occurred in the post-Cold War era, in the days of the fall of the Soviet rule and the post-Soviet, post-Socialist period. Obviously, the differences are significant too: while China has emerged as an ever-growing economical and cultural presence in the global scene, Eastern Europe, including Hungary, had only fifteen minutes of fame, its *Eastern Europeanness* attracting the attention of the West in a way that China's *Chineseness* did. Also a matter of personal concern for me stands the question: What kind of locality can be achieved, what kind of identity can be built up, experienced and expressed in a global scene when one's original context is cultural marginality.

At the same time, rather than aiming to present an overall assessment of general social and artistic issues, the primary concern of my thesis is the artists' personal motivations and their work *per se*. I discuss their historical, cultural and artistic pre-history and context only to the extent that is necessary for the understanding of their personality, practice and individual works.



## 1) Three generations of Chinese video art 1988–2015

Only 28 years have passed since the birth of Zhang Peili's *30x30*, considered as the first Chinese video work. However, during these less than three decades, fast and momentous political and social changes took place in China, and as a result, in the country's art scene. These facts, in their turn, led to a major change in the position of Chinese art in the global scene. Although the three artists whose works I discuss were born roughly only 10-10 years apart (1957; 1971; 1981), it is justified to see them as ones representing three generations, as they were socialised in different socio-historical environments, and started their artistic careers in different contexts. Although they started from different directions (Zhang Peili from conceptual art, Yang and Cheng from experimental film), by the middle or end of the 2000s, all three had come to make large, spectacular film installations, various versions of gallery film.

Studying the origins of Chinese video art, it becomes clear that the story starts with Zhang Peili's work – despite the fact that a number of artists also began to work with the camera quite early on, using it in a great variety of ways. Therefore, even in the early days, there was no such thing as a singularly characteristic Chinese video style. Zhu Jia's<sup>1</sup> work titled *Forever* (1994), Li Yongbin's<sup>2</sup> video projection *Face No.1* (1995), or Chen Shaoxiong's<sup>3</sup> *Sight Adjuster* series (1994), represented different directions in conceptual video.

Zhang Peili can rightfully be called the father of Chinese video art not only because he made the first Chinese video work in 1988, but also because he is one of the founding fathers, an active player of Chinese avant-garde movements from the 1980s, and also the initiator and founder of new media training, as well as a professor educating several generations of artists at the Hangzhou Art Academy, where he still teaches today. His artistic position has not changed much since the 1980s, he has built up a consistent oeuvre of conceptual works. His works show inspiration by David Hall, Andy Warhol and Bruce Neuman. At the same time, this oeuvre and Zhang's artistic position bear the peculiarly hybrid character of the Chinese art of the 1980s. His conceptual video installations are marked by a

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Jia (1963, Beijing, China –), video artist.

<sup>2</sup> Li Yongbin (1963, Beijing, China –), video artist

<sup>3</sup> Chen Shaoxiong (1962, Guandong, China –), artist, makes Chinese ink drawings, animations and videos.

clear intention to eliminate personalness and subjectivity, while his entire practice is also imbued with a kind of humanistic mindset, a utopistic view of the future of mankind.

Looking at the next generations, it would be hard to claim that there was one single artist among them with such a strong impact on their own generation as Zhang had on his. Although the meticulous eye can discover numerous common points and parallels between the works of such artists as Yang Fudong<sup>4</sup>, Qiu Zhijie<sup>5</sup>, Yang Zhenzhong<sup>6</sup>, Chen Xiaoyun<sup>7</sup> or Cao Fei<sup>8</sup>, there is no particularly Chinese style that could be identified in their works. Of the artists of the second generation, I will discuss Yang Fudong, who had invented a unique version of *Gestural Cinema* in his gallery movies by the end of the first decade of the 2000s. In his early movies Yang was looking to find his expression by experimenting with the visual world and image editing of the *New American Cinema*, *film noir* and the Chinese leftist cinema of the 1930s. These were the starting points towards his gestural movies of the late 2000s.

Cheng Ran<sup>9</sup> is a member of the third generation of Chinese video art,<sup>10</sup> a student of Yang Fudong, started his career at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, when Chinese art was still the focus of attention in the West, however, its reception was already past the phase when Chinese art was noted primarily for its exoticness. For Cheng's generation it was already self-evident that art has a serious potential for professional and financial success for a Chinese artist, and that the main geographical area for this success is the Western hemisphere. Clearly, the Euro-American film tradition in its entirety serves as Cheng's source of inspiration. The formal and structural construction of his videos and movies is primarily informed by Guy Debord's montage technique and the *New American Cinema*.

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<sup>4</sup> Yang Fudong (1971, -), video artist, lives in Shanghai.

<sup>5</sup> Qiu Zhijie, (1969, Fujian province -), works with videos, photography and installations.

<sup>6</sup> Yang Zhenzhong, (1968, Hangzhou, China -) media artist, lives in Shanghai.

<sup>7</sup> Chen Xiaoyun, (1971, Hubei Province -), media artist, lives in Beijing.

<sup>8</sup> Cao Fei, (1978, Guangzhou, China-), multimedia artist, lives in Beijing.

<sup>9</sup> Cheng Ran (1981, Inner Mongolia, China -), lives in Hangzhou and Amsterdam.

<sup>10</sup> Christen Cornell. Wang Gongxin and the three generation of Chinese video art. An interview with Wang Gonxin. *Blog*. The University of Sidney, 13 Oct, 2010. <http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/artspacechina/2010/10/post.html>

The work of Yang Fudong and Cheng Ran was particularly interesting for me because the central question of both practices is this: A decade or two after the Cultural Revolution, what kind of Chinese cultural tradition and historical memory could they use as the basis for constructing their artistic position and personal identity. Ultimately, the two artists came to sharply contrasting conclusions on those points.

## **2) The meanings and uses of the terms “modern art”, “avant-garde art ” and ‘experimental art” in the contemporary Chinese art scene.**

Before discussing the works of the three artists, I outline the historical and conceptual context in which they worked, spoke and were spoken about. In short: in China’s art scene, the art made after 1978 was called “modern art” or “avant-garde art”, which terms clearly do not mean the same as they do in the Western artistic discourse.

## **3) The Western notion of Chinese contemporary art**

It is necessary for my argument to examine how the Western world’s notion of Chinese contemporary art was born, what it means and through what filters and mediation it looks upon Chinese art. In this context I will discuss Western persons, collectors, curators, gallerists and institutions that made Chinese contemporary art visible in the Western art world. Furthermore, more than just mention must be made of the activity of independent Chinese curators and the network of independent events in China’s alternative art scene, and also of the tension that appeared in China’s alternative art scene as well as the academic elite upon discovering that instead of them, it is the Western art world that determines the canonization of Chinese contemporary art.

## **4) The preliminaries of Chinese “modern art”: Western influence in Chinese art from the end of the Qing dynasty to 1949**

As the program of Chinese contemporary art evolved under the impact of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art, I outline these Western influences and Chinese modernisation from the end of the Qing dynasty, the period of the republic (1912–49), the Cultural Revolution and the period that followed. In the post-

Cultural Revolution period, the achievements of early modernisation (that is, before 1949) were considered by many as the last authentic Chinese cultural tradition. The famous movement of leftist Chinese film in the 1930s and 1940s still has a major influence on art video, photo art and the gallery film genre today – as is demonstrated by Yang Fudong’s and Cheng Ran’s works too.

### **5) Art movements of the post-Cultural Revolution period. 1978-1989**

Although the work considered as the first Chinese video was made in 1988, the artistic context of Chinese video works is difficult to understand without considering the new artistic movements that started in 1978, and reached their peak in the 1989 China/ Avant-Garde exhibition just a few months before the “June Fourth Massacre.” I briefly outline the activities of the most significant Chinese art groups of the late 1970s and the 1980s.

### **6) The relationship of Chinese modernisation and post-colonialism**

The relationship of modernisation in China and post-colonialism has been a key topic for Chinese theoreticians to explore. Analysing the controversial local and global position of Chinese contemporary art, some theoreticians come to the conclusion that by Western type modernisation that started in the 1920s and became militant with the Cultural Revolution, China colonised itself, cutting itself from its very roots. Furthermore, in the past decades, resulting from the change of the power dynamics across the globe, post-Colonialism has evolved as a context of which everyone who appears on the scene becomes a participant whether they want or not, whether they experience it or not.

### **7) The issue of “copying”, brought up often in the discourse on Chinese art. I discuss this topic in the context of Chinese and Third World contemporary art.**

Discussing Chinese contemporary art is not possible without tackling the phenomenon of copying, of cultural appropriation. I explore the subject of borrowing, copying and appropriation between Chinese contemporary art, or more broadly, Third World contemporary art and the Western artistic tradition.

To what extent the idea of copying can be regarded as the remnant of traditional Chinese culture – considering that copying was a basic practice in traditional ink painting and calligraphy? Or to what extent can we say that the avant-garde generation of the 1980s reconstructed its own language from available Western models, to find a new form for the expression of the experiences of its own world and its emotions.

#### **8) The problem of Orientalism, self-Orientalism and Occidentalism in Chinese contemporary art.**

What artistic positions and attitudes, and what processes independent of these positions and attitudes place artists and artistic environments in the position of Orientalism, self-Orientalism and Occidentalism? This is a recurring question in my thesis. How do artists relate to the phenomenon of "representational inevitability"? How do they use or take ill advantage of the fact that, in the eyes of the Western World, any artistic act of a Third World artist represents the culture of his or her entire region and ethnic group, rather than being read as a unique work of art? Furthermore, what role does the Western World's post-Cold War identity crisis play in this phenomenon? And what is the role (in the phenomenon of representational) of the global contemporary art market that emerged in a world enduring this identity crisis?

#### **9) The relationship of art and politics in the practice and Western reception of Chinese contemporary art**

Another unavoidable question is the relationship of art and politics in the practice of Chinese contemporary artists, as even today, China is an oppressive, dictatorial system, with strongly limited freedom of speech, and strict censorship in the art scene too. Born in a mixed environment of free market and dictatorship, it is often claimed that the authenticity of Chinese artworks is related to their political opposition content. Ai Weiwei's activist practice keeps this issue in the focus of attention.

#### **10) Views of history in Chinese contemporary art, in light of the practice of the three artists whose oeuvre constitutes the corpus of my thesis.**

One of the questions that kept coming up to me when thinking of the works of these three artists, and of the age in which they have lived, is the question of historical memory. Forgetting and rewriting is the basis of the working of community memory. Whether it reevaluates past events positively or negatively, every age tries to find explanation and justification for the present situation in the past – in the past that it invents. The amnesia and inventing the past is especially striking after such enormous changes as the ones that occurred at the end of the Cultural Revolution and in Deng Xiaoping's reforms – and let us mention here the changes the fall of the Soviet empire meant for the countries of Eastern Europe in 1989/90. My thesis explores the patterns of memory and forgetting in the work of the three artists, in their artistic position and in their search for identity, and also, what layers, levels and aspects of historical memory these patterns activate or suppress.