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# EXPLORING REPETITION IN CHINESE VIDEO ART: THROUGH PLEASURE AND LAUGHTER

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## **Abstract**

This paper critically analyses the perceptive and emotional side of repetition in contemporary Chinese video art. Nowadays, that post-editing technology has become affordable for most of the artists in China, they are still engaging with repetition as a creative strategy. Nevertheless, as researchers are mostly focusing on the repetitive and almost empirical nature of the content of the 90s, this renewed tendency seems to have gone rather unnoticed. Through the analysis of 4 video artworks. This essay aims to be an attempt to serve as a starting point for further study in the field. For this purpose, the paper investigates how Kan Xuan's and Cui Xiuwen's aesthetic strategies can be linked to pleasure, exploring ideas related to both Zen and voyeurism. Moreover, it also evaluates Zhang Peili's and Jiang Zhi's repetitive procedures underlying a change of the original meaning that may result on a humorous reaction.

**Kew words:** CHINA; VIDEO ART; REPETITION; PLEASURE; HUMOUR

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## INTRODUCING REPETITION IN THE CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART CONTEXT

During the Cultural Revolution that took place between 1966 and 1976, repetition became a fundamental part in conforming to the regime, through the repetitive loyalty dance, the omnipresent portraits of Mao and recurrent readings of the Little Red Book containing Mao Zedong's quotations (Jiang 2010). In the following decades, artists made use of repetition reacting to the re-emergence of the individual identity. Louis Ho already illustrated this subject matter exploring the work of the artists Yue Minjun and Geng Jianyi (Ho 2013, 224).

But what about repetition specifically within Chinese video art? To which extent has this been researched? Video artworks created in the 1990s have definitely attracted the interest of renowned researchers. Wu Hung has widely analysed early Chinese video art and television (Wu & Philips 2004; Wu 2008; 2014). Indeed, Wu argued that especially between 1993 and 1994, artists made recurrent use of mundane and repetitive actions in their video creations (Wu 2014, 242). According to Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, at that time Chinese artists assimilated video art as a new way of individual expression, emphasising its aesthetic value (Wu & Qiu 2002, 233). Most of the artists accessed video cameras by renting them and did not have access to post-editing resources. For this reason, as Hou Hanru proposes, the performative process of the filmed action became very important (Hou 2009, 47). This may explain why the procedure of repetition seemed so appealing.

Related to perception, Gilles Deleuze already defended that even if repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, it does change something in the mind that contemplates the object (Deleuze 1994, 70). Within the Chinese context, Pi Li explained that artworks focusing on time provide a deeper sense of experience to the audience than traditional media such as painting or sculpture (Pi 2009, 304). Furthermore, Geng Yang and Peng Lingling have already analysed repetition in video art from aesthetics and with special regard to Zen; arguing that the boredom created by the repetitive disembodied movement caused a transcendental experience of atemporality (Geng & Peng 2016, 111).

Finally, in reference to pleasure and humour, Wu Hung has argued that voyeurism played a fundamental role regarding the desire of owning the television after the Cultural Revolution. For the reason that an ownership that granted not only a certain status, but also a sense of watching sexual fantasies that used to be censored (Wu 2008, 85). Besides, Nicole Huang already discussed

laughter when referring to the relationship between the audience and Chinese television in the mid-1970s (Wu 2008, 80). Nonetheless, approaches connecting repetition to these emotional responses, are still to be systematically developed and may shed light on the issue. Thus, it seems appropriate to start analysing the perceptive aspect of the recent repetitive artworks created by Kan Xuan, Cui Xiuwen, Zhang Peili and Jiang Zhi.

## ZEN AND VOYEURISM, CHALLENGING PLEASURE

The pleasurable response to repetition has been mainly explored in literature and music. Within the literary area, Umberto Eco identifies redundant aesthetic experiences as inherent to the contemporary society, suggesting that having left traditions aside; the repetitive narrative gives the viewer a chance to unwind (Eco 2005, 194). This pleasurable experience of reposing comes from the presence of predictability, because the viewer can foresee what is going to happen. Besides, repetition has also been related to pleasure especially in music. Researchers in this area have linked pleasure to the process of recognising already known structures (Garcia 2005; Margulis 2014). Lawrence Alloway previously explained that due to modern entertainment repetitiveness, this kind of distraction could be satisfying for different levels of understanding; both for the viewer that only expected to recognise the common structure of the entertainment and to the absorbed audience, depending on the attention they wanted to pay (Alloway 1958).

The case studies that are going to be analysed both respond to a pleasurable experience and are related to nakedness and sensuality, yet in different ways. Kan Xuan proposes a contemplative approach. In this case, she connects her practise to Zen and contemplation. Cui Xiuwen instead, worked with voyeurism in the artwork that is presented.

Zen approach of the beginner's mind proposes an experience of discovering through meditation and reflection. This perspective can also be related in a way to the philosopher Li Zehou's understanding of the relation between the object and the subject, who was considerably inspired by Marx's ideas on labour and practice. Hence, Li considers that the nature of beauty is reduced to its origin (the object) and does not depend on the viewer. The importance of the sub-

ject consists on being able to grasp the internal beauty of natural the object through labour (Man 2015, 24). Furthermore, repetition adds to this experience the exploration of the 'atemporal' present, through the repeated present, inviting the audience to a state of meditation (Geng & Peng 2016, 121).

Besides, voyeurism generally involves subjecting the object to a controlling gaze in order to obtain some enjoyment, which is normally related to sensuality. In the same way, from a feminist point of view, this gaze has been considered as a male staring at the female as a sexual object (May 1997, 590). Nonetheless, the examples that are analysed in this paper have been created from a female gaze, and thus one may argue that the generally dominant male gaze is combated through this practice.

The first artist to be introduced is Kan Xuan (b. 1972, Xuancheng), who studied oil painting at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou between 1993 and 1997, where she met some artists that were already using repetition in their artistic production: such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Yang Zhenzhong. Kan later moved to Beijing where she worked for a post-production film company. It was at that moment that she switched to video as an artistic medium, for the possibility of mixing memory and reality (Low 2012, 45).

The artists declares that she aims to immerse herself into the objects that surround her and reflect on human experience. In this way, she joins a child's approach to seeing objects for the first time in a playful way, also following the Zen idea of beginner's mind previously mentioned (Lu 2016, 15). Furthermore, some scholars argue that her later stay in Northern Europe may have influenced her minimalistic aesthetics and her tendency to contemplation, which heightens sensations that are often overlooked (46). Her works are firstly perceived through a sensorial level that leads afterwards to a meditational stage. This process is achieved thanks to the use of repetition and the continuous exposure.

The artwork that has been chosen is *Looking, looking, looking for* (2001<sup>1</sup>). Kan Xuan created this video artwork from her personal experience, departing from the loneliness that people feel after a long working day (Xuan 2013). In this artwork a spider is recorded while wandering on two young naked bodies, a male and a female one. Scenes of different parts of the human body are repeatedly shown while the arachnid wanders. Meanwhile, childish voices can be heard, reminding a Japanese cartoon song from her childhood about a little girl that is looking for her father. Nevertheless, for the artwork she decided to change

the words of the song, so that the spider seems to be looking for love (Lu 2016, 15). Sentences such as: “*I want to find the love, I am not scared if it is windy, if you find him/her can you tell me?*” can be heard. The artist explained that she wanted the audience to feel like a child, even in the office. Moreover, she chose the spider, because they are very lonely and work hard in their own world, identifying the arachnid with a worker (Xuan 2013).

Careful attention is required to processing the information of the artwork when repetition appears (Ross 2006, 99). Besides, the viewer is exposed to the smoothness of the young bodies and the menacing potential of the spider, creating a sensual tension (Hill 2016). The viewer may identify himself/herself with an explorer spider or a voyeur, who is staring without being seeing, while enjoying an immersive experience. *A Persimmon*, a work that was created the same year, equally mixes sweetness with violence, as the artist continuously squeezes the fruit with her hands. Nonetheless, these are not the only works in which Kan Xuan has opted to insert repetition. Other artworks of the artist involve with repetition include *Kan Xuan, Ai!* (1999), *Nothing!* (2002); as well *100 Times* (2003), and *One by One* (2005), where constant surprised repetition seem aimless and invite the audience’s mind to wander.

The case of Cui Xiuwen (b. 1967, Harbin - d. 2018, Beijing), shares some similarities but has also differences comparing to Kan Xuan’s work. Cui studied fine arts in Northeast Normal University and then continued in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. She was influenced by Buddhism and philosophy, especially Buddhism and the act of becoming conscious. She explained in an interview about her work that while at first people see things in a certain way, as repetition occurs, they start getting conscious about that perception changes. Consequently, she defined perception as a process that requires constancy and slowness, in order to getting more aware each time (Cui 2013).

Her work *Ladies’ Room* (2000<sup>2</sup>) can be said to follow the concept of voyeurism, but avoiding any judgement about what was happening. A camera was placed in the ladies’ room of a Beijing nightclub that was partly frequented by prostitutes. Even if the original duration of the recording was of two hours, it was later reduced to six minutes. The women’s appearances in the scenes are quick and rhythmic. The assembly of images show how repetitive actions take place: from combing their hair and counting money, to making phone calls in a quite urgent mood or even changing clothes. In this hectic ambience, the cleaner appears several times, creating a contrast. Regarding the sound, this is an environmental one with some modifications, what contributes to the feel-

ing that the spectator is hidden in the scene (Karetzky 2016). Wang Jiaying suggested that this ability of transmitting the feeling of the privacy is a highly feminine capacity (Wang 2003), but one may argue that this is not necessarily the case, because even if the toilet may be a place of privacy this is a public one, where unknown women gather together, and they share the repetitive same ordinary actions.

Finally, it is interesting to compare this artwork with another example of voyeurism which in this case involves focusing on one person instead of a group of people: that is to say *Underground 2* from 2002. An unknown woman dressed in red sitting in the underground, unaware of the fact that she is being recorded, is continuously tearing her dry lip in an obsessive way. People pass between the camera and the subject, but this woman continuous her gesture unconcerned about the camera. This artwork invites the viewer to watch a repetitive everyday scene patiently, to get the details of the present and think about who this woman is and what is triggering her this feelings. Always without the feeling of being seen.

## A HUMOROUS APPROACH TO APPROPRIATION AND REINTERPRETATION

Another response that is going to be analysed linked with repetition is the one related to humour, precisely the reaction coming from perceiving image appropriation. This may vary from a timid smile to laughter, depending on people. The first thing to take into account is the decontextualization of the image shown by using irony, which is a recurrent form of humour in postmodern art (Klein 2007, 18-19). This kind of humour combines elements to express something different from the original meaning.

Furthermore, by using repetition, the signifier is endlessly repeated, and the signified may lose its original meaning. As it will be analysed in the case studies, this creates an incongruent and unexpected situation which may lead us to laugh (Schopenhauer 1818). This technique of appropriation, reinterpretation and thus decontextualization of images from the Cultural Revolution was also characteristic of Political Pop art.

Related to politics, the images used are meaningful by themselves. When thinking about repetition in video art with political meaning, Wang Gongxin's *My sun* (2000-2001) may seem appropriate. In the video an elderly woman who seem to be a peasant, is working on the field. A sun starts emerging from the horizon and this light ends up in her hands. From that moment on, the image of the woman starts to be endlessly multiplied. The symbol of the sun was used during the Cultural Evolution as a representation of Mao himself. Nonetheless, even if it is a reinterpretation of a symbol, this artwork does not necessarily appear to be humorous. The reason for this may be that the peasant is an anonymous person, and her laborer role is not contradicted. On the contrary, within the two case studies provided by works of Zhang Peili and Jiang Zhi, the incongruity of the situation presented may induce the audience to smile by showing a specific character in a dissonant situation to what may be expected.

Zhang Peili (b.1957, Hangzhou) is well known for being the pioneer of video art in China from the late 1980s. Nonetheless, this essay will be looking at his more recent work. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge the vast experience that Zhang Peili has related to repetition. Even his first video artwork *30 x 30* from 1988 consisted of recording the banal repetitive action of continuously breaking and recomposing a mirror.

For this part dedicated to repetition in relation to laughter, the two channeled video installation *Happiness* from 2006<sup>3</sup> has been selected. The artwork shows selected scenes from the film *In the Shipyard*, directed by Fu Chaowu and screened in 1975. This film dating from the last years of the Cultural Revolution, narrates the story of a shipyard technician that suggests building a large ship. Even if this idea is widely approved among the working class, through the film they will be facing some difficulties to see their objective accomplished.

With regard to *Happiness*, the artist decided to spare the plot and make a selection of images and use them in a creative way. These scenes are divided into two groups: on the one hand, the ones showing the protagonist giving a speech passionately; on the other hand, group of extras endlessly clapping with fervour. There is another significant point related to the display of the scenes. When watching the film, the screen only interacts with the viewer; while the fact that Zhang's video installation is double channeled brings another relation into discussion. Not only does now the viewer face two screens, but the screens also interacts with each other. Hence, by the use of looping, as the images are repeated, the applause that the protagonist is receiving may start losing its original dynamism in the audience mind.

But this is not the only example where Zhang appropriates films scenes dating from the Cultural Revolution. The artist already used this method in 2002, in order to produce pieces such as *Last Words* and *Actor's Lines*. By repeating and editing the images that were part of the collective memory and easily identified by people, the artist ironically made important scenes loose the original strong meaning. Rejecting in this way, any positive emotion of that the original scene may have conveyed (Peckham 2011).

The last artwork explored in this paper was created by the artist Jiang Zhi (b. 1971, Yuanjiang), who graduated from China Academy of Art, and has been working on a variety of media from painting to video art. He considers repetition as part of everyday life, and aims to escape it by his works instead of waiting for a change to happen (*Photo Edition Berlin*<sup>4</sup>). In the video *Onward! Onward! Onward!* from 2006<sup>5</sup>, the three presidents of the People's Republic of China can be seen recreated by actors: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. Although the presidents run ahead, they move within their limited black space until they have no more strength left. In his webpage, the artists describes the artwork as a portrait of China's progressivism since 1940, as well as an analysis of a sanctified motion (Jiang 2006). The word sanctified together with the content of the video suggest an ironical interpretation of the artwork. Because even if the characters are continuously running, there is no visible advance. Their repetitive process is highlighted, but there is no moving ahead which refers to the past; the present and the future of China, linked to the unstoppable and sometimes conflicting changes that the country has undergone. Despite the humorous approach, Jiang rises the problematic of the anxiety that these rapid changed have generated in people. (Asia Art Archive in America 2006).

It is important to mention that this artist has made use of repetition in other artworks, specially in the mediums of photography and painting. *Maiden, All Too Maiden!* from 2009, is a photographic installation showing 120 portraits of girls, representing femininity from the point of view of the artist by expressing coyness. In the same way, his paintings from 2011 *Preview repeatedly - Privacy n° 1*, Repeat geometric forms and parallel lines. Even if these artworks are interesting proposals, they seem to lack the conceptual and humorous essence proved in *Onward! Onward! Onward!*.

## TOWARDS THE REASSESSMENT OF THE REPETITIVE ARTISTIC PRACTICES

The analysed artworks dedicated to pleasure related to repetition from Kan Xuan and Cui Xiuwen, have shown the shared sensual tension that arises between voyeurism and meditative contemplation. In spite of this similarity, each of the artist had a variety of motivations for using repetition, as part of their strategy in creating different relations between subject and object. Kan Xuan decided to make the viewer identify himself/herself with the curious spider; while Cui opted by making the viewer feel as an outsider voyeur. Besides, through Zhang Peili's and Jiang Zhi's researching examples dealing with repetition provoking a humorous reaction has been possible. For this purpose, the artists have appropriated images to change the meanings and create new ones by repeating them. This evolution of the meaning has been presented as inseparable from the use of repetition. By at the same time confronting the audience to the humorous and unexpected repetition through political characters.

Following what curator Hou Hanru explained in an interview, it can be said that early Chinese video artists were concentrated on the creation of objective experiences through repetition, almost in an empirical approach. Recent video artists instead, have become widely subjective and perceptive purposes differ more one from each other (Hou 2009). Thus, subjectivity is an important factor to take into account when trying to create a discourse with video art dealing with repetition. In other words, trying to understand how the audience is influenced by these experiences seems to be an essential point for the proper understanding of these artworks. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that the research subject of this paper could be further developed by including new emotional reactions departing from repetition. Furthermore, opening the discussion into the perception of the use of repetition in other mediums may help to develop a better comprehension. In this way, a systematic approach could provide a wider variety of visions and a better appreciation of the subjective perception of repetition in Chinese contemporary art.

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## Notes

The analysed artworks are available through the following links:

- <sup>1</sup> Xuan Kan: "Looking, looking, looking for". ShanghART Gallery. <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/image.htm?id=22863>
- <sup>2</sup> Xiuwen Cui: "Ladies Room". *DSL Collection*. <http://www.g1expo.com/v3/dslcollection/project/ciu-xiuwen/>
- <sup>3</sup> Zhang Peili: "Happiness" (2006), is not available online but it is accessible through White Rabbit Gallery
- <sup>4</sup> Jiang Zhi: "Photo Edition Berlin" <https://www.photoeditionberlin.com/artists-1/jiang>
- <sup>5</sup> Jiang Zhi: "Onward! Onward! Onward!". Review on *Asia Art Archives in America*. <http://www.aaa-a.org/collection/onward-onward-onward/>

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