

Transcription Revised & Edited

*Michelle Proksell : Chinternet Art*

Computer Chaos Club

32c3: Gated Communities

Hamburg, Germany

Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQH-clMdkGs> : media.ccc.de

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I am very excited to be here because often, the idea that people do not actually know what is going on [in China], is my frustration when I try and explain what I do. So, with that in mind I am going to start by allowing you to experience surfing the web in China. This initial part is with a VPN so you can get an idea of how slow connections are and how frustrating it can be. I will also talk you through this experience. Before I start, let me just say that my goal here is for you to get an idea of what it feels like to be on the Chinese internet, so I am going to throw a lot of things at you all at once, so be prepared.

*(Opens up first screen recording)* It looks as though I am trying to get on Facebook. *(A few moments later)* This website is Baidu, which is a Chinese search engine. It is not loading very well while my VPN is on. Yahoo usually works without a VPN but today for some reason it's slow with one. Sometimes it can act a little weird. Tumblr is also usually not blocked but as you notice with my VPN it is very slow, I don't have a lot coming in. *[Note: as of 2016, following this lecture, Tumblr is currently blocked in China].* Yelp is barely loading, neither is Facebook or Google. This is very frustrating as you can imagine, especially when you are trying to stay connected to the West. For some reason the New York Times page seems to be loading, luckily this image is a .gif animation so we don't have any streaming issues. I have decided to turn my VPN off now and search on the Chinese internet. We are going to see how fast it loads *(video shows searching for a Chinese website and it loads quickly)*. Look at that! It's pretty efficient when you are not trying to get outside of it. Baidu is a search engine, Douban is comparable to a music [film, book, culture sharing] website, Taobao is a shopping website. As you can see, this is the Chinese internet.

*(Video continues as she describes what audience is seeing)* I will take you through Taobao a little bit. Pay really close attention to the aesthetics of this page, there are many things 'blinging' at you. Right now I am looking up the word 'movies' [in Chinese], Now I will look up 'cellphones'. You can see how fast it is [loading]. Notice also the advertisement aesthetics on the side. Now I am looking up 'man'. I want to pause it here because what I typed into the search engine was the word for 'man' [in Chinese]. As you can see I have various products for the word 'man'. The interesting thing is, in terms of how you can find what you need, if they are products like these [sex products], you cannot simply type in 'dildo' and find what you are looking for. This means there is even a [special] way to find certain products online. This comes into play with creatively going through how to exist on the Chinese internet. Let's take a look at some of these products. While pornography may be illegal in China, toys are not. These are just a few examples. I am previewing this because I want you to understand that the culture is incredibly vibrant and everyone has the same desires. Did you notice how there are [heart] stickers censoring parts of the image [of the women's body]? I want you to keep that aesthetic in mind.

I am now searching the word 'Germany' and look at all the beer! Some of it is real German beer most

of it is probably fake. And just in case you need some 'birthday shampoo' (*shows image of German branded penis shampoo called 'Birthday Shampoo' in German*), we have that in China also (*laughs*) I tailored this for the Germans (*smiles*).

(*New window opened in screen recording*) Youku is basically like Youtube and it is pronounced 'yo ku' not 'you ku'. You can see that videos stream quite quickly. I think you also get the idea of the aesthetic and what the differences are like between trying to access the Western web in China versus actually existing on the local platform. Let's move on and talk about what that means.

The Chinese internet, I like to call it the Chinternet, [well] this term is obviously a cross between Chinese and internet. Essentially it means an internet with Chinese characteristics. What we have to understand is that it has its own ecosystem and existence in the way of doing things. Instead of Facebook and Twitter we have Weibo and QQ. Instead of Google we have Baidu. Youtube – Youku, Ebay and Etsy – Taobao and Alibaba. WhatsApp – WeChat. so everything that you have outside of the Chinese internet exists inside of it. The idea that it is a desolate, empty or barren landscape is very untrue. That is what I really want to talk to you about today.

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The biggest difference in the history of the Chinese Internet is that it mostly exists on a device like this (*holds up smart phone*). If you think about most of us in this room, we probably first accessed the Internet through a very large computer. It was expensive, slow and had a dial-up. Because of this we had a certain expectation on how to search the Internet. At this point in China's history, the majority of people experiencing the Internet for the first time are doing so through a mobile device. Their expectation for how they interact and maneuver through it, along with the speed at which it goes, is very different from most of us. This is something you have to consider.

This [image] is a funny advertisement from Weixin [*Pinyin known as Wēixìn and in Hanzi known as 微信 — "micro letter."*] or WeChat [in English], is one of the biggest mobile app platforms in China, which keeps getting bigger and bigger. In this [advert] it basically says that they are going to change the world. That moves me on to my research, which is partly anthropological and partly performative. I call it the Chinternet Archive.

To explain the Chinternet Archive, what I use is something called 'People Nearby'. it is a function in the app that lets me use the location based services of my device to access other people within a thousand-meter radius. My research is very location based because a lot of what I have collected for my archive has come from places like Beijing, Shanghai, Guilin, Shenzhen, Xi'an, etc. I think there are

approximately six different Chinese cities and internationally [I also have data from] Korea, Texas [America] and now Germany. [Note: as of August 2016 there is data from Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, Malaysia and Taiwan also]. It becomes very interesting, the fact that it is location based, because everywhere I go I find out new things about how people interact with this app and exactly what their relationship is to China. After all this is a Chinese app, owned by a Chinese Internet company and so it is a part of the Chinternet.

Here is San Antonio Texas (*referring to left image*) where I was briefly before and here (*referring to right image*) is [Hamburg] Germany. What I found in Germany was mostly German men and a lot of Turkish or Iraqi people which I was not surprised by. Wechat already has a reputation in the Middle East.

I want to give you an idea of how I go about collecting. I go through and start looking at profiles. Any profile that has that (*points to color wheel icon next to Wechat profile name*) tells me that I can look up to ten posts [of that person], which means they have kept their account open. I collect images in open accounts like this or profile images. They are all public images.

What do I do with these images? Well I am looking for patterns and collections and trying to find out what is going on in China in the virtual world. You can view me as a sort of documentary photographer because a lot of these images are actually screenshots. This [image] is an example again to look at the aesthetic of the Chinese Internet. We have a lot of busy-ness, a lot of colour, a lot of.. 'Bling.' Different text [fonts] on the same image. A little overwhelming. One of the artists that I work with named Ying Miao [in Chinese her surname is first as Miao Ying] -I'll talk about her later- she likes to describe the Chinese Internet as an 'Internet ecstasy.' So lets keep that in mind as we move forward.

What do I find in most images? Talking about graphics here (*shows new image*) we are reinforcing that 'Internet ecstasy' feeling. Notice all the hearts. This is what an open moments page looks like. So if I can go into an account -this is what I am looking at- below that account will be the posts they have made. This [image] is a great example. We have a few things going on here. We have a Chinese lantern, roses, Christmas candles and it says "greetings, good morning good morning" it says "good morning" in two ways [*Zǎoshang hǎo and zǎo ān* in Chinese]. It means the same thing but they decided that it was necessary to say it twice. This gives you an idea of how things get mixed up. When it comes to aesthetics there is a preference for the piecing together of graphics [and content].

This [image] is a retailer who is probably selling beads like this (*referring to beads in the image*). She used a Chinese editing app called Meitu Xiuxiu. I have used it a lot myself and guess what?! Chinese

people use it [a lot] too. This overload is a very common aesthetic and if we think about that early Taobao page where everything was blinking and Boom! Bam!, it starts to translate into every part of life in China.

Even if we have a traditional picture (*shows image of family portrait in a studio*), we still need to have some chaos. If you notice all the different patterns everybody is wearing on their shirts and if you also notice in the background, we have Bling! You cannot escape this! I think it is beautiful. This [next image] is actually a photograph I took in the park. I like to spend a lot of my time in the park because what I do on the Chinese Internet is a virtual landscape. Often when I look at what I do it seems like I am walking down a virtual street. For me to understand these virtual aspects, I need to exist in real life, which is why I live in China. I spend time in the park because it gives me a nice place to see diverse types of people. Did you notice his mismatching and all the chaos [in his outfit]? This Internet aesthetic exists in the physical form, it is everywhere.

In case you haven't gotten it yet, I am [trying to] tell a little story... So what are some of the other things I have in my archive? Lots of hearts, this [image] is a funny one because a lot of the way things work on the Chinese Internet is with wordplay and number play. In this case 520 is pronounced in Chinese as wǔ'èr líng but it sounds a little bit like 'I love you' which is wǒ ài nǐ. They [Chinese netizens] have decided that if you make the numbers 520 it means 'I love you' without having to say it or use the characters. This is [an example of] Internet speak in China. Interestingly, Wechat occasionally allows you to have little hearts float down your screen during Valentines day or other holidays if you type the numbers 520 in your chat. Something to [also] consider, the experience online in China is very interactive.

Moving on, someone made a nice dinner for his love (*shows image with another heart shape*). There are crabs and candles in a heart (*other image*). Somebody has decided that their dog needs a heart (*other image of heart shape shaved into a dog*). Foods in shapes of hearts (*other image*), roses (*other image*), shrimp (*other image of two shrimp making a heart shape together*). This [shrimp image] is a particularly beautiful one I think. They get very creative with their hearts. See! (*shows another image of desktop files in the shape of a heart*) It could even wind up as your desktop. Why not post an actual heart (*image of human heart in hospital*)! This is the actual heart of a 38-year-old woman.

This moves us on to a different portion of the Chinternet Archive; The explicitness of posts. They do not have the same kind of censorship for gruesome things. Interestingly enough I found a lot of people posting very vivid injuries (*screenshot of her Wechat moments post of people's body parts with*

*injuries and scars*). In the far left picture the cuts are very straight lines so it could have been self-induced. I also found many images with IV's in the hospital (*shows other screenshot of her Wechat moments*). That moves us into the hand pictures (*shows screenshot of her Wechat posts of first person perspective of hands in action*). I have so many images like this and they are very random. Sometimes the hand is doing something, sometimes the object is doing something, sometimes they are just holding it [something]. What I really want you to pay attention to is how, when you start to look at these, it seems like you're entering that space yourself. It has this perspective of a virtual experience.

This is the circle of life (*shows new screenshot of Wechat moments posts*). I have no idea yet why I find these quite often. I have some with food (*shows another screenshot*), you can notice on the second image in the middle row there is a nice one that is a little surprising (*referencing an image of a penis floating in a bowl of soup*). You don't catch that usually. I get to see inside people's houses (*shows more images*) and I see what kind of technology they are using. I want to move on to the houses because I am allowed a very intimate perspective of how people are living in China and it is varied. I have images inside of migrant homes or migrant/student dormitories and inside of people who are very wealthy. So there is a huge economic diversity happening in the country as well.

The aesthetic we saw earlier, it is happening here too (*shows diptych of house images*), do you see it? Not as extreme but you can see it. Here are some other ones (*shows another diptych of images inside the home*). There are always pictures of food. This one (*referencing right image*) is quite funny. They have a bottle with the text 'Yes My Wine'. I don't think that it is the original name because it looks like there is a sticker on top of the label. The Chinese characters actually say *yě mǎi jiǔ*, which sounds like 'Yes My Wine' [in Chinese]. Again a funny word-play. This is an interesting cultural pairing because red wine is not a traditional alcohol beverage of China, it is something imported. There is also Tylenol [Western branded pain medicine], which is also something imported, both alongside a traditional dish like the chicken feet.

I have some beautiful still lives (*shows diptych image*) of all kinds of interesting objects. I am showing you this because in the [Chinternet] archive there are a lot of differences in [image] resolution quality, referring to what kind of phone they have which can reveal demographics to me. Moving on to Apple products (*shows series of meme images of Apple products*), which are heavily made fun of by Chinese people because of a reference to status [symbols]. Let me just quickly go through these [images]. Here we have an iPhone 7 [made out of a brick] (*laughs*). Some more technology (*shows other images of technology*). These are from web cams (*shows new Wechat post screenshot*), most of them are taken at internet cafes. Here are people covering their faces (*shows new screenshot*). This comes back to

the topic of when people want to censor themselves [they do]. They understand the degree to which images are used and will censor intentionally. They use different apps to do that in different, funny ways (*shows new image and laughs*). She [the woman in the image] has done an interesting job here. It says “hey hey” [in Chinese] with a smiley face next to it [to cover her eyes]. She has also blurred out everything around her. These are important things to consider [when discussing censorship and aesthetics of these images].

I want to talk about this funny meme [next] (*shows screenshot from her Wechat moments feed*). Not too long ago we had many weeks of smog and then suddenly there was this glorious rainbow, at which point everybody’s feed looked like this in Beijing (*referencing image*)... over and over of photographs of rainbows. One artist in my feed made a beautiful rainbow picture in honor of it (*shows Zuo Ye 左野 digital drawing*) and this meme only lasted until the sun set. By the time all of the pictures and jokes had gone... in its place came this amazing .gif animation (*shows .gif of Mao Zedong with rainbows shooting out of his eyes and into the sky above the Forbidden City in Beijing*). For a meme that only lasted for a maximum period of two hours, that is pretty impressive.

Money is a very big theme (*shows more images*), lots of money (*image*), piles of money especially (*image*), money and phones (*shows image of money, phones and car keys*). Notice that they are all Apple phones, they could be fake ones.

These are the collections that I make and post everyday in my Wechat moments as a daily performance to show, reveal and learn more about these images as an archived collection. It has been installed at I : Project Space, owned by a German/Hungarian women, in a show called “Wang Wang Wang” which means ‘Internet Internet Internet’ [in Chinese]. I will typically install it on a mobile device so people can interactively witness the performance in real-time as I continue to post everyday.

That brings me to the arts. I started a project as a result of this [research]. Dr. Gabriele de Seta, is my research partner and a media anthropologist, specifically focused on the Chinese Internet. The archive began because he introduced me to all of this. We started a band and then we started researching [together]. He initially proposed that we write a paper looking at Chinese selfies and that’s how the archive started two years ago [since 2014]. I spent eight months collecting selfies [mostly at first] and during that time I realized I wanted to understand more because there was so much happening. The archive now consists of about 20 thousand or more images [Note: as of August 2016 there are over 40,000 images and growing]. [This is] small data but it is very telling and revealing as you saw earlier. I was already researching artists dealing with technology in China because I come from an Internet/

art/ tech background and the Chinese Internet was a whole new landscape. I was getting bored of the Western web and I thought to myself, 'this is a whole new place that we know nothing anything about', I bet there is some interesting art happening. I moved to China [about] four years ago [in 2012] to do exactly this and then started the archive two years ago. The pairing of the archive and the work with artists is important because I have a very in-depth cultural perspective of what is happening in China. That influences how I can understand the art, what is being expressed and why. I started Netize.net, a play on 'Netizen' which is a citizen of the Internet. This term came out in 1984 [the year, not the book] and at the time it was a word coined in the West [in relationship to] unified web freedom. They [still] use this word to describe Chinese Internet users [today] because when the Internet entered China, it was a unified experience. It was the first time the country could connect across cities, they could show their voices, share their ideas, opinions and anything else. They became referred to as 'Chinese Netizens.' The Chinese name of Netize.net is wǎngyǒu wǎng 网友网, which means 'Internet Friend Network' [in Chinese]. It refers back to the early years of BBS boards and chat-groups where a large amount of [Chinese] people made very close friends on the Internet. NewHive was supporting some of this [work on Netize.net at one point, but no longer does].

I have recently been moving into interviews. My biggest curiosity is asking the artists questions like "When do you remember hearing about the Internet?" And "What was your first piece of technology?" I am very interested in creating a time line of experience within the history of technology in China.

My first artist was Ying Miao. She did a nice little show online for us (*shows online exhibition screenshot*) and she named it; "Meanwhile... in China," which is a Western meme [reference]: "So in love will never feel tiered again." 'Tiered' is spelled wrong and that was a Chinglish accident she had made and we decided to keep it because it was very appropriate. She did one piece where we ended up splitting the screen (*shows other online exhibition screenshot*). This is a video that comes from this meme about a kid born in the nineties who wrote "so in love will never feel tired again" and it ended up becoming viral. This is an example of a website called bilibili.com, which allows people to stream their own videos [or films and TV shows] with comments running across the screen [from netizens online watching in real time]. It is very interactive. She [Ying Miao] has posted half of the content on Youku and the other half on Youtube so when in China you cannot see the Youtube side [without a VPN] and in the Western world Youku loads very slowly. This piece specifically is straddling both internets at the same time. The first piece she made referring to the Internet was in 2007 called "The Blind Spot," where she spent three months taking a Chinese dictionary and a list of Google censored words and blanking them out [in the dictionary]. This was the first piece I had ever found that was directly dealing with what the Internet was



in China in 2007.

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 Funa Ye was doing some [computer] screen paintings in 2008 (*shows image of painting*) and this one is particularly interesting because if you notice, the website is Google.cn. In 2010 Google left China because they did not agree with the censorship laws going into place and they routed everything to Hong Kong. This piece is interesting because it documents a screen that no longer exists for a very specific [political] reason. And it is a screenshot of an interactive game. That interactivity is a really big thing to understand about the Chinese Internet because it has become an experience [to exist online].

This is Weiyi Li (*shows website screenshot*). She is quite interesting because she is the first artist who also curates works online. She has an online gallery called bigbadgallery.com, where she has a number of projects. This piece is called "Oriental Giants." I will try and access it but I have been having trouble loading pages. Basically what she set-up was an open source crowd surfing project in which she is trying to get people to send her images and information about giant Mao Zedong statues around the country. With this information she is creating a statistical map, ironically on Google Maps [which is blocked in Mainland China].

Katy [Roseland] is an American (*shows her .gif art*). She is working on a project called "Human Spam." She was doing some pieces where she was spamming everyone and only regurgitating information because the biggest experience with mobile devices is the way in which information is flooded. People are so connected, you literally never log off. Her work is basically saying, if you lose the search engine then you lose that exploratory factor to go and find things. The result is information being regurgitated in cycles. This is the feeling of being on the Chinese Internet now. This (*shows new .gif*) is something she did playing on that notion. It shows the interactivity too. She pastes someone else's [copied] "miss u" and stars fly down the screen.

As I explained earlier, the Chinternet experience is very much about interactivity, meaning that the virtual world is a very special place and things are always connected; a place where people never log off. The virtual world experience and the real world experience are becoming exactly the same thing. In the West, we may think that we are always logged on but we are not in the way that the Chinese are, I promise you.

This is Aspartime (*shows online exhibition screenshot*), another piece commissioned by NewHive for Netize.net. They are playing on an idea called "Nine Computer Exercises for the 21st Century Online Digital Interactive Era," which is a great title! [This online artwork is] based on daily routine and daily

practice which is a part of the Chinese culture. They are [also referencing this routine in our] digital era and the idea of how we exist when it becomes the reality that we are always interacting online [continuously and seamlessly]. This example of the piece (*shows example .gif from this online series*) is showing you how each slide gives you instructions to follow. They also did a piece using Taobao (*shows screenshot*). They asked people to make art for them, requesting you to, for example, find objects that have the same weight, a pile of books, a bunch of pork, weigh them and take photographs. This one is quite funny (*shows new Taobao screenshot*). Here they are asking someone to buy this picture and physically make it themselves. Once purchased they have to get a smoke machine and stage the whole scene. Finally they must take photographs and videos to send back. Again this is another example of an artist playing with the interactivity of the Chinternet. I asked Aspartime to create a Chéngyǔ, which is a Chinese idiom or poem consisting of four characters, for the Chinese Internet. They came up with Xuánmiào mò cè [ 玄妙莫测 ], which is “mysterious, you can’t imagine how deep it is, difficult to guess or comprehend.” This is a Chinese person’s [artist’s] perspective of the internet in China.

This is happening right now (*shows .gif*) by performance artist Funa Ye and Beio. I mentioned Funa earlier with her piece of the Google.cn painting. They are doing it through an app called 51rebo.com, which is a domestic live-streaming app for [Chinese people] to have your own reality show [if they want]. These are some screenshots (*shows diptych image*). What you see here is the virtual and real world paired together. A [Wechat] friend took this picture at the studio where they were recording and she realized it did not have the right kind of aesthetic so she used Meitu Xiuxiu and blurred the whole image to make it ‘feel right’. This is how the scene in the live broadcastings actually looked like, the physical and virtual [images] look the same. This (*shows new screenshots*) is what the app looks like when you are featuring it. Again it is interactive, everyone is Bam Bam Bam, giving you images, giving you content, a sensory overload.

Wang NewOne (*shows online exhibition screenshot*) has an interesting quote. I asked her what she considered herself to be, an artist/designer/creator? She said that she saw herself in different physical forms and identities in the virtual world. She sees herself becoming less and less in real life and more integrated online. I am seeing this consistently with artists working with technology [in China]. The body is losing its entire meaning, [traditional] identity is losing meaning and the creation of virtual existence is primarily what they are moving into. Think about what we saw earlier, digitalizing real life (*shows image*), that seamlessness of virtual and physical and the way that something like Wechat is centralized in daily life to the point where you can get boyfriends or girlfriends, get taxi’s or even pay your bills.

Talking about the virtual world, Wang Xin (*shows images*), did an 8hz hypnosis lab, focusing on how we are developing the mind and losing the body. This piece also looks very Chinternet inside. She does hypnosis and is moving more into virtual reality with Oculus. I asked her what this experimentation was about and she explained that she is working on virtual reality hypnosis at the moment. She wants to create an experience which is entirely mental and dimensional on many different levels of perception.

That leads me to my conclusion (*shows diptych image of man smoking opium and a man glued to his mobile phone screen*). This image from my [Chinternet] archive is an example for all of us and for what is happening in the world as we continue to advance with mobile technology. It is not a doomsday thing, rather a reality we are going to have to consider, we have to start thinking about what this means in legislature, in choices and in production of materials. This image states that the Internet is like opium. It is a meme made by a Chinese person, however it is in traditional [characters], not simplified Chinese so it could be from Hong Kong, Taiwan or somewhere very far south. Did you know that China is the first country in the world to officially state that Internet addiction is a serious psychological problem? I see it everyday (*shows diptych image of 'digitized cyborg' and 'handmade cyborg'*). Again [here] we have that pairing, the side-by-side of digitizing real life and a real life wannabe cyborg. What I am trying to say is that in this massive [Chinternet] archive I am seeing these trends emerging. I am seeing how life is becoming digital and virtual and less and less physical. As we can see here, he (*referring to left image of 'digitized cyborg' via photo editing app*) is thinking about becoming a cyborg [and trying it out digitally]. Whereas he (*referring to the right image of a 'handmade cyborg' who has a camera taped to his eye*) is already ready to become a cyborg.

So what should we do with this idea? I think first of all we need to keep a sense of humor (*shows MAO / LMAO meme and crowd laughs*). And as we can see from some of the memes and content I have shown during this talk, the Chinese Internet has a great sense of humor. Even considering everything that is happening and how it is a walled garden. Nevertheless, it is flourishing with a unique digital landscape and it is affecting creativity in fascinating ways. I am keenly interested in looking at how out of limitations new ideas or experiences begin to emerge. The reality is that the entire world will become virtual and digital and we all need to be considering what direction we take with this.

Xièxiè, [is] Thank You in Chinese.