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Research

Arts and technologies in China

Connecting futures

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'Everyone hopes for some kind of integration with the arts to make technology more visible and accessible to the public, so that people no longer see it as just zeros and ones, as merely coded things, but as something warmer and emotionally engaging.'

— Cong Yongjian, Deputy Director, National Industrial Innovation Center for Bio-manufacturing, Shenzhen

Foreword

China's technological transformation is unfolding at extraordinary speed. Artists are engaging with artificial intelligence, gaming, extended reality, robotics and digital heritage in ways that challenge familiar boundaries between art, technology and commerce. Their work is experimental, collaborative, and deeply connected to wider social and cultural change.

For the British Council, arts and technologies – or digital innovation – are now a key strand of our global arts work. Our approach is guided by two principles: that the cultural and creative sectors are central to innovation, and that interdisciplinary, international collaboration enhances technological diversity and resilience.

This report, written by Gary Zhexi Zhang, maps a fast-evolving field in mainland China. It highlights emerging practices, charts connections between artists, institutions and companies, and identifies opportunities for UK–China exchange in areas such as generative AI, immersive media, art–science collaboration and digital heritage. It also recognises the distinctive conditions in which this work takes place, shaped by commercial–artistic hybridity, state policy priorities and challenges that practitioners must navigate.

The report forms part of a wider series of British Council research on arts and technologies ecosystems, with earlier studies in India, ASEAN, North East Asia and Jordan. Together, these reports provide a growing evidence base to support future partnerships, policy dialogue and cultural exchange.

Huge thanks to everyone who contributed their time and insight to this project. We hope it will encourage new conversations, collaborations and creative links between the UK and China, and help to shape the future of arts and technologies internationally.

Dom Hastings
Director of Arts, British Council China

Guo Cheng, *The Moon*, 2024. Courtesy of the Artist.


CREATIVITY
AND FOOD

Contents

Cao Shu, *Light VS Light* (2021)
Installation view in GO TO ROME, Imagokinetics, Zhejiang. Courtesy of the Artist.

Executive summary

> Chinese consumers are already living in the future.
>
> — Chando Ao, Artist

Mapping arts and technologies in China

China has emerged as a global technological powerhouse, with advances in artificial intelligence,[1] virtual reality, robotics and digital platforms fundamentally reshaping creative possibilities worldwide.

As the world's second-largest economy drives innovation from manufacturing to cutting-edge research, new conditions for artistic practice are emerging that challenge traditional boundaries between art, technology and commerce. This intersection of arts and technologies in Mainland China represents both a significant cultural phenomenon and an important opportunity for international collaboration.[2]

This report maps the landscape of arts and technologies in Mainland China through comprehensive fieldwork, including interviews and roundtables with 48 practitioners, educators, curators, technologists and institutional leaders, alongside field visits to five major cities: Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Shenzhen and Hefei.

Core questions

Who are the practitioners creating at the intersection of art and technology in Mainland China?

What themes and trends are emerging from their work?

Where are the opportunities to support stronger relations between the UK and Chinese arts and technologies ecosystems?

Key insights

Arts and technologies are in demand

Digital art is increasingly integrated into China's public and commercial spaces, supported by cultural policy and accessible technology – but independent artistic projects often face funding constraints unless aligned with cultural preservation or market priorities.

AI tools are ubiquitous

AI tools such as LLMs and generative image creation have been widely adopted into creative contexts, from artistic projects to ubiquitous marketing content. AI tool adoption is widespread and reflects the pragmatic embrace of new opportunities as well as optimism and pride in the success of Chinese AI products.

Scientific institutions are open to collaboration

Thanks in part to the steering of some senior arts and technologies curators and educators, and to political encouragement of technocultural production, art–science collaborations in state scientific research institutions are emerging with openness and goodwill on both sides.

Digital cultural heritage is flourishing

From games companies to contemporary arts to location-based VR experiences, the use of new technologies to create artistic experiences responding to heritage sites and activating museum collections is a popular strategy for technological cultural experiences.

The context shaping arts and technologies in China

The future is a common ground

Technological innovation and scientific advancement provide universally acceptable themes enabling diverse stakeholder participation, unlike politically sensitive cultural topics.

Accelerated technological adoption

China's rapid technological transformation over four decades, from manufacturing hub to globalised information society, has created distinctive conditions that have deeply shaped its artistic production. With a rapidly evolving technical environment and fewer institutional norms, practitioners are showing greater willingness to blend media, commercial applications and artistic experimentation.

Alignment with developmental objectives

Far-reaching central government initiatives, like the goal of 'high-quality development' and the National Cultural Digitisation Strategy, actively drive culture-technology integration, creating downstream demand for technology-driven cultural content across city infrastructure, cultural institutions and public programming.

Arts and technologies are less censored

Arts and technologies aligns with governmental priorities around innovation and cultural development, affording practitioners more incentives and exploration space than other artistic domains where political constraints are more pronounced.

Generational cultural shifts

As the economic and cultural environment changes, younger practitioners (born after 1997) face dramatically different conditions than their seniors who established themselves in or before the 2010s. The new environment sees fewer traditional artistic opportunities but a high demand for arts and technology skills, creating incentives for new forms of consumption and production, from immersive shows to urban installations.

Geographic distributions

The field is concentrated in core coastal cities, but significant activity is taking place in second-tier cities like Hangzhou and Hefei, which leverage distinctive local advantages in technology and education.

People and organisations

Higher education institutional backbone

Leading academies, like the Central Academy of Fine Arts and China Academy of Art remain central, producing career artists while developing new technology and science focuses; thousands of broader arts graduates acquire technology skills without pursuing traditional artistic careers.

Contemporary art institutions

A number of small but crucial specialist organisations maintain

experimental practice and international dialogue, though sustainability often depends on volatile economic conditions based on upstream sponsors and funders, keeping institutional life expectancy relatively low.

Technology companies

These engage primarily through pragmatic rather than strategic approaches, viewing art through corporate social responsibility frameworks and unambitious collections; opportunities for deeper engagement exist but meaningful partnerships often emerge through personal connections rather than institutional initiatives.

Commercial productions

Production companies blur art-entertainment boundaries, serving the growing demand for digital cultural content across museums, malls and urban spaces, while creating employment for arts and technologies practitioners.

Grassroots networks

Artist-run spaces and informal networks fill institutional gaps through relationship-driven ecosystems, clustering in affordable areas and creating vital experimentation spaces outside official frameworks.

Themes explored by practitioners

Reframing Chinese science, technology and infrastructure

Artists in China are increasingly turning their focus inward, using the lens of infrastructure, science and technology to reframe narratives of modern China - this was especially accelerated by pandemic-era restrictions that prompted exploration of domestic histories and geographies.

Traditional narratives and cultural heritage

State-backed initiatives are digitising iconic cultural sites like Dunhuang and Sanxingdui, fusing heritage with immersive technologies (AR/VR), while artists strategically engage with traditional Chinese themes to gain institutional support and public resonance.

Popular science fiction

Artists are imagining speculative pasts and futures for Chinese technological development, often countering dominant Western technological narratives through Chinese science fiction.

Challenges faced by practitioners

Few economically sustainable career paths

Despite demand for arts and technologies content, graduates increasingly don't dream of becoming traditional artists. Students target tech industry jobs over artistic careers, with commercial creative industries serving as the primary source of income for many practitioners.

Political constraints and censorship

Censorship is a fact of everyday life for artists, curators and everyone

involved in producing exhibitions and public events in China. However, arts and technologies are one of the less-censored spaces of artistic exploration.

Institutional fragility

The ecosystem features remarkable talent, market activity and creative energy, but it suffers from institutional fragility. Many organisations depend heavily on volatile economic waves, and short-term funding models that make sustained programming difficult.

Training opportunity mismatch

Structural funding gaps affect independent artists outside institutional affiliations; state funding exists but requires institutional sponsorship and ideological alignment.

Relationship dependency

The field operates through relationship-driven networks that enable innovation but create vulnerabilities and barriers to systematic growth.

Opportunities and recommendations

Prioritise learning and reciprocity

Emphasise reciprocity and learning to address knowledge asymmetries; long-term relationship-building over short-term exchanges; leveraging diaspora networks as cultural mediators; focusing on shared technological futures.

Form advisory networks

Establish formal structures to systematically connect across cultural divides, provide ongoing guidance, and maintain institutional memory beyond individual relationships.

Build joint production teams

Develop collaborative creative partnerships targeting China's robust audience demand while leveraging UK creative expertise with Chinese production infrastructure and technical capabilities.

Nurture emerging practitioners

Create targeted programmes for young graduates transitioning to professional practice in an evolving landscape where traditional career paths are less viable.

Explore scientific collaborations

Leverage China's openness to art-science initiatives and the field's relative freedom from political constraints; build on natural cross-cultural spaces in scientific infrastructure.

Establish sustainable partnerships

Focus on institutional capacity-building and shared resources rather than one-off events, addressing the ecosystem's relationship-driven nature and need for patient development.

1.

Introduction

Arts and technologies are everywhere in Mainland China

Whether it's art and science museums, gaming industries, VR experiences, generative AI videos or dancing robots, it is difficult to keep up with the pace of technological change in the world's second most populous nation.

This report maps the landscape of arts and technologies in China. It begins by asking, 'what are arts and technologies in China?' While this broad field – from media arts to creative technologies, immersive works to maker culture – has been globally institutionalised for decades through Western aesthetic and pedagogical frameworks, this lineage does not extend smoothly into contemporary Chinese society, where cutting-edge technologies and heterogenous aesthetic traditions converge.

Arts and technologies take place in China both as part of a global phenomenon and as a field which is being redefined locally in energetic and wide-ranging ways, often transforming prevailing genres of practice. At the same time, Chinese technology is not localised to China, either. As the world's manufacturing hub, China today is a leading producer and consumer of global technologies, from electric vehicles to internet platforms and generative AI. Perhaps more than any other nation, contemporary China is redefining the global conditions of technological innovation, and in doing so, the conditions of artistic production. It is at this juncture that this report examines the contemporary landscape of arts and technologies in China, with respect to its practitioners' perspectives, its formative environments, its myriad trajectories and its prospective futures.

1. Framing arts and technologies

> Yes, contemporary artworks that focus on tech often begin with resisting capital and technological determinism and contemplating the widening rift between technology and nature. For companies that want to move bravely forward, these ideas and critiques must be jarring, and they certainly do not 'add value'. For the public relations teams of major companies, craft and fine art are the same; both are used to soften a company's image, bring the public closer, or produce tempting consumer spectacles – all issues that critical theory has probed.
>
> — **Zhang Wenxin, Artist**[5]

Arts and technologies are a fast-moving and ill-defined area. This report is rooted in practices rather than definitions, in order to unpack 'what we talk about when we talk about arts and technologies' in Mainland China.

Arts and technologies often involve practitioners working across disciplines, meaning that these terms can be open to myriad interpretations. For the majority of Chinese audiences, 'art' denotes traditional media like painting and drawing, rather than the broad range of practices it occupies within contemporary culture. Technology, on the other hand, is more broadly identified with an open process of futuristic progress, given the rapid pace of technological change and economic development experienced across all levels of society.

This report focuses principally on the role of technology as a *tool*, a *theme* and a *context* for artistic creation, with a particular focus on frontier fields such as AI, XR, gaming and science. Through in-depth interviews with a wide range of practitioners, from media artists and curators to academics and scientific researchers, it works with framings and practices which are often themselves competing and in motion. By exploring how these various stakeholders see arts and technologies and how they relate to one another, it explores the underlying drivers shaping arts and technologies in Mainland China.

These moving targets mean that arts and technologies are often the result of highly interdisciplinary encounters, which can be both generative and challenging.

Scientific organisations – ranging from the China Academy of Sciences to data centres and biotech incubators – are increasingly enthusiastic about inviting art and artists into their domains.[3] In these cases, a lack of definition in the presence of mutual trust and respect between collaborators can lead to productive and innovative encounters. However, such collaborations face practical obstacles. Artists who collaborate with scientific institutions, for instance, can find themselves explaining that their work is a far cry from traditional painting or sculpture.

For museums, 'art and tech' often evokes technology-enhanced exhibitions and spectacular immersive experiences which can engage new audiences. This is particularly relevant given China's rapid expansion of museum infrastructure in recent decades. Meanwhile, tech companies like Huawei tend to view art as part of a commitment to corporate social responsibility.

This landscape of heterogenous values and objectives presents opportunities for innovative cross-sector collaborations with the potential to redefine the relationship between artistic expression, technological innovation and public engagement. City governments, for instance, often value art and technology projects for their ability to showcase an air of technological advancement and cultural prestige through museums, festivals and urban spectacles. This has been especially prevalent since China's central government stressed 'high-quality development' as a priority for economic growth in 2023.[4] Growing demand for artistic content has given rise to commercial arts and technologies production companies, which resemble neither traditional arts institutions nor purely

> **[Company A] invests several hundred million yuan (approximately £10million) in their art fund annually, but look at what they're buying. To sum it up in one sentence, they have a 'soft furnishing mindset' – 'I need something for my space.' [...] They are still far from entering the realm of technological aesthetics; their tech cultural identity hasn't truly emerged yet. As for [Company B], they're supposedly quite tasteful, the only Chinese company that could somewhat compare to Elon Musk's enterprise. But they're nowhere near establishing their own Chinese discourse or forming the aesthetic system befitting tech elites.**
>
> **— Fei Jun, Professor and Head of CAFA Media Lab at China Academy of Fine Art.**

Rhett Tsai and Justin Bortnick, *Static Sky: And Yet It* [redacted], Literary Computer Game, 2024–25. Courtesy of the Artist.

commercial agencies, but work across those fields to produce technically advanced, high-budget ticketed productions that appear in art museums, airports and malls alike. These resemble art exhibitions in many ways, but may not feature artists or curators in the conventional manner.

Artists themselves vary widely over the use of technology as a production process, philosophical theme, or subject of research. Young artists and technologists often find themselves navigating these rapidly shifting landscapes without established pathways, caught between accelerating technological change and uncertain economic prospects: being a career artist has never been easy, and it is much less economically viable today than in the relative boom years of the 2010s. Meanwhile, the pace of technological change, combined with China's relatively compressed history of institutional development, creates unique challenges, as technological acceleration produces a rapid turnover of styles and funding opportunities. However, as we discuss in Parts Three and Four, this presents incentives to combine skills, productions, consumers, funders and audiences in new and innovative ways.

2. Research questions

This report is structured around three research questions designed to systematically investigate the arts and technologies landscape in China.

These questions explore how different stakeholders understand, practise and negotiate the intersection of arts and technologies across diverse contexts.

1. Who are the actors creating at the intersection of arts and technologies in Mainland China, and what are their practices?

This question examines how this field is understood by those active within it. It investigates how various stakeholders define the boundaries of arts and technologies, the historical development of these understandings in relation to both homegrown cultural practices and international influences, and the institutional frameworks that legitimise certain practices as arts and technologies.

It also examines the economic, political, cultural, and technological factors influencing how arts and technologies practices evolve and the impact of government policies, market forces and commercial interests in supporting and constraining art-technology innovation. It also considers the influence of educational institutions, the effects of technological infrastructures and platforms, and the complex relationship between international circuits and local developments.

2. What are the themes and trends emerging from work created at the intersection of arts and technologies in Mainland China?

This question explores the specific features that characterise arts and technologies practices in Mainland China. It addresses thematic concerns and conceptual frameworks among generations of practitioners, from formal concerns to technical resources and methodological strategies. We also explore the organisational and institutional structures supporting arts and technologies collaboration.

3. Where are the opportunities to support stronger relations between the arts and technologies ecosystem in the UK and in Mainland China?

This question addresses both potential developments and obstacles. It identifies areas of emerging artistic and technological innovation, infrastructural and resource needs for sustainable development, and barriers to access and participation across different communities. The question also explores the potential for international collaboration and exchange, tensions between various stakeholder priorities, and values that may shape future developments.

3. Methodology

Desk research

Initial desk research began with an online horizon scan, followed by a series of provisional hypotheses about the sector, based on researchers' existing knowledge of the field. This process helped to define and widen the scope of inquiry. For instance, 'arts and technologies' could be narrowly scoped to technology-focused practitioners in the visual arts, but talking to those practitioners alone would offer limited insight into the overall landscape driving this rapidly changing intersection of technology and culture. This landscape encompasses moving targets, including social media platforms, policy shifts and generational attitude among practitioners, all of which are considered in this report.

Prior to interviews and in-person research, through a combination of online search and existing knowledge, a database of 126 arts and technologies practitioners related to or working in Mainland China was assembled. These were then labelled by criteria, including: primary location; nationality; profession/role; and arts and technologies sector, among other identifiers.

From this database, a priority list of target interviewees was created, with a balance of technological, institutional and sectoral foci. Additionally, online desk research (a combination of the internet, WeChat and Xiaohongshu/Rednote, a popular Chinese social media platform) was used to gather further information.

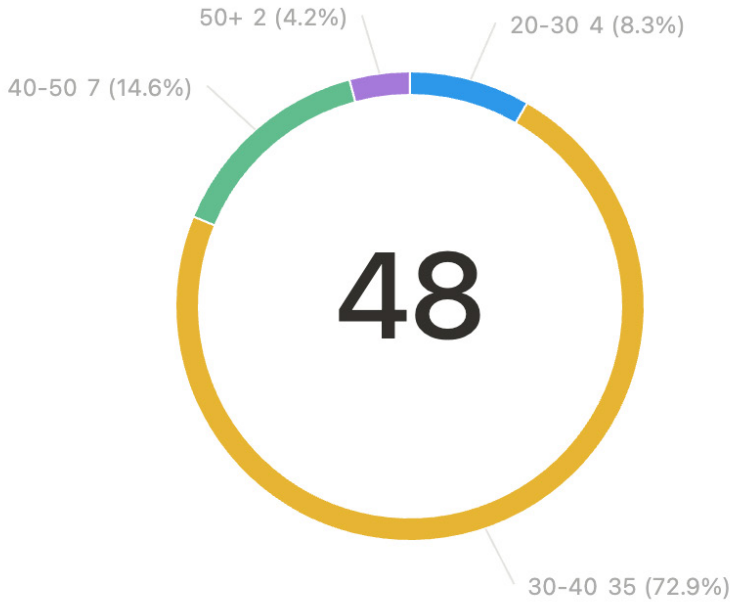
One-to-one interviews

The report is primarily based on in-depth interviews with approximately 36 key stakeholders across the arts and technologies ecosystem. Individual conversations typically lasted 60–90 minutes, exploring participants' experiences, observations and concerns. A range of interview subjects were represented: artists working with various technological media and approaches; curators and arts administrators from public and private institutions; technologists engaged in creative applications; academics researching arts and technologies intersections; and entrepreneurs developing platforms for creative technology.

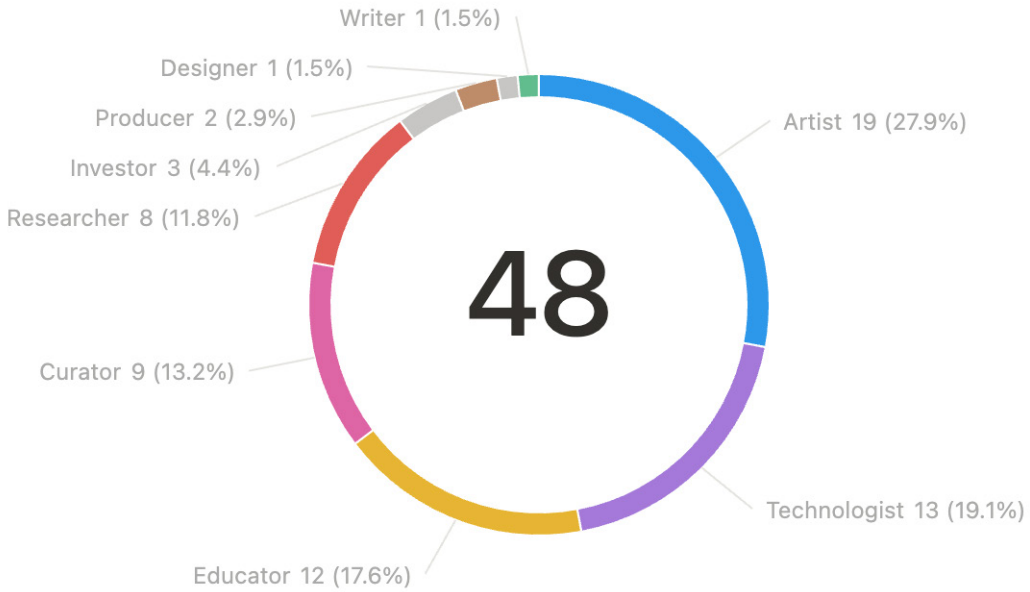
These interviews were conducted in Chinese or English, depending on the participant's preference. A semi-structured approach was employed that allowed for consistency across interviews while providing flexibility to explore the specific expertise of each participant.

Note that, for confidentiality reasons, not all interviewees in the report are named.

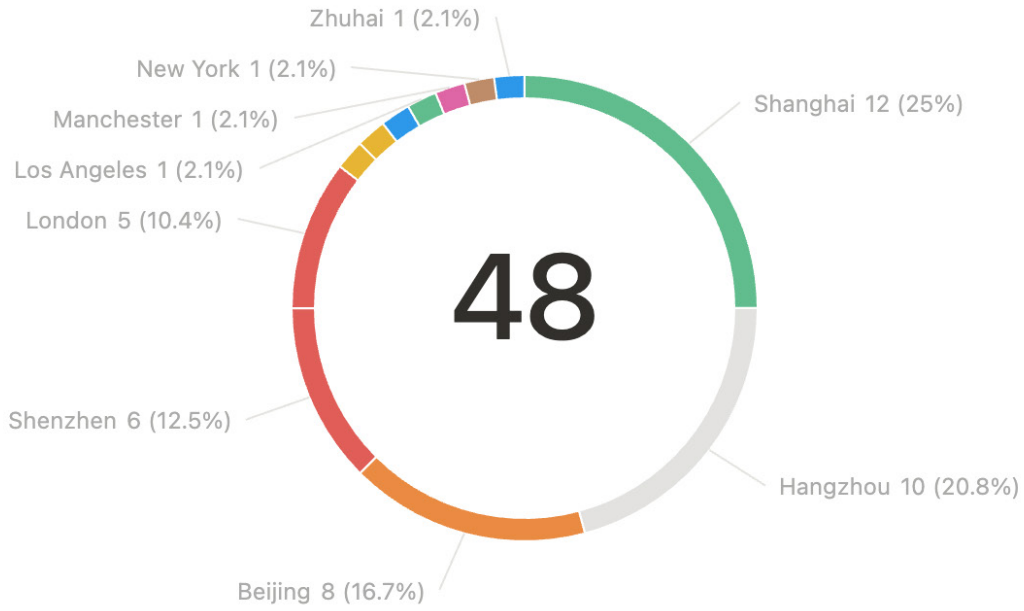
Participants: At a glance



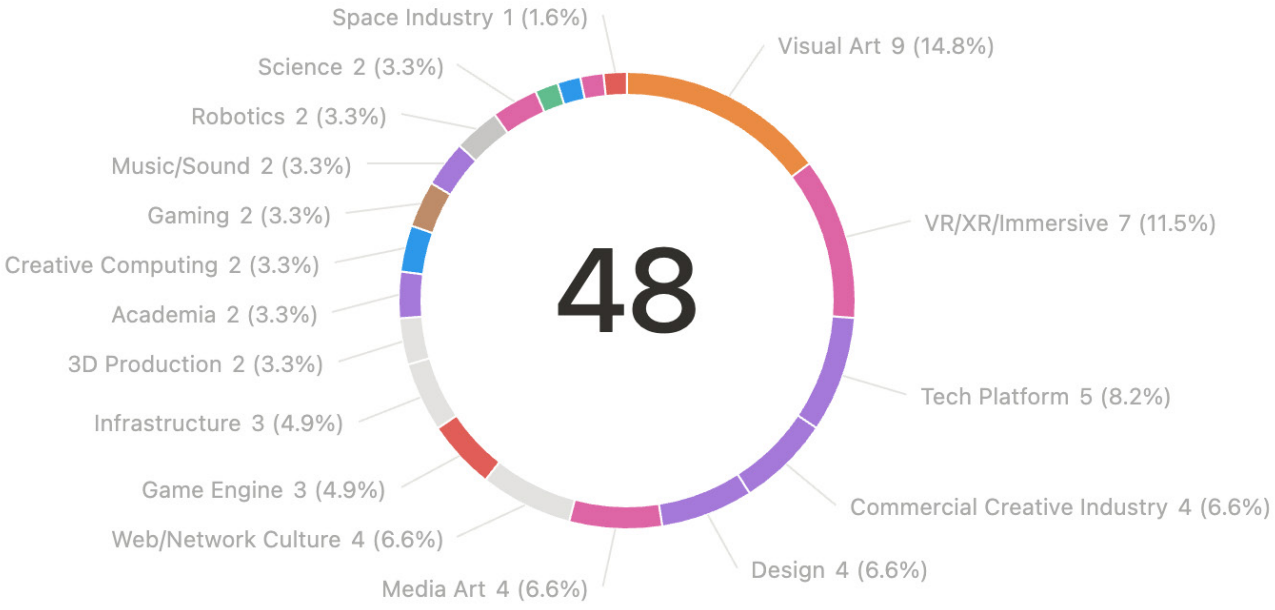
48 participants were mostly in their early-to-mid-30s, with few over the age of 50, which is as expected given the relatively new field of arts and technologies



48 participants were active in many arts and technologies-related professions, most prominently as practising artists, technologists and educators



48 participants were active across around 12 locations, with four major cities (Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Beijing) featuring most prominently



48 participants were active in many arts and technologies sectors, most prominently immersive arts, visual art, media art and technology platforms

China research trip

A ten-day research trip to Shanghai, Hangzhou, Hefei, Shenzhen and Beijing was undertaken in February 2025, visiting private companies of various sizes and from differing technology sectors, institutions, individual artists and communities. In-person interviews not only enabled a greater degree of mutual understanding and trust, but also allowed researchers to understand the concrete cultural and technical contexts in which various forms of arts and technologies activity was happening. As China is a highly relationship-driven society, gaining access to individuals working at institutions and private companies required leveraging the personal networks of researchers as well as seeking further recommendations from existing contacts.

Roundtables

A total of three two-hour roundtables with approximately 12 participants were undertaken in Beijing, Shanghai and online. The Shanghai roundtable was primarily made up of younger, more internationally educated artistic practitioners. The Beijing roundtable primarily comprised more established and establishment artists and professors. The final, online roundtable provided an opportunity to bring together diasporic practitioners and those not based in those two dominant cities.

Peer review

Following the completion of a draft of the report, a peer review was conducted by two experts in arts and technologies, one based in the UK, and one based in China.

Total participants

There was a total of 48 participants in one-to-one interviews and roundtable discussions.

- **Gender:** 27 were male (56%), 20 were female (42%), one was of non-binary (2.1%).
- **Age range:** the majority of participants (72.9%) were 30–40, tending on the younger side of that range, with 8.3% between the ages of 20 and 30.
- **Ethnic and cultural background:** 40 were ethnically and culturally Greater Chinese (born and/or educated until high school in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan); five were diasporic Chinese (educated since high school or earlier outside of China); and three were non-Chinese.
- All participants have worked in Mainland China, and all but one speak some level of Mandarin Chinese.
- **Sector and Role:** See the graph for a full breakdown of the arts and technologies sectors, and the role of each participant.
- **Location:** Acknowledging China's geographic diversity and regional differences, we conducted research across multiple cities with distinctive technological and cultural characteristics. Thirty-eight were primarily based in Mainland China, while ten were based elsewhere.

4. Scope, selection and note on bias

Arts and technologies names a large, inchoate field. The writers and researchers of this report are arts and technologies professionals working between China and the UK, a position which accords them a privileged degree of insight and access to this highly networked set of institutions and practitioners.

At the same time, they are predominantly focused on the visual arts and on those emerging sciences and technologies that more commonly find technical and thematic application in the arts. There is a bias towards both contemporary visual arts, broadly understood, and frontier science and technology. Furthermore, where international cultural relations are concerned, there is a bias towards the UK context, as one of the report's chief aims is to encourage international collaboration between China and the UK through the British Council.

The report's authors have made their best efforts to make a selection at this diverse intersection that is representative of arts and technologies as they are commonly discussed in the UK, and to make those findings optimally useful for artistic practitioners, curators, cultural managers, international organisations, businesses and investors alike. Nonetheless, there will be areas that have been left, subjectively, out of scope. Those looking, for instance, for insights into innovative stage technologies for large-scale theatrical productions (of which there are many in China) or the state of the Chinese streaming business will find limited utility here, although both might fit legitimately under the rubric of arts and technologies.

Similarly, a question of language, terminology and definition plagues this discussion, both in relation to arts and technologies as a field and to transcultural concepts in the anglophone sphere, in China, and at various gradients in between. This report endeavours to be as neutral and specific as possible with its use of concepts, and to explain or translate cultural concepts that may not easily transfer intercontinentally. The use of language such as 'international' in relation to China, or 'the West', illustrates this issue. Global channels of exchange in relation to arts and technologies in Mainland China are overwhelmingly with Europe and America, and with the UK and the US in particular. While other transnational networks in this field exist, for instance between Mainland China and South Korea or Japan, their influence is relatively minor compared to that of the West. When referencing the West, the reader can assume that the report is referring broadly to the Euro-American sphere of influence. When 'international' is used in relation to China, the reader can assume a more global point of reference, but one that is still heavily anchored in anglophone arts and technologies networks.

2.

Key insights

In brief

Arts and technologies are in demand

Digital art is increasingly integrated into China's public and commercial spaces, supported by cultural policy and accessible technology, but independent artistic projects often face funding constraints unless aligned with cultural preservation or market priorities.

AI tools are ubiquitous

AI tools such as LLMs and generative image creation have been widely adopted into creative context, from artistic projects to ubiquitous marketing content. AI tool adoption is widespread and reflects a pragmatic embracing of new resources as well as optimism and pride in the success of Chinese AI products.

Scientific institutions are open to collaboration

Thanks in part to the steering of some senior arts and technologies curators and educators, and to political encouragement of technocultural production, art-science collaborations in state scientific research institutions are emerging with openness and goodwill on both sides.

Digital cultural heritage is flourishing

From games companies to contemporary arts to location-based VR experiences, the use of new technologies to create artistic experiences responding to heritage sites and activating museum collections is a popular strategy for technological cultural experiences.

The future is a common ground

Technological innovation and scientific advancement provide universally acceptable themes enabling diverse stakeholder participation, unlike politically sensitive cultural topics.

1. Arts and technologies are in demand

Installation view of *K11 Voyage de Savoir-Faire,* 2022. Produced by OUTPUT. Chi K11 Art Museum, Shanghai. © OUTPUT.

Arts and technologies are ubiquitous in contemporary China, particularly in commercial and urban environments.

Dancing humanoid robots by the Hangzhou firm Unitree in the 2025 Spring Festival Gala, one of China's best-loved annual TV events, exemplified the spirit of techno-optimism in the era of 'high-quality development'. The vast south-western city of Chongqing is known for its dense, 'cyberpunk' urbanism, facades and metro trains travelling through high-rise buildings. Such dazzling displays have been going viral on social media in China and the West alike, symbolising China's everyday technological advancement.

For artists, barriers to entry to producing arts and technologies are continuously lowering. With increasingly accessible tools and the integration of generative AI models through diverse creative workflows, it has never been easier to be a digital creator.

In addition, the confluence of state policies supporting the digitisation of culture, the massive growth of museums in China and the spirit of techno-futurity embedded in cultural strategies have seen the incorporation of digital creative content into all kinds of public and commercial spaces. Companies like MANA and OUTPUT, profiled in Part Three, tap into this market where demand is often driven by local government culture and tourism budgets.

This, plus the ubiquity of digital display screens in Chinese urban environments, means that there is great demand for arts and technologies. However, the traditional role of the artist is often elided with the 'content producer', whether for creative branding campaigns or digital museum experiences.

The landscape of demand can leave artists themselves in the gaps between government support for cultural projects and commercial investment for market-viable products. This creates an environment where purely artistic or experimental projects struggle to find funding unless they align with cultural preservation goals or demonstrate clear commercial potential.

2. AI Tools are ubiquitous

> I believe artificial intelligence is advancing so rapidly that it will definitely feed back into VR. VR will move toward smart glasses, and smart glasses will move toward VR, eventually finding a convergence point.
>
> — Zhang Daming, VR Director of Felttime Studio

> I feel like there's so many culturally specific presumptions and narrative archetypes around technology and science, like AI safety: in the West that's modelled in some form of the Golem myth, which was not so intuitive for me. We're not used to the archetype of a man-made intelligence killing humanity.
>
> — Wendi Yan, Artist

AI, in the form of large language models (LLMs) and generative image models (genAI), are being rapidly adopted in all manner of creative productions.

Almost every large tech company has an AI model competing in the domestic and global market, from Alibaba's QWEN to Baidu's ERNIE to ByteDance's Doubao. The peerless leader in Chinese market, however, is DeepSeek, whose open-source R1 model took the global tech world by storm in early 2025. The success of DeepSeek was embraced by the central government, with DeepSeek's CEO Liang Wenfeng's much-publicised meeting with President Xi Jinping in February. As a result, AI has become a mainstream cultural phenomenon, promoted on prime-time news stories and something of matter of national pride.

AI is not just a novelty; it is an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life. The 'DeepSeek moment' triggered a wave of adoption, with major platforms including ByteDance quickly implementing DeepSeek's open-source model into their products. The rapid scale of this implementation is not unusual in China – after all, WeChat and Alipay were hardly in use a decade ago, and are utterly indispensable today. Compared to the West, there is considerable optimism and enthusiasm around AI technologies and their widespread integration, with little fear in public discourse on the subject. As one recent attitude survey on AI found, 'respondents in China had the highest level of awareness, trust and excitement about AI's use in products and services'.[6]

For artists, AI has become an important content-generation tool, particularly through popular video generation models, such as Kuaishou's Kling, although Western models such as ChatGPT, Runway and Midjourney are also highly popular. Artist Cao Shu's film *Diffusion* (2024), for instance, which featured in a recent solo exhibition at HOW Art Museum in Shanghai, used footage generated from materials in the artist's own research.

A much-anticipated anthology on China's approach to AI, Machine Decision is Not Final: China and the History and Future of Artificial Intelligence, edited by the founders of NYU Shanghai's Centre for AI and Culture, brings together prominent Chinese and Western curators, scholars and writers on this topic.

However, there are still reservations. A design lead at a major tech company expressed grave concerns at the rapid take-up of genAI imagery among designers, noting that many are already losing employment opportunities. Comparing China to South Korea and Japan, he reflected that Chinese companies are much more focused on the benefits of generative imagery to their bottom lines, and their audiences more willing to accept AI-generated imagery as part of their everyday experience. Overall, this report found that AI was most often a tool for artistic content-making, and rarely an object of artistic discussion in its own right.

3. Scientific institutions are open to collaboration

The growing openness of contemporary Chinese scientific institutions to artistic endeavours exemplifies increasing curiosity, confidence and optimism around scientific progress among scientists, artists and the wider public alike.

In some ways, it is comparable to the beginnings of modern arts and technologies in the US in the 1960s, where significant levels of technological investment led to deep artistic collaborations at Bell Labs and MIT, in the hopes of art-science synthesis.

Two leading scientific institutions are profiled in Part Three: Huairou Science City and the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC). Both have recently developed a focus on art-science collaborations through residencies, research programmes and exhibition spaces, representing a new-found openness to artistic engagement from scientific administrators and researchers.

Conversely, the scale and speed of techno-scientific research advances has also captured the attention of artists. As narratives abound around AI, microchip manufacture and green technologies in the Chinese and global public spheres, the significant progress being made by Chinese researchers in recent years is a source of pride and intrigue. In one roundtable discussion, an artist who works between China and the US wondered why Western arts and technologies practitioners were not more engaged with Chinese science, noting the 'artificial sun' at USTC in Hefei, which is making global breakthroughs in nuclear fusion research.

Nonetheless, frictions of cross-disciplinary collaboration persist, as they typically do in global art-science contexts. While artists may successfully establish communication channels with scientists that spark mutual curiosity and inspiration, developing truly collaborative work remains difficult. Scientific institutions increasingly allocate physical space for artistic and cultural initiatives as part of their science communication and public engagement efforts, but they often lack the interdisciplinary expertise to effectively curate these spaces.

4. Digital cultural heritage is flourishing

Duyi Han, *Landscapes: Illusions in Flux,* 2025. In *Resonance – Hebei Imaginations* digital artworks exhibition at Hebei Museum. Courtesy of the Artist.

> **If your content promotes traditional Chinese culture, and your production quality is relatively high, the government is more likely to support you.**
>
> **— Cheng Jia, Co-founder of Into Games**

Popular arts and technologies exhibitions and displays often use new media to bring traditional cultures and histories to life.

The 'rediscovery' of Chinese history and culture through arts and technologies is also a strong theme in the parallel world of state-run museums, particularly through the digitisation and activation of cultural heritage through digital art. The central government's 14th Five-Year Plan coined the phrase 'digital cultural heritage' in the lexicon of the state leadership, a directive which has boosted arts and technologies efforts by cultural sites and museums.

Art academies also often build on themes drawn from traditional Chinese culture in their programming. The China Academy of Art, for example, themed its 2025 graduation show '72 Metamorphoses', a motif from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, while its museum opened a concurrent exhibition on the Hangzhou-born blockbuster video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, based on the same story.[7] For practitioners, there is an incentive to align with Chinese cultural themes, because they are more recognisable and digestible by the public and are likely to be more widely reported in the media, often with official backing.

5. The future is a common ground

> People want to eat and have fun, they don't want to worry!
>
> — Huang Songhao, Co-founder of Raiden

From the central government politburo to the general public, from arts and technologies practitioners to scientific institutions, there is something everyone can broadly agree on: China's future will be shaped by advances in science and technology.

This techno-optimist spirit often appears as a source of national pride and a symbol of China's progress up the value chain from manufacturer to innovator, from 'made in China' to 'created in China'. A spirit of futurity is undoubtedly underpinned by the Chinese Communist Party's goal of building China into a 'sci-tech powerhouse' by 2035,[8] with this directive cascading down across local government policies. Beyond political slogans, mainstream techno-optimism is well-grounded in the everyday experience of people in Mainland China, for whom rapid economic growth has been coupled with tangible technological developments, from high-speed rail to homegrown consumer tech brands like Huawei.

In this milieu, arts and technologies productions, such as digital art displays, interactive experiences and immersive arts, are strongly identified with the spirit of futurity and innovation. Renowned contemporary artists, such as Cai Guoqiang and Xu Bing, have also entered the fray with rocket launches and drone shows.[9] For the most part, these projects embody technological aesthetics as a 'demo of the future', in much the same way that the 2010 Shanghai World Expo was a demonstrative moment for Chinese architects and designers to present their futuristic vision.

Balancing the demand for spectacle with artistic and philosophical inquiry can be challenging for artistic practitioners in the field, but a future-focused orientation can also yield opportunities for collaboration. For example, art and science collaborations at institutes such as the University of Science and Technology of China (profiled in Part Three) are made possible by mutual recognition and curiosity between artistic and scientific practitioners, with a view towards understanding bringing humanistic perspectives to scientific progress.

At the same time, the critical and conceptual spirit of contemporary art can sometimes be viewed as esoteric and politically charged, meaning that critically engaged artists often need to navigate different aesthetic idioms to land projects successfully. As the co-founder of arts and technologies curatorial outfit Raiden remarked during our Shanghai roundtable, 'People want to eat and have fun, not worry.' Many artists and curators try to strike a balance between developing interrogative artworks and sustaining an income through more public-friendly projects.

Wu Ziyang, *Pigeon Legend – Stories 100 Years After Agartha* (2024)
Still from AI-generated colour digital video with sound. Courtesy of the Artist.

3.

The landscape

In the context of rapid societal change, the ecosystem of arts and technologies in China brings together old and new narrative to form myriad visions of the future

The context of arts and technologies in China

Arts and technologies in China emerges from a unique history of rapid modernisation and technological development

Themes explored by practitioners

The subjects and approaches that define Chinese arts and technologies work, from infrastructure research to cultural heritage digitisation

Organisations, people and case studies

Key institutions, influential practitioners and representative examples that form the arts and technologies ecosystem

Challenges faced by practitioners

The economic, institutional and collaborative obstacles confronting arts and technologies in China

The context shaping arts and technologies in China

In brief

Accelerated technological adoption

China's rapid technological transformation over four decades, from manufacturing hub to globalised information society, has created distinctive conditions that have deeply shaped its artistic production. With a rapidly evolving technical environment and fewer institutional norms, practitioners show greater willingness to blend media, commercial applications and artistic experimentation.

Alignment with developmental objectives

Far-reaching central government initiatives like the goal of 'high-quality development' and the National Cultural Digitisation Strategy actively drive culture-technology integration, creating downstream demand for technology-driven cultural content across city infrastructure, cultural institutions, and public programming.

Arts and technologies are less censored

Arts and technologies align with governmental priorities around innovation and cultural development, affording practitioners incentives and exploration space more than other artistic domains, where political constraints are more pronounced.

Generational cultural shifts

As the economic and cultural environment changes, younger practitioners (born after 1997) face dramatically different conditions than their seniors, who established themselves in or before the 2010s. The new environment sees fewer traditional artistic opportunities but a high demand for arts and technologies skills, creating incentives for new forms of consumption and production, from immersive shows to urban installations.

Geographic distributions

The field is concentrated in core coastal cities but significant activity is taking place in second-tier cities like Hangzhou and Hefei, which leverage distinctive local advantages in technology and education.

The historical backdrop

The People's Republic of China has changed dramatically every decade since its modern birth in 1949.

To understand the arts and technologies landscape in China, it is important to acknowledge its historical trajectory. In the United States and Western Europe, the canon of arts and technologies emerged from 1960s experimental movements with considerable institutional support, notably the Experiments in Art and Technologies movement in the late 1960s.[10] China's path was shaped by different forces, with a technological culture defined by decades of rapid industrialisation, political upheaval and the arrival of contemporary art in the past four decades. The field of arts and technologies has been shaped significantly by this unique technocultural history.

The Reform and Opening-Up era saw an enthusiastic embrace of science and technoculture, from science fiction and popular science to consumer gadgets. The liberalisation policies of the Reform and Opening-Up period beginning in 1978 rapidly introduced new technologies, cultures and economic policies,[11] resulting in new waves of experimental culture and an optimistic spirit of globalised exchange and political openness. This era was a radical turning point for China's first generation of contemporary artists, setting the stage for a complex negotiation between national and personal identity, a society in breakneck transformation, the promises of globalism and a rapidly expanding economy, for decades to come. With growing international exchange, Chinese artists sought to define themselves amid a transforming society and a flood of newly available influences, such as modernism, postmodernism and conceptual art movements that had unfolded over decades elsewhere.[12]

At face value, we could say that arts and technologies appeared in China with the first generation of video artists in the 1980s, such as Zhang Peili, who made use of newly available tools like video cameras,[13] similar to experimental practitioners in the West.[14] This embracing of technology is reflected in wider Chinese society, which has adopted new technologies at a far faster and broader rate than its Western peers.[15] For example, home computers became commonplace in China in the mid-2000s, much later than in the West, but developments in smartphone technologies meant China largely leapfrogged the use of personal computers.[16] Apps like WeChat and Alipay, indispensable across society today for payments, basic services and a social life, were little known until a decade ago. This spirit of optimistic techno-futurity, once imported from abroad, still plays a role in contemporary arts and technologies today, particularly among practitioners taking a more reflexive approach towards a natively Chinese and Asian understanding of science and technology.

Artists respond to their times, and time has moved rapidly in modern China. This temporal compression continues to influence how Chinese practitioners approach technology, both as a medium and as a sign of a society in transformation. The Chinese contemporary art scene took to the global stage in the optimistic 1990s, significantly mediated by a handful of foreign gallerists and collectors. In this time, the social transformations of China's breakneck industrialisation was an overarching theme of artists' explorations. The cultural and political stakes piled high, with a palpable sense of history in the making. The first generation of Chinese contemporary artists were avidly grassroots, rebellious and

> **Before digital art, there was video art. By around 2000, we started to have the so-called discussion about 'digital art'.**[23]
>
> **— Li Zhenhua, Curator**

experimental, exemplifying the shock of the new. Bolstered by thin but vital threads of international exchange and largely self-funded, arts and technologies in this period saw works on CD-ROM, PowerPoint, software and video emerging from a small but committed experimental scene.[17]

Cultural institutions were few and far between, particularly for the milieux of arts and technologies. It was not until the 2000s that, under the pedagogical influence of video artist Zhang Peili, artist, critic and curator Qiu Zhijie and others in the major art academies, a new generation who grew up with the internet flourished under the auspices of new media art and 'intermedia', combining an experimental spirit with technological fluency. As Qiu observed in an interview, the most important year for China's role in the global stage was not 2008, oft-noted as the year of the Beijing Olympics, but 2001, the year in which the Olympic bid was won and China joined the World Trade Organisation.[18] This era marked an enthusiastic embrace of a globalised world and an increasing confidence in China's role in it.

At a macro level, Chinese arts and technologies follow the broader reverberations in the cultural, economic and political development of a globalising China.[19] Translation and historical self-orientation have been a key feature of Chinese contemporary art, particularly on the global stage, where non-Western artists often flourish as keen ethnographers, avatars and poets of their native culture in transformation.[20] As China's development evolves from industrialisation and manufacturing to informatisation and high technology, its technological landscape is transforming the world at large. Chinese arts and technologies practitioners are at turns beneficiaries, observers and critics of this condition, often caught between a globalised cultural field and a segregated Chinese ecosystem, depending on the political atmosphere of the period. The Chinese internet, a vibrant cultural space that has long been blocked off from the internet at large, is a case in point.

Today, arts and technologies practitioners in China bear witness to a nation and a world once again in transition. What was true in 2015, therefore, may not be true today. Arts and technologies is a highly amorphous, internationalised, networked field, which has been significantly reliant on international scholarships, residencies and support for it to flourish. Today, in the mid-2020s, whether due to domestic censorship, geopolitical tensions or a slowing economy, the relative co-operative optimism that characterised recent decades has cooled. At the same time, China's increasing technological and scientific prowess, and its centrality to the global order, frames emergent opportunities for arts and technologies on a different set of terms.

And so, there is no canonical history of Chinese arts and technologies.[21] Unsurprisingly, most active practitioners interviewed in this report are born after 1980, with a significant number in the post-1990s generation. Artists working with technology in China today frequently negotiate what technology means in China,[22] situating and articulating its rapidly advancing technological society within the contemporary as well as its modern history and its long cultural heritage.

The political context: state funding, cultural policy and censorship

> **The National Art Foundation currently leans more toward arts and crafts, and doesn't have a contemporary art category. All arts and tech-related works need to be developed under the arts and crafts category. Most of the works are actually stage design, or Chinese painting with technological tools added – that's the kind of understanding they have.**
>
> **— Cao Shu, Artist and Lecturer at China Academy of Art**

State funding and cultural policy

Policies impacting arts and technologies in China operates through a complex system of national directives, local implementation strategies, and bureaucratic funding mechanisms. While official documents articulate an ambitious vision of technological and cultural integration, accessing these resources requires assimilating into complex institutional hierarchies.[24]

The cornerstone of Chinese policy relating to arts and technologies in recent years is the National Cultural Digitisation Strategy, endorsed in 2022, which sets milestones for digital cultural infrastructure by the end of the 14th Five-Year Plan, the central government's flagship quintennial policy strategy (the '145' covers 2021–25). This strategy emphasises development across digital publishing, film, performance and art, while calling for the transformation of traditional cultural formats through digital means. It also mandates the creation of a nationwide cultural big data system by 2035, using existing 5G networks and cable TV infrastructure to enable universal access to digitised cultural products.[25]

Furthermore, the 'Guiding Opinions on Promoting Deep Integration of Culture and Technology' issued by six ministries in 2019 aimed to establish 100 national culture-technology integration demonstration bases and to foster 200 leading enterprises by 2025.[26] Through these policies, financial commitments to China's cultural digitisation have been substantial. From 2018 to 2022, national fiscal expenditures for culture-related initiatives totalled 1070bn RMB (approximately £110 billion).[27]

At provincial levels, implementation varies. Beijing's 2025–2027 action plan aims to leverage its position as a cultural and science centre, targeting technological breakthroughs and infrastructure upgrades, including AI integration into cultural infrastructure and immersive technology applications.[28] Guangdong province focuses on six initiatives, such as technology leadership and creating a Greater Bay Area digital cultural centre, with plans to establish five national-level demonstration bases by 2025 through policies emphasising industrial clusters and digital heritage preservation.[29] Zhejiang province has integrated digital culture into its provincial reform architecture, prioritising heritage preservation through projects such as the Lingnan Cultural Big Data Center, while advancing digital-native formats via standardised frameworks for holistic smart governance.[30]

Example national funding instruments include the Cultural Industry Development Special Fund managed by the Ministry of Finance, and the National Art Foundation for artistic projects specifically. From 2014 to 2023, the National Art Foundation funded 7,116 projects with a cumulative investment of approximately 55.7 billion yuan (around £5.8 billion), spanning stage arts, fine arts, promotion and talent development.[31] For example, in 2017 the National Art Fund supported Wuchang Shouyi University's VR Art Creation Talent Training, aiming to cultivate 'high-end VR art talent with international vision'.[32]

The gap between these high-level directives and ground-level implementation is notable. The concept of 'high-quality development' that

> **For me, the development of art and technology in China is very non-standard... Because in China, there's no real state funding for independent artists, you have to be in a certain academy or in a certain department to be funded or supported. So you have to always think of other ways...Most of my artists' peers are seeping [through cracks]. That's the way I feel.**
>
> **— Zhang Wenxin, Artist**

permeates these policies often translates to a balancing act for arts practitioners, who must demonstrate both innovation and ideological alignment.[33] While these resources appear substantial on paper, accessing them in practice requires navigating complex bureaucratic processes, typically requiring either institutional affiliation or explicit alignment with policy priorities.

Censorship and artistic expression

Censorship is a fact of everyday life for artists, curators and everyone involved in producing exhibitions and public events in China. Institutions must seek approval from their local city area's cultural and tourism bureau, and the evaluation of artworks for hints of political malfeasance or social subversion can be highly subjective. This system exemplifies what artist Payne Zhu identifies as the fundamental contradiction in China's development: 'There's this contradiction with China. Politics is underdeveloped/suppressed, but everything else is making significant progress.'

This has not always been the case, and the history of censorship in China over just the past two decades is complex. The internet, for instance, was a space of relatively open discourse throughout the early 2000s, although various crackdowns over blogs and forums did take place. Google's exit from Mainland China in 2010 marked a watershed moment for informational access. Nonetheless, the 2010s saw many critical media artists, such as Aaajiao and Miao Ying, flourish within the Mainland Chinese art world. In the latter part of the 2010s, however, and particularly after the pandemic, censorship became significantly more pronounced, online and off. Even maintaining the full list of artworks in an exhibition through to opening night has become an everyday obstacle.

Censorship revolves predominantly around public discourse relating to controlled social and political issues. Because of the risks of public communication, privately organised screenings, events and discussions amongst artistic practitioners are common, often functioning at the scale of unofficial institutions. This bias against open discourse also further emphasises the importance of private messaging and networking over WeChat, with group chats as a pillar of private and professional social infrastructure.

The geographical context: geographic diversity and regional dynamics

China's geographic expanse creates distinct regional artistic ecosystems. Arts and technologies activity skews overwhelmingly towards the east coast, with its deeper history of trade, international exchange and economic development.

The unofficial tier system ranks cities in terms of scale, wealth and significance, with the coastal cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (Bei-Shang-Guang-Shen) occupying the first tier. However, a striking mixture of infrastructural and scientific developments and cultural sites draw arts and technologies practices across China's vast landscape.

Coastal first-tier megacities

Shanghai and Beijing are China's unrivalled financial, political and cultural centres.

Shanghai, China's commercial and financial centre, is home to many of its most forward-thinking art institutions, as well as a vibrant and highly globalised consumer culture hungry for new ideas, technologies and fashions. In the past two decades it has created several dedicated art zones. It also plays host to Mainland China's largest art fairs and commercial creative and real estate industries, offering more opportunities for sponsorship and patronage of contemporary art through private museums. Due to high living costs, many artists live and maintain studios in residential compounds on the outskirts of the city.

Beijing, China's capital city, is also home to its most prestigious art school, the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). Beijing has long been the centre of Chinese contemporary art, from its iconoclastic beginnings in the 1980s[34], and is home to its most long-standing institutions. Proximity to political power and China's intellectual elite raises the stakes of artistic practice in Beijing, in terms of visibility and impact, but also in terms of political risk. Many artists moved away from Beijing to Shanghai and other regions in the mid-2010s after government crackdowns and rising rents.

Shenzhen and Guangzhou are wealthy first-tier cities in the Greater Bay region known for trade, technology and manufacturing.

Shenzhen was a fishing village before exploding into China's hardware manufacturing centre and design hub. It fosters a maker-oriented approach to arts and technologies, with greater emphasis on entrepreneurial applications and product development. Today, it is home to China's largest tech companies, such as DJI. It has long been an inspiration for arts and technologies practitioners worldwide because of its crucial role in the global technology supply chain. 'Shanzhai' innovation, deeply agile small factories and low-cost production has made it a Mecca for makers, tinkerers and artists alike.[35] While not well known for its cultural institutions, it is home to many top architects, cutting-edge real estate projects and concomitant exhibition spaces.

> Hefei is not like the Chengdu municipal government. The south-west region is itself a stronghold of contemporary art. But in Hefei, they haven't even hosted an arts festival, so talking about doing a science and arts festival is very difficult to mobilise and hard to understand. Hefei is a city with strong technological capabilities but limited artistic infrastructure.

— Dr. Sun Yue, Researcher in Art and Science at University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), Curator of Hefei Science and Art Festival

Guangzhou is a city with a deep cultural history and is among China's richest, building on its historic trading position to become a 21st-century commercial hub. Today it is best known for a flourishing grassroots scene of DIY art collectives. It is also home to Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art and the Guangdong Times Museum, a leading institution with a proactive arts and technologies strand, Times Media Lab. The prosperity and location of the Greater Bay Area – covering Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Hong Kong – has also resulted in several offshoots of prestigious universities in the area, such as the Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, which offers courses in media arts and production.

Emergent second-tier cities

Emerging technology and cultural centres are developing distinctive approaches to arts and technologies that challenge the dominance of first-tier cities.

Hangzhou is home to the CAFA's southern rival, the China Academy of Art, and a beautiful, affordable environment that retains many graduates in the city's strongly autonomous artistic scene, with many artist-run spaces and studios. The city is unusual for being a leading player in art, e-commerce and technology R&D, at times putting heftier rivals Shanghai and Shenzhen to shame. Already the birthplace of Alibaba, since the early 2020s Hangzhou has spawned many of China's leading advanced tech companies. Its so-called 'six little dragons' include the financial-firm-turned-AI sensation DeepSeek; the robotics company Unitree, a rival of Boston Dynamics; and Game Science, the maker of China's first AAA video game, *Black Myth: Wukong.*

Hefei, the capital of Anhui province, is a science and industry hub for tech production such as semiconductors, vehicles and electronic displays. It is also home to the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), a leading research university founded in the early years of the PRC. Today, it builds on its scientific research strengths, particularly in quantum computing, fusion research and artificial intelligence. While it is not known for artistic outputs, USTC's humanities department has an emphasis on art and science that provides contexts for artists to engage with advanced technological research that might be inaccessible elsewhere.

Themes Explored by Practitioners

In brief

Reframing chinese science, technology and infrastructure

Artists in China are increasingly turning their focus inward, using the lens of infrastructure, science and technology to reframe narratives of modern China – this has been especially accelerated by pandemic-era restrictions that prompted the exploration of domestic histories and geographies.

Traditional narratives and cultural heritage

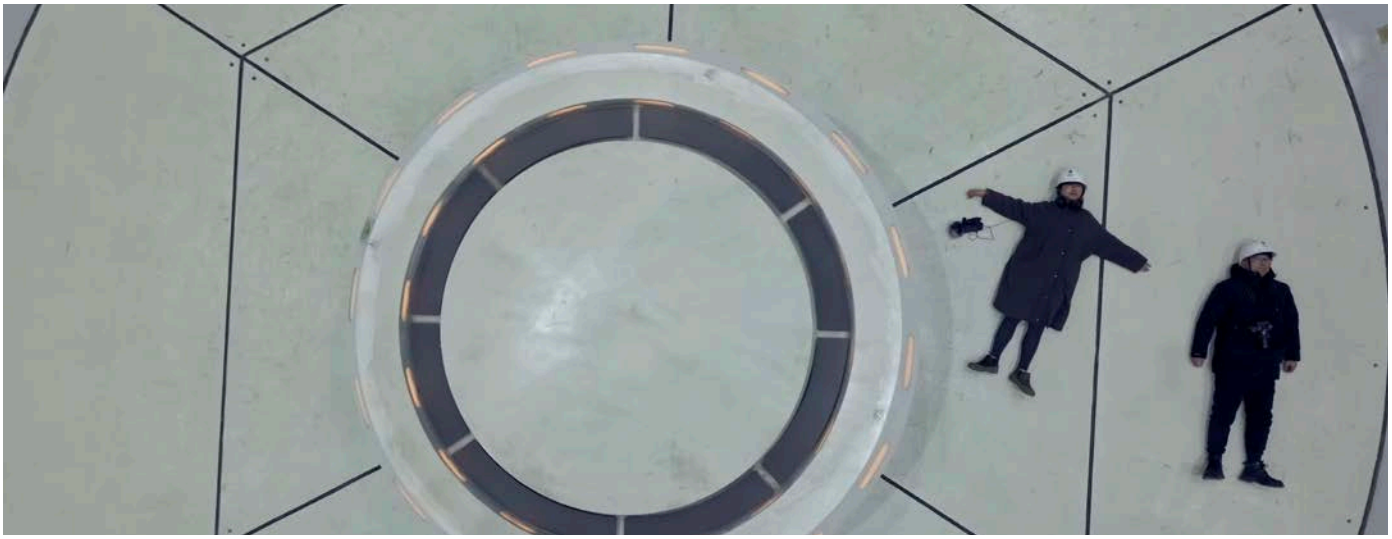
State-backed initiatives are digitising iconic cultural sites such as Dunhuang and Sanxingdui, fusing heritage with immersive technologies (AR/VR), while artists strategically engage with traditional Chinese themes to gain institutional support and resonate with the public.

Popular science fiction

Artists are imagining speculative pasts and futures for Chinese technological development, often countering dominant Western technological narratives through Chinese science fiction.

Five-hundred-metre Aperture Spherical Telescope (FAST) in Guizhou, a key site in the project *Under the Cloud* by Iris Long and He Zike. Courtesy of the Artist.

1. New narratives of chinese science, technology and infrastructure



Mia Yu, *Eme Cosmos*, Still from 4K digital video, 2024. Courtesy of the Artist.

> **In 2020, none of us could leave the country. So I found that many friends, including Cao [Fei], all went to 'rediscover' China. Everyone headed to the borderlands. If it wasn't for the pandemic, we might have gone to London or New York in the summer, to see exhibitions. But there was this rediscovery of China, and everyone seemed to go to the so-called hinterlands, possibly because places like Beijing and Shanghai had stricter surveillance. Many of us went to the north-east, the greater north-east, the 'Far East' [laughs].**
>
> **— Mia Yu, Artist**

Artists do not only explore technology by using it in their work, they also explore technology as a theme of history and culture. In recent years there has been a distinctive trend for curatorial and artistic research projects that reframe the history of modern China, particularly through the lens of infrastructure, science and technology.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a singular impact on Chinese artists, especially those who relied on international networks to support their practices. Travel restrictions and economic shutdown meant both financial support and freedom of movement was suddenly cut off, at least from outside China. A striking consequence of this is that many artists found themselves exploring China more deeply for the first time, whether Chinese history, geography or science, in all its vastness.

In their *Under the Cloud* project, part-supported by the British Council, Iris Long and He Zike led two field trips to big data infrastructure in Guizhou, south-west China. Such projects exemplify the trend for artistic research and internal fieldwork among Chinese contemporary artists seeking to situate the technological transformations in contemporary China. Exemplifying this turn towards fieldwork, this series of field trips inspired many more creations, such as Zhou Tao's *Axis of Big Data* (2023), which featured in the 13th Taipei Biennial.

Examples of these practices include Cao Fei and Wang Hongzhe's explorations of Inner Mongolia; artist and designer Flora Weil's poetic research project into geo-engineering in the north-west, *Design in Rising Winds*; Payne Zhu's research into maritime trade networks in the Zhoushan archipelago; Zhang Wenxin's exploration of south-west Chinese geology; Cao Shu's speculative history of Lop Nur; Wang Hongzhe and Shi Qing's film about socialist cybernetics and computing; Liu Chuang's essay films about lithium, hydropower and Zomia (the south-western plateau); Gary Zhexi Zhang's film about Afro-Chinese co-operation in the early Cold War; Hu Yun's archival exploration of British colonial botany in western China; and more.

Zhou Tao, *The Axis of Big Data* (2023), video still. Courtesy of the Artist.

2. Technological activations of cultural heritage

Yu Zairan and Relight Studio, *Boshan Mountain Incense Burner,* 2025. In *Resonance – Hebei Imaginations* digital artworks exhibition at Hebei Museum. Courtesy of the Artist.

With government support for the digitisation of culture, and a booming digital economy, iconic Chinese cultural heritage has been a popular theme for artists, games makers and content creators alike. Media attention and institutional opportunities further incentivise artists to engage with the exceptional depth and breadth of historic Chinese culture. The unprecedented success of the triple-A video game *Black Myth: Wukong* by Hangzhou-based company Game Science is exemplary for its commercial and artistic success.

It is not uncommon, for instance, to see AR glasses, VR experiences and projection mappings animating historical collections. OUTPUT, an arts and technologies production house profiled in Part Three, got their first big break through a prestigious collaboration with the Palace Museum, or Forbidden City. *Resonance – Hebei Imaginations*, a recent exhibition of immersive digital art at Hebei Museum by the art and tech production company Mousa, promised to animate Han dynasty artefacts through 'light and movement'.[36] These exhibitions often are ticketed experiences catering to a broad, family-friendly audience are held in major public museums. Cultural heritage is widely viewed as a nourishing and educational experience.

Because of their civilisational significance, sites such as the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, north-west China, or the Sanxingdui archaeological excavation in Sichuan, have received particular attention as iconic Chinese cultural assets and have been subject to digital art creations.[37] In 2025, the Dunhuang Museum announced an artist residency.[38] Elsewhere, technology companies are also involved in heritage projects. One leading tech giant has already demonstrated commitment to integrating technology with cultural preservation through partnerships with the Palace Museum and Dunhuang Academy, digitising cultural relics and creating virtual access to significant heritage sites.

3. Popular science fiction

Chinese science fiction is dominated by the work of Liu Cixin, whose *Three Body Problem* was the first Chinese work to win the international Saturn prize for science fiction and has been made into two major television productions, by a leading Chinese tech company and Netflix. Five of Liu's books were also set to be adapted into major films by China Film Group in 2014, with *The Wandering Earth* (2019) and its sequel released so far. Liu's work is arguably single-handedly responsible for domestic and international interest in Chinese science fiction, and while the author remains relatively reclusive, the IP franchise based on his work has energetically produced exhibitions, video games and other media, often intersecting with arts and technologies. *First Contact*, an exhibition curated by Iris Long at Suhe Haus in Shanghai, featuring Cao Shu, Xu Bing, Liu Xin and others, is one notable recent example. Such exhibitions exemplify how contemporary artists working with arts and technologies operate in a blurry zone between independent practices and franchise-based commissions, offering a marriage between blockbuster brand recognition and artistic novelty. In this report, we interviewed at least three arts and technologies practitioners who had participated in Three Body-related productions.

The rise of Chinese science fiction has also strongly influenced artists taking speculative and historical approaches to the question of Chinese science and technology. Cao Fei's celebrated feature length film, *Nova*, imagines an alternative history of Chinese computing set in the 1970s. Science and technology studies scholars like Wang Hongzhe, who has collaborated extensively with Cao and other artists, have brought a renewed fascination to Chinese cybernetics, the history of Chinese computing and socialist technological imaginaries, motivated in part by the desire to articulate alternative pasts and futures for a technological world.

Here again, the recent success of Chinese AI has also motivated arts and technologies explorations, often distinct from the Western model centred around the innovation cultures of Silicon Valley.[39] Commentators have noted the virtuosity of DeepSeek's R1 model in literary Chinese, as compared to peer AIs.[40,41]

Unlike contemporary art or arts and technologies, which is broadly seen as a niche subculture, science fiction writing has a broader appeal to readers, publics and policymakers for its more accessible explorations of the future. For instance, youth science fiction awards are supported by educational authorities, while Huawei's Research Institute has engaged in collaborations with science fiction writers such as Stanley Qiufan Chen. While artists are often considered a minoritarian subculture with a broadly critical attitude, science fiction is seen as a popular engagement with the future.

Organisations, people and case studies

In brief

Higher education institutional backbone

Leading academies like the Central Academy of Fine Arts and China Academy of Art remain central, producing career artists while developing new tech/science focuses; thousands of broader arts graduates acquire technology skills without pursuing traditional artistic careers.

Contemporary art institutions

A small number of small but crucial specialist organisations maintain experimental practice and international dialogue, though sustainability often depends on volatile economic conditions.

Technology companies

These companies engage primarily through pragmatic rather than strategic approaches, viewing art through corporate social responsibility frameworks and unambitious collections; opportunities for deeper engagement exist but meaningful partnerships often emerge through personal connections rather than institutional initiatives.

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Commercial production

Production companies blur art-entertainment boundaries, serving a growing demand for digital cultural content across museums, malls and urban spaces while creating employment for arts-tech practitioners.

Grassroots networks

Artist-run spaces and informal networks fill institutional gaps through relationship-driven ecosystems, clustering in affordable areas and creating vital experimentation spaces outside official frameworks.

Chando Ao, *Cradle*, 2023. Courtesy of the Artist.

Overview of organisational landscape

The landscape of arts and technologies is a complex co-production by many different stakeholders, global and domestic, private and public, commercial and academic. Arts and technologies practitioners in China often work between two distinctive systems, the establishment structure of state-backed academies, museums and projects, and the private system of the commercial world, from private museums to commercial festivals and foundations.

Some institutions, like art academies, and global artistic discourse, hold a key role in cultivating practices and discourses. Meanwhile, the boom in the Chinese art market and the rapid growth of private institutions produced a different set of tastemakers in commercial centres like Shanghai. Film and media festivals are crucial for supporting new technological media, such as VR and XR, which have more lately found their footing in ticketed commercial experiences. For arts and technologies, often existing on the fringes of the larger art and cultural spaces, a smaller number of dedicated institutions are load-bearing pillars of the ecosystem, as are collaborative milieus and grassroots networks. Commercial industries like fashion and advertising offer an important source of income. Finally, new opportunities for commission and collaboration rise from scientific institutions and technology corporations, although communication challenges remain as to how art is understood or is instrumental in these spaces.

1. Higher art education forms the backbone of China's arts and technologies ecosystem, with two institutions dominating the landscape.

The two most influential of China's many art academies are the Central School of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing and the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou. These two prestigious academies represent different approaches within the national art education system. CAFA's location in Beijing aligns it more closely with establishment politics, while the CAA's distance from the capital has historically afforded it greater experimental freedom. Both institutions maintain rigorous entrance requirements, combining artistic examinations (Yikao) with the standard higher education exam (Gaokao), emphasising technical proficiency that provides graduates with strong traditional foundations.

The CAA, formerly known as Zhejiang Academy of Art, has been particularly influential in the media art space since establishing its pioneering media art department in 1996 under Zhang Peili. The academy later developed comprehensive mixed media (综合艺术系) programmes under Qiu Zhijie and subsequently intermedia (跨媒体系) departments that have produced many influential graduates. The CAA's programmes extend through media archaeology initiatives, social network and p2p media labs led by Huang Sunquan, and theoretical frameworks developed by Gao Shiming and Lu Jie. The intermedia department is now transitioning to leadership under younger artists, including Wu Ziyang, Rhett Tsai and Cao Shu.

The first digital media programme at CAFA was established in 2001 as an international workshop, through the school's director of foreign affairs,

around the same time as a similar development was beginning at the CAA.[42] Since then, its arts and technologies education had developed significantly, with departments such as the School of Experimental Art (founded in 2010), which also covers sci-tech art, and recent EAST (education, art, science and technology) initiatives from around 2018. Qiu Zhijie, now head of Tianjin Academy of Art, is transforming its curriculum through the deep integration of science and technology, while Tsinghua University develops art-science collaborations primarily through the Department of Information Art and Design under Professor Shi Danqing and others.

2. Contemporary art institutions have provided important platforms for arts and technologies, despite its relatively niche status in China's visual art landscape.

Private museums and non-profit institutions

While arts and technologies practice represents a relatively small slice of China's contemporary art culture and art market, themes spawning from this practice have been a mainstay throughout the 2010s. A vibrant ecosystem of private museums and institutions emerged over the 2000s and 2010s, primarily concentrated in Beijing's 798 district, Shanghai's M50 and West Bund district, and other development areas. As state museums face stricter political constraints, these private museums and non-profits have become the lifeblood of independent contemporary art in China. Institutions such as Ming Contemporary Art Museum (McaM), UCCA Edge and HOW Art Museum have consistently presented works to broad audiences. However, many have experienced relatively short lifespans, their fortunes tied to the real estate companies that own them and the typically decade-long contracts they maintain with local government.

Public museums

Public museums can exemplify China's world-class cultural infrastructure, with venues like Shanghai's Power Station of Art, the Museum of Art Pudong (MAP) and the West Bund Art Museum offering more for big-budget surveys than their commercial counterparts, as well as large-scale, city-led projects such as Shanghai Biennial, China's most important global biennial. Public museums typically take a more conservative, establishment position and are subject to more political scrutiny, charting a less independent path than their private counterparts. Museum approaches vary significantly: some institutions maintain dedicated curatorial departments focused on developing young curators, such as the Emerging Curators Project at the Power Station of Art, which has shaped a generation of young Chinese curators over its decade-long existence. Others, such as MAP and the West Bund Art Museum, have opted to import international exhibitions wholesale from institutions such as Tate and Centre Pompidou.

Over the years, public museums have been important platforms for the mainstreaming of arts and technologies. Curators including Iris Long, Zhang Ga and Li Zhenhua have been instrumental in developing this field – for example, Zhang's landmark exhibition *Synthetic Times* (2008) at the National Museum of China and his recent *Techne* exhibition at Shenzhen's Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (2023).[43] As so much of

arts and technologies was influenced and inspired by international artists, these blockbuster public exhibitions offer a platform for global exchange, with large state institutions commandeering significant media attention. More recently, *Cosmos Archaeology* explored astrophysics data through data visualisations and contemporary artworks.[44] Co-curated by Iris Long, Jean-Paul Kneib and Sarah Kenderdine, the exhibition was a major collaboration between the Shanghai Astronomy Museum and the Swiss Insitute of Technology (EPFL), and it went on tour to the National Museum of China, demonstrating the opportunity for large-scale international cultural collaboration through arts and technologies.

Festivals and biennials

In the commercial sphere, art fairs such as Shanghai's West Bund Art & Design Fair and ART021 are vital to the contemporary art ecosystem, though few collectors specialise in arts and technologies; with most prefer more traditional art forms, especially during economically challenging periods. Two notable exceptions have emerged: a niche of digital-art-focused galleries and collectors exemplified by MUD Gallery[45] (founded by Wu Yishen); and the Chinese NFT market, which grew with global speculative trends until public blockchains were banned in 2021. Meanwhile, biennials and festivals have played an important role in fostering arts and technologies throughout China. The Shanghai Biennial stands as the country's strongest and most academic and experimental example of exhibition(s) that featured arts and technologies,[46] while other significant platforms include the Today Art Museum's Future of Today programme, Shanghai eArts and LOFT Media Art Festival (curated by Li Zhenhua). In the film circuit, VR/AR festivals like Sandbox Immersive Festival, the Shanghai International Film Festival and Beijing International Film Festival's XR section support immersive arts. In design, the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Architecture Biennial is a flagship global biennial exploring social and technological urban themes. The enthusiasm for biennial-type events from city governments and sponsors ebbs and flows, resulting in one-off events such as the Art and Technology Triennale, and the Beijing Biennial.

Media art institutions

Media art institutions form a rarefied space centred on a small number of specialised programmes and venues dedicated to arts and technologies. The Chronus Art Center (CAC) (see case study, p.51), stands as the leading and only dedicated non-profit media art institution in China. Its unique position in the ecosystem has made it an essential hub for media artists and technological experimentation. Meanwhile, Hyundai Motor Studios has established a presence in this space through its curatorial prize the 'Hyundai Blue Prize+' specifically oriented toward arts and technologies exhibitions, creating valuable opportunities for curators working at this intersection.[47]

Case study: Chronus Art Center/MANA

> **The reason we've survived until today is because we're 100% independent. I don't rely on government support or sponsorship. If I have more money, I spend a bit more; if I have less money, I spend a bit less. That's why we are an art 'centre', not art 'museum'. We don't collect art.**
>
> **— Dillion Zhang, Co-Founder of Chronus Art Center (CAC) & MANA**

Dillion Zhang, part of China's 1970s generation, started his career journey as Epson's distributor in China before establishing the Shanghai-based media art institution, Chronus Art Center (CAC), in 2013. In the past decade, he has also founded multiple entities such as online information sharing platform for new media art, MANA and the co-working space, The Point.

Chronus Art Center: the only long-standing non-profit art institution of media art in Mainland China

A product of Zhang's long-standing personal passion, the CAC was positioned as a serious non-profit art institution focused on rigorous artistic production and media art research. With Zhang as its financial backer, the CAC was co-founded with independent curator Li Zhenhua and artist Jieming Hu, creating what Zhang felt to be a stable triad of stakeholders. With the intention of supporting artists to develop ambitious technical projects that would otherwise be inaccessible, Zhang invested around 15mn RMB for the CAC's inaugural show.

'Anything with a business logic is certainly not art, because its function or motivation is different, as is its scale. It can be related to art, it can be associated with art, it can collaborate with art, it can be labelled as art, or become a vehicle for art, but it is not art.'

Since 2015, under the artistic direction of Zhang Ga, curator and professor of media art, the CAC restructured its programming by launching a series of interdisciplinary projects and solo exhibitions, bringing noted media artists such as Chris Salter (US), Thomas Feuerstein (Austria) and Terike Haapoja (Finland) to China. Supporting leading Chinese artists to produce large-scale works with advanced programming and production facilities, the CAC launched a series of collaborations between high-profiles artists and engineers, including comissions by Liu Xiaodong and Yan Lei.

MANA: An information-sharing platform for arts and technologies

Founded in 2016, MANA is a platform that features content and creators related to the global technological art industry, gathering technological art resources and offering supply-chain integration to the sector. Although sharing similar interests in arts and technologies, MANA is independent from the CAC as it is more commercially driven. As an agency, it also researches and develops next-generation technological art scenes and service products for cultural and creative industries, tourist sites, museum exhibitions, festivals and urban installations. Zhang's long-term vision for MANA began with building its reputation as a sharing platform specialising in media art during its initial decade, establishing connections with art resources and the industry supply chain. Over the next decade, Zhang hopes MANA can develop its own unique system of providing services for niche arts and technologies project production and new artistic planning for urban development.

Liu Xiaodong, *Weight of Insomnia.* Installation with real-time captured video stream, three robotic painting machines, projection, canvas. Variable dimensions, 2015 – 2017. © Chronus Art Center.

Student work at the Interactive Media Arts programme at NYU Shanghai. © NYU Shanghai Interactive Media Art Department

3. International academia and exchange

Given the predominantly Western origins of arts and technologies practices, many practitioners, teachers and programmes related to arts and technologies in China have strong links to Western institutions. Most prominent younger artists working in this domain undertook graduate-level education, if not undergraduate, in Europe or America, with RISD, UCLA, Alfred, Royal College of Art, Goldsmith's and NYU's master's programmes featuring heavily on artists' and curators' CVs.[48] Similarly, when artist and curator Qiu Zhijie initiated CAFA's shift towards art and science, the EAST project brought together a substantial number of Western practitioners of that canon.[49]

At the same time, Western universities with offshoots in China also teach undergraduate classes predominantly in this area, in part because faculty are much better paid than domestic art academies (typically between 5-10x). For example, due to its highly active faculty, NYU Shanghai's Interactive Media Art programme is a small but vital link to contemporary Western media art and philosophy of technology discourses, creating a single degree of separation between, say, undergraduates studying physical computing in Pudong and the canonical Interactive Telecommunications Programme (ITP) at NYU in New York. Another somewhat singular example is the programme in Technoetic Arts at Shanghai Institute of Visual Art (SIVA), directed by the renowned British cybernetic artist Roy Ascott.

Arts and technologies is a relatively niche and highly networked community. As such, the same community of exchange extends across homegrown programmes, tightening the threads of dialogue within the field. These include Huang Sunquan's annual net culture conference at the CAA; the curricular interventions developed during Yuk Hui's guest professorship at the Academy; and Times Media Lab's 'Cybernetics in the 21st Century' lecture series, co-organised by Wu Jianru and Yuk Hui. This dynamic exemplifies how arts and technologies exist as a global discursive network diffusing at different rates across institutional, political and cultural barriers.

Case study: Aaajiao

Aaajiao, *Deep Simulator*, 2021. Courtesy of the Artist and Tabula Rasa Gallery.

> **Technology is the only politically viable space for artistic engagement (other than traditional Chinese Art), while others are suppressed. However, the discussions focus more on the technological ethics and philosophy instead of critique of social systems.**
>
> **— Aaajiao, Artist**

Aaajiao (Xu Wenkai) is a Chinese, Berlin-based media artist, blogger and programmer. One of the best-known new media artists to emerge in the late 2000s, Aaajiao's work examines emerging ideas and controversies surrounding the internet in China and more broadly. His projects span multiple disciplines, capturing the experience of a generation immersed in cyber technology and social media.

A computer science graduate without formal art training, Aaajiao began creating media art in 2007. During the pre-Olympic years, amid governmental support for internet and technological reform under Wen Jiabao's leadership, Aaajiao's works were presented at major international media art venues, including eArts Festival (2007, 2008, Shanghai), DEAF07 (Netherlands), and Long March (2007, Beijing).

Early in his career, he established relationships with galleries such as Arario Gallery (Shanghai) (participating in the exhibition *Sustainable Imagination* curated by Li Zhenhua), and was later represented by gallerist Leo Xu. In the 2010s, Aaajiao's works achieved both commercial and institutional success, riding the wave of China's golden era for media art and a favourable art market for independent gallerists. Aaajiao represents a rare case of a media artist maintaining a sustainable, saleable practice while openly creating critical works that challenge censorship, having flourished during a period where surveillance culture was less intensely enforced.

After 12 years in Shanghai, Aaajiao relocated to Berlin, citing deteriorating freedom of speech conditions that made creating work within China increasingly difficult for fulfilling his artistic vision. Although he comes from a tech background, Aaajiao's work in recent years has focused more on the conceptual aspect, with less technical requirement. Nonetheless, he maintains close relationships with independent fabricators and engineers in the Mainland for his productions.

Aaajiao, *Seed: 3339138223*, Digital printing, manual silk screening, hand drawing on linen, 200cm*200cm, 2023.
Courtesy of the Artist and SETAREH. Photographer: Trevor Good.

Artists' visit to big tech companies including Huya and Tencent initiated by Wu Jianru, curator of Media Lab, Guangdong Times Museum, 2021. Courtesy of Wu Jianru

> Tech companies often have very specific goals... when they approach collaborations and then they see art as a way to reach wider audiences or have a clear agenda for a certain type of collaboration. For art on the other hand is usually about writing more questions... it tends to lead from one question to many others, so this fundamental difference is in the purpose of collaboration.
>
> **— Milia Xin Bi, Director of Chronus Art Center**

Technology companies

China has its own distinctive digital platform ecosystem, but as in the USA, these corporate giants grew to spectacular cultural and economic dominance over the 2010s.

With lucrative social media business models and a vast market to navigate, China's platform economy has generally prioritised mainstream content over artistic collaborations. Nonetheless, notable exceptions exist, often leveraged through personal relationships rather than high-level directives, demonstrating potential pathways for future engagement.

For instance, ByteDance sponsored an exhibition programme and series of commissions at UCCA Edge, the Shanghai branch of China's leading private museum franchise. UCCA Labs, meanwhile, was a department of the latter established to cultivate such corporate partnerships and sponsorships. A major tech company also sought artists to curate part of its video game trade show, although this was cancelled because of the pandemic.

Other companies have engaged in more pragmatic synergies with the arts and technologies field. For instance, 5G telecoms companies like China Mobile have been significant sponsors of VR projects to produce content demos and create demand for 5G infrastructure adoption. The Digital Empowerment section of China Telecom's 2023 sustainability report, for instance, promotes '5G+8K+AI+VR/AR' applications under the rubric of 'Smart Culture and Tourism'.[50]

Artists, on their part, are often interested in investigating the technical, cultural and infrastructural dimensions of technology companies. Between 2018 and 2022, Wu Jianru, curator at the Media Lab of Times Museum, Guangdong, led a series of visits to Chinese tech companies in the Greater Bay Area, including ByteDance, Huawei and Douyu, a streaming platform.[51]

Technology companies themselves also conduct social and cultural

Cao Fei, *Asia One*, 2018. Single-channel HD video, 2.35:1, colour with sound. 63min 21sec. Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers.

> **I'm very optimistic about this kind of research project, to see if it's possible to open up a pathway from artwork to product. I can't make products myself, but through collaboration with such tech enterprises, I can extend the universality of an artwork to reach a wider audience...**
>
> **My latest work involves researching with a major tech company how to integrate emotional healing – you could call it a technological innovation – into their smart watches, which essentially represents the process of migrating from artwork to product.**
>
> **—Fei Jun, Professor and Head of CAFA Media Lab at China Academy of Fine Art.**

research. For example, one major Chinese tech corporation's research division, situated under the legal and operations department, employs around 50 social scientists, philosophers, legal scholars and other PhD-level researchers and publishes widely on the themes of technology and society. Similarly, ByteDance's Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies also employs social scientists and international relations scholars to inform its global operations and policy. Creating greater awareness between technology researchers and arts and technologies practices exploring sociotechnical ideas could generate synergies and exchanges between these parallel practices.

As the artist Cao Fei reflected in our roundtable discussion, the best way to work with tech companies was to not ask for a penny of support. In 2018, Cao, well known for her humorous and investigative explorations of technological worlds, created a work set in a vast, automated logistics centre run by JD, one of China's largest e-retailers. Cao accessed the site with the permission of the factory manager and made the work using her own money, without a formal relationship with the company. Seven years after the work was made, JDhas expressed an interest in acquiring the work. Likewise, Cao's later project with the drone company XAG demonstrated a rare collaboration between artist and entrepreneur.

In recent years, some technology companies have started building their own museums. For example, a major Chinese tech corporation in Shenzhen aims to open China's first private technology museum in 2028, on the company's thirtieth anniversary. The project underscores the firm's commitment to showcasing the evolution of technology and its own role in China's digital transformation, notably through a centrepiece 'technology tree', a design led by OUTPUT (see profile, p. 68).

Artist-run space: Martin Goya Business. © Martin Goya Business.

5. Grassroots artist networks and artist-run spaces

Due to a lack of sustainable institutional support or commercial interest, and limited state funding, undertaking arts and technologies practice as an artist in China is challenging. From the perspective of young artists, whether graduating from art academies, returning from foreign study programmes, or self-taught practitioners, there are few viable career paths. Arts and technologies practice may result in artistic career development (in terms of renown, exhibition opportunities at home and abroad, etc.) but these remain very poorly compensated, especially in comparison to the expectations of an educated class in an increasingly wealthy middle-income society. Even the small number of prestigious teaching positions in experimental courses in the art academies are exceptionally low paid. In short, work and income in arts and technologies are often uncorrelated, because the artwork is much less likely to sell in the art market, which coalesces around painting and sculpture.

Artists navigate this tricky economic terrain by supporting one another, funnelling resources to build and support their own spaces and converging on regions with lower rents.

For example, many artists working in the expensive metropolis of Shanghai have moved their homes and studios to the peripheral area of Songjiang, while Hangzhou's artists, most of whom are associated with CAA, cluster around the inexpensive suburbs of Fuyang, near the Art Academy's Xiangshan campus.

Artist-run spaces also come and go with economic and political tides. In the early 2010s, many experimental and intellectual artist-run spaces, such as the Institute for Provocation (IFP) and Arrow Factory[52,53], existed in the hutongs of Beijing. However, demolitions and gentrification wiped out almost all of them by the end of the decade. New collectives and para-institutions have emerged less centrally. Assembly in Beijing, an arts and technologies organisation with a focus on the history of science, was founded in 2023.[54] The artist Cheng Ran, who found international renown in the mid-2010s, leveraged his success to create Martin Goya Business, an eclectic artistic and curatorial collective which supports many young artists in Hangzhou through exhibitions and parties.[55]

Research institutions such as Huairou Science City (profiled) and Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech, pictured) are engaging more and more with artistic programming and collaboration. Photograph: Sparktour / CC-BY-SA 4.0

6. State scientific institutions are increasingly engaging with art, despite China's traditional separation of sciences and humanities.

China's pedagogical approach has historically maintained a separation of sciences and humanities, positioning art as largely foreign to scientific contexts. However, since the mid-2010s a notable shift has occurred, with art-science collaborations becoming more prevalent, particularly between prestigious art academies like CAFA and state scientific institutions. These developments can be largely attributed to the influential work of Qiu Zhijie who, alongside his colleagues and doctoral students, has established a significant presence within establishment art-science contexts.

The Larva of Time, a 2024 exhibition at NYU Shanghai exploring different conceptions of time, was the result of collaborations between two Chinese artists and two scientists at Peking University's School of Life Sciences, as facilitated by its Berggruen Research Center.[56] Berggruen, itself the China offshoot of a private Californian think tank, grants fellowships and undertakes projects under themes like 'creative futures' and 'science, technology and philosophy', creating a rare hub for academic, artistic, and scientific and public engagement between Chinese and international institutions.

Evidence of this emerging integration can be seen in unexpected places, such as the Shenzhen Industrial Innovation Center for Engineering Biology – a major new synthetic biology facility partially created by the China Academy of Science – where CAFA organised a bio-art exhibition even before the facility's official opening. As YJ, Director of a biotech accelerator, explains, 'Everyone hopes for some kind of integration with the arts to make technology more visible and accessible to the public, so that people no longer see it as just zeros and ones, as merely coded things, but as something warmer and emotionally engaging.'

As the landscape for establishment art-science work in China continues to expand, it is typically driven by art institutions and facilitated through formal institutional relationships (professor-to-professor, institute-to-institute). A significant opportunity for further development lies in cultivating more specialised curatorial research and expertise dedicated to bridging these traditionally separate domains.

Case study: Huairou Science City and University of Science and Technology of China

Huairou Science City is a major scientific research hub located in the north-eastern suburbs of Beijing.

Still partly under construction, Huairou is a sprawling complex built to host 25,000 residents. It serves as a key research base for the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and houses several of its premier institutes, including the Institute of Physics and the Beijing National Laboratory for Condensed Matter Physics. The 100 square kilometre complex features specialised facilities, such as the High Energy Photon Source (HEPS) Synchotron accelerator.

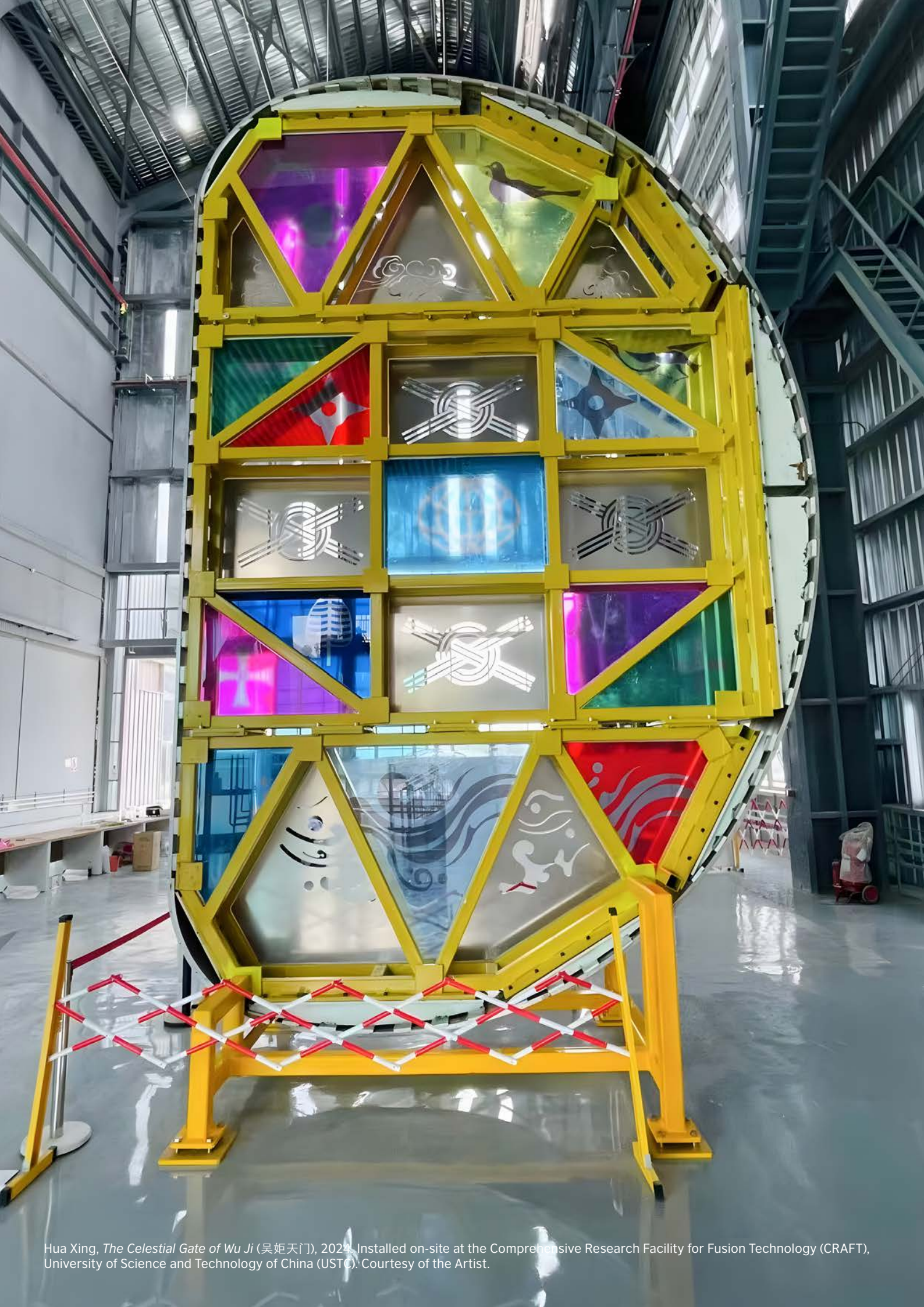
Nestled among the Huairou research laboratories, the cultural infrastructure features prominently, including a concert hall, a theatre, a vast exhibition space and a building for hosting artist-scientist residencies.

Huairou offers an instructive example for the aspirations and practicalities of art-science collaboration within state institutions. The allocation of the artist residency building was agreed by the administrators and the third-party company responsible for organising cultural offerings as part of the overall Science City plan, whose founder happened to have trained at CAFA with Qiu Zhijie. It remains far from clear what kind of art, artist or residency will be established here: this would be for an incoming curator to decide. Nonetheless, art was something Huairou's leadership felt willing to allocate resources to, without any predefined idea of what it would look like.

USTC is China's premier science and technology university, founded in 1958 by the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The Art and Science centre at the USTC is led by curator Dr Sun Yue, while her husband, Hua Xing, is the university's artist in residence. Having relocated to Hefei to take up the position in 2024, Sun, also a student of Qiu Zhijie, was tasked with setting up research programmes between the university's humanities faculty and scientific researchers. Hua Xing, a sculptor experienced with large-scale public works, found himself in the right place at the right time, with their presence as artistic practitioners on campus opening up opportunities for commissions. He has now made several sculptures across the university's campuses, with departments fighting over his work, which is often made using surplus machine parts and large-scale scientific equipment, or otherwise inspired by technical research.

Dr Sun Yue also organised the Hefei Science and Art Festival, which emerged from a proposal during a USTC government research delegation visit as part of Hefei's science popularisation strategy. The festival faced a rocky start, due to modest resources and limited municipal engagement from the Hefei tourism bureau. The festival represents an early attempt to bridge Hefei's strong scientific institutions with artistic expression, though it has yet to achieve the scale and impact of its international counterparts. Nevertheless, it serves as a platform for public engagement with science through art, in a city historically known for its research capabilities but limited artistic infrastructure.



Hua Xing, *The Celestial Gate of Wu Ji* (吴炬天门), 2024. Installed on-site at the Comprehensive Research Facility for Fusion Technology (CRAFT), University of Science and Technology of China (USTC). Courtesy of the Artist.

Case study: Location-based VR

> **One thing is finding a way to survive, second is acquiring the necessary skills – skills that no specialised schools provide – and then having enough time to learn through trial and error, as VR is not a mature medium.**
>
> **— Zhang Daming, VR Director of Felttime Studio**

Location-based VR (LBVR) refers to virtual reality entertainment experiences, where visitors don a VR headset in a physical location, such as an exhibition, a mall or another brick-and-mortar space. While personal VR headsets have struggled for steady adoption, both in China and worldwide, LBVR has become a growing phenomenon, operating principally on the model of ticketed narrative experiences, digital exhibitions and tourism.

In 2025, the Chinese LBVR market was valued at $253.49 million and is projected to grow at 35.8% annually in the coming years, as part of a rapidly growing global market.[57] This is second only to the US market globally.[58]

The boom in LBVR has coincided with a drop in consumer VR headsets since 2023, although the acquisition of domestic hardware developer Pico by tech giant ByteDance suggests long-term hopes for the medium.[59,60] This decline has been attributed to a lack of compelling content in this niche artform, which tracks with interviewee Zhang Daming and Into Games's observations of a shortage of investment and opportunities to build fulfilling new projects, especially in China. Zhang noted that within an already small VR community, 'very few' people were making new VR content, while Into Games diversified their game development business into a number of LBVR experience centres in Shanghai and Hangzhou.

The growing popularity of LBVR can be attributed to at least three major factors of commerce, policy and content. 'Retailtainment', which brings high-tech experiences to mall spaces, has seen joint ventures between technology and real estate players.[61] Museum-based experiences, often in the context of historical exhibits, have been embraced as a way to experience heritage sites and other rare materials.[62] A 2019 report, for instance, describes how a VR museum for the Dunhuang Mogao Caves emerged from digitisation and preservation research.[63] This also aligns closely with central government support for digital arts and creativity,[64] and downstream projects such as Hubei University's VR project on rural village preservation of the ethnic minority Tujia people.[65]

In the culture and tourism sector, French studio Excurio's *Horizons of Khufu* – a ticketed VR experience about ancient Egypt – extended for three runs in Shanghai and toured across China. Its explosive success generated numerous attempts at replication.The VR market has seen many peaks and lulls since 2018, and LBVR is currently riding high in a field dominated by those who can bring scale and IP to paying audiences. Just this year, iQIYI (often dubbed 'China's Netflix'), announced an 'iQIYI Land' theme park initiative in Yangzhou, which combines VR attractions with IP from iQIYI's streaming hits, creating narrative-driven experiences that merge cinema and interactive gaming.[66] Smaller producers, on the other hand, face a more challenging environment for an artform that has yet to become mainstream.

Zhang Daming, *OrBit*, VR film, 2019. Courtesy of the Artist.

> Driven by tech industry demands, the universities have no interest in educating students to be artists in a traditional artistic education way. But they're happy to educate future innovators and technologists who specialise in media technology.
>
> — Julian Feng, Artist and Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University-Beijing Normal University United International College

7. Commercial creative industries

Many arts and technologies practitioners draw income from the wider creative industries, such as graphic design, product photography, art direction for fashion and advertising campaigns, CGI work for commercial productions and so on.

In the opposite direction, practitioners operating primarily in these fields are also active as artists, architects and production designers working in the art world and the wider field of arts and technologies.

As China's consumer economy has rapidly grown, the commercial creative industry represents the primary mainstream space where the skillset of arts and technologies overlaps with well-paid work. Many educators reported that students who were learning arts and technologies skills expressed no ambitions for becoming professional artists in the conventional mould, since there were no career opportunities there. Instead, the most common ambitions were to find well-paid jobs with large tech and social media companies as designers and content producers, or even as influencers (wanghong). This economic reality creates a situation where creative professionals must adapt to market demands regardless of personal preference – 'I don't have the chance to choose. I cannot choose. I just do it when there's a way', acknowledges artist Zhang Wenxin, reflecting on how both she and her artist friends undertake commercial work without the luxury of being selective about their employers.

Gigwork aside, fashion-adjacent cultural platforms such as NOWNESS also take an interest in the art world trends and popular names. For instance, NOWNESS recently undertook an exhibition *A Thousand Silicon Eyes* on AI and creativity.

In a more ambient manner, the subcultural aesthetics of arts and technologies, and contemporary art more broadly, are visibly influential within the luxury sector in China. Shanghai's Gentle Monster 'Haus Nowhere' flagship store, for example, is known for its spectacular animatronic installations, sometimes commissioned from artists.[67] One marketing officer with extensive experience in Alibaba, startups and architecture indicated that he maintains awareness of the latest developments in both contemporary art and fashion to inform his art direction. However, when it comes to the work itself, he would be likely to hire commercial illustrators and interior designers for pavilions, but not conventional artists per se.

The commercial creative industries remain a question mark for arts and technologies since there are clearly financial barriers for practitioners seeking to make an income. However, traditionally highly paid creative work in big tech (*dachang*) is shrinking due to the economic downturn and the use of AI tools, leading to fewer jobs. Meanwhile, thousands of students graduate each year with training in arts and technologies skills.

Case study: Into Games

> **I think people from art schools tend to be more idealistic.**
>
> — Cheng Jia, Co-founder of Into Games

Into Games, a Hangzhou-based VR games company, was established in 2016 by a team of artists who first worked together in 2006, as graduates of China Academy of Art's Mixed Media department, although their 3D skills were gained in extracurricular courses. After a decade building 3D assets for outsourcing companies, such as MassiveBlack, and producing content for Western game studios, the team decided to start their own company.

> **For the same project proposal, the budget from the big tech companies could be three times ours.**
>
> — Cheng Jia, Co-founder of Into Games

Art school beginnings

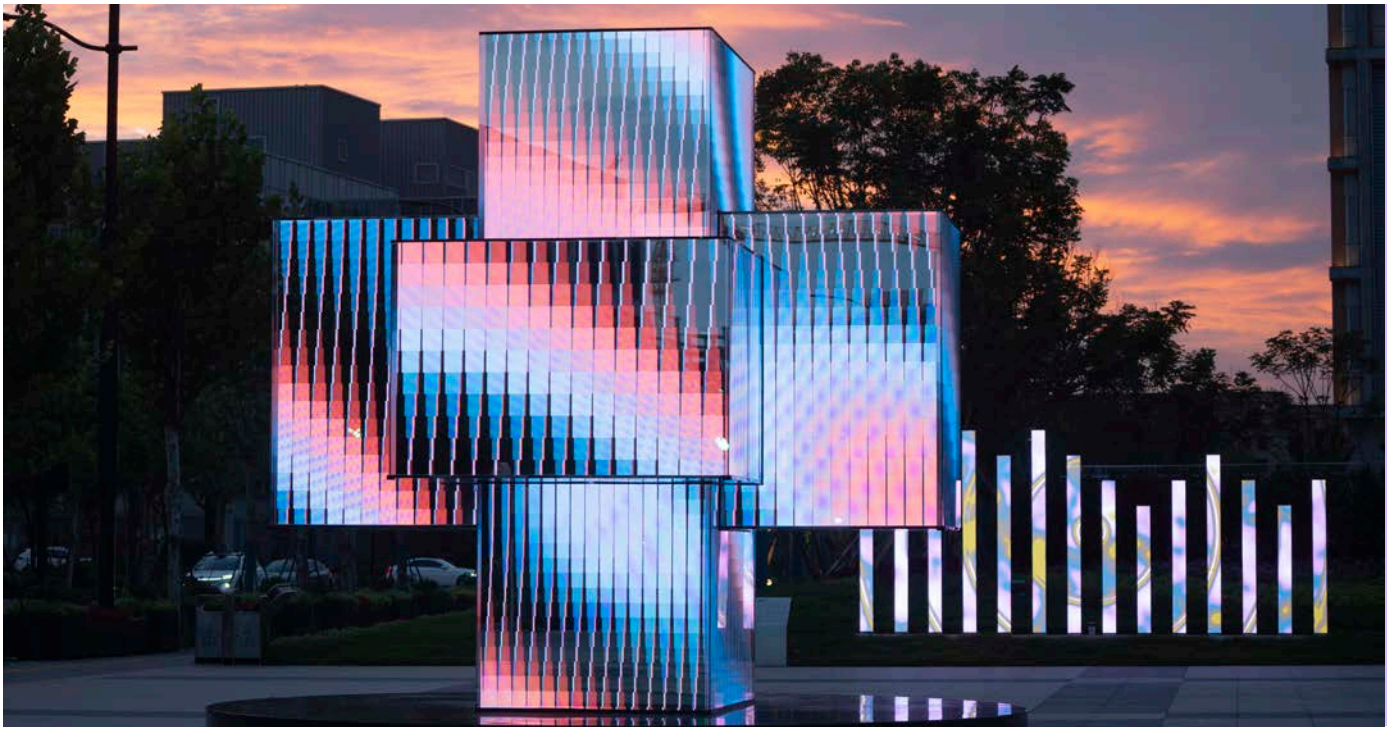
Today, the 40-person independent studio balances commercial success with creative ambition. Their first game, *Zomday* (which sold 2,000 copies on its first day on Steam), proved a commercial success. They maintain independence through a mixed model: developing their own IPs for international markets (87% of their players are overseas) and collaborating with major IPs like their recent *Three-Body Problem* game, while running a dozen VR immersive experiences in various offline spaces in Shanghai and Hangzhou.

Navigating challenges in China's VR gaming landscape

Smaller studios like Into Games face a challenging market, as investments in addictive mobile games are more profitable than VR or AAA titles, with long development cycles and a smaller market share. The VR sector presents particular challenges in China, where active users remain under one million. Where big tech firms (dachang) have greater financial firepower, small studios need to balance between artistically satisfying projects and more commercial products that appeal to casual VR players. Moreover, smaller studios like Into Games can't compete with big tech salaries. Instead, their hiring strategy values learning ability over elite educational backgrounds.

The phenomenal success of *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024) – China's first AAA video game title – by the Hangzhou-based studio Game Science, gave a significant boost to the Chinese games industry. The fact that its success drew on one of the most famous works in traditional Chinese culture, *Journey to the West*, is not lost on studios like Into Games. While promoting traditional Chinese culture may not lead directly to government financing – Hangzhou is already a patchwork of 'innovation zones' offering tax incentives for start-ups – it is clear that pursuing this direction makes it much easier for authorities and news media to boost the product. To this end, Into Games have been working on new assets derived from various cultural heritage sites, including Sanxingdui and the Dunhuang Mogao Caves.[68]

Into Games, stills taken from VR games 超时空猎人 and 僵死之日. © Into Games.



Turning Tower 图灵塔, produced by Raiden, Turning Square, 2023. © Raiden.

8. Commercial arts and technologies production

From public sculptural installations and urban light shows to architectural-scale projection mapping and LED facades, Chinese cities can sometimes feel like an electronic canvas waiting to be filled. Broadly falling under the category of 'culture and tourism', initiatives around museum spaces, urban gentrification, heritage restoration and more have created a great demand for spectacular displays of digital art.

Artists, traditionally understood, have an ambiguous relationship to such productions. The global trend for immersive art shows, such as those of Van Gogh and David Hockney (which opened in Shanghai in 2025), has been popular in China, and many young artists seek to emulate the success of artist-cum-production companies such as TeamLAB. The majority of these productions, however, are undertaken by commercial teams without explicit artistic authorship. Companies such as OUTPUT, MANA, Feijun Studio and Raiden take on exhibition contracts issued by municipalities, museums and government festivals; they fall under arts and technologies practice and overlap significantly with artistic work but do not typically see themselves as such.

What distinguishes between commercial arts and technologies production? The latter have typically valued autonomy and a critical stance towards technology, emphasising discursive or conceptual intervention over play and spectacle, whereas these commercial productions are geared wholeheartedly towards producing satisfying and fun audience experiences. Another related difference is that these contracts are often issued by local governments and come with associated pressures of political correctness, excessive bureaucracy and cultural differences.

Nonetheless, as the co-founder of Raiden described in our Shanghai roundtable, there is often a blurred line and an opportunity for arbitrage, whereby artists work in this domain to make money while creating exhibition opportunities for 'real' artworks. However, in this negotiation, it is not uncommon for a substantial number of the exhibitors to fail a censorship audit.[69]

Case study: OUTPUT

> **I find that Chinese artists are more flexible, while Western artists may be more stubborn and prescriptive about how audiences experience their work. I tell them that our experience in China may be different. China is very advanced on the application of technologies, so when Western partners learn more, they realise: 'Oh, such-and-such a thing exists, we didn't realise you can do it like this'.**[73]
>
> **— Cai Mingzhi, Vice-President of OUTPUT**

OUTPUT is a leading Chinese creative technology company bridging art, technology, and commercial production. Describing itself as a 'global digital content platform',[70] OUTPUT was founded in New York in 2017 by arts administration graduate Liu Yinmeng, before relocating to China with a small team in 2018. Today, its Shanghai HQ runs a team of 100-150.

OUTPUT's work exemplifies what this report refers to as 'commercial arts and technologies production' in China. Its first major production was the exhibition 'Celebrating Chinese New Year at the Palace' at Beijing's Palace Museum, which became the first of five collaborations between the two.[71] Alongside the museum shows, OUTPUT's many commercial clients include Salomon, Adidas and urban municipalities. In 2025, it produced the Shanghai edition of David Hockney's immersive exhibition at West Bund Art Museum as part of a long-term partnership with London immersive art company Lightroom. In a joint team with Tongji University, OUTPUT also won the architectural competition for a corporate science and technology museum in Shenzhen, commissioned by one of China's leading tech giants for its thirtieth anniversary opening in 2028.

The company works with a roster of 1000 artists – from traditional artists such as Xu Bing to gamers, coders and illustrators – in the capacity of a global agency for sales and IP, and production team for realising works, in some ways not unlike a major gallery. It also designs and produces large-scale exhibitions for major museums, as well as commercial spaces like malls and airports, like a production house. However, its business model is more akin to that of a content marketing agency, developing end-to-end projects for commercial clients, from conceptualisation and strategy to content and technical production, to IP management and distribution – all through the medium of creative technology and immersive media art. As its co-founder remarks in an interview,'This allows artists to focus on creative direction.'[72] In this sense, it could be understood as a holistic business for commercial screen-based media, bringing the work of its roster of multimedia and digital artists to some of the largest public displays, and consumer audiences, in the world.

OUTPUT, along with other commercial arts and technologies companies such as MANA and Raiden, demonstrates how arts and technologies in Mainland China often blurs the traditional boundaries between conventional production models, producing new alignments between artists, museums, brand content, public and commercial space, and audience development that undermine traditional artistic models – innovations driven by different sources of demand existing in China's ecosystem.

The possibility of this fusion stems in part from its team, the vast majority of whom were educated in the arts, internationally, and therefore experiences little friction in creating large-scale productions with global partners, although 80% of its projects take place in China.

Installation view of David Hockney's immersive installation, *Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)*, produced by OUTPUT, West Bund Museum, 2025. © West Bund Museum.

Challenges faced by practitioners

In brief

Few economically sustainable career paths

Despite demand for arts and technologies content, graduates increasingly don't dream of becoming traditional artists. Students target tech industry jobs over artistic careers, with commercial creative industries serving as the primary source of income for many practitioners.

Political constraints and censorship

Censorship is a fact of everyday life for artists, curators and everyone involved in producing exhibitions and public events in China. At the same time, arts and technologies is one of the few spaces of artistic exploration that is less heavily censored.

Institutional fragility

The ecosystem features remarkable talent, market activity and creative energy, but suffers from institutional fragility. Many organisations depend heavily on volatile economic waves, and short-term funding models that make sustained programming difficult.

Training-opportunity mismatch

Structural funding gaps affect independent artists outside institutional affiliations; state funding exists but requires institutional sponsorship and ideological alignment.

Relationship dependencies

The field operates through relationship-driven networks that enable innovation but create vulnerabilities and barriers to systematic growth.

> While the curriculum attempts to touch on theories and critical thinking, technical training is still essential to ensure employability, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most graduates target gaming industry jobs, while top performers tend to pursue commercial start-ups. Few want to be artists.
>
> — **Wu Ziyang, Artist and Professor at China Academy of Art**

The field of arts and technologies in Mainland China is highly advanced and deeply uneven, in a shifting landscape which affords new opportunities but also suffers from considerable economic and institutional fragility that makes building sustainable practices and careers difficult – particularly in new and experimental media.

Some of these challenges arise from the wider economic and political conditions, such as rising unemployment and censorship constraints. Other challenges stem from the internal dynamics of the arts and technologies field, which often draws upon diverse institutional resources, artistic or technical vocabularies, and experimental aesthetics, leading to both a richness of variety and an extensive web of relationships needed to make it happen. The fact of Chinese business culture being broadly relationship-driven compounds the effect of communicative bottlenecks and institutional fragility across the sector, which depends on the efforts of a small number of decision makers.

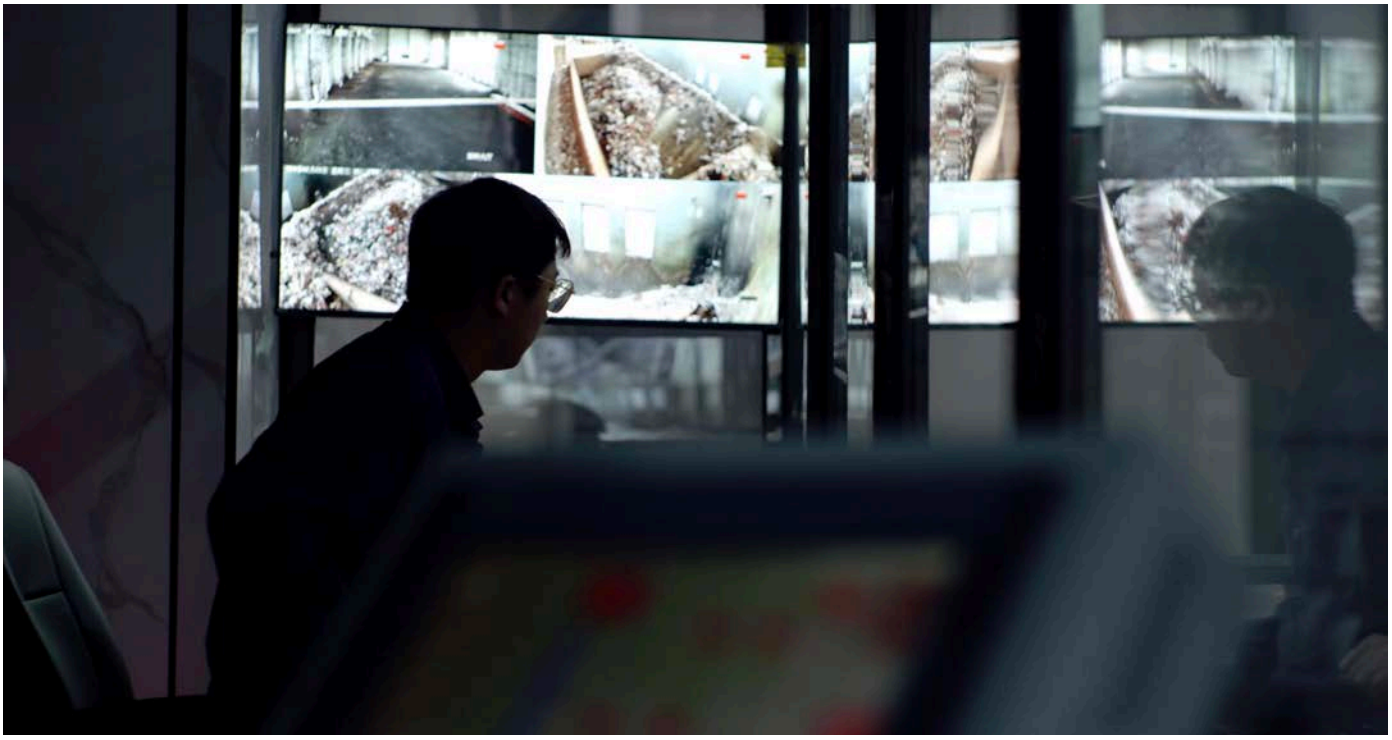
1. Graduates Don't Dream of Becoming Artists

There is a huge and growing number of academic programmes related to arts and technologies in China, particularly following the Internet Plus and Double First-Class policies around 2015, which emphasised emerging and interdisciplinary subjects as well as digital innovation.[74] Each year, thousands of undergraduates, master's students and PhDs graduate from programmes in contemporary arts and media production, design and creative technology, in diverse departments in every province across the nation. In these programmes, the possibilities of technological creation are becoming more and more accessible.

As Julian Feng, artist and lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University-Beijing Normal University United International College remarks, 'The computer graphic skills we teach students are very modularised or well-black-boxed; you don't need to know the super-detailed underlying mechanisms and algorithms to be good at them. It's like a game itself, basically. We separate the workable technologies for the theoretical and mathematical computer science areas. You don't need to be a computer scientist to be a 3D artist.'

However, this does not mean that students are incentivised to become artistic practitioners – even if their teachers chose that path. While being an artist in China has always meant a kind of voluntary precarity, artistic opportunities were more optimistic in the 2010s, and the educators we interviewed typically spent their early careers as young artists in a more openly globalising world. Despite an overall futuristic pace of technological change, pessimism about jobs and prospects prevails. For most, seeking a good job after graduation means applying for roles in big tech firms, which are well known for their churn of young graduates.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that all arts and technologies practices are well-supported. A nascent field such as VR, for example, lacks a formal educational pipeline for content creation, meaning that most practitioners are self-taught. As Zhang Daming reflected, creators in VR often need to start from adjacent fields, such as theatre or direction, and patch together skill sets in game engine work or 360 films themselves, while constantly adapting to new workflows.

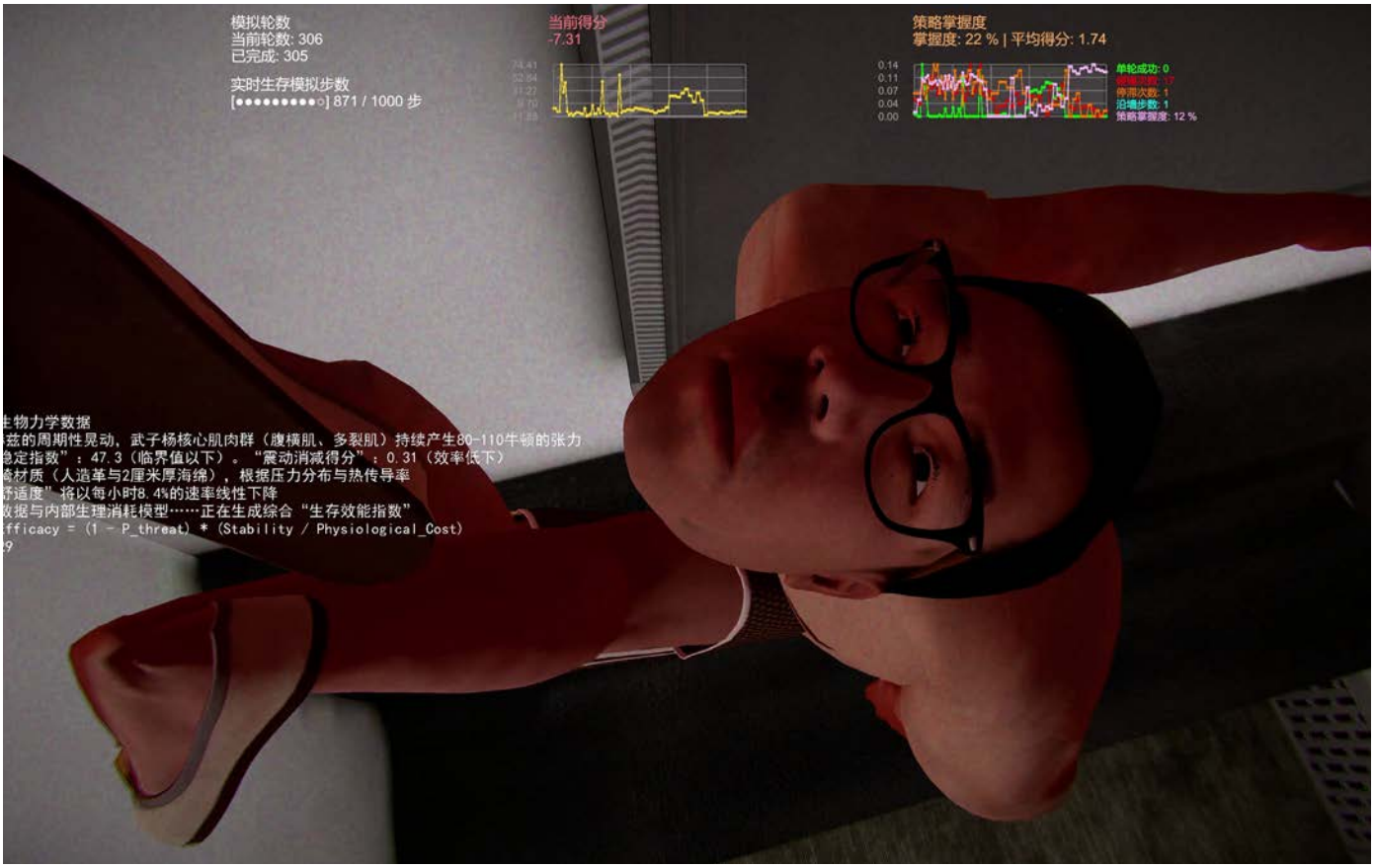


Mia Yu, *Eme Cosmos,* 2024. Still from single-channel film. Courtesy of the Artist.

2. Political constraints and censorship

For arts and technologies, censorship has a double-edged effect. Social and political issues have long sat at the centre of contemporary art practices and discourses, from post-coloniality to gender identity to ideology. For many years, contemporary artists have rubbed up against state censors, but their small scale and limited domestic impact (despite international renown) has allowed them to operate in the interstices of mainstream culture. As censorship has grown more severe, the very fact of making contemporary art in the critical idiom recognisable to its practitioners has become much more difficult, leading many artists to adopt more indirect, allegorical and poetic explorations, or to leave behind social issues altogether. Many artists, now well-established, could not have exhibited the works that made them famous in the 1990s and 2000s, in the 2010s.

Nevertheless, arts and technologies constitutes one of the few spaces of artistic exploration and investigation that is not heavily censored. Science and technology is one of the key focal points of the Party's 14th Five-Year Plan,[75] and technological themes, from science fiction to quantum physics to AI, have been largely embraced by state organs, leading to a trickle-down of demand for content into various aspects of society, not least museums and public spaces. Technology has been the dominant narrative of economic transformation and social turbulence across the globe over the past 20 years and, in so many ways, is deeply connected to social, political and aesthetic issues. As such, technology is not only an available topic for art but is also an urgent and interesting one. Where many other topics are likely to be censored, the ubiquitous significance of technology is a theme in which different forms of expression can be embedded and, at least nominally, aligned with widely accepted political goals.[76] As such, a major theme of this report is that the shared global interest in technological innovation provides common ground where international artistic exchanges, co-productions and knowledge-sharing initiatives can flourish, potentially opening channels for dialogue that might otherwise remain closed.



Wu Ziyang, *Two Walls: An AI Simulation on How to Evade Drone Attacks in Contemporary Warfare*, 2025. Real-time AI Simulation and Lecture Performance. Courtesy of the Artist.

> **Maybe that's a challenge for us, like we need to cultivate a certain or different... corpules and to talk to like different groups and to make this kind of translation or interpretations to set up this kind of connections from different groups. Maybe that's our job.**
>
> **— Milia Xin Bi, Director of Chronus Art Center**

3. Institutions can be fragile and personal relationships are key.

As the cliché goes, Chinese society operates significantly through *guanxi* (relationships). In the rarefied field of arts and technologies, with its precious number of institutions and sparse interdisciplinary interfaces in a fast-moving landscape, it is difficult to overemphasise the extent to which many facts emerge due to largely accidental reasons, or the whims of an individual and their connections. For instance, one artist, known for working closely with the commercial rocket industry, found connections to that field because a classmate at Tsinghua became the CEO of a rocket company. The fact that China's only non-profit new media institution persists is due to a single passionate benefactor. That Huairou Science City looks forward to a major art and science programme is largely because one major contractor was a student in the art-science department of CAFA and is linked into those networks. Alumni forged in international master's programmes, such as NYU's ITP, RISD's Digital Media programme, MIT's ACT, or Goldsmith's in London, are also influential on their return home.

It is not only about personal contacts creating opportunities, but also connecting to decision-makers within an organisation. As curator Wu Jianru reflected, 'Within these corporations, scientists and engineers are typically positioned as workers without much agency – they are rarely in a position to initiate cross-disciplinary projects. Meaningful collaboration is more likely to happen through individual connections or with privately owned, mid-sized companies, where founders or decision makers have the freedom and curiosity to explore new directions. I think this type of collaboration is becoming more common, as many younger entrepreneurs today are highly ambitious and open to new ideas.'[77]

4.

Opportunities

The rapid evolution of arts and technologies in China is creating new global opportunities

Arts and technologies are a vibrant and critical field for the open exchange of culture and knowledge towards a common future.

This chapter explores how international collaboration can help arts and technologies flourish as a vibrant field of exchange between cultures, nations, disciplines and practitioners. It discusses existing models and offers recommendations and suggested pathways for international organisations – such as the British Council – as well as institutions, practitioners and other stakeholders in global arts and technologies interested in establishing and furthering collaborations in Mainland China.

The challenges of international creative collaboration, especially in a diffuse field like arts and technologies, often lie in the nuances of facilitation, culture clash, matchmaking and interpersonal relationships. For example, a recent paper, *Opportunities and Challenges for UK-China Collaboration in The Creative Industries* identified challenges such as regulatory differences, cultural differences, communication barriers, lack of understanding, limited resources and differences in measuring outcomes.

The following pages identify opportunities and bridge gaps in the collaborative field of arts and technologies between the the UK, China and other international parties. These include ethical, practical and strategic considerations with the aim of developing generative international collaborations responsive to the resources and gaps in the rich field of arts and technologies in Mainland China. These include institutional directions, networking structures, the communication of mutual benefits, long-term partnerships and exploring existing bridges between China, the UK and the rest of the world.

Models of collaboration

Artists visiting Organhaus, an artist-run organisation in Chongqing, which has hosted international residencies and workshops since 2006. Photographer: Gary Zhexi Zhang.

Artist residencies

Artist residencies are opportunities for creative practitioners to spend an extended period at a host institution, often abroad, to research, create and engage with new cultural and technological contexts. In the UK–China context, these residencies foster cross-cultural dialogue and enable the building of lasting professional networks. For arts and technologies practitioners, they can often support artists in working with new production processes and technocultural contexts. Mid-sized institutional exchanges, such as the Triangle Network[78] and the British Council's Musicians in Residence programme,[79] have played key roles in facilitating vibrant and generative exchanges across the world, offering rare opportunities for artists to work internationally.

Artist residencies are highly productive for fostering deep engagement, cross-cultural learning and the development of new work that is informed by local context. As noted by the Asian Cultural Council, 'international residencies foster relationships between individual artists, scholars and arts professionals across cultures and international borders in a way that has the potential to change the world'.[80]

Touring productions and exhibitions

Touring productions and exhibitions involve the movement of major museum-level or large-scale cultural presentations between countries. Many prominent Chinese art museums have played host to major exhibitions from leading world museums such as Tate Modern, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museo del Prado, often supported at diplomatic level by consulates and national culture ministries. Large-scale

arts and technologies productions, such as large immersive shows and location-based VR exhibitions by commercial production companies, also tour frequently to museums and mall spaces.

Touring exhibitions are an excellent and traditional way to bring major cultural productions into new contexts, raising the profile of both artists and institutions and providing audiences with access to world-class works. However, this model can limit the development of local curatorial expertise, as Chinese museums can serve primarily as presentation spaces rather than active collaborators. In the context of ticketed immersive experiences, touring is often an essential part of the business model. For VR, in-person experiences have also been important for countering the challenge of low demand for personal headsets.

Educational partnerships

In in the 1990s, the Chinese government implemented educational policies promoting collaboration between domestic and international academic institutions. This initiative, referred to as transnational education (TNE) in British contexts and Chinese-foreign co-operation in running schools within China, has flourished over the past three decades. The framework encompasses collaborative institutes and joint educational programmes, growing to more than 1,400 active partnerships as of 2023. UK institutions have been a major partner, accounting for a fifth of overall partnerships, although this has slowed in recent years.[81]

Global universities have also opened a number of franchise campuses in China. These arrangements often involve significant investment from local governments and are prominent in fields like design, media arts and creative technologies, in which NYU Shanghai, Duke Kunshan, and HKUST in Guangzhou all offer English-language majors. These universities are also attractive places for bringing talent to teach in China, as they offer globally competitive salaries.

Educational partnerships are productive for building long-term academic and professional ties, enhancing the international experience of students, and supporting the development of creative industries talent. As a recent analysis notes, 'UK universities have become partners of choice for Chinese universities in the development of joint institutes and joint programmes', but the landscape is evolving, with a move toward more selective and higher-quality collaborations.[82] These programmes help to create formative bonds between students, institutions and academic networks, supporting the internationalisation of education and research.

Strategic industrial partnerships

Strategic institutional partnerships involve long-term research and innovation collaborations between UK and Chinese organisations in education, the private sector and creative industries. These partnerships are designed to align goals, share knowledge and build trust between industry and practitioner networks for economic and cultural co-operation.

Strategic industrial partnerships such as innovation hubs are highly generative for network-building, knowledge-sharing, cultural exports and the development of sustainable, multi-faceted collaborations between UK and Chinese creative industries. On a more mundane but crucial level, they provide scarce opportunities for UK and Chinese companies to meet and learn about each other's needs. As the AHRC SEED Fellowship report notes, 'the Chinese government also acknowledged the significance of collaborative R&D to the economy, underpinning their support for new R&D partnerships'.[83] The experiences of creative industry actors also demonstrates the need for sharing concrete guidance on how to operate between the two regions, better facilitation in finding partners, and greater awareness of successful models to follow.[84]

Festival and event collaborations

International festivals and events, such as film, music and technology festivals, serve as key platforms for showcasing new work, networking and fostering collaboration in emerging sectors like VR and XR. These events are crucial for performance and temporal media, providing opportunities for distribution and international recognition.[85]

Festivals and events are essential for building international networks, exposing artists to new markets and facilitating creative collaboration, especially in rapidly evolving fields. They are particularly important for works involving live performance, location-based media and immersive technologies such as XR, providing a crucial context for experiencing the works and for network-building with creators and distributors.

Delegations

Groups of representatives from different countries undertake short guided visits to share institutional knowledge, network, form collaborations and learn about different cultural and production environments. For example, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative's emphasis on cultural exchange, delegations such as the Shaanxi TV group have retraced the Silk Road to promote economic and cultural exchange between China and the UK, engaging with institutions and audiences along the route.

Delegation exchanges are a long-standing and effective method for initiating institutional relationships, sharing best practices and exploring collaborative opportunities. While the outcomes can be difficult to quantify, the personal and professional networks established through these visits often underpin more substantial future projects and sustained engagement.

Recommendations

In brief

Prioritise learning and reciprocity

Emphasis on reciprocity and learning to address knowledge asymmetries; long-term relationship building over short-term exchanges; leveraging diaspora networks as cultural mediators; focusing on shared technological futures

Form an advisory network

Establish formal structures to systematically connect across cultural divides, provide ongoing guidance, and maintain institutional memory beyond individual relationships

Build joint production teams

Develop collaborative creative partnerships targeting China's robust audience demand while leveraging UK creative expertise with Chinese production infrastructure and technical capabilities

Incubate emerging practitioners

Create targeted programmes for young graduates transitioning to professional practice in an evolving landscape where traditional career paths are less viable

Explore scientific collaborations

Leverage China's openness to art-science initiatives and the field's relative freedom from political constraints; build on natural cross-cultural spaces in scientific infrastructure

Establish sustainable partnerships

Focus on institutional capacity-building and shared resources rather than one-off events, addressing the ecosystem's relationship-driven nature and need for patient development

1. Prioritise learning and reciprocity

Under the Cloud, a bilingual publication compiling research gathered during artistic field study in the Guizhou province of south-west China, published by Serpentine and part-funded by the British Council. © Serpentine.

> **We circulated that call in our networks and we got applications from over 70 countries. But now, thinking back, I realise we didn't do any kind of dedicated marketing in China... I realised we actually didn't get that many applications from China. So I'm feeling there's probably a lot of international opportunities that are open to the whole world, but then I guess to gain traction in China, you just have to do all this extra effort.**
>
> **— Erin Li, Curator of Delfina Foundation, London**

Addressing the challenge of language barriers, cultural awareness and lack of knowledge about China's rapidly changing ecosystem for creative industries and arts and technologies

Perhaps the biggest challenge of international collaboration is facilitating productive communication and exchange across different and fast-evolving contexts. Over the past two decades, China's creative industry has rapidly moved up the cultural value chain and is increasingly an exporter of culture, including arts and technologies such as games, design and media. Where Chinese audiences are voracious consumers of global media, domestic cultural production increasingly looks to export. For instance, the co-founder of Into Games expressed hopes that Western audiences would come to learn more about Chinese mythological narratives – such as the legend of the monkey king at the heart of *Black Myth: Wukong* – just as Chinese audiences are deeply familiar with classical Western motifs, such as Greco-Roman mythology. One anonymous participant in the 2018 Hello Shenzhen Maker Exchange also reflected that, while it was positive to meet UK-based technologists, because the innovation chain was overwhelmingly concentrated in China it was unclear what was to be learned from the exchange.

Reciprocity is key. Potential collaborators should endeavour to address this informational imbalance by learning about China's expansive cultural ecosystem, which is no short order. International organisations and industrial partnership hubs can support this by maintaining up-to-date guidance on China's creative institutions, industries, business and regulatory environments, as well as a quick-start guide for its social media, payment and overall app ecosystem. This can be coupled with a database of sector-based contacts and potential partners for realising collaborations.

2. Form an advisory network

Zhang Wenxin, *Info Highway 2020.* Still from 8K colour animation with sound, 2020. Courtesy of the Artist.

> **It's very hard for me to understand how to design that pitch without really understanding how much they [Chinese companies] want to be part of the international art circuit and how much of a benefit a global art brand like Serpentine is to them.**
>
> **— Eva Jäger, Arts Technologies Curator of Serpentine, London**

Establish a formal China-based advisory network of cultural mediators to systematically connect international organisations and practitioners across institutional divides.

The current landscape of UK–China arts and technologies collaboration relies heavily on a small number of individuals who can effectively operate across cultural and institutional divides. To address this bottleneck, we recommend establishing a formal China-based advisory network specifically designed to connect international organisations and practitioners. This network would systematically identify and support a wider range of existing cross-cultural brokers, creating a more resilient ecosystem of exchange that doesn't depend solely on personal relationships. By building a specialised curatorial network with members who understand both contexts deeply, the advisory body could dramatically increase the efficiency and sustainability of cross-cultural initiatives.

Such a network would create platforms for continuous knowledge exchange rather than one-off events, allowing for the development of long-term relationships and institutional memory. The practical applications of this network would scale from high-level strategic alignment between major institutions to granular matchmaking between individual practitioners when new opportunities arise. With proper support and recognition, these cultural mediators could transform the currently fragmented landscape of UK–China collaboration into a more coherent and accessible ecosystem, significantly lowering barriers to entry for newcomers while ensuring culturally informed approaches to partnership.

3. Build joint production teams

Three Body Immersive Art Exhibition produced by Raiden, 2023–24. © Raiden.

> **The Western PhDs are good at inventing from 0 to 1, the engineers in China are good at engineering from 1 to 100.**
>
> **— Julian Feng, Artist and Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University-Beijing Normal University United International College**

Create international teams that combine creative minds across the UK and China, scaling new IPs through China's robust audience demand.

Collaborating creative partnerships should be aware of what each can offer the other. Taking the prospect of UK–China collaboration, we can identify that the UK has a leading creative industry with in-demand artistic training institutions and government-led resources for artistic development, such as the three-year immersive arts fund launched in 2024. While China has fewer government grants for artistic development, it has a thriving commercial creative industry, thousands of arts and technologies graduates each year, robust audience demand for immersive arts (as demonstrated by *Horizons of Khufu*) and significant production and presentation infrastructure. The UK, on the other hand, has relatively weaker audience demand and presentation venues for touring immersive works.

As such, facilitating joint UK–Chinese creative production teams aimed at a China-first market could bring vibrant collaborative productions to wide audiences, leveraging China's voracious consumer market to scale ideas 'from 1 to 100'. For example, the success of Chinese science fiction at home and abroad, as well as the state's support around promoting digital cultural heritage, could present opportunities to develop new IPs built around Chinese themes, which could then be brought to global audiences. This represents a concrete opportunity where UK cultural investment can catalyse new productions that can be made commercially viable through the Chinese market via international creative teams.

4. Incubate emerging practitioners

Graduation show of the Open Media Department at China Academy of Art, Hangzhou. © China Academy of Art Open Media Department.

Develop targeted residencies, entrepreneurial training and flexible visa pathways to support arts and technologies graduates in transitioning to professional practice across both countries.

In China, and perhaps globally, arts and technologies are at a generational inflection point, principally due to the disruptions of AI, shifts in the global technology economy and changing artistic attitudes and audiences. Put simply, young arts and technologies graduates in China in 2025 face very different conditions to their teachers, who might have graduated a decade or more earlier. Access to tools and skills has never been more abundant and open-ended; job opportunities have seldom been more scarce. Such cultural shifts enable new entrepreneurial opportunities for those who are able to take risks, but to do so requires early-stage support and investment that is in short supply in the Chinese ecosystem. Here, the UK can help incubate young practice and set the stage for fruitful collaborations.

The future of UK–China collaboration in arts and technologies depends on creating meaningful opportunities for emerging practitioners from both countries. With the UK educating a substantial number of Chinese students, there is strong demand for pathways that allow creative graduates to build their careers in the UK, thereby strengthening lasting links between the creative economies of both nations. Similarly, China produces numerous arts and technologies graduates who may not find jobs in traditional technology sectors. Overall, the UK offers more seed -funding opportunities through open-ended grants, residencies and training programmes, while China's system is relatively more rigid. Meanwhile, China has a huge pool of talent and demand. International incubation programmes should be developed to help the next generation of arts and technologies practitioners discover new models and audiences. Joint incubation initiatives between UK and Chinese creative industry bodies could provide critical early-stage support, mentorship and access to international networks.

5. Explore scientific collaborations

Hua Xing. Hua Xing, *Sunbearer* (金乌载日), 2024. Installed on-site at the Comprehensive Research Facility for Fusion Technology (CRAFT), University of Science and Technology of China (USTC). Courtesy of the Artist.

Establish artist residencies within Chinese scientific institutions and collaborative research projects to leverage science as a strategic pathway for meaningful international collaboration.

While geopolitics can be volatile, scientific exchange stands as a gold standard for open knowledge-sharing and productive collaboration. We recommend leveraging the increasing openness of Chinese scientific institutions to art-science initiatives as a pathway for meaningful international collaboration. Scientific infrastructures frequently span national boundaries by necessity, creating natural spaces for cross-cultural engagement, while art-science collaboration represents one of the most productive areas for future-facing inquiry within Chinese institutional contexts. Moreover, new scientific breakthroughs in fields such as quantum computing, fusion energy, environmental science and artificial intelligence are transforming aesthetic concepts and creative possibilities, making artist involvement increasingly valuable to scientific institutions themselves.

Following successful models such as Arts at CERN, establishing international artistic initiatives within Chinese scientific institutions like Huairou Science City and Shenzhen Synthetic Biology Infrastructure could create vibrant channels of creative exchange and aesthetic experimentation at the cutting edge of global science. The prospective scale and experimental approach of these engagements in China is also an opportunity to innovate beyond existing art-science models.

6. Establish sustainable partnerships

Payne Zhu, *Economics of loneliness: Service and Management*, 2020. Still from single-channel video. Courtesy of the Artist.

> **The British Council doing more art and tech programming can help bring credentials into this entirely chaotic field. Chinese contemporary art is chaotic enough, but Chinese art tech is even more so.**
>
> **— Julian Feng, Artist and Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University-Beijing Normal University United International College**

Develop sustained institutional partnerships that build capacity, share knowledge, and create resilient arts and technology ecosystems beyond economic fluctuations

The Chinese arts and technologies landscape features remarkable talent, market activity and creative energy but suffers from institutional fragility. Many organisations depend heavily on volatile economic waves, personal connections, and short-term funding models that make sustained programming difficult. International organisations like the British Council should focus on building meaningful long-term institutional collaborations that can strengthen China's arts and technologies infrastructure, creating more stable environments for patient development.

Bringing institutions together in friendly, long-term dialogue is also a low-cost way to maintain global camaraderie and reciprocal learning. While the UK, for example, has a much more stable institutional geography, it has much to learn from China's pace and scale. Rather than focusing solely on content exchange, programmes should include staff exchanges, professional development opportunities and shared resource frameworks that build institutional capacity. Creating twinning arrangements between established UK institutions and Chinese counterparts could provide models for sustainable development while facilitating more profound connections.

7. Principles of collaboration

A common future

Arts and technologies is an expansive, innovative and future-facing field in which collaborations are key to shaping a shared future. Amid near-term political tensions, future-oriented explorations through science, speculation and science fiction can hold a common longterm imaginary ground for mutual engagement.

Scale and adaptation

In the rapidly changing field of arts and technologies, collaborating partners in China and internationally should be clear-sighted about how they can join forces to utilise their respective strengths. For instance, Shenzhen's technological sector offers unmatched scale and speed of production and iteration, Hangzhou is melting hub of artistic and technical innovation, and the UK's mature cultural infrastructure can incubate emerging practices and scale promising projects internationally through joint ventures.

Reciprocity

In most collaborative exchanges, it is typical that Chinese practitioners are more familiar with Euro-American contexts than vice versa. International collaborators should be aware of addressing this asymmetry to work from a position of reciprocity and mutual respect.

Institutional patience

The most enduring international collaborations are often the result of sustained, long-term relationship-building. Given the relatively volatile cultural infrastructure of arts and technologies in China, investing in long-term relationships and building institutional memory helps to create lasting cultural impacts, whether through high-level engagements or grassroots networks.

Diaspora intelligence

A large, extant community of diaspora practitioners, international students and international research collaborations is key to building bridges and mediating cultural and informational barriers.

Appendix

Appendix A: A brief history of arts and technologies in China

In the early years of the People's Republic, technology was primarily framed through the lens of national development and modernisation.

The 'Four Modernisations' policy (agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology) positioned technology as central to China's future, primarily in service to industrial and military objectives. Many contemporary Chinese artists have explored this early history of Chinese science and technology, as it marked the beginning of modern China and its distinctive evolution from Western and Soviet influences.

Key technical universities established during this period included the restructuring of Tsinghua University's engineering programmes (1952), the Chinese Academy of Sciences (1949) and USTC (1958), which laid the groundwork for Chinese scientific development. The 'Two Bombs, One Satellite' (两弹一星) national project (1958–1970) became an iconic symbol of technological nationalism that would later influence artistic themes.

With the establishment of the PRC, the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing was restructured in 1950 to align with Soviet models of artistic education, emphasising technical skill and socialist realism.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) saw a significant disruption of both artistic education and technological development.

The tumult of this period suspended university admissions, demonised artists and intellectuals, and stalled academic research programmes significantly until Mao's death in 1976.

Art academies such as CAFA (Beijing) and Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) suspended normal operations and admitted the children of workers, peasants and soldiers.

Scientists, intellectuals, writers and artists alike were persecuted for bourgeois leanings. Scientific research shifted toward applied fields, away from fundamental research.

'Third front' industrialisation shifted China's limited technology and industrial sectors into the interior regions in the name of national security.

The Reform and Opening-Up period (1978–1989) opened the floodgates for cultural expression and economic exchange, marking a pivotal shift in both artistic and technological possibilities.

The end of the Cultural Revolution and economic liberalisation led to the 1979 democracy movement and an influx of Western publications and culture, transforming the outlook of a new generation.

Deng Xiaoping's government set about restoring science and technology research to pre-Cultural Revolution levels, through policies such as the 863 Programme, identifying key areas for research and development.

The landmark *Stars Art Exhibition* (星星美展) in 1979, held without permission outside the National Art Museum, signalled a break with socialist realist traditions by displaying works in banned contemporary styles.

The 85 New Wave movement introduced conceptual art approaches through exhibitions like *85 New Space* in Hangzhou (1985), including key art and technology figures such as Zhang Peili.

Zhang Peili created China's first video art piece, *30 x 30* (1988), a three-hour recording of a mirror being repeatedly broken and glued back together.

The sensational 1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition at the National Museum of China was a landmark for Chinese contemporary art, showcasing over 186 members of its pioneering generation. In the words of one participant, 'Everybody knew that we were making history.'[86] Installations, performances and works in various media were exhibited; one artist, Xiao Lu, fired two shots into her installation with a loaded handgun, causing the exhibition to be shut down.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident saw the army ordered to suppress protesters from the student democracy movement, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths. The violent suppression of political demonstration following a decade of liberalisation set the tone for the era of economic growth and political censorship to come.

The 1990s saw digital art pioneers experimenting with video, computers and new media.

Computers grew more accessible, while the first media art exhibitions were mounted. As Chinese contemporary art took to the global stage in this optimistic decade, the social and cultural effects of Mainland China's breakneck industrialisation became a key technological theme for many practitioners. Early Chinese contemporary artists also explored and used China's growing industrial capability, while exploring the effects of manufacturing and globalisation.

Feng Mengbo created *Game Over: Long March* (1994), a pioneering use of video games in Chinese contemporary art. With Wang Jiewei, Feng later participated in *Documenta X* (1997).

The *Image and Phenomenon* exhibition (1996), organised by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie at the Art Museum of China Academy of Art, marked one of the earliest focused video art exhibitions in China.

Zhang Peili established the New Media Art Department at the China Academy of Art (1996), the first of its kind in China.

The Digital Image Association was founded in Beijing (1998) by early digital artists including Hu Jieming and Wu Meichun.

Gao Shiming emerged as an important theorist establishing conceptual frameworks for early Chinese media art in the late 1990s.

Early internet cafés appeared in major cities (1996–1998), providing public access to digital technology.

From World Trade Organisation accession to the 2008 Olympics, the 2000s saw China step decisively onto the world stage and develop the institutions with which to display its version of globalised modernity.

The spirit of cultural globalisation was made concrete in the aesthetic transformation of first-tier Chinese cities by high-tech architecture, exemplified by the 'Bird's Nest' Olympic stadium and the CCTV tower in Beijing, and the World Expo hosted by Shanghai at the end of that decade.

At the same time, China began its uneasy engagement with the World Wide Web, which became widely accessible in the early 2000s. Google was banished behind the 'Great Firewall' by 2008, and the Chinese Internet has undergone multiple paradigmatic transformations in the 17 years since.

The Loft New Media Art Center opened in Beijing (2000), becoming an early hub for experimental digital art.

The Great Firewall was fully implemented by 2003, creating China's distinct internet ecosystem

Zhang Ga curated *Synthetic Times: Media Art China 2008* at the National Art Museum of China, a landmark exhibition featuring 85 international artists from 30 countries coinciding with the Beijing Olympics.

Cao Fei's *RMB City* (2007–2011) created a virtual art community on the platform Second Life.

798 Art District in Beijing was officially recognized (2006), becoming an institutional art hub.

The 2010s was a golden decade for a post-1980s generation of Chinese artists, who were celebrated on the global stage.

As the Chinese economy grew spectacularly, galleries, art fairs, institutions and state museums burgeoned. In this period of lively international exchange and relatively harmonious political relations, arts and technologies flourished through critical and exploratory engagements with new media, science fiction, internet culture, gaming and more.

CAFA launches an International Trienniale of Media Art, opening with Zhang Ga's *Translife* (2011).

The first wave of dedicated media art institutions opened, including Chronus Art Center in Shanghai (2013).

China's internet users double in number to over a billion between 2010 and 2020.

WeChat launched in 2011, and would later to transform the Chinese digital landscape.

The OCT Contemporary Art Terminal network expanded to multiple cities (2012–2016), often highlighting technology-engaged art, with Zhang Peili as curatorial director.

The *Art and China after 1989* exhibition at the Guggenheim (2017) featured significant technology and media-engaged works from the first generations of Chinese contemporary art.

'Sinofuturism' aesthetics are popularised by artists like Cui Jie, Lu Yang and Lawrence Lek, as well as in wider popular culture, such as the film *Her*, which used contemporary Shanghai as the set for a future LA.

Tech platform giants such as Alibaba and Baidu grow vastly influential through their ubiquitous digital services.

The 2020s has been an era of economic, political and cultural recalibrations, trading the optimism of past decades with new opportunities and pressures.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the shutdown of Shanghai, the popping of the two-decade property market bubble, and the rapidly shifting geopolitical conditions of the international order following the Russia–Ukraine war and the Israeli genocide on Gaza had significant effects. Many artists, especially those who had enjoyed the fruits of a more optimistic period of globalisation, grew politically disillusioned and left Mainland China. The dramatic pivot in economic fortunes wiped out a number of important art institutions and put significant financial pressures on others.

UCCA Lab's *Virtual Niche: Have You Ever Seen Memes in the Mirror?* (2021) was China's first major NFT art exhibition.

The collapse of the real-estate market, beginning with the Evergrande crisis in 2021, affected funding for many arts and technologies institutions downstream of property and investment.

Hangzhou-based DeepSeek shocks the AI world by producing a rival to OpenAI's models at a fraction of the cost.

China's homegrown AI generative video platforms, like Kuaishou's Kling, began competing with Western counterparts.

Appendix B: Glossary of cultural terms

996

'996' refers to working 9am–9pm six days a week – a schedule that dominated China's tech industry in the 2010s. This intensive culture accelerated China's tech growth, helping companies like Alibaba and ByteDance achieve rapid advancement in e-commerce and social media. However, it also caused widespread burnout. 996 is primarily invoked as the tradeoff for working for big tech/大厂 (dachang), which offers exceptional salaries but can also be highly demanding. Since the economic downturn following the pandemic, these jobs have also become far more competitive.

Establishment/体制内 (Tizhinei)

体制内 (Tizhinei), commonly translated as 'the establishment' or 'the system', refers to China's institutional and bureaucratic structure encompassing government agencies, state-owned enterprises and official cultural institutions. Those 'within the system' (体制内, tizhi nei) often work at state universities, research institutes or government-affiliated cultural organisations, enjoying a more stable source of funding but navigating complex censorship processes. Those 'outside the system' (体制外, tizhi wai) may have greater creative freedom but face greater resource constraints and regulatory uncertainties. The subcultural lines dividing those in and out of the system are often marked by affiliation with a more globalised, commercial outlook, perhaps via foreign graduate studies, versus a more homegrown outlook and greater willingness to engage with state institutions.[87] However, these lines are far from clear as artists negotiate shifting opportunities.

KOL/Wanghong

KOL (Key Opinion Leaders) and Wanghong (网红, internet celebrities) represent a powerful cultural and economic force in China's digital landscape through livestream commerce and content creation. Wanghong culture emerged in the mid-2010s as platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and later Douyin (TikTok) and Xiaohongshu (Rednote), created new pathways to fame and wealth. Influencers play an outsized role in China's commercial cultural landscape and present a viable pathway for many young artists to gain notoriety. The cultural prestige of contemporary art also attracts influencers, more often using museums as a luxurious backdrop than as content. Museums have picked up on this audience development strategy and this has also led to the phenomenon of 'influencer shows', a somewhat derogatory characterisation of art exhibitions designed to attract social media attention. Museums have recognized this audience development strategy, leading to the emergence of exhibitions specifically designed to generate social media engagement. These visually oriented installations prioritise photogenic qualities and shareable moments to attract younger, digitally connected visitors. This confluence of interests also led UCCA to co-produce an exhibition, *The Pieces I Am*, with Douyin Art at Shanghai's UCCA Edge in 2022.

Tech ecosystem: Chinese digital platforms

China's digital ecosystem operates as a parallel internet universe with distinctive platforms that shape both technological capabilities and cultural expression. WeChat functions not only as a messaging app but as a comprehensive platform integrating payment, mini-apps and official accounts that serve as primary social media platforms for many institutions and practitioners. Xiaohongshu (Rednote), similar to Instagram, combines social media with e-commerce and is the key cultural platform among middle-class youths, especially women. Video platforms Douyin (China's domestic TikTok) and Kuaishou have created distinctive visual languages and performance cultures. Compared to Western platforms, Chinese digital platforms are distinctive in their permeation into different parts of society, old and young, urban and rural, due to their wide utility, as well as their deep integration into almost every aspect of commercial culture.

Gaokao

Gaokao is China's rigorous national college entrance exam that determines university placement for millions of students annually. As a critical pathway to social mobility, Gaokao has long shaped Chinese education culture and young people's futures. Those who decide to pursue international education sometimes do so in order to avoid the intense pressures of Gaokao, preferring to earn international qualifications for Western universities. Students in the second year of high school choose between liberal arts or sciences, with the latter widely perceived as the more challenging to succeed in, enforcing a strong and early bias against arts and humanities graduates in Chinese professional culture. Students pursuing art also take academy entrance exams with Gaokao preparation, meaning that most Chinese artists have a strong background in drawing and other traditional techniques, even if they pursue arts and technologies. Reforms in 2023 further raised the stakes: while all university hopefuls traditionally entered Gaokao, new

policies mandated that only half of middle school graduates would enter the Gaokao system, with the other half entering vocational schools, turning Zhongkao (the middle school exam) into a new arena of competition.

Reform and Opening-Up

Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Reform and Opening-Up transformed China's economy through market reforms and foreign investment. This enabled technology advancement through global knowledge-exchange and manufacturing growth, while exposing Chinese art to Western influences and creating new markets for creative expression, all within state oversight. This pivotal policy shift fundamentally reshaped China's technological and cultural landscape after the Cultural Revolution's disruptions. For technology development, it initiated decades of knowledge transfer, joint ventures and eventual indigenous innovation.

Made in China 2025

Made in China 2025, announced in 2015, is China's strategic plan to transform from mass manufacturing to high-tech production. It targets ten sectors, including robotics, aerospace and new materials, through government subsidies and R&D investment, aiming for 70% domestic content in core components and technological self-reliance by 2025.

Shanzhai culture

Shanzhai (山寨) originally referred to counterfeit products but evolved to represent a distinctive innovation approach combining adaptation, imitation and rapid iteration. Emerging from Shenzhen's electronics manufacturing ecosystem in the early 2000s, Shanzhai practices created affordable alternatives to expensive foreign products through reverse engineering and localisation. This phenomenon transcended simple copying to develop unique hybrid products responding to local needs and preferences. In art-technology contexts, Shanzhai methodologies have influenced hardware hacking communities, maker spaces and artistic approaches that embrace improvisational assembly and technological repurposing. Some artists explicitly engage with Shanzhai aesthetics and processes as commentary on global innovation hierarchies and intellectual property regimes. While official innovation discourse has largely moved beyond Shanzhai toward indigenous innovation, these practices continue to influence grassroots technological creativity and represent an important framework for understanding distinctively Chinese approaches to technological adaptation and transformation.

Guochao

Guochao (国潮, 'national trend') refers to the rising popularity of Chinese cultural elements in contemporary design, fashion and digital content. Emerging in the late 2010s, this aesthetic movement reinterprets traditional Chinese culture through modern design sensibilities, often appealing to younger consumers seeking a distinctive cultural identity.

Tangping

Tangping (躺平), literally 'lying flat', emerged in 2021 as a social philosophy and passive resistance movement rejecting China's hyper-competitive work culture. The concept gained prominence when a factory worker's online post about choosing a minimalist lifestyle of reduced work, consumption and social competition went viral among young Chinese. Tangping represents a direct rejection of the intense '996' work schedule that dominated tech industries and the relentless pressure for material success.

Neijuan

Neijuan (内卷), translated as 'involution', describes a self-defeating cycle of intensifying competition that produces diminishing returns for participants. Originally an anthropological term, it gained widespread usage in China around 2020 to describe educational and professional environments where ever-increasing effort yields minimal additional benefit. The concept particularly resonates in technology and creative sectors, where practitioners face escalating skill requirements, accelerating production schedules, and fierce competition for attention and resources.

Wendi Yan, *Dream of Walnut Palaces,* 2025. Still from single-channel video. Courtesy of the Artist.

Author and research team

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Gary Zhexi Zhang is an artist and researcher. His work often takes the form of sprawling investigations into systems that border on the irrational and the fictitious, without becoming any less real. He is the editor of *Catastrophe Time!*, a collection of essays, fictions and interviews about finance and time (Strange Attractor Press, 2023). *Dead Cat Bounce*, the opera he created with Waste Paper Opera, premiered at Somerset House in 2022 and toured in 2024. His artworks have been exhibited at the 9th Asian Art Biennial, Taichung; Power Station of Art, Shanghai; EPFL Pavilions, Lausanne. He currently teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London and Chelsea School of Arts. As a researcher, he co-authored *Future Art Ecosystems III* & *IV* (Serpentine, 2022 & 2024); contributed chapters to *Resisting Reduction* (MIT Press, 2019) and *Incomputable Earth* (Bloomsbury, 2025), and is the author of *Multipolar Technoculture* (Berggruen Press, forthcoming).

Researchers

Iris Long

Curator and researcher

Iris Long is a writer and independent curator whose research focuses on the megastructures of science and technology in China and the psycho-geography of techno-science. She was a 2022–2023 Berggruen Fellow and a Swissnex Fellow. On the radio waves, she goes with 'BY1TYW'. She has curated and co-curated exhibitions exploring art, science, and technology, and her international presentations include The Magic Machine (University of Cambridge), Antikythera Salon, Space in Time (Warburg Institute/UCL Institute of Advanced Studies), and Art and Artificial Intelligence (Open Conference, ZKM). In 2021, she co-initiated Port: Under the Cloud, a long-term research and curatorial project on the infrastructures of science and technology in China—her passion project.

Kyrin Chen

Research assistant

Kyrin Chen is a researcher and artist whose practice spans video essay, found footage, installation, documentary, and fiction. Their work examines how globalised ideologies of discipline and agency operate across educational, migratory, and social contexts, investigating the socio-political positioning of cultural production and its practitioners. Their recent works have been presented in Toronto Arthouse Film Festival, Berlin Indie Film Festival, Chisenhale Studios, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Siobhan Davis Dance Studios, Confucius Institute for Dance and Performance, Café OTO and IKLECKTIK.

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[53] Arrow Factory (2008–2019), a 15-square-metre storefront in Jianchang Hutong, focused on site-specific works accessible to local residents. Key projects included Yan Lei's *Arrow Factory Newsletter* (2009), a participatory installation distributing fake news bulletins, and Liu Wei's *Distance* (2012), which transformed the space into a mirrored labyrinth reflecting the surrounding alleyways. The collective also hosted performances by Lin Yilin and Ken Lum, often engaging with the hutong's social fabric before its closure due to urban redevelopment policies in 2019.

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[66] Cheng, Evelyn. 'China's "Netflix" iQiyi Is Set to Open a Theme Park with Virtual Reality Based on Its Own Shows'. CNBC, March 14, 2025. https://www.cnbc.com/2025/03/14/chinas-netflix-iqiyi-to-open-theme-park-with-vr-based-on-its-shows.html.

[67] 'Gentle Monster blends retail, exhibition & experimental spaces in haus shanghai', designboom, October 2, 2021, https://www.designboom.com/architecture/gentle-monster-haus-shanghai-retail-exhibition-experimental-10-02-2021/

[68] Sanxingdui, an archaeological site in Sichuan Province dating back to the Bronze Age (*c.* 1700–1150 BCE), is renowned for its distinctive bronze masks, figurines and artefacts that have revolutionised understanding of ancient Chinese civilisation. Dunhuang, located at a strategic point on the ancient Silk Road in Gansu Province, is famous for the Mogao Caves (also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes), a UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring exceptional Buddhist art, including murals, sculptures and manuscripts.

[69] As reported by participant in the Shanghai roundtable.

[70] https://www.byoutput.com/#/About

[71] https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Gkpx3Ag0VFJ5CoIaCQU-Ng?poc_token=HO7OKWijcX0nBsfl1-OjXpFUwCJBhSQcLcyeszcg

[72] Interview with the OUTPUT team.

[73] Interview with Cai Mingzhi.

[74] https://www.studyinchina.com.my/web/page/chinas-new-world-class-university-policy/

[75] The quintennial flagship policy programmes announced by the Chinese Communist Party since 1953, currently on its 14th edition (2021–25).

[76] For instance, the 'Guiding Opinions on Promoting Deep Integration of Culture and Technology' (2019) was jointly issued by six national departments, including the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Central Propaganda Department. This document sets an ambitious goal: by 2025, China aims to establish a comprehensive innovation system for culture-technology integration covering key areas and critical links.

[77] Online roundtable

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[79] About the Musicians in Residence, China | British Council (https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/arts/upcoming-arts-activities/musicians-in-residence)

[80] https://www.asianculturalcouncil.org/pdf/international-artist-residencies-en.pdf

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