

FUSION AND CONFLICT: THE DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORY OF SURREALIST DIGITAL ART IN CHINA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this paper delve into the evolution of Chinese surrealist digital art and its unique position on the global art scene. The study reviews the origins and basic theories of Surrealism and analyzes in detail how digital technology has provided Surrealism with new spaces for creation and expression. The article focuses on the intersection of surrealism and digital technology in the context of Chinese culture, showing how this intersection has produced a unique art form that retains the essence of traditional Chinese culture while incorporating the innovative elements of modern technology. Through an in-depth analysis of several artworks, the author reveals the core features of Chinese surrealist digital art, emphasizing the profound influence of Chinese culture and history on its development. The article also explores the challenges and opportunities faced by this art form during its development and puts forward a series of recommendations aimed at promoting the sustainable development of Chinese surrealist digital art in the future. This study provides a window into Chinese surrealist digital art, demonstrating its unique value at the intersection of art, culture, and technology.

Keywords: Surrealism, Digital Art, Cultural Fusion, Technological Innovation, Chinese Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

Surrealism, originating in early 20th-century Europe, aims to explore the human unconscious and challenge the rational constraints of daily life objectively. Icons such as Dali's melting clocks emblematically represent it as a pivotal modern art movement. Today, in the digital era, the intersection of surrealism and technology has led to a transformative wave in art, resulting in globally-celebrated works that redefine the artistic experience.

The amalgamation of digital surrealism varies depending on cultural and technological contexts. China, distinguished by its rich history and cultural legacy, provides a unique viewpoint within this confluence. This phenomenon raises an interesting question: Within a globalized framework, how does China establish its particular voice in the realm of digital surrealism, and how does it relate to or diverge from Western paradigms?

This study has two objectives: to enhance global artistic discourse by examining the interaction between surrealism and digital art in China and the West, and to promote cultural dialogues between East and West by illuminating China's distinctive artistic development. Given the ubiquity of digital technology and the globalization of art, the relevance of this investigation is highlighted. Although Surrealism originates from European thought, its fundamental principles "challenging reality and exploring the unconscious mind" have a global resonance. These ideas manifest themselves in various ways, from the ancient Chinese landscapes to the supernatural themes of the Western Renaissance, reflecting contextual and temporal changes.

Hence, this inquiry goes beyond the realm of art history, intersecting with culture, technology, and art and contemplating not only the creation of art but also a nation's cultural placement within the world. The aim of this study is to reveal China's unique position in the ever-changing world of digital media, through the exploration of similarities and differences with Western practices. Additionally, this study identifies the challenges and opportunities that arise from this rapidly evolving landscape.

Overall, the intermingling of surrealism and digital technology has opened up a whole new world of art for us, and this study analyses the major similarities and differences between the East and the West in this regard by examining the characteristics and development of surrealist digital art in China in the hope of unearthing more cultural and artistic connotations and proposing suggestions and directions that will provide new perspectives and insights for future artistic creation and research.

This research aims to examining the characteristics and development of surrealist digital art in China, it analyzes the major similarities and differences between the East and the West in this area, and proposes suggestions and directions to promote further development in the field.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Originating in early 20th-century Europe, particularly in France, Surrealism aims to investigate the human unconscious without adhering to logical principles (Breton, 1969). In contrast, digital art appeared in the late 20th century, thanks to technological advancements (Paul, 2023). While Western Surrealism has undergone continuous development, its Chinese equivalent rose to prominence only in the 1980s. Chinese artists have integrated Western surrealist features with indigenous cultural aspects to create a distinctive art form.

The rise of digital technology has transformed the art industry, providing fresh opportunities for innovative and complicated expression (Manovich, 2002). This has resulted in the emergence of digital surrealism, which blends customary surrealist components with digital tools. Contrary to traditional surrealism, which depends on tangible art materials, digital surrealism employs computer hardware and software. Recent research has investigated the optimism surrounding artificial intelligence in the creation of art within the context of the Metaverse (Hurst, Spyrou, Tekinerdogan, & Krampe, 2023). and analysed the influence of blockchain technology on the art market (Grba, 2023).

Digital surrealism in China has attracted a lot of interest. Chinese artists have skilfully integrated Western surrealism with traditional Chinese aesthetics. Huang and colleagues have developed a multimodal guided diffusion model for digital art, which has been shown to be effective (Huang, Tang, Dong, & Xu, 2022). Furthermore, Fu has investigated the psychological depth of surrealism and its ability to traverse logical and reality boundaries (Fu, 2022).

In summary, the fusion of surrealism and digital technology offers artists novel ways of expressing themselves and expanding their creative horizons, thereby diversifying and enriching artistic creation. This innovative art style has been embraced by both artists and audiences in China, and has come to occupy a significant place in the country's contemporary art scene.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literature Review: The thesis opens with an examination of pertinent literature, establishing the foundational theories of Surrealism and digital art.

Case Study: The paper offers a detailed analysis of select Chinese surrealist digital artworks, highlighting the genre's characteristics and evolution.

Comparative Study: It employs a comparative approach, scrutinizing the trajectories of Surrealist digital art in Western and Chinese contexts to unearth cultural underpinnings.

Qualitative Research: Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study probes into the challenges and opportunities surrealism and digital art encounter in China's evolving landscape.

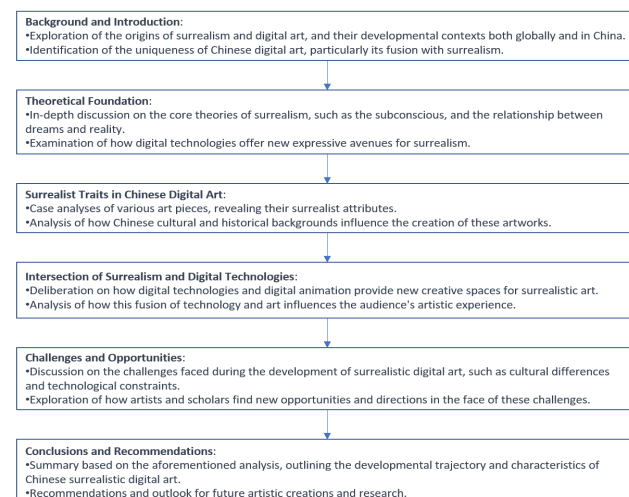


Figure 1 Research framework

Source: Drawn by the author

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. The origins and core concepts of surrealism

1.1 The Origins of Western Surrealism and Its Representation in Art

Emerging in 20th century Europe, Surrealism aimed to unlock the human unconscious, defying artistic conventions and elevating dreams and irrationality (Breton, 1969). Following the First World War, artists who were disillusioned by war and questioning Western culture embraced psychoanalysis and unconventional art forms, leading to the inception of Surrealism (Alexandrian & Clough, 1970). The movement was deeply influenced by Freudian theories and was formally articulated in André Breton's 1924 Surrealism Manifesto (Breton, 1969). Durozoi posited that genuine human emotions reside in the unconscious rather than in daily experiences (Durozoi, 2002).

Surrealism, in the visual arts, transcended literal representation. "Eternity of Memory" by Dalí subverts the concept of time through fluid clocks that are set in unusual landscapes (Descharnes

& S, 1984). Artists such as Ernst focused on primal instincts by amalgamating and altering images, exemplified in "Queen of Desire" (Ernst, 1948). Surrealist techniques also disrupted traditional artistic thinking. Breton and his contemporaries utilised automatic writing techniques to circumvent conscious control (Breton, Eluard, Soupault & Graham, 1997). Additionally, the movement contested conventional viewer assumptions regarding the connection between symbols and reality, as demonstrated through Magritte's work "This is Not a Pipe" (Gablik, 1985).

In brief, Western Surrealism, which emerged in Europe in the early 20th century, goes beyond being a mere artistic style. Instead, it investigates reality and delves into the subconscious, evincing a sceptical attitude towards tradition and a yearning for limitless possibilities.

1.2 The Development and Uniqueness of Chinese Surrealism

Emerging in China in the mid-20th century amid global cultural exchanges, Chinese surrealism diverges from its Western counterpart by drawing significantly from its own rich cultural and philosophical heritage. Rather than relying on Freudian psychoanalysis, Chinese surrealism cultivates a distinct style shaped by its own historical and cultural contexts.

1.2.1 Chinese Surrealism Development Lineage Development Lineage

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Surrealism was introduced to China during a period marked by reform and increased cultural exchange. As part of China's opening up policy, Surrealism became entwined with Chinese culture (Lijun, 2022). Chinese artists integrated Surrealist tenets with indigenous art forms, and this fusion resulted in a unique hybrid style.

In the 1990s, China's economic growth and emerging art market gave rise to Surrealist art deeply rooted in local culture. The emergence of digital art has created new opportunities for Surrealist practices and has become a subject of academic research (Xiayu, 2016).

The advancements in digital technology in the 21st century have enabled artists to explore a wider range of creative tools. Contemporary artworks frequently feature intriguing visuals that combine the irrationality of Surrealism with the precision of digital art. This has resulted in the ongoing evolution of Chinese Surrealism in the digital age.

1.2.2 The Uniqueness and Evolution of Chinese Surrealism

While European Surrealism explores the subconscious and irrationality, Chinese surrealism emphasises cultural and historical amalgamation. Lin Lefan argues that works such as "The Riverside Scroll at Qingming Festival" inherently contain surrealist elements, demonstrating a Chinese surrealist perspective (Lefan, 2021). Meanwhile, Qiuhong Chen and Lei Gong highlight its fusion of age-old themes with modern ideologies (Qiuhong, 2006) (Lei, 2015). Post-1980 artists, such as Huiying Hu, have integrated Western surrealist principles with native methodologies to create a bi-cultural artistic expression (Huiying, 2009).

This fusion has given rise to a distinctive Chinese surrealist style that mirrors the nation's rich heritage and evolving nuances, underscoring the cultural exchange between Eastern and Western philosophies and reflecting Chinese artists' dual commitment to tradition and modernity. As a result, Chinese surrealism holds a prominent place in today's Chinese art scene.

2. Overview of the development of digital art in China

Digital art in China has flourished, reflecting both Western influences and native cultural traditions. The emergence of the internet and computer technology in the 21st century have brought about substantial growth (Chengzhi, 2010). Scholars such as Chengzhi Mi and Lizhu Li highlight the transformative potential of digital tools, providing artists and researchers with innovative ways of expressing and researching (Chengzhi, 2010; Lizhu & Mei, 2017).

2.1 Characteristics and Trends of Contemporary Chinese Digital Art

With the advancement and proliferation of technology, present-day digital art is no longer merely an experimental endeavor but a predominant form of creative expression. Notably, digital art in China embodies distinctive characteristics and patterns.

Fusing tradition and modernity: Huanqing Bei and Dongning Li suggest that Chinese digital art effectively combines traditional elements and contemporary techniques in both form and substance (Huanqing, 2012) (Dongning, 2020). Artists frequently use digital media to update

ancient classics or merge traditional artistry with modern tools, rejuvenating cultural symbols through a contemporary technological perspective.

Interdisciplinary Characteristics: Yan Hu notes that digital art encompasses more than just pure artistry, but rather involves various disciplines including design, technology, and media (Yan, 2014).

Focus on Experimentation: Xinxin Lu highlights the emphasis on experimentation in digital art, with artists persistently exploring innovative creative approaches and techniques to push the conventional parameters of art (Xinxin, 2007).

Chinese digital art has developed distinctive characteristics through the fusion of Western influences and native cultural elements. Experts such as Lizhu Li and Huanqing Bei predict a strong future for the field catalyzed by advances in VR, AR and AI (Lizhu & Mei, 2017) (Huanqing, 2012). As digital technology matures, artistic expression in this medium is expected to expand significantly in terms of scope and diversity.

3. The intersection of surrealism and digital technology

3.1 The Innovative Drive of Digital Technology for Surrealist Expression

Due to the rapid advancement of digital technology, the expression of surrealism as an art genre has undergone noteworthy changes. This paper aims to examine how digital technology has expanded and deepened the creative space available to surrealism, thus contributing to its innovative approach to artistic creation.

Applications of digital modeling and 3D rendering

Modern digital tools, particularly 3D modelling, provide artists with incomparable creative freedom to produce ultra-realistic virtual landscapes. These technologies facilitate the implementation of ideas that surpass physical limitations, such as the levitating mountains in the 2009 production "Avatar," which were shaped through digital modelling to attain their dreamlike appearance.

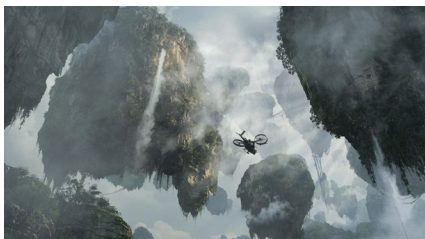


Figure 2 Hovering mountains constructed by digital modeling techniques in “Avatar (2009)”

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/mediaviewer/rm1416531456?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_67

Convergence of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR)

VR and AR technologies have transformed the presentation and experience of surrealism, now an interactive, dynamic art form instead of merely static admiration. A case study is the PSVR game "Dreams Universe" by Media Molecule in the UK, allowing players to build and explore their distinct surreal realms through VR, making the previously-static surrealism vividly interactive.



Figure 3 Surreal scenes created by players in “Dreams Universe”

Source: <https://www.playstation.com/zh-hans-hk/games/dreams/>

Advances in Digital Animation and Visual Effects

Current digital animation and special effects techniques provide a dynamic presentation of surreal elements. This technology makes the originally static surreal elements become more vivid. For example, in the movie “Inception (2010)”, the folding scene of the city is realized by digital special effects technology.

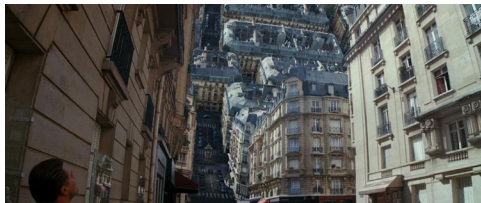


Figure 4 Folded city in “Inception (2010)” realized using digital special effects technology

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1375666/mediaviewer/rm3940992001?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_191

Deep Learning and Artificial Intelligence in Artistic Creation

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have created new possibilities in surrealist art. Google's "DeepDream," which is powered by Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), showcases how AI can transform ordinary images into surreal masterpieces.

In conclusion, digital innovations have expanded the scope and potential of surrealist art. The fusion of surrealism and digital tools, from 3D modelling and virtual reality to machine learning technologies, has inaugurated a new age of artistic innovation and creativity.

3.2 Chinese Culture and Surrealism on Digital Platforms

China's extensive cultural heritage, stretching through the centuries, provides an exceptional platform for surrealism, especially when merged with contemporary digital technologies. In the domain of digital art, this combination of Chinese culture and surrealist principles yields creations with remarkable depth and attraction.

Fusion of digital modeling and classical elements

The episode "Good Hunting" from the series "Love, Death & Robots" on Netflix is an illustrative example of how classical Chinese motifs can be reinvigorated through digital modeling. The episode effortlessly amalgamates steampunk components with traditional Chinese aesthetics, thus establishing a new artistic subgenre. This synthesis of technology and culture not only enriches both domains but simultaneously demonstrates the aptitude of digital art to revitalise age-old narratives for modern-day spectators.

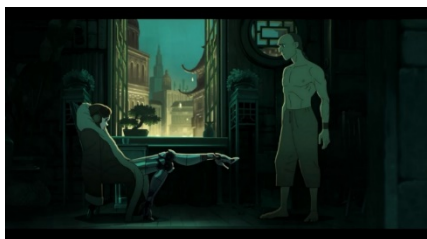


Figure 5 Episode 8 “Good Hunting” from the TV series “Love, Death & Robots”

Source: Netflix

Virtual Reality meets Chinese Philosophy

Essentially, the Chinese philosophical ideas of "Tao" and "Zen," endorsing harmony with nature and the cosmos, are congruent with the ethos of surrealism. In virtual reality, these concepts are visually represented, letting viewers comprehend the concept of the "unity of heaven and mankind" in an electronic domain. This not only enhances the digital art panorama but also provides a novel perspective on appreciating traditional Chinese philosophy.

Digital Animation and the Reproduction of Traditional Chinese Stories

Digital technology has facilitated the adaptation of antique Chinese folktales with surrealist features into current-day storylines. A case in point is the "Yao-Chinese Folktales" animated series of 2023, which is a confluence of Shanghai Animation Film Studio and Bilibili. Each episode is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese folklore, yet they utilise contemporary imagery and narrative devices. This digital reimagining not only revitalises ancient tales but also adds to a new artistic medium that enhances the richness and appeal of traditional Chinese culture.



Figure 6 TV series “Yao-Chinese Folktales”
Source: Bilibili

Deep computer learning meets Chinese art

By utilising deep learning, computers have the ability to replicate customary Chinese art styles that provide novel opportunities for surrealistic investigation into dreams and the unconscious. This technological breakthrough has a twofold purpose, as it not only advances artistic methodologies but also enriches the cultural appreciation of traditional art in China.

In summary, the convergence of Chinese cultural traditions with surrealism in the digital art realm enhances the artistic scenery, while presenting novel opportunities for cultural protection and progression. This liaison accentuates the profound essence of China's cultural lineage and exemplifies the inexhaustible imaginative possibilities of digital advancement.

4. Convergence and conflict between surrealism and digital art: core case studies

Surrealism's long-standing exploration into perception and the unconscious gains renewed vitality in the digital age. Technological progress creates the basis for artistic innovation, but it is the artists' clever utilization of these tools that genuinely accelerates the fusion. This partnership not only enhances the artistic expression but also amplifies the inherent value of technology within the art form.

The 2003 animated short "Destino" is an emblematic example of collaboration between Salvador Dalí and Walt Disney. The film utilizes digital animation to weave Dalí's surreal imagery with modern animation techniques, creating a dream-like world. This is not simply a digital reimagination of Surrealism, but a cross-cultural tapestry that merges Spanish surrealism and American animation, all made possible by technology.



Figure 7 Walt Disney & Salvador Dali's - Destino 2003
Source: <https://vimeo.com/178818145>

Swedish artist Erik Johansson challenges traditional photography boundaries by merging digital post-production techniques to develop visuals that go beyond reality. In 2022, his Beijing exhibition, "The Surreal Dream World of Erik Johansson," showcases this fusion of art and technology. In a similar vein, digital artist Beeple utilized emerging technologies for his

NFT masterpiece, "EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS," which sold for \$69.3 million at Christie's. The piece challenges traditional art forms and presents a digital critique of diverse cultural phenomena, spanning from consumerism to social unrest. The featured artists demonstrate the transformative influence of digital technology on surrealistic art.



Figure 8 The Surreal Dream World of Erik Johansson

Source:

<https://artpro.com/exhibition/ypcxvtv0TX5i5aFxnuzYSJBf4?tab=2>

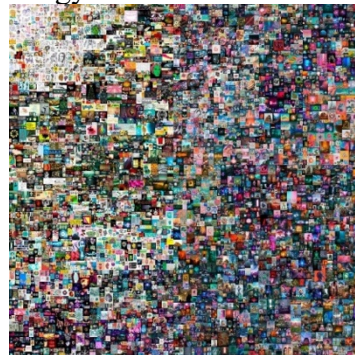


Figure 9 EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS

Source:

<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/beeple-first-5000-days/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>

Displayed at the Venice Biennale in 2015, Lu Yang's "Moving Gods" combines Chinese mythology with surreal digital realms. Using 3D technology, the artist animates mythological figures in an unconventional digital universe. The artwork illustrates the symbiotic relationship between surrealism and contemporary technology, against the backdrop of Chinese cultural narratives.



Figure 10 Moving Gods at Venice Biennale Chinese Pavilion 2015

Source: <http://luyang.asia/2016/12/09/moving-gods-2/>

In summary, the intersection of surrealism and digital technology has presented numerous opportunities and challenges for surrealist digital art in China. Digital art in China is currently entering a new golden period, influenced by technology, policy, and market forces.

5. Implications and challenges of surrealist digital art in China

In today's landscape, the confluence of surrealism and digital technology is undergoing a transformative fusion, with China carving a unique trajectory in this evolution.

In terms of technology, advancements in 3D modeling, animation, and virtual reality have supercharged artists' creative arsenal. Pioneering works like Lu Yang's "Moving Gods" showcase the seamless integration of traditional motifs into vibrant 3D realms. These advancements not only amplify the articulation of surreal themes but also diversify the artistic playground. Additionally, digital capabilities facilitate cross-media and cross-platform dissemination, enriching audience immersion and interactivity.

Policy-wise, the Chinese government's focus on cultural and technological innovation has accelerated this integration. Official policies actively champion interdisciplinary research and encourage a culture-tech synergy rooted in innovation. This commitment is further evident in

China's engagement in international cultural forums, such as Lu Yang's exhibition at the Venice Biennale, corroborating China's burgeoning influence in the global digital art sphere.

Market dynamics further catalyze this development. With a growing economy and evolving cultural tastes, China's digital art market is on an upward trajectory. High-profile auctions of works like Beeple's "EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS" serve as both inspiration and validation for local artists.

For practitioners, this environment offers a fertile ground for creativity. Technological strides open new avenues for artistic expression, while policy initiatives create a conducive ecosystem for innovation and international exposure. Market trends act as additional catalysts, steering artists toward consumer-aligned creativity.

In summary, the melding of surrealism and digital technology in China is fraught with both opportunities and challenges. However, under the synergistic effects of technology, policy, and market dynamics, the country is on the cusp of a digital art renaissance.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the development trajectory of surrealist digital art in China and distill its inherent revelations. After in-depth research, we realize that the evolution of Surrealism in China reflects, to a certain extent, the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. After comparing and correlating other related studies, this study not only emphasizes the gradual importance of digital technology in modern art creation, but also highlights the key role of cultural factors in the creation and interpretation of Surrealist art. This is particularly evident in a country like China, which has a deep history and cultural heritage.

The advancement of digital technology has presented Surrealism with new opportunities for artistic pursuit and self-expression. Findings from our research highlight that virtual reality, digital animation, and deep learning have broadened the creative horizon for surrealism. It is important to note that the integration of technology is not merely an addition, but rather intertwined with Chinese cultural traditions, adding depth and enrichment to the art form.

Looking ahead, artists are advised to continue to expand their creative means while deepening their understanding and integration of traditional Chinese culture. Interdisciplinary cooperation can also bring new perspectives and depth to artistic creation. In addition, scholars and researchers should continue to conduct in-depth studies in this field, exploring the relationship between surrealism and digital technology and how this relationship affects art creation and reception. The development of Surrealist digital art in China is still in a stage full of opportunities and challenges. It is hoped that this study will provide some valuable insights and suggestions for artists, scholars and researchers.

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