## Sinofuturism as worlding

*Imagining futures in sinophone digital art*

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# Summary

## Sinofuturism as Worlding: Imagining Futures in Sinophone Digital Art

This study responds to the prevalence with which politicians, journalists, and opinion makers imagine futures of the Sinophone sphere in either techno-utopian or techno-orientalist terms and as determined by China or "the West." It studies Sinophone digital art that has gained prominence and that produces nuanced imaginations of the relation between digital technologies and futures that go beyond reductive geopolitical binaries. The study asks: How does Sinophone digital art imagine technology-infused futures in response to techno-utopian and techno-orientalist imaginations of those futures? To answer this question, it adopts a method of cultural analysis grounded in art historical formal and contextual analysis, while also mobilizing ethnographic methods such as interviews and field visits.

The study's theoretical framework consists of three concepts: Sinophone, worlding, and Sinofuturism. "Sinophone" is adopted in order not to reduce artists, artworks, and their imagined futures to a geographical or geopolitical entity or reductive identity markers such as "Chineseness." "Sinophone art" is taken to comprise art by artists who are part of a culturally Sinophone community. Digital art is viewed as bringing into being future worlds through its imagination of the future and through the ways this imagination interacts with the existing world, the audience, the exhibitions it is part of, and its socio-cultural and political context. This process of "worlding" is supported by a practice of "worldbuilding," understood as the building of a diegetic world that functions as the stage upon which worlding is enacted, primarily through narrativity, medium specificity, and aesthetics. The concept of Sinofuturism, defined as a genre of worlding specifically concerned with the technology-infused futures of Sinophone worlds, is mobilized to analyze the worlding practices of future-oriented Sinophone digital art.

The chapters in this study focus on four prevalent themes in digital Sinofuturist worldings: connectedness, embodiment, self-care, and artificial intelligence. The first chapter considers how online exhibitions held during the Covid-19 pandemic used digital means to produce connectedness in a context where the future of a globalized art world centered on physical attendance had suddenly become uncertain. The chapter analyzes the following three case studies: *WE=LINK: Ten Easy Pieces* (2020 onwards) at Chronus Art Center, curated by Zhang Ga; *The One Minute Series: The Power of Transparency* (2020 onwards), curated by Yu Minhong in collaboration with The One Minutes Foundation and Het Nieuwe Instituut; and *A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum* (2020 onwards) at M WOODS, curated by Victor Wang. It argues that all three exhibitions produce opportunities for audience members to share a temporal moment or rhythm across time and space that enables them to experience connectedness even while in self-isolation, and that the exhibitions' adoption of the digital technologies that were already widely integrated in Chinese society reinforce this experience. In addition, it contends that, in response to the uncertainties of the pandemic, these exhibitions reworld the artworld's cosmopolitan system, with its reliance on global mobility, into one adjusted to the pandemic present – and potential future – specifically through an embrace of digital technologies. This chapter's focus on exhibitions produced during a unique period of time that has since passed but

could return, in similar or different form, at any moment, emphasizes that, in response to crises or other changes, worlds are constantly *re*worlded.

The second chapter focuses on embodiment and looks specifically at how videogame art reconsiders how digital technology is changing or has the potential to change audience's understanding of the physical, phenomenological, and affective dimensions of the human body. The chapter firstly studies the videogame *Deep Simulator* (2020) by aaajiao, showing how this work uses metagame tactics as part of its worldbuilding to world a present and future in which it is transparent how audiences' embodiment is co-produced in relation with the digital technologies they engage with. Subsequently, the chapter analyzes the video game and game film *The Great Adventure of Material World* (2019-2020) by LuYang, arguing that this work worlds a Buddhist world in which embodiment in general, and that of gender specifically, is conceived of as inherently relational. Lastly, it examines the machinima work *howdoyouturnthison* (2021) by Li Yi-Fan, revealing how this work worlds the relation between the artist and the virtual avatar he embodies in the artwork – and thereby people's embodied relationships with virtual avatars more broadly – as relational, and as characterized by both embodiment and disembodiment.

The third chapter analyzes notions of self-care in digital art and asks how an approach of vernacular creativity may be used to envision a future for practices of platformized self-care in which they are not co-opted by their commodification as forms of neoliberal self-improvement. This chapter analyzes two case studies: *Hardcore Digital Detox* (2018), a satirical piece of net art by Miao Ying about platformized digital detox programs, and *You Are in the Desert of the Real, but I Am in Beautiful* (2018), a lecture performance by Ye Funa about beautification apps. The works are shown to reworld the futurist present into one in which people adopt self-care practices based on a vernacular creativity that embraces ugliness and rejects the real-fake binary, enabling people to better navigate the complexities of life in a platformized society. The analysis of the artworks makes clear that, contrary to the common association of Sinofuturism with machinic "new aesthetics," Sinofuturist worlding can also proceed through and validate ugly, messy, outdated, or unoriginal aesthetics.

The fourth and final chapter centers on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and studies the role played by anthropocentrism in imaginations of the future of AI. The first part of the chapter consists of a textual analysis of exhibition announcement texts produced by the art institutions Chronus Art Center, Aiiiii Art Center, and Digital Art Center, which all engage with AI or algorithms more broadly in order to provide an understanding of how their future is being worlded. It concludes that in these texts the temporal relation between present and future often plays an important role, with the institutions aiming either to make audiences aware of how the present is changing or to inspire them to act in the present to change the future. It also observes a lingering tendency to imagine the future of AI as it pertains to humans, despite some attempts to go beyond anthropocentrism. The chapter's second part contains a close reading of videoworks by Lawrence Lek, Fei Yining and chuck kuan, and Betty Apple that all imagine a post-apocalypse, post-human future of AI. The analysis reveals that while humans still play some role in these artworks, they world futures in which human temporality has been replaced by computer time and/or geological time, and futures as no longer produced by the humans of the past. The analysis furthermore shows how imaginations of the future in Sinophone digital art are able to decenter both the hegemonic position of the human in relation to the machine and that of the West in relation to the Sinophone sphere.

The following insights follow from this study's analysis of how Sinofuturist digital art imagines futures in ways that break with essentialist techno-orientalist and techno-utopian perspectives. Firstly, it becomes clear that the Sinofuturist digital art considered in this study does not imagine the future as a temporally separate realm, but instead understands it as interconnected, in a linear or non-linear manner, with the present and also, in some cases, particular pasts. This disrupts (techno)orientalist perspectives that deny the Sinophone sphere contemporaneity by framing it as being in the temporally separate future. Secondly, when imagining the future of the Sinophone sphere, Sinofuturist digital art does so in a way that is locally situated but not locally determined, thus avoiding both essentializing and universalizing imaginations of those futures. Thirdly, Sinofuturist digital art often worlds the future in relation to the complex and nuanced realities of the present as experienced by regular people in their everyday lives, thereby avoiding the generalizing techno-utopian and techno-dystopian perspectives produced from the systemic perspectives of China or "the West." Together, these insights produce a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted futures that are being imagined and brought into being across the Sinophone sphere.