

# **Bursting Bubbles:**

## **A moving image exploration of contemporary Chinese individuality**

**Yi Gao**

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**Primary Supervisor: Dr. King Tong Ho**

## **Attestation of authors**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment is made in the acknowledgments.

**Yi Gao**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a practical project which involves moving images and paintings together as a medium that explores phenomena of contemporary China relating to personal identity, independence and its relationship with the traditional importance on collective groups, group centredness and interdependence. The project's approach draws on sociological research on Western thought, values and beliefs naturally occurring in China since the "Open Door" policy as raw data to focus on the transition and transformation of contemporary Chinese individuality, and translates these data to form the concepts underpinning the metaphoric method of my artwork. Bubbles are the main visual symbol that metaphorically imply the incessantly transformable Chinese individuality and social cultural identity.

My aim has been to portray this phenomenon through artistic practices on screens. By reflecting and engaging with moving images and paintings, underpinned by theoretical research and methods including data collecting, self-reflecting on data, practical manifestation and self-inquiry, I have attempted to unfold the phenomenon of contemporary Chinese individuality through my art practice.

The thesis is composed as a creative work of moving images accompanied by an exegesis component. The moving image represents a nominal 80%, and the exegesis 20% of the final submission.

## **Aim**

This is a self-reflective art project on the contemporary transformation of Chinese individuality.

By reflecting and engaging with moving images and paintings, underpinned by theoretical research and methods, this project considers the idea of bursting “cultural bubbles” in an abstract attempt to respond to the contemporary social phenomenon in China.

The common characteristic of bubbles and individuals being molecules will be explored and justified through sociological research into the phenomenon to inform the conceptual context of this project.

The aim of the self-reflective method is to put the artist in a secondary position, with a camera as the only channel through which to receive and respond to the Chinese phenomena. The research intends to create a natural aesthetic form with the minimum level of artificial elements.



## Introduction

An individual is the primary unit of existence and the ultimate standard of value ever presented among human experience. My view is not to deny that societies exist or that people benefit from being participated, but I see society as a collection of individuals rather than something overarching them.

The Western impact on today's Chinese ideological thought is significant - thought that had hitherto been constructed with the encouraged uniformity of the earlier generations. The advances in modern technology along with the introduction of mass media such as the Internet, live internationally broadcast television and new foreign movies have created influential media that fuel intellectual and cultural stimuli among the new generation, and are prime instigators of change.

The advocating of a materialised lifestyle plays a critical role when considering Chinese individualism. Just as importantly, it is of considerable value for contemporary Chinese to see themselves through their own mirror or perceptions of individuality and what this affect means for their own personal identity.

Through the exploration of the contemporary social phenomenon of China, I draw on media of moving images and painting to express my personal views. I am interested in employing bubbles as a metaphor to represent contemporary Chinese individualism. I deliberately concentrate on an investigation to express the inter-relationship between individuals and society, and elucidate the subtle influences in the unions of individuals apparent through the opening of China's door to the West. *Cultural bubbles* and *economic bubbles* are terms that express distinct moments in time. This project considers the idea of bursting cultural bubbles in an abstract attempt to respond to the contemporary social phenomenon.

From my perspective, Chinese individuals are always rebuilding themselves from their respective influences on each other, and exposing to other cultures and schools of thought. Thus initiates transformation and transition of culture and thinking pattern.

This project is an artistic reflection on the pursuit of individual identity of contemporary Chinese. Individuals who value individual privacy and personal freedom have developed a strong sense of self during the change in Chinese society. I focus on the reflection upon the visual interpretation of the potential collapse of traditional Chinese ideology and the traces of craving for a self-identity of contemporary Chinese. Therefore, I decided to create a series of three moving images – *Bubbles of Life I, II, III* - to represent the response of individuals to society. The moving images imply that Chinese individuals have been experiencing the process of losing traditional culture through to its regress, and the journey of the individuals in search of their self-identity.

The exegesis is structured in four parts. The first part explores Chinese individuality through analysis and discussion to establish the theoretical view on contemporary Chinese individuals' thinking patterns. In the second part I propose my perspective on individualism and make connections with my practice. The third part discusses the concept of a series of moving images that use bubbles as a metaphor and states the journey of my practical works, while the final part illustrates the methods that I have employed.

# Chapter 1: Background of the Practice: Individuality in Chinese

## 1.0 Individuality:

An individual's intrinsic character is made up of his or her thinking, manners, worldview, morals views, values and philosophies on life and reflected in his or her behaviour. Yet an individual's thoughts are constantly subjected to external social and cultural influences; therefore his or her thoughts and views are always in flux and will shift and change. Many artists express the existence of individuality in their work. For example, the Chinese artist Lijun Xiong's (see page 40 -- 41 for detailed discussion) works express the pursuit of new outlook on life of the younger generation; that is, those who were born in the 1970's. Youth always like to express their individual characters and make their life vivid, especially if they have no concern with consciousness, and they do not concern and involve themselves with society or their future.

I raise and explore questions such as "How do we typically think about ourselves or individuality? It is commonly taken for granted that identity consists of basic, intrinsic characteristics that emerge during life" (Beilharz & Hogan, 2002, p.12).

There is an interesting Chinese explanation for what constitutes an individual. I think the word *individuality* in Chinese is best characterised by the two characters "个性" (*ge xing*), the character of "个" means single and unitary, the meaning of "性" means characteristic and personality. These two words put together "个性" refer to the distinct personality of an individual.

As current Western philosophic thought is stealthily influencing the younger Chinese generations, the emphasis on individuality is getting increasingly dominant and has become a focal point in my expression through this project, as I wrestle with my own individuality and the constraints of a traditional upbringing. Below I will discuss the notions of Chinese and Western individuality.

## 1.1 Chinese traditional individualism

In China, the traditional idea of individuality is influenced by two key schools of philosophy, Daoism<sup>1</sup> and Confucianism<sup>2</sup>. Keqian Xu (2003) summarises three main ideas<sup>3</sup> to interpret Daoist Zhuang Tzu's (c.300 BCE) philosophy on individualism:

*First, Zhuang Tzu as a central representative of Daoism emphasises the spiritual freedom of an individual and also the continual development of self. He suggests that an independent identity is of fundamental importance. Second he attaches importance to the health of a person. Third he does not support the sacrificing of oneself to gain high official positions or riches. In the abstract of the article Xu says: "Zhuang Zui's individualistic thought ignores the individual's actual benefit. He advocates individuals evading social responsibility, and not participating in public affairs...this idea of individualism that is negative but not positive". (pp. 98-99)*

My perspective disagrees with Xu's idea that Zhuang Tzu's individualistic thought is negative. Zhuang Tzu takes a philosophical approach to find a balance between individual and society through spiritual consciousness. I think Zhuang Tzu's idea inspires individuals towards self-responsibility. In the material world, his thinking inspires individuals to pursue their spiritual world in tandem with their material desires.

Confucianism is another school of philosophy and the main root of traditional Chinese thinking patterns in individuals. Generally speaking it is common knowledge among Chinese that there is no individualism in Confucianism. Yet in Xu's article "On the Compatibility between Confucian Principles and Democracy" (2004), he offers a different opinion, asserting that:

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<sup>1</sup> "Daoism (also called 'Taoism') is a religion indigenous to China which takes its name from the word dao, 'the way'. It draws in its origins on texts of the late Warring States period (fourth – third centuries BCE), but its formative years were the centuries immediately after the fall of the Han dynasty in 220CE" (Clunas, 1997, p.101).

<sup>2</sup> "Confucianism is often characterized as a system of social and ethical philosophy rather than a religion. In fact, Confucianism built on an ancient religious foundation to establish the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society. It was what sociologist Robert Bellah called a "civil religion,"<sup>1</sup> the sense of religious identity and common moral understanding at the foundation of a society's central institutions. It is also what a Chinese sociologist called a "diffused religion";<sup>3</sup> its institutions were not a separate church, but those of society, family, school, and state; its priests were not separate liturgical specialists, but parents, teachers, and officials. Confucianism was part of the Chinese social fabric and way of life; to Confucians, everyday life was the arena of religion" (Berling, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> I translated the original Chinese text into English.

*Individuals' freedom includes two related aspects: 1. individuals' free speech and action in society should be respected and protected; 2. every individual as a human being holds his free will which can not be deprived by anyone else. It is generally accepted that Confucianism emphasizes collectivism while neglecting individualism. But in my understanding this is partly a misunderstanding...Confucius once said: "You can capture a general from the three armies, but you cannot capture the free will of a single man."...We can say that Confucianism advocates a kind of individualism with a strong sense of moral responsibility: everyone has a free will and is able to make decisions freely by himself; consequently, everyone should be responsible for his own choice. This kind of individualism is also a presupposition of a healthy and perfect democratic society based on law. (p.358)*

I agree with Xu's idea that "Confucianism advocates a kind of individualism with a strong sense of moral responsibility", but I do not agree with Xu's claim that "this kind of individualism is also a presupposition of a health and perfect democratic society based on law". In ancient China, the emperor controlled the law. There was never a democratic system. Confucius implemented a dogmatic moral school of thought in society to facilitate the ruling of the country. I think there are similarities of thought between Confucius and Daoist Zhuang Tzu, in particular, encouraging people to elevate themselves. However, I do not agree that these philosophic schools of thought can be the central tenets of a regime charged with the responsibility of leading society and country.

## 1.2 Western individuality in contemporary China

To compare these two Chinese philosophers and their idea of individuality, both posit that individuals should pay full attention to the cultivation of spirit and morality. The Confucius way of thought emphasises a patriarchal system doctrine; family as a single unit in accord with their country to enable individuals to be an integral part of the whole. However, Confucius' thinking patterns are to some extent still influencing Chinese nowadays; his thinking is passed down from generation to generation.

Zhuang Tzu suggested that individuality exists only when one is in harmony with nature. His primary focus on individuality stemmed from the inner self and responsibility to oneself and the living environment. Zhuang Tzu's famous quotes (cited in Watson, 1964) encapsulate his way of thinking and his influences:

*"Reward and punishment is the lowest form of education."*

*"Happiness is the absence of the striving for happiness."*

*"If water derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind! The mind of the sage, being in repose, becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation."*

*"We cling to our own point of view, as though everything depended on it. Yet our opinions have no permanence; like autumn and winter, they gradually pass away."*

*"Flow with whatever is happening and let your mind be free."*

I propose that Zhang Tzu reinforced the way of thinking in which an individual can stay centred as an individual only by accepting whatever he/she is as the ultimate level of individuality. Those two schools of philosophy influenced the Chinese generation by generation; however, due to the incorporation of foreign thought and culture, their meanings and interpretations have changed for the Chinese people.

To provide a further example, I draw on Robert Moore's (2005) essay about the meaning of transformations of the contemporary Chinese word *ku* – (酷). It is derived from the English word *cool* and is used by the generation who were born

after the Cultural Revolution. Moore (2005) states:

*Largely because of globalization, their viewpoints and attitudes are profoundly different from those of their parents. A central feature of these attitudes is a kind of individualism that stands emphatically opposed to the collectivist spirit promoted during the Cultural Revolution, an individualism that is influenced by Western pop culture and is linked to the new Chinese slang term "ku," derived from the English slang term "cool." The ku of China's millennials is not a carbon copy of Western styles. There are different ways to be ku in contemporary China, but all reflect Western kinds of modernity and individualism. (p.358)*

In my opinion, this newly adopted term is revealing in that it comes from a basic slang lexeme originating in Western popular culture, but is semantically linked to features not associated with the meaning of the Western term. In fact, the semantic modification of this slang term highlights what is most prominent in the way young Chinese identify themselves as distinct from their forebears.

I believe that the above quote describes a phenomenon of contemporary China where the concept or meaning of individuality is different to the understanding of individuality in Western culture. I offer a theoretical view of individualism from Jorge J. E. Gracia (1988) who defined individuality in his essay as:

*Contrary to the standard view among present day philosophers, who interpret individuality as some kind of distinction or difference, individuality must be understood primarily as noninstantiability. It applies to all individuals, regardless of their nature and location: To be an individual is to be a noninstantiable instance and, vice versa; to be a noninstantiable instance is to be an individual. Noninstantiability is what distinguishes individuals from universals, which are in turn characterized by their capacity to be instantiated. Understood in this way, individuality must be distinguished from although it is related to (depending on the nature of the individual and its location and circumstances), difference, identity, division, indivisibility, and unpredictability. (p.234)*

Individuals now present and identify themselves as they like, and create whatever they want in a way that reflects their unilateral understanding of the concept of Western individualism. My view is that what these "individuals" do and show are mere superficial reflections of Western individualism, they are not creative, have not developed to another level or dimension,

and lack any distinguishing Chinese features.

The Western notion of individualism was introduced to China only as recently as the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, Cheng and Bunnin (2002) discuss the ideas of Qichao Liang:

*Confucius and his disciples did their utmost to channel people's religious feeling into the framework of social rituals. In addition, they insisted that everybody should play his own role in a social hierarchy that the rituals represented. By virtue of these endeavours, they created a moral philosophy that could fulfil two major functions of religion, namely "to unite people together" and "to maintain an order in a society." Liang argued that "after the wide propagation of Confucius' doctrine, no religion could be truly successful in China" ... the Chinese "had not a corporate life at all, and therefore, had no chance to think about the problem of individualism. They had neither of the two types of lives. What they had was simply a thing in between, namely an ethical relationship". (p.167)*

However Liang's argument did reflect traditional Chinese ideology; however, the Chinese have been influenced by both Marxism and capitalism since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wang (2005) says: "For more than a century, Chinese intellectuals have been engaged in translating and introducing Western thought and literature in China" (p.9). After 1949, the Chinese government adopted socialism to rule China and fifteen years later the Cultural Revolution<sup>4</sup> began. Since then the Chinese have had to follow the political views and requirements of the government. "Throughout China between the 1950s and 1960s, altruism and collectivism were promoted by propaganda...Nevertheless, the Cultural Revolution carried the promotion of altruism<sup>5</sup> and collectivism<sup>6</sup> to an unprecedented high level" (Lan, 1998, p. 66).

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<sup>4</sup> This period is 1966-1976; it is introduced by Chang & Halliday in *Mao, The Unknown Story* (2005); During the Cultural Revolution Chairman Mao was self-centred and struggling for power; he tried to establish himself as a new cultural and religion by abolishing all other cultures and making people stop thinking. "He decided to fire his first shot at culture and this is why the Great Purge was called the Cultural Revolution" (p 523). He assigned Jiang Qing, who was his wife to draw up a manifesto denouncing everything from culture which was opposed to Mao's thinking. Jiang Qing was an ex-actress who loved culture, but she was not accepted by other artists. She was therefore satisfied to have an opportunity at revenge. Mao aimed to use the field of culture to start a political purge and to gain personal power. "A national guideline forbidding the use of political accusations tramples on culture and the custodians of culture" (p 528).

<sup>5</sup> A term coined by Auguste Comte in 1851, from the Italian adjective *altrui* ... "employed by him to denote the benevolent, as contrasted with the selfish propensities. It was introduced into English by George H. Lewes in 1853 (Comte's *Philosophy of the Sciences*, 1, xxi), and popularized thereafter by expounders and advocates of Comte's philosophy" (Brosnahan, 1907)



### 1.3 My own view on individuality

In my opinion, Chinese people tend to be accepting of socialist ideas because of their strong Confucian roots. After the Cultural Revolution, people realised that they had the right to decide on their own beliefs: some of them are still deeply influenced by collectivism, and on family: the core traditional values of family and society.

Under the influence of collectivism and socialism people regard the benefit of country and team over personal benefit. After the opening of China's door to the west that brought about the influence of the philosophy of individualism, people realised that individual rights and benefits were important as well; they therefore started to consider their own selves, and to reconsider the value of self.

I believe Chinese individualism will continue to morph and at a certain stage to form its own values. One significant factor is the craving of material qualities over inner spiritual substance that is observable amongst the younger generation. This lacking of a spiritual pursuit has contributed to the fragility of "self". The self always yields to an external, materialised self, for self-assurance.

In my artwork I do not intend to offer a solution, as the development of self is constantly changing. The pace of change is significant. This is reflected in contemporary Chinese social and political ideologies. The goal is to address the advocating of a materialised lifestyle, which plays a critical role when considering Chinese individualism. Just as importantly, it offers contemporary Chinese the opportunity to see themselves through their own mirror or perceptions of individuality, and what this affect means for their own personal identity. My research has motivated me to reconsider my own values and goals, and to seek what is it that forms the current Chinese individuality and the spirit that is enveloped within. As Confucius said, the reflection of the individual stems from what is within, implying the response of an inner self to the outer world (society and

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<sup>6</sup> " Individualism regards every man as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful co-existence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights, and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members" (Rand & Branden, 1964)

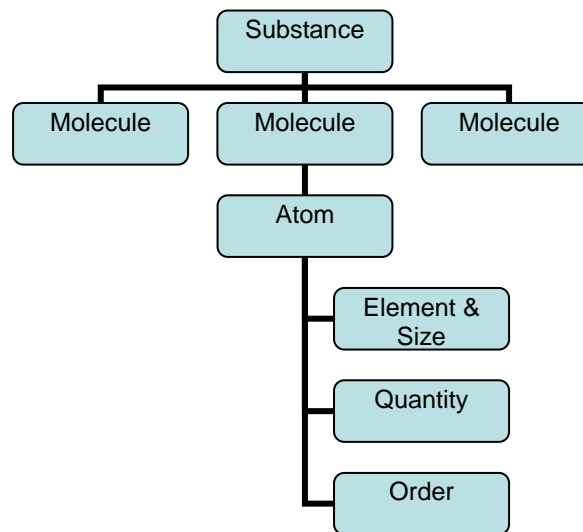
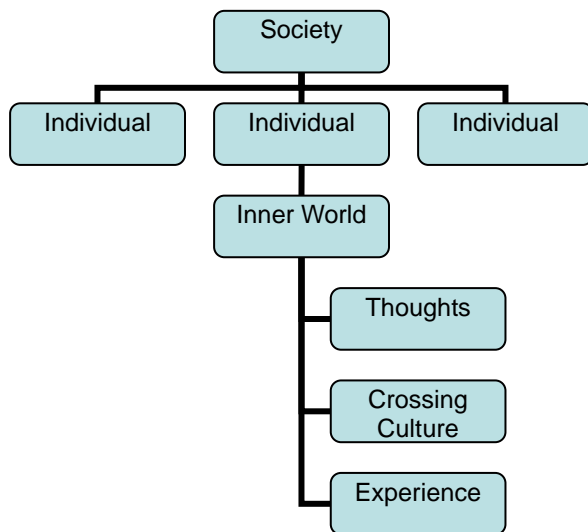
environment), which in turn, influences what is within the self. From this sense of spirit that I set forth to create my art. The next section sets out to discuss the connections between my own view of individuality and my artworks.

## **Chapter 2: Connecting Individuality through an Evolved Thinking Process**

In this chapter, I will describe the development of the concept of my moving images and painting and I will discuss how the research has influenced my ideas. I acknowledge the support of my model Pei Li in finishing my short movie works in 2007. In 2008, I applied for and was granted ethics approval (reference number 08/168) for low ethical risk research projects from AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

## 2.0 Original concept — the “molecule” notion

The original concept of the molecule notion was first generated in my mind on one summer day in China in 2003, when I was standing on a bridge watching the constant stream of cars and people. I realised that individuals were as molecules<sup>7</sup> representing the makeup of our society, and their similarities to molecules that make up substances. The two charts below illustrate these principles:

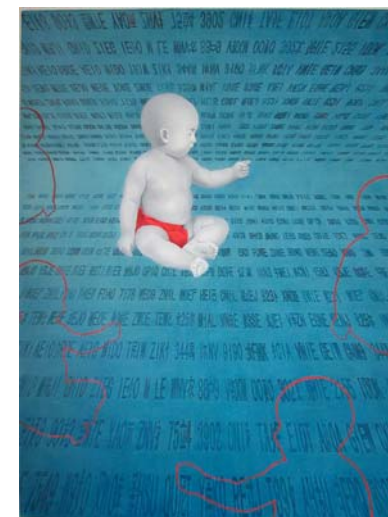


Atoms are continuously moving and differ in their size; they have different qualities and they have their own order, and can therefore create substances of huge variety. Similarly, the individuality of individuals which is formed by their different thoughts, culture and experiences can create many different senses of individuality.

<sup>7</sup> "A molecule, in turn, is constructed from two or more atoms bonded together in a well-defined fashion. A shorthand way to describe the makeup of a molecule is its

## 2.0.1 The development of concept in my earlier paintings

The molecule notion has been in my mind for long time, and I am always seeking a way to express it artistically. In the final year of my visual art degree in 2006, I first employed oil paintings to express this unique notion. The theme of the paintings *Cream of the Cream I, II, III* focused on the social background and not so much on the individuals in society. Individuals and society are interrelated, and my idea of individuals as the molecules which society consists of encouraged me to explore the individuals in such society. It was from this point that the research concept and pursuit of a master's degree and study started out.



Gao, Y. (2006). *Cream of the Cream I, II, III*. Oil & acrylic on canvas. 1200mm x 900mm.

In my mind I imagined a bubble which has a similar characteristic to a molecule in what I have termed the *molecule notion*. The forms of molecules are different round spheres, and they are also dynamic, so I chose the image of a bubble to represent my notion as it embodied these two key characteristics. Moreover, the bubble has similar characteristics to individuals. I will state the reasons as I use the bubble as a metaphor to express the individual below.

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molecular formula, which lists the number and kinds of atoms present in the molecule" (Macomber, 1996, p.22).

According to the molecule notion, an individual is only a single molecule in a society. But society, which consists of individuals, is the focus. In other words, when people see a substance they do not normally think of its molecules, they only focus on it as a whole substance. Bubbles express my molecule notion best, as they exist but are hard to see without any outer-world reflection. With the completion of the movies featuring a model, I turned back to my painting; I added some bubbles into my painting *Cream of the cream III*. However, the meaning of these bubbles is different from their meaning in my molecule notion, because I portrayed the baby in a realistic way in the painting, as the baby is best seen as a unique individual.



Gao, Y. (2006-2007). *Cream of the Cream III*. Oil & acrylic on canvas. 1200mm x 900mm.

## 2.0.2 The development of concept in earlier moving images

Based on the molecule notion I experimented with in my earlier practice to reflect upon contemporary Chinese individuality, I used a Chinese model to appear in moving images. I took a narrative approach to represent the inner self of the individual. To portray this new “outreaching” I created a movie called *Conserving some inner space* (See Appendix 1) to express the transition from lack of information to “information overload”. I used the sound of a heartbeat at the beginning and the end of

the movie to express aspiration, loneliness and innermost quietude, and to represent the expanding desire and the impulse of yearning to understand the world outside China (see page 24-25 for detailed discussion). However, it was only able to represent a specific individual and not the community. I agree with the idea of Jorge J. E. Gracia (1998):

*Difference is a relational feature of individuals in a universe where more than one individual is possible. Identity is a feature of individuals in a spatial-temporal universe where change and duration are found. Division is a feature of individuals whose nature allows multiplicity within the species. Indivisibility, as we saw, was an inadequate way of interpreting noninstantiability, reflecting a rather physical model. And, finally, unpredictability is a feature of individuals considered as subjects of thought and linguistic expression. All of these features are, therefore, contingent on factors other than the individual itself considered as such. Only noninstantiability can be regarded as the necessary and sufficient condition of individuality. (p.235)*

As an artist, I considered individuals as uncertain factors, therefore the question was how to express the relationship between the individuality of individuals and society to understand it in an objective way. Additionally, I wanted to relate my molecule notion with individuals in an artistic way and by finding the most effective medium to express this thinking pattern. Therefore, I moved on to combine painting and moving images. To capture both moving images and still images was to better reflect the process of the recently emerged phenomenon of Chinese individuality. I also departed from the narrative approach and began to pursue a metaphorical approach in my subsequent practice.

## **2.1 Bubbles as a metaphor in moving images & paintings**

I finally decided to use bubbles as the “performers” in the combination of the moving images and paintings. In my work the transparent quality of bubbles reflects the vibrant outer and the subdued inner worlds. The reflection of each bubble varies and that connotes the differences between individuals influenced by cultural values in society. Together they form a trend to represent the ideologies of the time. The seemingly identical inner self is empty. Does each bubble represent an individual or a collective individual? Do the fragile moments of existence as a bubble impact on the society? Will the vulnerable individual

succumb to materialisation? Will the bursting attract or reform the society?

My view is that with the bubbles that represent individuals, each bubble has its own character that shapes the individual. However each bubble expresses a member of a group, and in this group their thoughts and behaviour look the same as the other members', and each of them represents a collective spirit. Individuals together, they form the specific ideology of a society. I believe that Chinese individualism will continue to morph as the craving for material qualities takes over of the craving for inner spiritual substance amongst the younger generation. They are represented in my current work through transparent red and black bubbles. Each group of bubbles represents different groups' points of view at different ages; they give birth to individuals and form individual groups. The bubbles and the "formless" painting imply the phenomenon of Chinese individuality that has been transforming and shaping contemporary China.



## Chapter 3: Reflection on the Practice

In this chapter, I am going to briefly introduce one of my earlier moving images, and the process of creating my artwork. The main part I will focus on is how I use bubbles as a metaphor to express the creation of individuals. I also describe the development of my artwork and research. In addition to that, I will discuss the relationship between the moving images and paintings as well as the inspiration that I have gathered from my research.

### 3.0 Commentary on the process of practice

I decided to use bubbles, as a metaphor for individuals, to “act” in my moving images and paintings. This is action art of the bubbles, because they are without control. In addition, the bubbles themselves form an essentially “formless” painting; at the same time, dots appear on the paper and it is as if the painting is performed by itself when the bubbles burst on the paper to create images.

#### 3.0.1 My movie “Conserving some inner space”

Subsequent to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and shutdown of information, people have desired a better understanding of the outside world. Throughout the moving images of *Conserving some inner space*, I use a mixture of songs to represent change and transformation – specifically, as a way to express a person’s developing process of personal thought and the acceptance of, or resistance to, change. I also use soundtracks from computer games and television programmes, as well as telephones ringing, to represent the diverse and integrated communicating system in a technologically driven society. These audio effects are mixed together to deliberately instill a sense of chaos and confusion.

The movie takes a person as metaphor of individuality who wanders in the chaotic era; the movie also expresses the journey towards seeking and building one’s individuality.

The inspiration of my work *Conserving some inner space* comes from the Chinese film *Zhan Tai*<sup>8</sup> (站台) (Li & Jia, 2000). Director Jia sets out to portray the phenomenon of information flooding into China. This movie expresses a particular aspect of Chinese individuality during the age since the Cultural Revolution, in which individuals' self-awareness is weak and people are easily changed by the impact of the flourishing economy and penetration of foreign cultural ideology.

My movie *Conserving some inner space* expresses a generation who lived through and experienced the Cultural Revolution in their childhood and adolescence. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, people were restricted in their ability to interpret their own thinking due to the controlling strategy of the Chinese leadership at that time. This generation has also lived through economic reforms and the opening of the door to China. As the reforms progressed, people were eager to take up new ways of thinking that were previously unavailable, usually by embracing music and movies.

In Jia's movie, the music is significant. He has also used a television news announcer's voice connotate different historical eras. Jia's intention seems to be to express the disparity between people's dreams and real life.

I have made reference to some of Jia's approaches such as the mixing and shifting of music and voiceover. In my own work I enhanced the effect through adding sound effects from computer games. The noise of the pop music and voice prompts young people to experience the changing fashion of modern culture. The main idea is a self-reflective inquiry: What is the inner spiritual world of a person living in a society which is influenced by hedonist and materialist ideas?

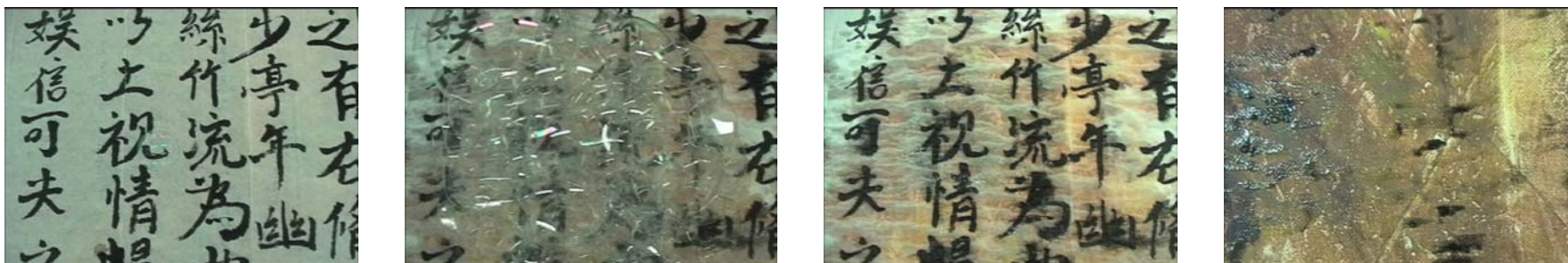
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<sup>8</sup> *Zhan tai* is a story about four young people, Cui, Yi, Zhang, and Ping. They are ordinary young people who aspire to be performers, so they are more sensitive about cultural change than other young people. They live in an innovative time and social change is influencing them. From the time they were young, they attempted to change their lives through different styles of performance. They continually imitate famous pop singers and dancers in their performances. When they are performing, they seem like real pop singers and dancers. In real life, they also attempt to change through their behaviour, because of the influence of Western popular culture. Ping crimps her hair, and starts smoking. The men alter their work pants to jeans and let their hair grow long. They pursue their loves and their futures. However, their dreams are very far away from their real lives in these innovative times, because of their social environment. They finally succumb to reality.

### 3.0.2 Moving image “Vestige”

It was hard to find a workable approach to combine the moving images and paintings. This gave rise to the question of how I could portray bubbles while incorporating the characteristics of Chinese culture. In the end, I inscribed Chinese characters on xuan zhi<sup>9</sup> and blew bubbles that settled onto the surface until they became one. This moving image is named *Vestige* (see Appendix 2). I created the colourless bubbles to express the individuality of people who were reliant on others for their intellectual prowess and out of touch with the values of the traditional culture during the era of the Cultural Revolution right through to the momentous emergence of China’s “Open Door” policy.

I pondered to myself: Can the bubbles really express individuals in contemporary China? Also, by using Chinese characters (there is no specific meaning intended to be communicated in the Chinese characters) in the moving images, does it give a sense that the moving images emphasise Chinese traditional culture? I asked myself if in fact Chinese traditional culture had been lost. This approach to the artwork led me to understand that it did not provide a satisfactory means of expression of contemporary China.

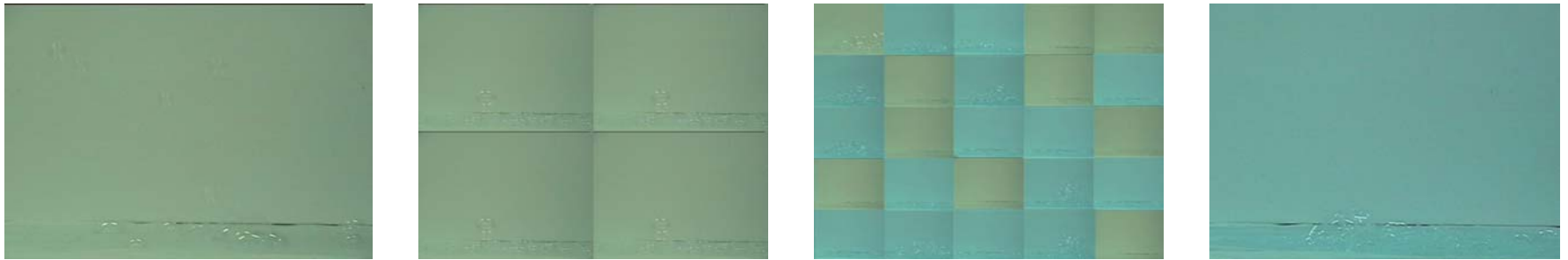


Gao, Y. (2008). *Vestige*. Stills from moving images.

<sup>9</sup> Around the beginning of Tang Dynasty, 618 - 907 AD, a fine paper was made from straw of rice in Xuancheng. This paper, known as Xuan zhi to the world, was named after its producing area. Today, all similar kinds of paper carry its name although they are produced elsewhere in China ,,, Although it is commonly known as ‘rice paper’, the formal name is xuan zhi and there is a wide range of different types of painting paper made of different materials and mainly from the bark of different types of trees. The term ‘rice paper’ is a misleading representation of Chinese painting substrate. ( *History of xuan zhi*. (n.d.))

### 3.0.3 Moving image “The life. The time”

With a view to contemporary China, I created a further series of moving images. I concentrated my focus on individuals, with social culture and ideology as a background in my work. The influence from the outer world on individuals became obvious in the reflection on each of the bubbles. Those moving images (see Appendix 3) express the idea that individuals are in pursuit of their own dreams. My most inner thoughts were to represent contemporary Chinese social phenomena such as economic transformation, technological advancement and the blind pursuit of a material world. However, I came to the realisation that these moving images could only represent and express chaos.



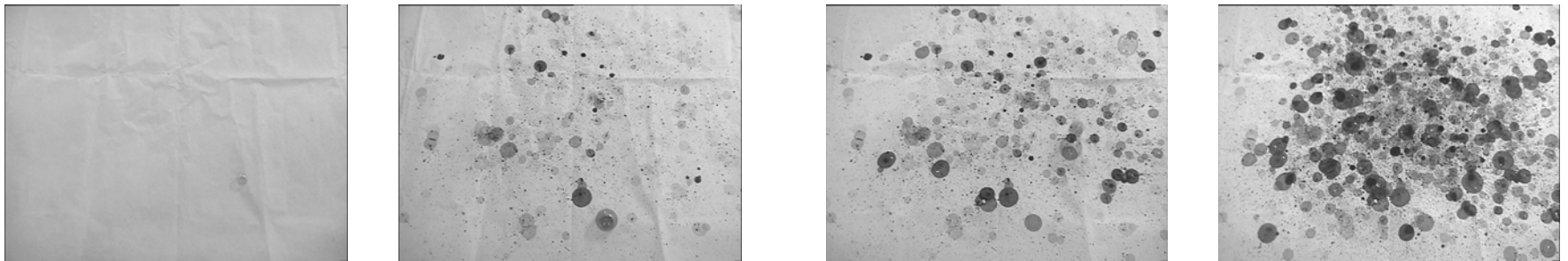
Gao, Y. (2008). *The life. The time*. Stills from moving images.

By objectively evaluating the outcome of this series of works, I noted a sense of imbalance; painting as one of the two artistic approaches had diminished and been left behind. Then, I started to question myself about the role of painting in my artwork, and the kind of relationship between the background and the bubbles. Based on the outcome of these moving images and my self-reflection, I returned to my original artistic approach, which was a more balanced combination of moving images and paintings.

### 3.0.4 Moving image “Nameless”

In the next series of artworks, I focused on how to combine painting with moving images. In this experimental artwork, I placed emphasis on both the bubbles’ performance and the effects of painting. The remnants of bubbles are uncontrolled as they materialise on the xuan zhi. The bubbles become an artistic instrument on their own and create a picture, spontaneously giving the effect of it being “my” uncontrolled painting.

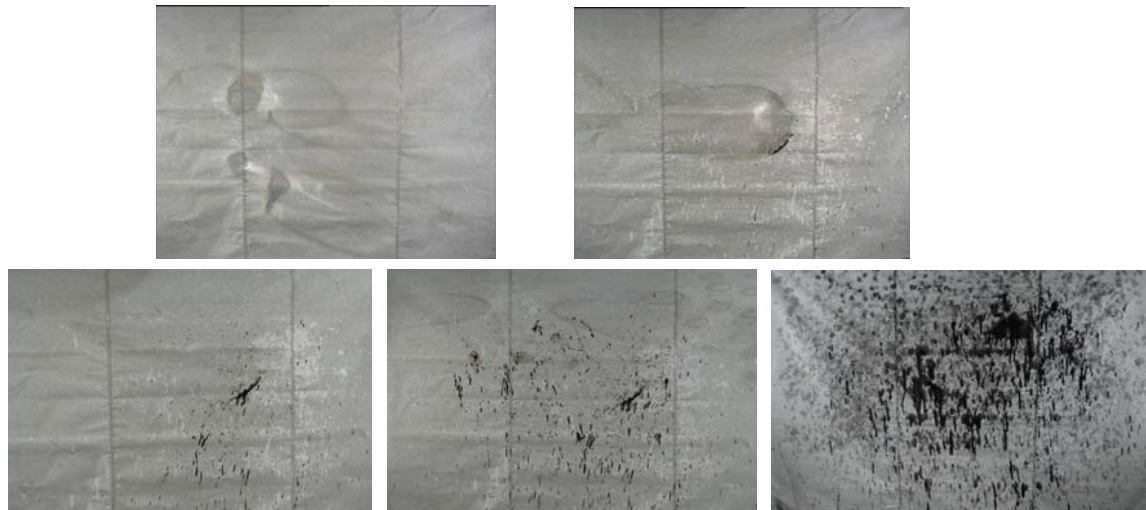
Those moving images (see Appendix 4) gave realisation to the significance of their performance. In using the bubble as the conductor of my artwork, I was considering: Should their sizes be different when representing different individuals? There is no doubt that the reason behind choosing ink and xuan zhi as materials in my moving images is to express some of the most representative elements of traditional Chinese culture and thought. I still pondered, however: What is the true relationship between paper, painting and bubbles?



Gao, Y. (2008) *Nameless*. Stills from moving images.

### 3.0.5 Experimental moving image I

Following my process of self-inquiry, I chose to use coloured backlighting for my films as an instrument to link the xuan zhi, shadow, and remnants of the bubbles. In this artwork, I ignored the bubbles; the emphasis was on a holistic artistic effect. I blew the bubbles between the light and paper; the reflection of the bubbles flew across the paper and disappeared as quickly as they appeared. My aim was to portray and to record the exact moment of the bubble bursting and its remnant becoming one of the “individuals” in these moving images (see Appendix 5). But there were some problems in the moving images; the ink ran after the bubbles burst on the paper, changing the remnants of the burst bubbles. On the reverse side, the paper warped because of airflow; I needed a steady background. I made a decision to stick with my original idea and refine it further.

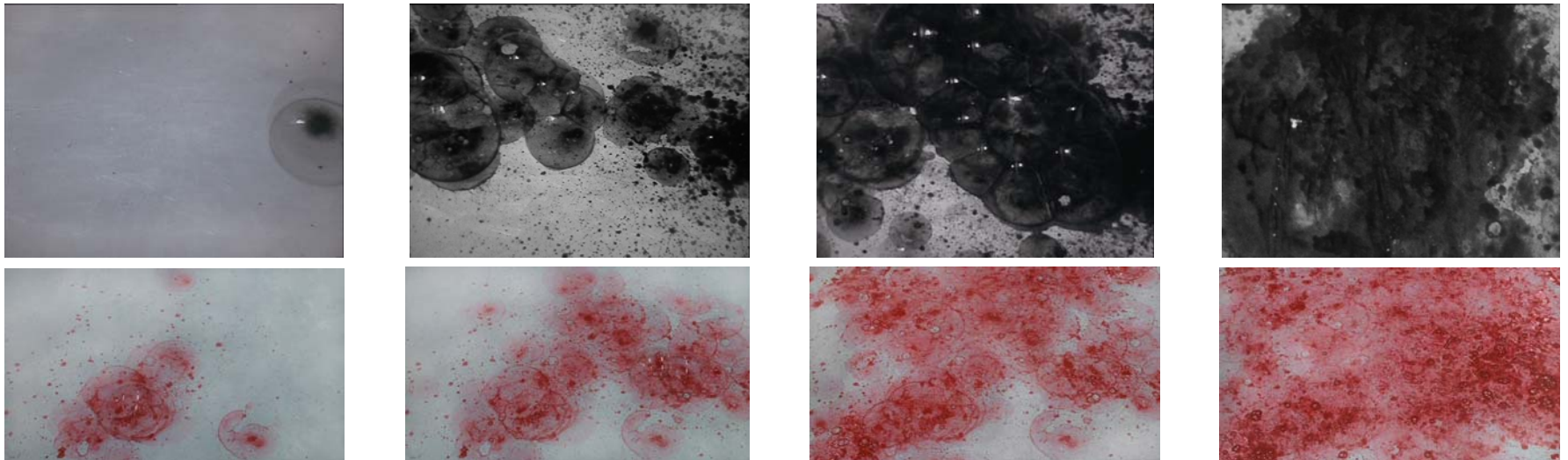


Gao, Y. (2008). *Experimental moving image I*. Stills.

### 3.0.6 Experimental moving image II & III

After I made decision to focus on the original idea, I tested new materials — watercolour paper and paints. By using watercolour paper, each bubble can be emphasised at the same time. However, the issue with using watercolour was that as the colours dried, the purity of the colours was reduced and they faded away.

Using a canvas that has been covered by modelling clay had a dramatically different effect. The modelling clay was rubbed by a scraper onto canvas. I then used the scraper to make the effect of a rough and uneven surface on the canvas. Modelling clay also had the distinct advantage of holding the colour on a specific part of the canvas rather than the colour flowing around. I blew bubbles onto the canvas after the modelling clay had dried. The chromatic bubbles could not form round shapes because of the special surface. As they splashed on the surface of the canvas they formed into abstract shapes and became abstract artwork. However, in those works (see Appendix 6) there are some Chinese elements that have been lost. For example, canvas is the primary western oil painting material.



Gao, Y. (2008). *Experimental moving image II & III* Stills.

### 3.1 Final moving images – “Bubbles of life”

My artwork titled *Bubbles of life* is made up of a series of three short moving images reflecting on disoriented, delicate and unsettled individuals. In my mind, this portrays the Chinese people as a civilisation of individuals that has experienced constant change and a metamorphosis through relentless struggle, ambiguity and an uncertain future.

In my artwork there are three main representations of bubbles: colourless bubbles used to represent the influence of society on individuals, black bubbles to express traditional Chinese culture and the mixing of emerging modern culture, and red bubbles to describe rebirth and new ways of thinking. The blank paper and the gradual but spontaneous formation of individual remnants are metaphorical references to the contemporary “individuality” influx and its effects felt within our society, which appears as a process of transformation of substances made up of dynamic moving molecules.

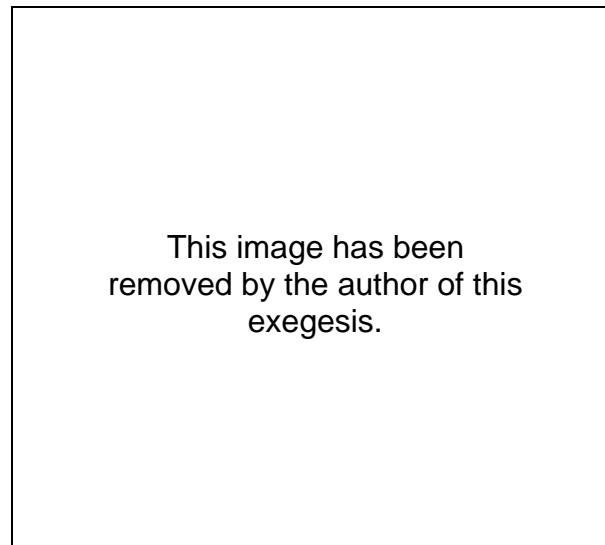
#### 3.1.1 Bubbles of life I

In *Bubbles of life I*, colourless bubbles were floating and they slowly dropped and burst on the paper. Each of them was independent of the other, but they seemed to be interrelated as they interacted and collided with each other. I focused on the movement of the bubbles; while watching their subtle but active “performance”, I pondered if there was really any tangible relationship between each of the bubbles as a whole. The slowness of dropping is a metaphor for the morphing ideology constituted by the wholeness of an individual’s journey; when the bubbles collide with the paper and burst, they strongly impact on society. Thus the influence of individual is slow, progressive, and yet significant. The appearance of a single bubble on the screen suggested to me a sense of loneliness and quiet. However, they soon became busy and crowded when more bubbles came together. The moment the bubbles burst on the paper a faint white light flashed onto the paper’s surface. This momentary flash of white light is a metaphorical trumpeting of the culmination and ending of the individuals’ short lives; it implies the radiant moment of an individual life. At those moments, there was nothing left on the paper except the faint trace of what they had been and now become, which were sad and pale stains of colourless bubbles’ lives, having lost their individuality and rarely remembered by others. New bubbles were continuously to accumulate, the stained remnant of the new bubbles overlapping on the old ones. Some lives were over, new ones generated, and I pondered once again:



What was the significance of their lives?

Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang's (1998) work *Bloodlines* series expresses the relationship between individuals and family, and between individual and society. Born in the 50s, Zhang's work reflects the traditional Chinese family. "Chinese people put a huge emphasis on the family. Family relations include those of blood, those who are your kin, at the same time in society, in your job; you cannot leave these families, like relations." "I wanted to express this relationship between the individual and society" (Anjali/CNN, 2007).



Zhang, X. (1998). *Bloodlines: The Big Family*. Size Unknown.

The Chinese saying "blood is thicker than water" is another implication that blood relatives (family and society) are very important. Zhang's work strongly reflects the focus on family as a societal norm in Chinese traditional culture. His idea also reflects that China as a country is represented as a big family, even though there may no direct kinship between all Chinese.

Because of this, the figures in Zhang's work have the same facial expressions, whether they are men, women or children. However, beneath their faces, the thinking of the individuals is undefined. Zhang addresses and questions the underpinning Chinese thoughts of a unified country that favours family and society, rather than the individual. Individuality is secondary in the norm of Chinese society.

In my understanding, Zhang's works express the phenomenon of collectivism that existed in society and family. His paintings intend to arouse the Chinese sense of individuality while keeping the cultural values of family and society. However, this challenges the traditional idea of placing emphasis on family and society, not the individual. His works inspire me to express the process of the traditional Chinese culture has been lost and the new culture in the process of being built by individuals among contemporary Chinese. Family as a unit of social system has been formed as the basis of Chinese thinking for long time. As the writer Brian Hook (1996) commented, when he was analysing the thoughts of Lucian Pye:

*The Confucian tradition ascribed moral virtue to the state and to its officials, and depreciated the worth of the individual, who was expected to defer to the interests of the collective, represented by the family, kinship group, or government, there was some ambivalence about individualism itself. Although the individual was expected to conform within the group, he was also expressed to excel at self improvement. (p.7)*

Contemporary Chinese are shifting from collectivism to individualism. Inevitably, in the transition process Chinese are exploring and finding their own system of individualism. Conflicts are between tradition and contemporary thought. The reflection of bubbles without any colour in my work represents the conundrum of unravelling the way out of chaos. The reflection of the bubbles refers to the confusing conundrum.

In my practice, plain, clear bubbles represent those people who lack self-identity because during the Cultural Revolution socialism promoted collectivism to people and directed them to ignore their own thoughts and feelings for the benefit of the collective. In addition Mao Ze Dong manipulated people's thinking and as such they had lost their self-identity.

In addition the traditional culture and philosophy have not been passed on to the new generation. They have also had no chance to understand the world outside China. Individuals had been trying to show and prove their values; however, it was futile, because individuality was not encouraged in such an “abnormal” collective era. Thus, in this period, the individual as a single unit was colourless (unrecognised) in society. They could be only seen or noticed through the reflection of things going around them. For instance, if the outer world is colourful then their reflection is colourful. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, grey, blue and black were the collective’s dress code - under which the individual self was hidden. This chameleon-like behaviour was seen as a means of survival during the Cultural Revolution, because in the collective people only wore clothes that were in grey, blue and black, and their thinking likewise represented these colour choices. I see the colours of their clothes as the reflection of their compliant selves.

The xuan zhi as a background was a metaphor for an imaginary space. It shrank, and then many wrinkles appeared as the colourless and non-individualistic bubbles appeared and burst on it. The wrinkles signified scars, which are the remnants of the individuals in that space. After the Cultural Revolution, some scholars recorded its influence in writings, movies and other artistic and literary works. Later their works became known collectively as *Scar Literature*<sup>10</sup>. People have come to accept that these scars will fade over time almost as if they had never existed. In fact, it is far too painful to acknowledge and this could be considered almost a position of denial. This belief has contributed to the sturdy and optimistic qualities of the Chinese.

In this works, bubbles represent individuals. A bubble is transparent, reflective, void inside and most important its existence is temporal. Each of them is unique and represents impulsiveness, insecurity and vulnerability. This work explores and seeks to explain these qualities in different ways.

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<sup>10</sup> “ Scar literature or literature of the wounded (伤痕文学) is a genre of Chinese literature which emerged in the late 1970s, soon after the death of Mao Zedong, portraying the sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the tragic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four”(Nationmaster.com, n.d.)

### 3.1.2 Bubbles of life II

In *Bubbles of life II*, black bubbles are formed from the constant accumulations of all colours. In contemporary China individuals unravel their own values and beliefs to develop their own “bubbles”. The trace of the individuals will be left on this supposed space – paper or canvas, which is uncontrolled. When the black bubbles land, they burst and leave their marks on the paper or canvas. The form and shape of these marks are unpredictable. Together they weave a big picture of “society”, again constantly changing. The bubbles shape into “formless” pictures.

In some of the moving images, the black bubbles overlapped faint grey bubbles on the paper. I focused on the picture, and the dots made by the black bubbles moving and transforming. Then, the bubbles had fulfilled their roles and were no longer seen as important, as the painting appeared magically performed by itself. The form of the picture becomes even more evident by adding more and more ink into the soapy water, which gives birth to new bubbles. Each of the bubbles defines itself and seemingly begs to lay down its mark and be shown in context more clearly. Sometimes they would come in groups; sometimes they came alone. What did they want to tell people? What did they want to prove? It is hard to tell the origin of each form on the picture. I captured the moment of the black bubbles’ movement before the paper was fully dominated by black because I wanted to capture the moments that could portray the individuals who were lacking the sense of individuality and their transitions to become self-determined. This is a “flash moment” in China’s rapid development and transformation. Any moment in the three moving images could be captured as a unique moment showing individuals’ influences on society. The flash moment is a metaphor to express people who are living in the developing society and whose individuality is constantly morphing. Their morphing identities amalgamate, creating the plasticity of the society. So, the flash moment represents only a transitory period in the process of transforming individuality.

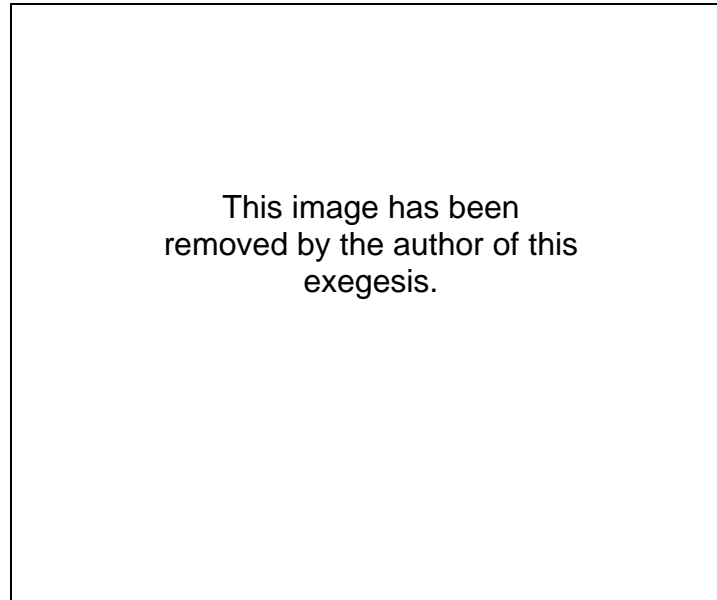
The picture is formed by inked bubbles as soon as they burst and spread on the xuan zhi thus creating contemporary Chinese painting style *Po Mo Hua*<sup>11</sup> [泼墨画]. *Po Mo Hua* painting is a traditional painting type, abstract in style, whereby the

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<sup>11</sup> Splash ink-painting (泼墨画) is a method using ink with water drenching and spills on the xuan paper. This technique is one of painting or drawing exaggeratedly. The effect of watery ink areas can take different forms; sometimes the artist draws the outline after spilling the ink (one of the technical skills characteristic of splash ink-painting. (Ma, J, 2007, translated by Y. Gao).

shapes are visible but not clearly defined. Because the objects undergo only minor transformation, shapes are still recognisable, although they are not clearly defined. The paintings that were created through the bubbles in the *Po Mo Hua* style are formless and clearly distinct from other paintings. I admire this form of painting with its subtlety and its silence.

To take a Chinese artist Wang Xiaolong's *Po Mo Hua* as an example:



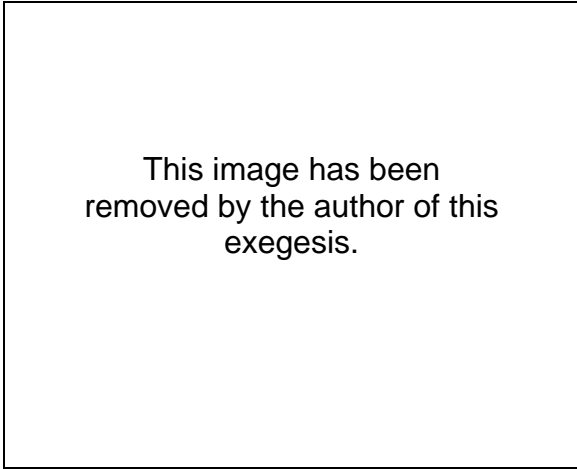
Wang, X. (n.d.). *Po Mo Shan Shui*. Size unknown.

*To show his attachment to natural scenery, in his painting Wang illustrated mountains and streams with his understanding, experiences and feelings of life. His painting does not portray mountains and water like a photo taken by a camera; he combines natural scenery and people's spirit based on his understanding of life to make his artwork. His artwork is an artistic reflection of spirit (Ma, 2008, trans. Y.Gao).*

The notion of Wang's work expresses the spirit of Chinese traditional thoughts — human beings and nature should be as a whole, of what the Daoism Zhaung Tzu advocated: “*Zhuang Tzu built on a related view — that people develop different moral attitudes from different natural upbringings and each feels his own views are obvious and natural*” (2007). But a person's claim should depend on his/her subjective understanding of nature and of himself/herself. As the American scholar Martin Powers (2002) says: “*in ancient China the concept of individuality had already existed in Chinese artists' mind. To take an example painting had not relied on religion and aristocrat in Song Dynasty*” (Yin, J. p.259, trans. Y. Gao). Power suggests that Chinese artists emphasise on their subjective point of view about the objects or the environment. For instance, in the past, artists drew landscape to express their emotion. When Western individualism was introduced to China, it spread quickly as it has parallel essences with the ancient Chinese concepts. I believe that Chinese traditional ideas form a sound foundation for receiving socialistic and capitalistic phenomenon that coexists alongside Chinese traditional culture in the contemporary China of today. The Chinese says “the great ocean is able to accommodate hundreds of rivers while the great man is able to accommodate thousands of different views.” Chinese traditional spirit is that Chinese culture survives for several thousand years. Chinese has carried 56 nationalities and their culture nowadays. Therefore accepting and embracing new ideas from Western thought of individuality will only enrich without necessary ignoring traditions.

Xu Bing's work is another example of the phenomenon of crossing culture. In his installation artwork *Book from the Sky* he invented four thousand characters to resemble Chinese characters at first sight. In actual fact, every character is an English word, but he just adopted the structure of Chinese characters to write English. Chattopadhyay (2005) introduces his work:

*Xu Bing's calligraphic artworks of the early 1990s address the English-speaking world from a space deep within the bedrock of Chinese culture...Xu Bing, in his early art work Book from the Sky, addressed the relation of the past to the present, investigating the relation of Chinese calligraphy to mainland China's artistic, cultural and political history. (p.5)*



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removed by the author of this  
exegesis.

Xu, B. (1987-1991). *Book from the Sky*.

In my opinion, Xu Bing's work takes a step back from both the Chinese and Western perspective to look at the differing cultures from a different perspective to break existing thinking apart and to reassemble them. This is the essential element that can create a new cultural identity.

Chinese thinking patterns have been influenced by Chinese culture from generation to generation. However, as I referred to on page 13-15, foreign thoughts could be easily adopted and transformed into a way of thinking and acting with special characteristics of Chinese thinking patterns, values and beliefs. My bubbles represent those individuals who have survived the experience of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of China's "Open Door" policy. Those individuals are still alive today and they have significant influence on contemporary China.

In these works, black is a metaphor to represent traditional Chinese culture. The bubbles' colour changes from translucent to black, expressing the process of traditional Chinese culture starting to flourish once again. In the beginning, the light black bubbles had a strong reflection. Even though it was still done in Chinese black ink, the black colour became gradually stronger; this process expressed the evolving Chinese traditions in a different era of culture and thought. This is similar to

Xu's artwork where the characters are in Chinese character form, but the meaning has totally changed. At the end of my moving images, the black gets stronger and stronger, because there were many coloured bubbles mixing together (a melting pot), but the Chinese black ink (representing the traditional cultural base) hardly changed even though it was significantly affected by other colours (foreign culture and thoughts) - the black colour (traditional Chinese culture and thought) would accept it, and yet absorb it.

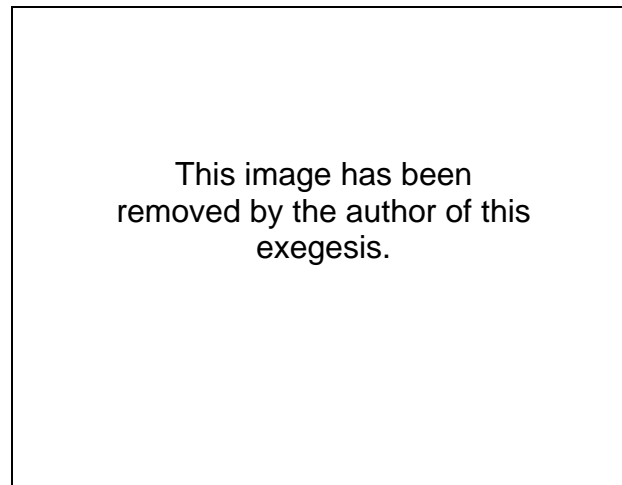
In my artwork, the black bubbles burst and made many dots of different sizes on the paper; the colour started with light black ink and gradually increased to a heavy tone of black that overcome all else until all the bubbles were deep black, very intense black. The black covered nearly the whole paper prompting the question: What kinds of things were in the dark area? The dark area seemed like a black hole; the black covered everything. The black form seemed as if it could be an extending current. For me, black represents the combination of a multitude of cultural groups. In colour theory, black is formed through prolonged sedimentation of a range of different colours. In Chinese tradition, black plays central role in art practice such as painting and calligraphy. In my work, black represents complex thinking patterns and ideas interwoven together which form the open and comprehensive mind of an individual.

These moving images are a series of metaphors showing Chinese culture's ability to be proud and tolerant, able to accept and absorb new ways of thinking, yet in the final analysis, profound enough to retain its own vital essence.



### 3.1.3 Bubbles of life III

In *Bubbles of life III*, red bubbles play the main role in the moving image. The red bubbles represent the young generation who only focus on themselves. They enjoy and are part of society at the present time. They are simple and happy in the moment. In my observation Chinese youth have a distinctive individuality. People in this generation put emphasis on their own value. In my opinion, young individuals are influenced by each other; they make groups but they also remain independent. To take Lijun Xiong's artwork as an example, according to Yu (2007):



Xiong, L. (2007). *Apple*. 1600mm X 2000mm.

*“...the word “beautiful” sensibly appeared in the artistic glossary in nowadays. In the long term the artistic critics believe that “I would rather see ugly, but be unwilling to see the beautiful rubbish”... We require a new perspective to rebuild highly value structure art language, and connection between art and people. This word gives Chinese youth a feeling of geniality...the young artists have focused their art style on fashion, and they employ carefree thinking to face the obsolete artistic notion. Xiong Li Jun provide the art style including game, pure , shallow to form her image, that foreboded art after having a variety of experiences of art practice and goes on to simplify ” (Yu, K. 2007, no page number).*

Her compositions exhibit a kind of idiographic temperament. The colours are bright and fervent. She applies saffron yellow,

green and red and the colours in the canvas have decorative sense. The hues of her paintings are bright and the rhythm has brilliance. Largely aged between 20 and 30, the characters portrayed in her paintings are full of energy, optimistic; self-confident. They are independent and expressive. Their appearance is cartoon-like, and their expressions are always joyful. Her works express the sense of fashion of youth, and the way they live, enjoying and pursuing what they want from a material world.

On the other side, owing to the development of the Internet culture, individuals' personal and private needs are being met to their satisfaction. Photography as a language that connects individuals with other people has been widely used on the Internet in recent years. "The term *private photography* means that the camera lens has gone beyond the bounds of individuals and their family, and is being used to shoot what a person wishes to shoot ... The feeling of private life has become the main content of one's private photography"<sup>12</sup> (Gu, 2007, first paragraph in part 3, trans. Y. Gao). This is interesting, as it appears that if people live in a collectivist period, they will not share their private space. The sharing of one's private life is significant among the newer generation. This leads to a conflict over the separation between what is seen as public and and what is seen as private. The act of sharing a private photograph is a way to present one's individuality, but is also a way of ensuring one's existence in society. As Gu says: a self-expression of individualism in terms of photography may not belong to private photography. (Gu, 2007, first paragraph in part 3, trans. Y. Gao) In my opinion, photos from the school of private photography do not belong to the photographer; they belong to the public. They exist to impact on others. The value of the photos changes once shared with the public and may be deemed to even belong to the public as soon as they are published or exhibited. Xiong's paintings and private photography inspired me to create red bubbles. Xiong's painting has active elements of modern and fashion. The notion of *private photography* seems to me like a new baby for the Chinese. I created the red bubbles to express the creative thinking of the young generation. Although their notions have not become mature yet, red represents their fascination with things. I also want to use the red bubbles to express their youthful spirit and vigour.

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<sup>12</sup> In the 80s, photography was getting popular in China. Some people employed photography as a means to represent their desires. Photography become part of the new generation's lives. It became one form of language used by youth. The exhibition *Private Photography* first appeared in Guangzhou (2001), it was a kind of artistic language to express ideas to the audience. But overuse led to its downgrading to a mere form of personal entertainment, in that its value is restricted to curiosity for new things.

These days, young Chinese look for spiritual support and in the process of seeking it they get many ideas from different approaches. There are many different educational programmes for developing a “spiritual civilisation”. As the government realised, because of the Cultural Revolution and the impingement of the economic tide, traditional Chinese thinking patterns are becoming less influential. Subsequently, many TV programmes have been produced to reintroduce traditional thought, but they take a contemporary approach through interweaving with Western ideas. One example is *Bai Jia Jiang Tai* (百家讲坛)<sup>13</sup>. Such initiatives from the Chinese government are intended to construct a new socialist spiritual civilisation and ideology. This is a significant change from what the Chinese government has been trying to do over the past decades, whereby the goal was to limit people’s thinking in order to control them more effectively. However, I think this method of re-education may initially lead to more confusion amongst people as alternative thoughts are suddenly infused into their minds. However, for the younger generation, this re-education effort is useful as it acts as a catalyst for understanding and bridging of traditional Chinese culture and Western culture.

Red bubbles are a metaphor representing the young generation of today’s China. There is no doubt red evokes for us a sense of fresh blood, and is full of energy. In the moving images, the red bubbles came quickly and full of vigour. They descended rapidly, and then they burst instantaneously, with some ferocity, enveloping the paper. Their motion created a sense of anxiousness and impatience; the red bubbles were eager to be allowed to exhibit themselves without delay. On screen, some of the red bubbles emerged slowly, but others appeared with stealth like speed, all of which made bright, rhythmic resonances as they burst making their own singular statements. On the painting, the formless patterns were haphazardly pieced together by the red bubbles. Compared with the dots made by black bubbles, the dots made by the red bubbles were more visible, and clear. The red colour in the painting represents three key meanings. First, according to long-held Chinese tradition the colour red signifies happiness, good fortune and the future. Second, red implies the long-held belief in the idea of the blood that flows forth from the communist party as the obligation of personal sacrifice to protect the

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<sup>13</sup> A popular programme in China on CCTV-10.

country and its people. Finally, in my philosophical view of the world, red represents renewal and the pulsating vital force permeating today's modern society. Together, red represents the vitality, optimistic belief and confidence of the Chinese in weaving a contemporary culture. In my painting, the red form yearns to capture and command its own space; similar to that of the black painting.

### 3.2 Exhibition

In the exhibition, the three parts of clear bubbles, black bubbles and red bubbles make up the whole artwork. They are displayed individually and play on three separate screens simultaneously.

The relationship among the moving images is tacit: the change of era. *Bubbles of life I* expresses a time that individuals were not well regarded. *Bubbles of life II* represents the vicissitudes of Chinese culture, at the same time accepting the external influence of foreign culture and thinking: Individuals were born with elements of cross-cultural thinking. *Bubbles of life III* represents a time when society, culture, and individual thought were developing concurrently; individuals were bringing their new ideas and expressing themselves freely. The bubbles play together on three separate screens, distinct yet in harmony, each acting at their own rhythmic pace and understanding of life; they co-exist as interacting and complimentary opposites that portray the distinct and individual paradigms emerging in contemporary China.

Showing the moving images simultaneously is a means to portray three stages of society's philosophical development that has been continuously evolving and transforming over time. On screen, the bubbles float, drop, burst and form their shape in a myriad of different ways. Meanwhile, the speed of the bubbles is different on each screen, which gives each its own sense of rhythm and uniqueness. The dots play by themselves and form the formless painting with a sense of self-direction. Against the white paper with fawn, the black and red colours become distinct and contrasting. The white and fawn painting gives a sense of paleness and dreariness, whereas the black painting appears thick and heavy; mild, yet intense. The red painting represents the sense of what is fresh, clear and definite, and the vigour of life's vital essence. The three works showing on separate monitors represent the connection of the three groups of people that hold on to their own beliefs, and live harmoniously in this society. Collectivistic thinking as the root has brought the Chinese towards moulding a more considerate individual way of thinking that is significant in the development of individuality.

## **Chapter 4: Methods and Approaches**

Below I will describe the methods and approaches I employed for the research project, explain the inner relationship between them, and conclude by describing connection of the research methods and materials employed in the creative thinking behind my artworks.

### **4.1 Data collecting**

To establish my position on Chinese individuality, I sought answers from various self-inquiries. In the process of creating my artworks, I put myself in a secondary position, and allowed the underpinning concepts to emerge through the natural performance of bubbles on the canvas.

At the beginning of my research, I questioned the individuality of contemporary Chinese individuals. Then, based on the question, I collected data from the relevant body of literature data, including academic dissertations on historical and contemporary theory in both Eastern and Western cultures, and non-literary data such as films, images, and paintings. Data collection from different sources allowed me to explore the relevant areas and improve the focus of the research question. The data collection was to help me to narrow the scope of my research at the stage of theoretical research. This research approach is based on Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory (1998, p. 53) which argues that a research question leads the researcher to examine data from a chosen perspective and to use certain data-collecting techniques and modes of data analysis. The questions set the tone for the project and help the researcher to collect the relevant data from the masses of available information. These processes enabled me to synthesise the collected data, which is important for expressing the acquired knowledge in a visual form. They also allowed me to capture any chance of discovering connections that would enhance my creative work.

## 4.2 Self-reflection on the data

Self-reflection was the main method used in my practical research in that its functions not only influenced the process of my experiments but also engaged me in generating new ideas in respect of both theory and experiments; it was the key trigger to help me develop the whole research project. Through the process of my experiments, I planned before every experiment by setting up a goal for each practice and constructing all the steps of the practice well. The plan was to reflect on the research question and set up a test of the new ideas generated from data collection and analysis. After planning, I started to act and to experiment with bubbles, creating different patterns on xuan zhi. My action was to precisely perform and create the artworks based on my plan. Then, I used a process of observation and collected the results from these experiments. The observation process was important for me to collect information from different outcomes. In the section of reflection, I analysed the results, reflected on them according to a theoretical framework for idea generation, and formed questions for the next plan. The process of self-reflection is developed from *action research*<sup>14</sup> methodology. Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) state that action research is a method that focuses on learning knowledge from experiences of practices, and generating new theory by testing new ideas and reflecting on relevant theories (p.6).

## 4.3 Practical manifestation

Following grounded theory<sup>15</sup>, I collected a large amount of data from both contemporary and traditional Chinese theory. To sort the information, I used a method of data visualisation to allow me to understand the relationships between different theories. Therefore in my research project diagrams are used to express the acquired knowledge in a visual form for myself and audiences to understand the various theories and relate them to my project. For example, I use a diagram to represent the relationship and comparability between individuals and molecules which is the basis for the molecule notion. (Refer to the diagram on p.19)

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<sup>14</sup> Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) explain that action research needs to go through four cyclical phases for developing the study, which are planning, acting, observing and reflecting (p. 11).

## 4.4 Self-inquiry

My overseas experience inspired me to think of the difference and relationship between Chinese culture and Western culture in terms of individuality. The self (my knowledge and experience) was the trigger that raised the research question at the beginning and engaged me to explore in the self-constructed area. Then, researching artworks and films, I asked myself why artists and directors represent the phenomenon of Chinese society in these ways. Through the questioning, I analysed the possible causes of the phenomenon apparent in the areas of both art and mass media; this process was based on self-understanding. Heuristic<sup>16</sup> study is the other method used in my investigation. It allowed me to put myself in a completely independent perspective, in which my research project is to focus on self-inquiry based on the understanding of my personal experiences of the dialogue between individual and society. Moreover, my research project is mainly influenced by my subjective thinking; I strongly believe that the self as a part of the society is a reflection of the society. Therefore, self-inquiry was the method I used to discover and reveal individuality in society.

## 4.5 Practice as performance

I employed methods and techniques that helped me to lift my artistic expression through the mediums of painting and moving images, in order to support the contextual resolution that was the central theme of my research project. The expression of my journey through both of these mediums was performed succinctly and deliberately, so as to underpin a heuristic process of discovery and self-inquiry. These methods ensure that each dialectic step of the enquiry supports the creative artistic process, thus bringing significant meaning to the research topic via the combination of mediums. I approached the research through performing in the practice so as to reflect on the current morphing state of individuality in China. More specifically, it is the bubbles that perform as “painters”. This will be discussed in the following.

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<sup>15</sup> Strauss & Corbin (1998) explain that In grounded theory, conceptual ordering is important to organise data into discrete categories after data collection. This helps researchers make sense out of their mass data according to a classification scheme (p. 19).



### 4.5.1 Creative strategy

My project is exploratory and weaves moving images and paintings together as an artistic method of expression. As an artist, I stand in a position of insignificance, a medium only; my camera is the receptacle of external phenomenon as also reflected on my canvasses. My intention was to establish form as a naturally occurring aesthetic, and to reduce the interference of the artist to a minimum in the artworks which became their own creation and took on a life, meaning, and expression all of their own.

By using this artistic method and employing moving “bubbles of life” as my metaphor, I linked the notion of my approach to the natural reality of “individuals” together with the notion of individuality in contemporary Chinese generally, as opposed to showing a specific person as its representative.

The uniqueness of my artworks is further enhanced due to the fact that they are “self-created”. This put me, the artist, in a less significant role, allowing the artworks to express themselves. Self-created paintings allow more complexity and make the artist not only focus on what is being created but also on what can be done afterwards.

### 4.5.2 Operationalisation of metaphor

I employ metaphor as an aesthetic representation that underpins artworks and notions: “As a linguistic phenomenon, where ‘a word which is usually applied to one sort of thing [is applied] to another sort of thing’, the metaphor is a ubiquitous constituent of both aesthetic and cognitive creativity” (Livingstone & Harrison, 1981, p. 95).

My initial use of bubbles in my artworks was in one of my oil paintings in 2007. Using bubbles as a metaphor has developed from there. As I have mentioned above, no one particular individual is clearly defined in my work; I can only sense what an individual is really like from their outward behaviour and their external appearance. Their innermost thoughts are manifested in society and are reflected *on* individuals *by* individuals in a myriad of spontaneous ways: I think there are some vague, but

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<sup>16</sup>“Heuristics is ... a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences” (Beckstrom, 1993, cited in Karsten, 1999, para. 4.).

obvious, similarities between a bubble and an individual.

### **4.5.3 Bubbles as performance**

The bubble is similar in nature to a looking glass and its appearance can only be seen by reflections in which it portrays what is actually happening in the outside world. These reflections are also meant to represent society or the world. As the thinking of individuals changes, so does the phenomenon we call society.

I added the Chinese black ink and red colour paint into soapy water to make different kinds of bubbles. Bubbles were blown from random angles to descend unguided onto the paper. They also mimicked individuals running and chasing from different sides as if on to the “screen” of life, unpredictable in where they would land and leave their trace.

My camera served as a window to a new way of looking at life; it captured the artistic process as it unfolded, without any bias. My camera became me and I became my camera to portray my bubble metaphors. Therefore I, the artist, am only an observer watching the bubbles (individuals) playing by themselves. It has been argued that there is no such thing as an unbiased representation using the medium of photography, and to an extent the camera represents the constructed perspective of the artist. In deciding on the camera angles, I set the camera in a position where it caused minimal distortion in order to simulate human perception, and in this way I had the minimum interference on the bubbles' performance.

#### **4.5.4 Painting as performance**

The bubbles burst on the paper sporadically, and the colour of the remnants transformed from light to dense colours. The bubbles' remnants seemed like brush marks on the paper. This left the visual illusion of bubbles (individuals) floating through the air onto the paper (of life), appearing, and disappearing in a mere moment. One or two bubbles played a major role: others were ignored and fell from grace. The remnants of the bubbles formed a "formless" artistic expression, which shows the relationship of individuals and society. It was as if the paintings played to their own "chorus", and even the bubbles that were ignored left their trace, having subtly played a role in the overall performance.

The clear bubbles appeared to lack any meaning until they descended and burst on the paper, leaving only colourless wrinkles. The colourless bubbles left behind wrinkles on paper as the only evidence of their lonely previous existence. The increase of the dots on the paper invited me to wait and discover their final creations.

## **4.6 Editing, time, and silence versus sounds**

In editing the moving images, I decided to deliberately ignore the bubbles' descent and instead show some remnants spontaneously appearing on the paper to emphasise the painting creating and forming by itself. I intentionally cut and edited parts of the moving images to focus on the painting performance, rather than paying full attention to the bubbles' performance.

The length of time of each moving image depended on the timing of the process required to create the painting. Originally, the time taken to create the three paintings varied greatly. However, as an artist, I captured the most representative sections from each movie to be displayed on the screen to ensure that the length for each movie was similar.

In the beginning when filming the moving images, I was looking for the perfect background music to appropriately enhance the moving images, curious to see if allocating music style would ultimately distort that thinking or its absence give the moving images an organised silence.

## 4.7 Materials

### 4.7.1 Ink and xuan zhi

Ink and xuan zhi are two of the most traditional Chinese objects in art practice. In ancient times, Chinese artists always used ink slabs. According to [Craftchina.org](http://craftchina.org) (2006):

*Ink slabs originated from the grinding implements used in primitive Chinese society to grind pigment on stone...A stone ink slab was found in a 5,000-year-old archaeological site in Jiazhai, Shanxi Province...The following three characteristics are critical for prime quality ink slabs. First is the texture of the material...Second is the craftsmanship of the carving. Third is the shape of the ink slab... (Ink slab: Chinese culture grinder, para. 3)*

Ancient rice paper (xuan zhi) originated in the Tang Dynasty. “Rice paper [xuan zhi] is paper made from the pith of the rice plant, or from a variety of other plants including mulberry and hemp” (Smith, n.d.). There are essentially two kinds of xuan zhi – raw paper and sized paper. The following diagram (Oriental Art Supply, (n.d.) gives an overview of the different characteristic of raw and sized paper.

HOW THE PAPER SHOWS	Raw	Sized
Absorbency	Excess moisture absorbed/pulled through surface to bottom	Excess moisture absorbed/pulled partially through surface to bottom
Responsiveness	Shows color transparency & bright intensity	Shows color less sensitively/intensely
Texture	Smooth, fluid	Dry, coarse
Wash	Streaks	Smooth
Bleed	Colors will run if too wet	Colors resist run even with

Diagram available from <http://www.orientalartsupply.com/products/paper.cfm>

There were three main reasons that I decided to use sized xuan zhi: firstly, the original shapes of burst bubbles would be

better preserved on paper, and they could be naturally overlapped by each other; secondly, it can hold dense colours better; and thirdly, to minimise the possibility of any water stains.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This exegesis has allowed me to exploit moving images and painting to explore and investigate individuality in Chinese contemporary society based on the recent phenomenon in China. I have used movies and paintings as the main artistic method to manifest the dynamic and yet changing interdependence between individuals and society in China.

As Western philosophy influences the new Chinese generation, a greater emphasis is placed on individuality. It has become my focus throughout this project, while challenging the thinking patterns of my own individuality. I researched individuality in Chinese traditional culture and thought, while simultaneously investigating the current Western influence on Chinese individuals.

Throughout my research, I found that contemporary Chinese individuality is ultimately influenced by collectivism, socialism and Western individualism. The Chinese have adopted these ideas to develop their own concept of individuality which is constantly transforming. I believe the traditional idea of collectivism will continue to play a central role in contemporary concepts of individuality. From the Western perspective, collectivism and individualism are two contrasting systems of thought. However, the Chinese have always been able to locate a philosophical balance between the two systems.

In the process of discovery, I planned a series of methods to seek the answers. I started from my self-inquiries, and focused on the information relating to my questions to form my conceptual basis. They are consequently expressed in a metaphorical artistic style. In addition, metaphors exist in the three elements; they are bubbles, painting and camera recording in my artworks.

Based on the molecule notion in which substance is the focus instead of the molecule itself, I designed a series of oil paintings *Cream of the cream I, II, III* (2006) that focused on exploring the social shift and not so much on individuals in society. Subsequently, I was inspired to use bubbles as the main content of research.

My view is that each bubble is unique and individual and constantly influencing the others. Bubbles have a short life and then they burst. The seemingly disappearing bubbles have left traces, which though in flux, are influential to the shaping and transforming of contemporary Chinese individuality. The clear, red, and black bubbles and the self-created paintings imply this constantly transforming and shaping phenomenon.

I have analysed each process in my moving images from a narrative style to a metaphorical style. I used bubbles as the performers in the moving images and paintings. I also discussed the relationship between moving images and painting, as well as the inspiration that I gathered from my research. The bubbles themselves essentially form a formless painting through their traces on the paper.

I also concluded on three main representations of the bubbles; the colourless bubble is used to represent the influence of society on individuals, the black bubble expresses traditional Chinese culture and the mixing of emerging contemporary culture, while the red describes rebirth and new ways of thinking. The blank paper and the spontaneous formation of individual remnants are metaphorical references to the influx of contemporary individuality and its effects felt within our society. This appears as a process of transformation of substances made up of dynamic moving molecules.

In the exhibition, I present the three moving images that play on separate screens simultaneously. The relationship among the moving images is tacit and represents the change of an era. Together they represent a unity of my view on the evolving and transforming individuality.

I employed methods including data collection, literature research, self-reflection, practical manifestation and self-inquiry to manifest my creative practice. The uniqueness of my artworks is further enhanced due to the fact that they are self-created and take on a life of their own. Bubbles are life, give life and have created a continuum of new life and this is portrayed on the paper and in my moving images.

In conclusion, I have argued that today Chinese individuals are in a constant process of renewal and expansion through the influence of one on another. I have expressed my own view on Chinese individuality through these two mediums. My



experiments have allowed me to test the theoretical frameworks. The combined approach of dynamic images captured on camera and expressed in my painting leaves scope for others to explore and further create.

## Appendix

The appendix is in DVD format and includes seven experimental moving images discussed in this exegesis. It does not include the final exhibited works.

The following is a detailed list of these works:

Appendix 1: Conserving some inner space

Appendix 2: Vestige

Appendix 3: The life. The time

Appendix 4: Nameless

Appendix 5: Experimental moving image I

Appendix 6: Experimental moving image II

Appendix 7: Experimental moving image III

Appendix 8: Final Exhibited Work

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