'Disjuncture' to 'Reconstruction': An Ethnographic Study on Cultural Identity Conflicts of Post-95 Chinese International Fine Art Students in London

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Abstract
Following the economic rise of China, the educational mobility of its nationals continues to increase. Intercultural communication between China and the UK is also occurring with greater frequency. Every generation of Chinese international students has encountered identity conflicts. Previous studies generally view them as a whole, discussing their identity conflict as a phenomenon of intercultural communication in an abstract way, leaving fewer studies to focus on how a particular professional group in a single location responds to the issue of identity conflict. The post-95s (those born after 1995), as a generation born at the turn of the century, share a distinctive feature of their identity conflict: 'disjuncture,' which is unique to them. The 'disjuncture' has led to widespread confusion, creating further potential problems in their identity conflicts and affecting their art practice. Consequently, the issue of 'disjuncture' identity conflicts is of urgent study importance. This study focuses on 10 post-95 Chinese international fine art students in London. Using mixed methods and ethnography approaches to investigate their subjective experiences of living, studying, and practicing art in London from the perspective of cultural identity. Through inductive and thematic analysis of the data collected, a more comprehensive understanding of their 'disjuncture,' 'conflict,' and 'reconstruction' is developed. The core of this study is to explore the possibility of how art practice becomes a potential means of transforming their identity from 'disjuncture' to 'reconstruction.'

Keywords: Disjuncture, Cultural Identity Conflicts, Chinese International Fine Art Students, London

Introduction

Following the economic rise of China, the educational mobility of its nationals continues to increase, and the number of Chinese students heading to the UK for higher education has steadily grown. In 2021-22, More than 150,000 Chinese international students are registered in the UK, making them the largest international student population in the nation. (Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA 2023). Every generation of Chinese international students has encountered cultural identity conflicts (Wang, 2018). Previous studies generally view them as a whole, discussing their cultural identity conflict as a phenomenon of intercultural communication in an abstract way (e.g., Gu, 2008, 2009, 2011; Hsieh, 2012; Wang, 2018; Zhang, 2020), leaving fewer studies to focus on how a particular professional group in a single location responds to the issue of cultural identity conflict (see Turner, 2006; Wang, S., 2022). This denotes the particular contribution made by the current study.

Born at the turn of this century, the post-95 (refers to those born after 1995) Chinese fine art international students share a distinctive feature of their art practice: 'disjuncture.' The phenomenon of 'disjuncture' reveals the widespread cultural identity confusion of this group, which creates further potential problems in their cultural identity conflicts and affects their art practice (see Zheng, Lee, et al., 2016). It is therefore of urgent relevance to examine this phenomenon among them and the cultural identity conflicts it conceals. This study is not only an interesting and important addition to the existing literature on the experiences of international students, but it also contributes to the exploration of cultural identity in the context of globalised mobility at the level of art practices and forms of expression.

In the following sections, the researcher will start from the phenomenon of "disjuncture" among Chinese Post-95 artists, review the key concepts and theoretical frameworks that have been developed in conjunction with the literature review, explore the problem of cultural identity conflict that lies behind this phenomenon, place the study in the current academic context, elaborate on the current trends of research, explain why this study can fill in the gaps in related literature, attempt to provide a solution towards the research problem in the form of art practice.

Phenomenon: "The Disconnected Generation"

The Song Art Museum in Shanghai hosted one of China's most contentious exhibitions last year, titled "The Disconnected Generation," from August 20 to December 4, 2022. The term "Disconnected" is the most defining aspect, according to curator Cancan Cui, who argues that this is the first show of the artists who best represent the generation born after the 1990s. Cui emphasises that the key to understanding "the disconnected generation" is to study the cultural ramifications of how to convey an aesthetic detachment. Cui delayed the opening of this exhibition by three years in order to provide a rundown of contemporary Chinese artists who were born in the 1990s. Because he thinks that post-90s musicians have never had a shared identity.

The author, who was born after the 1990s, finds it quite intriguing to learn about this show. Due to the author's personal experience and interactions with her peers, the majority of people between the post-80s and post-00s feel similarly about ghosting. The post-90s have been split in half, even in the Social generations timeline. This creates an odd sense of displacement and loss of identity.
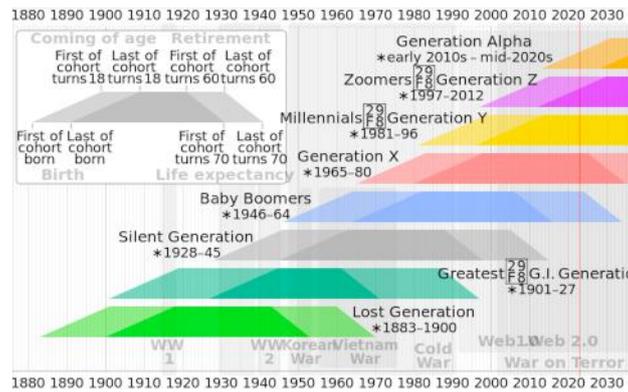
Figure1: Timeline of generations in the Western world

Assuming that the "disjuncture" as a feeling does exist in the post-90s, The author questions, what exactly is the disjuncture, what causes this, and how could Chinese artists from the post-90 era respond to this phenomenon?

Using it as an example, the author then makes an effort to investigate the traits of the art practises among the "representative post-90s Chinese artists" featured in this exhibition. The author will consider three issues using a case study approach: why do they think that "disjuncture" is a phenomena exclusive to post-90s Chinese artists, how do they interpret and portray it, and what kind of art practise and cultural shift are being displayed by this exhibition.

Figure 2: Slime Engine OVO Mixing 2021 Space installation
15 250 x 400 x 350 cm

Figure 3: Zhang Ji 三挺三通 2022 Oil on canvas
2x3m x 3

Figure 4: Zhang Yibei Obsolete lesions 2020 Pressure cooker, aluminium, resin, silicone, white steel 140x50x40cm x 3

Figure 5: Zhang Yibei When spring comes, the first sunlight belongs to me (partial) 2022 Aluminium, mixed media, ready-made Dimensions variable

Figure 6: Exhibition view of Helen Ma's work

Figure 7: Puying Wei Contemporaries (New Pantheon) 2022 Oil on canvas, acrylic, print on paper, screen print, rice paper, woodcut, stamp, spray paint, crayon 400x240cm

Figure 8: Puying Wei exhibition site

Figure 9: Hou Zichao, "The Fate of the Wild Must Swim" 2022 Acrylic on canvas 200x220cm

Figure 10: Zhang Yuewei _Protozoic 2020 3000px

Each artist is given their own exhibition space within the Song Gallery, which brings together nearly 14 modest solo displays into one cohesive area. The primary idea behind the artwork in the Slime Engine show is "information processing collection," which is comprised of a patchwork of disorganised grids of pictures that have been constructed and blended to reveal an incomplete state of pending information editing. As the title of the piece OVO Mixing suggests, picture information is combined with real-world events to create a collage that creates a new reality.

Notably, The Slime Engine exhibition emphasises the idea of "information processing collection" through disorganised image grids that show an incomplete state of pending information editing. Open-ended problems regarding the grammatical structure of art are raised by Zhang Ji's works, which combine non-linear, fragmented language with easel painting. Significant works by Zhang Yibei, whose titles are poetic words, employ assemblages of ready-made goods and mixed materials to represent societal forces and cultural shifts. The installations by Ma Hailun and Pu Yingwei mix visual and written work to portray and communicate the unique regional features of Xinjiang.

It is clear from the aforementioned in-depth investigation and contextual analysis that the majority of the pieces in this exhibition use the concept or technique of bricolage. Because of the presence of a hybrid cultural turn in this group of post-1990s Chinese artists, the author contends that bricolage is a common mode of their artistic practise. Based on this, the researcher will critically evaluate the concept and problem of "disjuncture" in this exhibition, with the goal of examining the motivations and individual experiences of Chinese artists working after the 1990s and illuminating the connection between their artistic practises and the "disjuncture" conflict between their cultural identities.

Generating Mechanism: Their Cultural Identity Conflicts

The author can summarise the three main interpretations of the "disjuncture" offered by the exhibiting artists as follows, in accordance with the title and content of this official

documentary as well as the preliminary information obtained by the author in the first section through a thorough examination and contextual analysis:

A. Generational Gap
B. Disconnected art practice approaches
C. Disconnected communication mechanisms

These phenomena are real, as the author concedes. But as the curator notes in the introduction, the goal of this exhibition is to present the "disjuncture" and investigate the generational cultural shift that lies beneath it. And the post-1990s must be the only period that saw this cultural shift. Sadly, the explanation provided by the collaborating artists falls short of expectations. This is due to the fact that these explanations only provide diverse viewpoints on various types of disjuncture events, and even these phenomena are not unique to the post-90s. It is unnecessary to address looking into the phenomenon's social and cultural components further to find out its "causes" and "solutions."

The author argues that the generational gap is hardly exceptional, as it is as widespread now as it has been in past decades (Doherty, C., Kiley, J. and O'Hea, O., 2018). The generational gap is simply a long-lasting and enduring cultural phenomenon, despite the fact that technical advancements and social changes since the 1990s have contributed to its existence. Each generation's cultural and social milieu has changed in some way.

New technologies and social media influence how art is created and shared in the present, even as fashionable electronic colours replace natural ones. Since its inception until the present, art practise has been about using the technology of the time to address the issue of existence itself. In the same way that we can still perceive the imitation of reality in the works on display, we can also observe that below the technologically advanced surface, the artists' fundamental ideas continue to be drawn from experience with daily life. Therefore, using images and visuals as the primary foundation for breaking with the past era means avoiding critical thinking, remaining at the level of phenomena, failing to develop new values based on past accomplishments, and failing to delve into the core of everyday experience.

At this point, the author just needs to quote Brian Droitcour's observation regarding post-internet art in order to address the question of whether the modification in the communication mechanism merits the label of a "post-90s-specific disjuncture":

> Post-internet artwork looks good in a browser, just as laundry detergent looks good in an advertisement. Laundry detergent does not shine as brightly in a laundromat, and post-internet art does not shine as brightly in a gallery. Post-internet art in a gallery can be boring: it is not sculpture and does not enliven the space; it is usually just flat, just to look good in front of the camera; it is some type of assemblage, with a little exciting element in the way the objects are arranged together, and nothing other than the best-selling products in it is anything but elaborate. It is an art of cargo worship, from the beginning to the end, out of reverence for the brands that flourish in the web.

In conclusion, despite the curators' constant insistence that "disjuncture" is a distinctive identity conflation for post-1990s Chinese artists, the exhibiting artists insist on further extending the cultural phenomena of "disconnection" from many angles as a shared identity for themselves. These actions show a lack of thought. Currently, it is not rigorous enough,

lacking in relevance and future orientation to utilise a long-standing and well-known phenomenon as a term for a generation.

Except for briefly describing the disconnect between art history and historical context, the curators have not addressed these specific problems by finishing the exhibition with such a vague word. The author does not think that the participants' attitude to art practise is totally different from what has come before based on the facts in this exhibition. Many artists have pursued a particular avant-garde sense in terms of colour and material, whether in terms of practise, concept, or exhibition approach, while still adopting the outcomes of earlier eras regarding creative logic and concept. For instance, the 14 galleries' use of collage and assemblage techniques is still connected to the idea of "bricolage," which was first proposed more than 60 years ago. They are founded on intellectual growth and self-styling.

To sum up, the term "disjuncture," as a pervasive cultural phenomena, can embrace the "surface" of the participating artists' practises, but it cannot be utilised as a standard term for Chinese artists born after 1990. The author is concerned that only intellectual and identity-based advancements in artistic practise may be made from the previous "ruptures." We should not lose sight of the fact that this sequence of cyclical "disjuncture" practises has highlighted a core issue: conflicts over cultural identity, even though we may use the term "disjuncture" to characterise the representational and incomplete nature of the works on display.

The author would like to state the following in light of the discussion above:

> Not the generations, approaches to art practise, or communication channels are directly at odds; rather, there is a gap between the Eastern cultural roots of artists and the Western ideological influences to which they are frequently exposed as a result of scholastic mobility. The practise of art may be a way to reunite them.

What if we don't make an effort to close the gap between them and establish our distinct identity from other cultural backgrounds and our forerunners as artists? The 'bricolage' concept, which this generation of artists has widely embraced, only serves to create an illusion of culture. Young Chinese artists of our generation can simply luxuriate in the value system established by the focal point of Western discourse by repeatedly using, combining, and recreating symbols of various cultural aspects, mistaking the exercise of power for their own volition. Our conception of who we are, the processes by which we create symbols in our work, and the underlying logic of our artistic practise may all float above the top of the water, swinging in circles.

This study is a cross-cultural study in the context of globalisation. From the perspective of the research field, this study involves three main areas: cultural identity, educational mobility, art practices, and forms of expression. Next, the author will present her research questions and aims based on the phenomenon. Firstly, the authors will review the developed theories, frameworks, or key concepts through the literature review, and place the study in the current academic context, describing the contemporary research trends to identify the focus of the current study and the critical research methodology. The authors will then discuss the gap in the literature on the phenomenon of "disjuncture" among post-95 Chinese art students and their conflicting cultural identities, explaining why this study is important. Finally, the authors will explain how these data and knowledge contribute to the study and outline how the findings can be applied to art practice.

Research Context

This study focuses on the cultural identity conflicts of Chinese art students who have experienced identity disjunctures in the era of globalisation. The core of the study is to explore how art practice can be a potential means of reconstructing their identities from "disjunctures" to "hybrids." This study argues that art practice can help young Chinese artists in the globalisation era to identify a hybrid identity framework by capturing, appropriating, remixing, and reusing multicultural elements, thus helping them to gain a sense of belonging amid a "disjuncture" identity conflict.

In this section, the researcher will review the dominant research relationships involving international students' cultural identity conflicts, incorporating reflective critique, recalling developed theories, frameworks, or key concepts, and discussing the literature gaps related to the phenomenon of "disjuncture" among Post-95 Chinese international fine art students and their cultural identity conflicts.
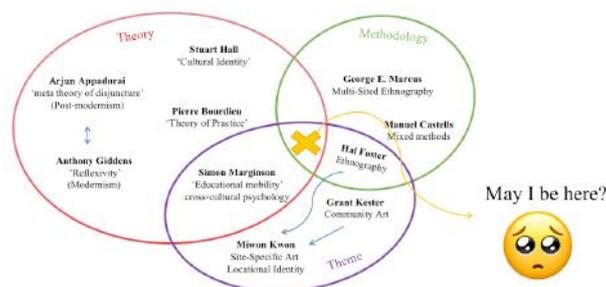
Figure 11: Research relationships

The study draws upon key concepts and theories such as "disjuncture" from Arjun Appadurai's Disjuncture Meta-Theory, "habitus" from Pierre Bourdieu's Outline of a Theory of Practice, and the concepts of educational mobility and hybrid identity from Simon Marginson's cross-cultural psychology perspective. Additionally, the researcher explores the notion of cultural identity, referencing Stuart Hall's definitions of cultural identity and its hybridity in the context of Chinese art students in the UK. The methodological approach for the study involves ethnography and mixed methods to examine the impact of postmodernism on art, culture, and society. Finally, the researcher incorporates the theme of community arts practice through the work of scholar Grant Kester, examining how community art practices contribute to social change and empower marginalized communities.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars and researchers have focused on the relevance of international students' cultural identity conflicts to forms of art practice expression. Next, the researcher will review recent research trends and developments, examine theoretical studies on the impact of globalisation and educational mobility on cultural identity formation and the negotiation of multiple identities, discuss the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding international students' experiences, and highlight recent research on the role of artistic practices and forms of expression in shaping international students' cultural identities.

Synthesising some of the results of the main research relationships and research trends, the researcher can determine that focusing on how the group of Chinese international students majoring in fine arts cope with the issue of conflicting cultural identities can fill the existing gap in the literature.

The Study

Based on the qualitative research model of ABR (Arts-Based Research) model (Leavy P., 2020), this research designed three research objectives: data generation, analysis and interpretation, and representation. Throughout this process, the researcher provides a detailed explanation of how to achieve the research aim by combining the methodologies of phenomenology and ethnography, as well as case studies and mixed methods.
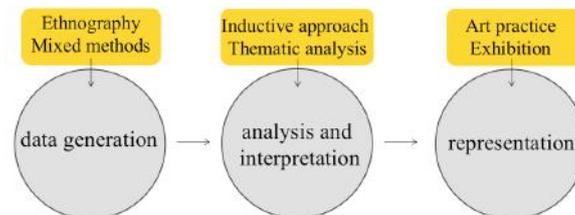

Figure 12: Research Objectives

Specifically, to fully address the questions of how educational mobility affects the practices of Chinese art students and how these students' art practices shape their cultural identities, I have chosen London, UK as the site of my research. The actual research will take place between September 2023 and August 2024, during which I will spend time at the University of the Arts London (UAL), Royal College of Art (RCA), Goldsmiths University of London (Goldsmiths), and the University of the Arts London (UAL). Goldsmiths University of London (Goldsmiths), and Central Saint Martins (CSM), and post posters with detailed information about the study throughout the campuses and on their social media pages and related topics to recruit Chinese art students to participate. To attract participants who are more interested in this study, the researcher will use an online questionnaire to collect demographic information to ensure the validity of the participant screening process. As it is expected that factors such as the length of time Chinese art students stay in London, gender identity, place of origin, family, and work, and educational background may have a direct impact on their perceptions of their experiences in London, the researcher will endeavour to ensure that a relatively well-balanced representation of participants is screened.

The study expects to recruit 10 participants. To triangulate the interview transcripts of their interviews with diverse backgrounds, the researcher will collect participants' written records, such as the circle of friends, chapbook, and Instagram (all of which will be accessed with informed consent from the participants prior to access). Additionally, in order to integrate into this group at a single site and truly engage with the cultural phenomenon being studied, the researcher will conduct extended field observations to understand and interpret the participants of the study through observation and communication. For example, centred around 10 participants, the researcher will conduct several focus groups, meet with the 10 participants in small groups or individually over an extended period, and conduct regular audio-recorded interviews. In addition, the researcher will mingle with friends, housemates, partners, classmates, and visiting parents at participant-organised events and meet with them regularly to obtain primary data.

Then, the researcher formulated a mixed-method approach by conducting interviews and questionnaires to collect qualitative data, and then analysing the values using statistical methods to obtain quantitative data. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the influencing factors, motivations, and subjective experiences of Chinese art students in

London involving cultural identity conflicts during their practice were investigated to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. By designing the research both qualitatively and quantitatively, the researcher could gain a more comprehensive perspective on the research phenomenon and enhance the utility of the research.

The researcher will illustrate how art practise can potentially be used to reconstruct an artist's identity from "disjuncture" to "hybridity," making the artists the objects of hybrid identities, in the third and final study objective, "presentation." The researcher will write a narrative in this phase that integrates theoretical research with artistic practise. In the particular practise of bricolage, the researcher seeks to develop something more profound and liberating that enables the artist to become a subject in bricolage art practise, free from the control of linear research thinking over the process of practise, and to actively respond to and challenge the connections that are inherently drawn between the materials of practise. A public exhibition of the presentation will eventually be made available.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study are as follows:

The 'disjuncture' is presented from three aspects:

1. Textually as a series of intercultural elements and identities.
2. Visually as a notion of fragmented collage using multiple materials.
3. Emotionally represents the colonial impact that results in dividing and fragmenting the colonized identity, culture, and ideology. It creates a strange loss of identity and a sense of displacement (Young, R.J., 2020).

It arose from the tension between educational mobility and the original cultural background, resulting in widespread identity conflicts.

The concept of identity still could and deserves to remain to help artists develop a significant artistic narrative. By drawing on a consensus identity, artists can blur the boundaries between the scholar self and the artist self, and explore a richer and more diverse representation.

Ethnography and mixed methods are valuable for exploring the cultural identity of Chinese art students, but they have limitations. The study's small sample size and focus on specific cases may limit generalizability. Conducting a mixed-methods survey in a time-constrained doctoral study can be resource-intensive, posing challenges in data integration. Additionally, the researcher's personal limitations may hinder a full understanding of participants' perspectives, necessitating alternative solutions.

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