

# CPDP.ai 2025

## Session Reports



### Day 1

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# A bit, a prompt, how to create void on cyberspace 21 May, CINEMA

Rapporteur: Liubomir Nikiforov, BPH

Moderator: Jiao Feng, VUB

Panellist 1: Xu Wenkai (aaajiao), ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe

Panellist 2: Dahai Zhang, University of Antwerp

The session centred on the eponymous exhibition by artist aaajiao, held in 2024 at SETAREH Gallery in Berlin. The exhibition spans video, painting, and installation, and examines the internet as a manifestation of computational power, focusing on how algorithmic mechanisms linked to the attention economy and broader ideological tensions shape and fragment everyday experience. Within this framework, aaajiao conceptualises the notion of the “void” in cyberspace—understood as gaps or absences in digital systems that are not yet fully occupied by structural or institutional power. These spaces are explored in his work as sites for reflection, resistance, and potential relief from dynamics of distraction, surveillance, and polarisation.

## Moderator’s remarks

The moderator opened the session by welcoming participants and highlighting the unique contribution of the panel: bringing a non-European, artistic, and critical perspective to a primarily legal and policy-driven conference. The moderator emphasised the importance of understanding digital surveillance, platform control, and mediated resistance through the lens of art and lived experience. The moderator encouraged speakers to share personal narratives and creative strategies that expose power structures embedded in digital infrastructures. They also underlined how cultural, political, and technological developments in China offer insights into global trends. The

moderator invited the audience to consider how questions of privacy, resistance, and memory manifest differently outside European frameworks. Lastly, they introduced the session as a dialogue—rather than a strict academic presentation—fostering open engagement across disciplines and regions.

## Panellists' contributions

### **aaajiao (Xu Wenkai):**

aaajiao (Xu Wenkai) presented a video-based art project reflecting on the COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai and its psychological aftermath. He framed the work within the concept of “negative space” on the internet, an area shaped by absence, surveillance, and suppressed narratives. aaajiao argued that platforms like Twitter (now X), TikTok, and Instagram are complicit in manipulating attention and behaviour, commodifying user engagement while reinforcing state- or corporate power. His reflections intertwined personal memory, platform studies, and historic resistance movements, such as the Hong Kong protests. He critiqued the illusion of decentralisation in the age of AI monopolies, pointing to the rise of centralised GPU infrastructure and the erosion of user agency. aaajiao emphasised the role of artists in documenting suppressed histories and warned that convenience-driven surveillance (e.g. QR code normalisation) masks deeper societal shifts.

### **Dahai Zhang:**

Dahai Zhang reflected on his experiences navigating digital infrastructure in China and Europe, including limitations imposed during the pandemic. He offered the research-practitioner perspective of organising sensitive coursework during the pandemic. He recounted hosting a Sino-foreign seminar via Zoom while relaying materials through WeChat groups, Notion pages, and VPN-routed email; an exercise in linguistic and infrastructural workaround. Decentralisation, he argued, now means polyglot hybridity: stitching together partial services to evade censorship. Zhang also reflected on the cultural displacement of Chinese students in Europe; language barriers in German-only curricula restrict expression just as much as Chinese surveillance does at home.

## Discussion points from programme

(Assumed programme questions)

**How can art be used to expose and resist digital surveillance?**

By foregrounding voids—deleted posts, blank Weibo timelines, glitch effects—that signal unseen censorship. aaajiao’s film repurposed 6 000+ scraped tweets. Historic parallels: 1960s underground magazine Sparkle and Fang Fang’s Wuhan Diary show that single artefacts can outlive repression. Audience members noted the work’s power to “translate PTSD into a shared archive.”

### **What is the role of decentralisation in digital resistance today?**

Speakers were sceptical. Blockchain/Web3 rhetoric promises autonomy, yet LLMs require centralised GPU clusters, power recentres. Real-world decentral tactics now look like tool heterogeneity (Zoom, Notion, WeChat relay) rather than pure peer-to-peer. Zhang called this “polyglot decentralisation.”

### **How can researchers and artists collaborate across political and cultural boundaries?**

Practical hacks: split-channel communication (public Zoom / private WeChat), mirror materials on free services accessible behind the Great Firewall (Notion), and leverage automatic translation to overcome linguistic chokepoints. Feng highlighted the need for “digital escorts”—trusted peers who move files across regimes. Funding agencies should value such labour as infrastructure, not admin overhead.

## Summary of Q&A discussion

**Question 1** : “European debates on rights feel abstract—how do your works connect to global human-rights struggles?”

**aaajiao** replied that “art makes pain audible where law reduces it to case numbers.” He sees his lockdown montage as a **portable evidence-archive**; screening it in Brussels re-inscribes memories China tries to erase.

**Jiao Feng** added that aesthetic narrative surfaces “asymmetries of suffering”, invisible to legal metrics, echoing Hong Kong’s “Be Water” movement, where hand-drawn posters outlived Telegram deletions.

**Question 2 Audience follow-up :** “If voids reveal power, can silence ever be misread as indifference?”

**aaajiao** nuanced the idea: a deliberate void is “charged emptiness,” citing John Cage’s 4'33"; indifference is entropy. He aims for “staged emptiness” that invites viewers to interrogate absence.

**Question 3 Moderator:** “Can Europe still craft its own language of resistance amid U.S.–China AI dominance?”

**aaajiao** downplayed geopolitics: “Power speaks through interface design, not passports.” European designers can reclaim agency by defaulting to privacy-preserving UX (no dark patterns, no infinite scroll).

**Dahai Zhang** noted that Berlin’s hacker ethos—‘chaos is service’—already offers an alternative lexicon of playful subversion.

**Question 4 :** “Advice to Chinese art students balancing German funding expectations and homeland censorship?”

**aaajiao** acknowledged the double bind: “Take commercial gigs to survive, but keep a side channel for uncensored work.” He referenced his own path—gallery shows fund server space for riskier online pieces.

**Jiao Feng** suggested forming micro-collectives that pool legal advice and exhibition venues, diluting individual exposure.

**Question 5 :** “Blog era vs TikTok era—does short form kill depth?”

**aaajiao** labelled TikTok “ice-candy”: sugared dopamine spikes that flatten nuance. Depth survives when artists impose friction—e.g., scroll-resistant web pages or 20-minute slow pans. He is experimenting with blockchain-time-locked videos that reveal layers only after repeated viewings.