

Hung Keung. Traditional Chinese Ideas of Time and Space Applied to Art: Dao Gives Birth to One

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HUNG KEUNG

Traditional
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Hung Keung, Portrait.

Traditional Chinese thinking and its approach to art can be readily transferred to a new platform: digital media. My theoretical and practical research includes a new understanding of the scroll format, which expands notions of time and space, and addresses traditional Chinese culture through calligraphy, painting, sculpture, and Daoist philosophy.

Dao Gives Birth to One (2009–2012) is my experiment of applying moving images in a scroll to traditional Chinese concepts of *Dao*, time, and space. The series provides the reader with a new experience by combining these concepts with digital technology.

The Concept of Dao

In my art, I strive to visualize the cycling vigour of *Dao* (the universal way) through digital media—a topic that had not been broached in relation to “play appreciation.” I first explored *sheng* (gives birth), which is represented by the Chinese character 生. Translations by different scholars reflect their individual linguistic perspectives, thus traditional interpretations of *sheng* include “to create,” “to give birth,” and “to generate.” I found a more abstract and spiritual view of *sheng* compared to these translations. This led me to question how *sheng* could be represented visually in the digital era.



I also considered *yi* (one). According to *Dao De Jing*, the classic Chinese text that describes *Dao*, the universe was created through *yi* and *Dao*. The most interesting aspect that drew my attention was the Chinese character 一, a single long dash that represents a singularity or one. This is the first word in *Shuowen Jiezi*, the ancient Chinese dictionary, which states that the One created heaven and earth, then generated the whole universe. *Yi* thus represents the unity of the universe, and this unity generates ten thousand things, which form their paths in the universe. Everything (the ten thousand things) grew in the beginning and will disappear in the end. This concept had not yet been considered using digital media.

The Concept of the Long Scroll

I developed a storyboard in which the One is created and generated into "ten thousands things" through interaction with human beings. First, I built twelve white screens and then inserted my Flying Animated Chinese Character (FACC), composed from my digital brush strokes. The narrative starts with the beginning of the empty universe (white virtual space). The three-dimensional One or FACC flies alone and then divides the cosmos into heaven and earth. How was the Two (二) created? Human beings (*xiang xing*) appear in this universe and the characters (象形) are given form and expand through their interaction.



Hung Keung, *Bloated City & Skinny Language* (Version II). Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong. © Photo : imhk lab.

Thus, in Screen 2, when a human limb, nose, or head interacts with the FACC representing the One, the character generates another of itself and becomes 二, since Chinese linguistic characters are meaningless without human involvement. In the following screens in the scroll, numerous FACCs are generated in such a way that they become brush stocks (digital, repeatable brush strokes).

Although the last screen contains many FACCs, they move systematically on their own paths, which simulate human activity in the chaos of the universe. In the last few seconds of the final scene, everything returns to a white void except for one Chinese brush stock, implying the human life cycle.

Through this work, I transformed the 2D plane to a 4D virtual space by reinterpreting the concept of *void* through digital technology. Traditionally, the white area in the pictorial space of Chinese rice paper was seen as a void—an empty space rather than a colour. Although paper is physically two-dimensional, it can be seen as an infinite space with endless time. When the Chinese characters fly about in that virtual space, the viewer has the impression of real beings racing back and forth in the universe, which gives a sense of 4D.

With this project, I sought a new approach for video and interactive art. I wondered whether a long scroll video installation could take digital art in a new direction



for the Yellow Box.¹ I invited people to interact with my flying Chinese characters at my studio, where I could shift my focus to photographing parts of their bodies. I then edited the footage into different lengths and set it on the twelve screens. The twelve screens are not nearly as seamless as the traditional long scroll. They do not seep into each other, but maintain their distance. Each screen shows flying Chinese characters interacting with humans. Because the loop length of each video ranges from 3 to 21 minutes, varying narratives were created automatically. Viewers do not need to worry about missing part of the video, because it loops in overlapping phases. In other words, people can come and go freely. They are encouraged to experience different perspectives of the installation by viewing the screens one by one, closely or at a distance—the important point is that everyone has time to observe and take in the narrative. The relaxed atmosphere encourages viewers to enter into the spirit of the work.

Chinese-character Writing as a 3D and 4D Experience Time in Character Writing

The *Dao* project used digital technology to simulate Chinese calligraphic characters flying in time and space. It gave viewers a temporal experience by having

them visualize the creation of the characters. Calligraphy has traditionally been a static work of art. Facing a work of calligraphy, viewers must try to imagine the underlying process, for example, the characteristics of the first brush stroke, the sequence of brush strokes, and the flow connecting one character to another—this enhances their appreciation of the work. My new approach in the digital era invited viewers to witness and experience the writing of characters through digital animation. Now the appreciation of Chinese calligraphy is no longer centred on a completed work of art; instead, it includes the concept of time, creating a sense of growth and duration.

Space in Character Writing

The second method that I used to produce a 4D experience for viewers involved re-visualizing Chinese brush strokes in three-dimensional forms by using 3D modelling technology, interactive programming, and video. I believe that Chinese-character writing contains the seeds of 3D and 4D experiences, which become manifest only when a traditional calligrapher controls the volume of ink



Hung Keung, 12 videos screens with 12 different running times.
 Screen scenario of *Dao Gives Birth to One* (version III);
 Hong Kong, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

and the pressure of brushes on a two-dimensional writing platform. I designed the flying sequence of this character as a shape that flips from left to right while in motion. When the viewer watches this character zooming around in virtual space (the void), the character's motion suggests a three-dimensional form rather than a flattened, two-dimensional image.

The project *Dao Gives Birth to One* explored *shu* "brush writing" (calligraphy) and *hua* "painting" in 2D and 4D practice, via a new approach that combined them in a long scroll format through visual technology. The concepts of time and space were represented through an interactive video sequence, shifting the viewer's role from passive observer to active participant, or even to interactive collaborator with the artist. The result offers a broad spectrum of connections between Chinese art and digital media.

Hung Keung

Director and founder of imhk lab, **Hung Keung** is a digital media artist whose creative practice involves interactive installation, performance, moving image, photography, experimental ink painting, and writing. In 2012, he completed his PhD in Digital Media Art and Chinese philosophy at the Planetary Collegium of the Zurich University of the Arts. Currently, he is a professor at the School of Design of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He has been awarded numerous prizes, including the Best of EMAF (European Media Art Festival, Germany) and the Best of Code Award at the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival. Born in 1970 in Kunming, China, he currently lives and works in Hong Kong.

¹ Hong Kong curator, dealer, and critic Johnson Chang developed the Yellow Box project, which presented contemporary Chinese works, with Gao Shiming and Qiu Zhijie in 2005. The Yellow Box meant an environment more favourable to displaying the works, which used traditional media such as *shan shui* ink, than the White Cube and Black Box museum formats that were dominant elsewhere in the world.