Digital Geopolitics:
Intermediality and New Media in East Asia

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The motivation for dedicating this issue of Concentric to intermediality in East Asia comes from acknowledging that new media have dramatically reconfigured literary and cultural studies, in both expanding the relevant research materials and redefining methodological approaches. New media now seem to be on everyone’s mind. Online video, games, and social media have become a major scholarly preoccupation. In parallel, questions about mediality have taken cultural studies by storm, based on renewed interest in the history of material media (e.g., Kittler, Parikka). Such studies have backdated new media to the pre-cinematic age and placed intermediality, remediation, and hypermediality at the center of humanistic inquiry.¹

Such discussions have not neatly resolved the definition of intermediality and related terms. “Media” serves as a portmanteau for communication forms—from genres to technologies to affects. The in-between nature of intermediality may refer simply to conveying similar content through various media (an extension of intertextuality), to the mediation inherent in communication (emphasizing social gaps and institutional interstices), or—in the sense closest to recent studies of mediality—to the elective affinity between paradigms of communication across technological practices.

These terms accrue further complexity in the East Asian context and require reaccommodation to new conceptual frameworks. At least for now, mediality studies have not gained equal currency in Asian academia. The question of traveling theory returns: after methodological paradigms are set in the metropolis, scholars familiar with other cultures must redefine these concepts—to save them, as it were, from universalist ignorance. New media may bear an additional burden: digital

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Technology ostensibly introduces the ultimate level cultural playing field, where everything is reduced to bytes and pixels. New technologies have originated in multiple hubs around the world, from Bangalore to Nairobi, Johannesburg, and Beijing. Are there nevertheless digital geopolitics, and how are they manifested? Does East Asia provide a special case? Does the Sinophone sphere in particular play a special role in determining media and rethinking intermediality? Speaking of the Sinophone, ideological differences have led to various definitions of the intra-Asian (Chen) and the Sinophone (Shih), based on divergent understandings of the nation-state, the postcolonial condition, and the relation between base and superstructure. It is a heavily mined field.

Rather than trying to smooth over the differences by foregrounding specific definitions, I defer to the essays in this volume, each with its own formulations. The authors responded to a broad call for rethinking intermediality and new media, especially given the challenges of the global south and the Sinophone sphere. The contributors were asked to reformulate and rehistoricize various forms of digital culture. The responses have addressed many aspects, and this issue includes discussions of film, digital and pre-digital video art, web publications, calligraphy apps, online shaming, Internet-based branding, and more. The arguments often call for defining the role of new media and its relation to the Sinophone.

The responses were somewhat different from what I had had in mind, and the expectation gap is telling. Although I had assumed that the essays would revisit the very nature of intermediality, the term and its usage have largely been left unchallenged. Instead, most essays focus on the social implications of new media. More ontologically prone academics have pursued a Bazinian or Deleuzian inquiry into “what is cinema” and subsequently “what is new media” (Andrew; Rodowick), or, alternatively, semiotic and cognitive approaches (Manovich; Hayles). Yet it seems that scholars facing the particularities of contemporary media are fascinated primarily with their direct impact on social structures. We seem to know little about the consumers, users, and makers of new media, who predominantly belong to an age group sometimes called Generation Me or the iGeneration, which expresses its aspirations through new media (Johnson et al.). If the medium is the message, then what matters is not what new media is but rather what its usage means and for whom.

The essays’ focus on social effects also reflects a slippage between the definitions of new media as relying on digital production on the one hand, and as based on the ideological conditions facilitated by digital production on the other. This ambiguity, rooted in what Fredric Jameson has called the political unconscious,
proves in fact to be central to some of the arguments made in the following essays. The intermedial phenomena examined in this issue are often seen as signs of their times, which are in turn defined by both transitional aesthetics and counterhegemonic structures.

Among the common themes and claims that emerge from the essays is the affinity between intermediality as form and social structure. In particular, the authors inquire into the purported homogeneity of the nation-state and find in the Sinophone a site of resistance. Intermediality can also tease out the ideological faultlines of the nation-state. In other words, the political unconscious of new media is fashioned as favoring the geopolitical south. This is an enticing argument, often borne out by the analysis, yet some caution is due: much depends on the institutional agents who determine the usage of new media, and the nation-state remains a powerful player.

The argument for new media as inherently counterhegemonic appears in Melissa Chan’s essay. Chan examines Midi Z’s films (released in the 2010s), which in terms of production adhere to pre-digital conventions. Chan focuses, however, not on the films’ form but on the social conditions portrayed in them, which are shaped by new technologies—in particular video surveillance. In this sense, the subjectivity of the characters is based on intermediality. The protagonists, diasporic Chinese in Myanmar, are culturally and economically marginalized, and their precarious identity is reflected in their constant negotiation with the mediated environment. The Sinophone as manifested in Midi Z’s films always depends on reformulation. As an intercultural mode of production, the Sinophone is at least metaphorically analogous to intermediality.

Cosima Bruno also looks at a form that may not fit neatly with the concept of intermediality, as she examines the genre of Taiwan art called variously “sound poetry,” “language art,” and “text-sound art.” As these names suggest, this art form cannot be limited to either word, sound, or image alone. Since such *ekphrasis* and confluence of genres is nothing new, the question may be asked, what is the role of intermediality in the new mediascape? Bruno implies that even though sound poetry has also thrived elsewhere, including in mainland China, it is Taiwan poetry, with its counterhegemonic undertones, that brings the form to its full potential since the Sinophone thwarts the hierarchy of language.

Shao-Hung Teng attends to similar concerns about the mediation of geographical space and collective identity. Teng focuses on Taiwanese film, video art, and performance in the early 1980s and points out their interconnections. By honing in on the literal intermediality—use of various media to represent similar
subject matter—Teng notes that all the media have a common reference in urban space. We may infer that intermediality should be understood not as a game of endless signification but rather as the reaffirmation of a separate term that endows the dynamics of reference with stability. Somewhat ironically, what anchors the various media discussed by Teng is a reference to displacement, namely that of retired soldiers alienated and left to their fate in unregulated military neighborhoods (juancun). Teng implies an affinity between the social issues and the use of intermediality to denote them: the deferral to various media mirrors the old soldiers’ geographical and social displacement. Teng concludes that intermediality is an apt way to address the plight of the juancun because it is a mode of representation that “fosters a collective citizenship.” Insofar as Sinophone kinship in 1980s Taiwan threatened to be too amorphous, the assimilation of various groups could be facilitated, or at least imagined, through intermediality.

The schisms in Sinophone identity are also the topic of Yunwen Gao’s essay. Gao looks at Blossoms (2012), a novel that started as an online publication. Following its popular and critical success, it was published in paper after being revised to reduce the presence of Shanghai dialect. Nevertheless, Gao finds in the novel a clear expression of Shanghai culture, conveyed through intermedial inclusion of sounds and voices from the coastal city. As Gao notes, Blossoms joins a long tradition of representing Shanghai everyday life and colloquialism to forge an alternative modernity that counters the logic of uniform Mandarin. Alongside literature and film from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, works on Shanghai create Sinophone aesthetics that rely on multiple media to challenge the grand narrative of PRC official history.

As Jecheol Park’s essay shows, similar dynamics also operate beyond the Sinophone sphere. Park compares the portrayal of shamanic rituals in Park Chankyong’s experimental documentary Manshin (2013) with earlier films on shamanism. Park argues that the digitally facilitated, intermedial techniques in the documentary secularize shamanic practices against the tendency to make shamanism into a spectacle. In so doing, Manshin demonstrates the split temporality inherent in the postcolonial condition and teases out the heterogenous nature of the Korean collective. In this case as well, intermediality, and the attendant hypermediacy, buttress counterhegemonic narratives and resist nationalist ideology.

A sobering check on intermedial exuberance is provided in Rui Kunze’s essay. Kunze examines how the popular PRC film director Guo Jingming has used new media to promote his cultural persona. Guo’s activity as a film director cannot be separated from other forms of cultural entrepreneurship, buttressed as it is by a
high-profile presence on websites and in social media. Based on Guo’s brand building across media, Kunze suggests that intermediality is an institutional phenomenon, the convergence of modes of production. In view of the essays by Chan, Bruno, Teng, Gao, and Park, we should also note how Kunze’s argument gives rise to yet another formulation of intermediality. In the mediascape of the PRC, intermediality is a sign of the state’s ideological and pragmatic investment in globalization and economic neoliberalism. Far from cognate to Sinophone pluralism, the intermediality exercised by Guo Jingming reaffirms the stronghold of the nation-state.

Other authors in this issue emphasize not so much the geopolitics of intermediality as its role in creating new modes of archiving collective memory and new forms of cultural heritage. Laura Vermeeren’s essay explores the social impact of online and app-based calligraphy exhibition, practice, and learning. Vermeeren examines these new technologies that facilitate familiarity with a brush craft that new media have marginalized. She argues that the digital medium gains ground by catering to a desire for immediacy, yet at the same time the calligraphy software introduces hypermediacy, a form of awareness of the various media and the historical layering involved. The creation of native digital calligraphy is an opportunity for revisiting older media rather than erasing them. Vermeeren shows the role of Internet-based platforms in developing contemporary art consumption, promoting connoisseurship, and forming appreciative communities.

Like Vermeeren and Bruno, Heather Inwood also studies the effects of adapting content from one media to another. The remediation involved in adaptations from text to screen is further complicated by the fact that the films at hand take as their subject matter the impact of social media on everyday life. In particular, Inwood looks at so-called “human flesh search”—a web-enabled form of surveillance, involving outing and shaming—and its onscreen portrayal. The films show how social media facilitate the transition from interpersonal dynamics to human-to-machine sociality. New media paves the way, both materially and ideologically, for the posthuman.

Angie Chau’s essay deals with artwork by Cao Fei, one of the leading PRC proponents of integrating digital technology and virtual reality, and her work ranges from documentaries to video art and to machinima. Cao Fei’s art patently and ostentatiously locates itself at the vanguard of new media. As such, her artwork exemplifies the connection between post-cinematic form, posthuman ideology, and post-memory—that is, vicarious post-traumatic recollection. As Chau addresses
forced amnesia in the PRC, she finds in new media not a redemption of memory, but rather a reaffirmation of cultural erasure.

As a whole, the issue demonstrates the political, cultural, and ideological stakes in new media. The authors raise important questions and provide criteria that will allow scholars to assess the impact of intermediality on East Asian society and art, and of its relevance beyond the specific subject matter at hand. The essays outline a new geopolitics and a new mediascape.

**Works Cited**


About the Author

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