

**THIS DRAFT IS THE ORIGINAL ESSAY FROM WHICH THE ABBREVIATED VERSION
ARE YOU A SPY?
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Introduction to a Dialogical Practice (through anecdotes of my encounters as a foreign artist working in Ireland)

Encounter 1

"Oh! Are you a spy?" This was a question I was confronted with when trying to initiate conversation with a Chinese living in Dublin. The incident took place in the initial stage¹ of my dialogical framework of practice, which involves using everyday situation and encounters² to identify potential participants for my art project, *Ni Hao – Dia Duit*. The question probably emanates from a reasoning that is based on his own cultural knowledge that artists usually paint or write calligraphy (and if he is more exposed to the kinds of art activities taking place in the few major cities in China with contemporary art centres and festivals, he would probably also include commercial goals as an important criteria of art activities), whereas an artist who acts and operates freely in public spaces in China is probably assigned to do so by the state authorities. An artist working without commercial goal and funded by NGOs as I was doing will likely appear to be a strange phenomenon for the pragmatic culture and knowledge of this Chinese migrant from China.

Background to *Ni Hao–Dia Duit*

Ni Hao–Dia Duit ('Hello–Hello' in Chinese and Irish) is a cross cultural project initiated in 2007 on a public art commission from CityArts with support from the Irish Youth Foundation and Dublin City Inner Partnership. It aimed to identify some key sustainable ways of establishing interactive channels between the migrant and local communities around Parnell Street³. When I began the project, being a foreigner in Ireland, I too have to acclimatize to the conditions created by the dominant culture just like the Chinese I was engaging with. As individuals the Chinese wish to remain ctheir studies or business without hindrance. These traits are strategies to survive in a densely populated competitive society and developed under an authoritative, scrutinizing system. But as a group, the Chinese desire to congregate within the comfort of the familiar (food, aesthetic, language and proximity), resulting in the creation of Chinatowns⁴ in whichever part of the world they migrate to. Little did they realize that such inclinations and actions create certain fronts⁵ that communicate non-verbally the message of isolation and ghettorisation. Some Irish see these visual markers as signs of unfriendliness, especially so when augmented by the fact that the Chinese lack the

¹ There are various social stages in my practice of engagement in public and participative art.

² Everyday situations and encounters are sites of research, normally used in anthropological studies named as Participants Observation.

³ Parnell Street, Dublin used to be a neglected area connected to drug trade in the 90s. Migrants begin to move in attracted to the low cost infra structure and since the mid 2005 evolved into a vibrant and unofficial Chinatown of Dublin.

⁴ The Visual Culture of Chinatown, Chinese weekly newspaper *Sun Emerald*, Dec.2009, published in English n Chinese

⁵ 'Fronts', is a sociological term coined by Goffman, Erving reprint 1990. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books (Chapter 1: Performances) to denote the everyday performance put forth by individual and group to create meanings for the others.

knowledge to communicate in local slang and to refer to local events (sports, politics) or lack participation in Irish drinking culture.

My research showed that the fast paced congregation of migrants bringing in and establishing pockets of foreign cultural environments may have triggered feelings of anxiety for residents in the vicinities of Parnell Street – suggested by the behavior of young residents living in the vicinities, “acting out” in front of some of the Chinese shops. The rather sudden presence of strangers speaking in foreign tongue in the hitherto largely monocultural environment of Ireland and their visible access to capital that has created an economy that target non locals would probably pose challenges (to the power perception of the locals (territorial) and create resistances to (or negative views of) foreigners. The lack of communication across cultural divides and the lack of knowledge of the positive effects of globalisation could contribute further to intensify negative attitudes and racist actions.

Ironically the majority of the Chinese do not appear in migrant statistics as they were attracted here by Irish advertisement of being the cheapest country in Europe offering English education. Nevertheless almost every Chinese coming to Dublin before the recession of 2009 would likely to hold more than one job due to the demand for cheap labour during boom time and the high cost of living. The recession also edges them to become the first on the chopping block. Chinese businesses shut down just like those belonging to the Irish but their ambivalent legal status, lack of local knowledge and rights make them extremely vulnerable to changes initiated by the state's decision to get rid of migrant labour when they are no longer needed.

Positive multicultural development in Ireland is now on the downslide due to anxieties of recession, an uncertain future and the need to find quick fixes (or scapegoats). These make any effort in developing sustainable intercultural dialogical process difficult but all the more necessary as economic struggle is likely to further strain social relations.

Reducing uncertainty between strangers

The encounter above illustrates the need to establish some basic form of acceptance between strangers before further engagements can ensue. In my dialogical practice, listening, conversing and investing time are necessary for the reduction of uncertainty⁶ between strangers during initial encounters in order to move forward to form relationships. Reducing uncertainty is an important part of working in context in the initial stage of the methodology of my practice when undertaking public and participative art projects. In order to create social situations which may facilitate the reduction of uncertainty in the *Ni Hao – Dia Duit* project, I organized get-togethers with potential Chinese participants and Irish artists who have interest to participate, usually in a private room of a Chinese restaurant fitted with the state of art karaoke machine - a common retreat space for the Chinese to socialize and relax among friends.

Encounter 2

It was in one of such arranged interactions that a case of cultural misunderstanding occurred leading to the withdrawal of a Chinese who was exploring to participate in our activities. The young Chinese felt being put under

⁶ *Uncertainty Reduction Theory* is put forth by Berger, C.R. And Calabrese, R.J. to deconstruct the communication stage of the initial socialization process between strangers.

scrutiny like a specimen on display by the barrage of questions put to him by an Irish artist who, with his background in youth work, believed that the dialogical process is a question and answer game. He probably thought that so long as the answers keep coming, the interaction is moving along positively. I did recall that I had noticed the discomfort of the Chinese from his body language but being myself in the midst of conversations with others in the room I did not intervene.⁷ The Chinese comes from a culture where initial conversations with strangers are acts of politeness and being pragmatic, he had probably come to the event to seek information as to whether participation in such activities would be beneficial for his personal well being. From this negative experience he concluded to withdraw from any future activities with us.

Listening

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, in *The Other Side of Language*, criticised western philosophy for privileging a logocentric culture that prioritises articulation and suppresses the role of listening. Without allowing listening to become an integral component of a dialogical knowledge, speaking may have the tendency to acquire a despotic nature.⁸

In listening I would argue that it is more than being receptive to the articulation and content but also extends to being sensitive to body language – the posture of the body and micro expressions that embodies non-verbal communication, emotional signs that can denote discomfort, irritation and suppression of certain feelings. Pioneer researchers, Haggard and Isaacs discovered these “micromomentary” expressions when researching into films recorded during psychotherapy sessions⁹. Here I don't mean that artists need training in psychotherapy but an awareness of non verbal communicative properties within dialogical processes and these forms of communication play a crucial part in the success of any project.

Non-verbal dialogue

Encounter 3

When I took up work in Dublin in 2007 on a commission by CityArts with support from Irish Youth Foundation and Dublin Inner City Partnership, I was made aware of the negative feedback from persons who interpreted CityArts's sale of their art space along the quay as a willful act intended at neglecting the artistic community. Rumors also circulated that the sold building had been a donation from Bono. Whether any of these are truths is not the issue here, as I would just like to demonstrate how meanings can be generated in spite of the dissemination of intention by CityArts. This circulated negativity, failure to address them and the management style of CityArts there after lead to major disruptions to their then secure funding, resulting to termination of various projects including mine.

⁷ This case study is analysed and critiqued in an academic essay Artist's Research Text on Methodology to be published in Kantonen, Lea (ed.), *Ankaraa ja myötätuntoista kuuntelua. Keskustelevaa kirjoitusta paikkasidonmaisesta taiteesta. Kuvataideakatemia*, 2010, Helsinki. (The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts). See link, <http://ifima.net/IFIMA/personal/articlesindex.htm>

⁸ Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Language*, translated by Charles Lambert (London: Routledge, 1990), p.9, 23, 26.

⁹ Haggard, E. A., & Isaacs, K. S. (1966). Micro-momentary facial expressions as indicators of ego mechanisms in psychotherapy. In L. A. Gottschalk & A. H. Auerbach (Eds.), *Methods of Research in Psychotherapy* (pp. 154-165). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts

In my practice-as-research¹⁰ academic studies on Public and Participative Art, I am researching on an area called Performance in Everyday Life. I place importance in non verbal modes of communication, e.g. via text and gesture, and the generation of meanings through interpretation and perception. I call these forms of communication dialogue because they provide continuity in the generation of meanings, exchange of information and production of consequences to the participative art project. The interpreted meaning of the Chinese creating state of isolation as mentioned earlier by the local Irish residents is the result of this non verbal dialogue, creating meanings that could bear consequences. Rumour such as described in Encounter 3 creates another form of interpreted communication.

In spite of some setbacks, the cross cultural project *Ni Hao – Dia Duit* continued to take shape and brought about the formation of the Irish Chinese Cultural and Sport Association. I continued engaging with collaborators from the Chinese community while also carrying out various activities such as mentoring, evaluation and mediation of art and development projects in Ireland. NH-DD has become my longest running and still ongoing project in Ireland, whereas my shortest project in Ireland involves a case of institutional inability to effectively communicate the intention of a project dealing ironically with mediation.¹¹

Investing time to build resource, negotiate differences and address anxieties

As an independent mediator, I see the necessity to create transference and readings of public art knowledge through explorative processes for the key players, in this scenario, they are the members of the public, artists, stakeholders and the institutions in that order. This is one of the important steps of my practice to highlight the relationship between knowledge and subjectivities, and to connect to a larger secular and open consciousness.

In an open society I would presume that misinterpretations and inefficiencies/incompetence are ideal learning paradigms to generate knowledge for future benefits. In an awarded commission as the mediator for a percent for art public art programme in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County, my activities ended after 2 months of research on the public art works in the programme and meetings with the stakeholders. The planned public mediation of art knowledge and explorative activities were perceived as “concern” to the arts office. My contract, which actually includes a list of these knowledge generating duties and activities,¹² was terminated on the ground that I had emailed an update to the stakeholders and artists of the project, after I was asked to temporarily stop all contact for the management’s review of my duties. Here, the accountability and competence of the institution in knowledge on and managing of public and participative art come into question, manifested in the inability or unwillingness to articulate their

¹⁰ Practice-as-research grounds research within 1st hand experience as field work, which acts as a kind of site or situation or arena for the research, while being profoundly influenced by the unfolding research direction. The research constructs critical frameworks (connection to a larger picture, histories, etc.) while project work offers points of experience that test ideas and strategies as well as prompt discussion and analysis. This artistic research approach becomes a form of scrutinising, working out and ‘acting out’ (performance) of ideas and concepts about participatory and collaborative practice.

¹¹ In 2009, I was awarded a commission to perform mediation activities for a percent for art, public art programme *Place & Identity* in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

¹² [The list of duties and activities can be found in this link](http://ifima.net/IFIMA/personal/DLR%20list%20of%20duties.pdf)
<http://ifima.net/IFIMA/personal/DLR%20list%20of%20duties.pdf>

precise concerns, what are my perceived short comings. Further communication did not led to any clarity on this “concern”.

Reading the Self, Reading the Others¹³

RSRO is the most recent event building on *Ni Hao – Dia Duit*. I collaborated with Thomas O Connor whose participation in NHDD dates back to 2007 to curate RSRO’s multi faceted activities. RSRO encouraged the Chinese in Ireland to submit images of themselves to be read by others. Through a series of published articles¹⁴ which acted as informal workshops, around topics such as the construction and reading of meanings through and in photographs, as well as a series of meetings in karaoke rooms in Chinese restaurants, the Chinese living in Dublin were invited and given motivation to take part in a photo exhibition that became part of the 2010’s Dublin City Council’s annual celebratory and week long Chinese New Year festival (12th – 21st Feb. 2010, in different locations of the city).



Submitted photographs portrayed the various ways the Chinese viewed themselves and the Irish. These photographs will be shown later in various everyday spaces such as restaurants, in order to initiate discursive interactions and to target specific groups. Follow up activities are planned, including an exhibition of artworks made by Irish artists living in Dublin to reflect on and respond to the meanings they gathered from the photos send in and from their interactions with the Chinese in Dublin.

¹³ A project in collaboration with the ICCSA and support from the Artist in Community scheme from the Arts Council managed by CREATE

¹⁴ These articles are published from Nov. to Dec. 2009 in Sun Emerald, the largest Irish Chinese weekly newspaper. [Some of these articles can be read in this link](http://ifima.net/IFIMA/personal/Reading%20Self.%20Reading%20Others.htm)



Ireland as postcards



1st prize winning entry



2nd prize winning entry

Encounter 3

During its one week exhibition¹⁵ run, RSRO featured daily talks organized around various themes. In one of the talks on the dating practices of youth, one of the Chinese participants responded to a question by a young Irish boy on how would one ask a Chinese girl out, by going into a long lecture on the responsibility associated with dating a Chinese girl, including a list of duties to be observed/performed (such as protecting the girl, anticipating her anxieties, fears etc.), character traits to be possessed and expectation to be met before courting should begin. (These sentiments were however not totally shared by the other Chinese present). To someone exposed to and brought up in a 'western' cultural background, these sentiments would appear as conservative and patriarchal (a view affirmed by at least one Irish member of the audience), perhaps even overbearing, presumptuous and oppressive. However, for the Chinese, a foremost consideration in life, a message drummed in from young, is a sense of responsibility, whether to one's parents and family, one's self or one's country. Someone from a similar cultural background would likely interpret the sentiments expressed by the Chinese participant as showing responsibility, consideration and care for others, akin to chivalry.



Talk on dating for young people

Intersubjective meanings as building blocks of relationships

From the encounter above, we see that meanings are often made based on subjectivities that are in play and judgment are often made based on a person's received values, experiences and background. In my dialogical practice, I place great importance on giving enough time and space for positive intersubjective meanings to form between participants, rash judgment would foreclose the development of further engagement. Sentiments are not only closely linked to one's cultural context, but also to the economic and social conditions that creates certain expedencies, such as when a Chinese female participant expressed that she is less likely to date for fun, due to the fact that she feels she has the responsibility to care and provide for her parents and siblings.

¹⁵ 14th – 20th Feb. 2010, 15 West Essex St.

In Grant Kester's dialogical aesthetics¹⁶, intersubjective meaning contributes to the active conscious process of creating collaborative relationships. Working across cultural difference, whether intra or inter cultural group, brings on additional difficulties to the application of this theory. This is due to the differences of knowledge internalized in each individual's subjectivity of the self and readings of others. These differences for example in ascribing meaning to a particular term (on dialogue as mentioned in an earlier narrated encounter) are revealed during the process of communicating across social and cultural groups. In order to communicate with the Chinese in Dublin who have no previous knowledge or experience of participation in cross cultural activities, it is not sufficient for me to only initiate conversations with them, but to also supplement these with supportive visual and textual materials and experiences. For these activities to be effective, they need to build upon continuity, acting as a collaborative capacity building process which can then enable intersubjective meanings to create positive condition for relationship to evolve.

This art led creative process aims to encourage participants to question the internalization process of subjectivity and evoke the imagination to envisage alternatives and possibilities. This process which is experience based is informed by interdisciplinary (social communication and anthropological research) methods and a cross-sectoral approach. This process does not issue from the modernistic art approach that quite often employs avant-garde ideas of intervention and communicating knowledge and intention in top down directions. The interventions in my process are negotiated after an introduction and explanation of my intentions during the initial phase of encounters.

In this article, I have attempted to discuss some aspects concerning the dialogical components of my practice that can hopefully lead to the creation of trust between potential collaborators. There are other important factors for e.g. the exploration of differences and embedded tension, the cultivation of ownership of generated knowledge as form of sustainability. These will be discussed in writings on later stages of my practice.

Jay Koh

¹⁶ Kester, Grant 2004. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press.