

Creating Art in Diaspora:
Network-Building of Young Chinese Artists in France and The
Netherlands

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Introduction

Life as an artist in diaspora is usually romanticized as a Bohemian way of pursuing art. However, is it as easy to achieve such life as to just imagine it? For the past decades, the increasing cross-border flows of artists and their works have accelerated the internationalization in the contemporary art world (Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). In particular, a few Western art centers, such as Paris, New York and Berlin have become magnets for many non-Western creative professionals seeking their international art career (Harris, 2013). These cities are famous for their art friendly climates and clustering of top artists, collectors, and art dealers as well as prestigious museums and galleries (Favell, 2014; Sooudi, 2014). However, previous scholarship suggests cultural differences, foreign identity, and organizational conventions in the local art world can pose significant barriers for non-Western artists to enter and develop artist career in the Western art world (Velthuis, 2013; Sariaslan, 2018). Given the increasing international mobility of non-Western artists, this study focuses on one group of migrant artists, young Chinese artists and examines how do emerging Chinese artists develop art career in France and the Netherlands, two popular destinations of international mobility among non-Western artists. Through in-depth interviews with 12 young Chinese artists, this study closely examines their perceptions and experiences with the Western art world.

In the art world, network-building plays a vital role on artist careers. From interactions with collectors, gallery owners, and curators, to connections with museums and art fairs, networks are ubiquitous and have profound impacts on reputations and recognitions of artists (Becker, 1982; Martin, 2007; Braden & Teekens, 2020; Braden, 2018). By looking into the pathways of migrant artists establishing networks with the Western art world, this study contributes to discussions on the impacts of different types of networks on emerging migrant artists in the study field of sociology of art. At the same time, this study provides insights into the pressure on and strategies of non-Western artists building networks for artist careers, which tests the transnational receptions of artists in the contemporary art world.

Migration of non-Western artists: dreams of art and realistic difficulties in diaspora

With the accelerated globalization of the contemporary art market and more convenient ways of international travel, transnational exchanges of artworks and cross-border moves of artists have become more frequent in the past three decades (Favell, 2014; Brandellero & Velthuis, 2018). Previous scholarship attributes the increased internationality in the contemporary art scene to the development of globalized capitalism and the urban cultural industry (Florida, 2002; Stallabrass, 2004). For example, many cities worldwide have been investing in international art events and artists-residence programs to develop local cultural industry and attract global audiences, which provides more opportunities for artists' international mobility (Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011). Besides, the organizational isomorphism of contemporary art auctions, galleries, and museums in different countries encourages transnational trades and exchanges of artworks (Lee, 2018). In particular, the Western clustering effect is strong regarding the migration of non-Western artists. (Addison, 2006). A few Western cities, such as New York, Paris, London, and Berlin are popular destinations for non-Western artists to live and create art (Harris, 2013; Favell, 2014; Sooudi, 2014). Studies show job opportunities have a push effect on non-Western creative professionals' choices of migration because the Western destinations of the artists' migration usually have more professional opportunities and networks for artists than their places of origins (Thomas & Young 2011; Borén, 2013). Concurrently, recognitions from Western legitimating bodies, such as exhibition records or media exposure in Western countries can bring positive impacts

on art sales and reputations of the artists both internationally and domestically (Favell, 2014; Brandellero & Velthuis, 2018). This is referred to the skewed art power between emerging non-Western art markets and traditional Western art centers that although the former has gained a significant development in the international art scene, the latter still wields profound impacts on non-Western artists' recognitions, whereas not the other way around (Harris, 2013; Buchholz, 2018; Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). Other factors, such as the exposure to the latest artistic ideas and techniques (Addison, 2006), a more open and inclusive context for art's free expressions (Thomas & Young, 2011), and new life opportunities, such as the freedom of pursuing an individualistic lifestyle (Sooudi, 2014) are also drive forces with respect to the migration of non-Western artists.

However, it is not easy for the migrant artists to achieve their professional goals in diaspora (Thomas & Young, 2011). First, although an international metropolis is tempting to art talents due to the affluent resources of art, foreign novice artists may find there are only a small number of remunerative slots for employment and the artistic labor market is highly competitive (Addison, 2006). Previous scholarship demonstrates that it can be difficult for artists to sustain themselves solely on making art, which makes multiple-job holdings a common phenomenon among creative professionals and sometimes part-time jobs pose serious interruptions to artists' creative work and lead them to giving up artist careers (Menger, 1999; Martin, 2007, Sooudi, 2014). For migrant artists, the fragility of art career is even more severe due to the "added disadvantage of less market knowledge and often fewer financial resources" (Addison, 2006: p.7). Second, non-Western artists and their artworks often encounter cultural or national imaginations from Western audiences and art practitioners. For example, Zhang and Frazier (2017) point out that Chinese artists are always connected with specific sociopolitical images of the Chinese State in the Western art world (Favell, 2014). Likewise, Sooudi (2014) finds that even though migrant Japanese artists expected New York City to fulfill their dreams of creating art individually, they sooner or later got to realize that "the Japanese artist's work is never just itself—it bears both the individual creator's imprint and the indelible flavor of national and ethnic origins" (p.110). This shows how the foreign identity of artists can become a dilemma when it comes to the evaluations and receptions of the migrant artists' works in the Western context (Ong, 2012). Third, the gap between migrant artists and the local art scene is significant due to the "home bias", which implies that art dealers may prefer Western artists more than non-Western artists as art concepts, and contents from the Western artists are easier to be accepted by the local art market and the public in Western countries (Velthuis, 2013). Therefore, although the Western metropolis is attractive to non-Western artists for the clustering of art contents and professional possibilities, developing an artistic career can be challenging for the migrant non-Western creative professionals.

To delve into the migrant artists' experiences of developing artist careers in diaspora, this study zooms in on young Chinese artists who live and create art in France and the Netherlands. In the past three decades, the number of Chinese art students in Western countries has been enlarging and remarkable market records of Chinese contemporary artists have greatly increased the global visibility of artists from China (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2007; Harris, 2013), which make the group of migrant artists a meaningful case to study their interactions with the Western art world. In fact, the migration of Chinese artists, especially the first generation of Chinese contemporary artists, to Western countries has been deeply embedded in the development of Chinese contemporary art. When contemporary art started to emerge in mainland China at the end of 1970s, there was no single contemporary art museum, gallery, or auction house in the country; the concept of contemporary art was mainly seen in theoretical discussions on art journals and related to avant-garde art experiments within a small circle of art critics and artists (Kharchenkova, 2017; Zhou, 2020). Although contemporary art practices became active in the 1980s when the "high-culture fever" hit the Chinese society, such enthusiastic art energy came to a

halt when the Chinese Government tightened the control on cultural and art productions after the 1989 student movement (Mo, 2020). Consequently, due to the few opportunities for exhibiting and trading art in mainland China, a few of Chinese contemporary artists started to look for careers in Western art centers, such as Paris, New York, and Berlin (Ong, 2012; Kharchenkova, 2017). At that time, some influential Western curators and art institutions reached out to these diasporic Chinese artists whose artworks often reflected on the controversial social issues in the fast-changing society, offering supports for them to develop artistic careers in the Western countries in 1990s (Zhang & Frazier, 2017, Zhou, 2020). Previous studies have made impressive discussions on the entry of these “star” artists, favored by the Western art market and art institutions, into the international art world (see studies on the history of Chinese contemporary art e.g., Lu, 2013; Gao, 2021). However, migrant experiences of the younger generations of Chinese artists have changed significantly. Compared to the pioneers of Chinese contemporary art, the decision of migrating to Western countries is made more selectively and proactively by the younger generations of Chinese contemporary artists (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2007; Zhou, 2020). On the one hand, the decision for studying abroad is mostly driven by strong personal motivations to increase human capitals and engage in the process of globalization for to the generations who were born after the Chinese economic reform in 1979 (Zhou, 2017). On the other hand, China’s contemporary art industry has gained significant development since 2000, by the time when the post-Reform generations of artists consider art education and careers, both the local art infrastructures and the international visibility of Chinese contemporary art have been considerably improved (Ong, 2012). However, little light has been shed on the migrant experience of young Chinese artists under the changes. Therefore, by conducting explorative research, this study hopes to contribute to analysis and discussions on the interactions between emerging Chinese artists and the Western art world in a time when both the international art world and Chinese art world have experienced significant changes.

Network-buildings in the art world and migrant artists

To explore how young Chinese artists develop their careers in the Western art world, this study identifies and focuses on an important analytical scope: networks of artists. In the social world, networks are ubiquitous (Christakis and Fowler 2009), which, according to Mclean (2017), “refer to a set of entities- actors, organizations, or locations, for example – and the ties exist among them.” (p.32). The impacts of networks on people’s career and life are profound as it is through different types of networks that individuals obtain information, opportunities, and supports (Granovetter, 1973; Rademacher & Wang, 2014). For example, scholars of migration studies often discuss the pivotal role of social networks for immigrants to be integrated into communities and develop career (e.g., Lieber et al. 2001; Haug, 2008). Furthermore, there are different networks, and the strength and effects of diverse networks vary. Granovetter (1973)’s famous research on strong ties and weak ties has shown that strong ties between families and close friends tend to be homogenous and more beneficial for emotional resources like reciprocity and trust; while weak tie involves fewer social interactions and tends to exist in more heterogeneous networks, which is more efficient in moving information among different circle (Rademacher & Wang, 2014; Mclean, 2017). According to Granovetter (1973), weak tie brings more career opportunities than strong tie. However, as Granovetter and his followers developed the theories of strong and weak ties in a Western context, which is not always applicable in other social and cultural contexts. For example, the connotations and implications of networks can convey very different meanings in Chinese culture. According to Luo (2012), social relations in China have a “structure of differential modes association” (p.165) in which trusts and pragmatic profits together decide the social patterns between individuals. Unlike the implications of strong ties in Western context, profitable opportunities tend to be shared and developed between people who have closer social relationships. In

Chinese social culture, people tend to develop long-term relations which combine both instrumental exchanges for social and economic goods, and emotional supports while reject relationships only based on a short-term exchange of interests (Hwang, 1987; Luo & Yeh, 2012; Mclean, 2017). Therefore, it is possible that conflicts emerge when two different social habits of establishing networks encounter in the migrant context and this study hopes to examine the contentions by looking at how Chinese migrant artists interact with the Western art world.

In the world of art, networks are pivotal for artists' careers. Although art is regarded as personal and individual, the recognitions and evaluations of art and artists are collective (Martin, 2007; Braden & Teeken, 2019). In his groundbreaking book *Art Worlds*, Becker (1982) has shown the collective nature of the art world where the collective activities and knowledge of different art actors determine the conventions of how to produce, consume, and evaluate art. Accordingly, networks with gatekeepers of the art world including individuals like curators, art critics, and gallery owners, and institutions, such as museums, galleries, and art grants, are important for artists' career. In different stages of artist careers, the weight of networks varies. Emerging artists tend to apply more for grants and opportunities of exhibitions when they enter to the art world, while the connections with museums usually come at a later phase when artists are more established (Martin, 2007; Braden, 2018). Concurrently, networks in the art world are interdependent, cumulative, and sequential (Giuffre, 1999). For example, a successful grant application may lead to an exhibition opportunity in a gallery (Martin, 2007). Previous studies showed it is more difficult for migrant artists to build networks in diaspora due to the lack of local knowledge and the bias of selection by the local art actors (Thomas & Young, 2011; Velthuis, 2013). This can lead to the failures of foreign artists to enter the local art scene, but also results in the migrant artists' decreased sense of belonging towards the hosting countries (Thomas & Young, 2011; Sariaslan, 2018).

For this study, I choose to focus on young Chinese artists and their experience of establishing networks for artist career in the Western art world. This research analyzes what types of networks of the young Chinese artists trying to build and how do different network-buildings influence their artist career in diaspora. Concurrently, I discuss pressures on and strategies of the migrant artists building art networks in France and the Netherlands, particularly the perceptions and conventions of network-buildings in the Western context and Chinese context may be different and sometimes even contradictory.

Methods and data

In exploring how do young Chinese artists perceive and establish networks with the Western art world, this research conducted the individual interviews with 12 young Chinese artists through a semi-structured interview guideline (See the guideline in Appendix B). All the participants were born in China but are living and creating art in Europe now, six of whom reside in France and six in the Netherlands. They all started the migrant artistic life by attending art schools in the places of their migration. This is common for non-Western art novices to start connections with the Western art world (Fujii, 2020). In this research, the interviewees made the choice of studying art abroad proactively and were financially supported by family or/and oneself. Nine participants have already had art education at least at bachelor level in China before their migration, although among which two of them do not consider their majors, video art and digital media, as art study. They came to the Netherlands and France to further pursue higher education of art. While for the other three interviewees, they choose to receive bachelor study of art in the two Western countries. Unlike the first generation of Chinese contemporary

artists who struggled with limited access to the international art world, the post-reform generation of artists has experienced the State's increasing involvement in the globalization that studying abroad becomes more imaginable and possible (Nie, 2020). With respect to gender in this study, eight of the interviewees are female and four are male. Age of the interviewees ranges from 26 to 40. This study chooses to focus on artists under / equal the age of 40 for two main reasons. First, the age of 40 is often used to define young artists in the art world. Such standard is widely seen in art funds, exhibitions, market records and international ranks of artists (Artprice 2012, Vogue 2018, The Art Newspaper 2021). Second, artists from this age cohort were born after China's initiation of Reform and Opening-up in 1978. As mentioned earlier, this generation of artists grew up with the fast marketization and globalization of the country, which brings them more opportunities for international experience of education and art compared to pioneers of Chinese contemporary art born in 1960s (Zhou, 2020).

As the definition of "artist" can cover a wide range of professions from musicians, visual artists, to dancers that each of them has the specific industry and professional context for establishing career networks (Menger, 2003), this study chooses to solely focus on visual artists who work on at least one of the popular forms of contemporary art, such as paintings, installations, photography, video art, or print. In doing so, this research hopes to provide more concrete discussions on the issues of building networks for artist careers in the field of contemporary visual art whose ecology is constituted of galleries, museums, auction houses, and art fairs (Kharchenkova, 2017; Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). Among the artists I interviewed, five of them regard paintings as their main art media while eight have rich experience with video art. Note, artists in this research do not limit themselves to one single art media, they would adopt various media from painting, video, digital tools, print, to performance to creatively present their art ideas and express themselves.

I choose to set my research context in France and the Netherlands because the two countries are popular destinations of international mobility for non-Western artists (see studies on migration artists like Addison, 2006; Sariaslan, 2018). With regard to the former, French art and culture are considered as important soft power for the country to maintain a persistent influence on other countries, which makes France a utopia for many creative youths for pursuing art education and career (Pamment, 2014; Bian, 2017), let alone there has been a long history of artists migrating to France, particularly to Paris for career since the 20th century (Sonn, 2022). For the later, the Dutch government also values international cultural exchanges; multiple art funds and policy are developed to assist artists who are living and working in the country (Dutch International cultural policy 2021-2024), which increases its attraction to foreign artists. In the meantime, the popularity of English language in the Netherlands reduces linguistic barriers for non-Dutch speakers to adapt to life there (Hong et al. 2017). Despite the national differences of cultural policy and art traditions, France and the Netherlands are both Western countries whose marketplaces and infrastructures are well developed for contemporary art, making them attractive places for non-Western young artists to create art and develop careers (Addison, 2006; Sariaslan, 2018). In this study, the migrant time of the artists varies from 1 year to 17 years, which makes migrant life experience different in the sense that some interviewees are still studying at or have just graduated from art schools while other interviewees have been developing artist careers for years and set up families in the places of their migration. Although there is an age difference among the participants, they all have experiences as novice artists in the Western context, endeavoring to establish their artist networks.

To explore how the 12 artists perceive and experience network-buildings in the Western art world, this study adopts the qualitative method of the semi-structured interview. In doing so, this research ensures that interviewees do not divert from the main concerns of this study, but also allows new ideas to be brought up during the interview (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The freedom of the semi-

structured interview gives participants more space to reflect on and interpret their artistic network buildings (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview data is analyzed through discourse analysis, which allows the study to examine the interviews' descriptions, interpretations, and explanations regarding their experience with network-buildings in the Western art world (Cruikshank, 2012). By performing discourse analysis, this study tries to identify common themes emerged from the interviews, but also capture the differences of how interviewees construct their discourses on network-buildings in the Western art world differently (Jones, 2012). In doing so, this explorative research endeavors to provide a more comprehensive picture of young Chinese artists building networks in the Western contexts. I recruited the interviewees through the snow-sampling method. By attending exhibitions of galleries and public activities of art organizations, I got to know some artists and then were introduced to the interviewees of the research. The snow-sampling method has been proven as an efficient way for researchers with no art background to enter the art world (e.g., Sooudi's study on Japanese artists in New York City 2014, Kharchenkova's study on Chinese contemporary artists in Beijing 2017). Privacy of the interviewees is respected and protected in the research. I informed and asked the 12 artists to garner their approvals of recording our interviews for transcription and analysis purposes. Concurrently, I used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees. Note that, all the interviews were conducted in Chinese and then direct quotes were translated into English.

A total of 811-minute audio recordings and almost 90,000-Chinese-word text data of transcriptions are obtained from the 12 semi-structured interviews. As the connotations of networks vary between Western and Chinese culture, every time before the interview, I introduced and explained the meanings of artistic networks in this research's context to avoid the interviewees' misunderstandings. In addition, when interviewees gave ambiguous answers, I asked the questions in different ways again or asked for their further explanations to ensure the validity and reliability of their responses. In total, the 12 in-depth interviews allow this study to present an overview of how the young Chinese artists establish networks in the Western art world as well as contextualize pressures on and strategies of the migrant creative professionals in the process.

Chinese artists' perceptions on network-buildings

In the Western art world, networks play important roles in artists' careers (Giuffre, 1999; Martin, 2007). However, the connotation of networking can be different in the Chinese context as the study discussed earlier, which further influences how the Chinese artists perceive and react to network-buildings for their artist careers. In this study, all the interviewees acknowledged the importance of building networks for their artistic careers. According to the artists, building social networks with art practitioners, such as curators, gallery owners, and art institutions helps artists to increase one's visibility in the foreign art world. Otherwise, "nobody knows what you have been doing for art" (Bobo). For example, Temo talked about how she realized the benefits of being proactive in social occasions for her artistic career that: "I used to be very shy and did not dare to talk to and make friends with strangers. However, the art world is forcing me to become more social because if you don't know anybody, you will lose many opportunities. It is until I started to socialize more with other curators and fellow artists, I got to realize there were so many art competitions, activities, and platforms out there—this was the information I couldn't know when I was doing research on my own." Bobo also talked about the positive impacts of expanding networks on artist career: "Things indeed changed when I started to grow my networks with galleries more proactively." Previous studies also reveal the significance of reaching out to gatekeepers for novice artists to enter and obtain information in the

Western art world (Dowd & Pinherio, 2013). However, not all the migrant Chinese artists get to use to or/and manage to adapt to such prevailing social way in the Western art world. Over half of the interviewees mentioned their preference for developing long-term connections with other actors in the art world than just meeting people for social purposes. Although these artists are aware of the benefits of meeting more people in the art world for their careers — like what Granovetter (1973) argued for the strength of weak ties that heterogenous information regarding opportunities of career usually emerge from acquaintances (Rademacher & Wang, 2014), suspicious and resistant attitudes towards network-building activities, such as social drinks with fellow artists, intentional presence at art openings are observed in the interviews. Some of the interviewees talked about the “unwillingness of being in crowds” (HB), “unnecessary increase in social costs” (Zhu), and “possible distractions from artist’s attention on making art” (Loulou) when they were asked about their perceptions on network-buildings in the art world.

The tendency of Chinese art professionals developing deep connections with other art actors is also reflected in the merging of utilitarian network-building and supportive friendship. In this study, at least 10 artists mentioned how helps from friends, also actors in the art world, have assisted their artist careers, from looking for a working studio, gaining professional information, to collaborating on art projects. On the one hand, some interviewees mentioned that the beginning of their friendship with some persons was in the workplace (e.g., MY & Loulou); on the other hand, some interviewees have or/and will plan to develop art projects with their fellow artist friends for careers (e.g., HB & GL). In this sense, the role of friends and colleagues is intertwined. Such blurry boundary between familiar social relations and instrumental exchanges for social and economic goods can be related to an important type of social relation in Chinese cultural context known as “familiar ties”, which refers to a relation of combining both common interest and emotional motivations (Yang, 1993; Luo & Yeh, 2012). In additional to the cultural factor, the individualist nature of artists’ works also has an important impact on the mixture of workmates and friends with respect to network-buildings in the art world. Hüssel used a metaphor to explain it: “The relationships between artists are like ‘company to company’. It’s not like within a company where there is a clear hierarchy between individuals. So, I think it’s easier to develop equal partnerships and you would have more emotional connections with each other.” Similarly, MY and GL also talked about the mutual trust and art interest between individual artists when developing collective art projects together.

In sum, the artists’ perceptions of network-buildings are influenced by the social norms from both the Western art world and the Chinese social conventions, and the individualistic nature of the artist career. Some artists adapted to a prevailing way of establishing networks in the Western art world by proactively interacting with other art actors at social occasions, which is proven to have positive impacts on their artistic careers for the migrant art novices. While some interviewees choose to develop familiar ties, which mixes career purposes and emotional motivations, with other actors in the art world. In the followings, this study further identifies different pathways for the artists to build networks, important intermediaries between migrant artists and the local art world, and invisible barriers of network-buildings in the Western art world. In doing so, this study hopes to provide a comprehensive analysis of young migrant artists’ experience with network-buildings in the Western art world.

Different pathways of building networks for artist careers

The interviews show that young Chinese artists establish networks for their artist careers mainly through four pathways. The first, applications for art grants in contests and artist-residence projects.

More than half of the interviewees mentioned their experience of participating in art competitions and applying for art funds or/and artist-residence projects at the early stage of their artist careers. As new graduates from art schools, the young creative professionals have fewer resources and connections of career. However, many art grants are designed for young creative talents to increase their visibility in the art world. Martin (2007) found experiences of successful applications for grants did help art novices to obtain credits in the art world and be noticed by the gatekeepers, such as curators and gallery owners. At the same time, open calls from such art contests and grants are usually accessible in school and on social media, which makes this a popular way for emergent artists to start their networks with other participating artists and gatekeepers of the art world. For example, ZD, a well-established artist in Paris, recalled that one of her original connections with the Parisian art world began with her winning of an art contest, through which her works were fond of a jury, also an influential figure in the French contemporary art world and this further brought her more exhibition chances. Besides, SZ regarded applications for art competitions as an efficient strategy of developing her early artist career that “For a period of time, I was very dedicating to applying for all kinds of art contests—I even set KPI for myself regarding how many applications I should submit every day. I think if you are not super good at social, this is an efficient way. No matter what, you need some exhibition opportunities to increase the chance of selling your works and continuing to be an artist.” Therefore, due to the public nature of art grants, applying for art grants is a more direct and efficient way for the emerging artists to get in touch with the art world. However, not all the interviewees find this way helpful as some complained the redundant process of preparing application documents (Hussel & JiJi) and selective bias for certain trendy themes in such art competitions and funds (Temo & Bobo).

The second, representation by galleries. In this study, five interviewees mentioned their collaborations with galleries in their career trajectories. Unlike open calls from art competitions and funds, selection process of artists by galleries is less transparent. For example, three painters, two are in Paris and one is in Amsterdam, both mentioned the introduction of friends helped their collaborations with the galleries. Concurrently, performance of young artists in art activities are important when galleries select artists. Two Paris-based artists talked about the fact that a successful partnership between artist and gallery usually begins with gallery’s notice of the emerging artists in art contests or exhibitions of young artists. That said, “you need to first ‘make some sounds’ in the art world and then galleries would start to notice you” (ST). As the relationship between artists and galleries tends to be more commercial, credits of artists, usually successful applications for art grants and exhibitions, are important for galleries to consider and evaluate emerging artists’ future market performance (Schönfeld & Reinstaller, 2007). Therefore, the establishment of networks with galleries usually requires other networks with the art world, such as success in art contests or/and funds and interpersonal ties with curators (ST).

The third, involvements in art institutions. In the art world, institutions like museums wield important influence on the recognitions of artistic careers (Giuffre, 1999; Braden, 2019). In this study, many of interviewees talked about their preference for connecting with institutions. Sometimes works of artists are not easy to be commercialized in the gallery context, such as research-based art projects and experimental art. In these cases, collaborations with art institutions, such as museums, art centers, and art research institutes are ideal for artists because such institutions offer exhibition chance and opportunities of network-buildings. For example, GL, a Paris-based digital artist, started his artist career in a famous contemporary art institute, through which he was able to get in touch with professional curators and influential artists; but also, he partly solved his doubts on how to develop his artist career through the less popular art media he preferred. According to him: “The institute is willing to help artists to achieve professionalization, like offering helps for promoting your work. I learned some skills and

knowledge about professionalization of my artist career there.” Concurrently, SZ mentioned the flexibility of working with institutions that “institutions are quite academic so there is less market pressure when I collaborated with them”. However, it is difficult to build connections with institutions because institutions usually require more credits of artists in the art world, which causes barriers for young art graduates with few records of exhibitions or/and grants to enter the sight of museums and art research centers (JiJi & ST).

In addition to being selected by legitimating bodies like grants, galleries, and museums, some artists choose to proactively participate in collective projects to develop artistic carriers. The participations in the collective projects of the four interviewees are quite different, from SZ’s dedication to publishing independent art books for Chinese artists, to GL’s collaborations with other artists as a working team to explore technology of digital art and offer related help for other artists and institutions, QH’s management of an online platform for sharing art information and introducing emergent artists, and MY’s organizations and curations of an Asian film festival. However, these projects are all showing artists’ efforts of creating alternative spaces to expand one’s networks and develop careers in the Western art world. It is worthy to note that the time of migration for the four artists is quite long, three of them have more than seven-year migrant time and SZ has been in France for almost 13 years. Therefore, the ability of organizing such collective projects comes at later stages of the artists’ careers.

In sum, a total of four main pathways for artists to establish networks with and develop artist career in the art world emerged, which includes making efforts to increase presence and visibility in art competitions, galleries, and intuition, but also proactively organizing and participating in collective projects to construct alternative chances in the Western art world. However, it is important to be aware that in most cases, the artists do not commit to only one way in most cases, rather, an artist can have multiple career paths at the same time. Further, the impacts of the four pathways on artist career vary at different career stages of the artists. For example, art competitions and funds are more efficient for young graduates from art schools, connections with galleries and institutions sometimes require good performance of artists in the art competitions, and establishment and management of collective projects may require more experience and networks with the art world, which usually happens at a more mature stage of artist career.

Intermediaries between migrant Chinese artists and the local art world

In social networks, intermediaries refer to those which tie different entities together and distribute important information in the network (McLean, 2016). In the art world, intermediaries play an important role of introducing artists to other art actors and organizations, which assists the development of emergent artists’ career (Sooudi, 2014). Previous research shows that cities have significant impacts on artists’ access to professional resources and opportunities (Borén & Young, 2013). Artists in major urban centers find it easier to develop networks with gatekeepers of the art world (Hautala & Jussi, 2019). While in a migrant context, Sooudi (2014) found migrant Japanese artists sometimes obtain career opportunities from other migrant Japanese—some of them are not even working in the art world. In this study, four types of intermediaries have helped to increase connections between young Chinese artists and the local art world in the Netherlands and France: city, school, other Chinese art practitioners, and social media.

First, urban centers offer more possibilities for young creative professionals. Due to the clustering of art organizations and fairs in urban centers, young artists tend to build their professional networks in

big cities (Harris, 2013; Addison, 2006). In this study, the clustering effect of young migrant artist in major urban centers is prominent. The 12 interviewees are all now living and creating art in major cities of their migrant countries, among whom six are in Paris, three are in Amsterdam, two are in The Hague, and one are in Rotterdam. The intentional mobility to urban center is significant among the artists who are in France. five artists did not come to Paris directly when they migrated to the country, they first started their study in other cities of France. However, Paris became the common destination later when they considered an artist career. For example, QH chose to move to Paris from a northern city of France for the following thoughtful consideration: “Through my contacts with other art graduates and artists living and working in Paris, I knew I must come to Paris.” While for artists in the Netherlands, unlike artists in France all chose to go to Paris, their residences are in different major Dutch cities. However, the clustering effect of young artists in urban center is also evident since Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam are all big cities in the Netherlands.

Second, schools’ supports for young artists’ career is the most efficient and direct. In addition to the educational purpose, the involvement in acknowledged art schools by the Western art world is important for the foreign young art talents who had few connections with art actors or institutions in diaspora (Fujii, 2020). During the interviews, eight artists have talked about the positive impacts of schools on their network-buildings in the Western art world. On the one hand, not only would some school directly offer exhibition opportunities for artists in art institutions or/and recommend students to art fairs, but also there are professional trainings of how to develop artist career in courses offered by schools. Concurrently, personal ties with art schools and alumni resources have offered efficient help for the career development of the young artists. At least six of interviewees mentioned their teachers from art schools have played an important role as introducer for them to enter and grow in the art world. For example, Loulou, a Paris-based artist highlighted the importance of her teachers to her artist career that “they were willing to introduce collectors, artists, and curators to me... there was one time, my teacher, a famous artist, was invited to give a livestreaming lecture at L’*école nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris* and she mentioned me as one of her favorite artists. Then, followers of my Instagram get increased a lot and many people started to follow my artworks”. Similarly, Temo mentioned her first exhibition at an influential art fair in the Netherlands was through the recommendation of her teacher who was also the curator of the art fair. Previous research also indicates art schools can be quite helpful for young artists to develop artist career as people they know from schools are or will be also active in the art world (Machida 2007, Lamb 2015). However, a few artists mentioned the reputational hierarchy between schools and its impacts on artist careers. For example, Hussel pointed out how art schools with a better reputation can offer more professional resources for young artists in the Netherlands. This can be observed from the interviews in the sense that artist who graduated from top art schools have more exhibition experience and career helps from their schools while artists who graduated from schools they themselves perceive more peripheral received less professional support from schools.

Third, other Chinese art actors in the migrant contexts. Previous research on Japanese migrant artists shows the engagement of migrant Japanese art communities increased professional opportunities of young artists in New York City (Sooudi, 2014). During the interviews, some artists did mention they gained some career information, such as: contacts with gallery owners (Bobo), exhibition chance (SZ, ST, ZD, Temo) through other Chinese artists. However, in general, relationships between Chinese creative professionals tend to be close regarding emotional support, but loose regarding professional connections in this study. In the interviews, a few artists mentioned it is common to see a small group of Chinese artists making friends with each other to maintain cultural and social supports in the migrant context (QH, SZ, ZD). But in professional life, many artists do not have a strong interest in creating art

as an art collective group since they are more individualistic when it comes to making art. For example: HB, a photographer in the Netherlands, argued that “art is a very private and individual thing, different people have different art styles” And two artists mentioned a Chinese idiom coincidentally: 单打独斗, meaning fight alone, to describe how Chinese artists develop career abroad.

Fourth, social media is also mentioned, though not by many artists, as a new possibility of expanding networks for artist career. In the era of social media, major platforms of social media, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tik-Tok have become new space of art museum and artists to interact with public (Chen & Kang, 2019; Fleming, 2014). MY mentioned the benefit of social media for artists who are not good at being in public social occasions: “Social media saves lots of time and social trouble for artists, it’s easy you reach your audience through social media.” And ST talked about the positive results of him starting to run his social media more regularly that he sold paintings and was contacted for exhibition chance on Instagram. According to him, “social media can help artists increase more visibility not only limited in one country, but also in the world.”

Although intermediaries do not directly offer job opportunities, they play important roles in linking young Chinese artists to the art world. In this study, urban centers, such as Paris and Amsterdam attracted young Chinese artists because of the clustering of art recourses and networks. For young migrant artists, art schools are the foremost and most important intermediary of connecting them with the local art world. Concurrently, social media has become an emerging way for artists to increase visibility in the art world. Although Chinese artists are connected with each other, it is more at a cultural and emotional level, less at a professional level.

Barriers of developing artistic careers in diaspora

In this research, a few barriers, both practical and cultural, are identified in this study regarding the artists’ development of art careers in the Western countries. For example, financial hardship and language obstacles can be a daily struggle for the young Chinese artists. In this study, most of the interviewees have talked about their experience of multiple-job holdings because it is difficult for artists to make a living by solely relying on selling art, not mention some artists’ works are hard to be commercialized in galleries. Previous research also shows the financial fragility of artists is a common issue in the art industry (Menger, 1999; Sooudi, 2014). The financial fragility of artist career further causes a dilemma of young artists balancing art and other work because multi-job holdings can bring significant distraction to artists’ art creation. SZ shared her opinions on reasons of some young Chinese artists in Pairs giving up art in the middle of their career: “There is definitely financial pressure. Creating art is such an energy consuming thing—if you want to make good art, you can’t do part-time jobs at the same time because after one-day work, you may only want to play your phone after going back home. This has stopped a lot of people on their way of being artists.” Meanwhile, a few artists mentioned the destructive impacts of COVID-19 on artists’ career that “many artistic residence and funding plans were cancelled because of the pandemic. People always say if you want to enter the art world, you must increase your participations in these activities, like ringing the bell of the art world’s door—during the two-year pandemic, you even don’t have the chance to reach out as these doors do not even exist anymore” (Temo). The vulnerability of the artist career to unexpected sociopolitical changes has been revealed significantly during the COVID-19 (Florida & Seman, 2020). Second, language can be a significant barrier for the artists to adapt to the migrant life, but this is more pronounced in France than in the Netherlands. Almost all the artists in France mentioned the importance of French language in their study, work and life. First, to start education in French art schools, they need to prove their

language skills by passing French language tests. Four interviewees mentioned their experience of spending considerable time studying French before their art education in France. Second, the unproficiency of language causes troubles for artists to express themselves in art and social occasions. GL recalled his experience of being “linguistically oppressed” by some teachers in art school that “when some teachers wanted to wield their authority, he/she would use some obscure concepts and words on purpose. I don’t really get why they would do so. But this gave me a feeling of being oppressed and even discriminated.” And according to ZD’s observations that French language is usually “the first gate for Chinese artists to enter the French art world”. However, despite his feeling that French acts a type of power for some authorities, GL also mentioned how proficiency of French can be an advantage for him as a non-French native speaker in some contexts: “now my French is good, if I am with other Asian artists, my French skills can make me distinguished from the crowd and be noticed by some French art practitioners”. For most interviewees living in the Netherlands, the lack of language ability of Dutch is not an urgent issue compared French in France as English is very prevailing in the country. However, if one considers applying for *Onbepaalde Tijd* (Undetermined time visa) for her/his long-term career in the Netherlands, passing the Dutch language intermediate exam (B1) is a necessary step.

In additional to the pragmatic difficulties discussed earlier, there are a few invisible barriers on the pathways of the young Chinese artists endeavoring to establish networks and develop artist career in the diaspora, which is the consequence of the power difference between institutions and emergent artists, but also relates to gatekeeper’s perception of the artists’ ethnic identity in the Western art world. Experience with institutions is important for emergent artists as exhibitions in museums and art fairs, reward records of art funds and art competitions not only help artists solve pragmatic issues such as visa¹ and income, but also promote the expansion of young artists’ career networks in the art world. However, many interviewees mentioned the vulnerability of young artists to institutions. First, institutions’ preference on themes of art reduces the opportunities of some artists who are not working on such topics. During the interviews, four artists talked about art institutions’ preference on trendy social issues which leads to “sometimes artists are expected to involve social commentary in their works and the chance gets less if artists are not working on certain social focus” (Bobo). Second, creative autonomy of artists may be interrupted by institutions. As an artist who has abundant experience with institutions, GL mentioned the negative influence of institutions’ aesthetic preference on individual artists’ work that “every institution has its own aesthetics and political stance, which significantly shapes artists in the institution and one’s works. I think this is quite dangerous for independence of artists”. Third, like what discussed earlier, selections of artists by institutions are also closely dependent on artists’ already obtained credits in the art world, which increases difficulty for young art graduates to connect with institutions. SZ who shared her own experience of being a judge in a competition that “The amount of submissions in the art competition is huge, reviewing 300 – 400 pieces of works in a day made me very tired in the end. Except for the artworks with really high quality, I would pick works from artists I already knew or works I have seen somewhere before——this is actually not a fair thing for young artists because maybe their works are both good, but the one whose name was seen before may have better chance to win.”

Another invisible barrier for young Chinese artists to develop their artist career is their ethnic identity as Chinese, as Asian. Previous research shows that although Chinese identity or art concerns on China’s social issues did help a few of early Chinese contemporary artists obtain attention and exposure in the international art world. Also, it leads to simplifying Chinese contemporary art as Political-Pop (Harris, 2013; Kharchenkova, 2017). In this study, the young Chinese artists do not show

¹ For example, the application of artist visa in the Netherlands requires exhibition records with art institutions and art funds recognized by the Dutch government.

much interest in using political art symbols in their works or limit themselves in certain type of work. Most of them expressed their hope that people could see their works first before paying attention to their ethnic identity. Although over half of the interviewees said they did not highlight Chineseness or Asianness in their works, the impacts of ethnic on their artist career cannot be avoided. GL shared his experience that “When I was collaborating with some institutions or producers, my motivations and works were doubted because I was trying to touch upon themes not relevant to issues of Chinese society but related to less radical themes.” Similarly, Bobo expressed her tiredness of encountering certain expectations or interpretations on her work due to her Chinese identity “When I was at art school, sometime the teachers hoped I could create some works on the conflicts in my society. I really didn’t like that because Chinese or Asian identity is not the reason of me making art. I made this and this art is because I want to, not because of my ethnic identity.” Concurrently, SZ mentioned the bias she encountered for her artist career that “there was one time a French artist came to me and said ‘you can have the chance of holding a solo exhibition because you are a Chinese. I am French, French is everywhere in the country’, but I know this is not true because he did see how many efforts I have made these years.”

Here we can see, when young Chinese artists were trying to develop an artist career in the Western art world, they not only need to deal with structural inequalities between institutions and less-experienced individual artists, but also encounter challenges and barriers come along with their ethnic background and identity. Concurrently, practical issues such as the financial fragility and language barriers are posing daily challenges for the migrant artists in diaspora.

Cross-border effect: network-building in the West and artist career in the East

In the emerging art market in non-Western contexts, professional experience in Western countries sometimes brought migrant artists reputations and opportunities in domestic art world (Favell 2014). Since China’s Economic Reform in 1978, studying abroad has become a trend among Chinese middle-class families and the overseas returnees are welcomed by the domestic labor market with higher payment and promising career promotions (Sun, 2016). The preference for international experience also applies to the Chinese art world and is revealed in the interviews. The preference for international experience also applies to the Chinese art world. During the interview, HB, a previous art editor, shared his observation: “At an early stage of artist career, international experience does bring young artists more professional opportunities and visibility on press. This makes sense as artworks from the artists with international background do have some distinctive features which are new to the Chinese art world. However, sometimes I also feel unfair to see some mediocre works from the so-called overseas returnees being overly reported and rewarded just because they interpreted their works with so-called avant-garde theories which they learned abroad.” Besides, a Paris-based artist also mentioned “CV exhibition” that “if you want to become an art teacher in Chinese art schools, international exhibition experience is needed. Therefore, someone would contact so-called art associations in Paris to find a place to exhibit their artworks. Such place may not even belong to the contemporary art system. It has become a business nowadays.” This indicates international experience does play an important role regarding the evaluations of artist careers in China.

When asked whether they want to develop artist career back to China, seven mentioned they do not plan for that, three said they wanted to, and the rest of two do not have strong preference. However, over half of the interviewees have exhibitions in China through their networks built abroad. For artists who confirmed their stay in the West, the reasons are mixed with professional and life choices as four

of them have already set up families and lead a stable life abroad while they more or less mentioned that they do not get used to the stress and rules of the fast-changing Chinese art market. Regarding those who have strong intentions to go back to China for their artist careers, such as GL and Hussel, they both mentioned they wanted to first make achievements in the Western art world and then go back. They think this may help them develop a better artist career. Also, QH shared a successful career trajectory of a friend of him that “when he[his friend] was in France, he did not get many good feedbacks from the market or institutions. However, because of his international experience and networks with artists in France, his career got better developed back to China.” This showed network-buildings and international experience in the Western context still has positive impacts on young Chinese artists’ career in domestic art market even if the Chinese art market has grown fast (Zhou, 2020). Like other studies show, although the contemporary art has become more international, recognitions from the Western art world is still wielding significant influence on emerging non-Western worlds, and the cultural centrality of the West persists (Buchholz, 2018; Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). In this sense, artistic networks built in the Western art world is likely to bring positive influence on the artists’ domestic careers in China.

Conclusions and discussions

Previous research has made impressive discussions on the importance of networks in the art world. Connections with legitimating bodies, such as curators, critics, and museums are proven to be efficient for artists’ entry into and recognitions in the art world (Martin, 2007; Braden & Teekens, 2020; Braden, 2021). This study contributes to such research by analyzing network-buildings of young Chinese artists in a migrant context. By delving into young Chinese artists’ perceptions and experience with network-buildings in the Western art world, this research examines pressures on and strategies of emerging migrant artists when they try to develop artist careers in diaspora.

This study finds that, the first, there is a contention between social conventions in the Western art world and Chinese social norms that proactive network-buildings and weak ties can bring artists more opportunities of career in the Western contexts (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005; Dowd & Pinherio, 2013), however, such instrumental exchanges for social and economic goods among acquaintances are not valued by Chinese social culture as “familiar ties”, mixture of common interests and emotional intimacy, are regarded as meaningful (Luo, 2012; Luo & Yeh, 2012). This leads to the resistant attitudes of some interviewed artists regarding their perceptions on proactive network-buildings in the art world. But this does not mean the artists reject to participate in network-building activities, rather, they prefer developing long-term relationships with other actors in the art world. Second, results of the study show the legitimating power of the Western art world still wields a push effect on the young Chinese artists’ decisions of migration and domestic career. Although the contemporary art market in China has gained significant development in the past two decades, recognitions and legitimacy of the Western art world keep attracting young Chinese artists as Western experience can bring positive influences on one’s artist career in China. Such persistent influence of Western art world on other non-Western emerging art markets is also discussed by Favell (2014) and Brandellero and Velthuis (2018). Third, four pathways of young Chinese artists building networks emerge in the 12 interviews: applications for art grants, representations by galleries, involvements in institutions, and active participations in collective art projects. In most cases, artists expand networks through multiple ways, however, the effectiveness of the four pathways varies at different stages of artist careers. For young art graduates, successful applications for grants turn out to be an efficient way to enter the art world and be noticed by other legitimating bodies, while connections with museums usually come at a more mature phase of artist careers because more qualifications are required by such authoritative institutions (Martin, 2007; Braden, 2018) Further, artists with more experience and networks tend to organize / participate in

collective projects as an alternative way to create visibility in the Western art world. Fourth, although intermediaries do not directly offer job opportunities for migrant artists, four types of intermediaries provide access and information for young Chinese artists to enter the Western art world: residence in urban centers, art schools' supports, other Chinese art actors, and social media. This study shows art school offers the most efficient and direct help for the migrant young artists to be connected to the art world, this is also proven in other studies on the career development of young artists (e.g., Lamb, 2015; Fujii, 2020). At the same time, although connections with other Chinese art actors sometimes bring helps and information for young Chinese artists' careers, many of the interviewees do not perceive such connections are professional but regard them as cultural and emotional supports. This may be explained by the individualistic nature of artistic career that art professionals see their works in a more private and individual way, but also latent competitions for resources and opportunities in the Western art world especially for migrant artists (Sooudi, 2014). Further, this study also identifies a few barriers of building artist networks for the young Chinese artists not only at practical level, such as financial hardship and language barriers for migrant artists, but also at organizational and cultural level, including power difference between institutions and novice artists, and gatekeeper's bias for the artists' ethnic identity in the Western art world. Note the language barrier is more nuanced for artists residing in France than the Netherlands.

I acknowledge there are some limits of the study. Although the current study has shown the dynamic interactions between young migrant artists and the Western art world, the research can only provide a small picture of network-buildings of artist careers in the migrant context. At the same time, due to the limited time and the lack of fund, this study can only adopt snow-sampling methods to include participants, which may lead to less heterogeneity of the research sample. For the future development of this study, I hope to continue interviewing art actors, not only limited to migrant artists, but also gatekeepers of the art world, such as local curators, gallery owners, and directors of art institutions regarding their perceptions and experience on evaluations and receptions of migrant artists in the Western contexts (e.g., Velthuis' s study on European gallery owners' perceptions on foreign artists, 2013). In doing so, I hope the study can provide more comprehensive discussions on network-building experience of emerging young artists in the Western art world.

However, by fully analyzing the abundant information from the 12 in-depth interviews, this study contributes to three aspects for research on the sociology of art and artistic study in the migrant context. First, although as the international mobility of creative professionals has been catalyzed by the global development of creative industry (Florida, 2002), the entry to the local art circle remains as a secret (Velthuis, 2013). By unveiling the process of migrant artists establishing networks for their artistic career, this study presents a more dynamic picture regarding creative professional's migrant strategies and negotiations when facing multiple external pressures. Second, by looking at the experience of non-western artists trying to establish artistic career in western context more closely, this study provides empirical evidence to test the notion of a more globalized, open, and inclusive contemporary art world (Velthuis & Brandellero, 2018). Third, this exploratory study provides findings on the impacts of establishing artistic networks, such as exhibitions in the museums and art fairs in the migrant context on the artists' career development in home country, in this way to enrich the meanings of network building at a global scale.

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Appendix A: Basic information of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Time of migration	Current place of residence	Main art media
HB	Male	33	1	The Hague	Photography, video, sound, performance, mixed media
Bobo	Female	36	12	Amstelveen	Painting
Zhu	Male	28	3	Rotterdam	Video, installation art, mixed media
JiJi	Female	28	3	The Hague	Painting, video, performance, writing
MY	Female	32	8	Amsterdam	Video, art publication
Temo	Female	25	5	Amsterdam	Video, digital art, photography, film
QH	Male	32	8	Paris	Painting
GL	Male	32	9	Paris	Multi-media art, new media, video
ST	Male	37	16	Paris	Painting
SZ	Female	33	13	Paris	Video installation, sound, publication, photography
ZD	Female	40	17	Paris	Performance (presented in video / photography) , mixed media
Loulou	Female	32	7	Paris	Painting

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview guideline

1. Background information: gender, age, how long have you lived and worked in The Netherlands / France , place of residence and work, major art media
2. Why did you decide to study art or/ and work as an artist in the Netherlands / France? Can you please describe how it went?
 - Study / work only? First come to study and then choose to work?
 - Temporary or permanent stay?
 - Find it difficult for studying? Working? Or both?
3. How do you see yourself as a Chinese artist living and working in the Netherlands / France? Is network-building important for your artistic career here? how does it affect your career and life?
4. Is it easy to find/ enter/ build/ artistic networks, or artistic career in general, in this place? Have you encountered any difficulty of building artistic networks and career here, if so, what are the difficulties? What do you think are the reasons?
5. What types of networks are most relevant for you as an artist? the local networks with galleries, museums, art fairs? Or the networks with fellows from your home country?
 - Connections with other Chinese art practitioners, Asian, local art community?
6. Are you satisfied with your artistic network(s) here? How did you build it (them)? how did these contacts come about?
 - Do you keep eyes on policy? Information for art funds? Certain platforms?
 - Is public information more useful or information shared through personal networks more useful for your artistic career?
7. Are you involved in certain art community / collective art activities here?
 - Is there any artistic community for international artists? Or for Chinese artists?
8. In the process of you entering local art scene, any obstacle you encounter due to your ethnic identity or/and your art identity?
9. Whether / How does the international mobility impact on your art creation?
10. Do you want to go back to China in the future? How do you think networks you build here will impact on your artistic career back to China?