

“IAO Scholar”: a global platform for the digital history of Modern China

By the doctoral students of the Lyons Institute for East Asian Studies (IAO – ENS Lyon)

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Abstract—IAO Scholar is a common platform that hosts six individual doctoral projects covering modern Chinese history. Its first goal is to build a digital archive as a base for a visual history of Modern China. It includes different types of visual materials (advertisements, films/motion pictures, photographs, posters). The project is supported by CNRS – IAO and the platform is hosted by [Huma-Num](#), which guarantees its sustainability. We use Omeka, a tool specifically designed for historians by historians (Center for History and News Media). The platform is structured by the five thematic projects (advertising, beauty, comedy, comics, nude). Each of us has her own separate section, but we can make connections and share contents and resources. As a work in progress and a collaborative project, the platform allows other people to contribute, managing different degrees of users, and is open to everyone interested in joining the project under certain conditions. As a public platform, it makes available to everyone original material or essays by the students at different stages of their research, virtual exhibits, demos, and resources about their research topic while providing copyright control and the consent of the authors. The demonstration to be given during the conference will consist in a general presentation of the global project (PowerPoint and poster) supported with a sample of three individual projects, at different stages of their research (Powerpoint and posters).

Keywords— *digital archive; visual history; Modern China; collaborative platform; Omeka.*

I. GENERAL PRESENTATION OF IAO SCHOLAR

IAO Scholar is a common platform that hosts five individual doctoral projects covering modern Chinese history. Its first goal is to build a digital archive as a base for a visual history of Modern China. It includes different types of visual materials (advertisements, films/motion pictures, photographs, posters). The project is supported by CNRS – IAO and the platform is hosted by [Huma-Num](#), which guarantees its sustainability. We use Omeka, a tool specifically designed for historians by historians (Center for History and News Media). We found the main *strengths* of Omeka are its openness, sustainability, normalization and interoperability (Dublin Core), and assistance (forum and users community, tutorials, documentation). Its main weaknesses are the complex

installation, on the one hand, and the norms and standard constraints on the other hand.

The platform is structured by the six thematic projects covering six areas of research dealing with modern Chinese history and the visual history of modern China (advertising, beauty, comedy, comics, nude, and more recently transportation). On the platform, each of us has her own separate section, but we can make connections and share contents and resources.

IAO Scholar is designed as an “open” and collaborative platform, in three ways. First, open means “public”, as the platform makes available to everyone original materials or essays by the students at different stages of their research, virtual exhibits, demos, and resources about their research topic, while providing copyright control and the degree of publicity or privacy according to the authors. We can also invite other contributors with various degrees of access (super users, administrators, contributors, research users). Second, open means welcoming, as we want the platform to be open to other projects in any language, under certain conditions (for projects that have a visual dimension and a focus on Asian societies). Last but not least, open as evolutionary: as a work in progress that promotes innovation and experimentations and traces the different stages of our individual and collective research.

To illustrate the possibilities of the platform, a sample of three individual projects will be presented: advertising, comedy, and transportation. Each presentation will be supported by a Powerpoint and a poster.



Fig. 1. Screen shot of the platform IAO Scholar.

II. PROJECT 1: A DIGITAL HISTORY OF ADVERTIZING IN MODERN SHANGHAI (CÉCILE ARMAND)



A. Fig. 2. Chinese advertisement for Coca-Cola, Shanghai, 1920s.

A. A visual, comparative and modern history of advertizing in modern Shanghai

My research project uses IAO Scholar platform to draw a visual, comparative and modern history of advertizing in modern Shanghai.

First, this is a historical approach of advertizing based on a two-dimensional definition of advertizing: on the one hand, advertisements as visual materials; on the other hand, advertizing as an economic activity and commercial strategy, and as a profession (advertisers, artists, advertizing agencies...).

By “visual history”, I mean a history of advertizing focused on images and visual aspects of advertisements and other historical materials. By the “comparative history”, I refer to a “global history” of advertizing, comparing Western and Chinese advertizing and companies, and focusing on three case studies - three “modern” products (medicines, cigarettes, sodas) connected by health issues.

Finally, it is a “modern” history of advertizing in two ways. On the one hand, for using advertizing materials to trace the history of modern China and Chinese modernity as a political, social, and cultural phenomena. On the other hand, for dealing with the modernity of advertizing itself, the emergence and development of modern advertizing (modern techniques, modern professionals and standards, modern industry...). This raises crucial issues for historians of modern China. Is modernity a product imported from the West or invented or recreated in China? Is modernity essentially Western, Chinese, or a kind of hybrid between Western and Chinese elements, “tradition” and “modernity”? Are these concepts still accurate or do we need to replace them by more neutral ones - such as old/new, foreign/native, indigenous/exogenous, internal/external? - or by more “hybrid” concepts able to cross and transcend these binary categories?

B. A digital depository for various and complex historical materials

As my research is based on various and complex sources, I purposely use Omeka and “IAO Scholar” platform to collect them and build a digital depository to host these various sources. The sources were produced by various institutions: state and public archives (from government or Shanghai Municipal Council), corporate archives (companies, advertizing agencies), advertizing organizations or chambers of commerce, press (newspapers and illustrated magazines - *Shenbao*, *Dianshizai Huabao*), (auto)biographies or personal papers (Carl Crow), public or private collections of ads (Duke University). They are of various types and nature: visual or written materials, press advertizing, design posters, New Year calendars (*yuefenpai*), paintings and works of art, and other material objects (packaging, cigarette cards, bottles, collectors). It is thus very important to carefully define *tags*, *keywords* and categories to connect these materials within the digital database. IAO Scholar has given me the opportunity to build a normalized collection, based on the Dublin Core system, and to organize this collection. I have chosen to divide the database into three collections according to the category of product,

reflecting my three case studies (drugs, cigarettes, sodas and beverages)?

IAO Scholar provides me a useful tool to face the paradox of historical materials and to put my two-dimensional methodology in practice. The main challenge of my research is the paradox of historical sources torn between abundance and scarcity. On the one hand, old ads and historical materials in general are abundant and scattered throughout the world, making it difficult to locate and access the accurate materials. On the other hand, historical metadata are rare and of unequal quality. Thus I have no other solution but focusing on well-documented materials while thinking about the absence or scarcity of certain type of materials. I also have to order and prioritize materials – concentrating on the most "representative" and accurate ads – and to classify and build typologies of ads. In that sense, drugs as "hybrid products" are particularly hard to define and categorize.

C. *IAO Scholar as a useful tool for a two-dimensional methodology combining "quantitative" and "qualitative" approach of advertizing*

To face the paradox of historical materials, I have designed a sort of "two-leg methodology" combining a "qualitative" and a "quantitative" approach. By "qualitative" I mean a *close reading* and analysis of visual materials. By "quantitative" I mean *distant reading* and *serialization*: individual images are related to each other and to other historical materials, and replaced in corpora and series of ads. "Serialization" has three main functions in my research project: first, to reveal patterns and visual culture(s) at various scales (local, national, global); second, to trace changes or identify constants (evolution); finally, to build and test "models" of ads or to identify and explain "deviant" ads (*modelization*).

I found Omeka and the IAO Scholar platform were useful tools to put this methodology in practice. My final demonstration will illustrate this point, showing a virtual exhibit about "The modernization of Chinese medical advertizing" (1850-1930s). This is an open and public exhibit (available to anyone) using Omeka. It has two sections: first, the "visual turn" of medical advertizing (what we can call "formal" modernization); second, the "discursive turn" of advertizing, from magic to science. This exhibit can be defined as a kind of "visual narrative" using primary documents as materials to write a visual history of Chinese advertizing. IAO Scholar platform finally appears to be an appropriate tool for exploring and showing my case studies.

III. PROJECT 2 : USING IAO SCHOLAR FOR A VISUAL STUDY OF SHANGHAI COMEDY FROM THE 1920S TO THE 1960S (CAO LIUYING)



Fig. 3. Cover photo of Chinese actress Ruan Lingyu, from the magazine Lianhua huabao, April 1935

My PhD research "Shanghai Comedy from the 1920s to the 1960s" is a cross-disciplinary research project which probes into the commencement, the development and the transition of Chinese comedy from the 1920s to the 1960s, by using the IAO Scholar platform to build a vivid visual online archive and by adopting diversified research methods such as historical study and film analysis.

The study of film industry provides me with a bustling yet delightful path to the questions raised above, by making the daily life of Shanghai vivid and perceptible. More precisely, my research raises questions about how the comedy genre started, what were the crucial historically moments of its development under the great influence of Hollywood slapstick comedy and about its transformation along with the social and political changes. This clearly, even arbitrarily, required cinema to play its role not only as a simple form of mass entertainment, but also as an essential tool of remolding the Chinese people's imagining modernization. The genre of comedy serves as a perfect hinge of three dimensions that I want to study in my dissertation: Western influence, the reaction of local filmmakers and the acceptance / denial of Chinese audience.

Apart from the historical carding of crucial events during the development of Shanghai comedy, what interests me most is to draw a visual study of the first-hand historical materials collected from all sorts of newspapers, magazines, memoirs, to name just a few (film extracts, film stills, advertisement, pamphlets, etc.). During my research, I find the platform of IAO Scholar a handy yet well-knit tool for visual study, and a perfect helper for research in the digital era.

This platform facilitates and enriches my research in three ways. At the first stage of my research, the tab/collection function of the platform enables me to systematically deal with lots of images and thus build a collection - abundant and yet

clear. The second phase interest lies in the browsing and presentation function, as the platform provides the users with a direct panorama of all the materials contained by the digital archive ("item browsing" function), as well as a more specific way of creating his/her own demonstration in the form of a blog/webpage by using the materials collected and by adopting the designed layout of the software.

Last but not least, communication. As mentioned in the general presentation of IAO Scholar, this platform is a collective project of six different projects. Although each PhD student has his / her own research field, some of them might be crossed. For example, my research of comedy and the study of advertizing and comics can cross and share documents and ressources, as commercial advertisement played an important role in the process of promoting indigenous-made films. Cross-disciplinary approach makes the sharing process extremely important, which is facilitated by IAO Scholar.

IV. PROJECT 3 : USING IAO SCHOLAR TO STUDY THE HISTORY OF TRANSPORTATION IN SHANGHAI (TAN XINXIN)



Fig. 4 – Tramway and Transportation System on Nanjing Road, Shanghai, 1920s.

My research project deals with “Public Transports, Social Practices and Spatial Changes in Shanghai (1881-1995)”. I will first present the main goals and directions of my project before explaining how Omeka helps me to store and sort out the resources I have used for my research.

My research project aims at examining the role of public transport in the urban transformation of Shanghai, through the study of the development of tramway companies in Shanghai. For that purpose I have explored the role played by institutional constraints in the development of the transport network, the evolution of land use in Shanghai resulting from the impact of the tramway and its suppression in the 1960s, and the adaptation of society to the new forms of spatial mobility.

My research is both an urban history of Shanghai and a business history of the tramway companies operating in this city. As the construction of the tramway system in Shanghai met the global history of transportation in the world, I have also adopted a comparative approach, comparing Shanghai with the tramway systems in European cities (London, Paris) and Asian cities (Hong Kong, Saigon, Singapore, Tianjin, Tokyo) at the same period.

As the available sources required for my research are diverse (tramway companies archives, Shanghai Municipal Archives, diplomatic records and some other private archives), scattered throughout the world (China, France, England) and multilingual (French, English, Chinese), IAO Scholar appears to be an appropriate tool for dealing with these complex materials. The platform allows me to build a digital database to collect and organize these various documents. My database is divided into three parts according to the type of materials: maps, including original maps and GIS maps; images; written archives and other documents. Through the geolocation function, Omeka also allows to locate documents and events, and make easy connections between them. The database can also be related to Virtual Shanghai, another digital platform developed by Lyons IAO that I also use for my research.

As a conclusion, this platform has helped me to store and sort out all the sources necessary for my dissertation, to explore these sources, to understand overlapping and complementary information and to organize a multifunctional database online. It has also allowed me to share data with other students and cross resources from other platform (Virtual Shanghai).

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