

Reconstructing the Hong Kong Landscape: Paintings in Response to Colonialism, Decolonisation and Post-colonialism

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Abstract

This article focuses on the development of landscape painting in Hong Kong. By exploring post-1967 artists' search for identity and its forms of representation, it studies the influence of political, social and economic changes on local art practices. The article attempts to go beyond the context of the "New Ink Movement" by integrating interview findings with individual left-wing and social realist painters and defining their role and significance in the Hong Kong art scene. It also discusses existing biased arguments claiming Hong Kong art to be a "cultural hybrid", resulting in an artistic response that lingers between colonialism, decolonization and post-colonialism.

Introduction

Landscape painting has only been established as a standalone subject matter in the 17th Century. It reached its popularity peak in 19th Century but by 20th Century, it turned into a genre of leisure painting, otherwise known as 'Sunday painting'². Over a period of time, contemporary artists, who increasingly chase after individualistic expression, gradually abandon this category of painting format and content. Nowadays, when the term 'landscape painting' is mentioned, people normally jump to a quick conclusion that it implicates a pretty scenery picture, or that landscape painting must represent an objective, realistic depiction of a site. These are all confusions derived from the genre's title. Landscape painting was isolated from religious and mythological stories by human's fascinations towards natural power and our worship of the mysterious.

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²Mitchell, W. J. T. (ed) *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994

This also symbolizes a course of naturalization that releases nature from its traditionally still and subjective representation, injecting freedom and vitality to it in the process. Nature slowly becomes a form of sign, eventually turning into the Abstract painting style³. This is evidential in Franz Kline's paintings; the dynamic strokes, abstract compositions that look like calligraphy from the East are the artist's subjective pictorial interpretation of New York City's architectures and bridges.

Since the inception of contemporary art, its creative process has often undergone what Sigmund Freud coins as 'sublimation' whereby the author internalises personal emotions by the virtue of the artistic medium. In the context of contemporary art, sublimation generally arises from the subconscious mind and transpires as art forms or artistic expressions. Sometimes this may be triggered by the surroundings and emotions of everyday life, it also allows for impromptu and reckless forms of self-interpretation. In terms of the development of Hong Kong landscape painting, this may not be the comprehensive explanation, as the formation of a majority of the works was in close connection to the City's socio-cultural politics. Generally speaking, there was a gradual shift from the objective portrayal approach towards a practice of self-expression after 1980s.

Hong Kong Landscape under Colonialism

Around the time of the Second World War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Hong Kong was in much need of restoration and order. Large waves of refugees submitted themselves to British rule in the relatively stable Hong Kong to escape political carnage and the tumult of war. Amongst the huge group of immigrants, a long list of artists began to settle in this British colony, they included:

³Greenberg, C. The Case for Abstract Art. Reprinted in O'Brain, J. (ed.)(1993). Clement Greenberg – the Collection Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957 – 1969. Vol. 4 London: University of Chicago, 1959

HUANGBoye, FENGKanghou, LEEYing-shan, LUOShuzhong, AU Kin-kong (OuJiangong), LEE Fung-ting (Li Fengting), CHAN Kong-jit (Chen Gongzhe), CHEUNG Wan-kai (Chang Yunjie), NGMui-hok (Wu Meihe), SO Cho-sang (Su Chusheng), LEE Geng-hong (Li Jingkang), CHEUNG Guk-cho (Chang Guchu), LAINGau-zai (Li Ouzhai), ZHAOShao'ang, YEUNG Shan-sum and some returned back from their overseas studies, such as BAOShaoyou, YAM Chun-hon, LITiefu, LEE Byng, YEE Bon, WONG Chiu-foon, NG Po-wan, WU Gan-tin (Hu Gentian) and YAUDoi-ming (QiuDaiming), with those who were already moved to Hong Kong before the WWII, such as PANDawei, FUNG Yun-chi (Feng Runzhi), DENG Erya, WONG Siu-ling, Luis CHANG, TO Kei-cheung (Du Qizhang), LAU Guan-yam (Liu Junren), CHOI Jit-fu (Cai Zhefu), FU Sau-yee (Fu Shouyi), WONG Siu-mui (Huang Shaomei), WONG Siu-keung (Huang Shaoqiang), WU Siu-keoi (Hu Shaoqu), XU Dongbai, HO Chat-yuen (He Qiyuan), The traditional Chinese Bimo (brush and ink) notion that "calligraphy and the creation of imagery are of the same origin" dictated a majority of the landscape ink paintings of the era and laid the groundwork for early 'Hong Kong Art'.

The Second Sino-Japanese War erupted at the end of the 1930s. Of the artists who ferried between Hong Kong and the Mainland, aside from the Lingnan masters, were the progenitors of Hong Kong Art, namely Wong Po-yeh who led the fashion with his inclusion of the Hong Kong scenery and Lui Shou-kwan, son of Lui Can-ming, who founded the 1970s New Ink Painting movement.

Until 1940s, Human Art Club was established and led by leftist artists FU Luo-fei and HUANG Xinbo towards the end of 1946. With a social communist leaning, the group hailed the aptness of literary and artistic pursuits for reflecting the society, and later formed an alliance with TSANG Yue's Red Yellow Blue Arts Research Society (1947) to promote the "New Art" movement. At its heart was the principle of serving the people, and the Society proposed to organise an annual "New Art Festival" on 3rd August to encourage social movement participation through the arts. Examples include the setup of the 1947 exhibition "Turbulent China" that commented on the corrupted nature of the Nationalist (KMT) Party. The role of Human Art Club as an auxiliary agent to the civil war began to wane after the establishment of the PRC in October 1949 and was officially disbanded when Huang repatriated to Guangzhou.

Despite their efforts, life under such political circumstances was hard and uncertain for the ordinary man who could spare little time to appreciate picturesque landscapes. Apart from the aforementioned ink painters, some of the artists who employed Western media would gather on weekends to paint outdoor. Artworks by these artists, such as HON Chi-fun, KONG Kai-ming, KWOK Ciu-leung who to this day often reminisces the solo excursions and outings led by their precursors to the countryside, are like field records of the City's development.

A majority of the imageries were processed with an objective realist approach. Works such as Luis CHAN's "Bayside, Causeway Bay" (1947), AU YEUNG Nai-ji's "At the foot of the Ma On Shan" (1965), and "Sham Shui Po Shek Kip Mei Village"(1953), "Under the Banyan tree of Ngau Chi Wan"(1954), "Choi Hung Estate under construction"(1961), "Circular Pathway" (1960) and "A building on Shanghai Street, Yau Ma Ti"by KONG Kai-ming were painted on-site and act as testimonies of a scenic past. Some of the sketches went on to form the basis of larger, more defined versions. Not only did these pieces document the transformations in the local landscape, they formed solid foundations for the artists' personal styles. Kong's compositions, for example, with their inclusion of the city's architecture, figures and nature, are full of local characteristics. The 'soul' that the artist advocates in recent years precisely refers to the spirit and mentality of the Hong Kong people, thus what is being communicated in the artist's recent landscapes, such as "Basalt Island" (2012) and "Wang Chau Cliff" (2013), are not mere impersonal representations of his surroundings but of a poetic space, projects from the author's state of mind⁴.

From the beginning of the 1960s, Hong Kong became the wrestling ground for various political and cultural ideologies, of which the cultural reflections instigated by the 67' Riots made the greatest impact. On the issue of Hong Kong sovereignty, the Central Government in Beijing at the time followed ZHOU Enlai's commandment to "take full advantage of long term planning". Answering the calls of some Beijing political groups, local leftist groups organised a string of protests, whilst some resorted to radical and even militant tactics, in an attempt to subvert the colonial government to restore Chinese rule.

⁴Kong, K.M., *Reaching the Highest Spiritual Level through Watercolor: A Collection of Watercolor Paintings by Kong Kai Ming*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Economic Times Press, P.24, 2014

The former Manager of Sino United Publishing (Holding) Limited HK, SHAWTze, who himself had sustained head injuries at the hands of the anti-riot police outside the Government House, recalls in an interview that some of leftist community misjudged the situation and had failed to follow the Chinese leaders' strategies on Hong Kong. Though the Riots of 67' ended in failure, it had shaken the colonial government's administration and compelled the authorities to revise their policies to adapt to the unstable political situation.

The Riots were followed by the government's introduction of "Hong Kong Festival" in 1969 as a way of defusing the damage done with cheer, whilst imbuing a sense of Hong Kong Consciousness in its citizens. Combined with a border policy to prevent southern migration of Mainlanders, the geographical and cultural circumscription were put in place to split second-generation Hong Kongers from China and communism.

Such mission fostered arts education to cultivate future artists with commissions of small-scale galleries as well as formalized art schools ran by civil organisations. Oil painter CHAN Hoi-ying for instance, who endowed the Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts, opened certificated foundation and diploma courses that were catered to the conditions of the society at the time, and consequently nurtured the likes of KONG Kai-ming, AU YEUNG Nai-ji and CHAN Chung-shu. The hardship of everyday life was not only reflected in the themes but had also limited their choice of medium and practice. That is why ink and watercolour works were the most popular media amongst their peers. To curb the proliferation of independent and critical thinking through art (namely contemporary), as it was seen to possess anti-establishment and subversive qualities, the colonial government pursued an arts education policy that "emphasized on design, less focus on Fine Art" and suppressed the passing rates of Art subject of HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education). Moreover, some say that the New Ink movement was actively promoted by the colonial government to achieve their political aim as its landscapes contained less politically sensitive subjects in comparison to modern and contemporary art.

Objective depiction is only one of many forms of expression. The charm of a landscape painting, in its ability to stir the viewers' emotions, lies in the author's subjective response to the scenery. In the words of the Tang Dynasty painter ZHANG Zao, "inner cultivation originates from external mastery of Creation".

“External” refers to observable matters and the organic world, whilst “inner” refers to reflections derived from subjective feelings and the cognitive process. In this light, landscape painting may not necessarily be illustrations of spectacular terrains but must encompass elements of Humanities and Culture. The artists’ appropriation of scenic ideographs as vehicles of self-expression is akin to the classical practice of Literati Painting whereby nature is subjected to the confines of art and is naturalised into a simulacrum shaped by men. The New Ink movement of the 60s and 70s was particularly keen on this style of painting, exemplary works include “Victoria Harbour”(1965) by LUI Shou-kwan and “Lion Rock” (1977) by CHENG Wei-kwok. Expressive imageries from the same period in Western media include the likes of “Hong Kong Shanghai Bank” (1951) by LEE Byng, NG Po-wan’s “Mountains”(1972) and “Sha Tin, Siu Lik Yuen” (1974). Though the observable environment remained the subject of the paintings, the use of colour and brushstrokes were engendered by the artists’ inner passions. Their approaches foretold the trajectories of each artist’s stylistic evolutions.

The socio-political factors of the 1960s and 70s had undoubtedly hindered the development of the arts, but to some Hong Kong artists, the same period meant a step into the realm of the wider, international art community. Scholarships offered by overseas institutions played a pivotal role in broadening the artists’ horizons and in the shaping of their practices. Were it not for such grants, studying abroad would have been a near impossibility. In a 2005 seminar, HON Chi-fun, who was awarded the Rockefeller 3rd Fund in 1968, recounted the influences along his artistic journey. From the time he was touring across Hong Kong on his motorbike to do life studies with the likes of “Yau Ma Tei, Yun Shu Tau” (1957), “Tai Po Road”(1960) and “Tung Tau Village” (1960); to coming to appreciate the greater significance of these early exercises, citing the Qing dynasty non conformist painter-monk SHI Tao, beyond a sheer “quest to sketch from every great peak” to quench the thirst for imagery, with his subsequent series that includes “When Mountains Roar”(1981) and “Legend of a Profile”(1981); it was a combination of such experiences with the knowledge gained from his studies in Europe and America that had shaped his Abstractist practice. His later larger works such as “A Place that Was” (1998) further demonstrates the application of the orthodox dictum “Inner cultivation originates from external mastery of Creation” in a contemporary context.

A comparison of "Tung Tau Village" (1960), "Black Crack"(1963), "Space and Passion"(1971),, "Mountain Faith" (1971), "Volume and Time" (1986), "Enigma Enigma Enigma" (1998) would further illustrate the impact of life sketches on the progression of his style.

Hong Kong Landscape Lingering inde- and Post-Colonialism

In the 1980s, the Hong Kong people suffered a further attack on their cultural identity. The fate of Hong Kong after 1997 was sealed at the signing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. Exasperated by the Chinese Central Government's subsequent repression of the 1989 pro-democracy protest at Tiananmen Square, the trepidation felt by the majority of the Hong Kong population towards its future ruler provoked a wave of emigration.

The mid-1980s saw a rise in the analysis of local contemporary art. Discussions on the questions of "East" and "West", and cultural hybridity in the context of Hong Kong Art began with David J. Clarke's 1996 piece 'Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective'⁵, followed by his 2001 thesis "Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization"⁶ on the issue of colonialism, the 1997 handover from British to Chinese sovereignty and the power of Localism. Applying Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, the writer reflects on the employment of both Chinese and Western elements of expressions by the LUISHou-kun and Wucius WONG lead New Ink movement that had more in common with the mainstream view of Hong Kong as a point of intersection between the two realms than with the politicization of art in the previous era. Clarke discusses the correlation between the choices of art practice and a local artist's identity, and cites the rise of new media and installation art in the 1980s and 90s as a reflection of some local artists' search for forms of artistic expressions that were of neither 'Chinese' nor 'Western' classicism as he believes that the media of oil and ink painting carry cultural baggage that would be a hindrance to the formulation of a local identity and forms of expression.

⁵Clarke, D. *Art & Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996

⁶Clarke, D. *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization*,, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001

The author rejects the above mainstream account of the City's arts development because Hong Kong Art does not necessarily have to be a synthesis of the East and West. In terms of Chinese painting though many works of the time embodied the philosophies of the fusion 'New Ink' movement that strived for an amalgamation of the two cultures, the virtues of Literati Painting, which stressed the mastery of traditional ink brush techniques as well as extensive knowledge of the humanities, were still being actively pursued in the 80s and 90s by artists such as PENG Xi-ming, FANG Zhao-ling and LIN Jen-tong. Thus the medium of Chinese painting was not any less prominent than the 'New Ink' school of fusion media that strived for an amalgamation of the two cultures.

Clarke reckons that the discourse on Hong Kong Art criticism was sometimes limited by excessive classification or focus on the extent of which art works or movements were 'Chinese' and/or 'Western'. Though such dualism has its significance in art criticism in providing a point of reference and insight into the public's response and the mood of the society, from an art history angle, the binary approach presented obstacles to the understanding of Hong Kong art development and is more relevant to the analysis of Western media works.

Looking at the local artist community, young fine art students such as CHOI Yan-chi, Yank WONG Yan-kwai, Josh HON(), LUI Chun-kwong, Benedict WONG, Victor LAI were gradually returning to Hong Kong from their studies abroad during the 1980s and 90s. In comparison to the previous generation whom (the majority) were born in China and raised in Hong Kong, Western art and culture has had a more profound influence on these returnees and Hong Kong-born generation, furthermore, they did not carry the burden of Chinese history and culture. Yet at the same time, even if the artists loathed the association, as ethnic Chinese living residing abroad, they were inevitably equated with the current affairs within China whereby their identities were frequently attributed to a 'Chineseness', both on the political and cultural level, due to their ethnicity. The experience as an outsider had prompted the artists to examine their own cultural identity. Along with immigrant artists, such as WONG Shun-kit and YEUNG Tung-lung, WONG Sau-ching who had encountered socialism under Communist China and were then faced with the anticipation of the 1997 handover, the works by both camps presented a diverse and critical dynamism.

Conclusion

Since the 1997 Handover, the new establishment made every effort to groom a sense of Chinese conciseness in its citizens. However after a string of political incidents such as the opposition to Article 23 (regarded infamously by the local as an equation of Treason Act), Queen's Pier preservation campaign in 2007 (an attempt made by the city's young generations to preserve its colonial past and historical heritage), protests against the building of Guangzhou-Hong Kong high-speed rail controversy in 2010 (being suspected as the instrument used by the Beijing government to integrate Hong Kong into China through geo-political unification, the first step to identity integration), and the recent Umbrella Revolution, had strengthened the local cultural identity of the Hong Kong people. On top of which the increasing conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland further highlights the cultural rift between the two territories whilst fuelling the rise of localism, particularly amongst the post-80s Hong Kongers, widening the void between China and this generation. At times of constant ideological change, what path will Hong Kong art take?