

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

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the development of Hong Kong landscape painting and presents the process and manifestation of identity exploration that Hong Kong artists underwent in response to the spirit of various times since 1967 by analysing the ways in which social, political and economic changes affected local artistic creativity. In addition to existing accounts on the New Ink Movement in Hong Kong, the contents of this article aim to expand on the role and significance of specific Leftist-influenced or social-realist artists in the formation of Hong Kong Art by drawing on recent artist interviews, and thereupon reconsider the narrow view of cultural hybridity as Hong Kong's distinct quality from which painterly responses that are characterised around Colonialism, Decolonisation and Post-colonialism would become apparent.

Preface

It was not until the 17th Century that landscape painting became an independent subject matter in arts and works of such medium and representation reached their climax by the 19th century. However, such form and content were gradually abandoned by the 20th century in the pursuit of individualistic expressions and were slowly reduced to the leisurely substance of "Sunday Painting".¹ As a result, landscape painting is often misconstrued as either picturesque decorations or realistic transcripts of nature. Because landscape painting has a kind of charm that binds together the power of nature and mystical, that even when isolated from its subordinate role in religious parables and myths, it still embodies the inherent concept of naturalization, that is to release nature from its conventional and passive state, and to empower it with freedom and life, wherein "nature" gradually turns into a symbolic representation constructed on an objective image, and eventually becomes emotive landscape paintings.

All along, the creation of contemporary art is driven by the inner emotions of the individual and oftentimes, undergoes what Sigmund Freud terms as "sublimation" wherein an exceptional artistic work is produced through the unique nature of the creative medium. In the language of contemporary art, the sublimation process generally arises from the artist's subconscious mind which then transpires as art forms and evolves as artistic expressions. Sometimes this may be triggered by the surroundings and emotions of everyday life, it also allows for impromptu or audacious forms of self-interpretation. In the same vein, even though the art of American abstract-expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning may conjure associations with grand sceneries, from a Formalist point of view, devoid of functions of narration, description and documentation, and liberated from representation, the images are in fact engendered by spontaneous gestures derived from a pursuit for abstraction.² This may be the ultimate stage in the evolution of Western art, however, it may not apply to the development of Hong Kong landscape painting as the formation and presentation of a majority of the works were closely connected with the society and politics. Generally speaking, there was a gradual shift from the objective representational approach towards a practice of self-expression after the 1980s.

Hong Kong Landscape under Colonialism

During the period between 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. There was political unrest in the Mainland and vast displacement of population; no citizen was spared from the political turmoil. Large waves of refugees submitted

¹ Mitchell, W. J. T. (ed) (1994) *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

² Greenberg, C. (1959). *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

themselves to British colonial rule in the relatively stable Hong Kong in order to escape political carnage and tumult of war. Of which includes well known Canton (Guangdong) calligraphy-painters such as Huang Bore, Feng Kanghou, Li Yan-shan, Luo Shu-zhong, Au Kin-kung, Li Feng-ting, Chen Kung-che, Zhang Yun-jie, Wu Meihe, Su Chu-sheng, Li Jing-kang, Zhang Gu-chu, Li OU-zhai, Zhao Shao'ang, Yang Shan-shen; artists who relocated to the city after their studies abroad in Europe, North America and Japan: Bao Shao-you, Yam Chun-hon, Li Tie-fu, Lee Byng, Yee Bon, Wong Chiu-foon, Ng Po-wan, Hu Gen-tian, Qiu Dai-ming; in addition to those who had long settled in Hong Kong: Pan Dawei, Feng Runzhi, Deng Erya, Wong Siu-ling, Luis Chan, Du Qi-zhang, Liu Jun-ren, Cai Zhe-fu, Fu Shou-yi, Huang Shao-mei, Huang Shao-qiang, Hu Shao-qu, Xu Dong-bai, and Ho Chat-yuen. At that time, most of the artwork is based on the traditional Chinese Bimo (brush and ink) notion that "calligraphy and painting have the same origin" which influenced 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. Amongst the artists who ferried between Hong Kong and Mainland were famous Lingnan painters, including Gao Jian-fu, Yang Shan-shen, Zhao Shao'ang, Lui Chan-ming, Ye Gong-chuo, Zhang Da-qian, Yu You-ren, Li Yan-shan, Deng Fen, Huang Bore, Feng Kanghou, Li Liu-dan, Deng Erya, Zhang Bi-han, Xiao Lisheng, Chen Jing-hung, Cheng Kar-chun, Chen Yu-shan, Zhao He-qin, and He Lui. Amongst the Lingnan painters who helped spread their styles of painting in Hong Kong, Huang Bore led the fashion of painting Hong Kong scenery, and Lui Shou-kwan, son of Lui Chan-ming and founder of the 1970s New Ink Movement, were all important pioneers of 'Hong Kong Art'.

Towards the end of 1946, the Human Art Club led by leftist artists Fu Luofei and Huang Xinbo was established. With a social communist leaning, the group hailed the aptness of literary and artistic pursuits for reflecting social conditions, and later formed an alliance with Zeng 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 public participation in social movements through the arts. Life under such political circumstances was hard and uncertain for the ordinary man who could spare little time to appreciate picturesque sceneries. Apart from the aforementioned ink painters, there were also many Chinese painters who made every effort to promote Western art amongst Chinese circles, with the likes of Yee Bon and Ma Jir-bo setting up apprentice studios, and Panama-born Luis Chan's relentless attempt in establishing art clubs. Some would gather with fellow artists on weekend field trips around Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories to paint. Artists, such as Hon Chi-fun, Kong Kai-ming, Kwok Chiu-leung, to this day often reminisce the solo excursions to the countryside, their artworks are field records of the city's development.

A majority of the landscape paintings created between 1950s and 70s, especially works of artists that made use of the Western mediums, were processed with an objective realist approach. Works such as Luis Chan's "Causeway Bay harbourside" (1947); Au Yeung Nai-chim's "Foothills of Ma On Shan" (1965); Chan Chik's "Tai O Stilt Houses"; Kong Kai-ming's "Sham Shui Po Shek Kip Mei Village" (1953), "Under the Banyan tree of Ngau Chi Wan" (1957), "Choi Hung Estate under construction" (1961), "Sheung Wan, Circular Pathway" (1960) and "A building on Shanghai Street, Yau Ma Tei" were all painted on location 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. Of which, the ensuing development of Luis Chan's subconscious approach was perhaps a reaction against the works from this realist period; whilst Chan Chik, Au Yeung Nai-chim and Kong Kai-ming etc. were guided by their creative desire to reflect contemporary life and upheld a realist approach that has enhanced their ability to paint delicately moving, nimbly detailed portrayals in their subsequent practice. Kong's compositions of Hong Kong'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, as he explains, "The artistic studies in my latter years are a merges of the Universe's mathematical combinations, reinterpreted through manmade material and professional knowledge."³ In this light, what is being communicated in his recent landscapes, such as "Basalt Island" (Hong Kong, 2012) and "Wang Chau

³ Kong, K. M. (2014) Reaching the Highest Spiritual Level through Watercolour: A Collection of Watercolour Paintings by Kong Kai Ming, Hong Kong Economic Press, p. 24

Cliff" (Hong Kong, 2013), are not mere objective representations of his surroundings but projections of the artists' internal and poetic state of mind.

In an age where art is still relatively uncommon in the society and under the regime of the British colonial rule, it is not easy for the works of Chinese artists to be exhibited. Although there were many amateur art clubs in the early years, they were predominantly run by expatriates whose period in Hong Kong tended to be short and as such, many of these associations were short-lived. As for the Hong Kong Club and the like, they would only admit members of high society whilst the doors remained closed to Chinese people. Luis Chan is said to be one of the Chinese minority who is able to socialize amongst the white Caucasian in the social art circle due to his Western style paintings and also perhaps the fact that he spoke English. At the same time, another English-speaking artist, Li Kwok-wing, who had in the 1950s, employed the use of ink medium to create modern artworks had his works exhibited at the Hong Kong Club and British Committee for Relations with Other Countries (precursor of the British Council) respectively. In Li's account of the events, though he was able to exhibit in the Hong Kong Club alongside artists such as Julia Baron, Ruth Robertson and Douglas Bland, he was infuriated by the fact that Chinese audiences were refused entry. Under a colonialist climate, the British and Europeans occupied the seat of power, from the realms of politics to economy and culture, and assumed superiority over the Chinese who could only make progress on the peripheral. One can only imagine what an impossible task it was for Chinese ink artists who did not speak English to secure a foothold.

By the 1960s, Hong Kong had already become the wrestling ground for various political and cultural ideologies, of which the cultural reflections instigated by the 67' Riots made the greatest impact. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, various political movements aimed to suppress dissidents, such as The Great Debate, Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap, erupted across the Mainland and ultimately the Cultural Revolution, which infected nation-wide. On the issue of Hong Kong sovereignty, the then Central Government in Beijing's stance was to heed Zhou Enlai's directive to "make the most of every opportunity for long-term planning" (trans.: from the stance that timing was not yet ripe for immediate resumption of Chinese rule and that the Central Government should capitalise on Hong Kong's special position to serve Chinese socialism, China's strategy on foreign diplomacy and its policy on Taiwan). Answering the calls of some Beijing political groups, local leftist bodies organised a string of protests in Hong Kong, whilst the radical resorted to militant tactics, in an attempt to subvert the colonial government to restore Chinese rule. Shaw Tze, the former Director of Sino United Publishing, whose head was hit and injured by anti-riot police outside the then Government House, recalls in an interview that some of the leftist community had misjudged the situation and failed to grasp the Chinese leaders' strategies on Hong Kong. The riot of 1967 owes its notoriety to the colonial government's crackdown on dissident movements and political strategy to win the support of citizens and on the other hand, a number of events such as the deployment of improvised explosive devices including the petrol bomb murder of radio broadcaster Lam Bun had led most of the population to abandon their support for the leftist. Chinese civilization was left in ruins after the Cultural Revolution. The "struggle sessions", in addition to the atrocities borne by local Leftists, had caused Hong Kongers to lose confidence in the new Chinese establishment. The Revolution also had social repercussions in the city. It had brought about an influx of refugees from the Mainland and at the same time many expatriates sold off their property to 'flee' Hong Kong. As artist Rosamond Brown recounts, many of her expatriate friends sold their assets at reduced price in a haste to decamp and muses that thanks to the riot, she was able to afford a residence on Victoria Peak. Though the Riots of 67' ended in failure, it had shaken the colonial government's administration and compelled the authorities to adapt their policies to the revised political situation.

Governor MacLehose initiated a series of social reforms in its wake. Besides the oft-cited building of social housing and underground network, establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and planned urban expansion, there was also the promotion of local popular culture such as the youth-orientated Hong Kong Festival. It was first introduced in 1969 and celebrated with a festive atmosphere to defuse the damage caused by the 1967 riots. On the other hand, it was a method used by the British colonial government to imbue a sense of Hong Kong consciousness. Combined with a border policy to prevent southern migration of Mainlanders, the geographical and cultural circumscriptions were put in place to divorce second-generation Hong Kongers from China and Communism. The City Hall, which had been rebuilt by the government in 1962, came to assume a significant role in cultural affairs imbued with political statements in the aftermath of the Riots. Situated in Edinburgh Plaza which

held the guard of honour ceremonies at the arrival of new Governors at Blake Pier, the cluster occupied the heart of Central district within the vicinity of official quarters such as the Central Government Offices, Legislative Council, Court of Final Appeal and St John's Cathedral, a location allegorical of the political, judiciary and religious powers accrued into the hands of the colonial government. According to the former Manager of City Hall Dr. Darwin Chen, SBS, the fact that the venue's administration was carried out by Major Reinaldo Oblitas of Hong Kong Defence Force was indicative of the importance of the local cultural activities in the British political agenda. The City Museum and Art Gallery at City Hall not only provided a formal exhibition venue for local artists such as Hon Chi-fun, Van Lau, Kam Ka-lun and Cheung Yee, it also helped open the mind-set of local artists by the holding of exhibitions, such as that of works by European prints masters curated by Mrs Sandra Walters. Actually, Hong Kong economy at the time was still in its infancy. With low wages, long working hours and crowded living conditions, the majority of the population struggled to make ends meet. Likewise, artists toiled to sustain their art practice. In addition to art clubs, several artists began to open art studios to promote arts or even as a source of living. Lui Shou-kwan, the representative figure of the New Ink Movement who had a full-time role as a Yau Ma Tei Ferry ticket inspector, made use of his spare time to draw on a foldable desk. Some say that the New Ink Movement was actively endorsed by the colonial government as landscapes are less politically sensitive in comparison to modern and contemporary art⁴.

The charm of a landscape painting lies in those artists' subjective response to the scenery. In the words of the Tang Dynasty painter Zhang Zao, "learning from the external nature, insight from the inner heart". "External" refers to the observable matters and the organic world, whilst "inner" refers to the hearts desire and reflections derived from subjective feelings. In this light, landscape painting may not necessarily be illustrations of spectacular terrains but must encompass elements of humanities and culture. As Taiwanese scholar Liao Hsin-tien asserts 'Landscape is the relative term between Man and Nature, Man with another, and Man with the Self. The core resides in "Man". Landscape is not merely a beautiful scenery and has a different meaning in the cultural vein; without meaning, landscape would simply be a random juxtaposition of rock and weed.'⁵ An artist's 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.⁶ Artists express their feelings through conceptualisation, formalisation and geometrization of subjective symbols in the guise of objective landscapes. Such style of painting was particularly well explored by the New Ink Movement in the 1960s and 70s. Examples include "Victoria Harbour" (1965) by Lui Shou-kwan and "Lion Rock" (1977) by Zheng Wei-guo as well as freehand brushwork ink series of Hong Kong landscape by Huang Bore, of which "Landscape of Po Tai Island" (1959) and "Ping Chau Rock Formation" (1965 – 66) are exceptional pieces but their analysis would have to be saved for another time due to limitations of this essay.

Besides broadening the horizons of artists, scholarships also played a pivotal role in the shaping of artists' styles. Hon Chi-fun recounted his artistic journey in a cultural seminar in 2005. He recalled riding across Hong Kong on his motorbike to do life drawing such as "Yau Ma Tei, Yun Shu Tau" (1957), "Tai Po Road" (1960) and "Tung Tau Village" (1960); which are merely landscape drawing based on objective observation compared to his later works such as "When Mountains Roar" (1981) and "Legend of a Profile" (1981), then he realised that his earlier training was at the stage of, to quote from the Qing dynasty nonconformist painter-monk Shi Tao, "in the search to sketch every peak possible". It was a combination of such experiences with his overseas study experience in Europe and America that has shaped his abstractionist style. His later larger works such as "A Place that Was" (1998) further demonstrates the application of the orthodox dictum "learning from the external nature, learning from the inner heart" 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 dwelling in decolonisation and post-colonialism

By the 1980s, Hong Kong people faced another challenge to 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 squelching of the 1989 pro-democracy student protest at Tiananmen Square, the

⁴ For further reading, please refer to: Criticism on LUI Shou-kwan's works by TSUI Kar-yeung (Chinese only) in Ronglu Congkan, Issue 1, Page 22

⁵ LIAO, H. T. Emancipation of Landscape: New Thoughts on Nature, published in Grout, C. (Trans. HUANG J. J.) (2009) Representations et experience du paysage, Yuan-Liou Publishing Co. Ltd., Taipei, p. 6

⁶ Gombrich, E. H. (1993) Art & Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, London: Phaidon

trepidation felt by the majority of the Hong Kong population towards its future ruler provoked a wave of emigration. Other than political influence, Hong Kong people faced yet another challenge to their cultural identity. Whereas the colonial government, as previously mentioned, had invested immense effort since 1967 into the creation of a Hong Kong consciousness to displace Chinese nationalism, the implications of the 97 Handover, are not confined to a return on the issues of sovereignty and economy to China but, compelled a cultural reunion. According to local cultural-man Chan Koonchung 's analysis in "Chinese Celestial Imperialism and Hong Kong"⁷, as the economy improved, more families could afford overseas education for their offsprings, of which the students experienced difficulty in assimilating into their new surroundings, whilst at the same time were unable to perceive themselves as Chinese by the reason that they found a disjuncture between themselves and the Mainland culture, and came to the realisation that their roots lie in Hong Kong but were not ready to accept the eventuality of the city's 'homecoming'. According to Chan, the Hong Kong identity was a product of forced circumstances.

The mid-1980s saw a rise in the analysis of local contemporary art. In his book, "Art & Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective", David J. Clarke discusses the issue of "East" and "West" in Hong Kong art and sets the backdrop for the cultural hybridity theory.⁸ He attempted to analyse the works of Wucius Wong and Van Lau, in particular how they handled and negotiated the contradictions between Chinese traditional subject and the presentation of geometric formalism in Western modernism, Clarke speaks of the difficulty of defining the boundaries of Hong Kongness, that is yet a seemingly unavoidable discourse. In his subsequent 2001 book, "Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization"⁹, the writer examines Colonialism, and the tensions between the 1997 Handover and a local cultural consciousness. Using Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity as a starting point, he further reflects on the employment of both Chinese and Western elements of expressions by the relatively apolitical, Lui Shoukun and Wucius Wong led New Ink Movement, which closely echoes the official mainstream view of Hong Kong as a point of intersection between the two realms. 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 oil and ink painting carry a cultural baggage that would hinder the formation of a local identity and expression.

The author of this essay however, disagrees that the development of Hong Kong art is as that described in the above account or accords with the mainstream view that "Hong Kong has a unique position in Chinese cultural history. Through a sophisticated fusion of Chinese and Western influences, it has created a pluralistic culture of its own."¹⁰ This is an overly simplistic attempt to define Hong Kong culture and its arts. In the author's opinion, Hong Kong art does not necessarily have to be a synthesis of the East and West. In terms of Chinese calligraphy and painting, there were still artists in the 1980s and 1990s who stressed on the traditional style of ink literati painting such as Peng Xi-ming, Fang Zhao-ling and Lin Jen-tong, as well as a significant number of works derived from the 'New Ink' school that embodies elements from both the East and the West, even to the extent of amalgamating the two. The author reckons that the discourse on Hong Kong Art criticism is sometimes limited by excessive classification or focus on the extent to which certain art works or styles were 'Chinese' and/or 'Western'. Even though the East-West distinction plays a certain significant role in the review of art, providing a reference point for the public to make sense of the reviews given for an artist and his works and the then societal atmosphere and other influence; however, from the perspective of re-constructing Hong Kong's art history, using the East-West distinction as a starting point for discussion may pose certain hindrance to a better understanding of the development. This kind of East-West hybridity tone appears even more impudent when applied to Western style art.

The reality is, young fine art students such as Choi Yan-chi, Yank Wong Yan-kwai, Josh Hon, Lui Chun-kwong, Benedict Wang, Victor Lai, Wong Sau-ching were gradually returning to Hong Kong from their studies abroad during the 1980s and 90s. In comparison to (the majority of) the previous generation who were born in China and trained in Hong Kong, Western art and culture has had a more profound influence on these returnees and Hong Kong-born generation that were free from the burdens of Chinese history and culture. Though most of the artists were born and raised in Hong Kong, for some "Hong Kong painting is seemingly in a constant state of rootlessness as its culture lacks self-definition. This absence of delineation and conceptualisation has meant that Hong Kong has a tendency to

⁷ Chan, K. C. (2013) *Chinese Celestial Imperialism and Hong Kong*, Oxford Press (Hong Kong)

⁸ Clarke, D. (1996) *Art & Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective*, Hong Kong University Press

⁹ Clarke, D. (2001) *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization*, Hong Kong University Press

¹⁰ Hong Kong Policy Address 2013, paragraph 178

adapt trends from other countries in many areas of life and therefore does not possess a cultural uniqueness.”¹¹ At the same time, as a Chinese ethnic living in a western country, despite their reluctance, they cannot help but be associated with events happening in the Mainland because of their Chinese identity and the association of their Chinese ethnic with “Chineseness” in politics and culture. Their home abroad experience has driven them to explore their own cultural identity. On the other hand Mainland artists who had moved to Hong Kong, such as Wong Shun-kit and Yeung Tung-lung, encountered socialism under Communist China and had to face the eventuality of the 1997 Handover. The two camps of artists had produced works that presented a diverse and critical dynamism.

Conclusion

Since the 1997 Handover, the new establishment has made every effort to groom a sense of Chinese consciousness in its citizens. However a string of political incidents such as the opposition to the legislation of (anti-subversion law) Article 23, Queen’s Pier preservation campaign in 2007, the Guangzhou-Hong Kong high-speed rail controversy in 2010 and the recent Umbrella Movement 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 ideological flux, which path will Hong Kong art take?

¹¹ Lai, M. H, ed. Chan, G. (2013) *Form, Colour, Line: Contemporary Hong Kong Painting*, Asia One Product and Publishing, Hong Kong, p. 128