



LOCATING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN HONG KONG-BRITISH ART AND LITERATURE

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY ART HISTORICAL AND LITERARY RESEARCH BY NG SIU YAU JESSE SUPERVISED BY PROFESSOR GRAHAM HUGGAN (LEEDS) AND DR VIVIAN SHENG (HKU)

ABSTRACT

A transdisciplinary research across art history and English literature, this project explores the complex cultural identities of Hong Kong-British people as represented in postcolonial literature and artworks. Aware of the uneven experiences of modernity in the world, this research avoids the Eurocentric time frame of "modernity" and uses the postcolonial lens to examine the representations of the Hong Kong people in the United Kingdom.

FOCI

- In what ways do intersectional forces such as ethnicity, nationality, language, history etc. construct the Hong Kong-British's cultural identity?
- How is the migrant's identity relational and performative against a foreign audience?
- How does migration alter gender roles and expectations?
- What are the politics involved in the migrant's imaginations of home and China under a foreign gaze?

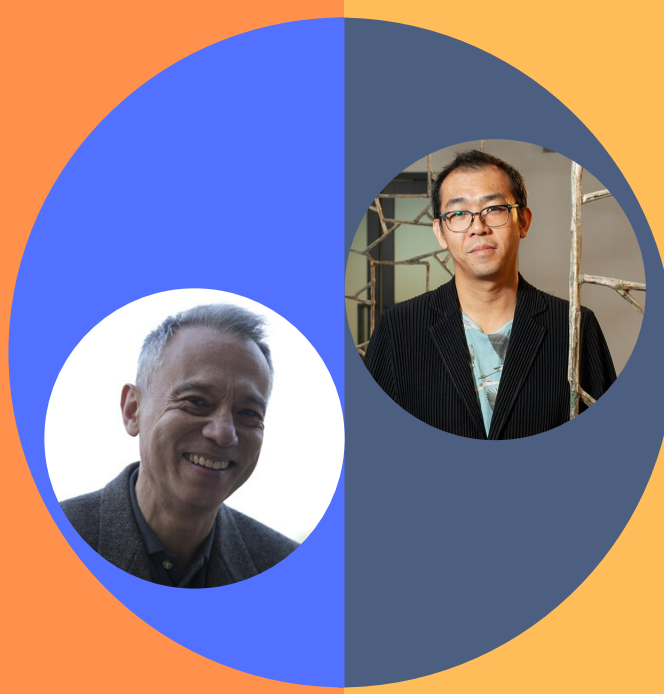
METHODOLOGY

A narrow focus on two artists, one Hong Kong-British writer and one Hong Kong-British visual artist, is used to evince some of the issues faced by the Hong Kong immigrants and their progeny in locating their cultural identities.

THE ARTISTS

TIMOTHY MO

- A novelist
- Born in 1950 Hong Kong to a British mother and Hong Kong father
 - Moved to the United Kingdom at the age of 10 and educated in St John's College, Oxford
 - His early works often depict the intercultural conflicts between Hong Kong, China and the UK
 - Novel *Sour Sweet* published in 1982 won the Hawthorden Prize and was adapted into a film in 1988



GORDON CHEUNG

- A visual artist
- Born in 1975 London to Hong Kong parents
 - Educated in Royal College of Art, London
 - His art of Chinese vases amalgamate Chinese subject matters with Dutch Golden Age still lifes and oil on canvas medium.
 - His first Hong Kong exhibition *Home* at Galerie Huit explores issues of nostalgia and cultural identity to a Hong Kong-British artist



Left: Poster for the film *Sour Sweet* (1988) starring Sylvia Chang, directed by Mike Newell

Right: *Here Be Dragons II*, Gordon Cheung, 2016, mixed media on canvas



THE THIRD SPACE: THE FEMALE VOICES IN TIMOTHY MO'S SOUR SWEET

Hong Kong housewives in 1960s London: To retreat or to reinvent?

Published in 1982 and written by Hong Kong-British author Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* demonstrates how migration introduces both challenges and opportunities to the Hong Kong family. Surviving in 1960s' London, the Chens strive to preserve their family traditions as remnants of their cultural identities and reinvent themselves as both Chinese immigrants and new members of the English city. Despite the cultural shock and obstacles they face as immigrants, the women in the family, Lily and Mui, become empowered in London, the relatively more feminist city than Guangxi and Hong Kong. As we see a shift in gender roles whereby Lily masterminds the opening of their very own Chinese restaurant and Mui explores her sexuality and becomes pregnant out of wedlock, the female voices and English culture slowly hijack the family, making the patriarch, Chen, a construct of a now obsolete Chinese tradition.

The Third Space: A Space for Hybridity and Newness

Ensuing the disappearance of Chen, Lily becomes the matriarch to preserve the Chineseness in her family. She instructs her son, Man Kee, the virtue of obedience which British schooling has failed to teach him. She also sends Man Kee to a Chinese school in Chinatown on the weekends lest he become a "foreign devil boy". Nonetheless, claiming ownership of her son through what she perceives to be her cultural identity, Chineseness, is futile as the family is becoming more acculturated day by day. The passage of time in London proves traditions to be invented as Lily defies the Chinese female stereotype to become the family's driver and later the matriarch. Although the novel ends with Lily asserting that nobody can take her son away from her, Britain is slowly assimilating every member of the family, including Lily herself. Born and raised in London, the children, Man Kee and Mui's half British daughter, are hybrids that are neither entirely Chinese nor British. As fruits of their mothers' wombs, they introduce to their family a third space, a space of newness that is capable of engendering cultures beyond definitions of the originals which have constituted them.

POST-ORIENTALISM: FROM TRADITION TO INTERROGATION

Questioning the Traditions: To Paint Without Paint

Blending Chinese motifs with icons of the Western canon, Hong Kong-British artist Gordon Cheung questions the arbitrariness of the fundamentals which constitute traditions. In *Here Be Dragon II*, he references still lifes from the Dutch Golden Age yet defies the traditional oil on canvas medium by covering the canvas with strips of the Financial Times. The diversity of its media is paralleled by the amalgamation of the Western still life tradition and the Chinese dragon, a creature that signifies divinity in China but an evil serpent in Britain. A hybrid in its form and subject matter, the artwork evokes Homi Bhabha's third space which in his own words "displaces histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom".

Appropriating Orientalism as an Interrogative Gesture

While the juxtaposition of the china vase and the Dutch painting style may point to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Gordon Cheung has decidedly moved his art beyond the binary opposition by inserting a psychedelic effect. The eerie patterns at the bottom signify the shape of the Mischief Reef, a contested island in the South China Sea and a marker of the Sino-American maritime rivalry. By featuring recognizable icons of Chinese and Western art, I argue that *Here Be Dragons II* enacts Post-Orientalism, a new form of Orientalism whereby the binary is appropriated to draw attention to topics that concern international parties, such as geopolitics. This interrogative gesture of the hybrid further responds to Bhabha's third space, a "new structure of authority and political initiative" that differs from the originals which constitute it.

CONCLUSION / WHAT'S NEXT?

Towards the Unexpected

In exploring the representations of the Hong Kong diaspora in the United Kingdom, this research has endeavored to show the alterities that challenge the preconceived notions of communities, traditions and cultures which tend to offer a parochial view of what people are capable of. Nonetheless, in many cultural representations beyond Europe and North America, reductive paradigms which Edward Said speaks of in *Orientalism* can still be found. Although one may argue that Post-Orientalism is still a kind of Orientalism, our challenge in hand, according to art historian Hou Hanru, is to "reorient Western expectations of the Oriental towards the unexpected".

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