

## **Framing the margins: The encounter between Tsang Tsou Choi and the art world.**

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For decades Tsang Tsou Choi (1921-2007), known in English as the King of Kowloon, wandered Hong Kong public space marking it with calligraphic graffiti. By the end of the colonial era in 1997 Tsang was in his late seventies, and needed the help of crutches to make his way around, but he was still actively pursuing his public mark-making even on the last day of British rule. On 30 June 1997 he was spotted in the act of inscribing his messages on the newly repainted white walls of an underpass very close to Government House, even as Governor Patten's car was leaving it for the last time. (1)

This acute sense of site was a crucial aspect of Tsang's practice of inscription. He would tend to place his work in locations with a good pedestrian flow, where it would be noticed - the Star Ferry concourses in both Central and Tsim Sha Tsui attracted his attention, for example. He also often placed inscriptions in sites where it could function to symbolically contest the power of the state, for most of the time he was working a very late period colonial regime. He was careful not to place his inscriptions in too prominent a position, however, where they might immediately be painted over: an oblique engagement, an occupation of the margins, was his preferred approach. He might paint over a post box, for instance, perhaps attracted by its insignia of royal power, and also marked a wall near the entrance to the Central Government Offices. When I spotted him at work on 27 September 1996 he was just outside Victoria Park in Causeway Bay, decorating an anonymous piece of street furniture with his distinctive writing. Perhaps he had been attracted by the royal name attached to the park (a pre-existing inscription of sorts that he was in some sense metaphorically over-writing), or by the statue of Queen Victoria which stood within it not far away from his place of work.

That image of Queen Victoria, first installed in Statue Square in Central in 1896, had been removed to this Causeway Bay park (constructed on reclaimed land and opened in 1957) by a colonial regime less confident in its last decades about propagating imperial ideology in what was (almost everywhere else in the world) a post-colonial era. It had been the much-publicized target of a direct assault with red paint and a hammer by Mainland-trained artist Pun Sing Lui less than two weeks earlier on 16 September 1996, and that very event may possibly have been responsible for drawing Tsang to engage with it or the location over which it presides. If that was the case then one could see his inscriptions there as inter-textual in nature, as an intervention aware of other interventions. As with the markings made near Government House on the day when British sovereignty

expired, his late September 1996 markings outside Victoria Park would then be seen as showing temporal as well as spatial sensitivity. His sense of the topography of power was not a static one, but displayed awareness of the shifts that occurred with the handover. After it had taken place, for instance, he chose to inscribe graffiti on a concrete support for a flyover directly opposite the Bank of China building, which was widely viewed in Hong Kong in the period following its first appearance on the skyline as a pre-handover harbinger of Chinese governmental authority. (2)

Tsang not only invaded sites with an association to governmental authority, he also in a sense usurped the very language of authority. His inscriptions invariably asserted that he was the emperor of new China - the two key characters of that claim, 'guo huang', usually being executed at a larger scale because of their significance. Dispossessed by his social marginality and relative lack of education of an autonomous language of protest, he responded by mimicking the language of power itself, referring in his inscriptions to his family lineage to bolster his claim as well as to assert a sense of belonging. Although Tsang's imperial claim may be taken as primarily an attempt to counter British royal authority (he apparently believed family land had been stolen by the British crown), calligraphic inscription also has specifically Chinese associations to authority, whether this be in the form of an imperial edict or Mao's calligraphic endorsement of a publication by writing its masthead in his own hand. (3)

In the mid-1990s, at a time when Tsang's calligraphic inscriptions were mostly viewed negatively by the population at large as defacements of public property, the artistic community was unusual in taking a positive interest in him. I remember discussing his work with Matthew Turner and Oscar Ho in an attempt to formulate a way it could be presented in an exhibition without misrepresenting it or exploiting its maker. We were unable to think of a means to achieve that goal, and so abandoned the project, but in the run-up to the handover Lau Kin Wai was to arrange a showing of Tsang's work in the art gallery of the Goethe Institut Hong Kong (Hong Kong Arts Centre, Wanchai). Taking place from 24 April to 17 May 1997, and titled *The Street Calligraphy of 'King of Kowloon' Tsang Tsou Choi*, this featured a variety of portable objects which Lau had provided Tsang with to write on, although the gallery walls were themselves in due course also covered with inscriptions by the tireless Tsang. I judge this exhibition to have been a success in terms of how it solved the difficult problem of representing Tsang's work in an art context, largely because I believe Lau successfully enabled Tsang to retain quite a significant degree of agency in the process, which he appeared to enjoy. Clearly however there are a range of issues which were raised by transplanting his work from the street to an indoor art-related space. The choice of site or objects on which to inscribe was now not purely one being made by Tsang himself, and the portability of the objects meant that they could move onwards to other sites which Tsang may not himself have chosen or even been aware of (and be displayed in times he had not made them for). Given that the meaning of his street work derived in part from the associations of the

locations and occasions of its placement, this loss of site-specificity and temporal belonging was a matter of some concern, and the inclusion of a display of documentary photos of Tsang's street works elsewhere in the Arts Centre Building was the main way Lau could attempt to remedy the deficit. (4)

Lau Kin Wai's exhibition of Tsang's work received widespread press coverage, and it was only after that time that Tsang became more widely known outside Hong Kong itself. (5) It proved controversial since many in Hong Kong were unprepared at that point to see him as anything more than a vandal (such opinions were expressed in a documentary film about Tsang made around that time for instance), but nevertheless it provided an occasion for the broader assessment of his practice. (6) Later inclusions of Tsang's work in art exhibitions were sometimes less sensitive to the issue of misrepresentation, perhaps, in part because they didn't or couldn't involve Tsang himself in the display and interpretive presentation of his work as Lau did – either because such exhibitions were taking place outside Hong Kong or because Tsang was no longer alive by that time. Lau, who had cultivated a personal acquaintance with Tsang which later curators were not always in a position to develop in their turn, had provided him with a variety of daily life objects to inscribe, thus retaining a sense of the encounter between writing and the pre-existing everyday world one got from his outdoor work, the sense of a clash between two different order of reality. The surfaces Tsang had been given to write on for the works included in Chang Tsong-Zung's exhibition *Power of the Word* (22 May – 29 August 1999, Taiwan Museum of Art, Taichung, Taiwan), on the other hand, were flat expanses resembling paintings. These two-dimensional surfaces obeyed the normal decorums of the white cube exhibition space, and furthermore offered no opportunity for Tsang to display the skills he had developed in his outdoor work to cope with writing on an irregular or three-dimensional surface. These surfaces had been prepared in advance, presumably by another hand, by being covered in grounds of a number of different colours, quite at variance with Tsang's usual practice when at work out of doors. In external environments he was used to working on hard, resistant surfaces, but these were made of cloth and thus would have presented him with a different challenge as regards their absorbency. Perhaps as a consequence of this some of the calligraphy in these pieces has a blurred appearance.

Also more easily accommodated without disruption in an art world context were the works Tsang created after he was no longer in good enough health to be roaming the city in search of outdoor sites for his inscriptions (see illustration 6). After he entered a residential care home for the elderly he was no longer allowed to use ink because of the smell and potential mess, and so had to work with marker pens on paper with which he had been provided. Obviously this new medium was quite different in nature from that he had been using out of doors, and in this author's opinion such 'late work' not only lacks site-specificity and the meaningfulness that derived from that but also lacks the fluidity of application and raw calligraphic energy often found in his earlier public works (which were usually

executed on a vertical rather than a horizontal surface). Although the art world has come to be the primary context in which Tsang's work is being mediated, curiously the very issue that should come to the fore within such a frame tends to be avoided, namely the question of the aesthetic quality of individual pieces, and I have yet to hear a good argument for the quality of the marker pen works.

Although his writing tended to be disparaged by established masters and connoisseurs of calligraphic art, unsurprisingly, Tsang's ink works did retain through the use of the ink medium some degree of a felt connection to the history of Chinese calligraphy. Albeit that they appeared as subversive appropriations of the canon of calligraphic art rather than unproblematic contributions to it, they were at least able to invoke that tradition and gain power and a degree of historical resonance from the association they had with it. Since inevitably most of Tsang's outdoor works have been over-painted as time goes by, and thus lost, it is the less impressive late works in marker pen on paper which tend to have dominated the more recent exhibits of his work. Large numbers were displayed in Joel Chung's show *Memories of King Kowloon* (ArtisTree, TaiKoo Place, Quarry Bay, 20 April - 31 May 2011 and more recently in a show titled *Tsang Tsou Choi "King of Kowloon"* at the commercial gallery Saamlung (Two Chinachem Plaza, Central, 14 January - 11 February 2012). (7) More portable than his site-specific outdoor works they have proved more easy to assimilate to the art market as commodities.

At the time of Lau Kin Wai's exhibition it was a novel thing for Tsang's writing to be presented in an art context and it was difficult for many to accept its presence there. Now however that frame has become if anything too dominant, and other possible contexts of interpretation for it are perhaps being occluded as a result. In Spring 2001 (which is after all more than a decade ago), while being interviewed concerning Tsang for an *Arts Talk* radio programme by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, I detected some resistance from the interviewer when I tentatively suggested that it might not necessarily be right to conceive of Tsang as an 'artist'. I felt my remark was being taken as somehow denying an artist's right to be considered as such instead of questioning the limits of the aesthetic frame in interpreting Tsang's activities and motivations.

Although the art historian in me does see a value in bringing the normal apparatus of that discipline's scholarship to bear on Tsang (for example by trying to assemble a photographic archive of his work made in public locations, especially focusing on the period before the 1990s, in order to raise questions about its development over time), I believe that other disciplinary frames could also be productive of knowledge. One could look to disciplinary spaces such as cultural studies, for instance, and sociology or psychology might also have something to offer.

Given the absence of full representative democracy in Hong Kong the real spaces of political life have tended to be public places, rather than the legislative

chamber. It is through demonstrations and occupations of sites of political significance rather than through the ballot box that Hong Kong people have come to experience political agency in a non-alienated form, and such outdoor protests have proved to be very effective. The 1 July 2003 rally and march against the Hong Kong Government's attempt to introduce draconian anti-subversion legislation resulted in the fall of Tung Chee-hwa, the first post-handover Chief Executive (albeit in slow motion since he couldn't be seen to have been ousted by the people and thus only resigned on 12 March 2005), and more recently the September 2012 rally outside the new Central Government Offices on the Tamar site has resulted in an abandonment of the proposed scheme for 'national education' in schools. Could not Tsang's engagement with Hong Kong's built environment be examined within the larger context of the local contestation of public space which these more overtly political events are the most visible expression of? (8) Even if one were simply to study the use of inscription in public sites during such protests one would come up with interesting parallels to what Tsang has done, and one could also investigate less directly political appropriations of public space in Hong Kong in an attempt to characterize local practices of using the shared environment to which Tsang's work could be related. The particular situation of Hong Kong, where freehold of almost all land is owned by the Government (in the colonial era it was referred to as 'crown land'), may perhaps have occasioned a particular set of attitudes towards public space and the private use of it which Tsang's interventions can be viewed as a particularly cogent expression of. Of course a placement of Tsang's work against the development of graffiti art in Hong Kong could also be undertaken and might prove illuminating in its own way. For most of the time when Tsang was working Hong Kong had relatively little graffiti - his work stood out in part for that very reason - but in the post-colonial era graffiti has become a much more common sight in the city.

In addition to the connection between Tsang and the art world that was made by curatorial practice there was also a link that was forged through the appropriation of his distinctive work by artists and designers. Amongst the earliest to do so was Lee Ka-sing, who made black and white photocopy prints in large but limited editions which incorporated Tsang's calligraphy in juxtaposition with images and printed Chinese characters from other sources. Lee produced these works for the exhibition *Cultural Chop Shui I* (Fringe Club Gallery, 4-18 October 1995), in which artists were assigned cultural partners of an earlier Hong Kong generation to engage with. Since the curator doing the assigning was Lau Kin Wai this may also be taken as an early expression of his own engagement with Tsang. Lau's 1997 exhibit also featured work by artists responding to Tsang, as did Joel Chung's 2011 show *Memories of King Kowloon*.

As Tsang became more widely known as a result of his curatorial exposure and the media spotlight that subsequently came to bear on him the appropriation of his work by artists and designers became more common. Fashion designer William Tang's Autumn/Winter 1997/1998 collection included a silk organza

dress decorated with motifs borrowed from Tsang's calligraphy, for instance. Tsang - as opposed to simply his work - was also featured in Fruit Chan's 2001 movie *Hollywood Hong Kong*, and as his fame grew he even appeared in advertisements. In these years, at first in artistic contexts and then in a wider way, Tsang Tsou Choi was becoming one of the most established symbols of Hong Kong cultural identity. An interest in promoting such a sense of local consciousness had been common amongst Hong Kong artists in the run-up to the 1997 handover but Hong Kong identity was more broadly a matter of concern in the period which followed the return to Chinese sovereignty. Popular cultural expressions were particularly mined for signifiers of the local (with high culture frequently seeming more tied to a Chinese national narrative on the one hand, or bearing deracinated international meanings on the other), and Tsang's calligraphy joined such diverse items as the Star Ferry terminal building and egg tarts on the list of fetishized expressions of Hong Kong-ness. Things which were threatened with extinction in some way were particularly valorized - the Hong Kong side Star Ferry terminal at Edinburgh Place was eventually demolished in 2006 (in the face of extensive protests), and a well-known egg tart shop on Lyndhurst Terrace looked at one time in 2005 to be faced with closure but eventually re-opened across the road. Tsang's calligraphy – faced as it was with the constant threat of official erasure – certainly fitted this criteria of disappearance.

While it is important to tell this story of Tsang's move towards the mainstream of Hong Kong cultural life it should be clarified that his widespread adoption as a signifier of the local imbued his work with associations which are in many ways rather different from those he himself must have intended it to bear. Rather than being a statement from the margins of society by someone with a sense of dispossession, it was now associated with issues of identity being addressed by Hong Kong people at large. Valid as those concerns may be in their own terms, they must not be allowed to occlude our investigation of Tsang's own motivations. We need to see the appropriation but not be held captive by it. It is time to start looking for new frames of interpretation for Tsang Tsou Choi's work.

Notes:

- 1) See Gérard Henry, 'Tsang Tsou-choi, Empereur de Kowloon', *Paroles*, No. 227, March/April 2011, at [http://www.alliancefrancaise.org.hk/paroles\\_archives/numeros/227/07.htm](http://www.alliancefrancaise.org.hk/paroles_archives/numeros/227/07.htm) (accessed 15 November 2012).
- 2) On the local reception of the Bank of China building in the pre-handover period see David Clarke, *Hong Kong art: culture and decolonization*, Duke University Press, 2002, p135-138.
- 3) On calligraphy and power in modern China see Richard Kurt Kraus, *Brushes with power: modern politics and the Chinese art of calligraphy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991. For a study of the role of outdoor calligraphic inscription in China see Robert E. Harrist, *The Landscape of words: stone inscriptions from early and medieval China*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008.
- 4) The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue-like publication, and this provided a further and more permanent venue for the documentation of Tsang's outdoor work.
- 5) One of the earliest discussions of Tsang in an internationally-circulating publication, published following Lau Kin Wai's exhibition, was Keith B. Richburg, "'King of Kowloon": graffiti artist, 76, writes on', *International Herald Tribune*, 13 May 1997, p20.
- 6) Negative opinions about Tsang from the general public were expressed in the documentary film *King of Kowloon* (Shen-Egan Productions, 1998).
- 7) Joel Chung's exhibition is paralleled by his publication *Kowloon King*, Hong Kong, Asia One Books, 2010.
- 8) I discuss contestation of public space in Hong Kong in my essay 'Contested sites: Hong Kong's built environment in the post-colonial era', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, p357-377, 2007. Some related earlier phenomena are discussed in my book *Hong Kong art: culture and decolonization*, especially in chapter four ('Carving public space').

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