
Varieties of Cultural Hybridity: Hong Kong Art in the Late Colonial Era

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Cultural hybridity in Hong Kong art can be seen by looking at the way in which artists relate to Western modernist and Chinese traditionalist cultural narratives, both of which are present in Hong Kong cultural space. Whilst there have been artists who have attempted to adhere to one or the other of them, for the most part artists of ambition have recognized that neither narrative can simply be dismissed. Many artists seem to have felt that to ignore an increasingly internationalized art world in which Western modernism is hegemonic would be to condemn themselves to a marginality, whilst to embrace Western modernism without equivocation would be to run the risk of losing a sense of their own cultural identity, of appearing to be mere mimics or belated followers of Western trends. Art of a hybrid nature has been the consequence of this dilemma, and artists such as Lui Shou-kwan (Lu Shoukun) and Van Lau (Wen Lou) make an explicit relationship in their works to both the narrative of Western modernism and the narrative of Chinese traditional culture, even though those two narratives are mutually contradictory and irreconcilable. Their problem is to make both narratives legible to the spectator but at the same time to prevent their incompatibility from becoming apparent, lest the work should fail to hold together and the task of becoming an artist who is both modern and Chinese should appear impossible to achieve.¹

1. In this text I refer to artists by means of a romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation of their names. For convenience I also give *pinyin* romanization of the standard Chinese pronunciation in brackets at a name's first mention (if there is no bracketed version the name can be assumed to be given in *pinyin*).

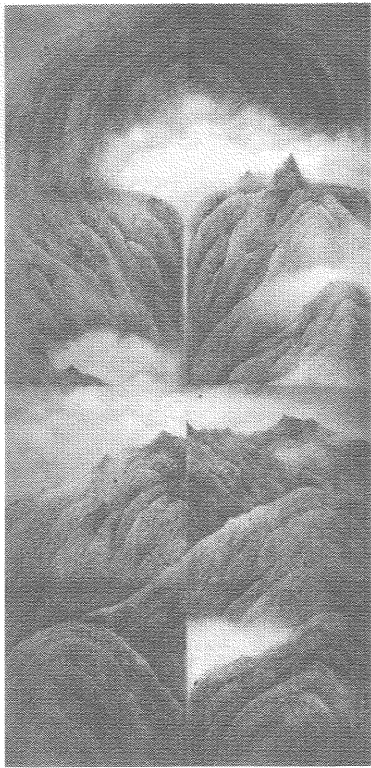


Fig. 1. Wucius Wong, *Cloud Harmony No. 1* 1978.

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At a time when the notion of hybridity is being explored in critical theory, I want to point out how problematic hybrid artworks can be.² I wish to show how certain consciously hybrid artworks produced in Hong Kong anxiously attempt to reconcile the incompatible, and to demonstrate that hybridity can collude with the notion of cultural essence, which it is often taken as undermining. The work of Wucius Wong (Wang Wuxie) rather than Lui Shou-kwan or Van Lau will serve to represent that generation of artists who were the first in Hong Kong to attempt to create a consciously modernist art. Wong is a good case in point as he is more willing to acknowledge visually the incompatibility between Western modernist and Chinese traditionalist narratives.

Although Wong and other artists of his generation seem to want to hold on to both the narrative of Chinese tradition and that of Euro-American modernism, there is a later moment in Hong Kong art history when such grand narratives begin to fall into disrepute. The work of two other artists (from very different age groups) who find their maturity in this moment come to mind. These are Luis Chan (Chen Fushan) and Antonio Mak (Mai Xianyang). Neither of these two artists attempts to find a space outside of the two dominant narratives: both seem to recognize that they are too powerful to be simply ignored. Nevertheless, neither artist seems to take either narrative seriously, and both may be viewed as producing works which are at least implicitly critical of those Hong Kong artists who do. The art of Chan and Mak is also hybrid in nature, but differs from that of Wong or Lui in that it erodes the narratives it engages with instead of attempting to uphold them. Chan and Mak, although their solutions are different, can each be said to produce art which makes a Hong Kong viewpoint possible. Taking elements from both cultural narratives, but without being in thrall to either, they produce a variety of hybrid art with greater liberatory potential—one which helps create a more explicitly local cultural space.³

2. The literature on hybridity is now quite extensive, see: Nikos Papastergiadis, "Restless Hybrids," *Third Text* 32 (Autumn 1995), 9–18; Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1990); Judy Purdom, "Mapping Difference," *Third Text* 32 (Autumn 1995), 19–32; Jean Fisher, "Editorial," *Third Text* 32 (Autumn 1995), 3–7; Sarat Maharaj "'Perfidious Fidelity': The Untranslatibility of the Other," *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press 1994), 28–35.

3. In this text I draw on my earlier attempts to come to terms with the work of Mak, Chan and

In juxtaposing the work of Chan and Mak to that of Wong we can identify differences and even antagonisms between various artistic phenomena to which the term *hybrid* might be applied and thus throw into relief some difficulties in the indiscriminate or blanket use of the term. Hong Kong paintings and sculptures invite scepticism about the notion of hybridity. In such a particular, relatively defined cultural and historical context we can see how hybrid artworks function. The cultural narratives which artists employ are not wholly given to them: at a certain level those narratives are ones they choose to engage with in their work, and for particular purposes. Nevertheless, artists do find themselves in cultural or discursive landscapes which are largely not of their own making. A particular cultural locus may only sustain certain strategies of hybridization at any one time—this at any rate seems to have been the case in Hong Kong, with the emergence of Wong’s hybrid style belonging to the moment of modernism’s appearance in Hong Kong visual culture, whilst Chan and Mak’s emergence as mature artists belongs to the era of modernism’s faltering, to the postmodern moment. Whilst the two moments might be characterized as “modern” and “postmodern,” they should not be conceived of in narrowly artistic terms but rather as moments of broader cultural change, and even as moments when the colonial government underwent crises of legitimation.

The broader preconditions for the two moments are occasionally alluded to in my text but cannot be fully elaborated in the present context. They are explored here in a schematic way. The first moment of crisis is arguably precipitated by the development of Hong Kong’s manufacturing sector, giving rise for instance to a heightened sense of inequalities, but also leading to a greater openness to external intellectual frames of reference. The influx of refugees in the postwar period was also a destabilizing factor. Demographically, the second moment was that in which the children of those refugees reached adulthood, constituting a



Fig. 2. Lui Shou-kwan, *Zhuangzi*, 1974.

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Wong. On Mak, see my “The Sculpture of Antonio Mak,” in *The Art of Antonio Mak* (Hong Kong: H.K. Arts Centre, 1995); on Chan, see my “Psychic Decolonization,” *Art AsiaPacific* 3, 4 (Oct. 1996), 39–41. My “Between East and West: Negotiations with Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong Art,” *Third Text* 28/29 (Autumn/Winter 1994), 71–86 deals primarily with Lui Shou-kwan and artists of the New Ink Painting movement and also with artists of Mak’s generation not treated here, but Wong’s work is also discussed. I am grateful to Ackbar Abbas for feedback on that *Third Text* article, and to him and Wu Hung for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

generation which took Hong Kong as its horizon and knew China only as a foreign country (the border having been closed by that time). Political factors which helped precipitate the second moment were the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong (which set the clock running for the handover of the territory to China) and the brutal crackdown on the Beijing student democracy movement in 1989 (which intensified fears over 1997). Concern for cultural identity in art since this time parallels political demands for greater local democracy.

Wucius Wong

Wucius Wong seems to feel caught between an allegiance to Western modernism and an allegiance to Chinese tradition, wishing in some sense to affirm both. Though he finds it a challenge to harmonize these two conflicting narratives, Wong takes some degree of control over his perceived situation by making opposition thematic in his work. The conflict is not resolved by this decision but is at least given expression, dramatized.

In a work such as *Cloud Harmony No. 1* (1978, fig. 1), Wong shows his desire to retain a link to Chinese cultural narratives by his adoption of a vertical “hanging scroll” format, but also more directly by his reference to the misty-mountain subject matter of classical Chinese painting. Whereas Lui Shou-kwan and his followers in the Hong Kong New Ink Painting movement made use of Chinese ink and absorbent paper, thereby producing works which claim an allegiance to Chinese traditions at the level of technique, Wong has commonly used acrylic. Subject matter thus becomes the primary site where Chineseness is signified in his painting. The Hong Kong sculptor Van Lau, working in metal and thus not able to effect links at the level of technique to literati culture, is similarly constrained to signify Chineseness through subject matter. He does this for instance in his various sculptures on the theme of the bamboo (such as *Windy Form*, 1985) which are executed in a manner indebted to the Constructivist tendency of Western modernist sculpture.

For Wong, unlike a straightforwardly traditionalist artist, a mere declaration of allegiance to literati modes is not enough: Chinese references must be counterbalanced by signs of modernity. Such claims to contemporaneity are made by the introduction of a geometric, gridlike structure, which serves to partition the surface of the image. This Constructivist vocabulary (also found in more recent paintings such as *Agitated Waters No. 5*, 1989) is one which Wong would have encountered through his involvement with design. Wong worked at one time as a lecturer at the design school of the Hong Kong Polytechnic (now the Hong Kong Poly-

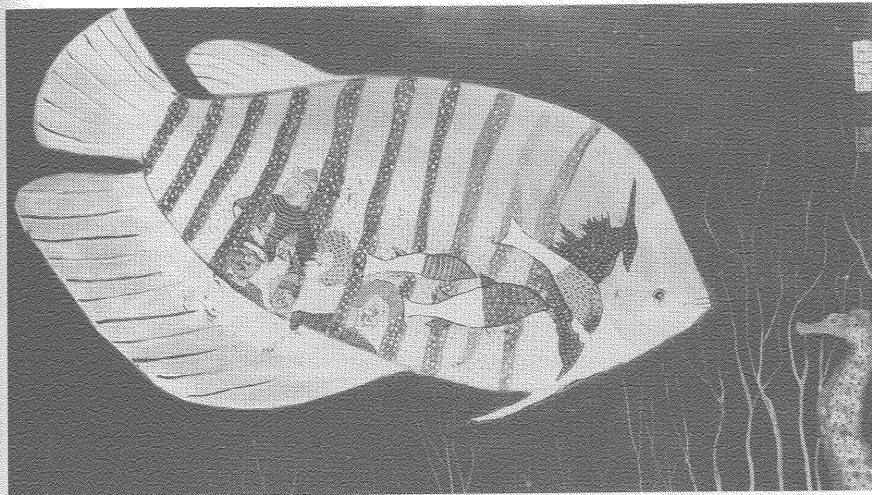


Fig. 3. Luis Chan,
Seahorse Meeting a Fish, 1978.

technic University) and is the author of several widely disseminated manuals on two- and three-dimensional design in which a Bauhaus model of basic design education is presented.

In *Cloud Harmony No. 1* the organic and the geometric are both present but retain a large degree of autonomy from each other. Visual harmony becomes largely a matter of balancing opposing or incommensurable forces. The painting opens up a symbolic arena in which Chinese (traditional) elements and Western (modern) elements are allowed their different voices. In this respect *Cloud Harmony No. 1* differs from such New Ink Painting works as Lui Shou-kwan's *Zhuangzi* (1974, fig. 2), which also balances Western modernist and Chinese traditional aspects, but which wishes to avoid any sense that the modernization of Chinese ink painting is a problematic project. In *Zhuangzi* the allusion to European and American gestural abstraction is meant to be noticed (in order to give the work its claim of contemporaneity), but an attempt is made to play down the differences between the two cultural narratives invoked, to present an aesthetically unified whole. Arguably Abstract Expressionism and its European counterpart offered particular possibilities to Chinese artists at the time when it was the most up-to-date signifier of Western modernism available in the international arena because its gestural nature had superficial similarities with the foregrounded brushwork of classical Chinese painting and calligraphy, and because the Abstract Expressionists were often themselves interested in East Asian brushwork. By choosing a hard-edged formal vocabulary instead of engaging with Abstract Expressionism like his onetime teacher Lui, Wong must have been con-

sciously deciding to accentuate rather than blur the East/West distinctions in his painting. Geometry, with its associations to rationality and the West, serves there as the “yang” in opposition to the “yin” of the organic, the natural, and the Chinese.

Although Wong may be taken as producing a kind of muted allegory of the situation of Hong Kong in works such as *Cloud Harmony No. 1*, it is an allegory which tends towards treating the Chinese and the Western as necessarily complementary parts of a larger whole. It points away from political and historical frames of interpretation towards a metaphysical one. His mode of painting has something of a double-voiced quality: it acknowledges difference but ends up reducing both Chinese and Western cultures to (diametrically opposed) essences in a way that is not all that different from the position of the traditionalist. Indeed, China is represented in his paintings only in terms of tradition, modernity being always placed outside of Chineseness. Because of this restriction a rigidity enters: the signs of Chineseness become exaggerated clichés, repetitive caricatures of literati traits. Hybridity proves capable of coexisting with a notion of cultural essence and even of entrenching it.

Luis Chan

Although Luis Chan developed his mature style at a later date than Lui Shou-kwan (and, as I will show, partly as a response to the challenge of such early Hong Kong modernist artists as Lui), he was a much older artist. Chan had already worked for some years in the academic realist manner adopted by a number of other Hong Kong artists of his own generation, such as Lee Byng (Li Bing) and Yee Bon (Yu Bun). None of these artists appears to have felt any pressing need to forge connections with Chinese cultural traditions in their art, and all were seemingly unaware of Western modernist discourse. Indeed, Chan's early work seems to me to be a striking instance of art created within a kind of colonial mentality. Since his mature work offers a radical departure from such a frame of mind and shares with that of the other artists I am considering a greater self-awareness about the cultural situation in which it finds itself, a brief consideration of the earlier work offers a valuable counterpoint.

Luis Chan differs from the other two artists I am discussing in that he did not have any overseas training.⁴ He was born in Panama in 1905 but moved to Hong Kong in 1910, remaining there until his death in 1995. Indeed, apart from a

4. Wong studied in the U.S.A. during the early 1960s. Mak studied in London in the early to middle 1970s.

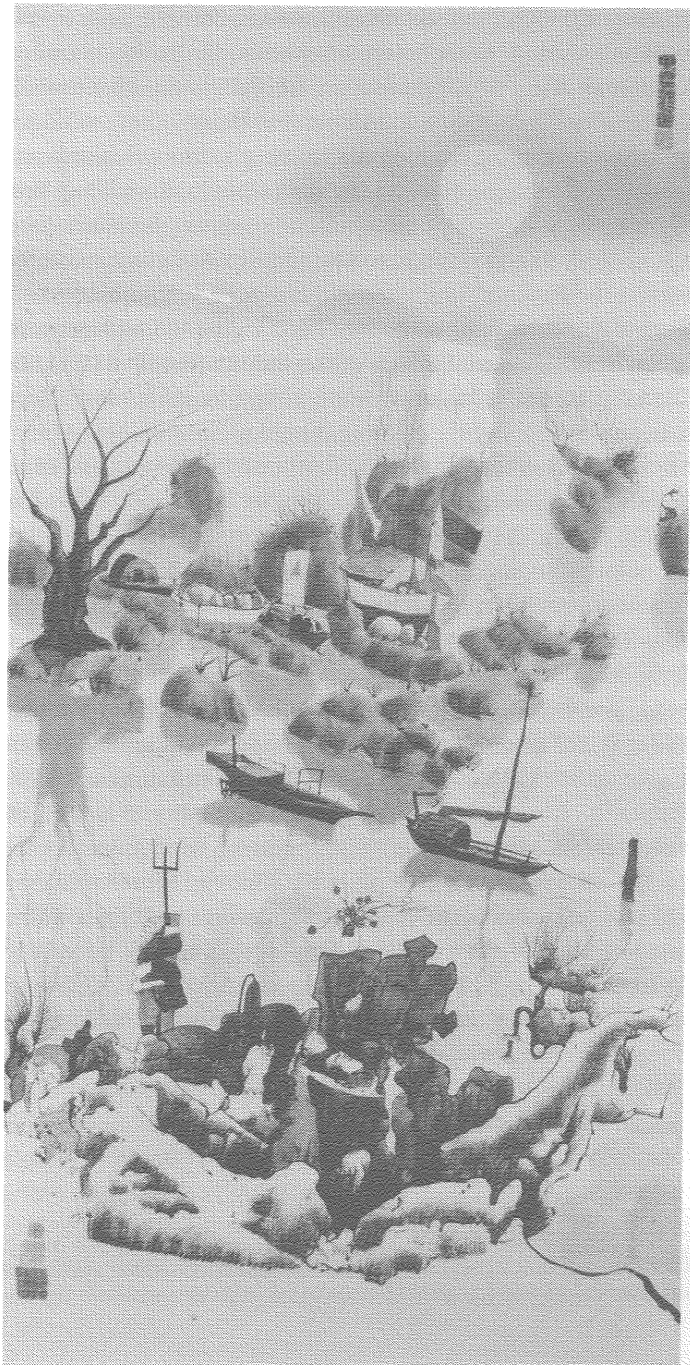


Fig. 4. Luis
Chan,
Execution,
1974.

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painting trip to Beijing and other mainland Chinese cities in 1936 and a sojourn in Macau during the Japanese occupation, he hardly seems to have left Hong Kong at all. Because of the absence of opportunities for formal art education in the territory (there is no art academy even today), Chan relied on correspondence courses as a way of learning art, turning to the colonial power Britain as the source of information and standards. *The Studio*, the leading British art magazine of the time, was an important frame of reference for Chan, who had subscribed to it by 1927. The style Chan developed was a fluent naturalism indebted to British models: he favoured landscape as his subject matter and generally preferred to use watercolour, working directly from nature and paying particular attention to light effects. Although his style of this time can hardly be described as innovative, Chan did achieve a degree of local recognition and status. Not only did he gain some attention and approval from the Hong Kong colonial élite, he even received it from the colonial power itself. Chan must have felt a sense of achievement when in 1954 he wrote an article on his own art (and that of other Hong Kong artists) for *The Studio*, thereby featuring in the very publication which gave him his initial point of artistic reference.⁵ A more official British recognition of the art of its colonial subject came in 1960 when Chan was invited (along with David Kwok [Guo Dawei] and Zhao Shaoang, two Chinese-media artists) to represent Hong Kong at the British Commonwealth Exhibition in London.

Only a year after this triumph, however, Chan faced a catastrophe. His work was excluded from a major exhibition organized at the new Hong Kong city hall on the grounds that it was “out of date.” Chan seems to have discovered his marginality as a result of this rejection, his insight into his real situation as a colonial artist leading to a loss of artistic security. For a great part of the 1960s Chan’s art was in crisis: one modern style after another appeared in the work of an artist who had once seemed so confident about his way of painting, but none was able to provide a stable basis for a distinctive individual idiom. Once naturalism was no longer acceptable, the issue of style was inevitably foregrounded, but there seemed to be no criteria he could adopt to choose between the plethora of possible artistic identities. Whilst not all works of this period are failures, one senses that Chan is playing with styles he does not fully understand: Cubist or pointillist idioms, for instance, are present in a partial and largely decorative way, the artist being condemned to the role of a mimic of that which has originated elsewhere.

5. The article was “The Hong Kong Artists’ Group,” *The Studio* 148 (July 1954), 84–87. In vol. 150 (1955) he was to write another article, “Fundamental Principles of Chinese Painting.” Chan was a prolific author, writing a great many books on art in Chinese.

Chan was to find a way of coming to terms with his marginality in relation to Western modernism after seeing a demonstration of monotype technique by the French artist Jacques Halpern. Halpern seems to have favoured a nongeometric, abstract style of an *art informel* kind, but it is perhaps important that Chan did not choose to imitate his style. Discovery of an automatist method of working was more important to Chan than the encounter with abstraction, since it provided him with a specific technique for provoking an encounter with the unconscious. His new works may have started as abstract pattern-making, but this was followed by a crucial second phase in which the marks produced with the assistance of chance were studied. Illusory images were found in them which were then further specified. This fantasy art has much in common with the *decalcomania* technique employed by Max Ernst in paintings such as *Europe after the Rain II* (1940–42) or Henri Michaux's ink experiments (of which Chan as an extremely well-read artist was certainly aware), but only at the level of method. At the level of content they are highly original, and no longer in the shadow of Western modernist examples: in the seventh decade of his life Chan had finally discovered his "mature" style.

Landscape predominates, as it had done in his earlier paintings, and water is frequently to be seen. Although we no longer see any exact topographical description, this is still recognizably the island and sea topography of Hong Kong (*City by the Sea*, 1974) rather than the mountain and river landscape of the Chinese heartland so often favoured by the more inward-looking and tradition-bound painters of the mainland. The animal, vegetable, and mineral realms are no longer distinct. Faces may appear in rocks (*Peach Garden*, 1977), or islands metamorphose into birds (*Duck and Rooster Island*, 1980). We may be taken underwater to visit a rich and strange world of tropical fish (a recurrent subject for Chan) but then encounter a crowd of human faces as if trapped behind bars along a fish's side (*Seahorse Meeting a Fish*, 1978, fig. 3). There is much that is visually ravishing (particularly because of Chan's growing confidence as a colourist), and the mood is frequently whimsical, but darker notes do intrude, *Death as a Skater* (1980) or *Execution* (1974, fig. 4) being two examples of this.

References to Chinese mythology may be found on occasion (as in *Rise of the Drowned Poet*, 1980), but whilst Chan in this phase of his art welcomes inspiration from all sources (Chinese or Western, high or popular) he is never a servant to them. His very openness now inoculates him against the danger of being either a Chinese traditionalist or a provincial imitator of Western modernism, and all sources must be transformed on entering the world of his paintings. *Rise of the Drowned Poet*, for instance, is based on the story of poet-statesman Chu

Yuan, whose drowning is commemorated every June by the Dragon Boat Festival. The painting, however, seems to give a personal reworking to the traditional story, introducing a theme of rebirth.

Whereas Chan's earlier works showed no relationship at all to premodern Chinese painting, he is now willing to adopt both hanging scroll and handscroll formats on occasion, and refers to such works as his "modern Chinese paintings."⁶ His lack of hang-ups about tradition (unlike Wong or Lui, he seems not to agonize about the difficulties of being both Chinese and modern) is revealed in his matter-of-fact statement that a painting by him is Chinese if it is done on Chinese paper. Lui's *Zhuangzi* anxiously counterbalances its engagement with the Western modernism of Gottlieb and Soulages by a reference to a traditionally sanctioned Chinese text in which the philosopher of the title dreams of being a butterfly. When Chan produces a work on the same theme (*Butterfly Dream*, 1986) his approach is recognizably more playful and accepting of heterogeneity. In a work which must surely have been undertaken with the intention of conducting a dialogue with Lui's, Chan employs both collage (his butterfly is a real one) and a pouring technique which clearly invokes Pollock (like Lui he brings together Chinese and Abstract Expressionist influences, but whereas Lui sinicizes the reference to Abstract Expressionism by rendering it in Chinese ink, Chan leaves his quotation in a Western medium). This Pollock-like pouring appears in other works by Chan and is used in an uninhibited way without worry over what meaning the technique might have had in its original context. As he lets his unconscious be the guide to what may be given meaning in his own work, the skeins of paint start to suggest faces, and circles are added to indicate eyes (*Untitled*, 1987). The theme of transformation in the *Zhuangzi* text is embodied by Chan even at the level of the creative method. Although his treatment may initially appear less reverential than Lui's, Chan perhaps displays a deeper engagement with their shared textual source.

Chan not only appropriated or resignified elements of the stylistic vocabulary of other artists in his own work, he also seemed to be doing something similar when in the role of spectator. He talked for instance of the possibility of seeing illusory images of people or creatures in the paintings of Cézanne and Zhang Daqian. The traces of this very idiosyncratic mode of reception can be seen on the copies of the art magazines to which he subscribed: often a face will be

6. Chan adds ("In Conversation [with Tsong-zung Chang]," in *Luis Chan at Eighty* [Hong Kong: Hanart 2, 1985]), "if you see one on which I've put my name-chop, it is a Chinese painting, otherwise it is not!" The following two quotations from Chan in the text are from the same book, the first from Tsong-zung Chang's introduction, the second from the above-mentioned interview.

“discovered” in an image and specified by a ballpoint pen mark. Even the austere abstract paintings of Kenneth Noland are given this kind of treatment by Chan. Far more than most Western artists of the same period Chan was reliant on reproductions for information, but the subservient attitude towards Western sources he had in his early years has now manifestly disappeared. His relationship to them becomes more active and confident, as his graffiti-like additions to the magazine illustrations attest. Rather than treating them as role models for conscious emulation he offers them up to his unconscious as raw material, interprets them from his own (Hong Kong) viewpoint.

As well as effortlessly incorporating elements from both Chinese and Western high art traditions, Chan also found a place for references to popular culture. In addition to his lifelong interest in art magazines, Chan also turned for inspiration in his later phase to the TV screen. “I still do life studies—I watch TV!” he once quipped, in answer to an interviewer’s question. Both political figures and fictional characters from this source of images have entered his paintings, but only if his unconscious finds their presence appropriate. At a time when television was giving a lot of coverage to events in the Middle East, Chan was surprised to discover “the figure of Arafat boxed in the corner of a half-finished painting” (*Magic Carpet*, 1981, fig. 5).

Another media event which finds its way into a painting is the Silver Jubilee celebration for Queen Elizabeth II of England (*H.M. Queen Elizabeth’s Silver Jubilee*, 1977). The monarch’s head appears as a collage item (on Hong Kong–

Fig. 5. Luis Chan,
Magic Carpet,
1981.



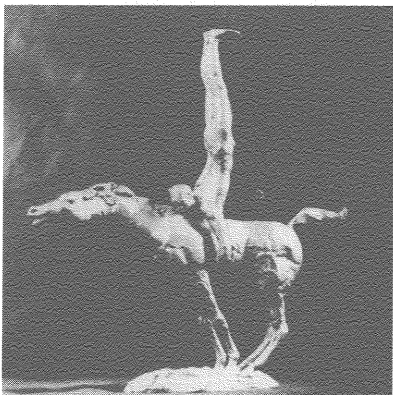
issued stamps attached to the painting's surface), and the British Union Jack—now in black and red, rather than red, white, and blue—is also included. What at first might appear to be an act of homage in fact turns out to be a gently subversive statement about the colony's mother country. Gentle, perhaps, because (after all) Britain had been the most important source of cultural information in Chan's early years as an artist and because his growing autonomy as a painter permitted a degree of magnanimity that might not have prevailed had he failed to transcend his earlier state of cultural provincialism. Having decolonized his psyche, Luis Chan could look more with humour than with anger at the signifiers of colonial power.

Antonio Mak

By the time of his tragic early death in 1994, Antonio Mak had created an extensive body of sculpture, working primarily in bronze, cast from wax originals. The human figure was the principal subject of his art (with animals such as horses and tigers also being of great interest), and the style in which he worked owed more to Rodin (and indeed to even earlier sculptural traditions) than it did to contemporary trends. Undertaking his studies at a later date than Wong, Mak seems to have been aware that the Western narrative of modernist progress was losing its credibility. Whilst he used a recognizably Western visual language, he chose not to make a futile attempt to be more up to the minute than whatever artists were currently being fêted in New York. His relatively old-fashioned stylistic idiom, however, was put to the service of an acute intellect, and one might wish to see him as a species of conceptual artist.

Although he does not represent Hong Kong subjects directly, or promote Hong Kong cultural identity in any positive sense, Mak's art can be said to offer a Hong Kong viewpoint. This is achieved by the ironic, distanced way in which he makes references to Western and Chinese culture—often both within the same work. The two great cultural influences active in Hong Kong are quoted by Mak (rather than simply employed), and he even treats the issue of their interaction (oppositions of various kinds being a key theme of his work). Most other Hong Kong artists who seek to make use of both Western and Chinese references seem concerned to bring them into harmony (Wong's *Cloud Harmony No. 1* and Lui's *Zhuangzi* are examples that have already been discussed), but Mak instead emphasizes disparities. It is extremely common to

Fig. 6. Antonio Mak, *Horse Lover Goes West*, 1992.



describe Hong Kong as the place where “East meets West,” and this cliché reduces Hong Kong to a mere gateway or bridge through or over which Chinese and Western influences pass, denying it any separate identity. Rather than illustrating this well-worn notion, Mak seems determined to undermine or expose it. Hong Kong gains a measure of autonomy as the site where incredulity towards grand narratives from elsewhere is allowed to develop. Irony opens up a space.

Verbal associations (either given in the title or alluded to in other ways) are important to Mak’s art and offer one of the means by which he develops his ironic perspective. Both Chinese and Western (that is, English) verbal associations may exist within the same work, an example being *Horse Lover Goes West* (1992, fig. 6). The title seems to point us consciously towards an occidental interpretation of the sculpture, or more specifically an American one. “Go West young man” it seems to say, and the Western reference in the title is confirmed by the visual evidence of the sculpture itself: a horse is a key prop of the Wild West lifestyle (at least as depicted in movies). In terms of artistic reference one thinks of the slightly tacky horse paintings and sculptures of Frederic Remington, Charles Marion Russell, and their followers, propagators of the cowboy myth.

Despite the strong gesture the work seems to be making towards the West, there is nevertheless also a contradictory signposting towards the East. The Chinese version of its title (*Mami Xiyouji*) brings completely different associations into play, Xiyouji being the title of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*. In the gap between these Western and Chinese narratives local Hong Kong meanings of a less exalted nature are allowed to develop. To a Hong Kong Cantonese speaker the characters rendered as *xiyou* in Putonghua (the standard pronunciation of Chinese used in the mainland) evoke a colloquial phrase that specifies bullshitting, the telling of fanciful stories.⁷ Given the context of horses and horse lovers we might be correct in imagining a reference to the many fans of horse racing in Hong Kong. Mak himself grew up near a racetrack in Happy Valley, and refers to that location in another work, *Bible from Happy Valley* (1991, fig. 7), which also represents a horse. In this case the bronze horse does not have a rider on his back but a book made of lead. The verbal dimension so often an important

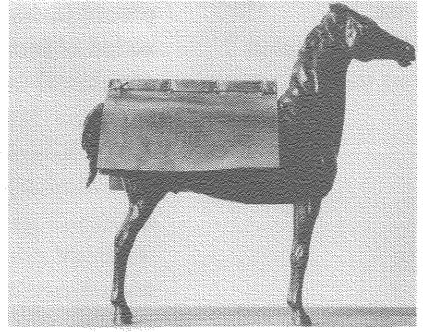


Fig. 7. Antonio Mak, *Bible from Happy Valley*. 1991.

7. The strongest expressions of Hong Kong cultural identity have arguably been in film and popular music, in part because of the way in which the Cantonese spoken language can act as a marker. This resource is not normally available to visual artists, but Mak’s interest in verbal allusion can bring it into play.

part of Mak's work helps us come to terms with the incongruity of this combination of elements, although in this case the title gives only an oblique clue. It points us to the racetrack, and to betting, and thus to bookmakers who *keep books on horses*. We are still with the horse lovers mentioned in the title of the previous work discussed: the pages of the book are arranged over the horse's back rather like wings, but by using lead as his material Mak seems to want to mock the grand dreams of gamblers. Flight will never be possible: this Pegasus (a literary or "bookish" horse) is being brought down to earth. Verbal associations underline the point: in both Cantonese and Putonghua the verb used to describe losing at gambling has exactly the same sound as that of the word *book*.

Attempts to juxtapose Chinese and Western references within the same work occur as early as 1972. *West Meets East*, a large collage of that year, has as its central image a photo of Richard Nixon shaking hands with Chairman Mao on the occasion of his then-recent groundbreaking visit to China. In choosing such an image Mak has immediately denied the depoliticized frame in which the "meeting of East and West" is generally presented in Hong Kong, and his reversal of the order in which the two compass points are usually verbally paired is another signal that he wishes to disrupt clichéd thinking. A further reversal in this work helps to hint at Mak's cynicism concerning the historic meeting of opposites he depicts: Mao the leftist appears on the right of the photo, whilst the rightist Nixon is shown on the left. Apparent opposites can actually be on the *same side*, Mak seems to suggest: "Tricky Dickie" may have been a *dexterous* or *adroit* politician, but *on the other hand* that Vietnam War-era president had his *sinister* side.

- Colonial Hong Kong might be the ideal place to see through both American free-world rhetoric and its Maoist counterpart, and Mak continues to make reference to the encounter of communism and capitalism, albeit obliquely. Several of his sculptures of tigers and men can be read as allegories of that subject. *Last Tango with Tiger* (1993), for instance, shows a man dancing with a tiger and seems to represent those businessmen and others in capitalist Hong Kong who have so assiduously courted the communist Chinese government in the period since the Joint Declaration agreeing to Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty. "That guy is really in trouble, but he doesn't know it" is Mak's own comment on this work: a tiger is unlikely to sustain such behaviour as dancing on its hind legs for long before its own nature reasserts itself, so the human is deeply mistaken if he thinks he's in control of the situation. As the title indicates, the dancing will soon be over, and then what? Mak is aware of a Chinese saying which compares serving a ruler to serving a tiger, in that they both might bite you, and our dancer faces a danger similar to that of a court official. This, after all, is no paper tiger.

Sleepwalker II (1991, fig. 8) can also be read as a political allegory. Again the tiger seems to represent China, and the work as a whole seems a meditation on Hong Kong's relation to it in the run-up to the 1997 handover. The much-promulgated formula "one country, two systems," which describes the relationship which will supposedly exist between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the rest of the People's Republic after the return to China, is apparently being invoked, but with much irony. The peaceful coexistence of opposites is a precarious one, made possible by the lack of wakefulness in the figure on the tiger's back. "So long as he doesn't wake up he'll be all right" is Mak's comment on this work, but can sleepwalking really be a positive thing, even if it does shield us from realities?⁸ Since the somnambulist as well as the tiger is in forward motion, it looks as if he is going to fall off the front of his mount, in which case his protective sleep will surely come to an end. The moment of waking seems already to have arrived in *Good Morning II* (1993). Here the outstretched arms, albeit similar to those of a sleepwalker, or of a diver about to take the plunge, seem (because of the context given by the title) to refer to the stretching motions of someone who is throwing off the drowsiness of the night.

In *Heaven and Hell*, an installation piece of 1993, Mak again explores his interest in the theme of opposites. In this work he makes use of a mirror, an element that has appeared in many of his earlier sculptural pieces, in part because of the way in which reflections offer opportunities for treatment of the theme of opposition. Mak combines it with a flight of steps, another frequently utilized element, which like the mirror can symbolize a threshold to another realm. *Heaven and Hell* is set into the ground, the steps leading down to a mirrored surface set at an angle, in which your own reflection becomes visible. In an earlier work, *Inside Out* (1974–82), a human figure appears to be walking into the illusory space of the mirror at the same time as a figure from within the mirror walks out (part of the bronze section of the sculpture represents the "penetrating" figure, part the "emerging" one). In *Heaven and Hell*, however, the spectator takes the place of the figure moving to meet its double in the mirror.

Because of the steps, the oppositions offered by the mirror are supplemented by an opposition between up and down (the directions metaphorically associated with heaven and hell). But because of the possibilities of the mirror there is a reversal, and in walking down into the work we seem to be descending into the (reflected) sky rather than the earth. We can interpret this as a statement on Mak's

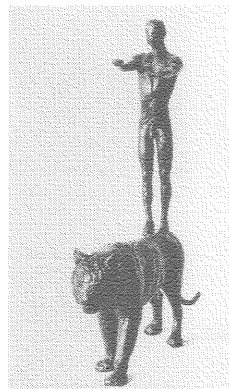


Fig. 8. Antonio Mak,
Sleepwalker II,
1991.

8. The two short quotes from Mak are from an interview conducted by the author on 1 October 1993.

part about the unstable nature of the relationship between opposites, a reading which could gain some support from a consideration of *Root* (1990). That sculpture also seems concerned with a confusion or similarity between opposites, specifically between the roots and the branches of a tree, which are represented as more or less indistinguishable.

From a certain angle of approach to *Heaven and Hell* one has a strong illusion of a doorway below ground level leading to an unbounded empty space. Steps lead down into what seems to be a void that has been discovered below the earth's surface. The strength of this illusion is tempered only when one gets close enough for one's own reflection to appear, thus identifying the plane of the mirror surface and laying bare the mechanics of the work's effects. Mak, if he does offer an intimation of the numinous, is quick to undermine it, and perhaps the whole notion of walking down towards heaven could be read in a similarly ironic way as a comment on human delusions. We are being quite literally brought down to earth, and this happens at the very same moment as we appear to ascend into the heavens. Metaphysical pretensions are being deflated here, but so one feels are all kinds of utopian thought. Grand narratives of progress are being thrown into doubt, whether they offer an artistic holy grail of formal purity and autonomy or a social paradise to be attained if we could only make one "great leap forward."

Because of its title, we may be led to see an influence of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* on Mak's installation piece. The theme of contraries is treated explicitly in Blake's text, which tells us to accept them as necessary to human existence. "Without contraries is no progression" is one statement of this principle in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which also asserts that "opposition is true friendship." If one wanted to, one could find further resonances between Blake's text and Mak's *Heaven and Hell*: his opening up of an illusory void beneath the earth in *Heaven and Hell* could be related to Blake's lines about "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid," as well as to the passage where the narrating voice describes being led down a cavern by an angel until "a void boundless as a nether sky appear'd beneath us."

As with so much else in Mak's art, however, one can also find a Chinese dimension to *Heaven and Hell*: the notion of yin and yang as dynamically interacting polarities underlying all phenomena is at least as valuable a source for the idea of complementaries as anything Blake can offer. This Chinese philosophical source, which Mak is happy to acknowledge, perhaps most clearly influences *Walking Figure I* (1977), a body constructed of two separate elements which intertwine (like the dark and light areas of the yin/yang diagram) to create one whole. Since in *Walking Figure I* the right side of the head is linked to the left

side of the torso (and vice versa), one is also reminded of the discovery that the two sides of our body are controlled by the opposite sides of the brain: a reversal and an opposition built into our biological hardware.

Useful as it is to note the culturally diverse range of sources employed by Mak, a mere cataloguing of them is insufficient and may even be misleading. What is crucial is the work that Mak does on his sources in *Heaven and Hell*. Rather than merely being “influenced by” Blake, he is offering a commentary on him (much as Blake himself offers a commentary on Dante and the other authors he chooses to illustrate). Again Mak invokes both Western and Chinese culture, whilst marking a degree of distance from both. He refuses to reconcile opposites by treating them as binary essences. Opposites are not necessary parts of a metaphysical whole for Mak, but rather differences which cannot be reconciled yet which may nevertheless collapse into sameness.

Mak’s concern with the theme of opposition, and the particular position he takes on it, must be seen as in part at least a critical, parodic response to the way other Hong Kong artists treat the theme in their works. A concern with the doctrine of yin/yang, for instance, can be found in a great number of works by first-generation Hong Kong modernist artists, including Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun), Hon Chi-fun (Han Zhixun), Aries Lee (Li Fuhua), and Van Lau. In the works of many such artists it functions as a “traditional” reference, a compensatory invocation of Chinese culture at the level of subject matter in paintings and sculptures which are deeply involved with Western modernism at the level of style. In certain works, however, the notion of yin/yang seems to be used as a way of thinking about that complex question of East/West interaction itself, offering a comforting philosophical frame for thinking about the potentially troublesome issue of the clash between Western modernist and Chinese traditionalist narratives. In Van Lau’s sculptural relief for the foyer of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, *The Meeting of Yin and Yang* (1989), there even appears to be an attempt to allude to the political aspect of the meeting of China and the West. Depicting male and female figures standing side by side, but not interacting even to the extent of looking at one another, it seems to represent allegorically the “one country, two systems” motto of the post-Joint Declaration era which Mak’s works poke fun at.



Wucius Wong and other artists of his generation (in particular those of the New Ink Painting tendency of whom Lui Shou-kwan is the most significant representative) were the first artists in Hong Kong to seriously engage with the project

of producing a modernist art. Whereas the most interesting artists of the previous generation (the early Luis Chan, Yee Bon, and so on) and of the younger generation (Antonio Mak, Oscar Ho [He Qingji], and so on) have worked primarily in Western media and taken their primary conceptual frame from the West, Wong and the artists of the middle generation tend to make Chinese culture their primary frame. Their project of modernization becomes problematic because they are never willing to critique the image they have of that culture; instead they merely juxtapose signifiers of the Western and modern to the signifiers of Chineseness. There is no point of purchase within their work for an interrogation of tradition, which survives unchallenged—and possibly even intensified—in order to anxiously counterbalance the Western references. Wong's misty-mountain subject matter or Van Lau's choice of bamboo as a subject for his sculptures can be seen as examples of this desire to claim a cultural rootedness.

Tradition, often synonymous in everyday parlance with the past, is really only a modern way of looking at it, a kind of perspectival image of the past on the two-dimensional surface of the present. Despite appearances to the contrary, traditionalists (as well as artists such as Wong who wish to preserve tradition in tandem with modernity) actually prevent our investigating and recovering the past in new and meaningful ways. A precondition for such an investigation would be an awareness of the autonomy and heterogeneity of the past, of the absence of any cultural essence which continues in existence over time.

One can only begin to critique notions of tradition by seeing supposedly traditional references as having particular present-tense meanings and functions. Bamboo may have been a favoured subject of literati painters, symbolizing (because of the way it combines the qualities of flexibility and strength) the virtues to which this social élite aspired, but in Van Lau's sculpture bamboo's primary signification is "Chineseness." The same signification can be said to be carried by Wong's mountain landscapes (the presence of "Western" elements in the same image only serves to highlight by contrast that this is the case). Such nationalistic meanings predominate in a great deal of "traditional" art, to the point where we might wish to think of traditionalism as an aspect of the specifically modern phenomenon of nationalism, as Eric Hobsbawm does in his groundbreaking study of the phenomenon.⁹ Signs of modernity and of tradition are semiotic acts occurring in the same present tense, although the latter can be characterized as wishing to erase our awareness of their contemporaneity (and thereby gain a spurious

9. See *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

authority as inheritors of the past), whereas the former wish to foreground (or to claim) novelty. The kind of sign which is able to signify modernity is constantly changing: at one moment it may be a reference to the visual language of Abstract Expressionism; at another that same reference may define the work as passé because the game has moved on. Tradition, on the other hand, tends to be signified through the investment of new meaning in preexisting signs. The meaning may be quite radically new, but continuity at the level of the signifier helps disguise that fact.¹⁰

The earlier work of Luis Chan exemplifies art that is unaware of any possible conflict between narratives of modernism and tradition. Wucius Wong represents those artists who are aware of a problem and who seek to symbolically resolve or manage it through a form of hybrid art. The later paintings of Chan and the sculptures of Antonio Mak are instances of art which attempts to escape from the binary thinking which plagued artists of Wong's generation. Both also engage with the art of that generation in their works, albeit obliquely. Mak concerns himself extensively with the theme of opposites, but does so more consciously and playfully than Wong and ends up both unexpectedly deflating oppositions and exacerbating them until they become unmanageable difference. Chineseness is not merely represented in terms of the past in his work—and since China is thought of as Mao as much as Tao the political is not excluded from consideration. The conceptual response of Mak (a move towards greater artistic self-consciousness) is quite different from that of Chan, who turns instead to the unconscious as a resource for moving beyond the East/West dilemma. Instead of an anxious search for signifiers of ever greater modernity, Chan lets the unconscious work in its own way on material taken from a variety of sources, high and low, Chinese and Western. Elements prised from the grand narratives of both (Western) modernism and (Chinese) tradition can still be identified in his images, but they are transformed by fantasy. There is heterogeneity, but the strong unconscious element to the creative process ensures some degree of psychic resolution. In different ways, both Mak and Chan make use of a kind of active playfulness to open up a Hong Kong position.

The cultural construction of a Hong Kong position tends always to be fragile or tentative, as the cases of Chan and Mak show. Although other artists of Mak's

10. Continuity may even be at the level of the art object, rather than just at the level of the signifier. Museum displays can make classical Chinese artworks signify as elements in an entirely modern narrative of national tradition. I discuss museums as propagators of cultural narratives in chapter two of my *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), a book which brings together much of my earlier writing on art in Hong Kong.

generation have also been interested in the question of Hong Kong cultural identity (particularly in the years approaching the handover of the territory to China) they have not been able to express that identity successfully in positive terms. Unlike most narratives of identity, “Hong Kongness” cannot draw upon religious, national, or ethnic discourse for support. Indeed, the latter two of this trio of discourses (powerful because they can appear as essential truths or natural distinctions) are actively ranged against the narrative of Hong Kongness and in favour of the competing narrative of Chineseness. In the case of Hong Kong, nationalism is a discourse in the service of annexation, not of liberation. Hong Kongness has as a value its distance from or scepticism about grand narratives—it is a species of rootless, nonessentializing, or postmodern identity which might be usefully considered by those concerned with cultural identity politics elsewhere—but it is always in danger of being unable to sustain itself in relation to the powerful Chinese nationalist narrative to which notions of tradition are allied.

Following the return of Hong Kong to China it seems highly likely that there will be extensive attempts to interpellate Hong Kong people as national subjects. In the cultural sphere, tradition will probably be one of the masks that national ideology will employ, with Hong Kong being defined as having become contaminated by foreign culture during the colonial era.¹¹ Strong forms of traditionalism are unlikely to have widespread appeal in Hong Kong, however, and even official political rhetoric has been expedient enough to acknowledge “two systems” at the same time as it proclaims “one country.” Given this acceptance of an ideology of hybridity at the political level, it is more probable that some kind of hybrid art will be officially endorsed and promoted, as it has been in the late colonial era.

Although hybridity has often been thought of in cultural theory as being associated with positive values, it is salutary to note that in late colonial Hong Kong it has for some time now been elevated to the level of civic ideology. Wucius Wong’s paintings, together with those of Lui Shou-kwan and the other artists of the New Ink Painting movement, are well represented in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and figure prominently in both its permanent displays and traveling exhibits. I would argue that this institutional privileging has occurred because the concern that art shows for combining Chinese and Western sources (and the apolitical way in which it does so) made it a quite suitable visual culture for a colonial government to promote, particularly in the wake of the riots

11. I document a 1995 attempt by the Hong Kong Obscene Articles Tribunal to impose “traditional” Chinese values by removing a sculpture by Elizabeth Frink from public display in my “Art in Trouble with the Law in Hong Kong,” *Art AsiaPacific* 3, 2 (April 1996), 32–33.

of the late 1960s, when old-style colonial policy was given something of a re-think.¹² Some kind of a “modern” culture was inevitable at that juncture, given the changes which economic development was bringing to the colony, but a measure of government support for a suitably innocuous notion of modernity was no doubt given a specific impetus by the challenge to its legitimacy offered by the very different conception of the modern being promulgated from across the border.

Whilst the hybrid art of Wong, Lui, and other artists of their generation has been accepted by the cultural institutions of the colonial government as consonant with their aims, the work of artists of Mak’s generation has been largely ignored until recently and has only been reluctantly admitted as a consequence of external pressure from the arts community, generated primarily through the media.¹³ One reason for this institutional exclusion must surely be that it is a kind of hybrid art which offers meanings which are less amenable to use as civic ideology. Indeed, Mak’s work functions to undermine the very art which that ideology has embraced and so can be seen as positively injurious to it, as offering a viewpoint from which its closures begin to become visible. Two varieties of hybrid art, which came into being at two different historical moments but which now coexist in the same cultural space, can be seen as competing for hegemony in late colonial Hong Kong. It would be both deeply ironic and at the same time completely unsurprising if some version of the same semiotic struggle were to continue in the period following the handover of Hong Kong to China.

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12. In an introduction to the catalogue of a 1981 exhibition of Hong Kong art at the museum, Lawrence Tam (Tan Zhicheng, an ex-student of Lui Shou-kwan and formerly the museum’s chief curator) talks of the exhibit as containing “happy evidence of the blending of aspects of two streams of world culture, the East and the West” (*Hong Kong Art, 1970–1980* [Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1981], p. 12). The art of Lui probably fits this ideological frame rather more easily than that of Wong, which refuses to simply “blend” East and West. Wong’s paintings seem more aware than Tam’s statement suggests of the problems of the “East meets West” project.

13. I discuss the pressure group activities of artists in Hong Kong at various points in *Art and Place*, especially in the first two sections. See particularly pp. 47, 52, and 58.