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*Experimental Painting and Painting Theories in Colonial Hong Kong (1940-1980): Reflection on Cultural Identity*

During the past fifty years the art of painting in Hong Kong has distinguished itself from other art forms, undergoing a metamorphosis in both concept and style. Conceptually, many Hong Kong painters have developed meaningful and systematic theories of painting and aesthetics which reflect a concern for cultural identity. In doing so, they have revealed the conflict that they as painters have encountered – a conflict between traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western aesthetics. Further, they have given expression to this in their paintings and experimental work. This article will illustrate the development of the conceptual and aesthetic transformation that took place in Hong Kong between 1940 and 1980 by examining the aesthetics and artistic experiments of several representative painters. In addition, this article will provide a critical discussion of this aesthetic development and investigate if art and cultural discussions in contemporary post-colonial discourse can be applied to the situation of Hong Kong.

*Painting in Hong Kong: 1940 – 1980*

Scholars agree that, since the mid-nineteenth century, Hong Kong has experienced more cultural interchange than any other Chinese city. This is largely due to its colonial heritage and its geographical position as the southern outlet of China. In the pre-war period of the 1940s, Hong Kong's painting scene was dominated by Western painting, and local art organizations were run by Westerners who outnumbered Chinese painters creating traditional Chinese art. This situation continued until masses of Chinese painters immigrated to Hong Kong from Southern China during the Japanese invasion of China in World War II.<sup>1</sup> Yet still it took years before Chinese painters could bring in more Chinese influences to painting.

The dominance of Western artistic methods in Hong Kong continued for several years after World War II as Western painting – still life and real-

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<sup>1</sup> Wucius Wong, »The Development of Hong Kong Art in the Recent Ten Years«, *Ming Pao Monthly*, Hong Kong, (1/1976), p. 169.

ism in particular – flourished in galleries and museums.<sup>2</sup> The work of local painters was not of the highest quality at that time, because they had only minimal exposure to the great masterpieces as well as to intellectual discourse regarding »foreign« art. The only painting classes offered to Hong Kong artists were taught by a few Chinese painters who had returned from Western art studies abroad.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Hong Kong artists still did not get as much recognition as Western painters in the years immediately after World War II.

Yet the neglect of Chinese artistry was soon to be remedied. Cultural modernization accompanied a period of intense industrialization in Hong Kong in the post-war era. Painters in the colony were introduced to a number of new Western modern art movements. In addition, the government of Hong Kong established new and innovative art colleges offering courses that reflected the rapidly changing art scene. In 1958, the »Modern Literature and Art Association« was established by a group of young, prominent local artists such as Lu Shoukun, Zhang Yi, Wen Lou, Wucius Wong, and Han Zhixun. The association organized prominent art exhibitions, such as the »Hong Kong International Salon of Paintings« in the early 1960s. The exhibit included modern abstract works by both local and foreign artists, and, typical of the modern art movement in Hong Kong at the time, was a bold reaction against the traditional Western artistic practices of the 1940s and the 1950s in the colony. New developments like the International Salon were reinforced by the opening of Hong Kong City Hall in 1962, which soon became the main venue for art museums, exhibition galleries, art courses, and other events involving art.

Still, in the early 1960s, Hong Kong's local artistic identity had not been fully established, and the art work produced continued to reflect Western influence. Six years after its founding in 1964, the »Modern Literature and Art Association« dissolved, and some of its members founded the »*In Tao* Painters Society«. This group consisted of experimental artists attempting to integrate Chinese and Western styles by using a wide range of forms and materials. The members of *In Tao* juxtaposed traditional Chinese techniques and materials – calligraphy and silk, for example – and novel Western methods, such as print, spray-gun painting, and aesthetically progressive concepts included abstract and optical art of the West in three-dimensional works and

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<sup>2</sup> According to *Hong Kong Artists* (vol. 1), the last art exhibition prior to World War II was »Exhibition of Western Paintings« held at a library in the Hong Kong University. Cf. Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Hong Kong Artists*, vol. 1, The Urban Council of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 1995, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wong, [1/1976], p. 170.



sculpture, as well as painting. This served to introduce an entirely fresh, though not uncontroversial, set of creative media. The mid-1960s, then, marked the beginning of Hong Kong art. This coincided with a period of rapid economic growth and a move toward localization policies instituted by the British government in the colony, which was intended to nurture a Hong Kong identity.<sup>4</sup>

Hong Kong's artistic rejuvenation was just underway when political riots were sparked in 1967 by local leftists objecting to British rule. During this time of rapid change and political upheaval came the call for a return to Chinese traditional art and the creation of forms of art that Hong Kong could call its own. The trend was led by Lu Shoukun, who, since the mid-1950s had promoted a »root-finding« process for local Chinese painters. He called on painters to first grasp the spirit of traditional painting and then turn to new developments once the proper tools were securely in hand. An accomplished painter himself, Lu combined Western styles – Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism and Abstractionism – with traditional Chinese painting in his experimental work. He later created the unique »Zen« style of painting. Lu's Zen painting integrated traditional Chinese ink painting with modern Abstractionism and served to convey Buddhist principles. Lu also launched one of Hong Kong's most notable movements in painting in the 1970s, which came to be known as the »New Ink Movement.« Members of this movement drew on traditional Chinese ink painting techniques and transformed them, yielding various new forms of expression. A number of Hong Kong's young artists were at the forefront of the movement, incorporating concepts from Western modern art, abstract expressionism, for the most part. The New Ink movement in the colony marked the end of the dominance of Western academic oil painting and gave rise to »Hong Kong Painting«, which aims at the founding of local artistic identity.

In the 1970s, more and more local artists devoted themselves to creating their own individual styles instead of conforming to Western artistic practice. In 1975, the Urban Council organized the first »Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition« at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, a milestone in exhibiting modern paintings created by local artists. The government sponsored the exhibition, reflecting its support of local artists. The opening of the Hong Kong Arts Center in 1977 and the founding of the Fine Arts Department at Hong Kong University further promoted art education in the colony. Finally, in 1978, the »Exhibition of Hong Kong Artists: the Early

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Generation« was organized by the Hong Kong Museum of Art. This exhibition gave a retrospective of the artistic performance of local painters in earlier years, demonstrated Hong Kong's commitment to developing a local artistic identity, and encouraged a historical awareness of the talent within its border.

### *Communist Influences*

In 1946, during the civil war in Mainland China between the Communist party and the National party, Hong Kong became a sanctuary for left-wing artists from the mainland. While their stay in the colony was temporary, these artists-in-exile founded the »*Yen Kan* Painting Society«. With the freedom and stability Hong Kong provided for them, the members of »*Yen Kan*« used art to promote their socialist political views explicitly. »*Yen Kan*«, which means »the living of the proletarians,« gave a strong socialist message to a colony in which the very rich and the very poor were living side by side; the contrasts were obvious and *Yen Kan's* message clear. The society held exhibitions and produced publication that also expressed their philosophy of art and aesthetics. While the *Yen Kan* was in existence only four years, before it was dissolved in 1950, it attempted to exert socialist influences on aesthetics in Hong Kong.

The founder of *Yen Kan*, Huang Xinbo, also organized artists who had immigrated from the mainland regions of Kunming, Chunking, and Quilin to the British colony and arranged for them to be members of the society. *Yen Kan* also used a social club for Westerners as its activity venue, and in this capacity masked the Communist identities of its members. Soon the Society's art projects became very political. Its exhibitions displayed cartoon and woodcraft that symbolically demonstrated first the failure of the military, and second the shortcomings of the political and economic projects of the National Party in China.<sup>5</sup> In another bold move, the *Yen Kan* issued political statements that linked art with socialist theory. At the close of the civil war, the Communist Party was victorious, and the New China was founded by Mao Tse Tung. The society then busied itself by producing war cartoons and huge portraits of Mao, the new and promising ruler. In the end, it sent nearly all of its members back to the mainland where they took up government

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Tan Shuetsung, »Memory of the Revolutionary Art Body who Fought in the South – The Yan Ken Painting Society«, *Meixu*, Renmin Meixu Press, Peking, 2, 1984, unpaginated.



positions related to art. The society's dissolution was complete by 1950, with high hopes pinned on the promises offered by the New China.

During *Yen Kan's* four years in Hong Kong, its members actively promoted Mao's aesthetic ideology, as expressed in his speech, »The Yen On Art and Literary Discussion,« delivered in 1942. A long article in a Hong Kong newspaper by the founder of the society, Huang Xinbo, in May 1949, revealed not only *Yen Kan's* vision of art, but also its political agenda for Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> In the first part of the article, Huang severely criticized the artistic community under the National Party in China, including particular local artists and groups that promoted Western paintings. Western painting, in *Yen Kan's* view was produced by and displayed for the rich only. Further, the paintings failed to express concern for the social conditions of the poor, nor did the artists themselves denounce the political policies that perpetuated that poverty. The article identified by name Shanghai artists guilty of these charges, among them Liu Haixu and Tsu Baixiung and accused their art of discriminating against the proletariat. Huang also claimed these artists either uncritically revered Western art and blindly followed modern Western painting or tried to please foreigners with traditional Chinese art – merely a leftover from a feudal society of days gone by. Huang's declaration defined the »New Art« he and his colleagues promoted as neo-democratic art. New Art was to depict the lives of the masses who, according to Mao, were the soldiers, farmers and factory workers. Huang and the New Artists insisted that art should offer serious reflection on existing social conditions, addressing the themes of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. It should also take a realistic approach to solutions to these issues, based on that reflection. Huang's article also identified two missions for artists: first, use art as a tool for education; second, retrieve art from the hands of the privileged class. It insisted that art should be concerned with content but not with form, and that artists should depict what people were familiar with in everyday life. Furthermore, the society believed that both the style and the content of painting should change with the times, as the lives and ideologies of people change over time. It should be noted that *Yen Kan*, in its public declaration, did not try to eliminate the art of the bourgeois because it realized that Hong Kong was quite different from mainland China. Hong Kong's masses were fueled by the corporate interests of capitalism. The society believed that the bourgeois could advance along with the proletariat, but that members of the bourgeoisie needed to practice »self-correction«. Obviously, *Yen Kan* ultimately failed to sway the

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<sup>6</sup> Huang Xinbo, »Our Opinions in the Establishment of New Art«, *Wen Wui Pao*, Hong Kong, May 20, 1949.

political opinions of the majority of people in the British colony, who so eagerly followed Western colonial values. By 1950, at the end of their time in Hong Kong, *Yen Kan* had won few converts to their politico-artistic theory, although their social and artist influence was certainly notable.

Other artists groups and art organizations took a favorable view of Western painting and were also active in the years of *Yen Kan*. Luis Chan, Lee Byng and Yee Bon, local painters who were famous at the time, produced Western-style paintings. Both Lee and Yee had studied in North America and returned to the colony to found their own studios. Though Chan had not traveled to the West, he became acquainted with both Lee and Yee. Apparently proving Huang's charges accurate, many of those who gathered in the studios of Chan, Lee, and Yee were indeed quite well-to-do. The three also offered lessons in Western painting to these same patrons. These artists were so devoted to Western Classical painting that local artistic identity was not of particular concern to them. Thus, as will be discussed later, their influence took on a very different character from that of the *Yen Kan*.

### *The Local Spirit*

There were a few painters whose art not only reflected the history of painting in Hong Kong in the 20th century, but also represented the colony's spirit of experimentation. Luis Chan, a painter in Western classical painting, was one of the most prominent figures in this era. As noted above, Chan had never been to Europe or North America for formal artistic training, but instead was a self-trained artist. He developed the style he came to call his own through exchanging ideas with other local painters who had studied abroad. Making the most of his keen artistic sensibility, his fluency in English, and an indisputably charming personality, Chan created a large circle of friends. These strengths in combination raised him to a prominent position in Hong Kong's art community.

Luis Chan was also one of few local artists to cross the boundaries of social class and race and had established friendships with a number of European and American celebrities in the colony. This played in his favor among his local friends and followers as well, ranking him among the most popular of cultural leaders in Hong Kong. But Chan's acquisition of the public attention was gained over time. By organizing fund-raising balls to benefit the arts and holding large art openings and parties, Chan created opportunities to exhibit work of his own and later founded art societies of his own as well.

In 1934, at the age of 29, Chan was introduced to the Hong Kong Art



Club by the wealthy Lady Shenton. Soon the club granted him executive member status and sponsored exhibition of Chan's work in water colors the following year. This was Chan's first solo exhibit and one that placed him firmly in the center of Hong Kong's art circles.

While Chan continued to paint, he earned his living by running the family business before the war. His work in these years included Western academic paintings, primarily landscapes in water colors and oil. After the war, Chan started to concentrate on oil painting. His strong relationship with the colonial governor, Grantham, helped to enhance his artistic influence.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the civil war in China between the Communists and the National party, as mentioned earlier, had fueled the passions of the *Yen Kan* Painting Society whose socialist orientation was very different from that of Chan. In the view of *Yen Kan* members, and other left-leaning artists groups in Hong Kong, Chan was as guilty as other local artists blasted in Huang's article of representing the »bourgeois« in art and were regarded as art elites in the colony. Moreover, the British colonialists were enthusiastic over Chan's promotion of Western painting, and formed an alliance which did not share *Yen Kan's* nationalism, further fueling the antagonistic relationship between these opposing local visions.

While Chan was a skilled organizer, he was also, quite simply, a great painter. Early in his career, Chan was influenced by other young painters who had returned from abroad and who had promoted the Realist tradition of Western academic painting. Yet Chan did not really embrace Realism. In the foreword of his book, *Treatise on Art* (1953), he described art as »creative imagination« and saw beauty as »the expression of consciousness and emotion.«<sup>8</sup> Although he adhered to the practical principles of painting in accordance with Western academic techniques, Chan had more regard for creativity than for imitation. Creativity, for Chan, was the spontaneous outgrowth of the artist's communication with Nature or objects, an idea he borrowed from Constable whom he quoted in his writings. Chan expressed this same idea in a discussion in 1954 of portrait painting:

... the most successful painting of a portrait, or for that matter, a figure subject, requires observant understanding and sympathy before full expression of the artist can be adequately made.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See the introduction written by governor Grantham to Luis Chan's, *How to Paint A Portrait*, Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong 1954, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Luis Chan, *Treatise on Art*, Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong 1953, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Chan, 1954, p. 21.

Similarly, Chan expressed his sense of aesthetics in the preface to his book, *The Art of Drawing* (1955):

(The) ultimate technical accomplishment lies rather in artists' success in their adoption coupled with their imaginative and creative powers that may be developed by experience and endless experiments.<sup>10</sup>

One's style, according to Chan, is the way to create one's artistic symbols. His quotation from Kandinsky summed up Chan's own sense of aesthetics:

To any question beginning with 'must', there is no 'must' in art, because art is always free ... from the point of view of an inner need, no limitation can be made. The artist may use any form which his expression demands; his inner impulse must find suitable form ... The general relationship with which these works of art through the centuries are always more strengthened does not lie in the 'external' but in the roots of mystical inner content.<sup>11</sup>

Chan's stress on free creativity and the mystical inner workings of artistic expression contrasted sharply with *Yen Kan's* sense of art as political manifesto.

Although Chan had seldom practiced traditional Chinese painting, he had written a related book, *A Survey of Chinese Painting* (1954), in an attempt to examine the development of Eastern painting theories and to compare these to developments in the West. A representative example is his reading of the notion of »spiritual resonance« (the first of the famous Six Ways in Chinese painting), based on Harold Speed's analysis. Spiritual resonance is a term used to describe the artistic process as a kind of musical movement.<sup>12</sup> Chan's interpretation, unfortunately, incorporated too many Western ideas of art and thus showed limited understanding in Chinese aesthetics, for he underestimated its metaphysical implications. Chan had also severely criticized imitative practices in the Chinese artistic tradition, which, to him, should serve as an introduction to painting only. Chan favored a stress on creativity and on Speed's notion of »internal musical movement« instead.

By the mid-1950s, Hong Kong artists had begun to join in on the West's modern art movement. In 1955, Lu Shoukun founded the Hong Kong Artists Association. This marked the beginning of the modern art movement in Hong

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<sup>10</sup> Luis Chan, *The Art of Drawing*, The Artland Co. Ltd., Hong Kong 1955, p. I.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Luis Chan, *A Survey of Chinese Painting*, Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong 1954, pp. 27-28.



Kong. The new movement threatened Chan's position as the spokesman of an older generation immersed in the Western academic tradition. At this time, Chan actively engaged in debates on modern art in newspapers and in his own writings to defend his position. Meanwhile, the New Ink Movement emerged as a major local art movement during this period. New ink, a style launched by Lu Shoukun, sought to modernize traditional Chinese art. New Ink's challenges to the old order meant that the traditional Realist/Impressionist school of

Western art, which Chan had represented so faithfully and so well, was facing severe challenges. Later, however, he started to experiment with modern art, following his desire to explore this new and provocative style.

Chan tried a wide range of styles. His motivation to explore modern art was heightened in 1962 after a rejection of his work by the curators of »Exhibition of Hong Kong Art Today«, an event promoting the local Modern art movement. This led him to begin an exploration of a number of schools of modern painting including Cubism, Expressionism, Abstractionism, as well as a number of novel techniques, such as monotype printing, hard-edged colored-field landscape, and spray-gun painting. In 1962, Chan explained his transition from Realism to Abstractionism:

(This) has been a natural part of my self-learning process. I have been making art in both directions for a while, and I have no intention to give up either one of them. ... When I first attempted to make 'new style' art, I was exploring Cubism and Surrealism, but I found them too limiting in form. Then I decided to go fully abstract. Meanwhile I wanted to continue my realist style, but added a touch of Fauvist modification.<sup>13</sup>

Chan dabbled in many different forms at this time and came up with new questions about art:

Why should we accept abstract art? That is because in our everyday experience, there is more than physical reality. We have thought, feeling and imagination and we cannot escape from abstract illusion. Realistic painting shows us physical reality, and abstract painting the mental and the emotional world. An abstract painter is someone who expresses emotion with his imagination as abstraction links with illusion and fantasy which exist in our daily life, only if we care to look for it.<sup>14</sup>

Through these explorations, Chan developed a theory of individual

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<sup>13</sup> Luis Chan, »From Realism to Abstractionism«, publication information unknown, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

perception, of how artists view the world and how their expressions are outlets for their deep emotions:

When one needs to deal with the complexity of the world, they could either be optimistic or pessimistic. My abstract art is born in pessimistic mood. Whenever I am depressed I turn to art, for it takes away my sadness and depression. In the world of my own creation, I am God, and I deliver all my sorrow to the universe I create. The abstract art I create is the voice from my heart which tries to make people understand emotion and life. ... Rhythm is the spirit of my abstract art, I create it in my own symbols and illusions, and successfully form a distinctive style.<sup>15</sup>

Based on these writings, it is clear that Chan's immersion in this new art form, led him along a path in which he was discovering his inner self. Art is not just simply representation of form, as he always realized, but also of the inner workings of the artist's own internal core.

After years of experimentation, abstract art became Chan's main vehicle of expression, and Western aesthetics remained his main references. Unlike other local artists of his period, Chan insisted on absolute freedom in artistic expression, and this freed him from the burdens of both cultural heritage and nationalism. Both personally and in his work as an artist, Chan thrived in the colony, a bi-lingual and bi-cultural space where East and West merged. Questions of cultural identity and Chinese tradition very seldom affected him as all he asked for was a »free soul.«

After another decade of searching, Chan revitalized his art through the playful and skillful use of the subconscious, producing distinctive surrealistic landscapes mixed with personal fantasy and illusion. His work included portraits and animal paintings in a unique and childlike style, revealing only his own humor (*fig. 7*). During the 1970s and 1980s, Chan once again emerged as an outstanding creative figure. Upon his death in 1995, he was described as:

Questions of cultural identity and Chinese tradition have never been burdens to the creative activity of Luis Chan who advocates absolute freedom in painting. Chan's fish paintings in later period reflect an unique and child-like style.

One of the outstanding figures in the history of Hong Kong art, and an artist who, through boundless imagination and endless creative energy, was able to keep up with the rapid pace of development of Hong Kong.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Hong Kong Arts Centre, exhibition notes of »Retrospectives of Luis Chan, 1905-1995«, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong 1995.





*Fig. 1: Luis Chan, Kau Yu Tao (Nine things in harmony), 1980*

Chan's adaptive and creative spirit, his association with the West, and his unique process of self-exploration parallel the development of modern art in Hong Kong.

### *The New Ink Movement*

The New Ink Movement, led by Lu Shoukun, usurped Chan's eminence in the 1960s. At the time, Lu was a very influential figure in the local art community, as he promoted modernization of traditional Chinese painting and related it to a Hong Kong cultural identity. His views helped emerging Hong Kong artists address an existential crisis in the British colony – a crisis that became more serious when political tension finally grew into riots and street demonstrations in 1967 as Hong Kong's leftists protested against British colonial rule.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The radical political tensions emerged between the British government and the Chinese leftists in the colony in the 60's was initiated by a group of factory workers on strike in San Po Kong which resulted in the 1967's riot. Thousands of workers joined

While Chan tended to interpret Chinese aesthetics according to the Western scheme, Lu absorbed Western ideas into the Chinese tradition. Lu, born in Canton, learned Chinese painting from his father. He also learned by copying ancient Chinese scrolls and pictures in his father's antique shop. Lu moved to Hong Kong in 1948 where he impressed the art community with his work and his teachings. Amazingly, he could reproduce at will every traditional style. However, his desire for individual expression caused him to become an experimentalist in what may be termed »Chinese art with a Western approach.«<sup>18</sup> Lu was keen on ink painting, which he later mixed with his experimental ideas. Eventually, this led him to 'Zen' painting, the style for which he was most famous in his later development.

Ink painting, developed during the *Tang* Dynasty in the eighth century, emphasized individual and spiritual expression. The original concept was to create an alternative to the strict outline and the splendid, colorful treatment that had been very popular in *Tang*. The New Ink Movement, introduced in Hong Kong in the 1960s, revised traditional Chinese ink painting. Via New Ink techniques, ink painting went through revolutionary changes and was experimented with, using various Western modern art forms and styles. Lu's intent in beginning the New Ink movement was to fill a need Hong Kong painters had to establish an artistic identity for Hong Kong. This group of young artists found traditional Chinese paintings repetitive and felt it failed to express feeling related to their living and times. At the same time, these painters were not satisfied with Western academic paintings, as they found them unimaginative. In Lu's view, new ink painting was a reform of the old Chinese tradition, as well as an embellishment to the Western academic tradition. He also took into account the social environment of the post-war era which encouraged, not only freedom of expression, but intense competition as well. So then, for Lu the spirit of new ink paintings offered a mental balance to people living in a colony which was overrun with material and technological advancements.

Lu regarded the tradition of ink painting as manifesting the spiritual principle of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which connected artistic content and form to personal spiritual and ethical cultivation. Lu believed that the growing prosperity of Hong Kong, which by the 1960s had become an inter-

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in the riot which led to injuries. The riot was read as a local rebellion against the colonial government. After the riot, localization policy was promoted by the colonial government to build up a sense of belonging and local awareness among Hong Kong citizens.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lee Ying Ho, (ed.), *Modern Edition*, Hong Kong Modern Literature and Art Association, Hong Kong, No. 4, September 1963, p. 14.



national and commercial city, provided some favorable conditions for the ink painting movement. First, according to Lu, the Hong Kong Chinese people could relate to ink painting; they felt closer to ink painting than to Western painting. Secondly, the international art community was more interested in a new genre of work that grew out of local cultural innovations more than it in imitations of Western schools. Finally, combining Chinese ink painting with Western materials and techniques, produced intriguing artistic effects. Lu's views were reflected in the work of young artists who mixed ink with fluorescent colors or printing oil and utilized ink with concepts of Western design. He classified modern ideas combined with tradition as »adaptation« which should not be separated from the »root« or foundation, which, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, is the spiritual cultivation of the artist.<sup>19</sup> The »root« of painting, according to Lu, was based on ancient Confucian principles and teachings such as *Chung Yung (The Doctrines of the Means)* and *Da Xua (The Teachings)* both of which promote self-cultivation and self-discovery. Lu drew on these teachings to urge artists to return to the »root« – i.e. the inner self – and nourish it, to find the wisdom to incorporate new forms of painting. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style which would also reflect their own personality and ways of existence. According to old Confucian teachings, this return to one's root, or inner self, could also transcend temporal, spacial, and cultural differences.

Critics tended to read Taoist and Buddhist messages into Lu's paintings, especially in his 'Zen' paintings which reflected life attitudes of the two teachings via brush strokes in ink and abstract expressionism in style (fig. 2). Lu explained his style in Taoist and Buddhist terms and said it reflected styles of living and the relationship between an individual and society. His vision offered solutions to artists struggling with a crisis of cultural identity in Hong Kong, who often found themselves feeling confused and ungrounded in their hybrid cultural situation. While Lu asked his students to follow traditional ways of learning and to copy traditional paintings, he regarded the practice of imitation as an introduction to the idea and skill of painting only. There was much to learn from the tradition, like the principles of brush strokes and symbols. Once painting students mastered these, and only then, could they establish their own definitive style. In other words, Lu believed that artists should be able to break with tradition only after they have a good foundation and knowledge of the tradition.

Lu saw plenty of possibilities in merging the Chinese and Western styles

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<sup>19</sup> Lu Shoukun, *Sui Mo Hua Jiang*, notes of Lu's lectures recorded by a group of his students and published by them, Hong Kong 1972, pp. 31-33.



Fig. 2: Lu Shoukun, *Chuang Tze by himself*, 1974

A representative work of Lu's »Zen« painting and the New Ink movement. Critics tended to read Taoist and Buddhist messages into his »Zen« paintings which are mainly experimental work in ink strokes in a style of Western abstract expressionism.



of painting. He believed that by combining the artistic treatment and technology of the West with the spiritual temperament and ink brush strokes of the Chinese tradition one could create a whole new visual experience. The most important goal, he believed, was self-discovery. For, only through self-discovery could one form original ideas, and this process should always come before artistic form. Lu saw a need for a new form of expression in Hong Kong which was becoming a place so »foreign« to the peasant society of China. To achieve innovation in art, as he always insisted, was to seek self-knowledge in one's tradition, a foundation which artists could build on later.

Lu's own experimental work paralleled his teaching. His attempts to modernize ink painting had been controversial as conservative attitudes resisted his push for innovative experiments in painting, which the following excerpt from a critique of his exhibition demonstrates.

(Lu's) new approach is almost entirely Western and it would, indeed, be hard to differentiate where Chinese painting ends and Western painting begins. However, his conception, technique and execution remain Chinese. ... I do think, though, that it is dangerous for Mr. Lui to assimilate a phase of Western art which I consider undesirable – that is vista or perspective painting. It has taken the Western artist hundreds of years up to our time to discover the disadvantage of making a hole in the canvas, thereby breaking the unity of the picture.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, throughout the struggle for a new art form, Lu's was a strong voice in favor of nurturing a cultural identity in the Chinese artistic tradition.

### *From Traditionalism to Creative Freedom*

Lu's influence through his work and his articles in various newspapers and magazines was significant to Hong Kong art circle in the 1960s. While involved with the New Ink Movement, Lu was also curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the 1970s where he oversaw many important art exhibitions and events. After his sudden death in 1975 at the age of fifty-six, his efforts were carried on by his student, Wucius Wong.

Wong had studied Chinese painting under Lu in 1958 and became his close follower. With his provocative views on art and his call to return to

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<sup>20</sup> K. C. Wong, »Impressive Exhibition«, *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, March 5, 1957.

Chinese tradition, Lu inspired Wong to a great extent. Wong studied art in the U.S. in the early 1960s and was struck by what he saw of Western artistic culture. In 1966, a year after returning to Hong Kong, Wong chronicled this experience, describing life as a young artist in Hong Kong and outlining his struggles between the influences of East and West, modernism and traditionalism.<sup>21</sup> According to Wong's description, prior to the 1950s Western art was available in Hong Kong only as low-quality reproductions in art books. It was not until the 1960s that Wong had the chance to see genuine Western work when he studied in the U.S. This experience also raised questions about cultural differences in artistic expression and an artist's relation to tradition. The West had not completely displaced Wong's Chinese roots, instead he was integrating the two influences, though not without struggle. He had also found that Westerners held two common attitudes toward Eastern art: one asked that what is essentially Eastern be preserved; the other insisted that Eastern artists should learn from the West. According to Wong, both revealed nothing but ignorance of Eastern art. Wong's reflection is reminiscent of Edward Said's notion of »Orientalism« and the problem of the »Otherness« in contemporary post-colonial discourse. As Wong said in 1966:

Some Westerners tend to look for their notion of the Eastern tradition in our work and make elaborate significance out of it, they disregard our creativity and our relations to the contemporary world. The others only read our work from their own aesthetics, values and modes of perception which finally repel them from really entering into our world of painting.<sup>22</sup>

Wong regarded the »Eastern identity« of young Hong Kong artists as the language they learned as they grew. Chinese ways of living, thinking, and visual habits are all related to the Chinese tradition. This identity, becomes »the other« in a foreign context and can result in an impetus for artistic experimentation. Wong himself had attempted to give up the traditional lines in Chinese painting and painted landscapes in oil and the human figure in ink. But no matter how hard he tried to combine the East and the West, the former was still his base and structure. Soon he decided to return, both to his homeland in Hong Kong and to his Chinese painting tradition in order to have, in his own words »a greater freedom in creativity.«<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Wucius Wong, »Return to the East and Get Set...«, newspaper article, publication information unknown, Hong Kong 1966.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



Wong's idea of return is similar to Lu's notion of return, except Wong elaborated more explicitly on the existential experience as a Hong Kong artist.

A return to the East does not mean just a return to the tradition or to cut oneself off from the West, both are impossible. We are living in a place where the East meets the West; we grow in our tradition while our way of living is under the influence of the West. To escape would only mean to limit one's creativity.<sup>24</sup>

In a 1963 article entitled, »The Reconstruction of the East,« Wong described the aesthetics of Eastern painting as disinterestedness, and as embracing a harmonious relation with Nature.<sup>25</sup> Instead of following the rules of perspective in Western painting, Wong saw Eastern painting as reflecting the principle of »spiritual resonance,« which transcends »style« or »technique,« as well as the bounds of nationality and culture. The only absolute, Wong said, is artistic freedom. This total freedom allows for the final transcendence of the East itself. In this sense, the incorporation of Western influences into Eastern art is certainly acceptable; it is always beneficial to learn from the West's forms of expression and materials and its developments in artistic movements. Wong's experimental painting, which merged the Western and Chinese ways, expresses his sense of the complementarity of the two cultures. One example in particular is his painting of a Chinese landscape, entitled »Purification #2« from 1979, using the form and texture of Western painting (*fig. 3*).

It should be noted that Wong was highly concerned about the role of the Hong Kong artist. For such artist, he said,

Rebellion is necessary when he wishes to break through the confines of his predecessors to make way for something new, personal... What is around him is vague, fluctuating, and shapeless. He has no sense of belonging; he lacks identity. However, with exceptional determination and conviction, he has an ample opportunity to mold the future.<sup>26</sup>

Wong was skeptical of Western art vogues and wondered if modern art

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Wucius Wong, »Reconstruction of the East«, newspaper article, publication information unknown, Hong Kong 1963.

<sup>26</sup> Wucius Wong, »Foreword to the Second Exhibition of the *In Tao* Painters«, catalogue of the 2nd exhibition of the *In Tao* painters, publication information unavailable, Hong Kong 1970.



Fig. 3: Wucius Wong, *Purification #2*, 1979

Wong's experimental painting expresses his sense of the complementarity of the Western and Chinese aesthetic principles. This is an example of his painting of a Chinese landscape in the form and texture of Western painting.



movements like Pop art had anything to relate or contribute to the living reality of Hong Kong artists.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, when Hong Kong artists' identity was being constructed in part by modernization and economic growth, the New Ink movement called for a return to the past. Distinction between Chinese and Western paintings produced by local painters was unnecessary, according to Wong, because in his view *all* artistic expressions produced by Chinese painters – no matter what their form – were still Chinese paintings. However, he admitted that it was difficult to identify »Hong Kong painting« because it was ambiguous, contradictory, and contained split elements. The most important thing, he said, was to return to tradition for spiritual identification, which, according to Wong, should be the harmonious relation of man and Nature.

For various reasons, beginning in the 1980s, the »Chinese complex« of the younger Hong Kong artists had lost its vigor. As the colony progressed to become a thriving international and commercial center, these artists preferred to follow artistic developments in the international community rather than remain within the Chinese tradition. The younger artists had more freedom to create, ironically, in a state of »rootlessness« than the generation of artists before them. Chinese tradition was one of the young generation's options, yet they preferred the artistic vision in the West.<sup>27</sup> This movement can be viewed as a phenomenon of late capitalism which happened to parallel the early stages of colonial independence. The mass culture and entertainment industries had distracted people's reflections on problems of cultural identity, power structure in colonial rule, race, and social class. Furthermore, the planned return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 did not create a real sense of colonial independence, especially in terms of cultural influences. As a result of commercialization, art education curriculum in Hong Kong came to focus on Western techniques and concepts during the 1980s, and the trend continues today.

### *Post-Colonial Discourse and Painting Theories*

It is said that pre-colonial cultural purity can never be fully recovered, because colonial cultures are inevitably hybridized. Colonial cultures have developed a dialectical relationship between the world view and epistemol-

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<sup>27</sup> David Clarke, »Hong Kongness: Chineseness and Modernity: Issues of Identity in Hong Kong Art«, *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, CUHK, Hong Kong, Winter (4/1995), pp. 82-84.

ogy of the colonizers and have developed an impulse to reconstruct an independent local identity. As pointed out by Helen Tiffin, the so called »decolonisation« process invokes a continuous dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and a peripheral subversion of these systems.<sup>28</sup> The painters discussed in this essay, along with their painting theories regarding the problems of cultural identity, correspond to some of the main issues in contemporary post-colonial discourse in the West.

The aesthetics of painting in Hong Kong, reflected by groups such as *Yen Kan* and individuals such as Chan, Lu, Wong, and the younger artists of the 1980s, reflect quite different values and perspectives. This is due to differences in personal background, education, class, political consciousness, and ideologies – especially regarding their views of the Chinese tradition. Each manifested their views in their art and unique styles. One common view expressed in post-colonial discourse is that hegemonic systems exert forms of control on colonized culture. This was not the case in Hong Kong. After political upheaval in the 1960s, the localization policy promoted by the government aimed to avoid further rebellions against the colonial rule. This policy greatly encouraged freedom of expression within the Hong Kong artistic community and thus a sense of belonging. The new aesthetics and artistic movements that grew as a result can be interpreted as a search for an artistic identity, instead of as merely resistance to cultural suppression. However, these views and activities can also be perceived as a particular manifestation of the process of decolonisation. This process is dynamic: it does not seek to subvert the dominant colonial ideology, but to promote textual strategies as they substitute the dominant discourse.<sup>29</sup>

It cannot be denied, however, that a power structure still existed, even within the localization policy. In the absence of a critical awareness of colonialism's ideological effects on the culture of Hong Kong, power and control were in the hands of local Chinese art authorities. All too easily, these authorities could have served the institutional function of ensuring that the dominant force's preferences in art were maintained. However, hegemonic projects were not undertaken by the colonialists themselves. The instance in which Luis Chan's work was rejected by curators of the »Exhibition of Hong Kong Art Today« in 1962 is one example.

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Tiffin, »Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse«, in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (Eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.



*Conclusion: »Chineseness« and the »Third Space«*

It is apparent that some painters had fewer problems with the colonial culture than others. Luis Chan, discussed earlier, is one example. He was buoyed by his fluency in English and his relationship with colonial celebrities who helped to build his reputation and sphere of influence in the local art field. He promoted basically Western academic paintings in his earlier years and introduced traditional Chinese painting under the interpretation of Western aesthetics. Chan was free of the psychological complex of »Chineseness« that plagued other painters. That is, he was not critical of Western aesthetics, nor did he have a prescription for Hong Kong art, instead, he embodied the spirit of Hong Kong itself – a truly multicultural society – by expressing and experimenting in great enthusiasm and freedom.

In contrast Lu Shoukun, a native of Mainland China, called for a return to the traditional and promoted the notions of »root« and »adaptation.« Hong Kong painters, according to Lu, are rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics which serves as a foundation for both content and technique. He claimed that knowledge of one's history and tradition are the keys to self-realization, and he called for expansion and development of local art. Lu's aesthetics thus was founded on traditionalism.

Wucius Wong's vision, as analyzed here, resembled Lu's, but offered a more elaborate notion of tradition. He discussed the conflicts between the aesthetics and traditions of the East and the West from his own experience of living and studying in the West. He also encouraged young artists to embrace Eastern traditions as a means to discover their true artistic ability or identity.

While Hong Kong painters' artistic identity was based on traditionalism and nationalism, these emerging young artists were also pushing forward and making important artistic innovations. Daring experiments like the New Ink and other modern movements – what one post-colonial discourse described as the liberation processes in colonial territories – emerged during a time of uncertainty and of signficatory or representational undecidability.<sup>30</sup> These changes arose out of a context in which most Hong Kong painters were busy producing works intended to meet Westerners' expectations of »Chinese art.« However, while a grand tradition which many regarded as the primary source of creativity, Chinese traditional art had come to be seen as a limited source of inspiration years later. This was because its »root« had been seriously damaged during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in Communist China. Thus its influence in the colony had slowly diminished. In addition, Hong Kong's

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<sup>30</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, »Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences« in *ibid.*, p. 206.

intense modernization process was a constant reminder to young artists that they were not living in old China, which made the work of what seemed a distant homeland seem less than relevant to their present context.

As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, the sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by an originary past and kept alive in traditions of a culture, was greatly challenged in the so-called »third space« in which the colonized group is caught between the traditional culture to which it had once belonged and the new colonial culture. Looking at it in the most positive light, this means that the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.<sup>31</sup> This happened in Hong Kong because of converging social, economic, and cultural forces. Again, as described by Homi Bhabha:

assimilation of contraries, the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an inter-national culture, based on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.<sup>32</sup>

And in fact, emerging from the reflections on cultural identity by local painters is the search for an artistic identity for Hong Kong itself that is different from that of either East or West. Hong Kong identity has become, instead, an integration of concepts, styles, and visual symbols of both parts of the globe.

The colonial government's localization policy after the leftist political riots against British rule in 1967 was originally tied in with promotion, even propaganda, for a growing and modernized Hong Kong, yet it laid the groundwork for the search for Hong Kong identity through art. It should be noted that, generally speaking, people in Hong Kong find it more difficult to identify themselves with Communist China (this was especially true immediately following the Cultural Revolution) than with China in a national sense. On the other hand, they do not regard themselves as British people. The situation again reminds us of the so-called »third space« in post-colonial discourse. The notion of »third space« has been described as

the 'inter', the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between, the space of what Derrida has opened up in writing itself that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.



In essence, those living under colonial power have taken on a hybrid identity. Under this new identity, they must ensure that traditional signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew. The return to the traditional may be a strategy to establish a cultural identity that does not advocate an irreversible or essential history of culture.<sup>34</sup> With this understanding, assimilation of Chinese and Western traditions into a new modern tradition becomes a useful strategy and is a natural outcome of the hybrid identity of Hong Kong artists. Luis Chan, for example, whose life and work represented the spirit of Hong Kong, served to help define the colony's artistic identity. Lu believed that Hong Kong's artistic style would depend on the freedom of the individual artist to develop whatever they wished, unrestricted, as long as they had good a traditional foundation. To modern artists like Wucius Wong, there is a strong historical dynamic in the art of Hong Kong. As Wong once said, its past is in China, its present is in Hong Kong, and its future lies in the whole world.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>35</sup> Wucius Wong, »Hong Kong Art Today«, *Nan Bei Gi*, Hong Kong, 58 (3/1975), p. 49.