

A Chronology of Artists' Activities in Pro-Beijing Newspapers in Hong Kong between 1940–1959

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The Origins of the Project

Researchers of Hong Kong art history would be among the first to acknowledge the many gaps and holes that exist in the studies of Hong Kong art history, particularly the decades prior to the 1970s. While Hong Kong became the adopted home of a group of southbound artists who continued to pursue art with a patriotic zeal during the post-war years, research and objective analyses of their creative inspirations and achievements in the territory have been scant. Even the most notable names such as Chan Hoi-ying and Ma Jir-bo often draw a blank.

Early Hong Kong art history has become a popular topic with my students in recent years, so much that it has made its way to many master/PhD thesis topic. It only came to light at the time that information on the Hong Kong artists working during the 1960s and 1970s is few and far between. And because of this void, I began a research project which involved delving into old pro-Beijing newspapers, mainly the *Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po* and *The New Evening Post*, and gleaning from the pages in an attempt to map the activities of local artists of yesteryear. A chronology of their exhibitions and other social and cultural activities would then be compiled in the hope of shedding new light on the relationships and dynamic of different art groups and among the artists themselves back then.

Initially the search covered the years between 1949 and 1979. The choice of when to start is obvious enough. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese arts and culture have grown and evolved to meet new political realities on the Mainland and in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the wider Chinese diaspora. Offering the advantage of geographical proximity, Hong Kong became a haven for southbound war refugees who fled to the territory where they continued to thrive and made their name in the genesis of Hong Kong art history.

It wasn't long into my research before I retrieved materials published in newspapers of 1941 and 1948 that suggested cultural ties and exchanges had been forged between the mainland (the Lingnan area in particular) and Hong Kong even before 1949. Hence, the timeline was moved back to 1940. The chronology ends at 1979 when documentation and records of arts development in Hong Kong as well as those on the background of artists, exhibition catalogues and publication became more readily available, leaving very tiny void to fill. The excerpt at the end of the article was taken from the chronology of the years between 1941 and 1959.¹ *Ta Kung Pao* went out of circulation in Hong Kong

¹ Editor's note: Since the chronology contains a great mass of people's names which, due to the lack of

between 13 December 1941 and 15 March 1948, while *Wen Wei Po* and *The New Evening Post* weren't launched until 1948 and 1950 respectively, resulting in an absence of research materials for the period between 1942 and 1947 in the chronology.

Filling a Void in History, Taking a Glance at Old Cultural Landscape

Time was hard and resources were scarce in the 1950s and 60s. The majority of mainland artists working in Hong Kong, especially the left-wing camp, came from the grassroots. Not only did they lag behind in social networking, they also segregated themselves ideologically from the British colonial government. Impacted by these internal and external realities, it was little surprise that private and public funding was unforthcoming. To avoid stretching tight budgets, publicity and promotion in the forms of advertisement, programme brochures and exhibition catalogues were done away with and many of these activities and exhibitions went largely unnoticed. It is hoped that materials compiled from reports, features and interviews in these three newspapers would now compensate for the information lost.

The chronology draws its primary materials mainly on the home news and the arts and entertainment pages of three local newspapers, namely the *Ta Kung Pao* supplements, "Grand Park" and "New Art Weekly" and the later "New Vision", and the *Wen Wei Po* arts and entertainment page "Colours". All of them delivered a high calibre of unbiased, objective and fact-based reporting, keeping a detailed record of the time, date and place of an event alongside the number of works, the genres and special features of the exhibits. Take the examples of "A Joint Painting Exhibition by Seven Artists: Wong Chiu Foon, Yu Ben, Ng Po-wan, Chan Hoi-ying, *et al*" in 1950 and the "Li Liudan Painting Exhibition" in 1951. The coverage of both exhibitions is free from ostentatious or laudatory implications, highlighting the themes of the exhibition based on the daily life and scenery of Hong Kong and its people, such as those of the fishing folk as well as scenes of quarrying and carpentry.

Clues to something interesting can always be gleaned from the most basic of information. Doubling as a who's who of the artists active in the local art scene, the report on a "Calligraphy Exhibition and Demonstration" organized by a residents association in 1941 is a case in point. Another report published in 1941 focused on the art show held in Hong Kong in early February that year. Having documented the activities of a group of Hong Kong and Macau artists, including Huang Dufeng, Lee Fu-hung, Li Gemin, Fong Yan-ting, Situ Qi, Su Wonong, Guan Shanyue, who founded the "Painting Society Remade" dedicated to the studies of Chinese painting and the advance of the New Art Movement, the article provides insightful glimpses into the interactions between artists in Hong Kong, Macau and Guangzhou as a collective and the close ties and links the three cities and their artists shared. The mere locations of art shows, most commonly the St Joseph's Catholic Church, Hotel Cecil and organizations' premises, also provide a hint or two about the lack of exhibition venues at the time.

primary English materials, could only be rendered in pinyin transliteration, an English version would not be in the interest of the reader and is therefore not published in this volume.

“New Art”: Serving the People

Containing arts activities filled with political significance or commitment to political causes, the chronology also serves to reflect the political and ideological aura of the left-leaning camp back then. In January 1950, some 40 members of the arts community in the territory issued a joint declaration in the newspapers in support of the employees of the tram company who went on a strike in demand for better pay and working conditions. As well as selling paintings to raise funds for the strikers, the artist Gao Zhesheng (aka D Ko) also wrote a letter to the editor at the *Ta Kung Pao*, which was published on 3 January 1950. In it, he said:

Dear Sir,

I am a poor art practitioner. Being poor and having the social consciousness of the poor are one and the same thing, which makes me genuinely sympathetic towards the tram workers who have been persecuted and starved for going on strike in their struggle. Now, for living and for my continuous work in art to serve the people, I will be organizing a three-day exhibition at the Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Centre on Des Voeux Road Central which will open on the New Year's Day. My sincerest wishes are to donate half of the proceeds of the sale on the last day (3rd January) in support of the tram workers as a small contribution on my part towards their causes. It is also my humble request that your newspaper joins me in raising social justice and awareness, and the presence of a member of your staff would be an immense honour.

Come on, Brothers and Sisters! Let's all be united in support of this most sacred group – our comrades the tram workers.

Yours faithfully

Gao Zhesheng

New Year's Eve

The joint declaration and the letter go to show there was a group of arts practitioners in the arts community who held fast to the belief that art is to serve the society and its people, a mission in line with principles of the New Arts in the new China. On 25 March 1949, the Renjian Painting Group issued a joint statement in *Ta Kung Pao*, calling for the declaration of 3 August as the New Art Festival to honour the birth of Lu Xun.² Lu was a strong proponent in woodcut art. Believing that the art of wood carving and printing could be used to serve the masses, his motto of “Art for the people”

² Editor's note: 25 March was designated as the original Art Festival by the National Chinese Art Association. In its statement, the Renjian Painting Group stated that a new art festival was called for because the former one was launched by none other than “the war criminal Zhang Daofan who was at the helm of the National Chinese Art Association.”

encapsulates the ideals and future directions of development following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. These articles are a testament to the ways in which Hong Kong artists were affected by the ideological waves of the New Art Movement sweeping the nation.

According to a report in *Ta Kung Pao* on 17 October 1949, a group of over 30 Hong Kong artists from an array of media, including oil painting, Chinese painting, woodcut art, film art and handicraft, began their work on a collective project of a portrait of Mao Zedong measuring 30 x 90 feet (or seven storeys in height) which, upon completion, would be hung on the exterior walls of the Aiqun Hotel in Guangzhou. In the portrait, Chairman Mao is standing erect with his right hand raised in the air, a five star red flag waving above his head proclaiming "The Chinese people have stood up!". To give a rough idea of the scale of the painting, you can fit a grown man between two buttons on Mao's jacket. Though the article does not contain a list of artists involved in the project, the belief that motivated the work and the amount of human efforts and resources invested into its completion are evident. While the current social circumstances may render it rather difficult to appreciate their sentiments, factoring in their point of view and the political, social and cultural realities of a post-war Hong Kong will allow us to see things in a new light. Interviewing a few 1950s graduates from the Hong Kong Academy of Fine Art,³ I heard almost unanimous accounts of their steadfast faithfulness to the artistic ideals held by the academy about how art should be fused with life and used to serve the society and the people. Fired by their ideals, many of the artists took up teaching posts in pro-Beijing schools, finding fulfilment in work and having no qualms about their meagre income. Every year around the National Day, teachers and students from these schools would team up with art practitioners from different disciplines and work collectively on a large-scale project in a celebratory mood.

The passion, ideals and sentiments of these left-leaning artists in Hong Kong invoke the memory of an exhibition held at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts between 13–25 April 2007, "The Studio of Ten Sheets of Paper: Case Studies in Contemporary Chinese Art History 1953–1957". It was an exhibition pregnant with historical significance. "The Studio of Ten Sheets of Paper" refers to the name of the painting club that was run by a group of academy staff members who met regularly in the backyard of 49 Shuimohutong, the residence of Wu Zuoren and his wife Xiao Shufang. Staff members from the Department of Oil Painting made up the backbone of the club, including Wu Zuoren, Dong Xiwen, Ai Zhongxin, Li Zongjin, Wang Kuoshi, Feng Fasi and Dai Ze, as well as Xiao Shufang and Li Hu from the Department of Chinese Painting. Beginning in 1953, the Central Government began to adopt an elite approach in the stead of its popularisation policies in the hope of advancing the education of the public and nurturing talent in the academic and scientific fields. The role of "advancing" education in the arts fell to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, which introduced its first postgraduate programme in the same year. With a wealth of passion and fervent ardour, the teaching staff and students of the Academy spoke about their anticipation for the development of the arts and the contributions the arts could make for the nation. Inheriting the principles of realism embraced by his predecessor Xu Beihong, Wu Zuoren in his capacity as the director of the academy sought to put Xu's

³ The Hong Kong Academy of Fine Art was founded by Chan Hoi-ying in 1952.

belief of “mastering sketching, laying a solid foundation” into practice. In order to promote collaboration among the teaching staff, he came up the idea of organizing a painting club for his staff who would meet one or two evenings during the week at the backyard of his house to do some sketching and painting. The Studio of Ten Sheets of Paper encapsulates the expectations Wu had for the painting club. Because the demanding teaching schedule had taken up so much of their time, Wu wanted to create opportunities for teachers to practise art and refine their skills. He once said it would make a good practice if they managed to complete ten sketches in one night. During one meeting in November 1953, Li Zongjin suggested naming the club “The Studio of Ten Sheets of Paper”. Captured by the inspiration of their zeal and hopes, scholars such as Deng Tuo, Ai Qing and a host of painters, poets and literary figures joined the bustling creative hub where they bounced off ideas from each other with their poems, writings and paintings.

That said, the Studio of Ten Sheets of Paper initiated by members of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts and the ensemble project by the Hong Kong artists from the pro-Beijing camp are entirely different things and yet inundated by the same torrent of thoughts at the time. Dai Ze recalled the surge of emotions, saying: “Everyone, from the teachers to their students, and from the leaders and their followers, shares the same thought – each day would be better than the last and there’d be good days ahead for China because we are about to embrace communism!” It was the expectation of an entire generation for a new China, sentiments one cannot begin to comprehend unless you have been there yourself.

The arts and entertainment supplements of the three newspapers contain a wealth of commissioned articles which discuss and explore the functions and principles of art, as well as featured reviews of art shows. Their political ideology and guiding and critical overtone is indeed as conspicuous as the sincerity in their faith. The article, “Establishing New Art”, in *Ta Kung Pao* on 23 January 1949, was written as a launch issue message for *New Art Weekly* edited by Zhang Guangyu, Wang Qi, Te Wei and Xin Bo. Setting the tone for the general direction of New Art, the article allows us to understand the artistic aspirations of a cohort of artists who was swept up in the political fever. They were the ones who mapped out the path treaded by the first generation of Hong Kong artists. Deeply impacted by the torrent of New Art passions, these realist artists threw themselves into the movement with vehement enthusiasm. While the chronology does not contain a list of such newspaper supplements, researchers who are interested in studying the principles and beliefs of pro-Beijing artists and the history of arts development in China before the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy can perhaps glean some important insight from the supplements in three newspapers.

History (as we lived it)

As stated in the beginning, the history of early art development is still a young study with many blank pages to be filled. Studying art history is one way to offer different readings to fill the void. Regardless whether they were pro-establishment or pro-Western in political inclination, traditional or modern in

expression, realist or abstract in style or that their artistic achievements were widely acclaimed or unrecognised, this sizable cohort of southbound migrants who had been toiling behind the scenes to advance the development of the arts in Hong Kong holds the key to an important chapter of history, together with testimonies of the steadfastness in their artistic vision and the passion and insistence to their art. It is my intent that more indepth and well-researched studies will be undertaken by individual scholars or institutions to flesh out the framework of past history and give overdue recognition to the generation of our cultural and art practitioners. After all, this is the history as we lived it.

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