The Misrepresentation of Hong Kongness

The Revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Established in 1962, the Hong Kong Museum of Art was the first public museum in the city. It closed in August 2015 for a four-year renovation and spatial expansion of the facility, and reopened its doors in November 2019. The renovation happened precisely in the interstices of two important historical ruptures in recent Hong Kong history: the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the ongoing Anti-China Extradition Movement that started in 2019. These movements are redefining the identity of the city and its people in contrast to the conventional Hong Kong cliché of transformation from fishing village to modern financial hub. Without addressing recent changes in cultural identity, the revamped museum rhetorically deploys obsolete curatorial narratives through exhibitions of Hong Kong art. This report critiques the representation of Hong Kongness in the revamped museum and argues that the latter is a soulless entity that overlooks the fact that both politics and art are now reconstructing local identities.

■ **KEYWORDS:** aesthetics, anti-China extradition bill, contemporary art, Hong Kong Museum of Art, identity, politics, Umbrella Movement

Visitors to a museum follow a route through a programmed narrative—in this case, on or another version of the history of art. In the museum, art history displaces history, purges it of social and political conflict, and distils it down to a series of triumphs, mostly of individual genius.

—Carol Duncan (1994: 282)

Carol Duncan asserts that museums are monumental structures in which symbols, objects, and artifacts help to create an anchor for citizenship and an identity to be forged, particularly in the case of national and public museums (Duncan 1994). Duncan wrote her famous article in the early 1990s, and though decades have passed, it is nowadays widely believed that a museum is not simply a cultural institution for art appreciation, it is also a site for the complex orchestration of sociopolitical narration through art and culture. There is much literature in museum studies and other fields that demonstrates the ways in which museums construct the identities of nations, communities, and other social groups (Du Gay et al. 2000; Evans and Boswell 1999; Kaplan 1994). This report applies this insight to the problematic case study of the Hong Kong Museum

of Art and explores the ways in which it constitutes an outmoded identity for the people of Hong Kong, one that does not match the fluid and changing nature of Hong Kongness.

To visit a museum is to have an aesthetic experience. Jacques Rancière (2013) asserts that the experience of aesthetics is always constituted through a system of identification that he calls a “regime.” In the regime of aesthetics, art makes something new. The intervention of aesthetics is always political. Both politics and aesthetics involve the redistribution of shared experience; they have similar features in terms of defining the shared meanings of a community. Aesthetics and politics both have in common, as Rancière argues, the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible. In this sense, art as a form of aesthetic representation encapsulates the shared values of a community that are channeled through its activities. Therefore, an artwork itself is a reflection, response, and/or critique of its time and history; through the ways in which artworks are curated in exhibitions, a critical space can be created for visitors’ reflection and imaginative response to their present circumstances.

Following Rancière, we can see that a museum is a key site for analyzing how discourses of politics and aesthetics shape and are shaped by society. However, instead of responding to the recent and ongoing political and social struggles in which vivid new notions of Hong Kongness are being expressed, the revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art (HKMoA) obscures the historical and political background of the city—insofar as it represents the experience of the city’s people—and adopts banal and obsolete narratives of Hong Kong such as the myth of the “fishing village turned into a global city” underpinned by the “East meets West” cliché. In this report, I will therefore argue that, as the city’s first public museum, the HKMoA fails to see art as a revolutionary social and political practice that can create new meaning for society. The revamped HKMoA deploys clichéd curatorial narratives, so its renovation in this sense is merely performative with no substantial sociopolitical context or reference to its time and place. It is understood, of course, that a public museum has to mediate between the contested roles of public administration, education, and interpretation in relation to political stakeholders, and that the curatorial direction is therefore always an act of balancing between different pressures internal and external. Yet from the perspective of this visitor, the city’s museum has a responsibility to address significant sociopolitical changes through its curatorial and exhibition schemes.

The museum closed in August 2015 for a four-year renovation and spatial expansion of the facility and reopened its doors in November 2019. The renovation fell precisely in the interstices of two important historical ruptures in Hong Kong—the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the ongoing Anti-China Extradition Movement of June 2019—that are now redefining the city and the identity of its people, and not just within a postcolonial or nationalistic ethos. Those cultural symbols—be they wonton noodles, milk tea, or Chinese traditional festivals—which were usually regarded as symbols of Hong Kong, are no longer doing justice as representations of the city and its people. After the start of two recent social movements, the sentiment in Hong Kong is shifting toward what Lai Kwan Pang calls “a complex orchestration of similarities and differences, community and individual,” arguing that “identity involves the confounding aspects of humanity, such as emotions, attachment, and dignity, which offer key momentum to politics” (2020: 18). Pang proposes that a new type of citizen began to appear during and after the creation of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, and that the new *emerging demos* in Hong Kong can therefore no longer be defined by the empty traditional narrative as liberal-minded, financially successful, and internationalized. It is rather now accentuated by shared spiritual notions of memorialization, such as participation in social movements and the desire to have an ideological inclination. It is not limited by those cultural and material symbols that have been familiar to us for many decades, but is now rather what I would call “humanistic.”

However, no traces of this ongoing emergent transformation can be seen in the revamped museum. The HKMoA was established by the government in 1962 as the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery and was originally housed in City Hall. It was moved to the promenade in Tsim Sha Tsui¹ in 1991. With other cultural facilities including the Space Museum and the Cultural Centre, this modern architectural cluster replaced the historic Kowloon–Canton Railway. The Museum has been proud of its collection of Chinese antiquities and Chinese traditional art, and of its representation of Hong Kong art portrayed as the hybrid meeting of “East meets West”; although in my view the conception of Hong Kong as an “East meets West” hybrid location was and still is invalid. It was expected that this obsolete rhetoric about Hong Kong would be reviewed and rewritten in the revamped version of the HKMoA; however, the expanded HKMoA seems to be all about a corporeal facelift. There has been an increase in the size and number of galleries,² but the exhibits still navigate a banal notion of Hong Kongness by distilling the city’s history of colonization and sociopolitical movements. The transformative and unsettling nature of Hong Kongness—the Anti-China Extradition Movement is fading, yet the transformation it has helped to create is now being fused with the sentiments of the people toward the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of the new National Security Law—is invisible within the Museum. Bearing the name of the city in its title, the Hong Kong Museum of Art therefore persists in manifesting the clichéd pseudosymbolic rhetoric of the so-called “Hong Kong Spirit,” which is constituted by the city’s growth from a fishing village to a major financial center, and the “Lion Rock Spirit,”³ which recounts the story of Hong Kong. The Museum glosses over all the historical ruptures and connections in its curatorial and exhibition strategies, resulting in a view of Hong Kong languishing as a constant and empty obsolescence and erasing the emergent identity of Hong Kong people today, which accentuates their collective political and social identities.

The Problematic Representation of Hong Kong at the HKMoA

The rebranded HKMoA is a five-story architectural structure. With its new glass façade, it claims to present “a refreshed transparent design, enabling the HKMoA to stand out on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront.”⁴ The newly added fifth floor will be the gallery for changing guest-curatorial projects on Hong Kong art. The Museum gave the public and people in art circles high hopes of a new perspective on Hong Kong art before its reopening. As I have specifically mentioned above, the renovation came right between the emergence of two social movements in the city that have sparked debates and protests about the autonomy of Hong Kong, the identity of its people, and the parameters of Hong Kongness. In my view, and based on my visits to the Museum, its art exhibitions are very disappointing in this regard. It exhibits more works of Hong Kong art than its previous incarnation; however, the rebranded institution shows zero sensitivity to the transformative and humanistic notions of Hong Kongness that have been coming out over the last decade, and continues to frame the narrative of Hong Kong with clichéd cultural and material symbols, namely the fishing village, port, and “East meets West” notion. I would describe these symbols as tangible and obsolete parameters.

The new HKMoA has three galleries dealing with Hong Kong art and its history, which are set amid the other thematic collection-based exhibitions, namely *From Dung Basket to Dining Cart: 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Wu Guanzhong (Phase I)*, *A Pleasure Shared: Selected Works from the Chih Lo Lou Collection (Phase I)*, and *The Wisdom of Emptiness: Selected Works from the Xubaizhai Collection*. The exhibits in the current thematic shows are mostly made up of Chinese art and antiquities; however, this report will accentuate the exhibitions and narratives about Hong Kong art in the Museum. The three sections on Hong Kong art are *Ordinary to*

Figure 1. The Revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art. Photo is courtesy of the author.

Extraordinary Stories of the Museum on the first floor, *Classic Remix: The Hong Kong Viewpoint* on the fifth floor, and *Hong Kong Experience: Hong Kong Experiment* in the second-floor gallery.

Passing through the Museum's entrance on the ground floor, visitors will be greeted by a free exhibition on the first floor, which is the story of the HKMoA. Titled *Ordinary to Extraordinary: Stories of the Museum* and divided into four parts: "Chinese Trade Art," "Chinese Antiquities," "Chinese Painting and Calligraphy," and "Modern and Hong Kong Art," the exhibition is a chronological story within the framework of Chinese art history and the embellishment of the Museum's collections. As a public city museum, the chronological story of this institution will always be related to and entwined with the history and story of Hong Kong. Before embarking on the first part of the exhibition on Chinese trade art, the visitor will see the work *Book from the Sky* (1988) by Xu Bing strikingly displayed at the entrance. This rather obscure contemporary work is seemingly irrelevant to the narrative of the exhibition, which is set to tell a story of Hong Kong history through the staging of the HKMoA's collections. However, the display of *Book from the Sky* before the beginning of the Museum's timeline paradoxically signifies the vanity and invalidity of the Museum's versions of Hong Kong stories. Xu's work reminds this viewer of Carol Duncan's notion of a "ceremonial monument," in that the exhibition on Hong Kong and its art expresses the Museum's ritualistic and authoritative role in shaping civic identity. Duncan compares the architectural structure of museums to classical temples and medieval cathedrals, ceremonial structures of the past, which similarly function as temples wherein "visitors bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into certain states of receptivity" (1994: 281).

Figure 2. *Waterfall at Aberdeen* (c. 1816) by William Havell. Photo is courtesy of the author.

The HKMoA's ritualistic narrative about the city continues to relate its predictable platitudes in other artworks. Next up, the visitor will see William Havell's *Waterfall at Aberdeen* (c. 1816) (Figure 2), a watercolor based on an oft-heard early story of Hong Kong: Aberdeen, on the southern part of Hong Kong Island, was once a fishing village; the story tells the history of discovery of the waterfall by the British Amherst Embassy of 1816–1817 when it was en route to China for trade talks with the Jaiqing Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. The British found that the then little fishing village was not only a natural haven, but also a source of freshwater. The barren piece of land with nothing but fishing villages was therefore discovered and later colonized by Britain, and then transformed into the international financial center we know today. It seems to me, however, that Havell's waterfall gives the exhibition a rather passé feeling.

Next to Havell's waterfall are paintings of the port of Canton and the fire hazards that are Canton's foreign factories. The wall texts next to the paintings describe Canton and the then fishing village of Aberdeen as "the Oriental London" and "River Thames in the East."⁵ It is as if the late Far East correspondent of the *Sunday Times* and *The Economist* Richard Hughes was summoned to give a guided tour of the newly rebranded museum. The archaic proposition of Hong Kong as "borrowed place, borrowed time"⁶ by Hughes was once widely adopted in reference to the city. However, this concept of Hong Kongness has started to evolve in the last two decades, so that the self-pitying notion of a city "borrowing" space and time is, thus, utterly redundant. Yet the resonance of Hughes's (1976) *Borrowed Place, Borrowed Time* haunts the exhibition. From a fishing village to modern Hong Kong, has the city not developed its individuality in the last

hundred-odd years and earned the recognition that is not simply a miracle of capitalist and colonial philosophies?

This underpinning self-pity appears again in the later part of the exhibition, where the great Chinese literatus, painter, and art historian Huang Binhong (1865–1955) is declared a “Beethoven in the realm of Chinese painting” (in Chinese). His work *Crisp Air in Mountain and Lakes* (1951) was completed when the master was almost blind, so the Museum’s narrative compares this work to the late classical works composed by Beethoven while deaf. As an influential figure of Lingnan culture, does Master Huang’s significance really need to be compared with that of a Western musical master? Here, the banal notion of Hong Kong as a hub where “East meets West” is revealed again. The city and its art are shackled within the old colonial narrative in the supposedly “extraordinary” stories of the newly revamped HKMoA.

By distilling its narratives from the historical ruptures and the social movements of Hong Kong, and aligning the works in the exhibition within its Chinese framework, the HKMoA reduces the city to a simplified colonial and postcolonial entity with Chinese heritage. Perhaps, this is part of the “role” of a public museum as an “identity-defining machine,” as Duncan asserts:

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths. It also means the power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community’s common heritage—in its very identity. (Duncan 1994: 286)

Or, we might ask, is it too risky to anchor the history of a place in some transformative emerging identities? The complex histories of Hong Kong are precisely constituted by ruptures and transformations, which cannot be simply represented by tangible and fixed cultural symbols reflected in the works in these art exhibitions. The course of Hong Kong’s history has been filled with social movements and change since it was established in 1842: the turmoil and revolutions in the early twentieth century—from the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, the setting up of the Republic of China in 1912, the Civil War (lasting intermittently between 1927 and 1949), the Sino-Japanese War, and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949—which resulted in an influx of refugees to Hong Kong; the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945; the riots in 1967, which are regarded as a watershed in Hong Kong history and the earliest emergence of the concept of Hong Kong identity; the anxious 1980s with the Sino-British Negotiations and the Signing of the Joint Declaration, which was also the period of “disappearance” (Abbas 1997); the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, which intensified the anxiety of Hong Kong’s people about the city’s future; the sovereign handover from Britain to the PRC in 1997; and the ideological confrontations since the handover, which have seen protests, popular movements, and challenges to the constitutional framework (namely One Country Two Systems) in 2003, 2014, and 2019.

All this political and historical turmoil signifies the changing nature of Hong Kongness, which is becoming a spiritual and emotional identity of sorts that cannot be determined by tangible parameters, or the so-called “harmonizing ethos of Hong Kong,” which has repeatedly ameliorated various hegemonic forces and apparently been considered the key to the success of the city. The city’s material boundaries and symbols, such as those conveyed in the Museum’s exhibitions, are unable to capture the disruptive, transformative nature of the city, as Pang argues: “This demos is anchored in a set of corporeal, immanent, and quotidian collective experiences, which resist being dematerialized into cultural symbols, whether the Hong Kong egg tart or the ghost figure in the film *Rouge*.” “But,” Pang continues, “representations and people’s self-expressions do matter; we need to take them even more seriously” (2020: 90). But these collective experiences, or what I would refer to as the sociopolitical transformations in which “the people” are the source of these impulses, are precisely the qualities that are made invisible in the Museum’s exhibition

narrative. The Lingnan School and its significance to the idea of Hong Kong, for example, are not fully articulated by simply exhibiting the works of the Lingnan masters. The affinity of Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Lingnan), the Lingnan legacy, and its revolutionary ethos that has shaped both cultural and sociopolitical facets of Hong Kong, all have to be addressed.

In the case of Gao Jianfu, one of the three masters of the Lingnan School, his work *Sepia* is shown in the exhibition. It is simply described as a painting of its turbulent times; Gao's *Sepia* in this sense manifests a merely rhetorical device as an innovative artwork. The revolutionary impulse of the Lingnan School lies not just in its paintings, but also in the form of the social and political movements of which its members were a part. The three Lingnan masters and their contemporaries, one of which was Pan Dawei, were all revolutionaries; they were followers of Sun Yatsen and participated in the revolution against the emperor early in the twentieth century. The revolutionary inheritance of Lingnan can be implicated in the notion of Hong Kongness, which in some sense is itself the evolutionary outcome of social movements. Nevertheless, there is no allusion to this revolutionary ethos—in the sense of sociopolitical transformation—of the Lingnan masters in the exhibition. This kind of purification of art results in the leaching of any sociopolitical background from the works.

Lin Fengmian's *Autumn Landscape* (1977) is exhibited in the same section as Gao's *Sepia*. Lin fled China and lived in a modest temporary warehouse in Mong Kok, Hong Kong. This painting was done when Lin was in Hong Kong, and here yet again the schema of rhetorical semantics is employed. Lin's precarious life is summarized with the words "hardship," "suffered," "imprisoned," and "destroyed," a series of ahistorical and apolitical words. The artist's bitter experiences, when he was tortured during the Cultural Revolution, and the related historical context are missing from the exhibition.

The turbulent times on the Chinese mainland from the 1960s to the early 1980s caused turmoil not only in the homeland, but also in other nearby countries. The displacement of the so-called Vietnamese "Boat People"⁷ in Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian countries was the consequence of the Cold War and the ideological tensions between the Eastern bloc and the Western bloc (China of course was part of the former). Another work from this time is included in the Museum's story: Fang Zhaoling's *Boat People on the Sea* (1981), which depicts the fleeing Vietnamese refugees and their hardships during the journey to Hong Kong. The English description of Fang's painting reads: "With the turbulence of Vietnam in the 1970s and 80s, many refugees fled their home country." But the Chinese version refers to Vietnam's "liberation" (*jie fang*), a term of socialist and communist rhetoric that encapsulates the meaning of rescue. The new website of the revamped HKMoA declares that its exhibitions

represent the unique cultural legacy of Hong Kong's connection across the globe. By curating a wide world of contrasts, from old to new, Chinese to Western, local to international, with a Hong Kong viewpoint, we aspire to refreshing ways of looking at tradition and making art relevant to everyone, creating new experiences and understanding.⁸

There are a couple of sets of binary oppositions in this official statement: old/new, Chinese/Western, and local/international. Hong Kong is revealed as an in-between interstice of different notions and ideologies, which render the status of the city and its related identity as transformative. Thus, the statement is paradoxically a self-accusation, as a Hong Kong viewpoint should not be fixed or embodied with certain ostensible historical and material symbols or corporeal representations. To achieve its ambition of "making art relevant to everyone," the HKMoA deploys a group of tired stereotypes, namely fishing village, "East meets West," port city, and chauvinistic Chinese inheritance, while it also denies or perhaps does not notice the very nature of the city and its identity, particularly after 2014. To deny the changing nature of Hong Kong is to refuse

to recognize its political and historical aspects. Without these political and historical aspects, the view of Hong Kong within the HKMoA does not amount to very much.

Hong Kong: Its People and Community

The Museum's narrative about Hong Kong has contemporary resonance. By commissioning local artists to create new works in response to the masterpieces in the featured collection, as a commemoration of sorts, the Museum once again registers the "Hong Kong viewpoint" within a binary rhetorical notion, tradition and modernity, with no trace of humanity apart from a few tangible traces. Fourteen Hong Kong artists participated in the exhibition *Classics Remix: The Hong Kong Viewpoint*, which claims to "creat[e] a dialogue between 14 local artists and 14 of the Museum's collection highlights."⁹ In order to "bring the collection to life," the 14 invited local artists created artworks in correspondence with 14 museum masterpieces. The pairings are as follows:

Luis Chan (1905–1995) and Bo Law (b. 1984)
 Lam Tung-Pang (b. 1978) and Anonymous
 Fang Zhaoling (1914–2006) and Rosanna Li
 Xu Bing (b. 1955) and Kwok Man-Ho (Frog King) (b. 1948)
 Lui Shou-Kwan (1919–1975) and Victor Wong (b. 1966)
 Wu Zhifan (act. 1662–1722) and Kum Chi-Keung (b. 1965)
 William Havel (1782–1857) and Kong Kai-Ming (b. 1932)
 Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) and Chu Hing-Wah (b. 1935)
 Deng Fen (1894–1964) and Wong Chung-Yu (b. 1977)
 Ju Lian (1828–1904) and Fiona Wong (b. 1964)
 Huang Binhong (1865–1955) and Koon Wai-Bong (b. 1974)
 Anonymous and Annie Wan (b. 1961)
 Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010) and Raymond Fung (b. 1952)
 Wang Duo (1592–1652) and Chui Pui-Chee (b. 1980)

However, the curatorial intention is perplexing because of problems with the spatial layout. The "remix" section with the works of the Hong Kong artists is located on the fifth floor of the Museum, so the dialogue with the collection highlights that are located on the first floor is thus hard to constitute; and the exhibition *Classics Remix* on the fifth floor (except for Lam Tung-Pang's work shown in the foyer of the third floor) is an independent display on contemporary Hong Kong artists.

With the intention to show an alternative narrative about Hong Kong art, the gallery on the fifth floor is in fact designated for exhibition projects by guest curators in the future. Therefore, *Classics Remix: The Hong Kong Viewpoint* can be seen as a separate exhibition; and the exhibition is seemingly trying to present a contemporary resonance with Hong Kong art history and the inheritance of its tradition. The exhibition, however, fails to convey not just the dialogue between the classics and the new works, but also any sense of a contemporary narrative of Hong Kongness: it merely reiterates the rhetoric of Hong Kong framed by those material symbols analyzed above and thereby waters down the complicated political history and identity of Hong Kong's people.

As mentioned above, Hong Kong has been undergoing transformations since its colonial inception in 1842. Contemporary change in Hong Kong often transpires in the form of popular

social movements, particularly in the circumstances of ideological confrontation with China and the awakening of Hong Kongness, which is a new type of belonging that does not register in the narratives of economic and financial liberalism and neoliberalism, the typical success stories of Hong Kong that are symbolized by the skyscrapers of the financial hub, encapsulating what has been called the city's "Central Value."¹⁰ The heritage preservation campaign for the Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier, the Anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link Movement, the campaign to protect Choi Yuen Tsuen (a non-Indigenous village of the New Territories in Hong Kong) from being demolished for the construction of the Express Rail Link, the Anti-National Education Movement, the Umbrella Movement, and the Anti-China Extradition Movement are all efforts to defend the democracy and autonomy of Hong Kong; they are all trying to resist the erasure of the city's alternative history. They are manifestations of an affinity with and an attachment to a place, to a community, to a livelihood, to well-being, and to people. The neoliberal cliché of Hong Kong as a global financial hub and its people as economically successful global citizens has become invalid to some Hong Kong citizens. In particular, the younger generation "have developed a new sense of identity through antidevelopment activism. They have declined the capitalist logic of development in their efforts to protect the survival of local Hong Kong communities" (Pang 2020: 169; see also Ip 2010; and Lam 2010). Some have also begun to "view the countryside in the New Territories as an essential part of their Hong Kong identity, reminding us that Hong Kong is a city with both urban and rural areas and ways of living" (Pang 2020: 169; see also Chen and Szeto 2015). They regard this emotional identification with Hong Kong's collective life and history as a more authentic cultural identity, in opposition to one based on Chineseness or transnational connectivity. Pang writes:

Many young residents have also begun to see Hong Kong less as an abstract global city in which people climb their individual social ladders, and more as a community with a living history, material existence, and daily intersubjective encounters. People's identification with the city is no longer built around the city's provision of individualistic opportunities, but rather on their emotive embedding and social responsibilities. (Pang 2020: 169–170)

In this sense, the distinctive quality of Hong Kongness has evolved into an empathetic form of humanity. It accentuates the people but not the old material and cultural symbols and the myth of monetary achievement. The HKMoA's declaration that the "[t]he stories behind the collections" bring the collections to life, and that these stories are a part of Hong Kong's collective memory,¹¹ is paradoxically not achieved by the exhibition. Instead of bringing the collections to life, the exhibition actually effects the collections' demise by taking away the people and the possible "intersubjective encounters" (Pang 2020: 169) referred to above that give the city life and meaning.

The curatorial approach to *Classics Remix: The Hong Kong Viewpoint* disregards local human factors in the selection and commissioning of the artworks. Some of the artists who participated in the exhibition do manifest humanistic notions in their works, such as Rosanna Li, whose *Beyond* (2019) features her renowned chubby ceramic figures inspired by ordinary people in daily encounters, and Lam Tung-Pang, whose video installation *Image-coated* (2019) stages the mythical figure of Lu Ting¹² as a metaphor connecting the reality, histories, and imaginations of the city. The idea of people or humanity in other works, however, is ephemeral and marginal. The veteran Hong Kong artist Chu Hing-Wah is well known for his painterly sensitivity in observing the lives around him. In his commissioned large piece for the HKMoA, *HONG KONG HONG KONG* (2019) (Figure 3), the ordinary yet picturesque human souls are reduced to miniature silhouettes standing among tall buildings and in front of a neon sign of "Hong Kong Kong Kong." With the depiction of typical skyscrapers and neon signs, this work conveys a playful sense of

Figure 3. *HONG KONG HONG KONG* (2019), Chu Hing Wah. Photo is courtesy of the author.

mimicking Hong Kong's stature as a cosmopolitan center. Patches of colored silhouettes are integrated into the painting, which is likened to an opera stage,¹³ suggesting the insignificance of humanity. By comparing the cityscape and the space in the painting to an opera stage, the exhibition text is showing that the museum's notion of Hong Kongness is paradoxically non-humanistic: Hong Kong is revealed as a place where people are merely seen as insentient objects.

Other examples of the Museum's inability to see the local human element, namely the people living in Hong Kong today, are revealed in the treatment of artworks by Annie Wan and Frog King in the exhibition. The ceramic artist Wan's work *Tung Zan Baak Fo* (2019) (Figure 4) is displayed to correspond to the vase produced by the imperial kilns during the three periods of the Qing Dynasty. The original idea of Wan's *Zan Baak Fo* series (2017) is literally to be touched by people. The ceramic replicas of fruit, snacks, and grocery products were put alongside the real products in local stores. Visitors and customers could touch and buy the ceramic replicas as a kind of critique of the value and aura of art. The version that the museum has commissioned is sadly not well designed, as it has been put in a domestic setting so visitors have to walk into a "house," where Wan's ceramic rabbits and piggies are lined up in an orderly fashion on a table. The popular, humanistic touch that Wan's work originally conveyed is entirely absent here.

In Frog King's case, it is not the absence of the human touch or people in the artwork, but the absence of the artist himself that is significant. Frog King is well known for his performative maneuver, namely "Ke Bin Lin," which literally means "upon the arrival of guests" in Chinese. Frog King inherits his situational and performative art practice from Allan Kaprow (1966), namely

Figure 4. *Tung Zun Baak Fo* (2019), Annie Wan. Photo is courtesy of the author.

the “Happening,”¹⁴ which provokes and frightens audiences through nonlinear, spontaneous, and nonrepetitive actions. Thus, the artist’s presence is the imperative in a Happening. Frog King provokes his audiences by the actions of throwing and shouting. He throws his calligraphy, painting, and other objects to the audience, and makes irritating noises during the performance. But, unfortunately, the HKMoA turns Frog King’s “Ke Bin Lin” into a static installation by taking away its soul, the movement that is provided by the artist himself. Except at the opening reception, no performance of Frog King has been arranged for the public, with only the paintings and calligraphy of the artist being shown at the entrance of the exhibition hall on the fifth floor, so the work of Frog King is rendered soulless by the Museum’s curatorial strategy.

The people and their stories are crucial in giving meaning to social life. The stories told here in these exhibitions refer not to difficult historical events or the dynamic experiences of people in Hong Kong, however, but to the tired old narrative about Hong Kong going from a fishing village to a financial center. Hui Po-Keung, the adjunct associate professor of Lingnan University, emphasizes the significance of having one’s own story. Hong Kong has no shortage of historical stories—the oft-told economic fairy tale, the harmonious community seen in *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973, Chor Yuen)¹⁵ the conscientious civil servants, and the Lion Rock Spirit—which all camouflage the neoliberal propensity for individual success in terms of monetary value. They are historical monuments of the city’s success, but not individual experiences that uphold up the humanistic value and identity of Hong Kong’s people today (Hui 2010). Thus, in order to be able to reflect the immediate surroundings and an unknown future, the stories of Hong Kong have

to be rewritten according to individual experiences. Only within the real contemporary stories of Hong Kong people are the social and historical narratives actually revealed.

Whose Experience? Whose Experiment?

The city's "experience" and "experiments" are part of the title of the regular exhibition on Hong Kong art history at the HKMoA. Located on the second floor of the museum, and titled *Hong Kong Experience: Hong Kong Experiment*, the exhibition is trying to constitute the context for the development of Hong Kong art history, according to the catalogue, by showing the Museum's collection. With a chronology that is subtly underscored, the exhibition is divided into five thematic and historical experiences, namely "Modernist Experience • Experiment, Ink Experience • Experiment, Hong Kong Hybrid Experience • Experiment, Human Concerns Experience • Experiment, and Local and Global Experience • Experiment." The experience and experiment here, however, do not involve people's stories, and yet again sadly only concern the fabled monumental moments of Hong Kong. In the preface to the exhibition booklet, it is declared that:

Hong Kong has long been a testing ground for over a century, where a small fishing village was turned into a business hub that nurtured economic miracles and a society that bridged the East and West. There were neither lessons from history nor examples in the present for reference. It was the people living in the city who made their own experience. (Hong Kong Museum of Art 2019: 1)

On the surface, this literally prefaces the Hong Kong experience as the people's experience, but it actually symbolizes that experience in terms of the materialist cliché of the fishing-village-to-business-hub myth. The economic myth is banal precisely because it homogenizes the people's stories, which are cast in financial and not social and historical terms.

As I mentioned above, it is problematic to simplify the artistic modernism of postwar Hong Kong in terms of artists' inclination toward Westernization and the notion of "East meets West." The ideas of East and West in the milieu of colonialism and the Cold War are in fact far from a mere dichotomy, but are intertwined in a much more complex manner. Scholars of Hong Kong art history have not deployed this oversimplified dichotomy, as Frank Vigneron suggests (paradoxically) in his article for the Museum's catalogue:

Postcolonial scholars have long established that the history of these concepts is rooted in the tactics of colonialism. To put it simply, it was important for colonialist Europeans to define the "East" as the antithesis of the "West" and thus try to justify the unjustifiable idea that the "West" was superior. As a matter of fact, reducing cultures to an "East" and "West" dichotomy eradicates any clear understanding of how incredibly complex cultures are and how their interactions are permanent and even more complex. (Vigneron 2019: 13)

I doubt whether the curatorial team of the Museum comprehend this assertion, since the entire exhibition uses the notion of "East meets West" as the narrative framework for its exhibitions, which is precisely what Vigneron refers to as problematic. Artworks of Lui Shou-Kwan (1919–1975), Cheung Yee (1936–2019), Van Lau (b. 1933), King Chia-Lun (b. 1936), and Hon Chi-Fun (1922–2019) are selected to signify the modernist experience/experiment. Their works apparently lean toward Westernization amid a reinterpretation of Chinese motifs. This is simplified into an "East meets West" dichotomy, even though the artists' historical experience in postwar Hong Kong in the global setting of the Cold War is far more complex and cannot really be entirely watered down in this fashion. Both Cheung and Van were born in China and studied

art in Taiwan; their personal experience in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China in that particular milieu indicates a complexity in their works rather than a simple “East meets West” opposition. The same treatment was applied to Lui Shou-Kwan. In the familiar account of Lui Shou-Kwan’s life, the pioneer of the New Ink Art Movement fled China to Hong Kong in 1948 and painted meticulous scenes of the city. As a prominent figure in the tide of Hong Kong modernist art, he was a teacher of many renowned local artists. The interesting and varied historical background of Lui’s time (1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) is completely missing; in the exhibition, the works are simply put together without providing any information regarding the different sociohistorical facets of their respective contexts. Questions abound. What inspired the artists to seek novelty? How can visitors connect these artists that are grouped together as Hong Kong modernists? The exhibition does not provide answers.

The HKMoA does have a fine collection of Hong Kong art; however, by simply exhibiting the works within the banal framework of the Hong Kong story, the entire exhibition is very disappointing. The hybridity of Hong Kong is seen as just another version of what the Museum describes as “East meets West.” The new scene in the Hong Kong art world in the 1980s is about more than a new generation of young artists, such as Antonio Mak (1951–1994), who returned home from overseas. The exhibition narrative does not mention the anxiety about the 1997 and Tiananmen Square protests, which were essential in shaping both individuals’ and the city’s experiences in the 1980s.

The local scene is again blurred and homogenized in the section “Local and Global Experience • Experiment.” This section intends to present Hong Kong artists situated between accelerating globalization and emerging localization, an experience that should be more about the artists, insofar as personal experiences are affected by the course of social and historical change. Sadly, we are not shown the artists’ experiences but yet again those same empty narratives—economic development, globalization, and multinationals’ history—deployed in the text of the exhibition. Historical background about the artists during this time is entirely absent. For instance, *Untitled (after Dream of a Path)* (1996) by Leung Chi-Wo (b. 1968), is a work that relates to the life of people in the 1960s and the childhood memory of the artist. The set of five rubbings are actually the menu of a common noodle shop in Hong Kong in the 1960s, which encapsulates the livelihood at the time when Hong Kong was starting to forge its economic “miracle” during and after the 1967 Riots. Works of the generations of Fotan artists,¹⁶ such as Chow Chun-Fai (b. 1980) and Lam Tung-Pang (b. 1978), are also included in the section. However, the unique experience of these artists who were starting to rent spaces in the industrial area for studios at this particular time is completely erased. Born after the 1997 sovereign handover, without the imprint of the colonial period and the chauvinistic sentiment toward the ostensible motherland, the generation of the 1990s expressed the emerging impulse of the city’s localized identity. Despite this point, the photographic work *Unfolded* (2012) of Chan Wang, Max (b. 1991) is displayed somewhat dubiously among the works of others in the section. The images of compact, crowded public housing in Chan’s *Unfolded* channel negative feelings in the young generation’s view of the future; in fact, the sentiment of the youths precisely reflect the recent protests against the China extradition bill. Those feelings, however, are overlooked in the curatorial framing of this section of the exhibition.

It seems to me that in this exhibition all the individual and collective experiences are abstracted in the official version of the Hong Kong “experience” and “experiment.” Hong Kong’s art history is therefore framed by the clichés of economic miracle, global city, and hybrid entity in the revamped exhibition narrative. I would argue that this is merely the camouflage of neoliberalism, not the real experience and experiment of Hong Kong and its people. It is an expression of authority (Hui 2010). At the end of the exhibition *Hong Kong Experience: Hong Kong Experiment*, there is a reflective installation with a wall text reading: “Life is our history of the future.” The text

Figure 5. The End of the Exhibition *Hong Kong Experience • Hong Kong Experiment*. Photo is courtesy of Vivian Ting.

is probably referring to our everyday lives, which are constantly becoming history in the flow of time (Figure 5). “Life,” according to the online *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*,¹⁷ means “the state of being alive as a human; an individual person’s existence” that is enabled by “the ability to breathe, grow, reproduce, etc. that people, animals, and plants have before they die and that objects do not have.” The existence of life involves changes and growth via personal and social struggles; it is the experiences of people not the material symbols, the habitual cultural and social expressions, which define one’s history. The Museum put this rhetorical statement at the end of the exhibition about Hong Kong art on a reflective surface; but in fact its transience reveals the Museum’s own ignorance in deciphering the new Hong Kongness that has been emerging in recent times.

The Never-Ending Remix

The notions of change, remix, and transformation are being deployed in representing Hong Kongness in the revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art. But rather than reflecting the real sociopolitical transformations in the art of Hong Kong, these notions are actually rhetorical and empty. The change, remix, and transformation in the Museum displays are obsolete notions that refer back to the monumental, colonial, and postcolonial narratives—fishing village, financial center, hardworking, port city, and Lion Rock Spirit—of Hong Kong. It is an asocial and apolitical rhetoric that does not reflect the experience of the community. The sociopolitical transformations of the city that give meaning to Hong Kongness are watered down. The strategy of “change” is actually an old trick. *City Vibrance*¹⁸ (*cheng shi bian zou* [城市變奏] in Chinese) was the first exhibition on the city’s contemporary art in 1992 at the HKMoA. In a review written by in *Cross Border*, Jin Rizin (1992) commented on the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, which failed to address the position of art in dealing with sociopolitical changes during industrialization and decolonization. The notion of “change” (*bian* [變]) in both *City Vibrance* (*cheng shi bian zou* [城市變奏]) in 1992 and *Classics Remix* (*yuan dian bian zou* [原點變奏]) in 2019 mean literally the same thing. The transformation, namely “to change” (*bian* [變]), of Hong Kongness in the Museum’s current context has apparently been trapped in an unchanging state for the past 28 years. This is disappointing particularly as the renovation of the HKMoA occurred between 2015 and 2019; precisely the period after the Umbrella Revolution and amid the ongoing Anti-China Extradition Movement. These two sociopolitical movements gave a new slant on the identity of Hong Kong’s people and Hong Kongness. The inability of the Museum to see these changes is disappointing, as the Museum bears “Hong Kong” in its name. As Rancière asserts, art and politics are intertwined and cannot be separated from each other. They are both forces that can crack the dominant hierarchies of representation and create space for equality in society, which is what the French philosopher called the “distribution of the sensible”:

The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. Having a particular “occupation” thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. (Rancière 2013: 7–9)

In the aesthetic regime, artworks can be perceived as “forms that inscribe a sense of community” (Rancière 2013: 9) and which can articulate a break within the existing political system. Through art, politics is able to redistribute shared experience in a community. Something new is thus kindled.

In this review of art exhibitions at “their” museum, I have argued that the people of Hong Kong have no say in the museological construction of their history, yet they have the right to contribute to their history, which is the right to determine their own identities. Instead, their history is looped around the platitudinous narratives created by political authorities (Wong 2010). It seems to me that the only way to redefine our identity and reclaim our history is by social action, such as the popular movements that Hong Kong has been going through lately in which the notion of Hong Kongness has been debated. Incapable of grasping these transformations and presenting them in its exhibitions, the revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art is a great disappointment. Perhaps the expression of Hong Kongness within the Museum could be brought out by anchoring this emerging identity in the work of Lam Tung-Pang, *Image-Coated* (2019) (Figure 6), which is located in the foyer of the third floor. Lam superimposes historical images of Victoria Harbor and projects them on the glass façade of the Museum. With the harbor as the

Figure 6. *Image-Coated* (2019), Lam Tung Pang. Photo is courtesy of the artist.

background, the mythical ancestor of Hong Kong's people, namely Lo Ting, is depicted looking at the harbor. This image captures the heterogeneity of past, present, and future. The overlapping of myth and reality create a sense of longing; Lo Ting signifies both Hong Kong's people and their ideas and emotions, which have not been recognized for over one hundred years but are yearning to be made visible. On the other side of the work, we see an image of a man looking out with a pair of spectacles (Figure 7), which, according to the artist's statement on his website, represents history.¹⁹ History has been witnessing the gradual evolution of Hong Kong since 1842, yet this witness cannot fully articulate and define what Hong Kong is. Only by bringing out this unrecognized identity out into the open will the city be free from the shackles of those clichéd material symbols, allowing the real stories of its people to finally become visible.

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Figure 7. *Image-Coated* (2019), Lam Tung Pang. Photo is courtesy of the author.

NOTES

1. The financial, commercial, and tourist area of Tsim Sha Tsui is located at the southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula, across the harbor from Central on Hong Kong Island.
2. From a press release about the chief executive's visit to the new HKMoA on 27 December 2019 from Government Information Services, "after expansion, the total exhibition area has increased by about 40 per cent and the number of galleries has increased from seven to 12, including a two-storey gallery allowing the display of large-sized artworks."
3. The term "Lion Rock Spirit" is derived from the name of a mountain in roughly the middle part of Hong Kong. It originated from the theme song of a 1970s TV series, *Below the Lion Rock* (RTHK), which portrayed the real-life situations of Hong Kong people during the period. It is felt that this spirit enabled the people of Hong Kong to achieve the socioeconomic advancement that transformed Hong Kong into today's cosmopolitan Asian financial center.
4. Quoted from the HKSAR Government Information Services press release published on 29 March 2019: "The HKMoA has been closed since August 2015 for the renovation project to increase exhibition space and upgrade its facilities. The renovation, undertaken by ArchSD, is creating a unique identity for the HKMoA with modern architectural features. A new glass façade presents a refreshed transparent design, enabling the HKMoA to stand out on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront."
5. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from wall texts and labels are taken from the current exhibitions at the revamped Hong Kong Museum of Art.

6. *Borrowed Place, Borrow Time: Hong Kong and Its Many Faces* was written by Richard Hughes, the Far East correspondent of the *Sunday Times* and *The Economist*. It was first published in 1968. His account of Hong Kong was anchored in the concept of a Western colony on Chinese soil. Since then, the title of the book has been deployed to describe Hong Kong as a colonial entity that confronts communist ideology without any concept of local identity.
7. Vietnamese “Boat People” were refugees who fled Vietnam by boat following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. This migration was at its highest from 1978 to 1979, but continued through the early 1990s.
8. Quote taken from the official website of the Hong Kong Museum of Art: https://hk.art.museum/en_US/web/ma/home.html.
9. The exhibition catalogue of *Classics Remix: The Hong Kong Viewpoint* states: “Creating a dialogue between 14 local artists and 14 highlight from the Museum’s collections, . . . It tracks the characters and stories behind the collections allowing the artists to display their unlimited imagination inspired by the classics and to explore new creative possibilities, whilst telling the unfolding story of Hong Kong” (Hong Kong Museum of Art 2020: n.p.).
10. The term “Central Value” was created by Taiwanese writer and cultural icon Long Ying-Tai in 2004. Long borrows the name of the commercial and financial district of Hong Kong (Central), so the term refers to the core capitalist mechanism in the city, which is mostly about the pursuit of individual wealth, and commercial competitiveness. The idea of “value” also prioritizes economics, fortune, and efficiency as the benchmark of social advancement.
11. “The stories behind the collection” bring the collections to life. “After more than half a century, the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art abounds in rich stories, like classic songs, which not only document the growth of the Museum, but are also part of Hong Kong’s collective memory” (Hong Kong Museum of Art 2020: n.p.).
12. The story refers to a half-fish half-man species that is regarded as the mythical ancestor of the people of Hong Kong.
13. The exhibition text states that “HONG KONG HONG KONG, the largest piece of art Chu has ever made, forms a cityscape and a space akin to an opera stage, in which the artist performs a section of a Cantonese opera” (Hong Kong Museum of Art 2020: n.p.).
14. “A Happening is an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available, or altered slightly. . . A Happening, unlike a stage play, may occur at a supermarket, driving along a highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend’s kitchen, either at once or sequentially. If sequentially, time may extend to more than a year” (Kaprow 1966: 5).
15. *The House of 72 Tenants* is about the life of ordinary Hong Kong people in the 1970s. The 72 inhabitants of a dilapidated tenement live under the thumb of a heartless landlady and her buffoonish husband. The story signifies the Lion Rock Spirit that emphasizes people helping each other and leaving their differences behind.
16. Fo Tan is the light industrial area in Shatin in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Since 2001, when most industrial businesses closed and moved to mainland China, more than 70 units in the utilitarian industrial blocks have reopened as artists’ studios, creating a vibrant if well-hidden local arts scene.
17. See https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/life_1?q=life.
18. “*City Vibrance* was the first contemporary Hong Kong art exhibition to be presented at the then newly relocated Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1992. With the intention of exploring the feelings of growing up and/or living in Hong Kong, the 49 participating artists used painting, photography, ceramics and sculpture to express their views and concerns about the city at that time and in the near future.” See “*City Vibrance*” on The Asia Art Archive website: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/event-database/city-vibrance-recent-works-in-western-media-by-hong-kong-artists-3625>.
19. See the artist’s website: <http://www.lamtungpang.com/index.html>.

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