

excerpt from thesis:

Searching for Home: The Theme of Migration in Contemporary Art

by Elva Lai / August 2015

Conclusion

The inconsolable memories

In the last part, the discussion will focus on my work which is based on personal migration experience in my childhood and also issues interested me on the topic of migration. The discussion will begin with the brief migration history of Hong Kong.

: Hong Kong as a homeland is a new idea

Hong Kong was nearly a no-man's land before the British occupied it in 1841. There were only 3,668 people there, according to the first population census conducted and only 4 percent who responded to the survey considering Hong Kong as their home. Over 95 percent of them were from Guangdong Province.¹(Hong Kong, Register General's office, 1881:4) After one hundred years after, immigrant population from Guangdong Province increased into 4.98 million in 1981. However, less than 3 percent of them consider Hong Kong as their place of origin.² Large scale immigrations from China to Hong Kong were often due to the natural catastrophes, wars and domestic turmoil. In Hong Kong history, they are regarded as the pioneers of Hong Kong. In this no man's land, everyone can actively act as pioneers. They are not immigrants who will be regarded as "ugly strangers, but without prejudice as exiled fellow sufferers".³ (Vilem Flusser) The weaving of Hong Kong as a future homeland, "the transformation of adventure into custom and this sanctification of customary remained exciting as long as more new waves of immigrants were received. The net in the process of being woven is still open".⁴ [...]



Image 1: Tai Po Kau, May 1971, Chu Ming-hoi

However, since Hong Kong was made up of "refugees" and "exiles" from the mainland, the legacy of the diasporic landscape created earlier among Hong Kong citizens are still visible. Since Hong Kong is a part of

China, a Chinese dominated society, with the same written language but very different cultural identities, the experience of diaspora of Hong Kong people is a kind of “Localised Diaspora”.⁵ The significant tendency of Hong Kong people moving from China or emigrating to English speaking countries are suggested that they are influenced by their “refugee mentality” which has existed ever since the colonial government was formed. (George C.S. Lin, 2003) Due to political uncertainties associated with the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, there were many citizens chose to emigrate from Hong Kong to English speaking countries. Economic reasons are not the concern of migration due to the long achieved economic establishments in Hong Kong. [...] It is until the 21st century that the young adults and teenagers, who were born in Hong Kong in the 80s and 90s and who cannot emigrate out of Hong Kong, may see Hong Kong as their last resort. Colonization has been a powerful catalyst in the desire to differentiating Hong Kong culture from the culture of the continent.⁶ This also explains why Chinese diaspora, including those in Hong Kong, has always demonstrated a greater emotional attachment to their native place or their ancestral homeland than to the vague connection of their Chinese national identity. The society of post-colonial Hong Kong is strange to Hong Kong Chinese immigrants. Things are beginning to be institutionalized. Acceptance into Hong Kong is more and more difficult. Prejudice begins to crystallize. In that case, the establishment of Hong Kong as a new homeland shows signs of success. However, the large immigration from China to Hong Kong never stopped after 1997. Those new immigrants from China are now “ugly” strangers at the door.

New Immigrant Children

Between the '50s and '70s, there are estimated two million Mainland people illegally immigrated into Hong Kong due to political and economical turmoil of China. Those immigrants often suffered from great personal loss, and numerous of them died, being caught or repatriated on their way. Most of those who escaped from their homeland were young, strong peasants. They left behind their old or under-aged family members in villages in Guangdong. Many of them became the blue collar working class of Hong Kong and got married with women which were much younger than them and mostly from the same home town of them. Therefore, one of the characteristic of New Migrant Children after the handover of 97s are tend to face the grief of the death of their father in their young age. After waiting for 5 to 10 years, children and spouse of the two million illegal immigrants were allowed to unite in Hong Kong gradually around 1997.

New immigrants from Guangdong after 1997 are domestic migrants. There are no racial barriers with the locals, only a few older immigrants have arrived in Hong Kong with accent features, and most of the new immigrant children complete their studies to join the labor market now. Most of them have completed the process of personal boundary assimilation. In general, they have quickly gotten educational resources to accelerate the assimilation process. Guangdong immigrant parents are mostly blue-collar but the formal education received by their children in Hong Kong have a greater likelihood of upward assimilation. Age is the crucial elements influencing the process of assimilation. However, *the process of assimilation is limited to the widespread hostility of Hong Kong society to the mainland.*

The conflicts between new immigrant and the local Hong Kongers are intensified when Hong Kong is experiencing its post-colonial and post-industrial period. Moreover, the immigration policy of Hong Kong is determined by the central, not on the hand of Hong Kong and it is a symbol of sovereignty of China. New immigrants from Guangdong after 1997 are domestic migrants. There are no rivalling skin color, name and other features of racial barriers with the locals, only a few older immigrants have arrived in Hong Kong with accent features, and in general, they have quickly gotten educational resources to accelerate the assimilation process. Guangdong immigrant parents are mostly blue-collar but the formal education received by their children in Hong Kong have a greater likelihood of upward assimilation of this second generation. These immigrant parents tend to maintain some contact with mainland China (the same family community), and therefore tend to adopt selective acculturation.⁷(Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) Now, most of the new immigrant children complete their studies to join the labor market. Most of them have completed the process of personal boundary assimilation. In the processes of boundary crossing, boundary crossing, boundary shifting and boundary blurring, according to Baubock (1994), Zolberg and Woon (1999)⁸, it includes individuals crossing boundaries, such as change in using Cantonese; and also in the social dimension, such as public facilities added Mandarin broadcasting, as an informal language; and finally the broader boundaries shift - group identity reconstruction. However, the process of assimilation is limited to the widespread hostility of Hong Kong society to the mainland. The community against mainlanders to visit Hong Kong is confused with the concept of mainland immigrants, making the reconstruction of social inclusion boundary for the new immigrant family, particularly during economic crisis, a failure. [...]

Children or teenagers are sensitive and unstable in their formative years. Migration brings the extra pressure for the development of self-esteem. There were terrible news about them committing suicide and those news were also over exaggerated by the media. Hong Kong SAR government has a lot of policies to help those new immigrants to adapt to the society. But those policies were only in voluntary basis and would stop helping a client after 1 or 2 years.

I have a strong feeling that they are two underprivileged groups and blame with each other. Both of them are tragic. However, I do not have an idea how to solve the tragic when government exploits from both parties. This is especially in the case between Mainland immigrants in HK and citizens of Hong Kong who are living under the poverty line. Nowadays, those over ten thousand New Immigrant Children are now young adults and may have obtained certain social status in Hong Kong. It is a good time to analyse this short history after over 10 years. [...]

Travel and homeland

Migration theory focuses on geographical distance from A to B, from homeland to hostland. We experience geographical distance with time. To understand geographical distance, we tend to describe it with units of

time. If migration is an experience of time distance, revisiting a long forgotten place is another way of migration. I am a stranger of that house.

After seventeen years, the house has been gradually deteriorated , now it looks like an elderly who craves for love and care. We are strangers, but the buttons for the lights and the patterns of tiles are still familiar to me. But they are neutral and normal.

They are quiet. No memory resides at the corner of every wall. The floating dust does not reveal any stories behind. I cannot think of anything when I tried to read from the scars on the walls. The air is full of dust but it represents nothing. This nothingness is a deep peace.

There is no dramatic discovery from the journey. The nothingness is very close to the normal and boring days I spent in the house when I was young. A very normal Monday after school. This nothingness brings me enormous peace while I was travelling back to Hong Kong. The process is slow but it is intense. When I went up to the rooftop, I decided to rent a room in the hotel in front of my house. It was a hotel that lit fireworks for almost all festivals and we my mother, my siblings and I, would climb up to the rooftop when we heard the noise of fireworks indoors and I would scream with my neighbor's children who also climbed onto their rooftops. There was a desire of going into the hotel when I was little. The journey of digging the past seems never ending. The issue of migration was once my eagerness to understand who I am and where I was from. To understand oneself is always a starting point for many young artists. Accidentally, an experience of migration chose me before I decide what I actually wanted.

This journey inspires my art making for my graduation show, "How about the other 80% you forgot?". It is an exhibition about the clearing of memory and experiencing distant memory in daily life. It investigates life between important memories through redundant and daily snippets of life in the distant past that we may be unaware of. And we would be able to find out how memory in the distant past exists in present.

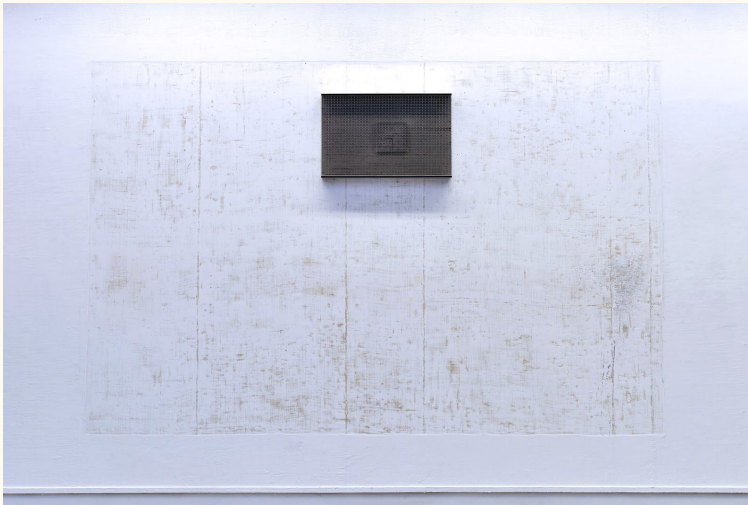
Selected artwork from exhibition:



(Fluorescent tube) , 2015, glass, charcoal and inkjet on archival paper, h. 39 x w. 60cm



(Red string) , 2015, glass, charcoal and inkjet on archival paper h. 50 x w. 33 cm



(clock) , 2015, glass, charcoal and inkjet on archival paper, h. 39 x w. 60cm

The investigation of the migration history of Hong Kong opens the unfamiliar and untimely sensitivity regarding how one's own form of living connects inevitably to the others far away and in the past.

“Homeland exists only in our memory in this era.” 54

Memory images presented and analyzed by the migrant artists in this paper, portraying a sense of helplessness, is always lingering on most of the works, especially on the work of the painstakingly made charcoal drawing animation of Kendridge, the work of M. Ligaya Alcuatas and the actions by Emily Jacir to the Palestinian refugees. Those memory images of desire and sadness constructed by their hands are kisses and hugs we wanted to send out to the forgotten ones. Owing to the ongoing development of xenophobic governmental policies by developed countries and zones of humanitarian conflicts, there is an continuing social and economic apartheid between developed countries and developing countries. It is always uneasy to deal with past social injustice, needless to say the current urgent situation of Palestinians.

For many migrants now living in their shelters, their homeland may now be undergoing a war, a rainstorm or being buried or occupied. We all have our own difficulties of going back to our homeland where the people we loved too little resided. There may never be a way to go back to such a homeland. The innate “weakness” searching for home of art on migration may never be solved. However, in the artmaking process or by reinventing dialogues between unbridged parties, we start to construct creative dialogues and writings to come. On the other hand, by revealing personal past memories, artists find their ways to dismiss the past by depicting and washing away memory that do not know how to erase itself.

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2. *Ibid*, 145.
3. Friedemann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, *Forward to Migration : Joseph Beuys, Alighiero Boetti, George Brecht, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Constant, Robert Filliou, Olafur Gíslason, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mona Hatoum, Nicolas Humbert, Werner Penzel, Mario Merz, Marcel Odenbach, Kim Sooja* (Köln : Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2003), 10.
4. Ma & Cartier, 156
5. Frank Vigneron, Chapter 1: *Localized Diaspora, I like Hong Kong : art and deterritorialization*(Hong Kong : Chinese University Press, c2010.)
6. *Ibid*, 9.
7. Rubén G Rumbaut; Alejandro Portes, *Ethnicities : children of immigrants in America*, ed. Rub'en G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes (Publisher: Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001)
8. Zolberg, Aristide, and Long Litt Woon, *Why Islam is like Spanish: Cultural Incorporation in Europe and the United States*. (Germany: Council of Europe, 1999), 27 (1): 5-38.
9. Bing'an. Chen, *Great Escape to Hong Kong*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Open Page Publishing Company Ltd., 2013)
10. Malsch & Meyer-Stoll, *Migration*, 248

Image 1. *Forgotten stories of the great escape to Hong Kong*, PUBLISHED : Sunday, 13 January, 2013, 2:56am UPDATED : Sunday, 13 January, 2013, 3:06pm, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1126786/forgotten-stories-huge-escape-hong-kong>

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12. Boris Groys, David A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick, Ilya Kabakov (London : Phaidon, 1998), 13248
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