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ART & Place

Essays on ART from a Hong Kong Perspective

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Between East and West: Negotiations With Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong Art

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This essay (first published in Third Text) considers aspects of Hong Kong modernist art as a whole, and thus can serve as an introduction to this section, which is otherwise made up of more specific studies. The issue of cultural identity is foregrounded again, and I talk about some of the problems faced by a cultural practice which seeks to assert a Hong Kong identity. The notion of 'tradition' is considered here (as it has been in 'Monologues Without Words' and 'Engaging Tradition'). It will also be examined in two later essays, 'The Insufficiency of Tradition' and 'Exile From Tradition'.

The most distinct grouping of painters and sculptors to appear so far in Hong Kong art came to prominence from the late 1960s onwards. This group, which is made up of artists who were either born in China or had strong links to that country's high cultural heritage, tended to position their work as a continuation of the Chinese ink-painting tradition. While there are artists of the same generation who might be taken as 'traditionalists' (a complicated notion itself, of course), my particular interest in this essay is with those who have attempted in some way to be 'modern' artists, who are explicitly aware of the need to negotiate a position in relation to the realities of contemporary life, as represented for them by Hong Kong existence.

Lui Shou-kwan (Lu Shoukun)¹ is the earliest of these artists, as well as the most well-known. Many of the painters to become associated with this movement studied with him, including Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun), Ng Yiu-chung (Wu Yaozhong), Cheng Weikwok (Zheng Weiguo), Leung Kui-ting (Liang Juting), Chui Tze-hung (Xu Zixiong) and Wucius Wong (Wang Wuxie). Most were also members of one or both of the two artists' groups which

appeared at the end of the Sixties, the *In Tao Art Association* (which first exhibited in 1968) and the *One Art Group* (which was formed in 1970).

The most favoured medium of these artists is ink on Chinese paper, applied with the Chinese brush — tools and materials which have remained practically unchanged over an enormously long period of Chinese painting history. Since these are the tools and materials for Chinese *writing* as well they carry a particularly strong flavour of tradition, and consequently have an important part to play in sustaining a sense of cultural continuity at the level of technique, despite the changes that occur in other aspects of painting.² Perhaps for this reason, technique is emphasized in the name most commonly used to identify this group of artists: New Ink Painting. The use of the term 'ink painting' (*Shuimo*, literally *water-ink*) asserts a desire to be viewed in the context of tradition on the part of artists worried by their transgression of it. It displays the anxiety inherent in the task of attempting to be both a Chinese artist and a modern artist — in a world where modernity tends to be defined in European and North American terms;³ where 'modernization' can so easily mean 'Westernization', the loss of cultural identity in favour of a not-truly-international 'internationalism'.

This difficulty of reconciling (Western) modernism and (Chinese) tradition was, of course, a problem faced by earlier generations of Chinese modernist artists. The Hong Kong New Ink Painting artists, however, were able to make use of more recent developments in Western art which were easier to assimilate to Chinese painting, in particular Abstract Expressionism and European gestural abstraction. Abstract Expressionism's foregrounding of dynamic brushwork, of the trace of the artist, is nothing new in the context of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Even the absence of directly identifiable subject matter is comparable to the latter. Furthermore, as the Hong Kong artists were well aware, Abstract Expressionism and European gesturalism were themselves already influenced by East Asian art and traditional philosophy,⁴ were expressions of a Western modernism which seemed, for once, to be coming halfway to be in dialogue with them. All this was very different from the case of earlier Chinese modernists such as Liu Haisu. When he and other artists introduced oil painting, volumetric representation of the human body and the use of nude models to China in the 1910s and 1920s, these were considered scandalous ruptures with tradition.⁵ That Liu, along with Lin Fengmian and other artists responsible for introducing Western modes of image-making, later returned to working in a more 'Chinese' style, may be evidence that they continued so to prove.⁶

One can specify the influence of Abstract Expressionist-era

Western art in Lui Shou-kwan's case. The broad, gestural, but relatively unmodulated strokes in the lower part of *Zhuangzi* (1974; plate 2) can be related to Pierre Soulages's characteristic syntax. Its format (found in others of his paintings as well) is indebted to that of Adolph Gottlieb's *Burst* series. Other Abstract Expressionist influences can be detected in the case of his students. The earlier works of Leung Kui-ting, for instance, have splashed ink effects which seem to derive from the vocabulary of Robert Motherwell, rather than from some unmediated engagement with East Asian precedents. The stain effects and veils of colour in Leung's *Tranquil Mountains* (1974) are more reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler than anything Chinese, even though water-based media (including Chinese ink) are being used.

Even the admission of influences from such East Asian-inspired sources could not be overplayed by artists, however, in the difficult task of balancing modernity and tradition. While it seems that an awareness of recent Western art was indeed the most significant factor in the evolution of Lui Shou-kwan's style, his departure from Chinese modes was also authorized by reference back to aspects of the Chinese tradition itself. The introduction to the catalogue for Lui's November 1964 City Hall Art Gallery exhibition, for instance, denied that he was imitating the work of recent American painters and suggests instead that Lui was rediscovering the abstract and expressionistic elements of early Chinese painting. While Lui was undoubtedly aware of the stories concerning eccentric Tang Dynasty painters who were said to have used chance effects in their art,⁷ it is hard to construe his paintings — as the introduction seems to wish to do — as part of a purely internal evolution of Chinese painting.

The attempt to assert connections to Chinese tradition which we see at the level of technique in New Ink Painting painting can also be found at the level of subject matter. The prevalence of landscape (particularly mountain landscape) in the paintings of Cheng Wei-kwok, Wucius Wong, Ng Yiu-chung and others can be seen as an anxious invocation of the most characteristically 'Chinese' of painting subjects in images which in other respects are embracing modernity. That sense of the landscape subject matter as balance (or antidote) for something non-Chinese can be found in *Guilin in the Sunset* (1982) by Ng Ku-hung (Wu Guhong) — not in fact one of the New Ink Painting artists, but facing a similar dilemma to them even though his paintings are not so radically modernistic. In that work (as in many by Wucius Wong) there is a coherent perspectival space whose source can only have been Western art,⁸ yet the emphatically Chinese subject matter of mountain and water scenery effectively veils that fact from attention. Pre-modern Chinese painting rarely treated particular geographical locations with as much specificity as Ng treats Guilin. Ng's more realistic insistence

on topographical specifics is a modern intensification of the flavour of 'Chineseness' which would not have been necessary in a pre-modern image. Distance from China is revealed even in the choice of location: Guilin is a popular tourist site which is only a couple of hours from Hong Kong by air — it is the China of the visitor and of the picture postcard more than the China of the resident.⁹ The same airplane which makes a visit to Guilin possible also enables the novel vertical viewpoints on the landscape which are so often adopted in Wucius Wong's paintings: yet it appears in neither Ng or Wong's images.

Lui Shou-kwan, to a greater extent than most of his followers, *was* willing to focus on the landscape of Hong Kong itself.¹⁰ In doing so he inevitably had to confront modernity at the level of subject matter since by the time he began to paint the territory, modernity had already made a significant impact on Hong Kong's appearance. Lui's strategy, however, was to minimize the visual impact of the high-rise buildings and other potential signifiers of modernity in a number of ways. The geometrical, man-made forms of human construction are visually devalued by the adoption of distant viewpoints, for instance, or softened with the aid of cloud or rain. The use of a night-time view achieves this latter aim even more effectively, and in many of his Hong Kong landscapes Lui is in any case concentrating on outlying islands, fishing villages, and other non-urban aspects of the territory. In all instances nature predominates over culture, and thus the latter is capable of being incorporated into (one might wish to say, of being neutralized by) the world of the painting.

A similar strategy of incorporating measured doses of inescapably modern subject matter into the schema of traditional Chinese landscape painting had also been successfully employed at an earlier date by Lingnan School artist Gao Jianfu. Even the airplane (that hidden precondition for the paintings of Ng and Wong) appears openly in his works. In *Flying in the Rain* (1932), for instance, a number of biplanes are depicted in the distance, looking only mildly out of place. Like Lui, Gao was undertaking the difficult task of modernizing Chinese painting, but unlike Liu he wished his art to bear an overtly social content.¹¹ Consequently we see the difficulty of producing an art which is both 'Chinese' and 'modern' more clearly displayed. The limits to the incorporation of modern subject matter within the Chinese painting economy are visible in Gao's *A Disaster for Civilization* (1937), where a close-up of an urban ruin — the consequences of warfare in China — is depicted. In order for this novel subject to be presented without irrevocable rupture of the Chinese aesthetic paradigm, a misty vagueness must be introduced into the middleground — the otherwise dominant forms of the architecture must be visually obscured even though this works

against the painting's ability to carry its meaning. The ruins must take on forms analogous to those of the mountains in a myriad Chinese landscape paintings, despite the incongruousness of the associations thus created.

Most of Lui Shou-kwan's followers eschewed an engagement with urban subject matter and consequently with the difficult social realities of Hong Kong during a period of extraordinary growth. Even more than their mentor, they were inclined to prioritize nature in their work,¹² or rather, the specifically Chinese painterly genre of mountain landscape. Only occasionally is a specific Hong Kong natural landmark recognizable in their images, perhaps because such a local reference, if insisted upon too heavily, might disrupt the connectedness of their paintings to the broader national tradition (even though a specific Guilin or Huangshan reference, on the other hand, might serve to strengthen it, to underline an equation of nature and China).

One exception to this general rule is Cheng Wei-kwok's *Lion Rock* (1976), which depicts a well-known landmark in Hong Kong's New Territories.¹³ Perhaps this particular motif is chosen because it enables the easier assimilation of Western elements (in relation to this work one thinks of Max Ernst's blurring of distinction between the animate and the inanimate in paintings such as *Europe After the Rain II*, 1940–2). To paint an unusually shaped rock, whose name already acknowledges the biomorphic associations which can be brought to bear on it, is perhaps the easiest, least disruptive route by which to introduce Surrealist elements into a Chinese painting.

Ng Yiu-chung's paintings display the difficulty of completely eliminating references to urban development when choosing to depict the Hong Kong landscape. The areas of white he introduces into his images (such as *Mountain Scenery IV* of 1970; fig. 12.1), while on the one hand being comparable to the areas of cloud or mist which traditional Chinese landscape painters introduced into their works to open up the composition, can often read as signs of the trespass of human activity into the landscape. Instead of the harmoniously integrated rustic villas and pavilions which tend to appear in earlier Chinese landscape paintings, I read images of water conduits, concrete paths, and even the kind of scarring of the rock that is commonly seen in Hong Kong when quarrying is taking place, or when an area of hillside is being cleared and levelled in preparation for the construction of buildings.¹⁴ In such a modernistic painting as this, the traces of modernization at the level of subject matter nevertheless read as intrusion into a world where nature, tradition and Chineseness are aligned as positive factors. Modernity and Chineseness are not presented as harmoniously compatible but as in some sense opposites, and possibly antagonistic ones.



Figure 12.1
Ng Yiu-chung, *Mountain
Scenery IV*, 1970. Reproduction
by permission of the Urban
Council Hong Kong, from the
collection of the Hong Kong
Museum of Art.

Analogous oppositions to that which I have just described in Ng's paintings can be found in the works of other New Ink Painting-generation artists, but generally at the level of form. An opposition between, on the one hand, nature (or China, or tradition, or the intuitive, or the feminine), and on the other hand the man-made (or the Western, or the modern, or the rational, or the male), is suggested, I feel, by a commonly found opposition between organic and geometric forms.¹⁵ The conflicts these Hong Kong artists face in their attempts to be both modern and Chinese are displaced into their artworks in this way. As my linking of chains of concepts will perhaps have indicated, I see this dimension of meaning as taking the form of shifting allusion rather than that of explicit iconography, but nevertheless in the work of painters such as Wucius Wong or Toto Kung (Gong Peiyun), or of the sculptor Van Lau (Wen Lou), there is a dramatization of, and perhaps an attempt to contain or resolve, more than purely formal oppositions.

The work of Wucius Wong contains many examples of the kind of opposition between organic and geometric forms I have been mentioning. Although human activity tends to be absent from his paintings (Wong writes that 'deserted landscapes symbolize the desire to escape from the concrete jungle of the city'¹⁶), they frequently have a highly prominent geometric structuring that provides a counterpart to the more organic, softly defined forms of the mountainous landscapes which are his usual subject matter. The vertical strips (as in *Divergent Waters* No. 4), or grids in diamond format (*Agitated Waters* No. 5) and square format (*Cloud Harmony*, No. 1, 1978; plate 3) are completely without precedent in Chinese landscape painting, and read as either elements imposed upon the organic forms behind, or as a fragmentation of them in the cases where those organic forms display no continuity across a geometric divide. In either case they provide a structuring logic which seems to come from outside, to be in opposition to the rhythms developing out of the natural subject matter itself.

Geometric overlay effects are also found in Toto Kung's *Yellow Chattering* (1984). Not surprisingly, since she studied at one time with Wong, there are specific similarities of style. Towards the bottom left of the image the organic forms partially continue across the horizontal line, which is indicated only as a tonal difference (in the same manner as the lowest horizontal in Wong's *Cloud Harmony*, No. 1). Where (to the left end of the line) there is no continuation of the mountain forms above the horizontal, this discontinuity emphasizing the geometric element is 'excused' by the presence of cloud, which might be taken as obscuring our vision of rock. A similar effect occurs below the central horizontal in Wong's work. Both these effects also appear in the work of another painter who has studied with Wong, Kan Tai-keung (Jin Daiqiang).

Spring-Mountain-Dream (1983) is an example. Leung Kui-ting (again a former student of Wong) also opposes geometry to more fluid, amorphous areas. In *Beyond Vision IV* (1990), a nearly abstract work, colour plays a more active role in giving prominence to the overlapping geometric planes, whose power is nevertheless tempered by the drifting cloud-like forms which transgress and obliterate their boundaries. In a work of a similar style, *Composite Landscape* (1992), the more amorphous forms are more clearly identifiable than in *Beyond Vision IV* as natural, landscape elements with a specifically Chinese flavour. The natural/man-made, Chinese/Western contrast is therefore highlighted to a greater degree. The persistence in Leung Kui-ting's art of an interest in opposing geometric or hard-edged shapes to less defined forms can be documented by reference to *Composite Assemblage IV* (1967). In that painting, shapes which appear to have been influenced by American hard-edge images of the 1960s are directly opposed to shapes which, while they recall the art of Motherwell and Frankenthaler, also look back to Chinese calligraphic brushwork traditions.

Wong, Kan and Leung share an involvement in design as well as in fine art. At one time or another all have been lecturers in the Hong Kong Polytechnic's School of Design, and Wong is the author of several widely disseminated manuals on two- and three-dimensional design. In these books a Bauhaus model of basic design education is presented,¹⁷ and that German design school can be pinpointed as the specific Western source of the geometric vocabulary used in the images of these artists.

Despite what seems a basically vitalist aesthetic,¹⁸ Hong Kong sculptor Van Lau chooses to introduce geometric forms into his works. Bringing together the usually separate constructivist and organicist sides of modern sculptural vocabulary,¹⁹ he creates an art where conflicts between the natural and the geometric are foregrounded as much as in the paintings of Wucius Wong. We can see such an opposition in *Windy Form* (1985) where the natural forms of bamboo leaves are represented, but in a geometricized vocabulary. An opposition between Chineseness and Western modernism is also present here, just as in Wong's paintings, and is highlighted rather than elided. The choice of bamboo as a subject is the means, of course, by which this allusion to Chineseness is introduced as a counterweight to the otherwise very Western style. The Chineseness of the bamboo derives not only from its widespread distribution in China, but also from its secure place as a subject within Chinese literati painting.²⁰ No literati sculpture tradition exists, so an allusion to this more highly regarded artform becomes necessary to effect a link to Chinese roots.

A way of thinking about opposites as mutually supportive in

their dynamic interaction is already present in traditional Chinese philosophy, and it is worth noting in this discussion of the representation of opposites in Hong Kong art that several artists draw upon this pre-existing intellectual resource. I am referring to the well-known concepts of Yin and Yang, which are associated respectively with the female, the quiescent, and the dark, and with the male, the active and the light. An application of the philosophical principles of Yin and Yang to the process of art-making can be found in the case of Irene Chou. 'Yin and Yang [she states] keep the universe in balance, the balance between human existence and life, the balance between intellectual thoughts and the emotions of gladness, anger, grief and happiness. True art is the production of such a balance.'²¹ Chou makes the well-known Yin and Yang diagram the basis of her *Yin and Yang* of 1993, and it also appears as the subject matter of Hon Chi-fun (Han Zhixun)'s *The Way of the Lotus* (1974) and Aries Lee (Li Fuhua)'s *Untitled* (1971). Van Lau's *Shiang* of 1972 (1972) and *Yin Yang* (1970) also employ it. In the latter work the choice of subject helps (as it did in *Windy Form*) to introduce a definitively Chinese reference into a sculpture which might otherwise appear very Western in style, but in *The Meeting of Yin and Yang* (fig. 12.2), a more recent work of similar title, one senses that the opposition between Chinese and Western aspects is being addressed in terms of the opposition of Yin and Yang itself. The ancient polarities are here being employed allegorically, it seems to me, to refer obliquely to the Western and Chinese dimensions of Hong Kong, and to imply their peaceful coexistence. This work, a large sculptural relief created for the foyer of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (which opened in 1989), reads as a kind of inexplicit or partially veiled civic statement, as close as one could expect to a direct commentary on the situation of Hong Kong itself.²² This image of a male and a female figure standing side by side, but not interacting even to the extent of looking at one another, belongs to the era of the Joint Declaration between Britain and China, the era of 'one country, two systems', that is, the era of declarations concerning the peaceful coexistence of opposites.

Although Hong Kong as subject seems (almost) to appear in Van Lau's *The Meeting of Yin and Yang*, in most works by *Shuimo* artists Hong Kong experience remains in the background, prompting perhaps the anxiety about reconciling Chineseness and modernity, but never being itself directly addressed. That anxiety is always expressed through oppositions between Western and Chinese elements, with Hong Kong itself being merely the neutral arena in which those elements come into contact. Such a characterization of Hong Kong is by no means unique to art: the notion of Hong Kong as the place where 'East meets West' is an enormously widespread cliché, and one which manages to deny any separate identity to the

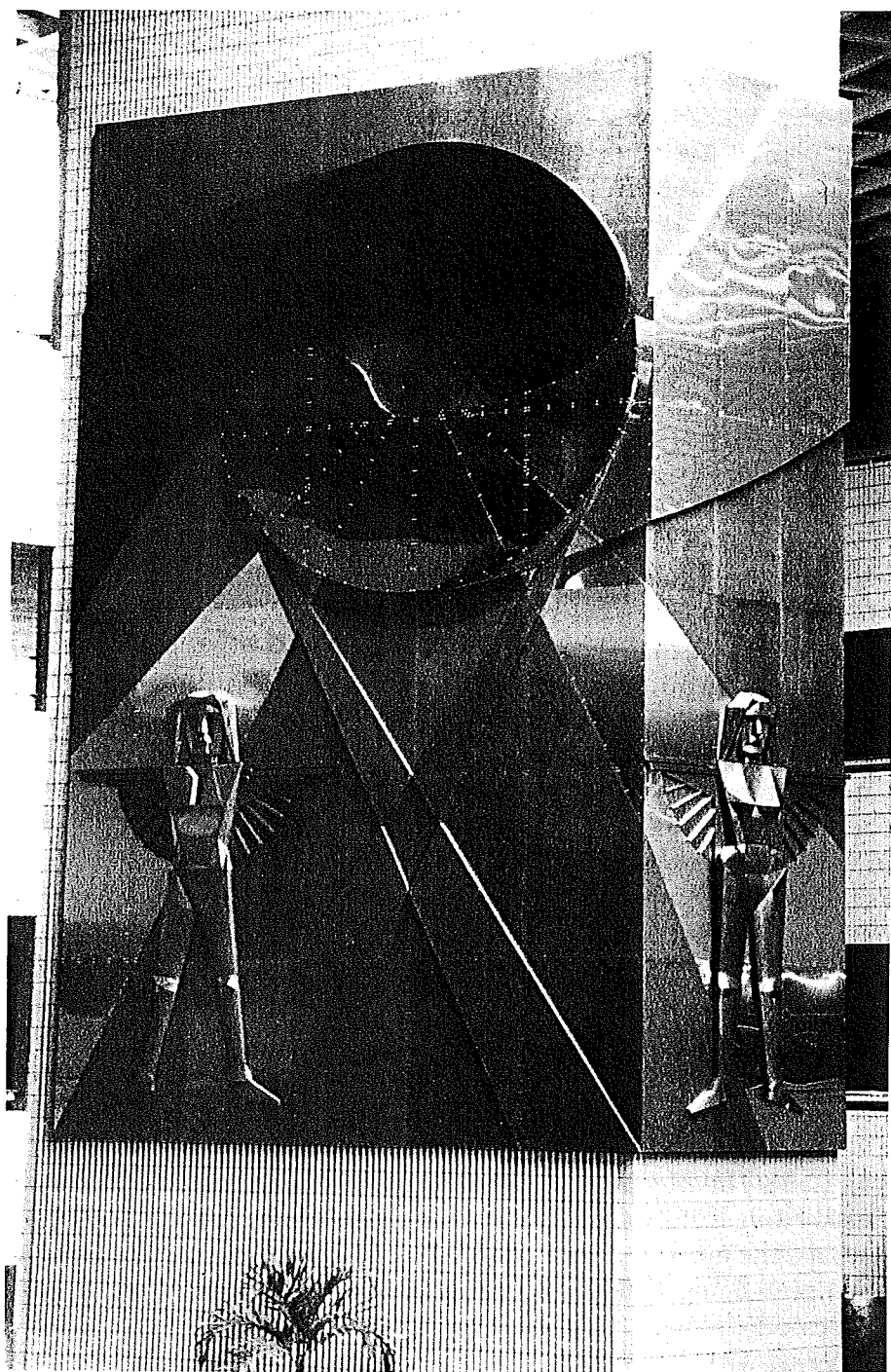


Figure 12.2
Van Lau, *The Meeting of Yin and Yang*, installed in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (opened 1989). Photo courtesy the Public Information Unit of the Urban Council.

colony, to reduce it to a 'gateway' or 'bridge' through or over which Chinese and Western influences pass. The displays of Hong Kong art in the Hong Kong Museum of Art seem predicated upon this notion of 'East meets West', categorizing the territory's art as either 'Western' or 'Chinese', and providing separate galleries for each. The Hong Kong art story is reduced to two narratives from elsewhere, and contamination (or miscegenation) is prevented through physical distancing.²³ The ideology embodied mutely by this organization of the gallery display is given more explicit voice by Lawrence Tam (Tan Zhicheng, a former student of Lui Shou-kwan and until recently the Museum's Chief Curator) in his introduction to a 1981 exhibition of Hong Kong art at the Museum. He writes of the exhibit as containing 'happy evidence of the blending of aspects of two streams of world culture, the East and the West'.²⁴

That the art of the New Ink Painting generation has pride of place in the Hong Kong Museum's displays and overseas travelling shows²⁵ is perhaps not surprising given the explicit way in which it treats the interaction of Chinese and Western elements, but while some works (such as Van Lau's *The Meeting of Yin and Yang*) seem to accept the framing ideology of a benign encounter between opposing forces, for the most part these works betray signs that the encounter is one fraught with a degree of difficulty. Wucius Wong, who at one point feels able to describe Hong Kong as 'the obvious frontier of the meeting of East and West',²⁶ nevertheless on another occasion saw the position of the Chinese artist in Hong Kong in a rather less optimistic light. Rather than combining the best of East and West, artists in this colony may instead merely fall between two cultures into obscurity. 'Some of us may eventually make history [he writes], but all of us do not know how the history of this age will be written. We are apt to get lost in searching for directions and be completely forgotten, ... all of our efforts could be regarded by historians as something of only peripheral significance.'²⁷

We can put in perspective the difficulties faced by artists of the New Ink Painting generation in attempting to be both Chinese and modern — as well as the specific strategies they adopt to deal with their situation — by considering briefly the experience of Hong Kong artists of a younger generation. Broadly speaking, the younger generation of artists — those who began to produce their mature work during the 1980s — have a much less strong affiliation to the Chinese high cultural heritage than the New Ink Painting generation. A major reason for this is that they have mostly been born in Hong Kong itself, rather than in the mainland — as second-generation residents they do not share the refugee mentality which was so prevalent in the earlier post-war years, when residents of the territory born outside it outnumbered those born within it. These younger

artists are for the most part drawn to work in Western media such as acrylic, thus cutting themselves off at the level of technique from the possibility of a dialogue with pre-modern Chinese painting. At the level of style too their work tends to adopt unashamedly the idiom of Western modernism — unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that many have gained their formal art training in the United Kingdom, continental Europe, or North America.²⁸

While this adherence to Western modernism might make their art seem more accessible to a Western audience than the unmistakably 'Chinese' art of the New Ink Painting generation, they too have obstacles to face. Like the New Ink Painting artists — but more so — they must resist being seen as merely weak, provincial mimics of an art whose centre of gravity is elsewhere. One way in which artists have done this (particularly since June 4, 1989, and as the 1997 handback to China approaches) is through an assertion of a Hong Kong identity; they are at the same time both more cosmopolitan and more locally orientated than the New Ink Painting generation of artists. But if Chineseness is an identity which is difficult for an artist to sustain in the face of Western modernism's challenge, then Hong Kongness faces even more obstacles to its existence. Not only does Hong Kong lack any high cultural tradition of its own which can serve as a resource, it also lacks support from either an ethnic or a national narrative in a broader sense. These two most powerful sustaining forces (present even in the case of the more liberatory narratives of identity) are not available to Hong Kongness, and indeed may be said to be actively ranged against it. This is true in the sense that most Hong Kong people (artists included) have their ethnic and national identifications invested in China — and yet it is above all from Chineseness which Hong Kongness must distinguish itself. No easy demonization of the other, such as might be employed by a white racist in England for instance, can be drawn upon to shore up a sense of a distinct Hong Kong identity.

Hong Kong had no separate existence prior to colonization, and (unlike all other colonies) cannot even dream of autonomy in the future. 1997 will bring no independence day, only absorption in another unitary nation state, and a walk-on role in that state's narrative of wholeness recovered. The absence of a resource from history and cultural tradition means that Hong Kong identity can only be expressed in art as a trace, as a species of non-essentialist, unrooted, post-modern identity.²⁹ We see this for instance in the work of Oscar Ho Hing-kay (He Qingji), one of the younger generation of Hong Kong artists most consciously committed to the question of cultural identity. Unable to draw (like the Mexican muralists, say) on a national myth, he instead invents his own stories about Hong Kong to fill the vacuum. Fashioned on the model of

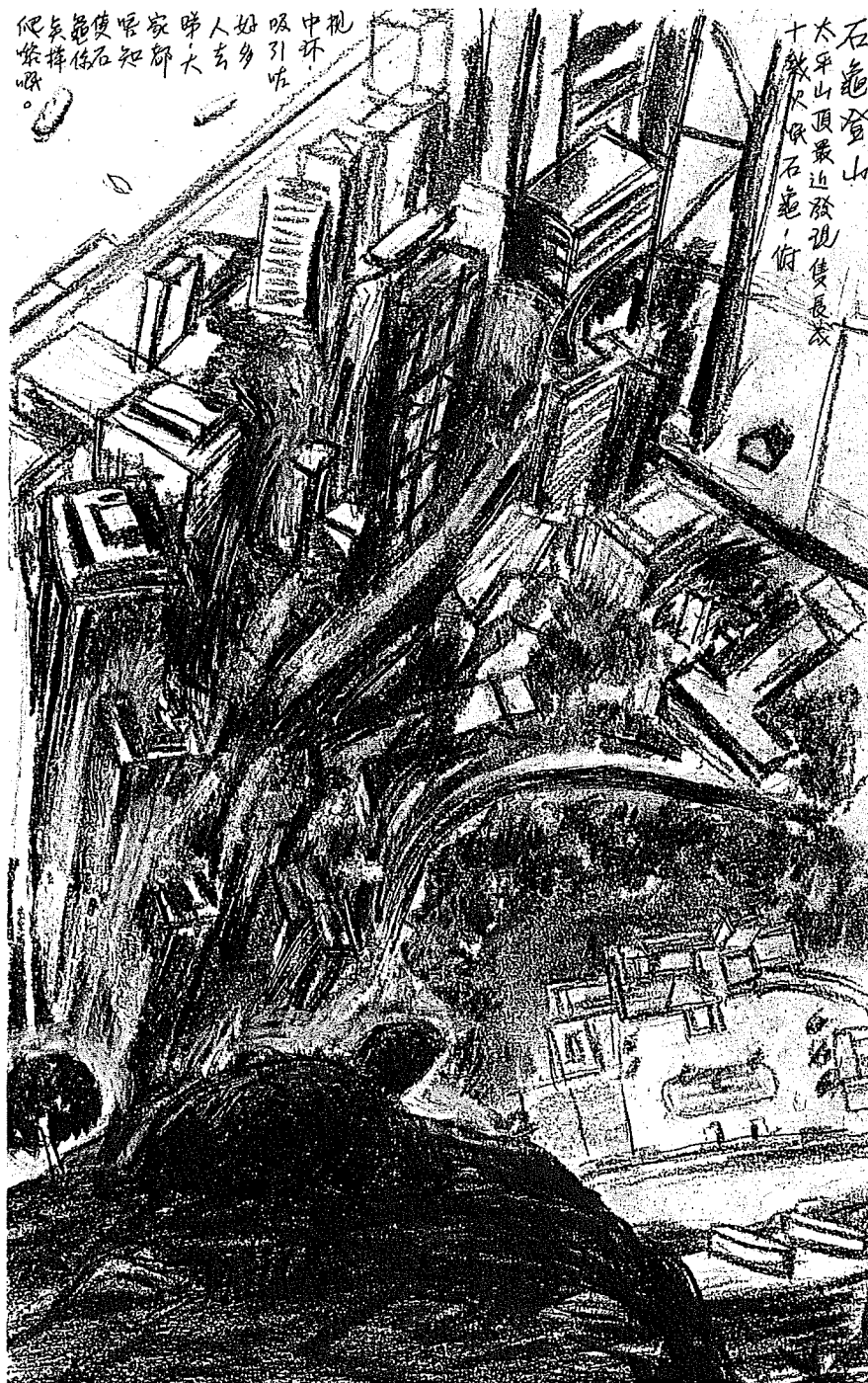


Figure 12.3
Oscar Ho, *The Turtle Rock*,
1991. Photo courtesy the
artist.

folk superstitions and urban myths (and sometimes elaborating existing ones), Ho's stories and their accompanying drawings (for example, *The Turtle Rock*, 1991; fig. 12.3) gradually accumulate into a narrative of the territory, fictional and discontinuous though it may be.³⁰

When actual history is trawled for evidence, the same fragmented narrative is found, and Wang Hai adopts a collage-like principle to produce a visual equivalent or metaphor for it. In his photo-realist paintings, such as *Cultural Relics. Hong Kong History Series (Section 4)* of 1990 (fig. 12.4), Wang juxtaposes disparate images borrowed from early photographs of Hong Kong (including those of the English photographer John Thompson) without attempting to create the kind of coherent illusory space which would make the past available as material for a nostalgic reverie. Using photos as a source has a double value for Wang: he is able to draw upon the aura they have of being authentic witnesses of the past, as well as to make clear that the past belongs to another. Not only are many of the people in his images Westerners, but the camera's vision is also Western, recording its Chinese subjects either incidentally as servants, or more consciously as ethnographic types. The visual history he quotes is laid bare as a colonial one, rather than one which might be unproblematically recovered and owned.

Given the difficulty of elaborating a Hong Kong cultural identity in positive terms, some younger artists attempt to assert it negatively, that is, to define themselves in terms of their distance from Chinese traditions. The choice of 'Western' media, of course, helps produce this rupture, given the centrality of the brushed ink gesture in Chinese art, but more interesting perhaps are those cases where tradition is as it were present as absent. This can be said of Chan Yuk-keung (Chen Yuqiang)'s *Untitled* (1990; fig. 12.5), which — to offer a literal description — basically consists of an open-topped box containing (one almost wants to say concealing) a series of black and white photographic portraits on its inner walls. These portraits are of the kind commonly used on family altars and graves in Hong Kong as reminders of the deceased, and so a note of bereavement is introduced. This theme of loss or disconnection from the past is similarly conveyed in Danny Yung (Rong Nianzeng)'s 1991 installation piece *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture, No. 4* (fig. 3.2),³¹ which consists of a closed circular arrangement of free-standing minimalist forms shaped so as to appear like enormously enlarged versions of the ancestral tablets found in family altars or clan ancestral halls as tokens of earlier generations.³² Instead of having names of the deceased inscribed upon them, however, they have been given mirrored surfaces. We Hong Kong Chinese people, the work seems to be saying, are cut off from the past by our experience of life in this British colony — and this may be taken as a freedom as well as a deprivation. We are condemned to a concern with ourselves, but also liberated somewhat from the burden of a several-thousand-year cultural heritage.³³ It is this sense that a distance from the grand narratives of both Modernization and Chinese nationalism may not be a wholly bad thing which

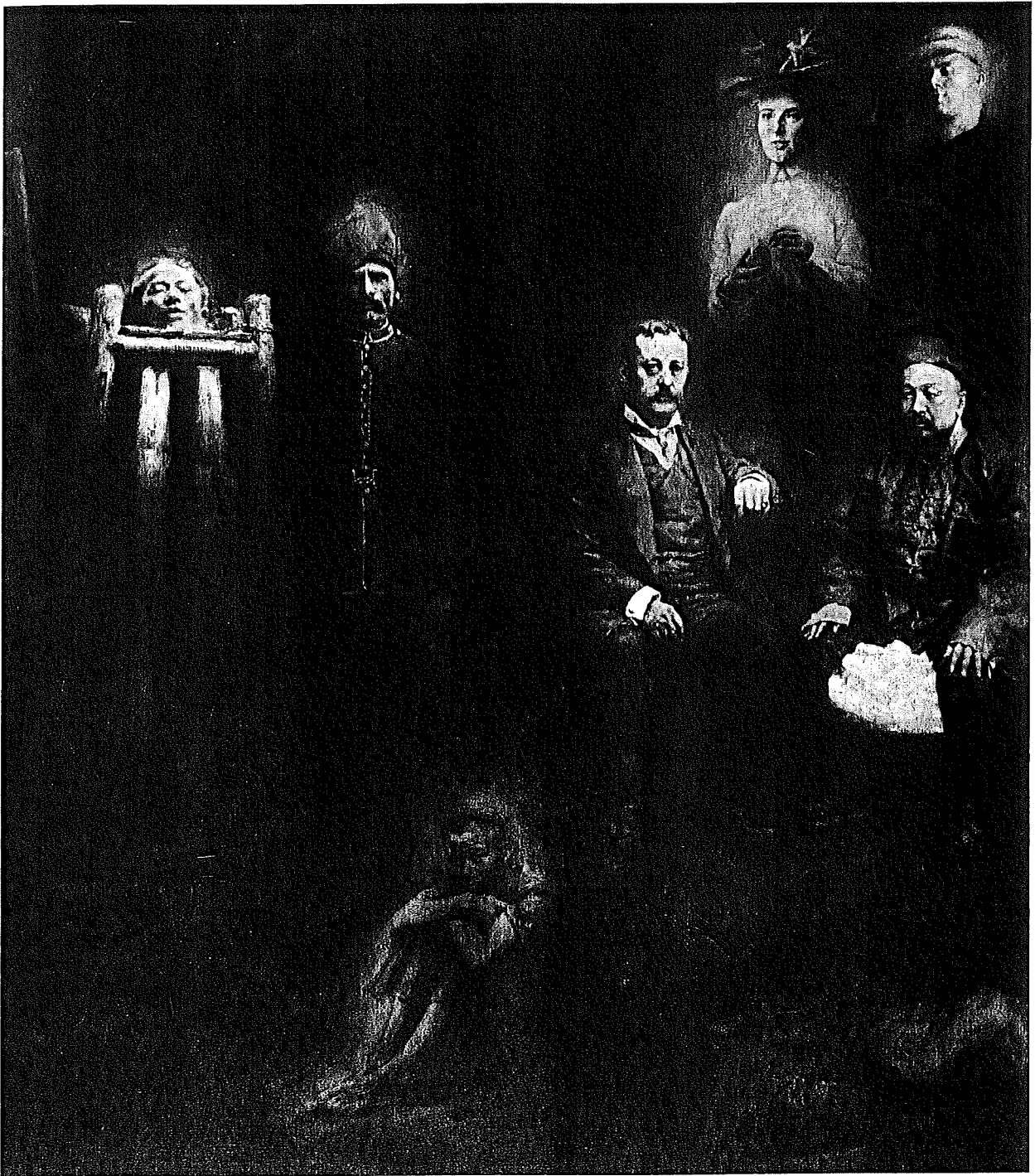


Figure 12.4
Wang Hai, *Cultural Relics*.
Hong Kong History Series
(Section 4), 1990. Photo
courtesy the artist.

most distinguishes the younger Hong Kong artists from the earlier *Shuimo* generation. Whereas the latter strove (often anxiously) to effect links between these two powerful terms, their juniors seem to be able to live more easily with their rootlessness, and to produce, within a Western modernist formal vocabulary, an art which is in many respects deeply post-modern, and primarily local in its address.

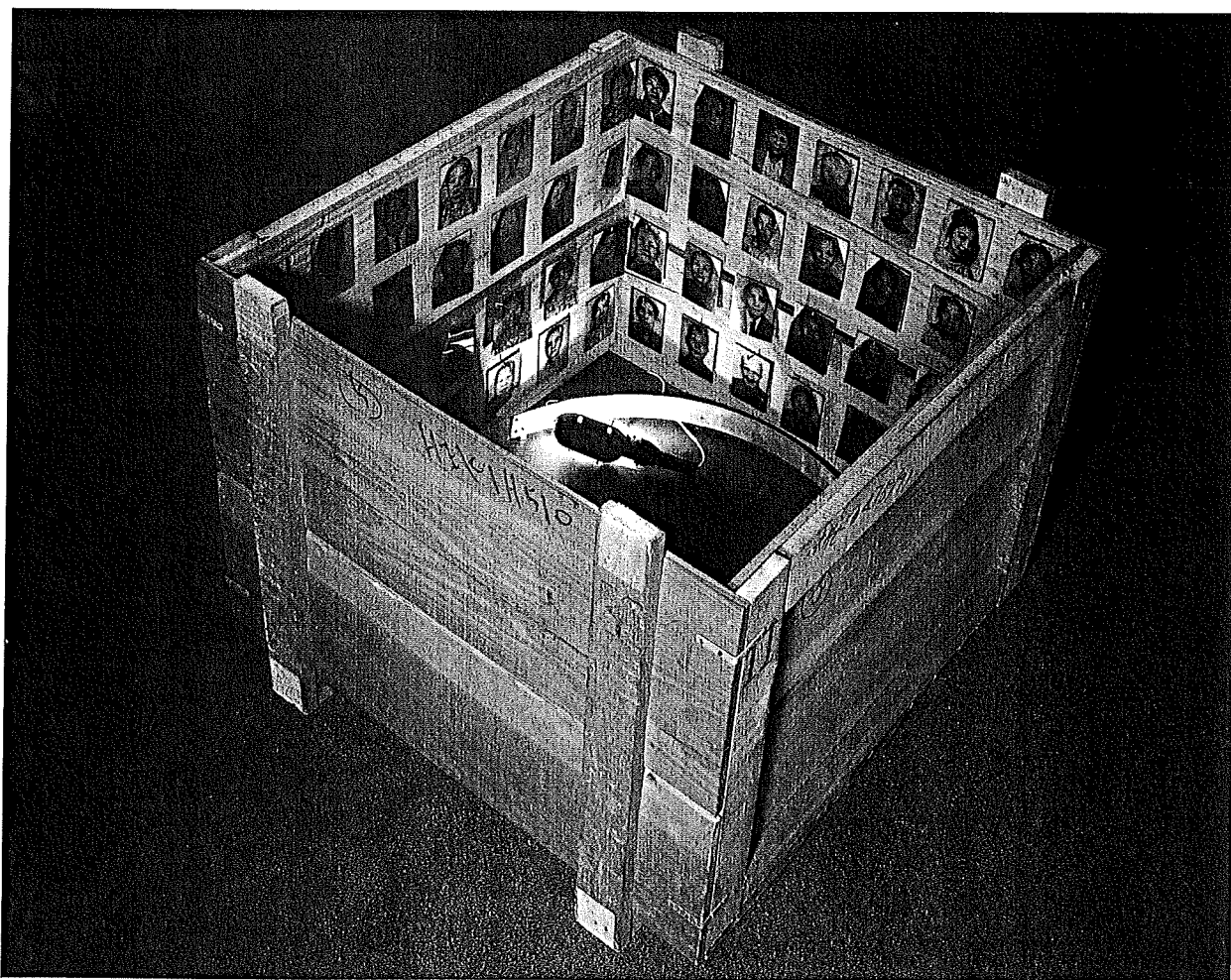


Figure 12.5
Chan Yuk-keung, *Untitled*,
1990. Photo courtesy the
artist.

Notes

1. Since I am specifically concentrating in this essay on the history of Hong Kong art, I have considered it appropriate to refer to artists by means of a romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation of their names. There are certain problems with this strategy, however. Firstly, there is more than one system of romanization

available for Cantonese. Secondly, people often produce their own informal romanizations for their own names. In order to introduce an element of standardization and to make things easier for those who wish to work out the Chinese characters of the names, I have also included in brackets after the first mention of a name the *pinyin* romanization of its standard Chinese pronunciation. Where no bracketed version occurs at first mention (as in the case of mainland Chinese or pre-modern artists) the name or term may be assumed to be given in *pinyin*.

2. The role played by the technical and formal continuities of Chinese calligraphy in helping to sustain an ideological sense of the continuity and cohesion of Chinese literati culture is interestingly treated in L. Ledderose, 'Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function', *Oriental Art*, Vol. 17, No. 10, Oct. 1986, pp. 35–50. See also D. Clarke, 'The Gaze and the Glance: Competing Understandings of Visuality in the Theory and Practice of Late Modernist Art', *Art History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 1992, pp. 80–98.
3. Writing of the Indian experience, D. Chakrabarty ('Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representations*, 37, Winter 1992, p. 19) argues that the 'third-world historian is condemned to knowing "Europe" as the original home of the "modern"'. 'Indian history, even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimicry of a certain "modern" subject of "European" history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure' (p. 18). Much of Chakrabarty's analysis could, I feel, be fruitfully applied to China. An example of a non-European country which has not only successfully inserted itself in European narratives of modernity, but even hijacked them, is of course the United States. I discuss aspects of this process in an article which in certain senses complements the present one, 'The All-Over Image: Meaning in Abstract Art', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1993, pp. 355–75.
4. On Abstract Expressionist responses to East Asia see D. Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1988.
5. In 1926 Liu Haisu was at the centre of a row with warlord Sun Chuanfang concerning his introduction of nude models at the Shanghai Art Academy. Sun had banned their use, and Liu chose to debate the issue with him in the press (see issues of *Shen Bao* for May 1926, especially those for the 16th and 17th of the month).
6. On Lin Fengmian's re-engagement with Chinese tradition after an extended involvement with European modernism, see D. Clarke, 'Exile from Tradition: Chinese and Western Traits in the Art of Lin Fengmian', *Oriental Art*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 4, Winter '93-4, pp. 22–9.
7. These Tang works don't survive, so this is not a *visual* source. See Charles Lachman, '"The Image Made by Chance" in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother', *Art Bulletin*, Vol. LXXIV, No. 5, Sept. 1992, pp. 499–510, for the most accessible recent discussion of the Tang eccentrics. Another Chinese source invoked as support for the new directions is Shitao (also known as Daoji), the 17th-century painter whose work is often viewed as eccentric and individualistic. Lui's interest in Shitao can be documented by his *Landscape, After Shitao* (c1972, hanging scroll, 153 by 83 cm). See Flora Kay Chan, *The Development of Lu Shoukun's Art*, M.Phil Thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1991, especially p. 101, on Lui Shou-kwan and Shitao. The *One Art Group* takes its name from a concept in Shitao's art theory, indicating that Lui's followers shared their teacher's interest in that artist.

8. Ng had worked in a Western style at one stage, before returning to Chinese media.
9. The distinctive landscape of Guilin was not a popular subject with pre-modern Chinese artists. Xu Beihong, Western-influenced reformer of Chinese painting, spent time in Guilin during the 1930s, producing there *The Lijiang in the Spring Rain* (1937), one of his most 'Chinese' works.
10. See the works illustrated in *Hong Kong in Ink Moods. Landscape Paintings by Lui Shou-kwan*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Fung Ping Shan Museum, Hong Kong, 8-10-85 — 13-12-85.
11. On the social idealism of Gao Jianfu and other members of the Lingnan School (which was closely associated with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement) see R. Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.
12. The desire to escape modernity seems to take an extreme form in Lawrence Tam's *Landscape 1* (1970), where an interior, cave-like space is depicted.
13. Cheng has painted Lion Rock on several occasions, as did Lui Shou-kwan.
14. Ng worked at one time for a company which levelled hillsides in preparation for construction work.
15. This opposition was commented upon at the time. John Warner, curator at the City Hall Art Gallery (the predecessor of the Museum of Art) wrote on the occasion of the fifth annual exhibition of the *Circle Art Group* that the paintings were 'full of contradictory elements — organic versus geometric lines, abstract versus representational forms, subtle linear passages versus bold ink splashes' ('Circle Art Group', *What's Doing in Hong Kong*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1968, p. 6). Warner also reads the formal oppositions, as I am doing, as metaphorical of broader concerns. Writing of Wucius Wong's works, he states (p. 7) that 'the paintings of this period reflect his struggle between the two opposites, the remote Oriental past which he found no longer relevant, and the modern West which is often alien'.
16. W. Wong, quoted in Petra Hinterthür, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 110.
17. See, for instance, Wucius Wong, *Principles of Two-Dimensional Design*, Hong Kong, Department of Extramural Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong/City Museum and Art Gallery, 1969. Irene Chou also shows an interest in Bauhaus notions of basic design, writing in *Chinese Painting by Irene Chou* (Fung Ping Shan Museum, Hong Kong, 1986, p. 25) that 'points, lines and planes are the essential ingredients of a picture'.
18. Van Lau writes (*The Art of Van Lau*, Hong Kong, Urban Council, 1987, p. 55): 'Most of my work tends to express a kind of organic life force, the process of growth in particular.'
19. See J. Burnham (*Beyond Modern Sculpture*, New York, George Braziller, 1987) for a cogent analysis of the vitalist tendency in modern Western sculpture.
20. The bamboo was a particular favourite subject of literati amateur painters, in part (as J. Cahill argues in *Hills Beyond a River. Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty*, New York, Weatherhill, 1976, p. 159) because it would have required similar brush skills to those the scholar might be expected to have acquired in the practice of calligraphy. Complex skills of spatial representation, more commonly found only in the case of the (lower status) professional painters, would not have been needed. The bamboo, which combines the qualities of flexibility and strength, symbolized the virtue aspired to by the literati.

21. I. Chou, quoted in Petra Hinterthür, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 96.
22. Public sculpture in Hong Kong, where it exists, is mostly characterized by a desire to avoid controversy. Although there is an early statue of Queen Victoria in the park which bears her name, there are (as one might indeed expect) no frank sculptural statements of imperialist ideology to be seen which date from more recent times. Paradoxically, most of the sculptures placed by the Urban Council in sites around the Museum of Art, or in the Kowloon Park sculpture walk, seem to have been chosen because they bear meanings which are more *private* than public. The one work which comes closest to breaching this apparent ban on contentious subject matter is the sculpture by César to be found in front of the Cultural Centre. This wounded statue of 'Liberty' (as César has identified it in an interview) must surely be taken as a reference to the failed Chinese democracy movement and the events of June 1989 (the work was finished in 1991 and had taken about two years to make). Perhaps because it is by a non-local artist, and was a gift of the French, it has been able to negotiate more leeway, but some attempt to disguise its content may be discerned in its title, *Flying Frenchman*. Hong Kong government policy on contentious public sculpture was most dramatically highlighted with the revelation of the hitherto secret text of a 1989 letter of appeasement written to the Chinese following a row over illegal immigrants. In the same paragraph as that in which the letter states that the government has no intention of allowing Hong Kong to become a base for subversive activities against the People's Republic of China there is a sentence noting that the Hong Kong government had recently rejected a proposal for a permanent site for the replica Goddess of Democracy statue that had been created in the territory.
23. The Hong Kong Museum of Art makes similar distinctions between 'Western' and 'Chinese' art in the categories it adopts for its Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition, although there the distinctions are presented as being between media rather than between cultures. The inability of the Hong Kong Museum of Art to provide a unified narrative of Hong Kong art history contrasts with the powerful narrative of Chinese art history told by the exhibits of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. The power of that narrative comes in part from it being framed in national terms (an option not open to the Hong Kong Museum of Art) and it can be said to have offered significant support to the Kuomintang's claims to political legitimacy.
24. L. Tam, *Hong Kong Art. 1970–1980*, Hong Kong, Urban Council, 1981, p. 12. A reference to (rather than mere employment of) the cliché of 'East meets West' is found in an early work by a younger generation Hong Kong artist Antonio Mak (Mai Xianyang). The title of *West Meets East* (1973) interrupts the flow of the cliché by reversing the normal order of its two terms, and Mak politicizes the notion of cultural contact by including a borrowed photographic image of Nixon meeting Mao. Mao the leftist is placed on the right of the image, while Nixon the rightist is here seen on the left. The theme of opposition frequently recurs in Mak's art and his ironic, playful employment of the theme of Yin and Yang may be taken as a critique of the way New Ink Painting-generation artists have used it. One example would be his sculpture *Walking Figure* (1977), which has a body constructed of two separate elements which intertwine (like the dark and light areas of the Yin and Yang diagram) to create one whole.
25. The two main travelling shows to emanate from the Museum during recent years are *Ink Painting by Hong Kong Artists* (which was shown in 1988 at the Concourse Gallery, Barbican Centre, London) and *Where Streams Become a River* (which

took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1992–3).

26. W. Wong, 'Chinese Painting in Hong Kong', in Mayching Gao (ed.), *Twentieth Century Chinese Painting*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 221.
27. W. Wong, quoted in Petra Hinterthür, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 171.
28. Western-style art by Hong Kong artists of earlier generations does exist, but there is very little continuity between such art and that of the younger-generation artists I am considering here, partly because earlier Hong Kong 'Western' art is rarely deeply influenced by modernist developments. The only artist of any significance working in a 'Western' style at an earlier date who succeeded in making a transition to a more modernist idiom is Luis Chan (Chen Fushan). Perhaps most deeply grounded in Western modes among the earlier Hong Kong artists are Yu Ben and Li Tiefu, both of whom had studied art in North America prior to 1930. The former had studied at the Ontario Art Academy, and the latter at various places in the United States, counting William Merritt Chase among his tutors (see D. Clarke, 'Li Tiefu and Western Art', in *The Art of Li Tiefu*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1991, pp. 11–3).
29. I am indebted here to Stuart Hall's attempts, drawing on Derrida, to develop a non-essentialist conceptualization of Caribbean cultural identity. See particularly S. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–37.
30. A model for Ho's fantastic stories concerning Hong Kong are the late Qing pictorial magazines in which lithographic illustrations with commentaries were reproduced. Bizarre tales of dubious authenticity predominate in these magazines. Ho's images have nothing in common with the style of his Qing precedents, China being for him 'just one of the many possible sources' open to him as an artist (O. Ho, Introduction, *Turn of a Decade*, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1989, not paginated).
31. Yung's work borrows its title from a popular book by Sun Longji which offers a critical analysis of what it regards as the underlying traits of Chinese culture. The bracketed reference to Hong Kong is Yung's own addition.
32. Practices of this kind were forcibly suppressed in the mainland by the communists, but have survived without much change in Hong Kong. The tablets are carried at funerals as representatives of the deceased, and descendants periodically offer incense before them after they have been installed in the family altar.
33. Yung (in conversation with the author) has spoken of his belief in Hong Kong as a site (and possibly the only one) for a renewal of Chinese culture. The mirrored tablets out of which *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture*, No. 4 was constructed were also used in a similarly titled theatrical production of which Yung was the director. In that case the mirrored structures were arranged in a format which more closely resembles the habitual organization of ancestor tablets, and they were placed on an altar-like structure at the back of the performance space. A use of mirrored surfaces also occurred in *Pai On Qin Qi. The Trail* (1994). This performance took place at the bottom of a well-like space with mirrored sides, echoing the sense of entrapment created in *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture*, No. 4.

The Sculpture of Antonio Mak

13

Antonio Mak died of cancer in June 1994. This essay, although it came to be published in association with a retrospective exhibition of his work held in 1995, was written in the preceding winter and spring, at a time when Antonio was still in good health. It draws upon discussions we had been having about his art, and there are a couple of direct quotes from an interview of 1 October 1993. Antonio was able to see and respond to an earlier draft of this essay, and I have kept it in the present tense in which that version was written.

The undeveloped nature of the Hong Kong visual art world, which I bemoan in the arts policy essays included in Section II, is graphically illustrated by the case of Antonio. Although he worked in a sustained manner over a period of about 20 years, he never had a museum show of his work. It is only now, after his death, that his sculpture is being seen in any kind of survey exhibition. A lesser artist might have given up in such an inhospitable environment.

In this essay some themes which have occupied me in my more academic writing about art reappear. It displays, for instance, my interest in concentrating on art as a bearer of meanings – as opposed to considering it in purely stylistic or formal terms. The interaction between East Asian and Western cultures, a subject I have been writing on since I was a Ph.D. student, also frequently surfaces, as does the question of the relation between words and images (an inescapable issue for anyone involved in the enterprise of writing about art). This latter theme returns in my essays on David Hockney's illustrations, included in Section IV.

Some Words About Words and Images

Arguably the most common schematic story concerning Western modernist art sees it as moving over time towards greater purity and autonomy. This involves an increasing abstraction as visual or formal qualities come to the fore. Art escapes from servitude to the

written word, no longer being tied to illustrating pre-existing historical, mythological or religious texts. No narrative, no words, lie behind images any more, according to this grand story of the liberation of the visual.

The sheer volume of theory that has been generated about modern art (by artists as well as by others) should perhaps lead us to consider this story sceptically. There are still a lot of words *about* artworks, *around* artworks, even if nowadays there aren't so many words *behind* artworks. From the perspective of an artist working in Hong Kong, far from the centres of Western modernist culture, the heroic narrative of art's escape from narrative might look less convincing, and what might seem elsewhere to be a contamination of the visual by the verbal might look more like an interesting and fruitful entanglement. Such indeed seems to be the case with Antonio Mak.

Titles provide us with a starting point for our verbal response to images. They are words offered by the artists themselves along with their works, subsidiary gifts of a non-visual nature which we might be tempted to use as a foundation for our own spoken or written structures. While the titles of Mak's works are rather more important to his enterprise than those of some other artists, offering a useful way into his work, the ground they provide is not a stable one. Rather than being a clear signpost (to change the metaphor), a Mak title may in fact be pointing in more than one direction. A title, for this artist, may turn out to be a means of proliferating associations rather than of limiting and channelling them.

Blue Elephant (1989; plate 4) is a case where the title, at first, seems to wilfully point us in the wrong direction. It is blue, of course, so that adjective can be applied to the sculpture in a nice straightforward literal way, but surely it is a human torso (one of the most common of Mak's subjects) rather than an elephant? In fact, however, we are not so much being misdirected as being sent on a roundabout route so that we might return to the sculpture from an oblique, but more interesting angle.

Words (but not those of the title) help pave the route back: human bodies as well as elephants have trunks, and while we certainly see the trunk of a human figure here, perhaps we can also see the trunk of an elephant. Although not mentioned in this title, trunks do appear explicitly in *Tree Trunk* (1993). Where a tree trunk might be expected we find a human trunk, a straight case of substitution which *Blue Elephant* is unwilling to be satisfied with: the arm (not the trunk) of the human figure is the form which resembles the elephant's trunk. We have a figure like those 'duck-rabbit' diagrams in psychology of perception textbooks, which offer two mutually incompatible readings. Unless, that is, we are prepared to consider the possibility of an elephant-man, which after all was

the subject of a recent film. The elephant man may seem at quite a distance from the visual evidence of the work itself, but we can get at him from another angle, that offered by the work's Chinese title. The Chinese character for elephant (*xiang*) is an element of the character *xiang* (meaning an image or statue). An elephant therefore *sounds like* a good subject for a statue (in Chinese), but to make the elephant character into the image or statue character requires the addition of another element — the radical for man. A statue, therefore, might be viewed as a kind of man-elephant.

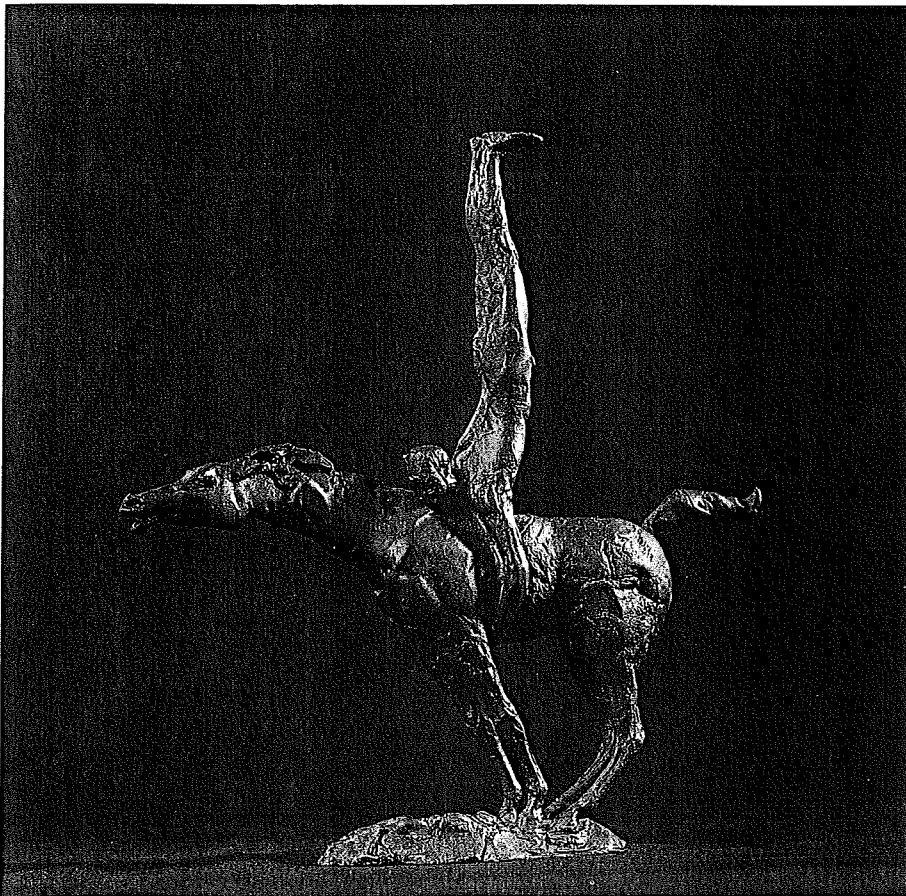


Figure 13.1
Antonio Mak, *Horse Lover Goes West*, 1992. Copyright Susan Fong.

Horse Lover Goes West (1992; fig. 13.1) is a title which seems to point us to an occidental interpretation of the sculpture to which it belongs, or more specifically an American one. 'Go West young man', it seems to say, although when Mak himself went West as a young man, it was initially only as far as England — hardly frontier territory — where he was to study art at Goldsmiths College and the Slade School of Art. The obvious visual element to which the Western reference in the title corresponds is perhaps the horse, the key prop of the Wild West lifestyle (at least as depicted in movies).

In terms of artistic reference one thinks also of the slightly tacky (but immensely popular) horse paintings and sculptures of Frederic Remington, Charles Marion Russell and their followers, which propagate the cowboy myth as enthusiastically as any John Wayne Western.

Just as *Blue Elephant* turns out to have Chinese language associations as well as English language ones, so this sculpture too has Eastern references that balance its emphatically Western ones. Themes of opposition are, we will see, very common in Mak's work at many levels, and here the title points both ways since its Chinese version (*Mami Xiyouji*) brings completely different associations into play. *Xiyouji* is the title of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*. Much as he admires this tale of the adventures of the Monkey King and his companions, Mak seems to be monkeying (horsing?) around here, and introducing less exalted Hong Kong references as well. As a colloquial phrase in Chinese, *da hua xiyou* specifies bullshitting, the telling of fanciful stories, and given the context of horses and horse lovers we might be correct in imagining a reference to the wild dreams of the many fans of horse racing that exist in Hong Kong. Mak himself is something of a fan of horses: they appear frequently in his work and have been of interest to him from early days, since he grew up near to the racetrack in Happy Valley.

Bible From Happy Valley (1992; fig. 13.2), like many of Mak's sculptures, is made up of two seemingly incompatible elements. One is not surprised to see a man on top of a horse (as in *Horse Lover Goes West*), but a book on top of a horse has the kind of incongruity we have learnt to expect from Surrealist painting. Quite extensive visual fissures can, however, be crossed with the help of fragile verbal bridges. Bookies, for example, are men who *keep books on horses* (making their living from those horse lovers who dream of *A Better (Better's?) Tomorrow* in the Vale of Happiness).

Mak points out that the open pages of the book have a visual similarity to wings. This horse, that is to say, is not so much a literal as a 'bookish' or literary one, a Pegasus. This particular winged horse won't get far, of course, because his wings are of lead, a material not conducive to airborne activities. His fate, should he attempt flight, might be similar to that of the human figure in *Book Lover I* (1992; fig. 13.3). The most famous human flyer found in books is Icarus, who fell to his death through pride, but if that's a sprawled cape rather than book-wings this could be some tragic comic-book hero instead, a superman brought *Down to Earth* (which is the title of a 1978 piece). Gravity is *serious*, *Book Lover I* seems to say, but *Gravity III* (1993) initially seems to lack *gravitas*. This drooping figure (like the wilting flowers depicted on the base) seems a joke, a reference perhaps to the process of modelling itself, which is subject to interference from gravity if armatures are not

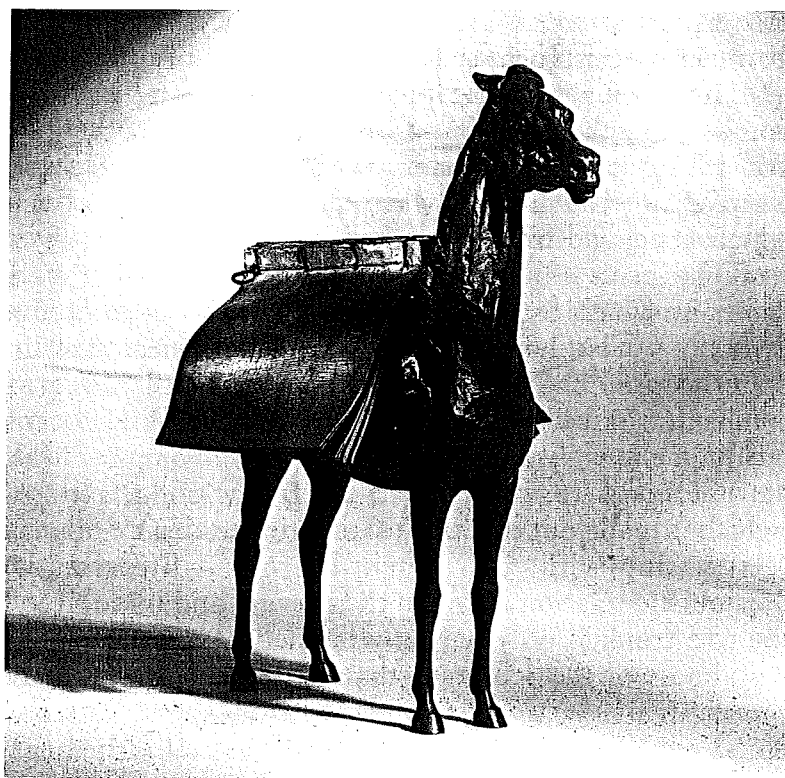


Figure 13.2
Antonio Mak, *Bible From Happy Valley*, 1992. Copyright Susan Fong.

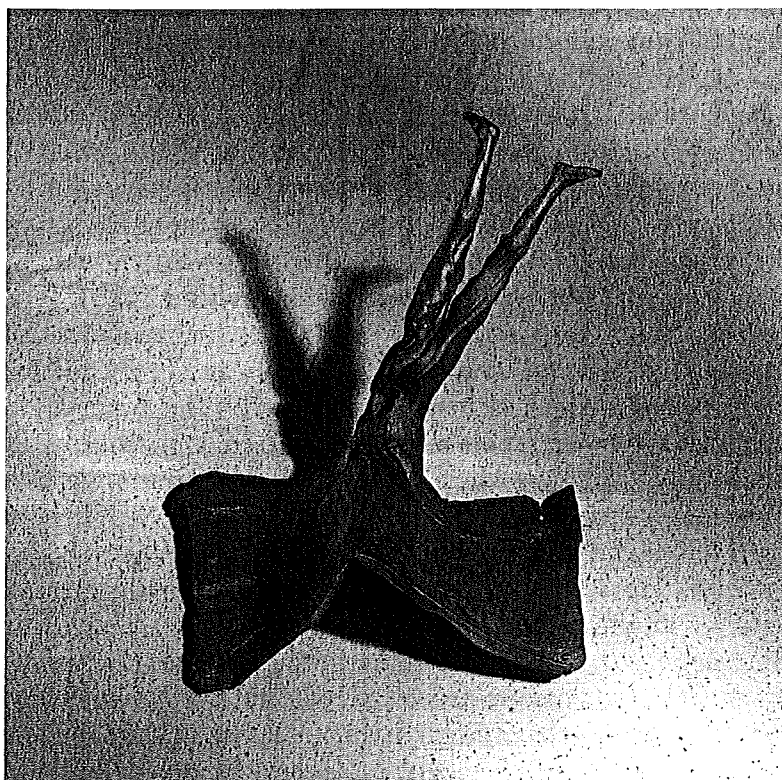


Figure 13.3
Antonio Mak, *Book Lover I*, 1992. Copyright Susan Fong.

properly constructed. More grave associations are there to be found, however, since spinelessness is as much a moral failing as pride.

The reference to the process of modelling in *Gravity III* is paralleled by the art-about-art quality of certain other pieces. *Craft (Vehicle)* (1992) seems to indicate a concern with technique by the word 'craft', and the shell which partially surrounds the torso (and which is echoed by the brackets in the title) reminds one of the casting process — albeit that it also brings to mind the fish-shaped dishes in which fish are often cooked in Thai restaurants. *Book Lover* may also have an oblique reference to the technique and material used to create it: both the downfall of Icarus and the production of this sculpture involved *lost wax*. A different sculptural technique, namely carving, is foregrounded in one of Mak's earliest works, *Wood (Inside Out)* (1973). By making a tree out of wood (which is made out of a tree) Mak brings subject and material into relationship with each other. There is a literal as well as an illusionistic relation between the carving and its subject, and since the tree trunk is only partially defined we are more aware of the woodiness of the sculpture than we might otherwise be: we are conscious of the wood that remains uncarved, as well as of the wood which has had to be removed. An unfinished carving (one thinks of Michelangelo's *Slaves*) can give the feeling that the artist has found the subject of his or her work embedded within the material. That certainly seems the case here, and (to return to the realm of verbal associations) one might note that trees are often found in a wood, just as wood is found in trees. We may not always be able to 'see the wood for the trees', but Mak seems here to be more worried that we might not see the tree for the wood. Perhaps this has something to do with Chinese language concerns: whereas in English there is room for confusion between 'wood' (the material) and 'wood' (a collection of trees), in Chinese the character *mu* meaning 'wood' (as a material) can also have the meaning of 'tree'.

I have already noted how *trunks* provide a verbal link between two of Mak's most common subject elements, trees and human torsos, and *Green Trunk* of 1989 and *Fig. Tree* of 1991 provide further instances where trees and human bodies are brought together in his sculptures. A similar link, between trees and books, is provided by the fact that they both have *leaves*, although unlike the former connection this is not one which the sculptor himself draws attention to in his titles (even though the pun works in Chinese as well, with the characters for *leaf* and for *page* both having the same sound *ye*). We might, therefore, begin to wonder exactly where to draw the line in our verbal response to the sculptures. A veritable forest of verbal associations seems to surround the works, and it may seem dangerous to wander too far from the main path — might not someone who *branches* off and *leaves* the *trunk* route (*root?*) get

lost in a linguistic thicket, or become too 'bookish' in their approach to a visual art form? We've already seen the fate of the *Book Lover*, someone with his 'head in a book' who came to a sticky end. My own view is that we are always actively *making* sense of art, and to follow the main path is merely to uncritically accept the senses that others have already made in their verbal wanderings. The non-verbal or resolutely optical response to art, rather than being an escape from the textual forest, is a path constructed of the words of Clive Bell, Clement Greenberg and many others. If meaning is something we make, rather than something we unload from the artwork, then perhaps the idea of a path leading to a complete comprehension of a painting or sculpture is a misconception. When closure of meaning is understood as something perpetually postponed, perhaps there are only meandering byways, and the highway to the citadel of truth begins to be reclaimed by the forest.

Thinking With Things

One characteristic of Mak's art which stands out is the persistence of his engagement with certain motifs over an extended period of time. This continuity is to be found not so much at the level of subjects, as at the level of the elements out of which he creates those subjects. Like Chinese characters (which are constructed for the most part of pre-existing units which tend to be meaningful in their own right) Mak's sculptures seem to be made, by a process of addition, from elements which are a recognizable part of his repertoire of images. While the combinations in which the elements are joined lack the predictability required of a language, there is nevertheless a sense in which we are watching their transformation from context to context, rather than merely looking at each work in isolation. Meanings attached to elements shift over time, and I want to view this as a kind of thinking with things, a use of sculpture as a medium of thought.

Some of the elements of Mak's sculpture have already been introduced. We have discussed examples which illustrate his interest in horses, torsos, trees and books. There is also a persisting interest in ladders, steps and chairs, and these items may be taken as a category in their own right of objects which are man-made and have a close relationship to the human body. Such a relationship is explored in sculptures such as *Man With Ladder II* (1982) and *Man With Ladder III* (1982), as well as in *Man, Chair* (1978) and *Figure on Staircase* (1982). One theme, most particularly explicit in the latter, is the way tools tend to mould human existence, when ostensibly they merely serve it. Flights of stairs can become symbolic thresholds, entry points into another realm. Although his use of

the flight of stairs motif predates his discovery of it, Mak is interested in the fact that a flight of stairs can be found in a hieroglyphic illustration to the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The persistence of elements in Mak's work can be illustrated by the appearance of the image of a chair in a painting of 1973, titled *West Meets East* (fig. 13.4). In this student piece, completed before the artist made his transition from two- to three-dimensional work, the verbal play we are by now accustomed to is already taking place. The chair is placed near to an image of *Chairman* Mao shaking hands with Richard Nixon, an event which had taken place earlier in the year of the painting's creation. A more recent chair-man is *Lift* (1983). Here the chair sits on the man, rather than the man sitting on the chair — they both have legs and backs, so perhaps it's not so hard for their roles to be reversed — and a visual reminder is at the same time created of the seat-like form found on the ceremonial hats of Chinese mandarins.

One theme of Mak's work not yet mentioned is the tiger, and I would like to consider it a little to demonstrate more clearly the migrations an element is subject to when it enters the arena of his work, the variety of meanings it is able to attract to itself over time. One could say that the tiger's primary associations are with wild nature, but Mak's tiger is from the beginning a 'bookish', literary animal, with associations gained from William Blake's brightly burning forerunner that make it representative of the imagination. It plays this role most diagrammatically in *Man's Nature*, an etching of 1972, where it is opposed to a flight of stairs. The latter element in that context is given associations with rationality (and its 'step by step' logic), and a human figure is shown faced with the dilemma of choosing between the two options as if this were a modern day version of Annibale Carracci's *Choice of Hercules*.

Although Mak is interested in Henri Rousseau's representations of tigers (he was able to study the National Gallery's *Tropical Storm With a Tiger* while a student in London), he began gathering the visual sources which fed his own tiger sculptures at a time before he would have been aware of modernist art history. While still quite young he started gathering a scrapbook of tiger images culled from a variety of photographic sources. In doing this, Mak was imitating the practice of his father, a commercial artist, who collected images of various kinds as reference material for his work.

While associations derived directly from Western Romanticism (William Blake and Henri Rousseau) or indirectly (via the commercial advertisements which exploit its heritage) are important to Mak's tigers, they are not the only ones. We have already, in examining Mak's titles, encountered cases where what might at first sight seem purely Western turns out to have a submerged Chinese dimension, and the same is true with the tiger iconography.

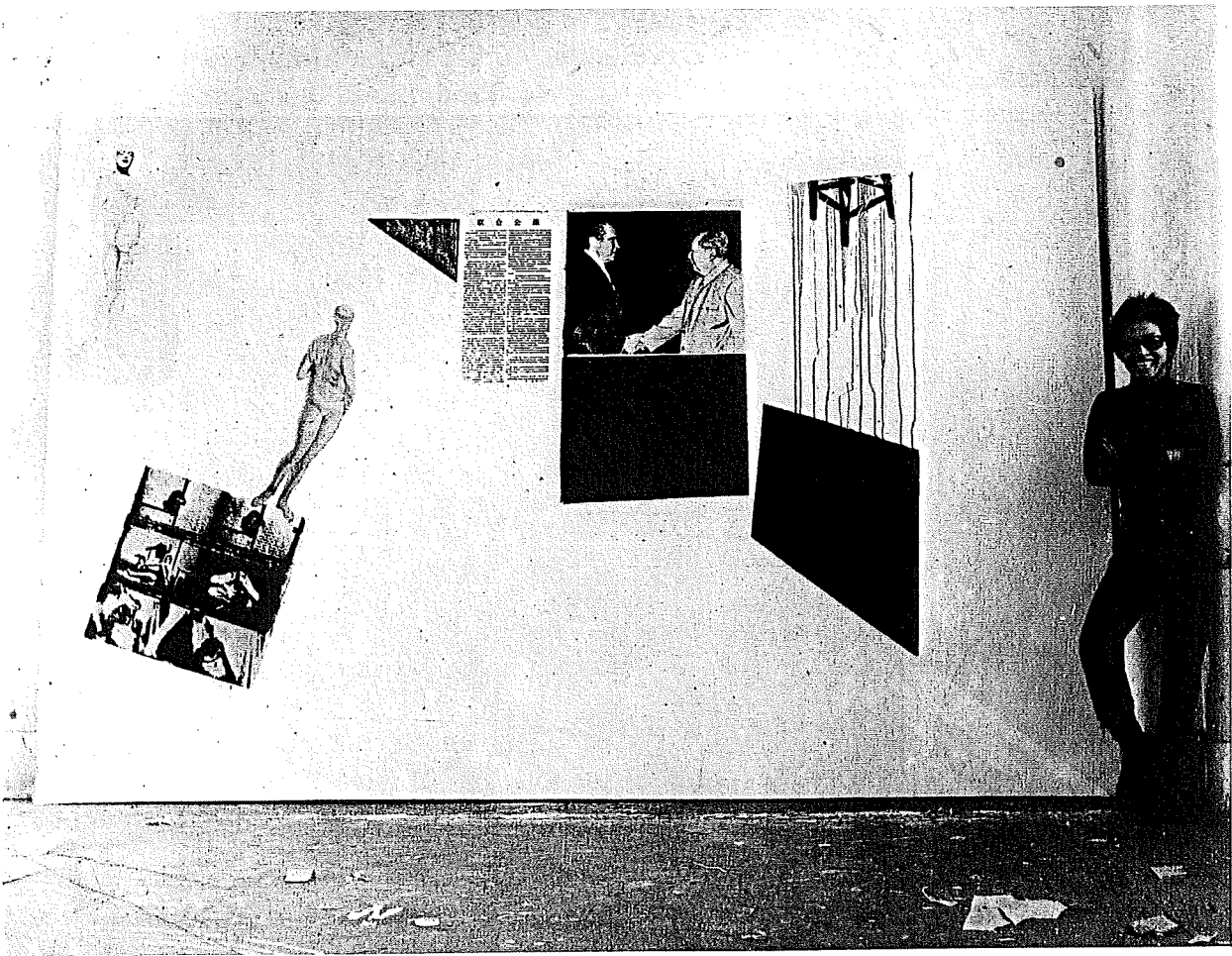


Figure 13.4
Antonio Mak and *West Meets East*, 1973. The photograph dates from the period when the artist was studying at Goldsmiths College, London. Copyright Susan Fong.

The tiger has a long history of associations in Chinese art, and one could point to *Two Minds in Harmony* (Tokyo, National Museum), a work in the manner of Shi Ke, as a direct ancestor of Mak's *Easy Rider* (1993; fig. 13.5). Despite the American film alluded to by the title, this is actually one of the most overtly 'Chinese' works that Mak has produced, containing as it does an image of a Bodhisattva on the back of a tiger. In both this and the Shi Ke work the figure is in an inwardly directed, meditative state of mind, and is shown as in a harmonious relationship with the potentially fierce beast. Buddhist ideas, in which Mak has had an interest, supply the context for both works. In each case harmony is attained not so much

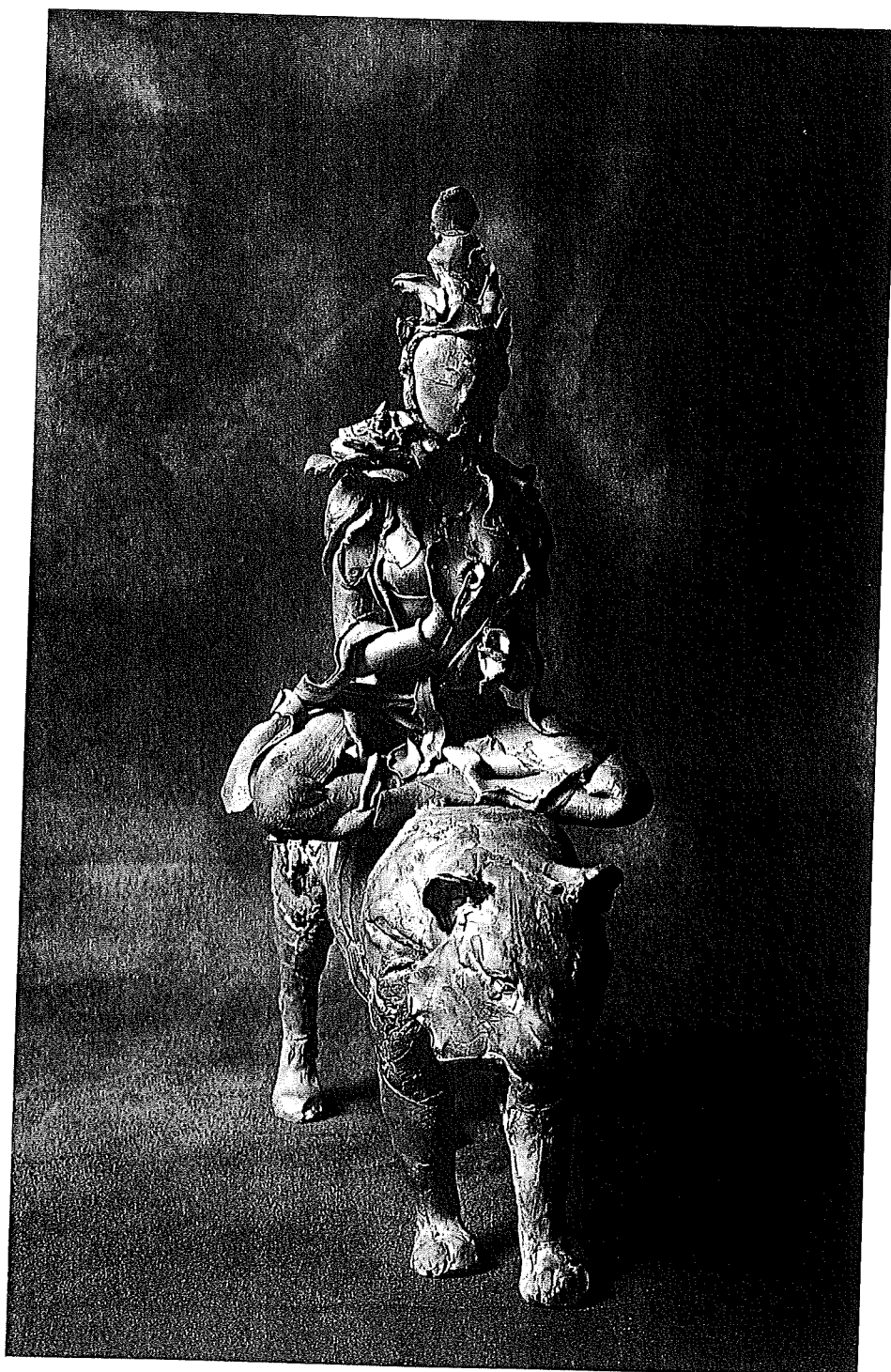


Figure 13.5
Antonio Mak, *Easy Rider*,
1993. Copyright Susan
Fong.

through mastery of the tiger as learning to coexist with the tiger within us, our essential nature. Here (unlike *Bible From Happy Valley* with its horse and book) the coexistence of diverse elements is seen as an inescapable part of the human condition, not a bizarre departure from it. *Easy Rider*'s Chinese title (*Cheng*) has the everyday notion of 'ride' — which meets with the associations of the English title — but it also brings explicit Buddhist associations since the same character can also mean 'vehicle' — in the sense of the 'greater and lesser vehicles' (the Mahayana and Hinayana schools of Buddhism).

In addition to carrying religious associations, Mak's tigers are also being used to help think out positions on political matters. Such an idea is not completely without precedent in Chinese art. The Lingnan School painters of the earlier part of this century, for instance, used tigers (and other animals found in pre-modern East Asian art) as political symbols, resignifying elements of traditional iconography in order to introduce contemporary references without creating too great a breach with the past. Without any explicit link to the Lingnan School practice, Mak is also using the tiger as a symbol for China. Specifically, his tigers appear in works which address the vexed question of Hong Kong's relation to China in the run-up to the 1997 handover of power. Whereas the Lingnan School tigers were painted within China, with that animal's proverbial strength becoming a symbol of China's need for a new boldness, Mak's tigers have been sculpted outside of China, and the aggressive quality of the tiger is therefore constructed as something to be wary of. The tiger signifies 'them', not 'us', and a them whose imminent arrival has scared many people into emigration.

Like *Easy Rider*, *Sleepwalker II* (1991) has a human figure on a tiger's back. Seemingly Mak is again offering advice on how to develop a working relationship with unavoidable powerful forces, albeit that those forces are conceived of here as political rather than psychic. Flight into emigration appears not to be the option proposed, and a mode of coexistence seems possible if the tiger and its powers are not taken too seriously. Again the riding figure has closed eyes, but this time it is sleepwalking rather than meditation which is taking place. 'So long as he doesn't wake up he'll be alright' is Mak's comment on this work, but it is hard to see it as an image without ambivalence. Is sleepwalking, after all, such a positive thing, even if it does shield us from realities? Since the somnambulist as well as the tiger is in forward motion, it looks as if he's going to fall off the front of his mount, in which case his protective sleep is surely going to come to an end. And, in any case, can peaceful coexistence between two very different entities be presented as a solution wholly without irony when that notion is the very one which political rhetoric proposes in the phrase 'One country, two

systems'? Sleep seems to be coming to an end — for better or for worse — in *Good Morning II* (1993). Here the outstretched arms, albeit that they are similar to those of the sleepwalker, and also recall the actions of a diver about to take the plunge, seem (because of their context) to refer to the stretching motions of someone who is waking, or perhaps to the early morning martial arts-based exercises so popular in Chinese societies. *Sleepwalker I* (1991; fig. 13.6) is very closely related to *Good Morning II*, although here the orientation of the figure has been reversed, so that it faces in the same direction as the tiger.

Whatever the merits of the sleepwalker's strategy for dealing with tigers, it seems clear that the approach being adopted in *Last Tango With Tiger* (1993; fig. 13.7) is not one being recommended by the sculptor. 'That guy is really in trouble [says Mak], but he doesn't know it.' The human here (representing, one feels, those in Hong Kong — businessmen and others — who so assiduously court the Communist government) seems to have completely forgotten the essential nature of tigers. Such unnatural behaviour on the animal's part cannot be expected to last for long — both parties, after all, need their 'freedom of expression'. Of course, we do see tigers acting tamely in the circus, but if the human thinks he's in control here he's mistaken. The movie reference in this title to *Last Tango in Paris* is not so reassuring as the one in *Easy Rider*: the dancing will soon be over, and then what? The tango, despite its romantic qualities, has a deadly undertone to it. Mak is aware of a Chinese saying which compares serving a ruler to serving a tiger, in that they both might bite you, and our dancer faces a similar danger to a court official. This, after all, is no paper tiger.

To specify more closely the range of meanings carried by the tiger in Mak's work we can compare it to the horse, some associations of which have already been introduced. Both animals connote nature but, although a wild horse is a possibility, it is generally seen in Mak's work in a tame state. Whereas riding tigers is a dangerous activity, the riding of horses carries no such association in Mak's sculpture. Men and horses associate easily, perhaps because horses have been bred over time to perform a useful function for man, to fit his needs. They are tools, in a sense, like the ladders and chairs which appear elsewhere in Mak's art.

The tame quality of horses when compared to tigers is illustrated by *Bound to Win* (1992), in which two horses are seen dressed up in dinner jackets. We cannot imagine tigers attired in this fashion, but the notion that even for a horse such dress is unnatural, a form of constraint, is introduced by the word 'bound' in the title (although 'bound' in another sense is what a horse might do if it was set free). We are back to the world of horse racing, and although this pair are dressed like human 'winners' in the race of life, a horse is never

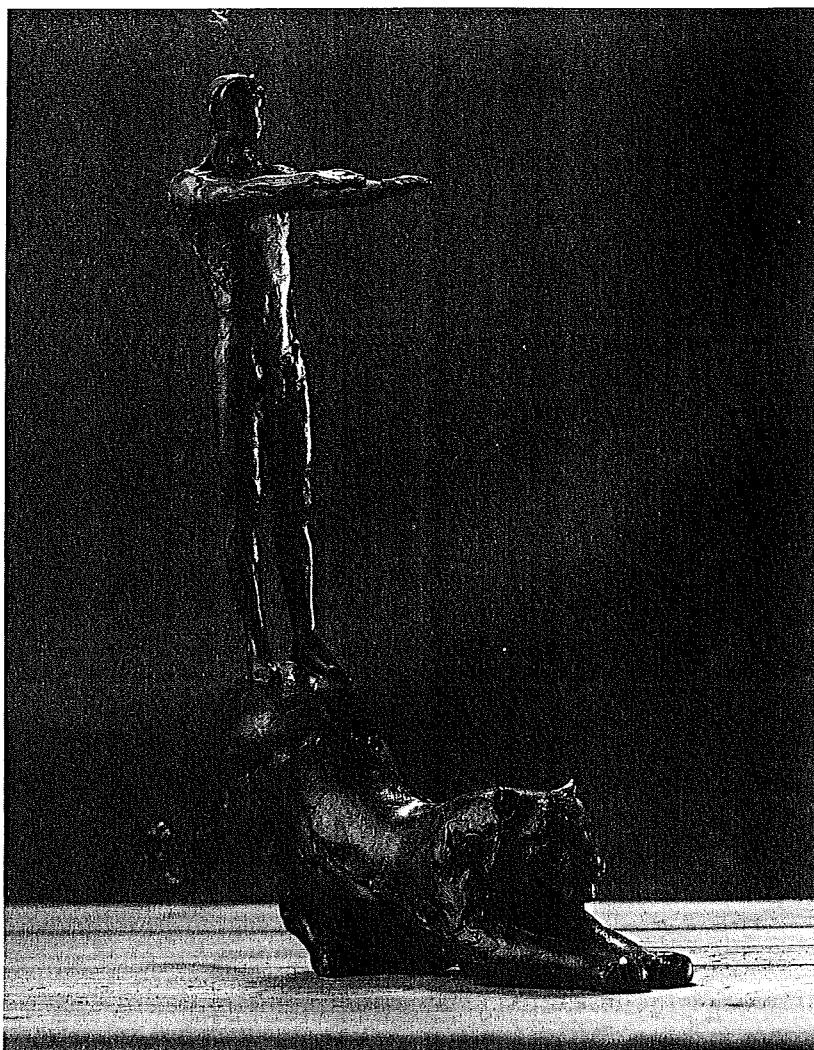


Figure 13.6
Antonio Mak, *Sleepwalker I*,
1991. Copyright Susan
Fong.

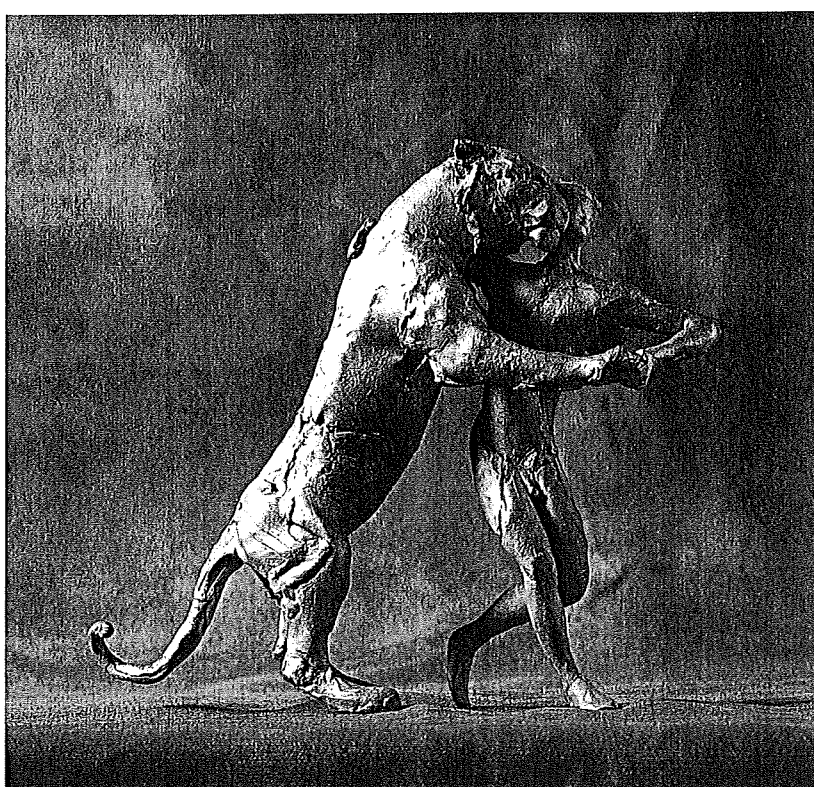


Figure 13.7
Antonio Mak, *Last Tango
With Tiger*, 1993. Copyright
Susan Fong.

'bound to win', no matter how much of a favourite it might seem before the start.

Reflections on Reversal and Opposition

I have already had occasion to discuss artworks by Mak in which quite diverse elements are brought into relation, and in some cases those differences might be thought of as direct oppositions. The tigers and stairs of the untitled 1973 etching (with their connotations of imagination and rationality) can stand as an example, as can the encounter of Mao and Nixon (who may be taken as representing respectively East and West, or Communism and Capitalism). Mak seems explicitly interested in treating oppositions of various kinds in his art, and this can be explored most effectively by a consideration of pieces in which he uses a common element of his work not yet discussed, namely the mirror. Mirrors offer a possibility for exploring the theme of opposition because of the way they bring objects face to face with their illusory doubles. Their property of reversing right and left is, of course, another way in which oppositions are introduced, and one which is shared with the process of printing from an etching plate.

Although the use of mirrors in three-dimensional artworks is perhaps not so very common, a great many two-dimensional artworks include images of mirrors. Mak seems particularly interested in *Not to be Reproduced* (1937) by Magritte, which depicts a mirror that reflects the back of the figure before it, rather than the front. In his exploration of this conceptual Surrealist's image, Mak attempts to replicate its effects with a real mirror, achieving this in *Atomical Relationship* (1974; fig. 13.8) by means of a line drawing of a figure's back view executed on a transparent surface. If the figure appears to be looking at the back of his head, does that mean he is behind the mirror-image rather than in front of it?

A concern with fronts and backs can be found in Mak's work as early as 1972. In *West Meets East* he introduces two complementary versions of a female figure, related to Botticelli's Venus, in which aspects of the body's front and back have been combined — one, for instance, has a bottom visible as well as a face. These figures reappear in another work (*What's Behind Venus?* of 1973), where a transparent material is again employed as a surface for images. One of the front-back images is put on each side of a piece of glass, so that a superimposed complete front and complete back image can be read from both the front and the back of the work (because each of the front-back images has a front and back to it). Front and back are further played with here since the

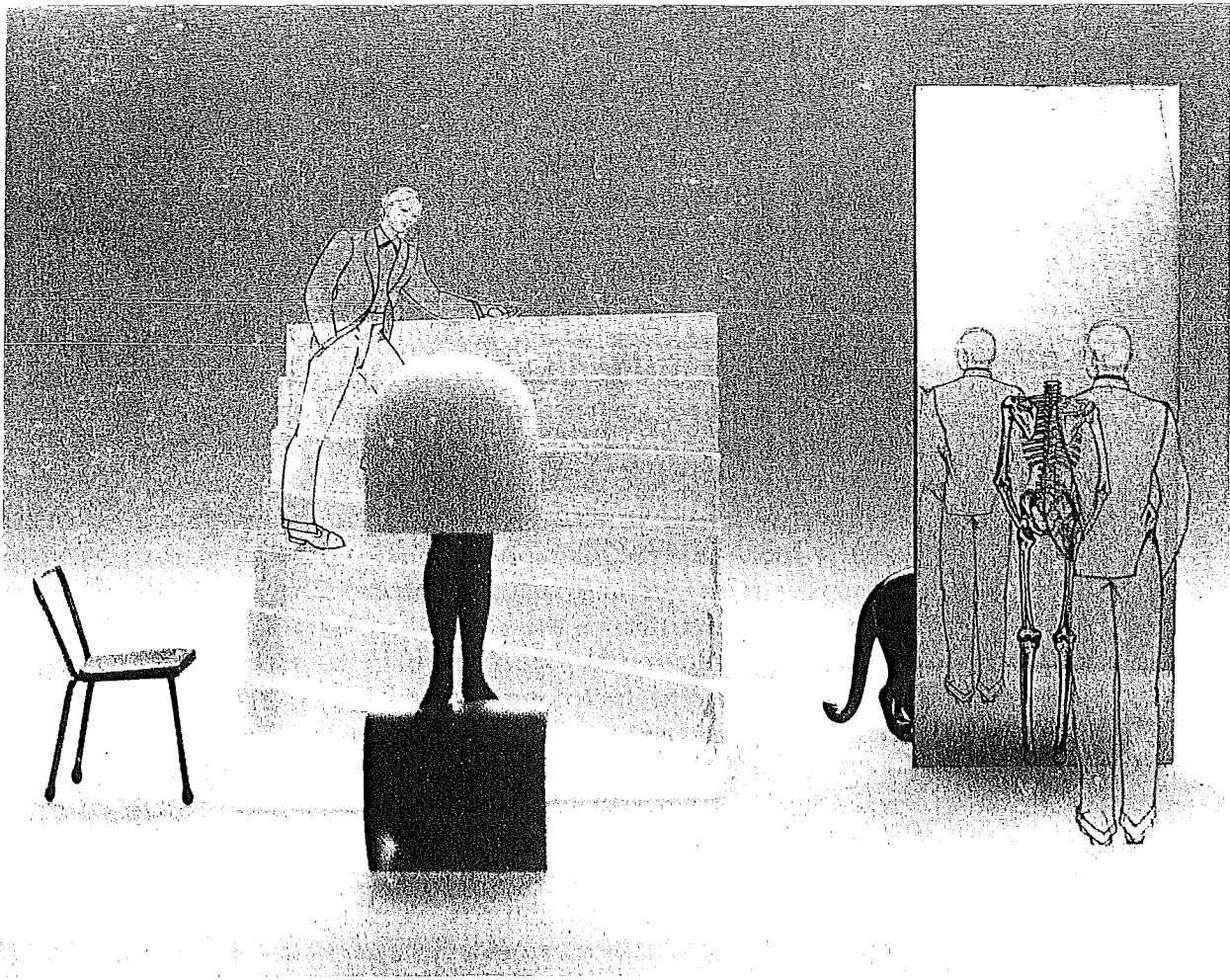


Figure 13.8
Antonio Mak, *Atomical Relationship*, 1974. Copyright
Susan Fong.

image is placed in a frame which enables a shift of orientation: its front and back can be reversed. It might seem apposite to include an image of a *bottom* in a work which quotes *Botticelli*, but there is room for disorientation if we attend to the word-play too closely. *Bottom* and *behind* may refer to the same bit of anatomy, but as directional terms they refer to different dimensions. The situation is further complicated in *West Meets East* by the pair of compass points in the title (*reversed* from the usual order in which they are verbally paired), as well as by the presence of the two national leaders, who may be taken (in terms of political metaphor) as standing on the extreme left and right. Mak's *Last Tango With Tiger*, as we have already noted, may be a documentation of the awareness that left and right can often be *on the same side*, and Nixon's visit to China can be taken as marking the beginning of the

process, so visible in Hong Kong today, of capitalists finding common (economic) cause with communists. Mak gives us one further reverse to hint at his cynicism concerning the historic meeting of opposites he depicts: Mao the leftist appears on the right of the photo, while Nixon the rightist is on the left. 'Tricky Dickie' may have been a *dexterous* or *adroit* politician, but *on the other hand* that Vietnam War-era president had his *sinister* side.

In *Playing Escher* (1974), as in *Atomical Relationship*, Mak creates in three dimensions an illusion similar to that first proposed in a purely two-dimensional image (in this case, M.C. Escher's *Reptiles* of 1943). Here, however, the mirror is a tool introduced to solve the problem, rather than an item which exists in the original image (although elsewhere Escher does show an interest in reflections, his *Magic Mirror* of 1946 providing the closest comparison). Mak produces a circular arrangement of tigers which recalls Escher's circle of reptiles: whereas the latter start as two-dimensional images on a page and become three-dimensional before returning to their flat world, the former start as three-dimensional images and become flat reflections before returning to their three-dimensional world. One could rather neatly refer to Mak's work as providing a 'mirror-image' of what happens in Escher's lithograph, if it were not that the notion of a 'starting point' makes less sense where there is a closed sequence of identical images than it might elsewhere. Although we know that the reflected tigers are dependent on the bronze ones (and not the reverse) we cannot help but wonder whether these are two-dimensional tigers who have come out briefly into a three-dimensional world. Because of the arrangement, the bronze tigers read as opposed to the reflections which are parallel to them in the illusory mirrored space, although in fact the reflections are actually of the bronze tigers which appear to be at ninety-degree angles to them.

Atomical Relationship was apparently Mak's first piece of sculpture, and therefore mirrors can be seen to have played a part in his move from two- to three-dimensional work. Both it and *Playing Escher*, as I have just been arguing, are explicitly three-dimensional versions of other artists' two-dimensional works, and the latter can in addition be read as thematically concerned with the emergence of two-dimensional beings into the three-dimensional world. Such a theme is also present in *Heads and Joker* of 1973, which includes a series of three overlapping versions of the same profile head. The first is a black silhouette or shadow, the second uses conventions of representation to imply the illusion of a third dimension, while the third is modelled in shallow relief. A further indication of desire to escape into the third dimension is that the image of the three heads is placed over the larger canvas of the painting (in a small frame of its own), rather than being executed

directly onto it. It is joined to the larger canvas by a hinge at its (and the larger canvas's) edge, thereby permitting it the freedom to swing out into the dimension not occupied by the canvas surface and its painted forms.

That Mak continues to use mirrors in his later works is perhaps an indication that he has not lost interest in two-dimensional images altogether, since they provide a way of introducing such flat images into otherwise three-dimensional works without a return to drawing or painting. We can see such an encounter between two- and three-dimensional images within a single piece in *Inside Out* (1974–82), where the theme treated in *Atomical Relationship* of a figure's opposition to its mirror image is carried one stage further. Here opposites meet and even interpenetrate, the figure in the mirror appearing to move out into real space at the same time as the real figure moves into illusory space. In this work, which can be taken as a more three-dimensional version of *What's Behind Venus?*, part of the bronze section of the sculpture belongs to the penetrating figure, part to the emerging one. The same is true of *Chair* (1977) and *Horse, Crossing I* (1977–83; fig. 13.9), which repeat the idea of *Inside Out* with two of Mak's other recurrent sculptural elements. In *Horse, Crossing I*, however, there is an elaboration not found in the work using the human figure: the horses appear to cross each other on paths that intersect at right angles. A similar — although less extreme — difference of angles is present in *Chair*, but because of the inanimate nature of the subject here there is not a sense that two chairs are in motion into and out of the mirror. Instead the chairs seem to be suspended between two worlds, solid objects paradoxically sharing some of the same space (an idea Mak also explores in *Chair on Chair* of 1977).

Mak's interest in mirrors is informed by many textual sources. He has heard, for instance, of a belief that there are beings in mirrors who copy our movements because they have been conquered by us, and of a people who supposedly avoid looking at reflections of themselves because they deem them to be false images. A scientific source for his speculations on reflections is Martin Gardner's *The Ambidextrous Universe*, while more literary sources are H.G. Wells's *The Plattner Story* (in which a man returns from a journey in the fourth dimension with his heart now on the opposite side of his body) and, of course, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. This latter text is claimed by Mak as a direct inspiration for *Inside Out*, since while reading about Alice stepping into the mirror he found himself attempting to visualize the details of the process.

In *Heaven and Hell* (1993) Mak returns to the idea of the mirror surface as a threshold to another realm, enriching the metaphorical associations by means of the title. In this work he combines a mirror with another of his habitual sculptural elements, the flight of steps,



Figure 13.9
Antonio Mak, *Horse
Crossing I*, 1977/83. Copy-
right Susan Fong.

which (as I have already noted) also carries the connotation of a symbolic threshold. Whereas Mak's sculptures are usually relatively small, manipulable objects, *Heaven and Hell* is an installation piece, set into the ground. Steps lead down to a mirrored surface placed at an angle, in which your own reflection becomes visible. The spectator takes the place of the human figure in *Inside Out*, moving to meet its double.

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

the interchangeability of opposites, perhaps, a reading which could gain some support from a consideration of *Root* (1990). That sculpture also seems concerned with a confusion or similarity between opposites, specifically between the roots and the branches of a tree, which are represented as more or less indistinguishable. That downward motion should not be necessarily read as negative is also suggested by the title of *Rebirth* (1990), which depicts human bodies with heads downwards as if taking a journey of rebirth to some Jungian regenerative underworld. The feet, perhaps as a symbol of the rebirth mentioned in the title, are covered in foliage — recalling Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree as depicted by Bernini in his *Apollo and Daphne*.

From a certain angle of approach to *Heaven and Hell* one has a strong illusion of a doorway below ground level leading to an unbounded empty space. Steps lead down into what seems to be a void that has been discovered below the earth's surface. The strength of this illusion is tempered only when one gets close enough for one's own reflection to appear, thus identifying the plane of the mirror surface, and laying bare the mechanics of the work's effects. Mak, if he does offer an intimation of the numinous, is quick to undermine it, and perhaps the whole notion of walking down towards heaven could be read in a similarly ironic way as a comment on human delusions. Like Icarus or the *Book Lover*, we are being (literally) brought down to earth, and in our case this happens at the very same time as we appear to ascend into the heavens.

Because of its title, we may be led to see an influence from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* on Mak's installation piece. The theme of opposites and their reconciliation or coexistence which appears here and elsewhere in Mak's work is explicitly treated in Blake's text, which tells us to accept oppositions as necessary to human existence. 'Without contraries is no progression' is one statement of this principle in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which also asserts that 'opposition is true friendship'. If one wanted to, one could find further resonances between Blake's text and Mak's art: the contrast between tigers and horses in his work, for instance, could be related to Blake's statement that 'the tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction'. Mak's opening up of an illusory void beneath the earth in *Heaven and Hell* could be related to a line about 'melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid', as well as to the passage where the narrating voice describes being led down a cavern by an angel until 'a void boundless as a nether sky appear'd beneath us'.

As with so much else in Mak's art, however, one can also find a Chinese dimension to *Heaven and Hell*: the notion of Yin and Yang as dynamically interacting polarities underlying all phenomena is

at least as valuable a source for the idea of the complementarity of opposites as anything Blake can offer. This Chinese philosophical source, which Mak is happy to acknowledge, is perhaps most clearly influential on *Walking Figure I* (1977), a body constructed of two separate elements, which intertwine (like the dark and light areas of the Yin/Yang diagram) to create one whole. Since in *Walking Figure I* the right side of the head is linked to the left side of the torso (and vice versa), one is also reminded by this sculpture of the discovery that the two sides of our body are controlled by the opposite sides of the brain: a reversal and an opposition built into our biological hardware.

When Mak applied for postgraduate study at the Slade School of Art he apparently submitted a double statement: an optimistic one he had written in the evening was attached to a more pessimistic one written the next morning. Not only has his interest in opposites and their interaction continued since that time, but one can say that his works have explored different, and even *opposite*, positions on opposition. Sometimes more than one position seem available even towards the same work, as I have tried to argue with respect to *Sleepwalker* and *Heaven and Hell*.

Rather than seeing these slippages between belief and ironic distance as a negative inconsistency, however, one could choose to regard them as evidence of a positive ambivalence, a refusal of easy, final positions. One advantage of doing your thinking with things, especially the generally small and manipulable ones that Mak uses, is that you can *Look at things from both sides*. By avoiding a voice of authority in his sculpture (however seductive such voices might seem), Mak allows us space to participate in the process of investigation he has begun.