## Chow Chun Fai, *Hong Kong*, election campaign in mixed media, size variable, 2012

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Last year, a notable event in Hong Kong's art scene was Chow Chun Fai, a painter, ran for Legislative Council (LegCo) election. It was notable because in Hong Kong, one doesn't always see artists getting involved in politics. It was notable also because it was characteristically Hong Kong, an event that would not have happened elsewhere. In a modern society, those getting into politics are more likely to be lawyers, merchants or soldiers. On relatively rare occasions when artists do run for elections, we imagine them to be eloquent critics, theatre actors or literati-those who know how to press the hot buttons of their audience's. Painters normally do not go onto the political stage. They do not make their living by writing. They observe and express their thoughts with their works, made with their hands. They do have an influence on the society, but indirectly. Chow explicitly stated that "I do not buy into the concept of 'political art' all the way.....why must artists show concern on social issues through their works? They can do so more effectively by casting their votes or joining demonstrations." What he meant was that artists could also take the initiative to strive for changes in policies and the society they live in. Hence, on 26 July 2012, Chow entered the LegCo election at the Registration and Electoral Office. Together were his friends and supporters with one of his signature "paintings on movie": a scene from Enter the Dragon when Bruce Lee said "To me there is no such thing as an enemy." To Chow, there are two

Plate 1 Chow Chun Fai registering as a candidate for LegCo Functional Constituency election, 26 July 2012, Shatin, Hong Kong types of visual art practitioners, "some artists actively take part in social movements at the expense of art productions.....some, on the other hand, are totally ignorant of politics." By saying so, Chow would probably like to find a golden mean, a middle ground between the two poles. In this opinionated era, very few want to take the middle way, which is the hard way. Therefore Chow's running for election is an event that is worth documenting and understanding.

People of our times are impetuous and concerned only about "now". There is a reason for this. Sociologists point out that high modernity (or late modernity) forces us to live in a "Runaway world", a world that we find constantly slipping away beyond our control. The discovery and accumulation of knowledge does not make it easier for us to decide how we want to live our lives, but on the contrary, it seems to create higher risks and more accidents. An individual finds himself hunting for jobs with no chance of developing a career in such a society. He is forever trapped in the cycle of starting and finishing a short-term employment and as a consequence, has to learn to give up any dreams of settling down.4 It is as though history cannot teach one anything and no future can be planned. The best thing one could learn is perhaps Andy Warhol's famous maxim, "everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." Instead of being a "hardworking nobody", one might as well go do something gimmicky to catch people's eye, if only for a few seconds. This sentiment is generally felt all around the world while even more so in Hong Kong, a place of "borrowed time" sandwiched "between colonisers" Yet, Chow is an exception. He only does what he is capable of, taking it step by step. He does not try to impress nor does he do as all others do. His running for election unearthed not only his true personality but also the deeply-rooted Hong Kong cultural heritage hidden underneath the city's shallow and superficial appearance.

Chow has repeatedly told his story in lectures, exhibitions, and other public occasions: he is an average Hong Konger from the grassroot. His father was a taxi driver who went on to become the owner of two taxis. When his father fell ill and could no longer drive, Chow had to take on the burden of repaying the taxi installments. During his university days, Chow on one hand was surrounded by the haze of "a fine arts student of New Asia College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong" while on the other, he had to earn hard bucks for the installments. He did not grow up with the "coffee-drinking and French-movie-going" lifestyle but he started learning Tai Chi martial arts as a young man. As a fine arts student, he learnt all kinds of Western art techniques and aesthetics but Hong Kong movies and taxis seemed to have stronger influences on him. He has never been a student activist at school. It was only after he became a full-time artist did he began to get involved in social matters that directly affected him. First he participated in the organisation of "Fotanian Open Studios", next he stepped out of the visual arts circle and set up "Factory Artists Concern Group" with other arts practitioners. Then came the strife for cultural rights through running for LegCo election.



An artist who is serious about his career incessantly searches for breakthrough, and this is reflected in his works produced at different life stages. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the social position a writer or an artist could achieve is simultaneously affected by forces inside and outside of the artistic "field". An artist will have better access to resources to materialise his ideal once he has achieved market success. Yet to be established among his peers, he has to be an unworldly defendant of an autonomous aesthetic value. That is to say that he should not put too much emphasis on gaining external recognitions. For example he may challenge the taste and value of the bourgeoisie after he gained economic success, or he may align himself with emerging aesthetic trends upon gaining academic consecrations. In other words, his disposition is characterised by an "interest in disinterestedness" in the word of Bourdieu, while Bourdieu also admitted that there was no way for an artists to precisely plan out their strategies. They could only rely on a generic "feel of the game" and chance personal encounters to have his status established.

Chow is a down-to-earth person who does not go for a conspicuous style. He believes in exploring his own styles and breakthroughs step by step. Once he thinks he has enough of a certain life stage, he moves on to a new environment to experience something new so he could learn more. During his university days, Chow started from the basics of paintings, working perspective and lines, studying forms and aesthetics. He began by taking photographs of the streets of Hong Kong and painted them. After sometime, he did it the other way round: taking pictures of the textures of different materials, of pre-produced model objects, sometimes even of his own face, then by collaging the photos he made representations of classical works throughout the history of art. There was a period when he deliberately copied, mixed and disrupted characters and scenes in classical literary works of both the east and the west. He has also expressed his art in video or as performance art. Having initially established himself in Hong Kong, he set foot on his exploration in Beijing. Chow is one of the most productive full-time artists in Hong Kong who was presented by a gallery in a solo exhibition just a few years after graduation. He has been frequently awarded and there is no shortage of buyers and collectors of his works. All in all, his art career progresses smoothly. Chow is one from the rare breed who can sustain his living in Hong Kong by painting.

However, albeit his multiple changes in creative direction, Chow has never been into some of the more trendy intellectual discussions such as feminism, body politics, gender issues, and queer culture, etc. While all art works can be read as polysemic texts, Chow tends to be inspired particularly by masculinity: Bruce Lee, Infernal Affairs, A Better Tomorrow, and male politicians that appear in the news. In his recent work A Better Tomorrow - "It's amazing how pretty Hong Kong's night scenery is", a taxi parked on top of a hill dominated the painting, with Chow Yun-fat and Denon (Hong Kong male actor) sitting sentimentally by its side, the night scenery of Kowloon at the background. Chow described his painting as expressing "sentiments that all of us can relate to" instead of his personal feelings while in fact, he favours taxis above anything else. He said that he felt blissful every time he finished painting the red car body. Painting with enamel paint instead of acrylic is also a Chow trademark. He finds acrylic commonplace while enamel paint, the material used for painting outdoor movie advertisements before digital prints were used, can be applied to any type of surface materials. I have seen the sketch of a Hong Kong street scene of Chow's. Before any colour was applied, the lines were precise and clear-cut. Yet the finished artwork with colour felt rough and looked like a deliberate revolt from the fine sketch he made. His paintings sometimes look out of place in the context of modern thinking, or one can describe them as nostalgic. Being old-fashioned is what makes them outstanding.

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Plate 3 Chow Chun-fai and his work *CY Leung, "June 4 Incident for sure was a tragedy for Chinese"*, enamel paint on canvas, 244x488cm, 2012. (Photo courtesy of writer)

Chow is equally nostalgic when it comes to his participation in politics. "The personal is political" has become last century's manifesto. Today the fashionable discussion topic for intellectuals has shifted from governance to governmentality. Authority is embodied in micro scale personal relationships, identity, hegemony, gender, body, family roles, or in macro scale in natural disasters and population control. "Representative politics" seems to be a concern of the past. Artists are as much affected by social policies as other people but they have never been good at formal politics such as running for an election. They usually express their criticisms or accusations in their

artworks with the intention of triggering discussion, hoping others will kick off the procedures required for changes to happen. In countries with full-fledged democracy, artists, among all citizens, have access to channels to voice out their needs, while politicians are prepared to execute procedures. But Hong Kong is only semi-democratic. The administration is not a mandate of the general public. The Legislative Council, partially accessible to popular votes, has only limited power. It may scrutinise government practices but it has no authority to actively formulate policies. The PRC government in Beijing has its utmost concern on emphasising stability after the handover. Hong Kong's democratic development has hence been hindered. Colonial practices are continued, including the Functional Constituency (FC) of the LegCo which should have long been abolished. It has been known that the definition, demarcation and election rules of these

The negative purpose of Chow's election campaign is to be serious about what is known to be impossible.

constituencies are problematic to various degrees. Voters' eligibility is limited, biased and muddy. Due to these systematic flaws, many FC seats have become the pets of groups of arbitrarily-defined few, and are uncontested term after term, regardless of the performance of the incumbent. Among all the FCs, "Sports, Performing Arts, Culture and Publication" sector contains all of the shortcomings described above. So long as no one competes for the seat, those who concern about Hong Kong's cultural development find no way for their

voices to be heard in LegCo. It would be such a shame if LegCo gets "on par" with the government administration when it comes to the missing voice for culture.

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Plate 4
"Kick Fok" press
conference by Factory
Artists Concern Group,
1 Apr 2012, Foo Tak
Building, Wanchai,
Hong Kong

The negative purpose of Chow's election campaign is to be serious about what is known to be impossible. By going through the campaign process, he revealed the absurdity of the FC system, including the senselessness in voters' registration, <sup>10</sup> the non-representativeness of the "Authorised Representative", and the disproportional influence of some individuals in the constituency. <sup>11</sup> Chow introduced competition to the election, challenging his rival candidates and pressured them

to seriously write their election platforms. Timothy Fok Chun-ting took the seat uncontested in the previous election, so he did not conduct any campaign activities or even get in touch with most of the voters. As a result, before Chow announced his decision to run for the election, a group of arts practitioners organised a "Kick Fok" press conference to report and complain Fok's nil contribution as a FC member. Since 2001, Fok has not made any motion at LegCo, nor has he raised any amendment. In the LegCo year 2010-2011, Fok made zero inquiry and had (again) been absent for the highest number of times among all members.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, Fok did not run for the 2012 election. Ma Fung-kok, who first became a LegCo member through another "small circle" election when Hong Kong was newly handed-over, took over Fok's candidacy. 13 Going through the list of publicly-announced supporters, Ma was preferred by cultural capitalists, representatives of industry and trade associations that had been established when FC was initially set up, and societies that could be influenced by pro-Beijing camps. On the other hand, Chow was supported by front-line, independent arts and culture practitioners, the majority of whom were not eligible to vote in FC elections. The election ended up with Ma receiving 1,106 votes, Chow 477, the third candidate Siu Sze-kong 109. Chow secured a higher share of total votes than all other challengers in previous elections and has been seen as a serious threat to the status quo.



Plate 5
Result announcement
for "Sports, Performing
Arts, Culture and
Publication" Functional
Constituency election,
10 Sep 2012, Asia
World-Expo, Hong Kong

Besides revealing the unfairness of the FC system, another importance of running for the election was to leverage the campaign and media coverage to promote discussion and create public awareness on cultural issues. The key message in Chow's election platform was "cultural rights". He argued that Hong Kong citizens have lost their rights to select their lifestyles, or express their culture, because of the hegemony imposed by property developers who manipulated feverish property speculation. As a result, only those activities with the highest monetary returns can survive, driving all in Hong Kong to go after a single kind of life. For me, I think "cultural rights" should also mean that citizens should not be regarded as consumers of cultural economic activities or as cheering teams of mega events. Individuals have their rights to participating in subjective history writing, values formation and lifestyle exploration through cultural participation. One should have the rights to associate with others who share similar interests, or have opportunities

to become artists or cultural practitioners, in a professional or amateurish way. Our culture could only grow and prosper in the long term if Hong Kong could provide such an organic cultural soil. Before the election campaign kicked off, Chow once brought his easel and brushes to factory buildings, just like how the Impressionist painters drew the "everyday lives" of others. Chow painted rehearsal studios of theatre groups, band rehearsal rooms and artists' studios, all located in factory buildings. While these few paintings were meant to be realistic representations, they highlighted the mixed usage of factory buildings. After officially announcing his election campaign, a reporter covered his visits to those cultural workers and artists in factory buildings who have no votes. By doing so, the possibility of a variety of different lifestyles and professional practices are revealed, enriching the cultural aspect of election news report. One would consider these efforts of Chow's non-conductive to win him the FC seat. Yet it was exactly because Chow did not have to be elected, that he did not have to make his living as a politician, he could afford to do all those. I found that the election campaign enhanced solidarity among artists and culture practitioners. The campaign also exposed to the public the intricate problems of cultural production, during and even after the election, namely, (1) how the Government's vision of promoting arts and culture development has been hindered by contradictions in the bureaucracy; (2) the factory tenants are actually stratified, some are well-educated, some not that much so; some could hardly make ends meet while some are enjoying themselves as Bohemians; (3) artists are as much part of the community economy as other customers buying at the same corner shop, forming an organic ecology; (4) innovative arts burgeons during economic downturn, and in overlooked locations in the city. Artists had enjoyed the low property prices after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the subsequent SARS epidemic when they started residing in Fotan, Chow being one of them. He purchased his studio and secured the space he needed for art production.

Plate 6 (left) Chow Chun Fai's campaign poster, July 2012

Plate 7 (right) Chow Chun Fai, *Artists* in *Factory - Music in Kwun Tong*, acrylic on canvas, 40x60cm, 2012. (Photo courtesy of the artist)



It is undeniable that without FC, Chow could hardly have run for the election as a practicing artist. In recent years, LegCo geographical constituency (GC) members have been dominated by "good housewives" and "family men", who project images of caretakers of municipal hassles. It is also true that Pong Yat-ming, the consumer crusader boycotting the city's property giants for one year, received only a very small share of the total votes in a GC election, even though he had already been made famous by the press prior to the election. If we only needed a discussion platform once every four years for culture practitioners to debate without having to join the LegCo, FC could have served the purpose of expanding the subjects of concern beyond those typically related to GC. Of course it does not mean that it is easy for cultural issues to be covered in mainstream media, as the newspapers and TV have their own preferences on what attracts popular attention and the audience has often been saturated. It seems like a rather massive effort to have to run a whole election in order to trigger discussion of cultural issues. In a country with a more mature electoral polity, both the ruling and opposition parties have think-tanks to work on social policies and project a cultural vision. Then, through election, leaders supported by the majority form the cabinet and appoint respected, knowledgeable individuals as cultural ministers, who will subsequently attract more talents to join the government and serve the community.

Hong Kong's political system is still too peculiar compared with the typical arrangement described above. Chow's running for election is paralleled to "treading on a tiger's tail". Therefore, some described Chow's political foray as "performance art", implying that he has a hidden agenda. Since the rise of Dadaism, Pop Art and conceptual art, contemporary art has allowed witty artists to take advantage of the system by putting everyday objects into exhibition spaces and museums. Then, they simply sit back and watch curators and art critics running around, busily producing

meanings and interpretations for their works beyond what they immediately are. Lanham, a humanities scholar, described this phenomenon as "attention economy", or "from stuff to fluff". <sup>14</sup> Indeed, contemporary artworks can sometimes be too pretentious or trivial. It is only when the

When asked if the election campaign would negatively affect his art career, Chow said it was hard to estimate and wondered why life and artwork had to be deliberately separated.

artist genuinely shoulders the risk for his work that it becomes valuable and influential. Chow's paintings of movie scenes, news clippings, or government publicity advertisements can be considered a contemporary art strategy, but he is wise to disregard his election campaign as "performance art". When asked if the election campaign would negatively affect his art career, Chow said it was hard to estimate and wondered why life and artwork had to be deliberately separated. His response sounds sincere because he did prepare for the consequences of him really being

elected as a LegCo member. At the same time, he ran the campaign from start to end, with the knowledge that there was a slim chance for him to win. Nevertheless, the idea of running for the election did not originate from Chow himself – others suggested him to do so. After comparing his own situation with his peers, he believed that he should "step forward to do my part" (C Y Leung kept saying the same thing when he was a Chief Executive candidate) as he was not bounded by a full-time job schedule. In a way, he did it out of his "spare capacity", or in Confucius' words "Xing You Yu Li" (行有餘力). The election is a key turning point of his life and artistic career, but it happened rather seamlessly. Politics enriched Chow's art and vice versa. Chow is a true pioneer in this sense.

In 2012, the people of Hong Kong reacted strongly against the mandatory "national education" programme in secondary schools proposed by the government. Since then, Hong Kong learned that a person as young as a secondary four student could instigate a movement that involved the entire population. Compared to the teenager, Chow's political sense and social participation comes late. Yet, in the traditional world of electoral politics and LegCo he is young. While it might not be so much of a ground breaking act, it for sure was exceptional for someone like Chow to run for the election. A city like Hong Kong made Chow who he was - the painter who painted Hong Kong. When the election day was drawing close, Chow stopped visiting studios and did outdoor sketching at Sai Yeung Choi Street instead. He drew the daily lives of this bustling city, witnessed by those living such lives. In fact, Chow's election campaign is in itself a sketch of Hong Kong's social and political reality, a realistic painting with personal style. Striding along the middle-way of politics in art, he sees both left and right and witnessed Hong Kong's social dilemmas. For many years Beijing officials have been describing Hong Kong as "a city with deep rooted contradictions", a saying subsequently adopted by political pundits and has taken on general popularity. Yet everyone points to different places on where the contradictions lay, their reasons and solutions. Maybe the ambiguous definition is a deliberate shelter for monologues, accusations, or everchanging policies. But Chow gave shapes to the contradictions, and they can now be observed and

archived. He has revealed that today's Hong Kong is a city where everyone discusses Foucault and post-modernism in universities while universal suffrage, a basic citizens rights established in early modernity, is still missing. Hong Kong people's ethos is complicated. Because of the gap between ideal and reality, many phenomena seem to be simultaneously popular and esoteric, avant-garde and traditional, disappointing and hopeful, surprising and mundane. In this painting of Hong Kong's social and political reality, the background suggests a developing storm, approaching but not yet arrived. The subject of this painting is a taxi just passed on from one driver shift to another. The previous colonial "shift" drove on the slow lane of cultural development. The cultural policy under British rule deprived arts criticism, avoided identity building, promoted performing art and unleashed popular culture. On the other hand, Hong Kong was able to take advantage of such an historical condition. When it was located next to mainland China, but remained outside of the nation proper, it became a cultural sanctuary harboring a passive freedom of expression, one that refrained from the strict ideological controls exercised in mainland China and Taiwan. Under this condition, individual artists with unique characters flourished. In present days, world cities are falling in love with the fantasy of the "creative industries". The HKSAR government might as well follow the trend, or even package managerial and economic initiatives as cultural projects. This new driver keeps shifting path, chasing after the mirage of a "creative city" branding. Hong Kong citizens are like back-seat passengers on a taxi, one must be clear-minded and point out the right way to go so that he will not end up paying excessive fare. I hope Chow will continue his

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Plate 9 (left) Street promotion to the non-voter public, 18 Aug 2012, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong

Plate 10 (right) Street promotion to the non-voter public, 21 Aug 2012, Fotan, Hong Kong Plate 11 Three candidates at the "Functional Constituency election forum", RTHK TV, 31 Aug 2012

participation in politics as an artist. That there will be more surprises for us when he makes his next turn.

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- <sup>1</sup> Exhibition catalogue of "Cultural Rights Artist running an election", p.5. "Cultural Rights Artist running an election", 7-19 March 2013, Tsang Shiu Tim Art Hall, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Presented by The UST Centre for the Arts.
- <sup>2</sup> Exhibition catalogue of "Cultural Rights Artist running an election", p.5. "Cultural Rights Artist running an election", 7-19 March 2013, Tsang Shiu Tim Art Hall, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Presented by The UST Centre for the Arts.
- <sup>3</sup> Anthony Giddens, Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives (Routledge, c.2002)
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company c.2000)
- <sup>5</sup> Ray Chow, Between Colonisers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 1992, pp.151-170, 10.1353/dsp.1992.0011
- <sup>6</sup> Financial Secretary John Tsang Chun-wah said on 28 Feb 2013 at a radio programme, "I lead a middle-class lifestyle. (A question was put to him: how much one has to make to be qualified as a middle class?) It does not necessarily have to do with one's income. It's a matter of lifestyle. I have read some articles saying a coffee-drinker is a middle-class. So is one who likes French movies". *Hong Kong Economic Journal* website, 1 March 2013



- <sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu: The Field of Cultural Production. Columbia University Press 1993
- <sup>9</sup> Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political" in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (Sulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, c.1970)
- There are 4 sub-sectors in the "Sports, Performing Arts, Culture and Publication" FC. Individual voters are accepted for "Performing Arts" and "Publication" sub-sectors but only organisation voters are accepted for "Sports" and "Culture". A number of well-known and established artists, including those who have been awarded "Hong Kong Arts Development Awards", have been rejected when trying to register as voters and therefore could not participate in the voting process, directly or indirectly. Kan Tai-keung, who appeared in a video recording in support of Chow Chun Fai, is not an eligible voter. Nor is Chow's Tai Chi mentor.
- 11 The appointed representative of organisation voters is responsible for the actual voting. There is no requirement for this representative's eligibility to be reviewed after a certain period of time, nor is there a mechanism to ensure that the representative would consult the opinions of all organisation members before casting the vote. Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) has got only one vote. Yet some commercial organisations register their subsidiaries as independent organisations so each has a vote. HKADC did not conduct general consultation of its own voters' opinions before making a voting decision. It ended up that artists have a different candidate preference from what the Council members decided. A representative from a community-based Xigu society called Chow Chun Fai election office after receiving a campaign leaflet, asking why the office has access to the mailing address information (which was in fact provided by Registration and Electoral Office), and what LegCo was! After detailed explanation, the representative ended the call by saying "I wish Mr. Chow a successful performance". One can almost describe this apple and orange conversation humorous. This incident is but one of the many problems the FC system has. Parties who have benefited from the system see no incentive to support any changes. Even though the Government is trying to make improvements, she could only partially do so while it takes forever for even small amendments. As a result, changes could never be made in time for the next election while more confusion and complexity results.

Plate 12, 13 Communicating "cultural rights" to the non-voter public by drawing on street, 2 Sep 2012, Mongkok, Hong Kong

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> 2011-2012 Monitor Report by "Catholic Monitor on Legislative Councillors", 18 Oct 2012

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In the first LegCo formed after the handover, ten members were elected by the same 400-people Election Committee that also held the right to elect the Chief Executive of HKSAR. In the second LegCo, Election Committee members increased to 800 while the LegCo members elected by the Committee reduced to six. Ma Fung-kwok became a LegCo member through this mechanism. According to the Basic Law, no LegCo members were to be selected by the Election Committee by the third LegCo. Ma Fung-kwok did not run for the third LegCo election but he was appointed the Chairman of Hong Kong Arts Development Council. His chairmanship lasted until the end of 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Richard A Lanham, *The Economics of Attention, Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, c.2006)