A Dialog with Hong Kong Arts: 1842-1960

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Delineating the development of Hong Kong arts is a tricky task. Simply the "division of Hong Kong history into periods" already yields no sign of agreement. For 155 years except during the Japanese Occupation, Hong Kong had been under British political and economic influence from 1842 to 1997. Gradually, the colony established a set of near-western political, economic and social norms and practices, while its Chineseness thinned out, differentiating Hong Kong from other Chinese societies. However, the British colonizers, unlike other imperialists, sought to distance themselves from their subjects. The cultural and living spaces were deliberately divided into the ruler and the ruled: while British culture such as horseracing and afternoon tea was imported to Hong Kong, local customs and traditions were not recklessly altered for the sake of assimilation. Most of the local customs and cultures were therefore preserved.

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Shielded by the colonial government, Hong Kong became the base of gatherings and activities for late Qing revolutionaries before the 1911 Revolution. Yeung Hok-ling, Chan Siu-bak, Yau Lit, Sun Yat-sen and others, for instance, held secret meetings at the Red House (Hung Lau), Tuen Mun. Meanwhile, literati and artists, such as Pan Dawei, Ho Kim-si (He Jianshi), Wong Siu-mui (Huang Shaomei), Gao Jianfu, Chan Shue-yan (Chen Shuren) and Cheng Lui-chun(Zheng Leiquan), publicized or plotted for revolutions in and out of Hong Kong. After the Revolution, however, Hong Kong became the destination for Manchu adherents, including Chen Baitu, Gui Dian, Zhu Ruchen, Jiang Hongyin/Jiang Hongyan, Cen Guangyue, Ou Dadian, Ou Daiyuan and Wen Su. Used to be the Qing scholar-officials, they were the masters of calligraphy and Chinese classics. For this reason, they were frequently invited to give speeches at the University of Hong Kong, the Confucian Academy, Hok Hoi Library and other educational institutes, offering generous support to the development in Hong Kong's calligraphy arts. For the local art circles, this could be considered as the first, steady advancement amid Hong Kong-Chinese political upheaval.

While turmoil ensued from the establishment of the Republic of China (e.g. the Northern Expeditions, the Encirclement Campaigns, etc.), Hong Kong was relatively stable, rare at the time, due to its frontier location and colonial status. Hence, the city once again came to be the spot of convergence and exchanges for intellectuals and artists. Many Guangdong calligraphy and painting masters, for example, Huang Boye, Feng Kanghou, Lee Ying-shan, Luo Shuzhong, Au Kin-kong (Ou Jiangong), Lee Fung-ting (Li Fengting), Chan Kong-jit (Chen Gongzhe), Cheung Wan-kai (Chang Yunjie), Ng Mui-hok (Wu Meihe), So Cho-sang (Su Chusheng), Lee Geng-hong (Li Jingkang), Cheung Guk-cho (Chang Guchu), Lai Ngau-zai (Li Ouzhai),

Zhao Shao'ang and Yeung Shan-sum, emigrated to Hong Kong one after another. Artists who had studied in Europe, North America and Japan, including Bao Shaoyou, Yam Chun-hon, Li Tiefu, Lee Byng, Yee Bon, Wong Chiu-foon, Ng Po-wan, Wu Gan-tin (Hu Gentian) and Yau Doi-ming (Qiu Daiming), joined the long-residing Pan Dawei, Fung Yun-chi (Feng Runzhi), Deng Erya, Wong Siu-ling, Luis Chan, To Keicheung (Du Qizhang), Lau Guan-yam (Liu Junren), Choi Jit-fu (Cai Zhefu), Fu Sau-yee (Fu Shouyi), Wong Siu-mui (Huang Shaomei), Wong Siu-keung (Huang Shaoqiang), Wu Siu-keoi (Hu Shaoqu), Xu Dongbai, Ho Chat-yuen (He Qiyuan) and others in Hong Kong. To widen the influence of art and culture in the city, these artists organized art groups, for example, the National Painting Research Society Hong Kong (established 1926), *Shuhua Wenxue She* (the Association of Calligraphy, Painting and Literature) (established 1927), *Suihanshe* (the Winter Club) (established 1939) and *Zaizaoshe* (the Reborn Club) (established 1941). On top of the spread of Lingnan School of painting in Hong Kong, Huang Boye's paintings of Hong Kong landscapes led the fashion while Lui Shou-kwan, son of Lui Chan-ming, launched the New Ink Painting Movement. Both of them are important pioneers of Hong Kong arts.

Nonetheless, art was not available to all and contacts among artists were relatively few and far between. On rare occasions art exhibitions were held, but reserved for private viewing only. Hong Kong also had artist organizations, such as *Sumiao Julebu* (the Drawing Club) (1919), the Hong Kong Art Club (1920) and the Sino-British Club (1949), but some of the art groups or artist associations were led by foreigners, so Chinese could hardly find their places. Luis Chan and other artists had, with repeated failures, organized a few artist associations, including *Qinghua Yishushe* (the Chinghwa Arts Society) (1931), *Qingsong Yishushe* (the Chingchung Arts Club) (1932) and *Xianggang Yishu Yanjiushe* (the Hong Kong Arts Research Society) (1932), but the locals lacked access (e.g. studios) to the arts. The arts remained confined to the small group of leisure class, yet to be accepted by the general public. (Ed: numerals in brackets in this paragraph denote the establishment year of the organization).

Thus far art was not popularized in Hong Kong, but newly immigrated artists founded a variety of art schools to scrape a living, ⁴ including

Organization	Year of establishment
Lijing School of Art	1928
Xianggang Meishu Xuexiao (Hong Kong School of Fine Arts)	1928
Jiangong Shufa Zhuanxiu Xuexiao (Kinkung Calligraphy Training Institute)	1930
Yihua Yishu Xueyuan (Ngaifa Art School)	1930
Xu Zhizhi Meishu Yuan (Hui Chichi Academy of Arts)	1930
Zhonghua Meishu Zhuanmen Xuexiao (Chinese Fine Arts Institute)	1930
Xianggang Wanguo Hanshou Meishu Zhuanke Xuexiao (Hong Kong	1932
International Correspondence School of Fine Arts)	
Jiulong Meizhuan (Kowloon Academy of Fine Arts)	1937

In the year 1937, Luis Chan and other local artists advocated to establish an art academy named after Governor Sir Andrew Caldecott, but wars disrupted the initiative. Undeserving the title of "school", some art schools merely functioned as a studio for artists to teach. The pre-war art education for the Hong Kong public, however, began to take shape. Despite the mixed teaching quality of self-organized art institutes, such education was a treasure to those of no access to the arts. Furthermore, local artists published for the arts, such as *Feifei Magazine* (started publication in 1928), *East Pictorial* (started publication in 1928) and *Modern Eyes Pictorial* (started publication in 1929), in order to advertise and report art and literary activities at the time. Unfortunately Hong Kong had no government-run exhibition venues, so artists searched for alternative sites, e.g. Hotel Cecil, Golden Hotel, St. Francis Hotel and Queen's Hotel. Such power of convergence stimulated a rapid development of Chinese arts in Hong Kong, albeit with a lack of promotion of western medium.

During the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s, popular medium such as comics and woodcut were employed to spread anti-Japanese propaganda. Some art groups of different sizes also conducted a small number of art activities. These groups included the Hong Kong Women's Calligraphy and Painting Society (1938), Jilu (the Season House) (1938), Ziuhai Tong Studio of Seal Carving, Painting and Calligraphy (around 1939), Zhongguo Wenhua Xiejinhui (the Chinese Culture Union) (1939) and Jiangong Shufa Zhuanke Xueyuan Tongxuehui (the Kinkung Calligraphy Training Institute Alumni Association) (1940). (Ed: numerals in brackets in this paragraph denote the establishment year of the organization).

Post-war Hong Kong was a society of diversity, complicity and chaos, so as the city's art circle reflected. Shadowed by the metamorphosis of mainland politics between 1948 and 1949, various kinds of art groups emerged, for example, Yuan She (the Yuen Society) (established 1948) and Zhongguo Jindai Shuhuahui (the Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy Paintings Collection) (established 1948), which claimed to attract art talents with no regard to one's background; the "Human Art Club", founded in the second half of the year 1946 and led by Huang Xinbo, leaned to socialists and communist revolutionary trend of thoughts and employed art and literature to reflect social realities. Leftist artists such as Liao Bingxiong, Luk Wuye, Cheung Ching-yu (Zhang Zhengyu), Cheung Kwong-yu (Zhang Guangyu), Wong Mao (Huang Mao), Chan Yu-tin (Chen Yutian), Leung Wing-tai (Liang Yongtai), Tam Suet-sang (Tan Xueshen), Fong Seng (Fang Cheng), Chu Ming-kong (Zhu Minggang), Fong Yin (Huang Yan), Lo Kui-chuen, Shum Tonghang (Shen Tongheng), Yip Chinyu (Ye Qianyu), Luk Tei (Lu Di), Tak Wai (Te Wei), Mai Kuk (Mi Gu), Fu Luofei, Li Tiefu, Kwan Shan-yuet (Guan Shanyue), Yeung Tai-yeung (Yang Tai-yeung), Wong Miu-zi (Huang Miaozi), Wong Kei (Wang Qi), Sing Kin-kwan (Sheng Jianjun), Fong Ching (Fang Jing), Chui Kin-bak (Xu Jianbai), Ding Chong (Ding Cong), Wong Duk-wai (Huang Duwei), Huang Yongyu, Cai Dizhi, Fu Tin-sau (Fu Tianchou) and Poon Hok (Pang He) joined the Human Art Club one after another. These figures had also cooperated with Hongbailan Meishu Yanjiushe (the Red Yellow Blue Arts Research Society) (1947), which was led by the underground party and took part by Zeng Yue. The Club members actively organized a variety of art exhibitions, such as the "Adversities in China" (1947), so as to expose the corruption of the Nationalist Government; they had even published comics, illustrations, short commentaries and other kinds of United Front propaganda in the culture section of major newspapers in Hong Kong. To celebrate the Guangzhou Liberation in 1949, more than 30 painters in the Club, including Yeung Tai-yeung (Yang Taiyang), Liao Bingxiong, Kwan Shan-yuet (Guan Shanyue), Cheung Kwong-yu (Zhang Guangyu), Cheung Ching-yu (Zhang Zhengyu), Wong Wing-yuk (Huang Yongyu) and Wong Kei (Wang Qi), spent a week painting a gigantic propaganda *The Chinese People Have Stood Up*, the first Mao's portrait in New China.⁵ Nonetheless, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the function of the Human Art Club as a united front diminished and eventually ended after Huang Xinbo emigrated back to Shanghai.

In the same era of the Human Art Club, the number of people devoted to the arts was on the rise. For better exchanges among peers, a number of artists organized art clubs together. Since 1950, the following organizations, among others, emerged in Hong Kong:

Organization	Year of establishment	
Hongbailan Huashe (Red Yellow Blue Painting Club)	1949	
Taohua Hui (Waves Art Club)	1950	
Gengyin Shuhuahui (Gengyin Calligraphy Painting Club) Department of F1950 Arts,		
Xianggang Yishushe (Hong Kong Art Society) ese University of Hong 1952ng		
Zhongguo Ziyou Shuhuajia Xiehui (Hong Kong Free Calligraphers and Painters Association)		
Xianggang Zhongguo Meishuhui (Hong Kong Chinese Fine Art Club)	1956	
Bingshen She (Bingshen Club)	1956	
Xianggang Zhongguo Meishuhui (Hong Kong Chinese Fine Art Club)	1956	
The Society of Seven Artists	1957	
Zhongguo Shufa Xiehui (Chinese Calligraphy Society)	1958	
The Modern Literature and Art Association	1958	
The Chinese Contemporary Artists' Guild	1960	

These organizations were all set up by the newly emigrated painters or young artists.

While the colonial government was not intent on promoting the arts as it was regarded as an ideological activity threatening the regime, its contributions to art education should not be overlooked. Self-organized art education, once suspended by wars, revived again. *Xueman Yiwenyuan* (the Xueman School of Arts and Literature) (1950), the Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts (1952), *Dongfang Yiyuan* (the Eastern Arts Centre) (1954), *Song-Lu Shuhuayuan* (the Chong-Lo Calligraphy and Painting Centre) (1954), *Chunfeng Huayuan* (the Spring Painting Centre) (1958), *Zhonghua Yiyuan* (the Chinese Arts Centre) (1951), *Gongxin Meishu Zhuanke Xuexiao* (the Kung Sun Academy of Fine Arts) (early 1950s), *Jiulong Jingwei Shuyuan Yishuxi*

(the Department of Arts at the Kowloon King Wai Academy) (1958), Linghai Yishu Zhuanke Xuexiao (Ling Hoi Art Academy) (1958), Hongdao Yishu Shuyuan (Wangtou Art Academy) (1961) and other civic art schools were founded between the 1950s and 1960s. As for government-run educational institutions, arts was established as a subject at the Northcote College of Teachers (1941), previously as the Hong Kong College of Education (1939), which was facilitated by the then Director of Education C.G. Sollis. During the 1950s, Mrs Ann Devoy and Helen O'Connor lectured English Calligraphy as well as Arts and Design at the College. In the same period, the Grantham Teachers' Academy (1951) also arranged a general art course and hired teachers such as Ho Chut-yuen and Lee Kwok-wing (until the three-year art program started in 1968). In the year 1960, the Sir Robert Black Teachers' Academy was established and art courses were organized there a year after. By training art teachers with a more comprehensive curriculum, it was believed to have improved the quality of art teaching. (Ed: numerals in brackets in this paragraph denote the establishment year of the organization).

To popularize the education of arts, the Hong Kong Director of Education pledged, in the 1952/53 annual report, to develop local arts education. In 1955, the Chief School Inspector W. J. Dyer set up a Division of Arts at the Education Department and appointed Michael F. Griffith and Lee Kwok-fai as Arts Inspectors, to manage and promote arts education. Later the Division provided educational resources to the Educational Department Advisory Inspectorate Art and Craft Section, founded in 1973, which helped guarantee a satisfactory level of art teaching in primary and secondary schools. Art was also arranged as a subject in the Common Entrance Examination, which enhanced the status of art in the society. For a better progress in art teaching, the colonial government selected and sent officials to the Great Britain and Australia for continuing education and fieldwork. Officials include Lee Kwok-fai, Peter Lam, Chan Ping-tim Julian (1963-1965), Lee Kwok-wing (1958-1959), Kwok Chiu-leung (1962-1966), Poon Wang-keung, Kwok Yuen-hang, Pang Chin-mo (1969-1971), Yeung Wai-fung (1972-1975) and Tse Kong-wah. (Ed: numerals in brackets in this paragraph denote the year(s) during which officials were sent abroad for education and fieldwork).

In post-war Hong Kong, art education in universities also advanced considerably. As early as the 1950s, the School of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) had already arranged courses of art and archaeology in the Department of Chinese. The courses were China-oriented, in coordination with the teaching of Chinese history. In the year 1966, a master's degree program in art history was established. Twelve years later, the HKU School of Humanities founded the Department of Art, independent of the Department of Chinese. The New Asia College, on the other hand, organized a two-year arts program in 1957, in which art creation and implementation were the emphasis. Two years from then on, the program transformed into a four-year studies in the Department of Art. When the Chung Chi College, United College and New Asia College merged in 1963, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) became the first university in the city that provided art training. Chao Hai-tien was an observing student in the Fine Arts Department of CUHK at the time. Moreover, the HKU and CUHK founded the Department of Extra-mural Studies in 1956 and 1965 respectively, and organized Art and Design Diploma or Certificate courses. Famous artists were the teachers, such as Lui Shou-kwan and Wucius Wong who started teaching

in 1966, Hon Chi-fun in 1971. King Chia-lun taught between 1967 and 1996. Gaylord Chan has been a student in these courses from 1967 to 1970, Chu Hing-wah 1968 to 1971. They henceforth embarked on a career in arts.

Nevertheless, Hong Kong arts development faced numerous obstacles when political, economic and social factors were in play. Although there was progress in the government-led and civic art education, one should not overlook the limitations imposed by the socio-cultural environment on artists at the time. One should avoid romanticizing art development between the 1950s and 1960s. Facing a huge influx of Chinese immigrants, the colonial government conducted backstage manipulation, 6 in which the public and intellectuals, including the artist groups, were under surveillance, attacks or co-optations. In the case of the Zhongguo Ziyou Shuhuajia Xiehui (Chinese Independent Painters and Calligraphers Association), its rightist background enabled it to establish as one of the few art groups in the 1950s Hong Kong. The Association even participated in the "Hong Kong Arts Festival", organized by the British Council, as a representative of Chinese calligraphy and paintings. The colonial government set up the Special Branch to oversee and control all sectors. The Branch submitted the report The Confrontation with Communists in Schools (1967) to the British Commonwealth Office, detailing the investigation into government-funded schools, such as the Belilios Public School and the Queen's College. The report profoundly demonstrated the rigor of British precaution against the leftists. With regard to cultural and art activities, examination and approval by the colonial government was necessary for some artists like Kong Kai-ming before exhibitions. Viewing the arts as rebellious and challenging to the regime, the British colonial government employed administrative measures, such as emphasizing design over arts and suppressing the passing rate in art examinations, in order to prevent the popularity of arts. As the political tension escalated, the government had only expanded intervention.

As for the economy, the low living standard had put the general public off doing the arts. After all, the Hong Kong economy only began to take off in the 1950s and 1960s. Meagre wages, long working hours, cramped living conditions and so on had occupied the minds of the locals. All they could think of was to make ends meet. Take oil painter Ma Jirbo as an example. His students were mainly the working class in the society. Whether one took an art class or pursued a career of art largely depended on the availability of a stable income. Lui Shou-kwan, Hon Chi-fun and other artists spent after-work hours to make artworks when they first started out on the arts. Even when the HKU and CUHK organized extra-mural art studies, the tuition was a great burden to most of the students. Hence, in their pursuits of the arts, Gaylord Chan, Chu Hing-wah and many others studied part-time, rushed to classes straight after work and worked on their assignments in their free time.

Speaking of the societal situation, Hong Kong was short of facilities to support art development during the 1950s and 1960s. First of all, a majority of the population lived in cubicle apartments, public housing, squatter huts or other kinds of shacks. The lack of space had adverse impacts on art creation. Second, exhibition venues were anything but abundant. Despite the support from Lady Grantham (wife of Governor Grantham in the 1950s), Luis Chan's plan to build the permanent Hong Kong Art Club and

galleries in the Mid-Levels on Hong Kong Island failed owing to internal conflicts of the Club.

When the Hong Kong City Hall was inaugurated in 1962, it had merely been seen as a piece of news or a record of history that bore no direct significance to the citizens. To the artists, the exhibition space in the Hong Kong City Hall was short of demands, so they were forced to organize exhibitions in private venues, for example, the Cosmos Club, St. Francis Hotel, the Peninsula, Park Hotel, Hotel Cecil, St George's Building, the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, Société Générale, and even foreigners' homes. Furthermore, the local art market was yet to be formed. Rarely could one find an independently run, commercial gallery, with the exceptions of the Sally Jackson Art Gallery, Chatham Galleries and Tsi Ku Chai, which were established in the 1960s by artists, and CJL Gallery and Kok Lam Gallery, founded in the 1970s. It can be concluded that the arts was still labelled as something for the minority with a nobility taste. Only those of economic and social capital could have access to the arts, and artists. While foreign cultural institutes in Hong Kong such as the British Council, the Alliance Française and the American Library endorsed and promoted local art development, to the public, there was an insurmountable gap between themselves and the arts.

Despite the robust development of western ideas and culture in post-war Hong Kong, big-scale or international art exhibitions were of a scarcity due to the shortage of infrastructure. Print media such as books and magazines thus became the access to news on global art development. Chi Yuen Book Store, the Hong Kong Book Centre, American Library and other places acted as the links between local intellectuals and western trends of thought. Artists, particularly the members of the Circle Art Group such as Hon Chi-fun, King Chia-lun, Van Lau and Wucius Wong, even promoted western Avant-Garde arts within the local cultural circles, rivalling with Chinese arts.

Indeed, social factors in the 1950s and 1960s had restricted the development of the arts in Hong Kong. However, to a lot of artists, this period also signified a door to the global arts slowing opening up to Hong Kong. If the Hong Kong art scene before the 1960s was said to be closed and oblivious to the world, they became relatively open with international dimensions. In such times of hardship and austerity, "studying abroad" was one's wildest dream. Therefore, the importance of scholarship could not be overstated. Both the government and the society had provided limited scholarships open for public applications. As aforementioned, the government offered scholarships for civil servants to study in Britain or Australia. On top of that, civic scholarships, such as the John D. Rockefeller III Fund (later as the Asian Cultural Council Award) and the Ford Foundation, provided economic assistance to those aspired to learn art in a foreign country, e.g. Hon Chi-fun (he was the first recipient of a fellowship from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund in 1969), Van Lau (obtained a one-year scholarship from the Institute of International Education of U.S.A. to visit Europe and America in 1965), Cheung Yee (obtained a one-year scholarship from the Institute of International Education of U.S.A. to visit Europe and America in 1965) and Chu Hing-wah (received the Asian Cultural Council Award in 1994).

After the experience of national struggles, fleeing and living under the shelter of foreigners, artists in the

1950s and 1960s had stronger affiliations with their Chinese cultural identity than other local artists in different era. Living in a colony ruled by foreigners as a Chinese, isolated from their cultural Mother while under the influence of western culture, these artists were Chinese and western, as well as non-Chinese and non-western. Artists of traditional ink painting, e.g. Lui Shou-kwan and Liu Guosong, inherited Chinese traditions while learning western arts rigorously so as to break away from old-school constraints. They wished to integrate Chinese and western arts beyond the traditional boundaries. Examples include King Chia-lun switching from hard-edge painting to cursive calligraphy, and Van Lau's advocacy of "Return to Chinese Culture" movement.

While searching for medium, methods and ideas, Hong Kong artists were also looking for their cultural identities through art and creation. Concluding with Hon Chi-fun's words: "We seek eastern ideas as well as a start with One. We would like to know our identity/ identities... Is material the carrier of a culture? Is ink painting Chinese? Is it not fully Chinese if done in a colony? China in western medium, or the west in Chinese medium?"

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