



IN CONVERSATION WITH THE *ANCIENTS*

As China continues to embrace modernity and as Hong Kong moves deeper into an identity crisis, a number of artists are starting to travel back in time to connect with their own – and the country’s collective – roots through art. By Clare Morin

As ink painting and literati works sell for colossal sums at auction houses this spring and China continues to modernise at breakneck speed, a question has been emerging in artistic and intellectual circles: where does Chinese contemporary art stand in relation to its vast history? As the country hurtles ever more quickly into modernity, is there a desire among the younger generation to connect with older ways of being?

“Since the 1980s, tradition was not an option for the radical artist,” says Dr Pi Li, a

leading critic and curator now based in Hong Kong as the Sigg senior curator at M+. “The consciousness of the artist was persistently bifurcated between East and West, traditional and modern: intellectuals torn between the ideals of cultural salvation of the early 20th century and the contrasting socialist approach to culture (‘no construction without destruction’) seemed to tend unthinkingly towards the latter, leading to a common understanding that there was nothing of value to be found in tradition.”

All of this changed, however, after China entered the World Trade Organisation in 2000. “China was forced to face up to globalisation and art, in light of market forces and official recognition and suddenly began to realise that tradition had again become a relevant choice through which it might be able to speak to the public, particularly relevant in an era in which unrestrained speech remained impossible,” says Pi. “Artists hope to find a connection between experimental art and Chinese tradition.”

Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, a legendary curator who ushered Chinese avant-garde art to the West with his landmark exhibition *China’s New Art Post-89* in 1993, has always had a deep reverence for traditional Chinese culture. He wears it on his body in the form of old-fashioned Chinese suits (which, indeed, inspired his friend Sir David Tang to open up Shanghai Tang) – and in the past five years, he’s built Jinze, a village at which tradition is firmly instilled.

Located on the outskirts of Shanghai, Jinze is a cultural revival project where an entire village has been brought back to life, complete with artisans and primordial cultural practices. “I’ve been trying to revive traditional festivals,” explains Chang.



Time's colliding (clockwise from top left) *Celestial Fortune Telling* by Kacey Wong; *Splash XIV* by Hung Fai; Jinze village; an artist's impression of the upcoming Xiqu Centre; West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre; *Etudes for the 21st Century* by Robert Cahen, John Conomos and Kingsley Ng



“Without a doubt, more and more young Chinese people are interested in learning more about traditional Chinese cultural practices

“I think the most important thing about Chinese civilisation is to relate to the cosmos through the agricultural seasons and also to find a tangible link to one’s ancestry.”

This drive to reconnect to the wisdom of agrarian society – which one would think could have hugely positive repercussions for China today given the country’s environmental challenges – is manifested in the newest initiative to come to Jinze, The Homestead Project, in association with the China Academy of Art in nearby Hangzhou. “It has to do with trying to bring back this memory,” says Chang. “The heart of Chinese life has historically always been in the countryside. If you become a big minister, if you become a very famous poet or a very rich man, you always bring everything that you’ve done back to the village. You don’t keep it in Beijing or Shanghai or the cities. So we thought, any revival would have to be done starting from the countryside.”

Chang says that while some artists are reaching deeply into this question of tradition, mainstream culture continues to demand the new. “There is some interest in going back to the roots but I don’t think people in China believe it that seriously,” says Chang. “People don’t see going back to

history, to the roots, as a possibility. They are basically interested in going forward and history is still seen as a stock of visuals they can exploit. But then, in a way, that is correct. You have to use the past, but you have to use the past without exhausting it, and also use the past wisely. These I think are lessons that need to be learned.”

In Guangzhou lives Hu Fang, an acclaimed fiction writer, curator, and co-founder and artistic director of the pioneering Vitamin Creative Space. His writing and artist interviews often circle around the virtual space where ancient Chinese philosophy collides with contemporary life. Hu suggests history has become a mere commodity – yet another thing to be consumed. “I feel the dominating ideology today has been leading us to a rather superficial relationship with history,” says Hu. “History has become a part of cultural consumerism.”

Hu continues: “Without a doubt, in today’s China, more and more young people are interested in learning more about traditional Chinese cultural practices which can improve their daily perceptive abilities, such as Chinese medicine, wing chun and tai chi, ancient musical instruments (particularly the guqin) and even Chinese cooking,” he

says. “Rather than a cultural phenomenon, I am more interested in seeing how these practices can rebuild man’s daily perceptive abilities. [This] would naturally bring about a vision of how social forms could be shaped by the sharing of this sensibility connected to cultural roots and compassion, rather than simply being dominated by the monotonic modern, social ideology.”

Hu suggests that the question we should really be asking isn’t how artists are connecting with a static and fixed history, but how they are awakening it, deconstructing and reinventing it in the present moment. “What is worth contemplating is not only to be aware that we are in the stream of history, but to figure out in which ways we can enter into the stream, into the real flow of energy.” ▶

Stepping into the Flow

In the context of Southern China, the discussion of history is particularly charged, given Hong Kong's shifting sands of identity as it unifies with the Mainland. In recent years, several artists have been charting a root-seeking course. Clare Morin profiles four who have been exploring tradition through innovation...

MING WONG | *Sci-fi xiqu*

Ming Wong has been meditating on our city's nature as a meeting point of the ancient and futuristic. "Hong Kong awakens something," muses the Berlin-based artist. "It opens up time for me – backwards and forwards."

The artist, who represented Singapore at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 and has been celebrated globally for his video and performance works, came to Hong Kong this winter for a residency with Spring Workshop. His mission: to study where Cantonese Opera, one of the world's oldest living art forms, intersects with the future and, more specifically, with Chinese sci-fi novels.

Wong has Guangdong roots and his aunt and uncle's opera troupe in Singapore allowed him to observe the ancient art form up close while learning Chinese painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. He found a mystical space where humanity morphed in and out of myth. "I discovered this world of the backstage, between artifice and reality," he reminisces. "These actors who are getting ready are running around, screaming and cursing. Then once they cross the line and go on stage, they transform into mythological heroes and Gods, kings and queens. They cross back, and back to reality, running, cursing and taking their costumes off."

From his base in Berlin, Wong is developing a project that takes as its starting point this question: how can we use Cantonese opera to talk about notions of the future? The question is particularly apt given the architectural plans for the Xiqu Centre set to open on the grounds of West Kowloon in 2016. The site that has played home to traditional, temporary bamboo opera theatres every spring is to see a new design by Bing Thom Architects and Ronald Lu and Partners descend on the land, a design that is astoundingly futuristic and could quite believably have come from an alien civilisation.

As a relative outsider, Wong has an edge in commenting on the city's most beloved art form as he punk-rockets it into the future. "I mess with icons," he says. "If you come from a country where an icon is sacred, it's really tough to touch it. A certain cultural restriction forbids one from touching something. But if I don't belong to that, I think it's a licence to look at it."

Ming Wong performs as 'an apocalyptic pop idol' at the Apocalypse Postponed Art Bar, May 13-17, 17/F, Soundwill Plaza II – Midtown, 1 & 29 Tang Lung St, Causeway Bay. For more, visit mingwong.org.



HUNG FAI | *Ink rebel*

At the age of 25, Hung Fai is one of the most exceptional ink painters to emerge in Hong Kong in recent times. The son of noted artist Hung Hoi, his personal style echoes the brilliance of the great Hong Kong ink master, Wucius Wong (he's already won numerous Wucius Wong Creative Ink Painting Awards amid his growing raft of honours).

"I studied at an EMI (English medium) school, listened to Western pop music, used modern gel pens, and 'ink' was a synonym of my father," explains the young artist. "But during my explorative journeys in art, I was astonished to discover my preference and core concepts towards art are very similar to the concepts of Chinese ink. That confronted me to think about the relationship of myself and my roots, traditional ink and contemporary art."

In Hung's solo exhibition, *Movement*, at Grotto Fine Art in April, several of the works were inspired by Chinese literary master Lu Xun, in particular the poem *Wild Grass* that speaks to those downtrodden in society, those with historical narratives marginalised by mainstream records. It reveals the depth of thinking permeating this young artist's mind – and a political consciousness emerging in Hong Kong's new generation. "Under the influence of globalisation, a monotonous and unified voice has substituted difference and diversity," he says. "A lot of the wisdom embedded in unique subcultures has vanished during the process. I believe every culture contributes important nutrients to art creation." ▶

For more, visit hungfaivito.com.

KINGSLEY NG | *A modern time traveller*



In Kingsley Ng's seven-minute video installation *Galaxy Express*, created in collaboration with Fumio Nanjo, director of the Mori Art Museum, and showcased at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center earlier this year, a young woman boards a train bound for the past. She lives in a time 'where the only chance for survival lies in revisiting the past'.

Ng has embarked on time travel

before. In *Excavation* at the 2009 Hong Kong-Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture, he turned the exhibition site into an archeological dig. In *Musical Wheel*, he paid homage to the rapidly disappearing working class communities of Kwun Tong by creating a vast wheel based on its industrial history.

"I think artists of this generation in Hong Kong are well-aware of the issue of roots and identity," says Ng. "But what is encouraging is that the wider public is also getting more engaged in this topic and conversation, and they are more aware of the value of art in resurfacing a kind of cultural identity in society. For my work, although I may use the contemporary media of our time, I do not see it as detached to the thoughts and spirits of the old masters."

In *Etudes for the 21st Century*, presented by the Osage Art Foundation in November, Ng worked in collaboration with Australian artist and writer John Conomos as well as seminal French video artist Robert Cahen. The work was responding to the words of Conomos: 'Following the whirlwind of the last century's aesthetic, cultural, political



Musical Wheel by Kingsley Ng

and technological revolutions, a century of manifestos and paradigm-shifting creativity of art, culture and knowledge, how do we move forward from 'art for art's sake' to 'art for the sake of life?'"

Ng's instinct was to reach backwards through time to 300AD to gather the sage words of Lu Ji – a poet and literary critic of the Three Kingdoms Period. "I see art as a continuous flow or stream," says Ng. "It is perhaps the responsibility of the contemporary artist to continue traditions and ancient wisdoms, while making them relevant to the present, and a pathway for the future."

For more, visit kingsleyng.com.



The Empire of Yesterday by Kacey Wong

KACEY WONG | *Utopia seeker*

Kacey Wong is an acclaimed Hong Kong artist whose *Drift City* project saw him travel through the world's cities dressed as a skyscraper in search for utopia. His art has long explored the poetics between men and their living environments, and, in recent years, his work has turned political. "These past five years, I've been restudying Chinese culture, traditional culture," explains Wong. "I went through a major identity crisis and tried to understand more deeply what it means to be Hongkongese because I want to make sense out of all this mainland Chinese convergence. And now, I'm a clearer man."

Wong's conclusion is that Hong Kong's lineage with Chinese culture is very much intact – the city's resilient Cantonese culture wasn't wiped out during the Cultural Revolution but was strangely incubated under Colonial rule. "Before, I was like, okay, we are like this kind of outcast and not authentic. But if you study it more clearly, you can see that even the Cantonese language we speak, you can trace all the way back to the Tong Dynasty," he says. "The writing, the script that we use, traditional script, the so-called Chinese components, all go directly to the classics."

Earlier this year, Wong created an art fortune-telling booth on the grounds of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, where he offered I Ching-esque readings with art world quotes. "We have preserved our Confucianism much better than the Chinese under the communist regime, so we can be proud of that," he says. "We can stand tall and be proud as Hongkongese." ■

See Kacey Wong's tribute to Hong Kong's past in the short film *The Empire of Yesterday*, as part of the M+ online exhibition, *Neon Signs*. For more, visit kaceywong.com.