

The Parallax of Generations and Genders: Women in Art, the Hong Kong Case

This article is written as part of the New Hall Art Collection Asia Art Initiative, “Women in Art: Hong Kong,” a research project commissioned in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, in 2017. The New Hall Art Collection currently boasts over five hundred works, housed at Murray Edwards College of the University of Cambridge, England, and is the largest collection of artworks by women in Europe. Founded in 1954 as New Hall, Murray Edwards College was created to increase educational opportunities for women, and it continues to advocate for equality. Murray Edwards College and the University have a long established relationship with Hong Kong and the development of this project went hand in hand with relationships old and new, leading to the addition of new works in the collection by artists from Hong Kong.

In 1992, commentators who were invited to the launch of the New Hall Art Collection wrestled with the deceptively simple but contested term “women artists.” Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock suggested in her published address, “We can read the works for clues about the full complexity and possibility of what it might mean to live ‘as women’ under the sign ‘woman,’ ‘black woman,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘mother,’ ‘artist,’ ‘citizen,’ and so forth. Therein in this collection we will find no consistency, no generality, no common thread.”¹

And yet commonalities are discussed—both clichés and facts—every time a platform is opened to talk about “women artists,” with recurring questions about women’s representation and visibility in art history, public institutions, and the market. Artists reflect the world we live in and how we nurture culture in society, and so how artists are able to work, how they are supported, and how art is consumed says much about us. What is striking about the statistics of gender analysis in the visual arts arena is the pervading imbalance between the high numbers of women entering arts education and the higher percentage of men that dominate the market. Perhaps more significant is the lack of exposure of art by women in art institutions and academies across the board, an omission that reverberates and is perpetuated through programming, critical reviews, and press, and that calcifies within an understanding of art history for the next generation. These omissions cross borders and nationalities.

In our research on Hong Kong women artists, we gathered data about the representation of women artists in Hong Kong through the help of many institutions and commercial galleries, and we considered survey exhibitions and publications as well as key exhibitions and events organized by both

the public and non-profit sectors.² Yet the core of our research is the voices of the women artists. Our methodology was to create an ethnographic portrayal of women in art over the past decades rather than a formal historical enquiry that emphasizes the continuities and discontinuities. Taking a narrative journey, we looked into the life experiences through conversations with three groups of women artists of different generations;³ and each conversation centred around the individual's life story—her aspirations and struggles as an artist. These artists' experiences may or may not overlap, but, collectively, our conversations, when written down as “thick description,”⁴ provide glimpses into the development of the art world in the sociocultural context of Hong Kong.

Untangling the Gender Debate in Hong Kong

First, it was important to research the conversations on women artists that preceded our own work and to consider how an understanding of these conversations may have changed over time and where, if at all, this intersects with a current feminist art discourse.

In using the designation “women artists,” we immediately create a label, a subgroup, a recognized barrier. Artists often reject labels, and “women artists” is used here for want of an alternative. The search for an alternative designation is the basis of many discussions about feminist discourse, and in 2017, at a symposium at Leeds Art Gallery, UK, the term “artists:women” was suggested by Pollock.⁵ She proposed that the continuation of a discussion of “women artists” “sustains a hierarchy of value” that implies that “women” are not inherently artists.

In *Gendering Hong Kong* (2004), authors Anita Kit-wah Chan and Wai-ling Wang note that “in the past few decades, gender has become a fashionable term in the language of academia. There has been a significant growth of gender studies in Hong Kong, as more courses in the universities have now included gender. . . . However, when one closely examines the ways gender is used in this emerging field of research, one soon realizes that there are two popular approaches. The first one is to treat it merely as an independent variable, which is there to help researchers measure the differences in behaviours, attitudes, and attributes, whether biological or psychological, between women and men, whereas the second one is to conceptualize gender as role differences.”⁶ They regard both approaches as less than satisfactory, as “they under-utilized the conceptual insights generated by the concept of gender and the theoretical and political rigour of feminist knowledge.”⁷ Their work covers interesting issues about the subordination of women and colonial rule—specifically pointing to collusion and a complex interplay of power and politics between Chinese male elites and British colonial rulers.

Finding such references to feminism and gender in writings about the art world in Hong Kong is not easy. Anthony Leung Po-shan is a notable exception—the artist, a woman who has given herself a male English name, has written about feminism and gender since the early 2000s; she has also



Sunny Yung re-enacting Marina Abramovic's performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) at the opening of the exhibition *Man Made*, March 16, 2004. Image from *Man Made* exhibition catalogue, 2004. Courtesy of Para Site Art Space, Hong Kong.

curated exhibitions over this period that play with gender assumptions, such as *Man Made: A Project about Masculinity and Art* (Para/Site Art Space, 2004), in which she invited a group of male artists to recreate works by women artists in an effort to challenge stereotypes of gender and art production.

Anthony Leung Po-shan sees the lack of debate around women in the arts in Hong Kong as the positive result of pioneering women artists who were game changers in their particular media. For example, Choi Yan-chi was cited as the first artist to show installation work in Hong Kong in an exhibition titled *An Extension into Space* at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1985, and May Fung and Ellen Pau founded the organization Videotage and developed the landscape for video and new media in the region. Fang Zhaoling and Irene Chou, in the 1960s and 70s, had a huge impact on the New Ink movement. These women, Anthony Leung Po-shan says, “prepared a safe playground” for her generation; “there was no longer an obligation for one to define or defend one’s gender position before making and exhibiting art.” She goes on to note that “the younger generation in Hong Kong do not need to waste their energy protesting against the male dominated art world. They can follow their artistic aspirations.”⁸

Anthony Leung Po-shan was writing this in the mid-2000s, and in Hong Kong the newly established Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and the newly opened artist-run space Para/Site Art Space were part of a groundswell of confidence and self-sufficiency in the activities of artists. Only a few years before, in 1999, the eminent curator and gallerist Johnson Tsong-zung Chang had said, “in a place like Hong Kong, where there is no dominant art scene and few supportive institutions, the enquiry of art is interesting because it tells us something about the heart, perhaps the hidden heart, of this place.” He added, “This is a most unsympathetic place for the arts.”⁹

The picture painted by scholar Carolyn Cartier in her 2008 paper “Hong Kong and the Production of Art in the Post/Colonial City” is starkly



Choi Yan-Chi, *An Extension into Space*, 1985, white gauze, mirror, wood sticks, and slide projection, partial view at Hong Kong Art Center. Courtesy of the artist.

different from the one created by the recent commercial boom. Cartier considers how Hong Kong artists were left out of the conversation in many larger exhibitions or related discussions about Asia, such as the 2000 regional conference “Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women,” in Singapore, and the 2007 exhibition and publication *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, at the Brooklyn Museum. “Yet,” she says, “these would-be regional projects about art and women in Asia have been deployed to raise questions about the presences and absences of Hong Kong art from some contexts of recognition, international exchange, and art criticism.”¹⁰

Au Hoi-lam, installation view at *If Hong Kong, A Woman/ Traveller*, 2005. Courtesy of 1a space, Hong Kong.



Cartier unearths conversations about feminism among artists in Hong Kong referencing the 2005 exhibition *If Hong Kong, A Woman/ Traveller*, held at 1a space and Artist Commune with eight Hong Kong artists and a symposium on feminism and art history. Ivy Ma, who was involved in this exhibition, studied at Leeds University (under Pollock) and acknowledges the local denial of the term “feminism” but does not consider it a post-feminist phenomenon. She says, “what I learned from

feminism was a way to rethink norms and infrastructure,” so “the switch is always turned on to remind me to rethink.” Many women artists in Hong Kong feel that the term is a limiting factor—a label that does not help or reflect what women artists are doing.¹¹

Hong Kong presents a difficult ground in which to engage fully with feminism. Feminism historically has not had a moment of collective action there, and, according to Cartier, “educated women in Hong Kong have experienced greater equality than elsewhere in Asia, which mitigates against the notion of a homo-geographical ‘Chinese woman-ness’ across the region.”¹² Laws were changed in Hong Kong under colonial rule that reflected the rights being fought for in the UK during the 1960s and 70s. Changes in women’s rights were taking place from the top down rather than the bottom up, and this allowed the colonial administration to ignore the more local needs of women.

Some years later, in 2012, in *Hong Kong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art*, the catalogue for a touring exhibition curated by Johnson Tsong-Zung Chang that was first presented in London and travelled back to Hong Kong, Anthony Leung Po-shan reflects, “I graduated from university in 1996, one year before the end of colonial rule in Hong Kong. For people of my generation, the miasma of politics can never be separated from art. The post colonial theory was deeply entrenched in my scholarship. Current events taught me how to observe the world, and prevented me from being seduced by any particular narrative.”¹³

To some extent the undulation of politics in Hong Kong, and its historically migratory population, give a sense that each generation of artists feels part of a living history. Preoccupation with Hong Kong and its status has always appeared to outweigh a feminist agenda. Over the period we are covering in our research (since the 1960s), the first generation of artists migrated to and from the region; the next struggled to survive without any institutional support, and then, with the advent of art infrastructure around the 1997 Handover to mainland China and thereafter, politics, geography, and personal identity became a preoccupation for artists.

Along with Anthony Leung Po-shan, scholar Linda Lai also has been a persistent voice in the discussion of women artists—addressing many of them through catalogues essays, articles, interviews, and her own research. Her 2015 paper “Contemporary ‘Women’s Art in Hong Kong’ Reframed: Performative Research on the Potentialities of Women Art-makers” (to be published in 2018) aims to “expose clues for why in Hong Kong feminism has not evolved as a complex form of knowledge.”¹⁴

Linda Lai perpetuates a notion of “women’s art” in Hong Kong and breaks down its documentation into three phases: “the recognition of gender solidarity and efforts to promote visibility of female artists since late 1980s, the emergence of the notion of ‘women’s art’ tied to a unique feminine approach called *shouzuo zai* around the late 1990s, and a third

phase emerging in the early 2000s, of what she calls ‘historiography and contestation’ reflecting on how the history of feminist and/ or women’s art is written.”¹⁵

Linda Lai finds a “general hesitation in really [un]picking the question of what is feminism, what is feminism to [an] artist, and what important distinction to make between women’s art and feminist practice and so on with due theorization.”¹⁶ The first self-conscious engagement with this is, she says, in theatre in the 1980s and that the “visual-contemporary art community was about a decade behind avant-garde thinking.”¹⁷

Generational differences

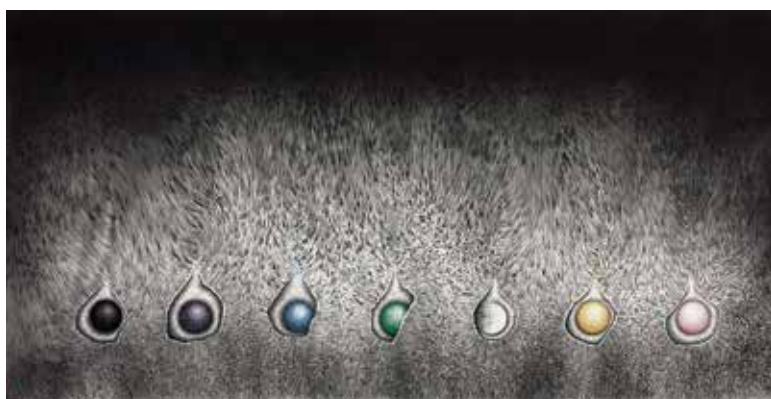
As Linda Nochlin argues in her landmark 1971 article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” the problem lies in asking the wrong question in the first place. A default narrative of artist as genius, artist as man, and artist as social outcast needs to be completely dismantled to ask why women artists had been erased from art history. Our research works against the accepted “notion of the great artist as primary, and the social and institutional structures within which he lived and worked as mere secondary ‘influences’ or ‘background;’”¹⁸ and looks into the lives and careers of women artists in Hong Kong over the past fifty years.

For our research, we were able to interview women born in the late 1940s onward. Still, it is perhaps worth taking a detour to briefly look at the two eminent women particularly active in the 1960s to 1980s who still have a market profile and were mentioned as pioneers by Anthony Leung Po-shan—Irene Chou (1924–2011) and Fang Zhaoling (1914–2006).

For the period examined in this project, colonialism and politics are interwoven into the experiences of all these artists. The 1967 Riots, a blizzard of anti-colonial riots led by the local communist-leftists began as a strike resulting from a labour dispute in an artificial flower factory, which changed the course of colonial rule, erupted a year after the locally charged Star Ferry Riot, triggered by the raising of the ferry fare. Both arguably created a legacy of demonstrations and political activism that survives today. Culturally, this was a time marked by the opening of the City Museum and Art Gallery in 1962 at City Hall, with a clear-cut policy to promote and recognize “local art”—not Chinese or British/Western art, but Hong Kong art.¹⁹

Traditionally it has been harder for a woman to make money (there was less access to education and more societal pressure to see their course as one of duty to family and children); it therefore is unsurprising that many of the pioneers were independently wealthy. One term that came up when we first started talking to people about women artists was the term *tai-tai*. *Tai-tai* refers to the rich wives or women from well-off backgrounds who have leisure time for art making, mainly painting. In this vein, it also has connotations of amateurism and certainly is imbued with an overtone of snobbery against it. In traditional Chinese painting, a specific

term, “boudoir painting” (*guixiu*), is used to refer to works by privileged women—or courtesans—and thus the socially prominent young ladies would seldom show their works to others and sometimes would destroy them.²⁰ The original Chinese term came from the tradition of a woman’s territory being very much confined to the home, and, more precisely, their bedrooms or boudoirs. Women from privileged families had the time to paint, a genteel pursuit, and would have been trained by their fathers or husbands. The metaphorical use of the term “boudoir painting” evinces a certain sensation, and some may argue that it is itself an objectification of women. The term also suggests their motifs of depiction—not themselves (indeed, women as motifs are often painted by male artists)—but interiors, flowers, and birds.



Irene Chou, *Genesis*, 1980s, ink and colour on paper, 92 x 177 cm. Courtesy of Chang Tsong-Zung.



Fang Zhaoling defiantly broke this mold by painting landscape, whereas Irene Chou’s cosmic motifs (gradually derived from sketching trees and nature) seem to depict both an interior universe and the outer universe. In Fang Zhaoling’s paintings, she projects a positive worldview in her landscapes by replacing the water or river with a road leading up to the mountains. This upward trajectory along with a depiction of women with their hands pointing, suggests the progressive contribution of women in society. The artistic legacies of

Fang Zhaoling, *Set the World to Rights*, 1973, ink and colour on paper, 92 x 58.5 cm. Courtesy of Fang Zhaoling Foundation.

Fang Zhaoling and Irene Chou have been celebrated significantly in the past ten years, dispelling the term “boudoir painter” or *tai-tai* that they were often labeled with during their lifetimes. Their successful artistic careers and contributions to the field, such as Irene Chou’s unique “impact structural stroke,”²¹ have contributed immensely to changing the perception of women artists in Hong Kong.

The first group of artists we interviewed were the baby boomers Choi Yan-chi, Wong Wo-bik, and Yvonne Lo, all born in the late 1940s and 1950s.²²

Most local baby boomers, especially those from working class origins, were subjected to certain hardships growing up, given the sociopolitical situation in postwar Hong Kong. With limited arts education opportunities in Hong Kong, these young women struggled to pursue their ambitions; they chose to study overseas, returning to Hong Kong in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Together with other returnees, they were a major force in bringing contemporary art practice to Hong Kong beginning in the mid-1980s.

Sara Wong, Jaffa Lam, and Angela Su were born in the post-baby boom period (after the mid-1960s) and form the second focus group of artists, who grew up at a time when Hong Kong started to prosper economically, and the colonial government was seen to bring improvements to public services and social equality in terms of language, marriage, and labour laws. This generation did not have such a complex relationship with the British colonial administration as the previous generation, and the grant economy of support by government and foundations that subsequently had taken shape in the 1990s provided new opportunities and alternatives.

Ho Sin Tung, Ko Sin Tung, and Elva Lai, the last group of artists, were born in the late 1980s—a time when Hong Kong had become an affluent society with considerable stability. Yet, at the same time, a political undercurrent prevailed, fed by Hong Kong's reaction to the violent suppression of the student movements in Beijing in 1989 and the approaching handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997. This generation had more educational options, and developed as artists in an art world with a broader acceptance of art practices. The balanced cultural infrastructure and a substantial art market emerged at the time of their graduation, creating both opportunities and challenges.

Hong Kong was a migrant society and still is. Of the nine artists in these three group conversations, two of them, Jaffa Lam and Elva Lai, are migrants from mainland China. It is worth noting that only one of the artists had parents who were both born in Hong Kong, whereas four of the artists' parent(s) are overseas Chinese from Indonesia or Malaysia. Some parents returned to Communist China in the 1950s and then subsequently relocated to Hong Kong. Three of the artists themselves migrated to Canada at one point and later returned.

Elva Lai came to Hong Kong with her mother at the age of eight (her father was among a generation of so-called “freedom swimmers” who fled China in the 1970s, and later returned to China in the 1980s to marry her mother). Language was not an issue for her, as she grew up watching the same television cartoon programs as Hong Kong children did during the 1990s. Her life was, therefore, not as tough as that of other migrant children, such as those whose stories are told in the book *We Are Hongkongers Too: New Immigrants from the 70s*.²³ The book contains personal histories from seven migrants who were born in the 1970s and moved to Hong Kong from mainland China in the early 1980s after China's Open Door Policy (1978). They were then a few years old, and tell their experiences of uneasiness



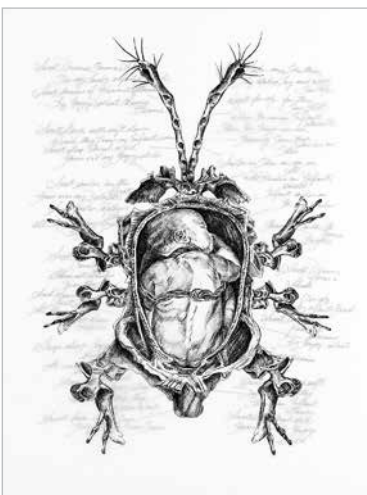
Elva Lai, *Freedom Swimmers*, 2017, installation view at Landskrona Foto Festival, Landskrona, Sweden. Courtesy of the artist.



in fitting into Hong Kong society. It is important to note that this generation of migrant children were unique in the sense that they felt most alienated because of wider language, economic, and cultural (and even political) gaps between Hong Kong and mainland China during the 1970s and 1980s.

Elva Lai, cover for *Freedom Swimmers*, 2017, book design by Rita Sabbo. Courtesy of the artist.

Jaffa Lam, born in the early 1970s, who moved to Hong Kong from Fujian with her sister and mother, was also among this wave of migrants. Jaffa Lam sees her migrant background as having forced her to be more mature. She repeats in the interview with us, “I felt like I was born in the 1960s,” describing her feeling of distance from her schoolmates. She would take up odd jobs to support herself, and she struggled to learn both Cantonese and English, especially the latter. Jaffa Lam’s first aspiration to work as an artist had much to do with her secondary school art teacher, who was well-dressed and wore fancy jewelry, impressing on the young girl that art could be a respectable and well-paid career. Jaffa Lam has worked extremely hard to pursue success and attain achievement through her art, feeling that she now has reached a more sophisticated understanding and practice of art.



Admitting that she was (and still is) attracted to things foreign (read, Western), Angela Su never liked Hong Kong when she was growing up; she lacked a sense of belonging, and the idea of studying abroad was always pervasive for her. She explained, “My mom and dad, being overseas Chinese, have never been very grounded in Hong Kong anyway, especially my mom. She was very scared of the communists at the time, and knowing that Hong

Angela Su, *Chalcosoma Atlas*, 2007, ink on drafting film, 84 x 60 cm. Photo: Eddie Lam @ Image Art Studio. Courtesy of the artist.



Jaffa Lam, *Singing Under the Moon for Today and Tomorrow*, 2015, recycled umbrella fabrics, ceramics, slides, audio, installation view at MOCA Taipei. Courtesy of the artist.

Kong would be returned to China, she felt the urgency to send me away after the signing of the [Sino-British] Joint Declaration in 1984.” Angela Su studied art after receiving a degree in biology in the 1990s in Canada. Canada was one of the main destinations during the “brain drain” of Hong Kong in the 1990s.²⁴ She applied and obtained Canadian citizenship after graduation, though she returned to Hong Kong in 1999. In an oral history project, Choi Yan-chi downplays the decision to relocate with her artist husband Hon Chi-fun to Canada in the 1990s, which had less to do with the looming return of Hong Kong to China than with their desire to find a better environment for their art practices.²⁵

The foundation of Hong Kong’s “local-ness” is much characterized by this constant mobility of people. With its location at the far south of China and its 150 years of colonial history, Hong Kong was regarded as the “Other,” or the “Exception.” To quote from *We Are Hong Kongers Too*: “The Chineseness of Hong Kongers is a form of Hong-Kong-style Chineseness, and also a Cantonese-style Chineseness. It is a form of Chineseness that has long been disregarded and marginalized by mainland China’s essential Zhongyuan Culture.”²⁶

Choi Yan-chi has a vivid memory of the 1967 Riots. She was in her final year of high school, and the territory-wide public examination was underway as the riots first broke out in May. She routinely had to take two bus rides to get to school, and recalls one of the bus services being suspended because of a bomb discovered on the route; she had to go home on foot. She described the riots as exciting, yet she did not know then that the course of her future had been changed. A few years later, she lost the opportunity to teach at a government school because of her family’s leftist background. Choi Yan-chi’s father was second generation overseas Chinese from Indonesia and worked at a leftist trading company after he migrated to Hong Kong at the



time of World War II. Her family background and her father's leftist pro-China stance had less to do with a political ideology, however, and more to do with the oppression of overseas Chinese in Indonesia.

Choi Yan-Chi, Waiting for the first beam of light, June 21, 2015 (summer solstice). Courtesy of the artist.

As the eldest child in the family, and as a girl, Choi Yan-chi was prescribed by her mother a future career as a teacher. Choi Yan-chi recollected, "I was in a special third year course at the Grantham College of Education, with four teachers and only ten students, which was the first batch of teachers with proper art training to teach art, so I felt I was in a privileged group. Upon graduation, I knew I would be offered a teaching post at a top government secondary school in the colony, namely, the Queen Elizabeth School,²⁷ which would be a remarkable achievement in itself. More importantly, a teaching post at a government school would subsequently lead to the chance to study at the Royal College of Art in Britain for a few years with generous subsidies. This is a career path with excellent prospects. However, I lost the opportunity because of my leftist family background."

Choi Yan-chi's lost opportunity and Jaffa Lam's tremendous struggle as an abjectly poor migrant were certainly events that changed their personal life courses, but they were experiences that epitomize the era. How would the young generation see themselves in their own era? Elva Lai, born in 1989, does not agree that her generation's lives have been "uneventful."²⁸ With the rise of radical localism in the past decade in Hong Kong, Elva Lai feels her generation has experienced oppression during and after the Umbrella Movement (2014). She tells of a friend of hers who was immediately kicked out of the studio he shared and banned from entering mainland China for designing a banner that states "Hong Kong is not China," which was used by two pro-independence lawmakers-elect at the oath-taking of the Hong Kong Legislative Council in 2016, both of whom were subsequently disqualified by court ruling.

Ho Sin Tung, in contrast, is inclined to say that her generation has lived through "uneventful" times, and she also connects her individual and



Ho Sin Tung, *Tomorrow you will wear a ponytail for me*, 2015, video installation, 13 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

societal dynamics to the art education she has received. She explains, “I agree that the experience of an individual is largely attributed to the times s/he lives in and through. However, I also reckon that our art education has encouraged us to think mainly on personal levels, but rarely in collective or societal terms.”

Angela Su, *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*, 2017, single-channel video, 14 mins., 35 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



The one subject that got the Choi-Wong-Lo group (Choi Yan-chi, Wong Wo-bik, and Yvonne Lo) of artists very excited—and delightfully chatting—was cinema. There were Cantonese movies, mainland China movies, Japanese terror flicks, and Western movies. Many visual artists are cinephiles: Angela Su said she was (and still is) inspired more by films than reading art books, while Ho Sin Tung is known as a dedicated

Sara Wong, *Notes about a Field Trip*, 2017, single-channel video and handwritten text, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



cinephile, with many of her works themed upon film. Sara Wong, with a brother who was part of the movie industry, developed an early interest in films and went to the Phoenix Cine Club’s screenings at a young age. What is interesting here, among the Choi-Wong-Lo group, is the different categorization of films in that period. Growing up in a leftist family, Choi Yan-chi loved both leftist movies and Western movies (read: Hollywood movies), without a conflict of ideologies. Whereas, Yvonne Lo, as a young teenager, enjoyed spending time with her grandfather in cinemas as they lived in the neighbourhood of Hung Hom with various cinemas nearby. She enjoyed communist movies from mainland China and locally produced Cantonese movies on equal terms, and she had no prior knowledge of films for propaganda or social education. Yvonne Lo later went to watch art films, also at the Phoenix Cine Club, a couple times as a young adult, but without a peer group to share thoughts about what she saw, she soon ceased going.



Yvonne Lo, *Infinity*, 2015, archival print on paper, 92 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Wong Wo Bik, *University Hostel—Man Descending from the Spiral Staircase Imported from France 130+ Years Ago*, HKU, 1990, digital photograph, 127 x 101.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Back then, for individuals with dreams of pursuing art, studying overseas was a viable option. Choi Yan-chi and Wong Wo-bik studied overseas in the 1970s, and Yvonne Lo in 1980s. Interestingly, Choi Yan-chi and Wong Wo-bik, after working in other fields for a few years, attended the same art school when they first arrived in the United States, although a few years apart. Choi Yan-chi went to Columbus College of Art and Design, Ohio, in 1973, and shortly thereafter switched to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, whereas Wong Wo-bik studied at Columbus from 1975 to 1977 and gained her first degree there before moving on to Tyler School of Art, Temple University in Philadelphia. In another interview a couple of years earlier, Wong Wo-bik stated that, unbeknownst to her, ink artist Wuicus Wong also studied at Columbus College back in the 1960s.²⁹ It is no small coincidence

that Choi Yan-chi and Wong Wo-bik (and indeed several more individuals of the same generation) studied at Columbus College in the 1970s.³⁰ The college, offering scholarships to Hong Kong students, provided appealing opportunities to these aspiring young adults.

Yvonne Lo, *The Comfortable Are Too Comfortable*, 1995, archival print on paper, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Yvonne Lo, eight years younger than Choi Yan-chi and Wong Wo-bik, and initially trained in journalism, took a similar path in studying abroad, but for different reasons. For her, it has only been in hindsight that she has understood her father. He was the self-appointed headmaster of a neighbourhood primary school that he set up, and, helped by other income he made, her father provided her with a comfortable childhood. However, her upbringing

was full of tension because her father was a strict patriarchal figure, and her mother was submissive to him. Yvonne Lo remains a “dutiful” daughter (later, dutiful wife, daughter-in-law, and mother), yet, deep down, she tenaciously resists the strict paternal expectations of women of her era. Studying abroad was the excuse she needed in order to “escape” from a strong sense of suffocation after working in journalism for several years. As she did not have much money, and chose a university with the lowest tuition fee that she could afford. With photojournalism in mind when she entered school, she ended up in 1985 with, in what she now sees as a series of serendipitous events, a master’s degree in art from the Texas Woman’s University. Yvonne Lo fully embraced the study of art and had a profound revelation: “I came to realize that something of me remained untapped. More importantly, art operates on a different mindset, which suggests a vast horizon, and autonomy; whereas my previous journalism practice has pushed me to be judgemental; being judgemental gives off nothing but negative energy.”

Recalling their time studying in the United States in our conversation with them, the Choi-Wong-Lo group enjoyed anecdotes about the old days; these memories seem bitter sweet; a blend of hardship and pleasure. Also without much money, Choi Yan-chi and Wong Wo-bik took up part-time jobs such as waitressing, cooking in the school campus canteen, or working as helper in a kitchen. Without a car, Wong Wo-bik could go grocery shopping only once a month and did so in a group. Those lucky enough to have a car, as Yvonne Lo or Choi Yan-chi’s classmates did, had rusty old ones with broken windows, broken doors, or holes in the floor. Wong Wo-bik’s professor in Philadelphia would host dinner parties for overseas students unable to return home during festive seasons such as Christmas and school breaks. To save money, she consumed much more bread than rice as a staple food, and on her return to Hong Kong she did not eat bread for over a decade.



While Choi Yan-chi, Wong Wo-bik, and Yvonne Lo went to study abroad as young adults, Sara Wong, Jaffa Lam, Ho Sin Tung, Ko Sin Tung, and Elva Lai all did their undergraduate studies in the Department of Fine Arts of the Chinese University Hong Kong (CUHK), the only art school with university-level credentials in the territory until the late 1990s. With the promotion of the creative industries by the Hong Kong government, there was an art education boom by the turn of millennium, with more art schools being established, including the Academy of Visual Arts at Baptist University, the School of Creative Media at Hong Kong City University, and the Hong Kong Art School. For this later generation, it is apparent they had more options in terms of study and career choices.

Wong Wo-bik, Fabrication of A Family Portrait from a Found Clipping of the EU Family, 2013, digital photograph, 101.5 x 127 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The Choi-Wong-Lo group understood that they were more independent, could survive on their own, and were able to choose what to study. Unlike Sara Wong, whose parents were open to her choice of study as long as she received university education, Jaffa Lam's mother wanted her to study medicine, as she herself was a trained physician. Angela Su's mother preferred commerce, so for Angela Su to take up a science subject, biology, was a kind of compromise, and the studying of art seemed to her parents an outrageous decision. From what Ho Sin Tung, Ko Sin Tung, and Elva Lai described, their parents seemed more relaxed with the idea of their children studying art. Moreover, these latter three women in the group conversation are all the youngest children in their respective families; each having an

older sibling who could fulfill the family's expectations and obligations, they were free to be the "rebellious" ones in the family and study art.

Ho Sin Tung, *Miss Dong Quartet: Miss Tung* (Tung), 2014, colour pencil and ink on paper mounted on board, 120 x 95 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



For the generation of Choi Yan-chi and Yvonne Lo, taking up a teaching post was the main strategy for survival, whereas Wong Wo-bik feels at home working as an art administrator, which she attributes to the few years she worked as junior secretary at the Royal Police Force in 1970s, prior to studying abroad. "I had to take up a full-time job [in art administration] to support my art production as there was no financial assistance available, nor any promoter who could give me a helping hand. Yet, I worked very hard and managed to organize quite a number of one-person exhibitions from 1980 to 1990." What Wong

Wong Wo-bik, *A Man Walking Across the Courtyard of Old Central Police Station* (now Tai Kwun), 2016, video. Courtesy of the artist.



Wo-bik finds the hardest to bear has been a general lack of encouragement throughout her art career.

Sara Wong, *The Cut (+22°17'19.38"N)*, 2013, landscape installation with turf and modified landform, programmed vent system, approx. 4.8 x 12 x .6 metres. Courtesy of the artist.



In order to leave herself more time for making art, Sara Wong decided to take up freelance or project-based jobs after graduation in 1992. She once landed a project that required her to work on the logistics of collecting for the future Hong Kong Heritage Museum that opened in 2000. As for Jaffa Lam, while all of her classmates became secondary school teachers after receiving their degrees in art, specializing in Chinese painting, she immediately

took on a two-year MFA course at the same school, CUHK, as an alternative to getting a job, and subsequently shifted her practice to sculpture.

Sara Wong recalled, and appreciated, that their teacher at The CUHK, Lui Chun-kwong, would encourage his students to set up their own artists' association after graduation so as to further bonds with each other, as well as keep up the momentum to make art and organize exhibitions. Hong Kong has a long history of art clubs or art societies as a form of self-organization and network support, yet part of their function has been gradually replaced by the initiation of art spaces since mid-1990s, funding availability since the establishment of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and the clusters of studios that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s

such as those in Fo Tan, Kwan Tong, Chai Wan, or, most recently, in Wong Chuk Hang. Sara Wong noted that she herself, Leung Chi-wo, Ng Tze-kwan, and others set up their studios in Fo Tan as early as the late 1990s, around the same time that she was heavily involved in the Para/Site Art Space. As a founding member of Para/Site Art Space,³¹ Sara Wong sees those years as a solidly productive period, and while for a considerable time she earned her income as a landscape architect, it is a profession she does not find excludes “art.” In comparison, Jaffa Lam has taken a more fluid career, ranging from engaging in teaching and public commissions, to participating in numerous artist residencies overseas.



For the generation of Ho Sin Tung, Ko Sin Tung, and Elva Lai, more options were available, not just in terms of education, but also artistic careers. Ho Sin Tung has been represented by TZ Hanart Gallery since her graduation; she is among the very few local women artists represented by this renowned gallery, which was established in

Ko Sin Tung, *Absent Store*, 2016, neon lights, steel racks, stainless stain basket. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

1983. Ko Sin Tung started her relationship with the Edouard Malingue Gallery, founded in 2010 in Hong Kong, shortly after a studio visit by the gallery’s staff. Teaching children art three days a week, alongside the support from her gallery, Ko Sin Tung, taciturn by nature, conveys a sense of contentment at this point in her career. In terms of surviving as an artist, Elva Lai has chosen a different “career path,” hoping to carry on her art practice by applying for artist residencies overseas, or grants for individual projects. While Ho Sin Tung is somewhat dubious about this direction of working, finding that individuals tend to choose it as a form of “escape,” Elva Lai embraces it fully.

The art market boom in Asia started in the millennium and was galvanized by the debut of ART HK (Hong Kong Art Fair) in 2008, which was such a success that Art Basel bought the fair in 2011.³² Anthony Leung Po-shan, known for her trenchant critique of the Hong Kong art ecology and its cultural politics, marks the year 2008 as a time of “total capitalization” of Hong Kong art and has recently authored and published her research on the subject of art and capital.³³

Newly established galleries have been springing up across Hong Kong since 2008. With statistics compiled in *ArtAsiaPacific Almanac*, up until 2013, contemporary art galleries operating in Hong Kong numbered 113. This was an extraordinary boom compared to the forty-nine galleries that were in existence in 2007 (one wave of galleries corresponded with the rise of interest in contemporary Chinese Art, with a significant number of them presenting Chinese artists), and represented a five-fold increase when compared with the twenty-two operating galleries in 2005. Moreover, after 2010, a number of overseas galleries set up branches in Hong Kong,

including Gagosian, White Cube, Galerie Perrotin, and Lehmann Maupin; however, there was a drop in 2016, to ninety-two, and a further drop to eighty-eight in 2017. As for the “Value of Art Exported” from Hong Kong, a figure of 725,147,044 USD was reached in 2017, a steady increase from the figures of 476,031,016 USD in 2012 and 229,468,028 USD in 2007.³⁴

Graduating in 2008 and 2009, respectively, Ho Sin Tung and Ko Sin Tung would emphasize that the art market “arrived” after their graduation. They were, as they put it, “still simple and innocent as art students,” whereas those who are studying now do so with the knowledge that an art market awaits them. Elva Lai, three years junior to Ho Sin Tung, had her first show at Karen Weber Contemporary when she was still a third-year student, although she insists that she did not aspire to be a gallery artist. When Ho Sin Tung delivered a lecture at her alma mater, the art students who posed questions showed more concern about their career path than about artistic pursuit.



Jaffa Lam, *A Quarter of Pavilion*, 2011, recycled umbrella fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

In view of Hong Kong becoming an international art hub and an integral part of the global art world, Sara Wong, Jaffa Lam, and Angela Su, the mid-career group of artists in this research, seem to have undergone identity and status issues. They would tease themselves about being the “ever emerging artists” as far as a global art scene is concerned. Take Angela Su as an example; she explained that for a long time she did not feel comfortable or confident to call herself an artist, as “artist suggests something noble.” Only when she felt it had become a “normal” career, and when there were many more artists within the Hong Kong art community, did she begin to introduce herself as an artist. Angela Su continues to stay at her full-time job but persists in making art. Since 2016, she has been represented by Blindspot Gallery, and with increasing numbers of commissioned art projects from various sources, she now feels secure enough to quit her job and devote herself full time to art.

Perhaps we can conclude this article with the discussion that took place among Sara Wong, Jaffa Lam, and Angela Su when the group was questioned during our interview about their “ambitions” in art. The artists queried and deliberated on the use of terms such as ambition, recognition, ego, self-awareness, self-assurance, and determination. All in all they agreed that determination, not ambition—which perhaps carries too many connotations of commercial success—is the decisive factor keeping them in the field.

1. Griselda Pollock and Marina Warner, *Women's Art at New Hall* (Cambridge, UK: New Hall, 1992).
2. This project was completed in February 2018 and launched at Sotheby's Hong Kong alongside the exhibition *Women in Art: Hong Kong* (March 5 to 10, 2018), which included works by Au Hoi Lam, Rosamond Brown, Irene Chou, Choi Yan-chi, Fang Zhaoqing, Ho Sin-tung, Ko Sin-tung, Jaffa Lam, Man Fung-yi, Ellen Pau, Angela Su, Nicole Wong, and Doris Wong.
3. The group conversations, in Cantonese, were conducted between September and November 2017. All artist quotations without citations are from these conversations.
4. The notion of "thick description" as a form of ethnographic writing that integrates description with interpretation was popularized by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who adopted the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle; see Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.
5. Sackler CPD Programme Study Day: Women in Collections, <http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/event/sackler-cpd-programme-study-day-women-collections/>.
6. Anita Kit-wah Chan and Wai-ling Wang, eds., *Gendering Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), xxvii.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Anthony Leung Po-shan, "Feminism Beyond the Female Body," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 4, no. 1 (2005), 37.
9. Chang Tsong-zung, "The Secret Artist—Is Hong Kong Art the True Underground?" in *Private Content: Public View—Opinions on Hong Kong Art and Documents from the Exhibition Restricted Exposure* (Hong Kong: Fringe Club, 1997), 82.
10. Carolyn Cartier, *Hong Kong and the Production of Art in the Post/colonial City* (Leiden: China Information: The Documentation and Research Centre for Modern China, Leiden University, 2008), vol. XXII.
11. *Ibid.*, 251.
12. *Ibid.*, 252.
13. Anthony Leung Po-shan, "Nation-State, Locality and the Marketplace: The Multiple Art Worlds in Hong Kong," in Chang Tsong-zung and Serenella Ciclitira, eds., *Hong Kong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art* (Milan: Skira, 2012), 31–43.
14. Linda Lai, "Contemporary 'Women's Art in Hong Kong' Reframed: Performative Research on the Potentialities of Women Art-makers," unpublished manuscript, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 10.
17. *Ibid.*, 15.
18. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1971), 344–66; reprinted in *ARTnews*, January 1971, 22–39, 67–71.
19. Christina Chu, "The Hong Kong Eye: A Legacy Revisited," in Tsong-Zung Chang and Serenella Ciclitira, eds., *Hong Kong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art*, 28.
20. Liao Wen, *Lufei hongshou: Gudai yishu zhong de nuxing xingxiang he guige yishu* (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 2005), 129.
21. Kao Mayching, "The Artistic Universe of Irene Chou," in *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2012* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013), 25.
22. Unbeknownst to us before this conversation, Choi Yan-chi and Sara Wong were born in the same year and studied in the same secondary school; later they even attended the same art college in the US.
23. *We Are Hongkongers Too: New Immigrants from the 70s* (Hong Kong: Step Forward Multi Media Company Limited, 2009).
24. See "Waves of mass migrations from Hong Kong," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waves_of_mass_migrations_from_Hong_Kong/.
25. "Choi Yan-chi," in Victor Lai and Eva Man, eds., *In Conversation with Hong Kong Art (1980–2014)*, (*Yu Xianggang yishu duihua [1980–2014]*) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2015), 398–411.
26. *We Are Hongkongers Too: New Immigrants from the 70s*.
27. Queen Elizabeth School was opened in 1953, when Queen Elizabeth II was crowned, and it was the first co-ed government secondary school in the colony.
28. Frank Vigneron, "The Everchanging Hybridity Between Global Art Practices," in Cordelia and Christoph Noe, eds., *Hong Kong Artists/20 Portraits* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012), 10–17.
29. "Wong Wo-bik," in Victor Lai and Eva Man, eds., *In Conversation with Hong Kong Art (1980–2014)*, 53.
30. Other artists of the same generation who have studied at the same school include Eva Yuen, Mike Ng, Bing Lee, and Siu Lai Chi. E-mail communication between Wong Wo-bik and Phoebe Wong dated February 11, 2018.
31. Four of the seven founders of Para/Site Art Space are women: Lisa Cheung, Leung Mee-ping, Phoebe Man, and Sara Wong. Para/Site changed its name to Para Site in 2013.
32. ART HK (2008–2012). Art Basel bought ART HK in 2011 and renamed the art fair Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013.
33. See Anthony Leung Po-san, *Wo ai Art Basel: Lunjin yishu yu ziben (I Love Art Basel: On Art and Capital)* (Hong Kong: Dirty Press, 2018).
34. All of these figures are taken from the *ArtAsiaPacific Almanac* from 2007 to 2018. The AAP Almanac quotes the "Value of Art Exported" figures from the UN Comtrade Database.