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RED-WHITE-BLUE AND HONG KONG INSTALLATION ART

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MPHIL

LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

2011

RED-WHITE-BLUE AND HONG KONG INSTALLATION ART

by

LIU Nga Ying

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Visual Studies

Lingnan University

2011

ABSTRACT

Red-white-blue and Hong Kong Installation Art

by

LIU Nga Ying

Master of Philosophy

The purpose of this study is to analyse the interaction between art and contested notions of Hong Kong identity by examining recent installations that employ the red, white and blue-striped plastic fabric, locally known in Hong Kong as red-white-blue (紅白藍). The red-white-blue fabric has, in recent years, become a signifier of the collective identity of Hong Kong people and of the 'Hong Kong spirit', with specific reference to the traits of the working class in the 1960s. The repeated articulations of this material in artworks show that there are certain qualities in this material with which local people identify. This study examines how installation works that employ this material question and revise notions of Hong Kong identity, and suggest its plurality and mutability. Works of local artists including Stanley Wong (a.k.a. Another mountainman), Kith Tsang, Doris Wong, Siu King Chung and Tim Li are discussed in detail.

Accounts of installations that employ red-white-blue often offer a limited interpretation of such works, paying insufficient attention to formal qualities and assuming a fixed and unitary notion of Hong Kong identity. The thesis argues that this paradigmatic cliché about Hong Kong identity is also expressed in the red-white-blue works of Stanley Wong to the extent that they evoke nostalgia and neglect contemporary social reality. The prevalence of such readings of red-white-blue-inspired works of art has veiled the complexity of works that interrogate Hong Kong identity from a diversity of perspectives. The contribution of this thesis is to remedy that situation, and provide a comprehensive account of key red-white-blue installation works.

DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

(Liu Nga Ying)

16 August 2011

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers readings of works of art which employ a ubiquitous plastic fabric known locally in Hong Kong as ‘*red-white-blue*’ (紅白藍). It examines the complexity of these works of art with a specific focus on their contestation and expression of Hong Kong identity. In recent years red-white-blue plastic fabric has been widely perceived as a signifier of the identity of Hong Kong’s people, and as specifically referencing the traits and attitudes of the Hong Kong working class of the 1960s.

In 2004, Hong Kong designer and artist, Stanley Wong¹ curated a thematic exhibition in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum dedicated to the red-white-blue fabric, entitled “Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue”². The exhibited works shared the common feature of the use of red-white-blue as either a medium or as subject matter. In the exhibition catalogue and pamphlets, devised by Wong, red-white-blue is promoted as a representation of Hong Kong identity, referring in particular to a collective image of the Hong Kong working class in the 1960s and 1970s. In the Preface to the exhibition catalogue, Wong says,

These [red-white-blue] could be plastic sheets at construction sites, the canopies outside street-side groceries. Or it might take the form of baggage carrying our belongings, our presents to take back to home villages on visits, even our dreams. The omnipresent plastic sheet soon acquired its own character, complete with attitudes, not unlike a human being standing steadfastly by his post, patiently facing life’s difficulties, and struggle on without a word of

¹ Stanley Wong Ping-Pui 黃炳培, also known as Another mountainman 又一山人. The shorter form of his name – Stanley Wong – will be used in this thesis.

² Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue was open from 17 November, 2004 to 18 April, 2005, in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.

complain — to be involved in our own city. This is very much like Hong Kong people of the 1960s and 1970s.³

This statement clearly contributes to an association of red-white-blue with Hong Kong identity. In the popular press, large numbers of comments are devoted to the red-white-blue-inspired artworks, all of which stress the same idea: that “red-white-blue” is a representation of Hong Kong culture and the Hong Kong people⁴. This emphasis on superimposing the material quality of red-white-blue over an image of the Hong Kong working class could be seen to function in limiting the readings of those red-white-blue-inspired works.; often, insufficient attention is given to the works per se, especially to such important aspects as their formal qualities.

This tendency to emphasise a link between red-white-blue works of art and a stable and unitary notion of Hong Kong’s identity is also to be found in institutional discourses, such as those of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum itself. So, for example, in the Preface to the 2004 exhibition catalogue, the Museum’s curator, Judy Chan, maintains that this

mundane and banal red-white-blue material popularized by artists ... [has] assumed an illustrative visual identity through different conceptual interpretations to represent the spirit of the Hong Kong people.⁵

Yet this explicit statement of the capability of red-white-blue in representing the “spirit of Hong Kong” begs the obvious question of exactly how it does so; even what it is that constitutes that “spirit” being represented is left unexplained. This

³ The language errors in this text belong to the text as published by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. Stanley Wong, *Introduction, Building Hong Kong : Redwhiteblue*, Exhibition Pamphlet, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2004.

⁴ Chung Lai Ming, “紅白藍袋反映港式文化亮相威尼斯 (Red-White-Blue Tote Bag Reflects Hong Kong Culture Showed in Venice)” *Ta Kung Pao* May 21, 2005, C8.

⁵ Judy Chan, “Building Hong Kong Redwhiteblue”, Exhibition Pamphlet, Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Service Department, 2005.

tendency towards vagueness is not universal, however, and critic Jonathan Thomson's reviews of particular red-white-blue artworks, for example do discuss the formal qualities of those works⁶. Still, what seems to be lacking is a detailed analysis of the complex links between these formal qualities and the social realities that such works point to. The exploration of this linkage is essential if one is to gain an understanding of the works' expressions of a range of notions of Hong Kong identity.

The indistinct quality of the relation between red-white-blue and the notion of Hong Kong identity has been identified by local art critic, Leung Po Shan. Leung claims in "Carton, factory and red-white-blue (紙皮、工廠與紅白藍)"⁷, that the fact that red-white-blue has been associated with local identity should not be taken as a final and simple indicator of the meaning of the works: artists and audiences shape the meanings of works, which therefore may be ambiguous and even contradictory. Leung argues that:

Once the object of the grass-roots (working class) is chosen by an artist, the symbolic meaning is immediately detached from the economic structure and context of the original... Therefore, whether art or a cultural symbol is conservative or progressive depends on the way that meanings are deliberately imposed and shaped by the author and the reader. Thus conflict and harmony can exist together.⁸

In the same article, Leung cites Mathew Turner's comments on the representational meaning of red-white-blue:

So it is that red-white-and-blue stripes may be imagined as an unofficial kind of flag of the people... neatly reversed its stripes... take on an almost caricature symbolism of proletarian purity...

⁶ Jonathan Thomson, "Red White Blue," *Asian Art News* 15 (3) (2005): 60-65.

⁷ Leung Po Shan, "紙皮、工廠與紅白藍 (Carton, Factory and Red-white-blue)," *InmediaHK*, posted on May 27, 2010, <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1007158>

⁸ Ibid.

Drawing on colonial promotion of ‘the Hong Kong Story’ that pictured local residents as poor, hardy but hardworking (ideal for exploitation), stripy plastic bags and construction sheeting have been taken to symbolize the hard industriousness of local factories, and the resilience of those who built a towering city... at once defiantly local and prudently patriotic, at once innocently authentic and internationally sophisticated, at once wickedly illegitimate and institutionally legitimized: altogether the perfect symbol for a shifting cultural identity that is itself glimpsed between the lines.⁹

Here Turner is suggesting that it is possible to have different, even contradictory readings of red-white-blue in relation to Hong Kong identity. Still, the question of just how red-white-blue relates to Hong Kong identity and how works inspired by the fabric assimilate existing connotations to open up alternative readings of the notion of Hong Kong identity is left unexplored. Existing readings of red-white-blue-inspired works have, on the whole, been cursory, even serving to veil the complexity of those works.

This study aims to address this lacuna by providing a comprehensive account of key red-white-blue installation works; by analysing the interaction between art and contested notions of Hong Kong identity; and by examining how installation works that employ red-white-blue question and revise notions of Hong Kong identity, and suggest its plurality and mutability. Works of local artists including Stanley Wong (a.k.a. Another Mountainman), Kith Tsang¹⁰, Doris Wong¹¹, Siu King Chung¹² and Tim Li¹³ are discussed in detail.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kith Tsang Tak-Ping 曾德平. The short form of the name—Kith Tsang—will be used in this thesis.

¹¹ Doris Wong Wai Ying 黃慧妍. The short form of the name – Doris Wong – will be used in this thesis.

¹² Siu King Chung 蕭競聰. The full name will be used in this thesis.

¹³ Tim Li Man Wai 李民偉. The short form of the name – Tim Li – will be used in this thesis.

Methodology

The complexity of works that employ red-white-blue as material is related directly to the range of connotations inherent in the material itself. Thus, the methodological attitude employed by this study will combine a number of approaches. It draws upon Hong Kong's social history, art history and sociology, especially insofar as these disciplines concern Hong Kong identity, to will locate red-white-blue installation art within a larger history of contemporary Hong Kong art. Research methods include the study of the literature in the relevant fields, archival and newspaper research, as well as the conducting of interviews and the relating of first-hand experiences of the works themselves.

The ubiquity of red-white-blue is, by definition, of course, not confined to Hong Kong; red-white-blue abounds in many other countries. But it is argued here that this material has specific meanings within the Hong Kong context, often being identified as a symbol of localness. A comprehensive reading of artworks that employ it therefore requires sufficient local social and historical contextualisation. Since the different meanings of red-white-blue contribute to the meanings of the artworks, it is necessary to analyse these works in an interdisciplinary manner; one which draws from disciplines such as social history, as well as from art history and aesthetics. Special attention is also needed to identify any social, cultural and artistic particularities that relate back to the selected artworks.

A social, cultural and historical contextualisation of the red-white-blue material is necessary before analysis of the works themselves takes place. Since the use of this mundane, industrial material is a key feature of the artworks, it is necessary to account for the relationship between the material and the artworks. Because red-white-blue serves different purposes at different times, the meanings and

associations of red-white-blue works can be diverse, even contradictory. To enable further analysis of artworks that reflect on particular local issues, or to draw on the specific connotations of the red-white-blue material, a certain store of background knowledge regarding the material in its different contexts is required.

The study, then, begins with a ‘biography’ of red-white-blue. In addition to presenting the historical background of the material itself, this biography provides an account of its social context and argues for a further analysis of these artworks, one which examines the manner in which the culturally constructed meanings of red-white-blue are appropriated, contested or reinvented. By studying the role of red-white-blue in local Hong Kong people’s lives, and in the development of the city of Hong Kong itself, the social and personal significance of red-white-blue is revealed. Revealed, too, are the manner in which particular meanings of red-white-blue have been constructed in the specific local context of Hong Kong, and the different meanings the material assumes in different circumstances.

In *Reading Matter*, Arthur Asa Berger examines material culture and particular materials in a multidisciplinary manner, combining anthropological, semiotic and sociological approaches. A similar approach has been adopted in this study of red-white-blue¹⁴ where an anthropological study of red-white-blue focuses on its changing functions, from industrial material to personal consumer product and, more recently, fashion commodity – a progression which indicates people’s changing experience of the material – as well as on the extensive use that has made the material part of Hong Kong’s landscape. The adoption of this inexpensive industrial material for the production of luxury commodities provides it with further potential

¹⁴ Arthur Asa Berger *Reading Matter: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Material Culture* (U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

connotations.

The reading of red-white-blue offered here considers the material in the design and consumer culture of Hong Kong and discusses Hong Kong people's perception of it as a material. In addition, the red-white-blue material is analysed semantically in terms of its functions, nature and physical appearance as a sign. So, for example, the colour combination of red, white and blue can, since it is a color combination used for the national flags of many different nations, be interpreted differently according to various national contexts. This clearly contributes to the various connotations and popular interpretations of red-white-blue in the specific context of Hong Kong.

Since the meaning of an artistic creation and its cultural context are inextricably linked, the interpretation of a work of art cannot be separated from its social, economic and cultural influences. These influences also affect artistic practice and the resultant works of art, and are thus reflected in the subject matter, forms and style of those works. Formal analysis, and art-historical and social contextualisation, are all critically important to a comprehensive reading of art works. Because the interrelations between the formal qualities of a red-white-blue artwork and the connotations of red-white-blue itself are often not clearly explained, and since the use of red-white-blue in these artworks is known to imply a close relationship between the works and the social context that this material connotes, the works' artistic significances should be discussed in a comprehensive manner.

For any formal and aesthetic analysis of the works, of first concern is *colour*, since it is the very colours red, white and blue which appear in all red-white-blue works and which are an immediately apprehended feature of the works. This study

closely considers: the ways in which these three colours are arranged in the individual works, as well as the visual interaction of the colours of the works with the colours of their surroundings, or with other elements of the work, will also be studied closely. Discussion of the formal qualities of the works in relation to the exhibition space is undertaken: since the selected works are installations, the interaction between the works and their environments is essential to any readings of those works. Installation art is a spatial construction, so it is important to consider the ways in which different components are arranged. Walls and floors may frame or limit the view of the installation work, so the spatial dimensions of individual works, and their relation to the exhibition space are crucial in determining the meaning of the works.

The tactile quality of the fabric is an important feature of red-white-blue. Since the works may employ more than one material, it is important to consider the relationship between these various materials, and the texture or effects they create in the work. The approach here also includes attention to aesthetic matters, including questions about the definition of art and the difference between art and a mere object. Such questions are especially pertinent to those red-white-blue installation works that closely resemble the urban Hong Kong streetscape.

Art-historical and socio-political contextualisation are necessary here so that the works may be positioned within a general history of Hong Kong, within the history of local art, and within global art currents. The significance and specificity of red-white-blue installation art in Hong Kong context are examined in order to identify the artistic interest in recent red-white-blue works in relation to Hong Kong identity. An art-historical contextualisation drawing on Zhu-Qi's *History of Hong Kong Fine Arts* is undertaken, and an account of **the influence of early artists and**

art groups from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. Note of this local artistic influence of the late 1980s is necessary to any exploration of those preconditions which were required for the emergence of those early installations in the 1990s which so affected the artistic interest in using this commonplace material.

Contemporary social and political conditions for each of the artworks are also considered. A considerable number of studies of Hong Kong art¹⁵ have made the point that the socio-political uncertainties during the mid-1980s and up to 1997 were influential upon the artistic concerns and expressions of Hong Kong art. This social and political context stimulated local artists' desire to find or construct an expression of Hong Kong identity which was distinctively, uniquely local. In addition, global art currents also influenced the local art scene, since the younger generation of artists of the 1980s had largely received their art education in western countries, and had returned to Hong Kong to experiment with non-conventional media and forms. The artistic practices and preferences of these precursors contribute significantly to the art of today.

Chapter Outline

The study is divided into four chapters following this Introduction. The first chapter traces the history of red-white-blue and of Hong Kong art from the 1960s to 2000s so as to lay the groundwork for understanding how red-white-blue is assimilated into art-making in the Hong Kong context. A biography of red-white-blue will be given, followed by a history of Hong Kong art from the 1960s to 2000s. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of an exhibition dedicated to

¹⁵See David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). Frank Vigneron, *之間：中西藝術賞析比較* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007). Ed. Ivy Ma, *How to see Hong Kong Art* (Hong Kong: 1a Space, 2004).

red-white-blue – “Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue”(2004) – and of the early red-white-blue works of Stanley Wong, in order to explore the social and artistic linkages between red-white-blue, works of art, and the notion of Hong Kong identity.

Chapter Two examines further the works of Stanley Wong and takes a detailed look at the contribution they have made to the growing identification of red-white-blue with a unitary notion of Hong Kong identity. Discussion focuses on works from the series *Building Hong Kong* (2001), including *Show Flat* (2003), *From London to Hong Kong to London* (2005) and *Tea and Chat* (2005). Through the use of red-white-blue in the construction of nostalgic spaces, Wong’s works address the Hong Kong people as a collective unit with the shared traits of the working class in 1960s and 1970s. This notion of Hong Kong identity is compared with that presented by Kith Tsang 曾德平 in *One Voice 同聲* (2004). It is argued that any notion of a stable Hong Kong identity is challenged by the work of Kith Tsang in a manner which highlights the existence of social differences.

Chapter Three inquires into Doris Wong’s *Home-moving furniture 移家傢俬* (2002) and Siu King Chung’s *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue 紅白藍應用解剖學* (2004), especially in relation to the present-day, bodily experience of Hong Kong urban space as it affects working class people. In these works, the signification of red-white-blue is reinvented in relation to present-day lived experience. It is argued here that Doris Wong’s work destabilises the fixed and unitary notion of Hong Kong identity by representing the experience of border-crossing and the ambiguity of ‘home’ as experienced by border-crossers. Siu’s work, on the other hand, explores the present-day urban experience with regard to the street space of commodity consumption. The work appropriates the image of the hawker stall, overlapping it with the material evidences of surplus consumption, thereby highlighting the

present-day transformation of the hawker stall and people's experience of such change.

Chapter Four examines two works by Tim Li in his art project *Dialogue with the bed* 與床對話 (2007-09). In this chapter, the specific spatial concerns that Li's works present to their audience are discussed in relation to the current social conflicts concerning underprivileged communities and people's right of access to public space. Li's 2007 work *Unfolding the possible II* 開展所能 II--*Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* contributes to the notion of a plural Hong Kong identity by highlighting under-represented communities in a specific location. The discussion of the art project *Dialogue with the Bed* (2008-09), focuses on two interventions carried out at Times Square and HSBC Headquarters. It is argued that the works of Li explore the plurality of Hong Kong identity by means of active audience participation in the public space, and that this contributes to the formation of a conceptual space for reflection on Hong Kong identity.

Acknowledgement of the social significance and artistic qualities of the red-white-blue works of art is important to a comprehensive reading of those works. The red-white-blue installation works integrate a commonplace and widely-adopted material, with particular connotations in Hong Kong, into art-making within the local context. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the use of such commonplace materials in art, and to the exploration of the relationship between art and the plurality of contemporary Hong Kong identity.

CHAPTER ONE: Biography of red-white-blue and the early development of installation art in Hong Kong

This chapter provides a biography of red-white-blue in Hong Kong in order to illustrate the links between people's identification of the industrial and domestic functions of red-white-blue's material characteristics and significations of the material reflecting Hong Kong people's sense of belonging. There follows an introduction to the development of Hong Kong art from the 1960s to 1990s as a foreshadowing of discussion into the use of red-white-blue in art-making from the late 1990s to 2000s. Examination is undertaken of the early red-white-blue art works of Stanley Wong, and the exhibition "Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue" (2004) in particular, since these are important influences upon the subsequent use of red-white-blue in art-making within the Hong Kong context. Of the many works of art in this exhibition, the focus here is on Stanley Wong's poster design of red-white-blue, which is posited as an example of the way in which red-white-blue is identified by many Hong Kong people as thematically representative of Hong Kong identity.

Biography of red-white-blue

The red-white-blue fabric so common and so well-known to Hong Kong and its people is not an invention of Hong Kong. The material was first imported from Japan in the 1970s at which time it was used as the covering material for construction sites, as temporary shelters in squatter areas, and as protection for farmland. Due to the large number of construction projects in the 1970s, red-white-blue became a part of the visual Hong Kong landscape, although

nowadays it is seldom used in this way. Still, in some parts in China, such as Guangzhou and Macau, red-white-blue use can be seen on a monumental scale in construction sites. The most prominent scene of red-white-blue use in present-day Hong Kong is the hawker area on Tung Choi Street (Ladies Street), Mong Kok (Fig. 1.1). Red-white-blue fabric is also made into the cheap and light-weight tote bags that are associated with border-crossing. This association is described in detail later.

Fig. 1.1: Red-white-blue used as covering material for the hawker booths in Ladies' Market, Mong Ko. Photo: the Author.

It is suggested here that the red-white-blue fabric is endowed with meaning through its manipulation by popular culture, which forms the connotations that Hong Kong people identify as a material expression of localness. Yet these connotations have been re-examined and reinvented, particularly in artistic productions, such that its possibilities lie beyond mere social interpretation; this will be more precisely discussed in later chapters. So, for instance, it may be useful to explain the phenomenon of identification of the material in terms of its social and historical

background. By discussing the material as a cultural icon of Hong Kong and analysing the history of this material, attention will focus on exploring the social significances of the red-white-blue material that give rise to various interpretations of these artworks.

Red-white-blue fabric was originally invented by the Japanese in the 1960s and later imported to Hong Kong through a Taiwanese manufacturer in 1975¹⁶. It is a fabric usually woven from polyethylene or polypropylene threads with a similar weave to that of the rattan mat (the criss-cross weave). The strength and durability of the fabric relative to its low price, and in comparison to its canvas sheet counterpart meant that it became widely used in industry and construction during 1960s, and eventually supplanted the use of canvas in many different industrial purposes. Falling demand and the low profit margin to be made from its manufacturing led the original Japanese inventors to abandon its production, and Taiwan took over as red-white-blue's major manufacturer and exporter.

It is noteworthy that the red-white-blue material, in fact, contains a variety of color combinations. But the most commonly used color combination in Hong Kong is a red, white and blue striped variety or a simpler white and blue striped fabric¹⁷. The choices of color combinations, and the colours themselves, have no definite origin although it is said that colors of the fabric result not from dyeing but are rather

¹⁶ Another mountainman (Stanley Wong), *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere: To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCCM Creations, 2005), 16-19.

¹⁷ Reflected by a local importer Tse, In Hong Kong, the most commonly used color combination of the fabric being ordered is blue and white which make up 70% of the company's local orders. For the most well-known tote bags in Hong Kong, the red, white and blue stripes pattern is still considered the classic form. As well as the red, white and blue striped pattern, there is also a tartan pattern arranged from the same color combination; Filipino clients apparently prefer a yellow-green-red-and-blue-striped variation, while Vietnamese clients prefer a red-white-blue-red-white five-striped design.

the original color of the raw plastic pellets which are melted and processed to produce it. The colours would then, appear to be the result of economic imperatives rather than due to any aesthetic considerations.

In 1970s, the Taiwan-made red-white-blue material was imported to Hong Kong to meet the vast demand of local construction projects then being undertaken. During the 1970s, Hong Kong was undergoing an economic boom and construction projects – including housing, industrial and financial buildings – were proceeding at an astonishing rate. This created a great demand for red-white-blue on construction sites, where it was used as covering material for scaffoldings to prevent falling debris. At the same time, and no doubt from the same source, red-white-blue was co-opted into use for temporary shelters in Hong Kong's squatter areas as well as where immigrants and the poor and lived¹⁸; farmers in Hong Kong's rural area, the New Territories, also began to use as a protective covers for their plots. The presence of red-white-blue material in the Hong Kong landscape is vast, yet its use seems often to be too trivial to be noticed. Although large scale construction projects have declined over recent years, numerous on-going small-scale city renovation projects sustain the presence of the red-white-blue fabric in Hong Kong.

In addition to these large scale industrial purposes, red-white-blue is also made into the cheap and light-weight tote bags popular among Hong Kong's working class. One of the many connotations of the red-white-blue material has evolved exactly from this popular use of the tote bag by Hong Kong citizens who frequently travel between Hong Kong and mainland China. Red-white-blue has thus becomes a synonym of cheap durability on the one hand because of its specific material quality

¹⁸“Eight Things You Don't Know about Hong Kong,” *Tai Kung Pao* (Hong Kong), June 11, 2007, <http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/07/06/11/ZM-749567.htm>

and industrial background while also symbolising the act of border-crossing and so which embodying the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. The image and nature of border-crossing travelers carrying a red-white-blue tote bag has especially developed since 1980s when mainland China adopted an open policy encouraging population flow between the two places. This changed form of red-white-blue signification has led to a more intimate connection with people's life.

The notion of border-crossing travelers with red-white-blue tote bags has also developed since the 1980s and is more often associated with working class people, or at least those who are not in the higher socioeconomic classes. During the 1980s in particular the practice of visiting one's ancestral home on the mainland became very common for Hong Kong people; and continues to the present day. There is considerable evidence in popular literature to confirm the red-white-blue tote bag's association with the crossing of the border between Hong Kong and China. So, for example, a local newspaper columnist Chen Yun comments that the

'red-white-blue' bag is 'patriotic' in a sense that it materializes collective creativity of Hong Kong industrial design, and witty shows response to the limitation of border-crossing at 1980s.¹⁹

Because Hong Kong's population is largely made up of Chinese migrants, when Hong Kong Chinese people speak of their 'ancestral home' or 'roots', it is often to their ancestral origin in China that they refer. It is not surprising then that the image of crossing the border between Hong Kong and China with a red-white-blue tote bag has also been appropriated by and incorporated in advertising. So, for example, there is the subway poster advertisement promoting cross-border transportation via the newly-established Lok Ma Chau Station (落馬洲站) (Fig. 1.2) which is a gateway to Futian (福田), China. In this poster, a border-crosser carries a briefcase made of

¹⁹ Chen Yun, *舊時風光：香港往事回味*, (Hong Kong: Arcadia Press, 2006), 5-9.

red-white-blue when travelling to China via Lok Ma Chau Station, thus signifying the act of border-crossing and referring particularly to China as a destination. This association between red-white-blue, China and border-crossing is discussed in detail in Chapter Three, by examining Doris Wong's *Home-moving Furniture* (2002).

Fig. 1.2: “Earn Double Bonus Points for rides on Airport Express or on East Rail Line to or from Lok Ma Chau Station”. Subway advertisement. MTR Club (2009). Photo: the Author.

Fig. 1.3: The 2007 spring and summer collection, Louis Vuitton. Photo courtesy: VOGUE China.

Since the turn of the century the production of stylish fashion commodities using red-white-blue has increased Hong Kong people's consciousness of local symbols or representations. Examples of such appropriation can be seen, for example, in the 2007 Spring and Summer collection of international luxury brand Louis Vuitton, where the image of red-white-blue was tied to the production of handbags (Fig 1.3). An earlier example is provided by Jack Spade's 2005 *Chinatown* collection (Fig. 1.4), where a red-white-blue tartan pattern tote bag with the brand's name tag sewn becomes the red-white-blue tote bag so familiar to local people. In addition to these international brands, local design also re-work red-white-blue into fashionable products targeted at the youth market. So, Hong Kong household products retailer G.O.D (Goods of Desire住好啲), a local brand famous for incorporating local cultural icons or images into their products produced a variation on the red-white-blue combination in the design of their handbags (Fig. 1.5)²⁰. Such promotion of red-white-blue within consumer culture serves to renew the image of red-white-blue within the public mind and reinforces its representational qualities.

Fig. 1.4: 2005 Chinatown Collection, Jack Spade

²⁰ “品牌看回歸 (Looking At Reunification In Brands)”, *Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), June 21, 2007, http://esze.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_21.html.

Fig. 1.5: Red-white-blue handbag collection, Photo courtesy: Ming Pao

All of these attempts to bring red-white-blue into consumer culture strike a chord with the local people and evoke responses not only to the material itself, but also towards Hong Kong's cultural status, its people's identity and the niche occupied by art and commercialism in society. The result is that this highly utilitarian material becomes invested with symbolic meaning associated with the modern Hong Kong lifestyle. According to Hong Kong artist Wen Yau the identification of the artifact as a cultural icon is established by its commodification, and this phenomenon is particularly obvious in the case of the red-white-blue²¹. It even appears that the use of red-white-blue material or its visual representation has become something of a cliché over past few years, in that a preoccupation with the material often ruled out many possible readings of art works incorporating this culturally coded material. Yet, red-white-blue's many invested symbolic meanings are characterised by the particular social reality of the specific moment and so are ever-changing. Although these many established symbolic meanings are often employed by works of art, the works themselves leave room for a variety of additional interpretations and their use

²¹ Wen Yau, "Artist Talk", *Heritage X Art X Design- Touring Through the Creative Community*, February 28, 2010.

of this material in such a range of ways raises a range of broad issues that are well worth discussing.

The presence of red-white-blue in Hong Kong's daily scene has for long been taken for granted by the busy working people in the city. The highly functional value and extensive everyday use of the fabric has particularly linked it to social connotations. The material's aesthetic quality is often undermined; when it is being used in the manufacture of fashion products²², it attracts both positive and negative criticism²³. On the one hand, the appropriation of red-white-blue by international designers is a phenomenon perceived by the local people as recognition of a cultural heritage unique to Hong Kong, while on the other, opinions from the mainland Chinese regard the fabric being used in high fashion as hilarious because red-white-blue is there given the the name "rural worker's bag" and represents cheapness and bears associations of working class identity. Despite the material's established impression of cheapness, a Hong Kong household products manufacturer G.O.D (Goods of Desire) re-designed the red-white-blue tote bag and successfully promoted it as a fashion commodity. Such promotion of the red-white-blue material in consumer culture has re-shaped the unfashionable image of this material and reinforced its linkage with the younger generation of local people.

²² In 2007, the international luxury brand Louis Vuitton launched its Spring/Summer collection with a classic Hong Kong red-white-blue bag bearing the stamp of a Louis Vuitton logo. Fashion critics claimed the idea of using the iconic red-white-blue bag as a challenge to consumerism. Hong Kong people generally welcomed the image of a Hong Kong icon entering the international stage of high fashion.

²³ Mulan, "Luis Vuitton-Who's shanzhai'ing who?" *Freaky Friday*, December 11, 2009, <http://www.shanzai.com/index.php/market-mayhem/23-freaky-friday/520-freaky-friday-luis-vuitton-whos-shanzhaiing-who>

Development of Hong Kong Art since the 1960s and the emergence of early installations

Key themes raised by the red-white-blue art works discussed in this chapter centre on the artists' interest in less conventional media and formats when presenting the subject matter of people's everyday life and their lived experience. Before attempting a detailed discussion of the art works themselves however, and in order to provide a background to the understanding of the art works and their relation to Hong Kong society, an examination the context of the exhibition of art in Hong Kong is necessary. The aim of introducing this relevant background is to assist the reader in understanding the potential challenges that the art works after 1980s pose to privileged conventions in art-making.

In the 1960s, traditional artistic media, such as Chinese ink, and Western concepts of modernism were often preferred. The emergence of non-conventional styles, production and media in art in Hong Kong can be regarded as reactions to the preferences of the local art institutions. An account of history of Hong Kong art from the 1960s to the 1980s provides a point of reference for the blossoming of installation art as a favoured medium in the local Hong Kong art scene of the late 1990s. More recent works of art specifically address local circumstances and provide local audiences with presentations reflecting distinct influences that stem from neither Chinese nor Western traditions, and that manifest creative content which is familiar in the everyday life of the audience and display the artist's awareness of the local society. Hence, the artistic significance of the works in question can be synthesised with their social significances and discussed in ways that show the manner in which red-white-blue works of art contribute to the plurality of Hong Kong's social identity. This is in addition to the understanding of red-white-blue works of art as responses

to the artistic development of local art in terms of medium, presentation and production.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, China experienced a number of civil upheavals, as well as the Japanese invasion on the Second World War. The unstable social and political conditions initiated migration to nearby unaffected locations, such as Hong Kong. Later, in 1950s and 1960s, under the rule of the Communist Party Congress, individual expression – and cultural expression – was strictly monitored by a fanatically socialist Chinese Central Government. After experiencing such social conditions, a number of Chinese artists chose to flee China and eventually settle in Hong Kong. Among those who made this journey were groups of young and adult artists who were to contribute greatly to the development of Hong Kong art started in the 1960s, and were also to shape the disposition of art institutions and art's public reception from that period of time.

Since most of the older generations of Hong Kong artists were Chinese-born, their close relation and lived experience in China contributed to a stronger bond with Chinese tradition than that of locally-born artists. Clarke suggests that artists of this generation, such as Wucius Wong, identified the irreconcilable narratives of Chinese tradition and Western modernism, and consequently expressed in their art works the tendency to internalise such different cultural traditions so as to avoid overt “sign[s] of Chineseness” and “exaggerated clichés”²⁴.

During the 1960s, and into the 1980s, it was not only prominent artists like Wucius Wong who contributed to the establishment of what was to be called the

²⁴ David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 18

New Ink Painting²⁵. Influential artist groups such as The One Art Group (一畫會) and the In Tao Art Association (元道畫會) also helped to spread these new concepts of art to the public and to shape institutional preferences on style. In the 1970s, In Tao Art Association organised a series of monthly artists' talks to promote a conceptual framework harmonising Chinese tradition and Western modernism to the public²⁶. The result of these talks was positive, reflecting the ready adoption of these ideas by many as a way to develop a stylistically unique Hong Kong art form. The work of New Ink Painting presents less direct association of the current social condition. Clarke in explains this style's great support from the colonial government, by suggesting that:

Wucius Wong's paintings, together with those of Lui Shou-kwan and the other artists of the New Ink Painting movement, are well represented in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, and figured prominently in its permanent displays and travelling exhibits during the late colonial era. This institutional privileging occurred because the concern that artists showed for combining the Chinese and the Western (and the apolitical way in which they did so) made it quite a suitable visual culture for a colonial government to promote.²⁷

As a modernist pursuit in artistic experimentation with the language and technique of its conventional medium, and because of its abstract painting style, New Ink Painting presents little in the way of political challenge. Clarke comments on its presentation of "an image of Hong Kong as a place where 'East meets West' [which] was the

²⁵ According to Clarke, artists of the New Ink Painting generation in the 1960s favoured the use of ink that applied by Chinese brush on Chinese paper. This favoured medium and tools reflects a sense of cultural continuation of Chinese traditional ink painting (*Shuimo*) in terms of tools and techniques. David Clarke, *Art and Place: Essays on Art From a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 65-84.

²⁶ Zhu Qi, *History of Hong Kong Fine Arts* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd, 2005), 209-211.

²⁷ David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27

perfect veil for the realities of colonial life”²⁸ at that time. Prevailing social conditions are concealed by the positive associations of this reductive, and seductive, “East meets West” discourse, and artistic phenomena become subsumed by what is a problematic division of artistic motivations.

The dominating ‘East meets West’ paradigm has been particularly well-adopted by commercial galleries and Government-run museums in Hong Kong. It is a discourse on art that has contributed to an unbalanced emphasis on that local art work which prefers the apparent features of Chinese traditionalist or Western modernist presentation. The significance of the works of art was often neglected by this exclusionary discourse of local art. So, for example, the sculptural works of Ha Bik-Chuen 夏碧泉, which are made of material collected from rag-picking, reflect that artist’s awareness of the potential for mundane materials to be manipulated as an artistic expression. The significance of these works, given their use of unconventional material, is barely mentioned²⁹ in that discourse of Hong Kong art which favours conceptual frameworks borrowed from either Western modernist or Chinese traditionalist art. Because Ha’s choice of material does not immediately relate to a Chinese traditionalist or Western modernist presentation, his work risks being neglected within the fallacious ‘East meets West’ paradigm which has been criticized for its generalising and reductionist approach towards the bulk of Hong Kong’s local artistic expression.

In the work of Frank Vigneron a critical discussion of the problematic nature of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See Petra Hinterthur, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, ed. Nina Corazzo (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd., 1985). Zhu Qi, *History of Hong Kong Fine Arts* (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd., 2005). Lin Xuehong, *視藝文集：香港視覺藝術與創意時代* (Hong Kong: MGuru Limited, 2008). Focus is given to Ha’s prints which had received many awards from local art institution.

the ‘East meets West’ paradigm and its inability to thoroughly explain the complexity of Hong Kong art is given. Vigneron, rather than of perpetuating the oversimplified division of art according to this reductionist conceptual framework, suggests the employment of the concept and

the term hybridization [which] allows its user to avoid falling into the trap of a bipolar discourse—itself necessarily poorer because it closed to the possibility of variety—it had to be a better way to understand the arts practiced in a place like Hong Kong where communication with a multitude of sources had been possible for a much longer time than on the Mainland... Hybridization can therefore be seen as a combination of pre-existing elements but arranged differently, some of these elements are more visible than others not so much because they are new or coming from different epistemological horizons but more simply because they are juxtaposed in ways that have not been seen before.³⁰

The works of New Ink Painting, and other forms of conventional artistic creation demonstrate creativity in their engagement with both traditions, and this oversimplified division of ‘East meets West’ which dominated the discourse of Hong Kong art was reflected too in institutional predisposition about art. These are unfavorable conditions for alternative artistic phenomena to enter the well-promoted institutional art scene and to be properly understood.

The persistence of the ‘East meets West’ dichotomy as reflected in the institutional disposition towards art, results in a distorted narrative of the development of Hong Kong art. Increased resources were invested in the development of local art by the colonial government of 1970s, in the form of, for example, the encouragement of art education in local universities; exhibition spaces

³⁰ Frank Vigneron, *I like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), 135

and facilities were also established and funded³¹. The Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition was instituted in 1975 and was held 16 times until 2007 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. It was only in 2009, when the exhibition was renamed as the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Awards that a dimensional constraint on art works of 3 meters along all sides was removed; this was obviously an unfavorable condition for certain works requiring physical space. Strictly defined categories³² also hindered the entry of particular works. These regulations of the prominent art exhibitions and competitions in Hong Kong had previously excluded creative works that explore especially a large space. Therefore, with the change in the rules for such exhibitions, it became possible for local artists to respond to international artistic influences and explore a wider range of artistic possibilities.

At the end of the 1950s diverse trends had emerged in the international art scene which began to critically reflect upon issues concerned with art itself. So, for example, artistic examinations began into the conventional categorisations of art and the relevance of conventional modes of art to experiences of the modern world. The features of this modernist art, especially in painting, align with the institutional stance and belief in the East/West dichotomy prevalent in Hong Kong.

International art trends of the 1960s developed toward a postmodern aesthetics as modernist ideas of art began to be challenged by the artwork itself. Certain norms that had been supported by modernist ideas were radically reviewed

³¹ The Art Gallery of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was opened in 1971 with responsibility for teaching and research for the Department of Fine Arts of the University. This gallery also provides exhibition facilities and spaces. Land resources were also granted for private organisations for the building of the Hong Kong Art Centre which provides exhibition and performance spaces for modern art. Hong Kong Museum of Art, Urban Council, *Hong Kong Art 1970-1980* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1981), 10

³² There are six categories which include painting (Western media), painting (Chinese media), prints, sculpture, Chinese calligraphy and mixed media.

such that, for example, notions of authenticity and originality – which had been conceived of as the essential features of art – were disrupted by the fact of mechanical and consequently mass production and reproduction of art works. Artworks that communicate through overall bodily sensations require much reassessment of the mode of their exhibition. The emergence of such creative styles, presentations and media, posed important questions regarding the conventionally-perceived art object as an expression of profound emotions and beauty.

In the 1980s Hong Kong art scene, some local Hong Kong artists reacted to the established institutional environment of artistic expression and exhibition by developing styles that deliberately detached their works from the cliché of ‘East meets West’ through the portrayal of the perceived decadence of urban life. The somewhat ugly appearance of the works produced in the 1980s contains within it an inherent rejection of the established institutional association of art with elitist cultural tradition and an expression of the high culture. These works of the 1980s were especially sensitive to the employment of urban space and to the use of the openness of public space as a strategy that reacts against the closed institutional space. This manifested itself in the reconstruction and manipulation of exhibition spaces so as to provoke a rethinking/re-experiencing of the urban which is one of the characteristics of the Hong Kong living space. According to Hal Foster “shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reaction of messages rather than a passive contemplator of aesthetics or consumer of the spectacular”³³. This framework is particularly helpful for the understanding of the installations in 1980s’ Hong Kong as we can see from the emerging works of installation in the 1980s. The

³³Hal Foster, “Subversive Signs” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Malden, (U.S.A.: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 1037-1038..

modes of production and presentation of these works differ greatly from the conventional technique-centric or talent-oriented ways of art making, which can be perceived as an active engagement with a multitude of contemporary experiences in human society. Audiences/viewers are freed from the enforced passive contemplation that the work of New Ink Painting demands. With their changed presentation format and media, the installations that emerged in the 1980s, became a material embodiment of the arbitrary relations between signs, constructed within a language of the everyday.

The flowering of art practice using conventional Chinese or Western media that occurred in the 1960s and which manifested itself in abstract approaches reveals those artists' preoccupations as generally akin to modernist ideas of art. It is only later that artists can be seen to respond to, and to explore artistic language as a means to address and tackle the problems of contemporary social realities. Thus the 1980s shows a growing interest in a more diversified media usage and presentational formats as a reaction to the dominance of local aesthetic convention. Hong Kong art after the 1980s blooms into a diversity of forms. Moreover, a more obvious political engagement can be observed in, for example, artist's critical response to current social and political issues. The announcement of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule undoubtedly provided an impetus towards an exploration of localness that was to become a central focus of the works of this period of time. The presentation of these works dwelt on a nostalgic mood representing a humble past; they display great differences in terms of their exhibition when compared to the red-white-blue works that were to emerge in mid-1990s and the 2000s. These works of art of the 1980s show an alternative way of an expression of localness in terms of subject matter, presentational formats and media. Discussion of this shift in interest to medium and

format (i.e., the employment of industrial material as media and their presentation in the form of installation art) among the new generation of artists of the 1980s is essential to an understanding of the development of installation art in Hong Kong.

The reaction to privileged artistic taste and the quest for individual style among the new generation of artists displays a direct engagement with the contemporary society is an essential difference between themselves and the artists of the 1960s. Interest in trivial subject matter, mundane materials and exhibition within an environment that lessens the distance between art and the common people (especially working class) is favored by these later artists. Their groundwork led to a flourishing of installation art in the 1990s; a trend which continues to develop to the present day. These installations or multi-media works in the 1980s display certain significant differences in mood and presentation, often presenting images of age, urban congestion or sometimes poverty. More recent works demonstrate heavy influences from design and elements of contemporary trends that call to mind the commercial, glossy presentation of commodities. Such commercial design qualities are to be found, too, in the red-white-blue-inspired works. Although the New Ink Painting and other forms of conventional artistic creation have dominated Hong Kong's institutional art scene for decades, they have not flourished as expected. Instead, a diversity of art forms has bloomed since the 1980s. Responses to local social and political realities has manifested in a search for localness by Hong Kong artists through an exploration of diverse alternative modes of artistic expression. That is, the specific social and cultural context of Hong Kong has itself stimulated creativity in directions not limited by preoccupations with providing clear distinction between East and West. David Clark, in his study of Hong Kong art, remarks on this very lack of explicit Eastern or Western tradition in installation art which offers

artists freedom in their artistic expression³⁴.

The modernism-influenced New Ink Painting permeated the Hong Kong art scene, and deservedly so since it is both artistically valuable and adventurous. However, eventually it was to be absorbed into the prevailing institutional environment and proved unable to satisfy a new generation of artists whose focus had turned to the exploration of new formats of artistic presentation. This shifting of artistic focus can be seen as early in 1987, in the exhibition “Out of context (外圍³⁵)”. As the New Ink Painting still dominated the local institutional art scene, a group of Hong Kong artists, whose creations tended to integrate an international art language of that period, could hardly find a venue appropriate for the exhibition of their works. A generation of young artists, for example Antonio Mak Hin-yeung 麥顯揚, Ricky Yeung Sau-cheuk 楊秀卓 and Wong Wo-bik 王禾璧, returned from their overseas studies in the UK or France with unbounded enthusiasm for the exploration of an art language that spoke to and with international contemporary art. Their works included installations and performance art as examples of this new direction, but the most remarkable aspect of the “Out of context” exhibition was its choice of exhibition site. An old mansion on Kennedy Road, Wanchai, was selected, a location with a history unconnected to art. This deliberately chosen site reflects a need for an alternative space beyond the established institutional exhibition mechanisms. Even the local press of the time was aware of the importance of this statement of independence, with *The Standard* declaring of the exhibition that “The

³⁴ David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 70-71.

³⁵ Oscar Ho recalls in an article about the exhibition “Out of context – a historical exhibition 外圍--一個歷性的展覽”, that the use of the Chinese title 外圍 was chosen because the word can be immediately associated with the action of illegal gambling as the Cantonese meaning of the word 外圍 is commonly understood by the locals.

Hong Kong avant-garde artists have finally emerged”³⁶.

Later in the same year, another attempt to bring together people and art resulted in “Mobile art show (1987)”; no exhibition pieces were prepared prior to the start of the event which was driven by the participation of the audience instead. Such collaborative art activities which linked artists and the audience as participants posed unforeseen challenges to those art activities organised by official bodies. The attempt to bring the audience and the art into physical contact and conversation displayed an alternative approach to artistic creation; an approach that demanded uncontrollable external human factors to form part of the creative process. The concept of an artistic conversation meant that art could no longer be considered as merely following a unidirectional flow of emotion or contemplation of the profound philosophy of the Chinese tradition. The urge to overcome the limitations of the pictorial surface became obvious and a shift from the use of conventional media to an unlimited use of everyday motifs and materials became the preferred new direction among a new generation of artists; artists who did not necessarily share the explicit historical sentiments of their predecessors.

The early installations and sculptural works employed these more mundane materials in order to evoke a sense of age, of decay, and of poverty. Such presentation hints at considerations of mortality, either in reaction to the unstable political situation in China or to the uncertainty surrounding the future of Hong Kong at that time. One can observe such efforts in Choi Yan-chi 蔡衍姿’s *Drowned* series 沉溺 (1989-97). In a set of five rectangular fish tanks – filled with water, yet without fish – torn pieces of a replica of Picasso’s *Guernica* are immersed alongside

³⁶ Quote by Oscar Ho, “Out of Context: A historical exhibition” in 形彩風流：香港視覺文化史話, Lai Kin-keung (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., Ltd, 2002), 72

ripped snippets of poetry. An air pump attached to each tank keeps its water aerated despite the fact that it contains no (apparently) living thing. Air bubbles create a gentle current that makes the torn pieces of paper inside the tanks rise and fall. On a nearby wall five identical images of blurred black and white photos of the Statue of Liberty are arranged, upside-down in positions corresponding to each tank.

Low-angled, frontal light shed on each tank is refracted by bubbles and casts an overlapping hazy shadow of the installation onto the wall, superimposing it over the image of the Statue of Liberty and creating a ghostly and uncanny atmosphere.

Turner, in his understanding of this work, perceives the artist expressing her opinions about the life of local people: “they look as if they were free; in fact they are trapped in a space without extensibility, swimming back and forth”³⁷. In an interview, the artist herself observes:

Hong Kong people, both the general public or commercial institutions like Hang Seng Bank, have always loved keeping goldfish. This may be due to the need for ‘feng shui’, however it actually reflects two points. Firstly, the living space of local people is narrow and crowded; especially there is repression in many aspects in this society. Keeping a tank of goldfish in their living environment could be the only relief. Secondly, the goldfish is pretty much a symbol of Hong Kong people. Goldfish is an object of beauty but always inseparable from its tank. It is always trapped in a self-deceiving state of freedom, however not true.³⁸

This presentation of the installation seems to suspend the passage of time by creating a dreamy, mind-numbing visual effect through the hazy play of shadow and light.

The exhibition of these empty fish tanks with air pumping continuously into the water implies the existence of life, however only as fragments of poetry and the

³⁷ Matthew Turner, “蔡仞姿的桀不馴” in *從過渡跨越千禧：七人視藝評論自選文集*, Lai Kin-keung and Leung Po-shan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Art Centre, 2002), 8-9.

³⁸ Choi Yan Chi interviewed by Tsang Hing Ling, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2002.

remnants of a masterpiece of modernist pictorial art.

These early installations were deliberately constructed to appear ugly, impoverished and aged as a calculated reaction to traditional art's reverence for the object of beauty. This sentiment on beauty is taken up again in the recent works. When compared with these early installations, more recent works demonstrate a peaceful mood, often integrating commercial design elements and so adding to the work a glossy appearance. These commercial elements are positively assimilated such that the beauty and playfulness of such trivial motifs is arranged and represented in the artistic creation. There is a shift in the manipulation of materials, and interpretations of the abstract and the physical space of the work itself changes between the early installations and the newer works. So, for example, in the construction of space, the early works of the 1980s tend to create very congested and crowded spaces that remind spectators of a humble reality, whereas more recent works tend towards a possibility of breaking through the distinction between private and public spaces, and blur the boundary between the art and the non-art space.

The more commercial-looking of the recent works can be understood as an artistic attempt to communicate with a wider audience, particularly a working class audience who may not frequent art activities. Although more down-to-earth and playful commercial design elements are employed, particularly in the red-white-blue-inspired works that form the centre of discussion here, references to the issue of contemporary Hong Kong society and identity are well expressed. These latter works display a consciousness of the urban experience of the city. This focus on a shared working class lived experience and local identity is reconstructed from an alternate point of view; a viewpoint not necessarily included in an official discourse.

Beginning in the 1980s, when a diversity of art forms emerged, one may also discern a preference for subject matter quite different from the more traditional aesthetic tastes of the past: exploration of the more mundane and daily particulars of Hong Kong life. The following analysis discusses how the red-white-blue-inspired works of the contemporary Hong Kong art scene effectively take up the notion of localness and express it in way that resonates with a local viewing public.

For respected Hong Kong artist Wucius Wong, the situation facing Hong Kong Chinese artists is problematic in that they “have to face the problem of not having any national identity and all of our efforts could be regarded by historians as something of only peripheral significance”³⁹. This was perhaps true when Hong Kong was under the rule of a colonial government primarily focused on the economic development of the territory. With the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997, Chinese national identity became promoted most emphatically. Still, the cultural difference between Hong Kong and mainland China is hard to reconcile and the social implications of this on the local art scene, and on society in general in Hong Kong is great. Ambivalence of identity is manifested in a transformed expression observable in contemporary works of art. It is towards an analysis of the red-white-blue-inspired art that developed from this social milieu during the 1990s and 2000s that the discussion now turns.

The emergence of red-white-blue in art-making

As has been noted, the red-white-blue material made its appearance in Hong Kong in the mid 1960’s and, because of its functional importance to Hong Kong’s industrial

³⁹ Petra Hinterthür, *Modern Art in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd, 1985), 171.

development was connected closely with people's daily lives. By the mid-1990s, the red-white-blue motif begins to appear in certain local graphic designs and advertisements (Fig. 1.6 and 1.7). This synthesis of everyday familiarity and social associations gradually invests the fabric with connotations of affection and the subtle expression of collective identity on a level rivaling official symbols, such as a flag. Its employment in works of art has consolidated the identification of the red-white-blue with the notion of 'Hong Kongness'.

Fig. 1.6: Pearl Wong. Monument (1994). Manulife Young Artist Series '94.

Fig. 1.7: Cynthia Lau, Lee Chun Chung, Willis Wong, Hong Kong Arts Centre print advertising (1996), one of a set of 3 poster designs.

An analysis of the early red-white-blue works of Stanley Wong, provides a launching point for exploration into how red-white-blue gained these connotations. Wong's manipulations function as a 'flagging' of an alternative manifestation of Hong Kong identity. It is argued here that Wong's works suggest immediate reference to the 'collective memory' of the Hong Kong working class by the very appearance of red-white-blue, which serves as a thematic agent which Wong brings into awareness through his artistic production. In the process of reading Wong's red-white-blue art works, the audience is motivated to identify and to engage with the idea of red-white-blue as representative of Hong Kong identity. This is a suggested and promoted by Wong in the 2004 exhibition of his work organised by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum; the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's comments on the exhibition and on its use of red-white-blue at the time are explicit in this regard:

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum fosters the cultural identity of the local community and promotes Hong Kong's heritage to overseas visitors. It features a wide variety of programmes on local history, arts and culture.

Design ∞ was the theme of the museum's programmes in 2004-05. A series of exhibitions and educational activities was organised in 2004, including ... *building hong kong — redwhiteblue*, provided a visual platform showing Hong Kong's spirit by using the red-white-blue fabric.⁴⁰

The role of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in maintaining a unique cultural identity of Hong Kong creates a general idea of local identity which through its institutional status also becomes the commonly adopted one.

Since 2001, red-white-blue has been the signature motif of the works of a local designer and artist Stanley Wong (a.k.a. Another mountainman). Wong's

⁴⁰ Leisure and Cultural Services Department, *Annual Report 2004-Museum*, 2005.

experimentation with red-white-blue began with photographic images and graphics featuring the material itself as their most recognisable image. This can be seen particularly in the poster designs Wong had entered in the Hong Kong International Poster Triennial in 2001⁴¹. These works had been exhibited in conventional and major exhibition sites in Hong Kong (Figs. 1.8 & 1.9) since their creation. Wong also managed to present his work within the public space: in construction sites (Fig. 1.10) and at a subway station⁴². The first outdoor installation of the series “Building Hong Kong” is *Building Hong Kong 04/Redwhiteblue* (2002) which was exhibited in the construction site on 102 Austin Road, Tsim Sha Tsui⁴³, a conventional business and shopping area in Hong Kong. Red-white-blue sheet was mounted on the wall next to the main entrance of the construction site. These sheets were cut into rectangular shapes of differing dimensions and arranged into either vertical or horizontal patterns. The resultant image resembled an array of crowded skyscrapers arranged in a manner very similar to that which one can observe in the skyline of Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong. A Chinese inscription “正面向上 (right side faces up)”⁴⁴ was silkscreened onto the surface of the two-dimensional work. The use of Chinese inscription appears frequently in Wong’s early red-white-blue-themed works.

Building Hong Kong 03/Redwhiteblue (2002)⁴⁵ (Fig. 1.8) is a set of five differently

⁴¹ Poster Power – Hong Kong International Poster Triennial 2001, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 31 October, 2001 to 29 April, 2002.
http://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/english/exhibition_sel_past.htm.

⁴² Redwhiteblue Poster Exhibition, March 2003 *Redwhiteblue/faith, hope, love, Poster Exhibition*, 20 Feb- 24 Mar, 2006.

⁴³ Another mountainman, *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere: To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCCM Creations, 2005), 50

⁴⁴ This phrase can be read separately as two individual words: 正面 literally translated as being positive and; 向上 means progressive.

⁴⁵ Approximate size: 118.9 x 88.7 cm. This work was exhibited in the Hong Kong Museum of Art for the *Hong Kong Art Biennale* in 2003; in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum for the *Hong Kong International Poster Triennial* in 2004; in *Legacy and Creation - Art vs Art* Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, 2010. The work is now in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

patterned red-white-blue sheets with silkscreened Chinese inscriptions. These inscriptions, some of which read: “先建國,後建家 (first build a nation, then it will become a home)”, “嚴禁黑箱作業 (no shady black market operation)”, “三上會三落, 有上必有落, 忌唔上唔落 (what comes down must go up, do not give up half way)”⁴⁶, are unmistakably to be understood by the local Hong Kong audience as an encouraging expression in response to the particular social realities facing Hong Kong in the aftermath of an economic downturn.

Fig. 1.8: Stanley Wong, *Redwhiteblue: Building Hong Kong 3* (set of 5), silkscreen on red-white-blue fabric. Five pieces of 118.9 X 88.7 cm. 25 editions in total.

Fig. 1.9: Stanley Wong, *Redwhiteblue: Building Hong Kong 3* (set of 5)
Detail.

⁴⁶ Another mountainman, *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere :To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCMC Creations, 2005).

Fig. 1.10: Stanley Wong, *Building Hong Kong 04/Redwhiteblue*. (2002).
Installed in the construction site on 102 Austin Road, Tsim Sha Tsui.

These examples of Wong's early works using red-white-blue show his thematic intentions towards red-white-blue as an expression of "Hong Kong spirit". The works metaphorically weave into the red-white-blue fabric certain aspects of Hong Kong identity and address, in particular, social solidarity. Wong has used red-white-blue as part of a visual language that insinuates a sense of shared belonging into the notion of Hong Kong identity; red-white-blue becomes a symbol of engagement with a wider, particularly local audience. Wong's interpretation of this

material in terms of its manifesting local identity, is communicated through, not only the visual appearance, but also the linguistic expressions presented by the Chinese inscriptions. Indeed in the early poster designs and art works of Wong, the verbal expression contributes to a direct association of the red-white-blue with the positive qualities of the territory and the people. Wong has often stressed in media interviews and other publications, that the physical characteristics of the red-white-blue fabric remind him of the resilient character of Hong Kong's working class of the 1960s to 1970s⁴⁷.

The influence of Wong on other Hong Kong artists who employ red-white-blue in their works is obvious, as is the building of meaning achieved by these other works upon those connotations of the fabric established by Wong. Yet these early works do not show the high degree of manipulation of the material or of the three-dimensional space in which they are situated that it is a concern of the present study. And so, while the role that these works have played in bringing red-white-blue to the attention of audiences should not be understated, further analysis will not be undertaken here.

Instead, the focus shifts in the next chapter to the analysis of select red-white-blue art works by other local artists, including, Kith Tsang, Doris Wong Wai-Ying, Siu King Chung Tim and Li. Yet, there is cause to begin with a revisiting of Wong's works. It is in this way that the central thesis of the present study – that these works represent the contemporary everyday experience, social reality of present-day Hong Kong in order to articulate various aspects and to express the pluralities, of Hong Kong identity – is substantiated.

⁴⁷ Stanley Wong, Preface to *Hong Kong Design Series 1: Building Hong Kong Redwhiteblue* (Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2004).

CHAPTER TWO: The unitary notion of Hong Kong identity in Stanley Wong's *Building Hong Kong* series (2001-) and its contestation in Kith Tsang's *One Voice* (2004)

This chapter examines three works from Stanley Wong's ongoing series, *Building Hong Kong* (2001-), and their contribution to the growing identification of red-white-blue with a unitary notion of Hong Kong identity. Discussion focuses on such works as *Show Flat* (2003), *From London to Hong Kong to London* (2005) and *Tea and Chat* (2005). It is argued that the use of red-white-blue fabric in the works of Stanley Wong suggest a fixed and unitary notion of Hong Kong working class identity through the works' construction of idealised and nostalgic spaces in Hong Kong. Wong's works address the Hong Kong people as a collective that shares traits with the image of working class people of the 1960s and 1970s. This notion of Hong Kong identity is compared with an alternative position to be found in Kith Tsang's 曾德平's *One Voice* 同聲 (2004). In these works the stable notion of Hong Kong identity is challenged in a manner which underlines the existence of social differences.

***Building Hong Kong 09: Show Flat* (2003)**

Building Hong Kong 09: Show Flat was first shown in the exhibition "Two or three things about Hong Kong"⁴⁸, an ongoing exhibition series presented by the City University of Hong Kong since 2003. The exhibition itself aims at presenting a range

⁴⁸ "Two or three things about Hong Kong" Exhibition pamphlet, Hong Kong Heritage Museum Archive, 2003

of local issues in Hong Kong from artistic and cultural perspectives through the presentation of different modes of artistic creation, such as poetry, installations and visual images. Wong's work is overwhelming in its visual presentation and the degree of linkage of this work to people's experience is obvious. Of the work itself, the artist notes in the exhibition's pamphlet that "[v]isiting model [display] home[s] is believed to be a big past time in the life of Hong Kong people. A big event in life. Let's build a better tomorrow."⁴⁹

Fig.2. 1: Stanley Wong, *Building Hong Kong 09: Show Flat* (2003).

Overall view.

Building Hong Kong 09: Show Flat (2003) is an installation that reconstructs a space resembling the interior of a living room of a typical small Hong Kong apartment familiar to many local people (Fig. 2.1). A half-opened space is constructed as a large part of the work remains open to views. Unlike an actual apartment which provides a private and intimate feeling, the half-open setting of the work functions exactly as the title suggests: to 'show' a flat that invites and demands people's attention (Fig. 2.2). The openness of the work invites the audience to enter the artificially arranged space which is all surrounded, enclosed, and defined by

⁴⁹ Ibid.

red-white-blue fabric: the floor, partition walls, furniture-like screens, table, couch, folding beds and lampshades are all lined or covered or created with red-white-blue fabric. The familiar red-white-blue pattern and its texture spark in the audience a strong sense of visual familiarity. It is obviously the red-white-blue itself which is designed to be exhibited and emphasised in this work. The ubiquitous presence of red-white-blue is apparent to the audience, the extensive covering of the whole installation reminding the audience of the familiar construction site scene where red-white-blue is also used extensively as a protection layer for buildings or from dirt. The strong visual impact brought about by such extensive coverage of the bright and fresh red-white-blue plastic. is familiar to the audience in its shapes and texture, yet this familiarity is detached from the fabric's usual functional qualities and appearance. So, for example, the red-white-blue on the wall appears to function as wallpaper; it also becomes the table cloth, chair covers and screens. These objects are often associated with home decoration for which they are made from relatively precious materials and fabrics such as leather or printed natural fibres.

Red-white-blue plastic is by no means renowned for its use for decorative purposes, nor does it, in reality, exist in domestic spaces in order to provide a pleasing appearance. An uncanniness to the work is produced by its juxtaposition of people's understanding of red-white-blue as an industrial material with their idea of what constitutes domestic objects.

Fig.2.2: Stanley Wong, *Building Hong Kong 09: Show Flat* (2003) Detail.

Above left: “Red-white-blue” sofa

Above right: folding furniture

Bottom: A lamp and a guestbook

Tea and Chat (2005)

Tea and Chat is another example of Wong’s work displaying a nostalgic image of Hong Kong (Fig. 2.3). The work itself occupies a space 19.2m wide, 6m long, and 3.5m high. The work constructs a spacious interior consisting of a corridor, a high ceiling and large windows. At each end of the long corridor is placed a computer installed with camera and connected to the Internet. Seven revolving lanterns made of red-white-blue hang from the high ceiling. Inside this space, placed in an orderly fashion are square, white tables upon which are arranged white Chinese teapots and teacups. Small, cut scraps from newspapers from around the world are inside these teacups and folding stools lined with red-white-blue fabric are provided for the audience to sit and gather around the tables. The most visually striking aspect of the

work is the red-white-blue covered wall and floor. The use of the classic square tables, folding stool, teapots and revolving lanterns, gives an overall impression that makes *Tea and Chat* reminiscent of the old style Chinese tea house.

Fig.2.3: Stanley Wong, *Tea and Chat* (2005). Installation exhibited in Hong Kong Pavilion in Venice Biennale. Photo courtesy: Haupt & Binder

This kind of tea house is of particular importance for Hong Kong people in whose memory it evokes memories of good times. The Chinese teahouse was once a place of social gathering and, very often, of family gathering; a centre of communication. That the old-style Chinese teahouse is disappearing in present-day Hong Kong means that the work presents to the audience a nostalgic image of its past. Yet this nostalgia is linked with modern social realities in the form of the Internet and the computer. Thus the work presents the new technological and communication modes of everyday life in the guise of the old and traditional. This is similar to Wong's previously-mentioned work which incorporates modern design features within a nostalgic space. Decorative patterns on walls and windows

resemble Chinese wall-hangings, however, they are made with red-white-blue fabric and patterned into shapes that are visually modern and appealing to viewers (Figs. 2.4, 2.5 & 2.6).

Fig.2.4: Stanley Wong, *Tea and Chat* (2005).

Fig.2.5: Stanley Wong, *Tea and Chat* (2005). Audiences gathering around each table.

Fig.2.6: Stanley Wong, *Tea and Chat* (2005). Talk organised inside the constructed space of the work.

Exhibited in the Hong Kong Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale, Wong's artwork was there regarded, to a certain degree, as being representative of Hong Kong. In a press release the Hong Kong Art Development Council, charged itself with the aim of participating in the prominent international exhibition so as to allow the international art world an understanding of Hong Kong, its art, and in order to build a closer relationship with the international art scene⁵⁰. The combination of the formal qualities of Wong's works and the expressed aim of the exhibition, implies red-white-blue's efficacy as an agent for expressing or representing certain loosely associated features of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong people.

From London to Hong Kong to London (2005)

From London to Hong Kong to London (Fig. 2.7) is a work that was exhibited in Wong's first solo exhibition, held in London by the gallery EXHIBIT, immediately following the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. It is a work which continues Wong's use of red-white-blue fabric by covering every object and surface: the wall, floor, chair and sofa are all covered by red-white-blue; the revolving lantern hanging in the

⁵⁰ Hong Kong Art Development Council, “紅白藍西遊記 – 綻放香港獨特的個性 (Red-white-blue in the West—Blooming Hong Kong's individuality)” Press release, 16 June, 2005, <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/tc/content/web.do?action=pressdetail&id=ea717801e4b04481ab810ad052d1c93b>

centre is made of red-white-blue. This revolving lantern is a common visual element in a number Wong's red-white-blue works. What makes this work different from the earlier works, however, is its use of explicit colonial associations. So, for example, silhouettes of a gentleman and of a lady are mounted inside picture frames; Western-style furniture is used (Fig. 3.8). The spatial configuration resembles the living space of a colonial or Western-style living room. Wong says of this work, and of red-white-blue: "...after all, the British government gave Hong Kong a lot during the past 150 years; so now, this colonial 'red-white-blue' colour of Hong Kong is also my fond memory of England, the home of creativity in my heart."⁵¹

Fig.2.7: Stanley Wong, *From London to Hong Kong to London* (2005).

Photographed from different angles.

⁵¹ Stanley Wong's personal website <http://www.anothermountainman.com/>

Fig.2.8: Stanley Wong, *From London to Hong Kong to London* (2005)
Detail. Frame and colonial motif on wall.

One aspect of the significance of works these works comes from their bringing to public attention the artistic potential of trivial material. When local Hong Kong audience, specifically, observes these works, their visual presentation displays obvious local motifs that refer uniquely to the collective experience of Hong Kong. This then reinforces in the local audience those associations between red-white-blue and their shared, local collective experience, essential to conveying a unified sense of identity. Wong tends to hint at this idea of local identity through symbols and signifiers that have established meanings. The exhibition of the *red-white-blue* series of works has seen the artist's personal attention turn from explicit association of localness with the red-white-blue material to an identification of red-white-blue as symbol on a larger scale. Wong has repeated the same motifs when displaying red-white-blue material: the totally covered interior; mundane objects that people use daily. Red-white-blue is used to exaggerate flag-like objects which draw forth from Hong Kong viewers sentiments concerning the former colonial government.

Re-presenting these familiar objects and spaces with the local, and introducing an overtone of colonial reference, seems a particularly effective way of pinpointing the ambivalent emotions sparked in a local audience. Displaying a motif that hints at colonial associations serves to address a part of colonial history that the official narrative often deliberately understates in the dominant discourse. The nationalism that the post-1997 government so desperately implants in Hong Kong society often omits the island's colonial history. What is untold or understated persists in people's minds in unexpressed forms.

Show Flat, Tea and Chat and *From London to Hong Kong to London* are three spatial creations that attempt to convey particular ideas about Hong Kong identity by creating an introspective experience within the space constructed by the work. The visual stimulation generated by the interior space being constructed from a red-white-blue covered wall and floor initially arrests the audience's focus; the red-white-blue walls of the installation create a place that calls to mind the familiar environment of the construction sites often seen in Hong Kong; the obvious and orderly arrangement of the brand new red-white-blue material and the visually appealing objects—traditional furniture, decorative window frames and patterned wallpaper—in the installations juxtaposes domesticity with industrial function as well as with modern design. In *Show flat* and *From London to Hong Kong to London*, the semi-open space defined by the installations within the gallery is located on the border between an open and semi-private space as these two work resemble a familiar image of one's living room, however appeared in the gallery space where visitors come and go frequently. These associations of the red-white-blue thus open up a space for a re-examination of the material.

The artist's relating of such a familiar material with a Hong Kong person's

memory and experiences of the city enables the audience to engage with the work with a revised sensation about this omnipresent yet seemingly unimportant material. Although the use of red-white-blue has been part of the lived experience of many Hong Kong people, it has always seemed too trivial to be noticed. In these works of art, however, the connections between Hong Kong life and the fabric is singled out and emphasised by means of the works' visual configurations. These installations by Wong cocoon the audience within the geometric harmony of red-white-blue and stir up renewed sensations of the material. The audience is encapsulated within a place that seems slightly detached from the actual external world. Nonetheless, each of these spatial creations allows the audience to submit themselves, to a certain degree, to a nostalgic mood. By rendering different objects and images in an orderly manner, these two works appeal to audience through their sense of balance and timelessness, and create a space for remembrance. The works share similar a visual configuration that often elicits visual pleasure by resembling different signs that direct audience to engage reminiscently with lived experience; and with a lived experience of colonial Hong Kong, in particular.

Although Wong's interpretation of the red-white-blue fabric brings forth a forgotten part of localness, it does not develop further on the disconformities on social acceptance. Wong's early red-white-blue-inspired works are still on exhibition around the world, and so the representational value of red-white-blue invested in these works by the artist continues to be communicated to a wide range of audiences. Identification of the red-white-blue in Wong's work is also very much related to a 'personification' of the material which takes place in other works of art, some of which are to be discussed in later chapters, yet which is not immediately related to those 'personalities' that Wong sees in the material. Wong's red-white-blue series

presents an optimistic view of social unity in Hong Kong society, but his works do not address any of the discrepancies in this notion of identity that are particularly important to its understanding within the Hong Kong context. (These are issues which are brought to light and addressed in, for example, the works of Kith Tsang who makes visual representations of such conflict over identity taking place within the otherwise rosy imaginings of the city.)

Wong's works often invoke a nostalgic image of Hong Kong space or an idealised image of 'home' that many Hong Kong working class people imagine. The largely unitary and fixed sense of identity that is to be found in these works complies to, and is elucidated by what cultural theorist Stuart Hall identifies as two principles for considering cultural identities:

There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.⁵²

In other words, in Wong's works, identity is being considered as a 'oneness'; a continuity of shared experience umbrella-ed by the many differences of reality. It is a view of identity as a complete and coherent object; a traditional way of understanding identity gleaned from the idea of history as continuous. While Hall acknowledges the importance of this sense of identity, he also points out that it is a way of recovering an identity from the past which requires certain artificial,

⁵² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in ed. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, **Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin**, (London : Routledge, 2006), 435.

imagined qualities be added for an identity to be recognised as such. And while this recovery of history involves a consensus on certain shared qualities – the similarities – Hall explains that it is the “significant differences” which constitute “what we really are”; or rather “what we have become”⁵³. In the unfolding of these differences Hall understands identity as being concerned with how people relate themselves to, and speak of, the past. He says:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It’s not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, [...] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.⁵⁴

So, according to Hall, the *ways* in which identity is constituted is also important to the understanding of the complexity of cultural identity. This model of understanding identity is particularly useful in the case of Hong Kong, the construction of whose identity derives from interaction between three forces: Chinese nationalism, Western colonialism and a process of localisation. All three forces contribute to the constitution of Hong Kong identity⁵⁵.

Hall’s understanding of identity is useful in relating the works discussed in this study to the complex and dynamic interactions which produce Hong Kong identity. The suggestion of a collectively shared experience of Hong Kong in Wong’s works

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ip Iam-chong, “本地人從哪裡來？,” in *誰的城市?: 戰後香港的公民文化與政治論述*, 羅永生, (香港：牛津大學出版社, 1997), 13-18.

speaks to what Hall sees as one of the most important factors in the reading of cultural identity in all its complexity: the unitary and fixed notion is taken into account.

In reading the other works of art discussed in this study, alternative perspectives of the “history of Hong Kong” and the “shared experience of Hong Kong people” emerge from the artistic representations or interventions. These subsequent works of art display conformity with Hall’s second factor for the complex reading of identity at work: “the unstable point of identification”. These other works of art can be seen to highlight what is not included in the prevalent narratives of Hong Kong identity, rather than simply positioning themselves as directly opposing the idealised notion of unitary identity; these art works re-present diversity and plurality, and audiences are opened to the recognition of such diversity in social reality as well as in their understanding of self in relation to Hong Kong. All of which enriches their notions of Hong Kong identity.

Kith Tsang’s *One Voice* (2004)

Kith Tsang’s *One Voice* is a series of black and white portraits of a group of Chinese people whose identity is being questioned on a legal basis. This work, which was exhibited in the 2004 *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue* exhibition together with Wong’s works, shows a big contrast in terms of its mood. The immediate appearance of Tsang’s work is directly related to red-white-blue since the work uses this very material in an obvious way. Using the same visually recognisable red-white-blue⁵⁶, however, this artwork questions the vaguely understood “Hong Kong spirit” suggested by the exhibition and opens up another interpretation of “Hong Kong

⁵⁶ Another mountainman, *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere :To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCM Creations, 2005),136

spirit” through the specific political issue that was about “identity”. This can be understood from the formal qualities of the work.

One Voice consists of ten boards of approximately 90 by 180 centimeters each, which stand adjacent to each other, and with 20 centimeters between them (Fig. 2.9 Left). The boards are arranged to form a circular shape approximately five meters in diameter and with an opening on each of two opposite sides which seemingly indicate entry points into what is virtually an enclosure. The outward-facing sides of the boards are lined with red-white-blue fabric with its red, white and blue bands evenly divided horizontally. Black marker pens are attached to the side of each board for the audience to write or draw on the red-white-blue-lined surface (Fig. 2.9 Right). Each inward-facing surface of the boards features a black and white portrait of a person or persons involved in the debate over the right of abode for Hong Kong, while details of their individual struggles with authority are written in the background of the portrait (Fig. 2.10).

Fig.2.9:Kith Tsang, *One Voice* (2004).

Left: View from above.

Right: View from outside. Photo courtesy: Heiyan Ferda

Fig.2. 10 Kith Tsang, *One Voice* (2004) Inside view of the black and white portraits.

Before turning to an analysis of the formal qualities of the work, however, it is necessary to provide a sketch of political incident which inspired the artist to create this installation. In 1999, the debate over the right of abode in Hong Kong was raging fiercely. The Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal ruled that the right of abode in Hong Kong extended to the children of parents who had the right of abode; irrespective of whether their parents were permanent residents of the city at the time of their birth. Some political commentators in Hong Kong were worried that this ruling could lead to a surge of immigrants (an estimated 300,000 persons were made eligible for abode by the ruling), thus placing pressure on the local education, health care and social welfare systems, and eventually disrupting the city's economy. Opposing opinions among Hong Kong society meant that a sizable section of the Hong Kong population rejected these immigrants and did not regard them as 'Hong Kongers (香港人)'.

The exhibition *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue* (2004) was promoted by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum as a representation of Hong Kong identity. The idea promoted by the exhibition framework was a fostering of social cohesion in Hong Kong society. Yet the works shown in the exhibition do not necessarily accord with the idea that reinforcing social cohesion is the only way to explore the notion of

Hong Kong identity. Certain works present ideas which elicit a sense of doubt over Hong Kong's seemingly harmonious social conditions. Kith's *One Voice*, in particular, speaks to an alternative series of facts concerning social harmony and directly question collective identity. The fixed and unitary notion of Hong Kong identity suggested by the connotations of red-white-blue (in the works of Wong) is questioned by Tsang's work through its juxtaposition of these connotations with the social significances of the controversy over the right of abode. This juxtaposition is achieved visually and explicitly through the use of the familiar appearance of red-white-blue and the image of Hong Kong people who are excluded from such collective and shared aspects of Hong Kong identity.

Turning to Kith's work itself, the black and white photography and frontal posture of the subject convey a close connection to documentary photography that has realistic undertones. The controversy over the right of abode raised the problem of social inclusion and exclusion with regard to an individual's legal identity, and so this in this series of portraits, the audience perceives what appears to be a social document of this social and political controversy. The person being referred to in the photographic portrait is both present and absent at the same time, eliciting a sense of ambiguity from the audience. On the one hand the slightly larger-than-life-size scale gives a confrontational presence to the subject which is visually striking; to behold this large scale portrait at a short distance brings the human subject intimately into the audience's focal awareness. Yet, on the other hand, these photographed subjects are represented within the context of a unified idea of Hong Kong identity that the text upon each portrait reveals is responsible for their being excluded from and marginalised in the Hong Kong society. By acknowledging the social status of these human subjects, their misrepresentation or under-representation in the mainstream

media can be apprehended by the audience. The re-presentation of this marginalised group of people suggests a void within the generally shared idea of social solidarity. And this void is visualised in this installation through the human subject in the form of portraiture. The way these human subjects are presented also suggests ambiguity. The clothing, facial expressions and the backgrounds of the portraits are consistent throughout the series of photos, implying a certain collective identity shared among these people; however, they are a group excluded from or marginalised within Hong Kong society. These people are represented in the specific political context where debate over identity is intensified. The voices of the photographed persons, written on white background of these portraits, express their wishes to stay in Hong Kong for reasons of family unity (Fig. 2.11). This commonly shared value of family togetherness connects any audience with the work whether their origin be in Hong Kong or China (or, indeed, any other nation of culture). These different stories told by the photographed subjects contribute, then, to the ambivalent emotions driving the collective idea of Hong Kong unitary identity that people might have concerning Hong Kong and China, as well as the Hong Kong Chinese and mainland Chinese peoples.

Fig.2. 11: Kith Tsang, *One Voice* (2004). Portraits of people involved in fighting for the right of abode in Hong Kong.

Another formal element contributing to the work's portrayal of uneasy feelings is imparted by the grey tone of these black and white portraits. When Kith's portrait series here is compared with the photojournalist Vincent Yu's series "Shek Kip Mei 1954-2006"⁵⁷ – which documents, also in black and white portraits, the residents of Shek Kip Mei, an old district with disappearing life style, architecture and other local cultural heritage – a difference can be discerned that makes Tsang's portraits appear confrontational. Tsang's photographed subjects are positioned in front of plain white canvas up on which the written Chinese record of each individual's context is noted; however, this verbal form suggests a possible effacement of the material engagement that a place in reality can convey. It is as if these human subjects and the memories that these representations evoke is held in a moment of suspension; neither past nor future is suggested. The audience may find that the connections or attachments it develops to these people are ambiguous because the lived experiences of the particularity of the work's subjects are given no material or visual reference with which the audience can relate. Although the appearance of the portrayed subjects suggests that they share certain similarities with the local Hong Kong working class, in fact these people do not legally belong to the place, nor are they accepted into Hong Kong society in general. The short distance between the photographed subject and the background forms a shallow depth of field which also serves to convey an oppressive and uncomfortable feeling in the viewer; a feeling which mirrors the oppression and discomfort of the subjects themselves.

The circular arrangement of the boards creates an enclosure of sorts, with the larger-than-life-size portrait on each board standing to remind the viewer of the presence of the portrayed human subject. With the confrontational gaze from the

⁵⁷ Vincent Yu, *Our home, Shek Kip Mei 1954-2006* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2007).

portrayed subject projected out of the picture plane, the viewer who enters this installation immediately feels herself bathed in their gazes. This configuration makes the subjects of the portrait always visible while the statements on the white background speak explicitly of social injustice as strong evidence of the problematic conception of social solidarity. It also questions the idea of the “collective memory” suggested in the exhibition as a whole or in the red-white-blue fabric, in general.

Red-white-blue lines the surface of the outward facing boards in an arrangement which creates echoes with other works exhibited next to Tsang’s. From outside the installation space the audience may retain the conventional idea that the work of Tsang is related to the exhibition theme in a positive manner, co-opted with the unitary notion of Hong Kong identity suggested by Wong. It is only when audience enters into the space created by the work that it is forced to confront these solemn images. Even without an understanding of the social and political background of the right of abode issue, the viewer can still feel the impact and strong presence of the portrayed articulating ambivalent feelings (Fig. 2.12). In addition, each board has a black marker pen attached to it with which audiences were free to leave comment on the external red-white-blue-lined surface (Fig. 2.13). As time passes, writings or drawings on the “red-white-blue” material become messy, chaotic, adding to the work an appearance that calls to mind the graffiti-filled urban street scene. The geometric harmony of the horizontal red, white and blue bands and the freshness of the work are disrupted by these random calligraphic marks from the audience which, as they accumulate are transformed into a visualisation of the passage of time. The audience perceives on the outer sides of the circular setup the red-white-blue-lined surface of the boards with written commentaries given by other audience members. So, voices from people whose legal identity is in doubt are

presented together with the voices from an audience who many have a different or the same origin revealing not only the problematic notion of a unified identity, but also suggesting a rethinking of ‘Hong Kong identity’ for people with mainland Chinese or Hong Kong origin. Associations with lived experience in Hong Kong and with red-white-blue are undermined in this work. Instead, the institutionally privileged meaning of red-white-blue is assimilated as part of the work’s visual language in such a way that it constructs reflexive ideas on the symbolism of the material itself.

Fig.2. 12: Kith Tsang, *One Voice* (2004). A single panel mounted with portrait.

Fig.2. 13: Audience leaving comments on the red-white-blue mounted surface of the panel.

Widely-circulated connotations of red-white-blue material and the idea of strengthening social cohesion that is held, and enunciated, by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum are contested in this work. Tsang's work does not immediately direct the audience to the desired, idealised image of Hong Kong people as resilient and hardworking. Instead, these portraits of people who are fighting for the right of abode in Hong Kong, remind the audience about the divergence of identity between the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese in the local society. Thus, this work is itself a challenge to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum's institutional interpretation of local identity as a unified concept.

Comparing the works of Stanley Wong and Kith Tsang reveals a decisive difference. Where Wong's use of familiar interior scenes and furniture speaks nostalgically to many, the inclusion of portraiture in Tsang's work underscores people's individuality. Although such individuality is in constant negotiation with stereotypical evocations in the form of representation, when the work is considered in its totality it still attains certain a representational quality of the human subject beyond the picture's plane. In contrast, Wong's use of such signs as familiar home

furniture, lanterns and the silhouette of Queen Elizabeth II, is a highly questionable pointing of the finger at the notion of Hong Kong's 'collectivity'.

In the following chapter an examination of such imaginings of the local, and of the problematic notion of "collective memory/experience" as they are found in other works of art, using the very same red-white-blue material, is undertaken. Emphasis is shifted from the overtly expressed symbolism promoted by Stanley Wong, to the subtleties of embodying living experience found in the works of Doris Wong, Hung Lam, Siu King Chung and Tim Li.

CHAPTER THREE: An under-represented aspect of Hong Kong identity in Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* (2002) and Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004)

This chapter is concerned with two works: Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* (2002) and Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004). These two works are here be considered in relation to the daily, bodily experience of contemporary Hong Kong urban space as a manifestation of Hong Kong identity. While the works discussed in the previous chapter respond to the question of local identity in an explicit manner, by directly addressing social conflict concerning Hong Kong identity, other red-white-blue works articulate the issue of identity by exploring the contemporary lives and lived experience of local people. Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* and Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* reflect under-represented aspects of Hong Kong identity in a relatively subtle manner. Doris Wong's work *Home-moving Furniture* expresses the artist's awareness of an experience of growing significance among Hong Kong people-- border-crossing. The experience of border-crossing between Hong Kong and China reflects a recent change in social reality and relationships. The work resembles the space of a dwelling or home and is suggestive of familial relations; however, it contests the idea of a stable home by suggesting – through its employment of red-white-blue – the nomadic experience of border-crossers in the present-day Hong Kong. Discussion of Doris Wong's work will focus on the instability of home that is related to experience of border-crossing. Discussion of Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of*

redwhiteblue relates the work to one of the generally shared contemporary experiences of Hong Kong urban space – the market; it is work which pays particular attention to the ubiquity of the commodity and the experience of consumption.

Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* (2002)

Fig.3.1: Doris Wong, *Home-moving furniture* (2002). A total of eight red-white-blue objects.

Home-moving furniture is an installation that consists of eight red-white-blue forms resembling furniture and other household objects (Fig. 3.1). These eight red-white-blue forms include a single bed, two pillows, a small table, a chair, a cabinet, a milk carton and a mug. All are life-size and have been constructed by sewing together red-white-blue plastic fabric (Fig. 3.2). Scrap paper and rubbish bin liners are used to loosely fill in these forms and to support their three-dimensional shape. When exhibited, these eight forms are arranged into a simulation of a single room. Discussion of the work in terms of its representation of a private space that might be suggestive of 'home' is undertaken, as is an examination of the ambiguous notion of 'home' in relation the experiences of border-crossers in present-day Hong Kong society. It is argued that this work suggests a further dimension of Hong Kong

identity through its addressing of the issue of border-crossers and the reality of their lived experience.

Fig.3.2: Doris Wong, *Home-moving furniture* (2002). Details of the work.

Left: Three forms resembling a cabinet, a milk carton and a mug.

Right: Close up of milk carton and mug forms.

Fig.3.3: Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* from different perspectives. The work was installed with other red-white-blue works in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in the exhibition *Building Hong Kong: redwhiteblue* in 2004.

Since *Home-moving furniture* is arranged differently for particular exhibitions, it is necessary to specify the arrangement on which this analysis focuses. In the 2004 exhibition *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue*⁵⁸, all eight pieces of red-white-blue furniture and household forms were arranged into a corner of the exhibition venue, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum (Fig. 3.3), creating a space which resembled a single bedroom. When the work was shown in the 2009 exhibition *Charming Experience*⁵⁹ in the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the eight forms were arranged into two separate groups for display: the table and chair were shown inside the exhibition hall on a white, pedestal-like stage (Fig. 3.4 Top), while the other objects, including a single bed, two pillows, a cabinet, a milk carton and a mug, were exhibited outside the exhibition hall in the passageway (Fig 3.4 Bottom). With the forms separated in this way, the work no longer resembled the interior of a single bedroom. The different configurations of the work in these different exhibitions result in the unfolding of different interpretations of the work. In the following, the discussion speaks of the work as it was exhibited latterly in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. The representation of private space in this work is here discussed in terms of the appearance and arrangement of the red-white-blue forms which suggest two important themes – home and border-crossing – and are representative of alternative aspects of Hong Kong identity.

⁵⁸ Design ∞ Exhibition Series 4 *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue*, November 17, 2004 to April 18, 2005, Hong Kong Heritage Museum.

⁵⁹ Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue Exhibition Series IV—*Charming Experience*, February 20 to April 19, 2009, Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Fig.3.4: Doris Wong, *Home-moving furniture*. Pieces of the work exhibited separately in *Charming Experience* 2009, Hong Kong Museum of Art. Photo:

Author

Top: Chair and table exhibited inside exhibition hall

Bottom Left: Milk carton and mug (detail)

Bottom Right: Six other pieces displayed in corridor outside exhibition hall.

The red-white-blue forms of Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* are installed in a corner of the exhibition space inside the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in a way that suggests a private living space⁶⁰. The bed is aligned alongside the wall;

⁶⁰ Despite the fact that this exhibition took place in 2004, the present tense is deliberately employed here and elsewhere in order to convey to the reader the sense of immediacy in the works.

the cabinet stands in front of the bed; the table is set up at the foot of the bed and the chair sits, half collapsed, on the floor. The furniture and household objects are suggestive of the interior of a room. The corner where the work is installed is transformed by the existence of the furniture and suggests a temporary haunt for a person. Because it is set up in the corner, where the view beyond the space is limited, the work is also suggestive of a private space. This arrangement of furniture – the single bed, a table and a single chair – indicates the intimate space of just one person and does not necessarily indicate the conventionally understood idea of ‘home’; the furniture and household items appear to be designed for one person, and so the idea of ‘home’ as encompassing notions of ‘family’ may not immediately come to mind, especially to those unaware of the local connotations of red-white-blue: the presence of the red-white-blue fabric forms in this work can be read explicitly as symbolic of a practice familiar to many Hong Kong Chinese – ancestral home-visiting. This association is made clear by the shapes of the rectangular red-white-blue forms, which together with their soft structure, closely resemble the ubiquitous red-white-blue tote bags commonly used for ‘home-visiting’. Such a resemblance to the red-white-blue tote bags and the association of ‘home-visiting’ can in turn be seen as signifying a general experience of border-crossing that many Hong Kong Chinese have encountered. It is, then this notion of ‘border-crossing’ that will be of most relevance to the context of Hong Kong identity current under discussion.

Hong Kong Chinese border-crossers in present-day Hong Kong employ red-white-blue tote bags extensively for carrying gifts or necessities when they return to their ancestral homes in China. Red-white-blue is thus associated with border-crossing. But the purpose of border-crossing is not limited to ‘home-visiting’, especially over recent years when border-crossing has become an important part of

the daily experience for cross-border employees; Hong Kong people who travel to China daily to work jobs on the mainland. In Doris Wong's work then, the associations with border-crossing are also suggestive of contemporary dimensions of border-crossing. The growing number of border-crossers reflects the dissolving geographical boundary between Hong Kong and China. This dissolving territorial frontier brings with it conflicts in many areas, ranging from the social to the political and to the personal.

The linking of red-white-blue tote bags and border-crossing travel is often assumed in popular media, such as newspapers and television⁶¹. The travel experiences for Hong Kong Chinese during the 1970s and 1980s often involved the carrying of gifts and other necessities to relatives in China in red-white-blue tote bags. Although the use of red-white-blue bags has been in decline in recent years, the signification of the tote bag and 'ancestral-home-visiting'⁶² is firmly established and widely understood; for many Hong Kong Chinese such a visit forms an important family memory. Yet the significance of border-crossing is not one of mere remembrance or nostalgia; paying habitual visits to one's ancestral home in China for family gatherings is still popular among Hong Kong Chinese. According to the report published by the Census and Statistics Department on patterns of outbound travel of Hong Kong citizens in 2003, the major purposes for travel are for vacation and for visiting relatives/friends. Of the 2,611,900 persons who travel to Guangdong Province/Macau from Hong Kong each year, 39.6% do so for the purpose of visiting relatives⁶³. Border-crossing for familial purposes is then, familiar to a great many of

⁶¹ See Chapter Two for detailed discussion of the red-white-blue tote bag and border-crossing.

⁶² “返大陸” is the Cantonese expression that refers to travel to China, and is sometimes used to refer to paying a visit to one's ancestral home in China.

⁶³ Census and Statistics Department, Thematic Household Survey Report, No.16 - Pattern of Outbound Travel, 2003.

Hong Kong's people. Doris Wong describes the inspiration for her work in a manner which confirms such an interpretation:

I often went to school [Chinese University of Hong Kong] by train, and met a lot of people carrying the "red-white-blue" tote bag. Some of them are coming back to Hong Kong from China, while some others are on their way to China. This scene inspired me and I imagined that people traveling back and forth ... thus I created this work.⁶⁴

This explicit observation of the routine of the border-crossing travelers on a train, displays Doris Wong's sensitivity to this concrete aspect of Hong Kong people's present-day living experience. The formal qualities of the work *per se*, and the widely understood associations of red-white-blue tote bag with border-crossing practice, interact in her work to produce the convergence of two significant themes: home and border-crossing.

The representation of border-crossing experience in Doris Wong's work relates to a social reality of present-day Hong Kong rather than evoking nostalgic emotions for the past. The generic forms of the red-white-blue furniture and their arrangement do not call to mind fancy or idealised images of an interior: the red-white-blue pieces appear soft and fragile and the crookedly standing table and chair, the bed and the cabinet can barely maintain their rectangular shape. This flimsy appearance and tactile quality conveys to the audience that nothing is functional and capable of usage. Doris Wong speaks of the creation of these irregular shapes and their softness as deliberate:

I fill the work with plastic rubbish bags and newspaper as supportive material, in order to keep the feeling of a tote bag while keeping the work's appearance as furniture.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Author's email communication with the artist on 11 February, 2011.

⁶⁵ Author's email communication with the artist on 11 February, 2011.

The nature of red-white-blue as a fabric is highlighted and, in the detail of the work, the image of a red-white-blue tote bag is maintained. So, for example, on the writing surface of the table and on the chair seat, there are two loops, making these surfaces resemble the top of a red-white-blue tote bag. Moreover, the presence of a zip opening in the bed reconstructs its rectangular form into a giant red-white-blue tote bag. The softness and the crooked appearance of the red-white-blue forms is another significant feature of the work for Doris Wong. Indeed, Wong has expressed dissatisfaction about an exhibition where the work was altered by the exhibition organiser (by incorporating the work with a dance performance) in a way that resulted in it losing this tactility and softness:

I am very dissatisfied with the Hong Kong Art Biennale, because they arranged a dancer to jump onto the bed and installed a wooden frame inside the work to strengthen the structure.⁶⁶

From the artist's words, it appears reasonable to hold that the work's softness is of particular importance to its interpretation. In contrast to the approach employed by Stanley Wong, where red-white-blue plastic usually appears as a decorative motif in the work, Doris Wong's work directly presents to its audience the commonly used red-white-blue tote bag familiar to working class people and border-crossers. It is a visual engagement created by highlighting the nature of the fabric and by indicating the iconic red-white-blue tote bag through the retention in the work of some of the details of an actual tote bag.

There are widely acknowledged connotations of red-white-blue which see it as referencing an heroic Hong Kong past, in the form of the process of rapid development of industrial Hong Kong from the 1960s to 1980s. Describing from a sociological perspective the conditions necessary for the formation of nostalgic

⁶⁶ Ibid.

emotion, Andrea Deciu Ritivoi notes that it is an emotion that emerges when people have a feeling that the “present seems deficient in contrast to the past”⁶⁷. Recent Hong Kong history appears to have provided just such conditions for the spread of nostalgic emotion: the territory’s experience of the economic downturn after 1997; the financial crisis in the early-2000s following the SARS epidemic of 2003. The risk of being marginalised politically and economically by the Chinese Central Government impacts negatively upon aspirations for the territory’s future and Western modernisation has ceased to be of advantage to Hong Kong in the face of a rapidly developing. The social, economic and political instabilities that people experienced in the new century lie in stark contrast to the success of the past. Where, on the one hand, Hong Kong people experience uncertainties about the Chinese regime, there is on the other hand, the dissolving of territorial boundaries brought about by reunification which brings with it chances for cooperation between Hong Kong and China that are believed to be of benefit to the former. Consequently, it is not surprising that these prevailing social conditions contribute to conflicting emotions towards China in the people of Hong Kong.

In Doris Wong’s work, it becomes noticeable, even when it is installed in a large space of the exhibition venue, without an obvious method of enclosure, that the work’s configuration still hints at a private space. The simple generic forms and the lack of personalised features of the red-white-blue furniture is suggestive of a generic private space; a room that anyone could inhabit. This is an association that is particularly striking for border-crossers, since the work articulates in this way their experience of dislocation and their ambivalent emotions towards regarding either Hong Kong or China as home. It is useful here to quote from Gill Perry’s definition

⁶⁷ Andrea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's self: nostalgia and the immigrant identity* (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 32-33.

of “home”:

I am using the term ‘home’ to denote a more personalized environment than the idea of a house or building. Houses are units that define and bring together people and families, and their social and sexual interactions. When inhabited they become ‘homes’. A home can thus signify an enclosed dwelling or shelter which is familiar, comforting and secure.⁶⁸

This passage makes clear that the concept of “home” denotes human interaction within a space, and it is this interaction which transforms that space into a “home”. In Doris Wong’s work, the furniture appears clean, fresh and new, without traces of dirt or use to indicate recent human activity; sterile. The milk carton and mug implies certain individual activities like eating and drinking. The most noticeable sign of human activity is the transformed vision of the red-white-blue tote bag into which the transitory border-crosser life of an individual can be read. Filled with papers and plastic bags, this furniture is standing but distorted because of a lack of strong structural support. These visual, structural and tactile elements convey strongly a sense of the possibility of mobilisation of humans, of objects, and of home itself. A feeling of instability and temporariness is evoked that does not fit into traditional conceptions of “home”. It is a work, then, that suggests emotional ambiguity and which opens up to local Hong Kong audiences considerations of cross-border travel and of the maintenance of a “home” for the border-crossers.

As has been mentioned, border-crossing continues into the present day and constitutes an essential part of the daily experience for the people of Hong Kong; especially those Hong Kong Chinese who work or study in China, which necessarily involves travel between the two places. Cross-border employment has increased

⁶⁸ Gill Perry, “Dream house: installations and the home” in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gill Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 237.

from 52,300 in 1988 to 237,500 in 2005 and of these people, 72.7% are employees⁶⁹. In 2003, figures indicate that 44.6% of border-crossing workers were living in staff residences provided by their employer and 23.4% were staying in hotels or hostels⁷⁰. Although Doris Wong herself may not have witnessed the living environments of individual border-crossing workers, the work projects an image of a hostel or hotel room, of a temporary place of residence; the generic and simple design of the red-white-blue furniture further conveys a sense of impermanence and instability.

It is apparent that the forms of the red-white-blue furniture in both Doris Wong's *Home-moving furniture* and Stanley Wong's *Show Flat* are simple; however, the softness in Doris Wong's work brings a sense of transitoriness and instability to the room; meanwhile Stanley Wong provides the audience with a comfortable, balanced and wholesome appearance of home⁷¹. The evocation of such uneasiness from Doris Wong's unstable yet familiar space seems very apt for describing the conflicting emotions faced by the border-crossing travelers. A commonly understood idea of 'home' often speaks of stability and security; where one finds orientation and sense of belongings. But the appearance of *Home-moving furniture*, with the chair that is too soft to stand and a cupboard that looks fragile and cannot maintain a perfect rectangular shape, seems suggestive of the uneasiness that accompanies travelling; unease at the traveling itself, as well as its consequences on family life in the "home". According to The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, present-day border-crossing workers are experiencing negative effects on family relations due to

⁶⁹ Lau Yuk-King, Department of Social Work, Family and Group Practice Research Center, *北上工作：家庭決策及家庭研究*, Hong Kong, 2008, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

⁷⁰ Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong residents working in the mainland China—General Household Survey : Special Topics Report - Report No.33, Hong Kong, 2003, 56.

⁷¹ For details of Stanley Wong's *Show Flat* (2003), refer to Chapter Three.

the pressures such separations bring to bear⁷².

Whilst an idealised and successful image of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong people, is projected from Stanley Wong's red-white-blue work, Doris Wong displays a sensitivity towards society and people's lives in the present-day. The idea of travelling to China – particularly by border-crossing in the Hong Kong context – and the idea of having to occupy a temporary home, is combined in and represented by the bag-like furniture form of Doris Wong's work. Juxtaposition of the signs of these commonplace motifs – a red-white-blue tote bag and home furniture – brings together the concepts of travelling and stability. The overlapping of references is emphasised by the tactile quality in the form and material used to construct the work.

And so further consideration of the border-crossing experience suggests alternative dimensions to the concept of Hong Kong identity, and to border-crossers in the local context. The border-crossing worker of today's Hong Kong is represented in *Home-moving furniture* through the elucidation of a specific idea of the concept of "home". In representing a home as fragile and unstable, the work subtly contests the unitary notion of Hong Kong identity by awakening audience awareness to the unstable quality of everyday reality in present-day Hong Kong.

Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004)

Siu King Chung's *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* imitates a street scene familiar in contemporary Hong Kong. By so doing it re-presents an aspect of everyday Hong Kong, the hawker's street stall, as a means of highlighting a commonly shared urban

⁷² The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, *Cross border employment-The impact of family life*, Hong Kong, 1999.

experience – consumption. The work itself consists of a 3x4x4m red-white-blue fabric-covered tent-like structure with an opening at each, opposite end. Numerous consumer products, such as toys, clothing, household goods and others commodities, are displayed in imitation of the manner in which these commodities are shown on a real hawker's stall (Fig. 3.5). The tent-like structure is supported by metal frame over which red-white-blue fabric is draped to form a semi-open, temporary shelter. Inside, four spotlamps such as those commonly used as a light source in hawker stalls are installed. The outward appearance of the tent, as well as the interior in which goods are displayed, each resembles a real temporary, hawker stall like those commonly seen in present-day Hong Kong, and especially in the long-established hawker area in Ladies' Market, Mongkok, where they contribute significantly to the Hong Kong street scene.

Fig.3.5: Siu King Chung, *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004).

Dimensions: 3m x 4m x 4m. External view of the work.

Since the chief concern of the work of Siu King Chung is with 'consumption', it is appropriate here to examine just what consumption may mean in order to discern

which particular form of the concept is suitable for the reading of Siu's work. One of the many definitions of consumption is a simple one which comes from Colin Campbell, who suggests that consumption involves "the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service"⁷³. The following discussion is an extrapolation from Campbell's basic idea of consumption to that of the more generally shared experience of consumption as a transfer of goods that depends on monetary exchange. The practice of exchanging of goods constitutes a large and important part of people's everyday experience of living; and not only in Hong Kong. Nowadays, consumption is no longer understood merely as an economic practice; it is also considered to involve an exchange of symbols (Miller, 1995). When consumption is not aimed at fulfilling the basic physical requirements for living, the process of selection of consumables, and the consumed object itself, becomes filled with alternative meanings attached to the consumers and to the society that they inhabit. Siu King Chung's installation resembles one of the very spaces where exchange takes place and has as its subject matter the surplus consumption in Hong Kong.

Although globalisation has led to a highly uniform mode of exchange and commodity consumption, when it comes to the local space of exchange, localised particularity is still inherited.⁷⁴ This kind of red-white-blue covered hawker stall presents a highly specific localised Hong Kong scene, especially when compared to the uniformity found in shopping malls and the modern architecturally composed urban space of Hong Kong. This sense of locality, it is suggested here, originates in the image of red-white-blue as a prominent backdrop to the city since its extensive

⁷³ Colin Campbell, "The Sociology of Consumption." In *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995) 102.

⁷⁴ Eric Ma, "Shopping and Globalization" in *後九七香港認同*, (Hong Kong: Voice, 2007).

industrial usage in the 1970s. The outward appearance of Siu's hawker stall is easily recognised by a local audience, and even to visitors to the city because the Ladies' Market that the hawker stall refers to has been a famous tourist destination for many years. Ladies' Market is promoted as a uniquely Hong Kong street scene by the Hong Kong Tourism Board⁷⁵ and in many traveler's guides⁷⁶. The external appearance of the hawker stall, then, can be read as a representation of locality and, at the same time, its nature as a tourist spot draws implications of the globalised influence of ever-increasing consumption. This is also reflected in what is shown inside Siu's work; inside the hawker stall the artist displays a collection of material evidence of consumption: surplus commodities. These objects, which have been bought but never used for the purpose for which they were intended, speak to an almost daily experience of Hong Kong people (and for the people of any developed city) for whom the purpose of consuming is no longer the mere satisfaction of their basic physical needs.

In March 1975, Ladies' Market was set up under the ordinance Hawker Permitted Places⁷⁷ which aimed to improve public hygiene and provide better management of the chaotic on-street hawking. The first hawker area permitted under the ordinance was set up in Tung Choi Street, Mongkok; hawker stalls adjoin each other to form a row of stalls on both sides of the street, and shoppers crowd in the narrow passage between. These hawker stalls are erected each morning and dismantled at night after the permitted business hours at 11:30pm. Due to the temporary nature of such businesses, simple structures of metal frames and

⁷⁵ "Street Markets", Shopping, Hong Kong Tourism Board,
<http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/shopping/street-markets.html>

⁷⁶

⁷⁷ Hawker (Permitted Places) Declaration – Chapter 132AG, L.N. 70 of 1975, Hong Kong Regulations in Hong Kong Legal Information Institute, <http://www.hklii.org/>

light-weight red-white-blue covering material are preferred and have become the key structural feature of the stalls, allowing stall owners to assemble and disassemble their temporary shops quickly and easily. Nearly a thousand red-white-blue hawker stalls⁷⁸ crowd both sides of the street in Ladies' Market and have become a characteristic street scene of Mongkok area.

A further characteristic of the hawker stalls in Ladies' Market has relevance to the local working class experience comes in the products that are sold by the hawkers. The name of Ladies' Market itself originates in the goods sold, which include mainly women's clothing and accessories; other commodities such as male's clothing, toys and household goods are also sold at low prices. The availability of varieties of personal and household articles at low prices has been an attraction of this place to the local working class. Thus, this 'street market-going' experience is a commonly shared experience among many of Hong Kong's less well-off. And in recent years, Ladies' Market has also become a tourist attraction and is promoted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board as "a best illustration of Hong Kong's living culture",⁷⁹.

Sui's art work operates through its general signification of a hawker stall to refer to a collective experience of the contemporary urban space and the human interactions grounded in this place. Although hawker stalls are familiar to the working class, the experience of observing a stall in its everyday context and of observing a simulation of such a stall in a museum is decidedly different. And in

⁷⁸ According to the minutes of the Council Meeting on 23 January, 2008, there were 1052 fixed pitch stalls set up in the Ladies's Market. Until 2007, 321 hawker stalls are not rented. "Management of Ladies' Market" in Meetings, Council Meeting, Legislative Council homepage, retrieved on 2011 Jan 29 from <http://legco.gov.hk/english/index.htm>

⁷⁹ "Street Markets", Shopping, Hong Kong Tourism Board, <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/shopping/street-markets.html>

ways that contribute to the reading of Siu's work. The following first analyses *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* in terms of its structural form and building materials, which suggest the transitory qualities of the hawker stall in reality and expresses in the practical life;. second, the medium of the work is discussed in relation to its subject matter which provides a social comment regarding the experience of over-consumption in present-day Hong Kong.

The structural form of *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* recreates a representation of a single hawker stall in the concrete reality of Hong Kong's urban space, accurately simulating those hawker stalls in Ladies' Market which have formed a major red-white-blue-filled street scene in Hong Kong for decades. Where the actual street scene is a visual feast of many stalls together as a collective, Siu's work has reconstructed a single unit of the street market as a representation of the site in general. The representation of this particular place is significant in that it references the close relationship between red-white-blue and a Hong Kong urban space intimately linked to the lived experience of Hong Kong's working class people. The work engages with local audiences by referring concrete, present-day experiences of a place which partakes in working class people's everyday activities. Siu King Chung, the artist, is also an architect, and so is particularly qualified to assure his audience that the "stall is set up...in the manner of temporary hawker's stalls in the so-called Ladies' Market"⁸⁰. Although red-white-blue is not the focus in Siu's work, its deliberate significance as a visual anchor for the familiarity of the appearance of the crowded urban space, cannot be dismissed.

⁸⁰ In the original quotation in Chinese the artist expressed that he particularly referred to the form and construction skill of the stall while making the art. Another mountain man, *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere :To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCCM Creations, 2005), 132.

The red-white-blue fabric in this work appears in a more subdued, even peripheral quality here; its use as a visual anchor is understated in Siu's piece in comparison to other red-white-blue art works, such as that of Doris Wong in which red-white-blue fabric is integral to the appearance of the work in totality.

Red-white-blue is integrated with the work in such a way that it does not distance itself from its everyday function. The overall appearance of the work, then, does not suggest a rethinking of the material per se so much as it proposes a re-evaluation of the fabric as an individual sign. That is, the red-white-blue in Siu's work must be interpreted in its interactive references with other materials, as well as with the overall appearance of the work.

In addition to references towards the daily Hong Kong street scene, the viewer of Siu's work can also draw allusions to temporariness and instability from the form of the work's construction. This is a signification may be apprehended in isolation from the history of local hawker areas and by non-local viewers of the work. The physical flimsiness of the red-white-blue fabric cover and the metal frame contributes to an overall impression of instability and temporariness. The ways in which the consumables inside are displayed also show an impermanence suggestive of mobility. So, for example, goods are displayed on small folding tables or baskets hanging on square metal fencing; pieces of clothing are hung on hangers attached to the loops of plastic chain, overlapping one and other. Such a shop display is of practical use to hawkers since it which allows a great deal of goods to be shown in the limited space, facilitates the easy reconfiguration of the 'shop window', and is conducive to rapid the assembly and disassembly of the stall. Experiences of hawker stalls can be trivial and go unremarked by many viewers in the daily urban context of Hong Kong. When it is presented in the aesthetic context of a museum, however, the

‘hawker stall’ is perceived differently and, perhaps for the first time, considered as signifying something outside its familiar place. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has this to say regarding the creation and awareness of ‘place’:

Place can be defined in a variety of ways. Among them is this: place is whatever stable object catches out attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest... The pause may be of such short duration and the interest so fleeting that we may not be fully aware of having focused on any particular object; we believe we have simply been looking at the general scene... It is not possible to look at a scene in general; our eyes keep searching for points of rest.⁸¹

When exhibited, the fidelity of scale and structural form of Siu’s work to the actual hawker stalls it represents draws audience attention to a usually overlooked ‘place’. In reality, hawker stalls do not exist individually and in isolation, but adjoin each other to form a cramped street space. When a person is situated in the crowded space of the hawker area in reality and their vision becomes over-saturated with the commodities on offer, it is difficult to comprehend the particularity of the hawker stall. In the exhibition space, however the individual stall becomes what Yi-Fu terms the “point of interest” for viewers; it becomes, or comes to refer to, a place. The impermanence of the work is particularly noticeable within the museum space and makes visible an overlooked place; a place great significance to the experiencing of the contemporary urban space in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum, as an exhibition site, contributes, through its collection and display of (what are deemed to be) important historical and cultural objects, to a master narrative of Hong Kong identity. So, for example, the two permanent exhibitions of Cantonese opera and Chinese ink painting, paint a picture

⁸¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and place: the perspective of experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 161.

of Hong Kong identity that references its roots in traditional Chinese art forms. These collections of objects present examples of what is considered historically important and representative of high culture. The inclusion of Siu's work, which presents a collection of seemingly insignificant and commonplace objects, serves to form a museum-like function in itself. The reconstruction of a familiar lived environment within the artistic space, means that the lived experience associated with the work is relocated within an altered context. The familiar experience suggested by the work is superimposed over the viewing experience of the familiar scene as a work of art, and this generates in viewers an alternative reading of the place or relations which the work represents. As Yi-Fu Tuan states, experience "implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone, acting on the given and creating out of the given"⁸².

Due to the work's resemblance to the everyday, it does not fit into the concept of material heritage or art object as conventionally understood. In discussing the art of the contemporary period, Nicolas Bourriaud in a discussion contemporary art notes that many works have "to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts".⁸³ He suggests that human relations in the present cannot be directly experienced and this this experience is replaced by materials or symbols⁸⁴, the manipulation of which articulates the current modes of living in concrete contemporary reality; it is in this way that Siu's work is able to engage its viewers in a contemplation of current Hong Kong consumption-driven society.

In addition to its structural form reminding the audience of the everyday, Siu's

⁸² Ibid. 9

⁸³ Nicolas Bourriaud , "Foreword" in *Relational Aesthetics*, tr. Simon Pleasance , Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland, (Dijon : Les Presses du raeel, 2002), 8.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 9

work also presents the familiarity of the everyday through the display of commonplace objects. Special note should be taken, though, of the commodities on show in this work, since their specific selection is the result of an important limitation imposed by the artist upon himself. Siu deliberately borrowed from his friends numerous kinds of brand-new commodities that are brand-new but superfluous to their owners. The objects are arranged in an orderly display of baskets and racks, in the manner that goods are arranged in real stalls, and presented as if they had never been bought. A reason is given as to why each of the borrowed items was bought but never used and presented on the chart standing in front of the stall (Fig. 3.6). The baskets and racks present these redundant objects so that their superfluity is neutralized and they appear ready to fulfill another consumer's desire. The types of goods collected and displayed in Siu's work include clothing, accessories, toys, home furniture, ornaments, musical instruments and more. These objects underscore the fact that the satisfaction of basic needs is not in question here, rather it is what is attractive to consumers in these objects that makes them desirable. This blatant display of an excess of commodities creates in the work a social comment that emphasises the practice of over-consumption in the present-day. Displayed within the hawker stall, the objects are evidences of the consequences of over-consumption.

Fig.3.6: Siu King Chung, *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004).

Photo courtesy: Dan Wong

http://www.pbase.com/dan_wong/image/39921120

The selection of these objects is important to the reading of the work in relation to social realities. The work represents the contemporary experience through the particular representation of over-consumption. The image of a hawker stall directs the viewers' thoughts to a working class identity, however, this is contrasted with the accumulation of excess goods inside the stall. That is, these wasted commodities signify some quality in the people who make buying decisions, and thereby reflect a particular aspect of their identity. To the trained observer of art they call to mind the sentiments expressed in Barbara Kruger's 1987 work entitled *I shop therefore I am*⁸⁵.

⁸⁵ Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)* (1987) photographic screenprint on vinyl, 284.5 x 287cm. Private collection from Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zurich.

The humble material condition of the Hong Kong working class signified by the cheap red-white-blue fabric or the hawker stall itself, is juxtaposed with the content inside representing excessive commodities encountered by people in their everyday lives. The inside of the stall is filled with consumer products which, under a prevailing capitalist system which often considers consumables and the ability to consume them – even, and especially to the point of over-consumption – as an indicator of wealth and achievement. Writing of the notion of the relation between a product and its consumption Karl Marx noted that “a dress becomes really a dress only by being worn; a house which is uninhabited is indeed not really a house”⁸⁶. So in a Marxist sense the various objects displayed in Siu’s work are not real products at all: they are all redundancies. Sui confirms this:

The 1000 different kinds of merchandise displayed in this stall are ‘special design items’ submitted by my friends, i.e., everyday things they somehow bought, but never used.⁸⁷

Because it is an economically well-developed city, the experience of living in Hong Kong is predominated by material excess, particularly in the urban environment. The process of creation of Sui’s work – choosing from a variety of new commodities from people’s everyday life – suggests an experience similar to shopping. That is, the shopping experience is reconstructed for the audience in the work’s formal presentation of the collected commodities in a stall-like space. Indeed the hawker stall is itself a symbol of shopping. Yet although the work attracts audience attention by its visual resemblance to a familiar place for shopping, and presents a display of goods within the structure that is representative of the material attractions of buying, the work is designed to interrupt and disrupt such an experience. The goods are

⁸⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Postproduction*, Nicolas Bourriaud, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2007).

⁸⁷ Another mountainman, *Redwhiteblue Here/There/Everywhere :To All Those Hong Kongers Who Have Given Their Hearts and Souls to Their City* (Hong Kong : MCCM Creations, 2005), 132

well-presented in the work, as if for sale, instilling desire in the audience, yet they cannot be bought; they are essentially inaccessible. The result is an ambiguous situation at odds with the daily experience of consuming where shoppers are free to choose between the presented objects which they are also free, with an adequate amount of money in exchange, to possess. Since viewers are not allowed to touch the objects and can only take them in visually, the impossibility of fulfilling their consumer desires is made clear. This disruption of a familiar exchange draws the audience out of the familiar context and provokes the audience to respond to the questions it poses regarding the habits of consumption and over-consumption which constitute a large part of the experience of present-day Hong Kong.

This is an approach in stark contrast to the tack taken by Stanley Wong's representations of the social space of Hong Kong in an idealised and imaginary manner. Whereas Wong's *Tea and Chat*, in which a reconstruction of the disappearing scene of the old-Chinese style teahouse, is presented in a visually stylised way, Siu's hawker stall imitates and even simulates the actual hawker stall it represents in full details. Such imitation of a scene from everyday Hong Kong life and its retention of the practical properties of the stall's architectural creation draws attention to its humble and trivial quality. The visual presentation of the work does not invoke a nostalgic imagining of the past, nor does it aestheticise the present. Rather, it underlines the triviality of the daily scene and in its use of red-white-blue – which becomes particularly obvious within the closed, institutional space of the exhibition – displays a different degree of artistic manipulation when compared to other red-white-blue-inspired works of art shown in the same exhibition. Within the exhibition context, the work becomes the subject of aesthetic consideration despite its being visually indistinguishable from the mundane, day-to-day object it

represents.

Of particular relevance to the visibility of everyday objects in art, is a discussion by Arthur Danto in his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Danto begins by stating the urge for a definition of art; he describes a work by Andy Warhol – *Brillo Soap Pads Boxes* (1964)⁸⁸ – by noting that “they so totally resemble what by common consent are not art works”⁸⁹. Warhol appropriated the imagery from an actual consumer product, and constructed numerous identical copies of the original Brillo boxes in plywood. The work was exhibited at the Stable Gallery in 1964, and numerous Brillo boxes were piled up in a manner that resembles the ordinary display scene of a store. Danto develops an argument through the analysis of notions of mimesis, content, interpretation, identification, expression and style, and comes to a conclusion that the ‘Brillo-box-as-work-of-art’ position is defensible. This is despite the taking of a commercial object as subject matter because of the context in which it is presented. Within the context of an artistic representation, extra meanings which the commercial soap pad boxes cannot possess are generated that reflect significant on the way art is to be viewed.

Although Siu’s work shares certain similarities with certain works of Pop Art, it does not borrow from, nor does it emphasise, the imagery of popular culture or advertising in the same way. What becomes obvious in Siu’s work is its reconstruction of the everyday experience by using the materials from everyday life. His work shows awareness of material characteristics, and characteristics of materialism, found in the everyday reality, and directly employs these materials to

⁸⁸ Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box* (1964), silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood, 17 x 17 x 14in. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh Founding Collection

⁸⁹ Arthur Danto, Preface in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1981)

resemble the everyday within a new context. The artist imposes certain ‘rules’ to control the creative process, however, and makes a particular point about how the commonplace and the space that contains it space can be juxtaposed to create new meanings in the resultant work. The work is not merely a displaying of a real thing snatched from an everyday street but is, by its rearrangement of mundane objects and the imposition of self-limitation in their selection, a generator of extra meanings that the original object does not have in its daily context; the work is essentially different from that which it imitates. The work’s articulation of these banal qualities by its recontextualisation of its subject matter into an art work indistinguishable in appearance from the original subjects the art work to aesthetic consideration. In *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue*, Sui’s preoccupation with exact resemblance does not invoke an idealised nostalgic emotion; it vividly demonstrates its contemporariness and offers a subtle response to contemporary life’s reality.

Overall then, this work involves not a manipulation of raw material or existing objects, but rather it plays with signs and associations of the objects that are already known and familiar to most of the audience. These objects – and red-white-blue especially – are omnipresent in Hong Kong people’s daily activities. By creating extra meanings for the everyday objects and practices the work does not affirm the existing conventional interpretation of Hong Kong identity. Instead, it presents to the audience a way of contesting the conventional by discovering in the trivial experience of urban life an unaddressed aspect of identity.

Both Doris Wong and Siu King Chung are inspired by the observation of the ordinary daily routine and habits of local people, and draw from these everyday experiences specific connotations for contemporary Hong Kong – a sense of imminent change and transitoriness is inherent in these daily activities and places

and pervades the artists' works. The sense of change is often overlooked by people who are submerge in their everyday trivialities, and so these works of art bring it into the light in their re-presentation of the commonplace. The street environment in Siu's work and the intimate living space created by Dorothy Wong are presented in different contexts: Siu's juxtaposition of the seemingly omnipresent urban scenario and the institution space of the museum challenges audiences' perception of what is conventional, and inspires a re-reading of the physical reality to which the work refers; simplicity of visual presentation in the work manifests in itself the possibility of a complex reading of the everyday that connects such commonplace material materials as red-white-blue with Hong Kong working class identity. The physical space generated by these two works is marked by a sense of transitoriness and of instability; this instability is a part of the everyday experience of the city's dwellers life that cannot be ignored in any discussion of identity. Mobility and the potential for change as represented in the structural forms of both works crystallizes and embodies the ever-changing and unstable quality of the lived experience Hong Kong. Thus they emphasise characteristic aspect of Hong Kong urban life, enriching the notion of Hong Kong identity and supporting it with the representations of the concrete realities of the territory. Both works function from a perspective that depicts present-day Hong Kong without invoking an overtly idealised, nostalgic mood in their audiences. In this way they differ from the more confrontational approach taken by Kith Tsang. The simplicity and plainness of these two works denotes the most basic, indispensable and essential relations between people and places, hence, they are particularly associative with a personal realisation of self as an experience of movement within and between social spaces. The limited exhibition space occupied by these works coheres with people's experience of the limited urban space of Hong Kong; with its compactness, its dense population, and the physical intimacy this

generates between people and the objects that surround them.

Fig. 3.7 Siu King Chung, *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004)Detail.

Photo courtesy: audience Cathepine

Fig. 3.8 Siu King Chung, *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004).
Detail.

Photo courtesy: audience Halffishman20.

CHAPTER FOUR: Tim Li *Dialogue with the bed* (2007-09)

This chapter examines Tim Li's *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* (2007) and his art project *Dialogue with the bed* (2007-09) with a special focus on the way that these works engage under-represented communities in conversation with, and in, public space. These works destabilise unitary notions of the Hong Kong identity by making visible under-represented communities and destabilising the equilibrium of spatial politics in the public space. It is argued here that the works of Li deepen the plurality of Hong Kong identity by means of active audience participation and draw attention to neglected social conflicts and inequalities. *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* engages under-represented city inhabitants in conversation by constructing a space for dialogue within local community space. This dialogical approach has been extended by Li into public space in *Dialogue with the bed*, a work which places red-white-blue folding beds symbolising the working class individual in public arenas which have political or economic significance.

Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition
(2007)

Fig. 4.1: Tim Li, *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* (2007)

Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition (Fig. 4.1) is an installation constructed by the piling up of eighty red-white-blue nylon folding beds to form a wall-like structure with approximately nine feet in height. These red-white-blue folding beds are then secured by tying the metal bed frames together using cable. A single wall-like structure is positioned diagonally across the centre of the exhibition space. The process of construction was carried out at the exhibition location: a nearly-300 square meter rooftop of a nine-storey residential apartment block in Sham Shui Po, Kowloon. In the course of the creation process, Li collaborated with the inhabitants of that apartment block which is one of many tenements of its type in Sham Shui Po districts. Located in the open air of the rooftop, *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* also incorporates the landscape of Sham Shui Po.

The most visible features of this work – the red-white-blue colours – are of prime importance. When the work is perceived in the open space against the old and impoverished-looking skyline of Sham Shui Po district, the piled up red-white-blue folding beds create a large brightly-coloured surface that contrasts strongly with the grey tones of the surrounding landscape. Donald and Gammack discuss colour in cinematic representations of the urban space of Hong Kong city by summarising Jean-Philippe and Dominique Lenclos' analysis of the relation between colour in natural and artificial environments and local culture:

[In] respect to the architecture, public art and geological tones of urban space, the depth and sensuous spectrum of colour perception is at the heart of its role as a recognized marker of spatial affect⁹⁰.

It is suggested here that the palette of the environment is inextricably linked to the culture it contains. The colour of a given environment affects its spectators' knowledge and impression of that particular place, and creates in them an emotional response. In Li's installation, which is exhibited within a built environment the vivid colours of the work contrasts with the dull tones of the cityscape and thus draws out the presence of the work. Although chromatically contrasting, the structural form of the work blends harmoniously with the built environment. Analysis of the structural qualities of the work, then, is equally as important as its colour. Also of importance is the active participation of local communities in the work's construction which contributes to its social significance and is discussed here in relation to locational and spatial concerns. In the following, the particular social context of Sham Shui Po is introduced, and is followed by an analysis of the chromatic and structural qualities

⁹⁰ Jean Philippe Lenclos and Dominique Lenclos, *Colors of the World A Geography of Color, in Tourism and the Branded City: Film and Identity on the Pacific Rim*, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and John G. Gammack (England : Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 115.

of the work, and how these are related its site-specificity. In a discussion of the on-location creation process of the work and the involvement of local residents, it is argued that Li's work acts as an agent that engages with local people in their social space.

Li's work is set in Sham Shui Po and addresses that districts local people. Tim Li and community organiser Iman Fok Tin-Man are the co-curators of the "Our Life in West Kowloon" exhibition in which the work is displayed.. The exhibition was organised by Society for Community Organization (SoCO) and aimed at a presentation of the social reality and life of Sham Shui Po's the local community. According to statistics published by the Census and Statistic Department, residents of Sham Shui Po district have the lowest median monthly household income⁹¹ of any Hong Kong citizens. Other research shows that poverty is very prominent in Sham Shui Po and is concentrated in small local communities consisting of tenants who co-rent private rental units⁹². These private rental units are commonly found in old residential blocks similar to the tenement where the exhibition was located. The demographic character of Sham Shui Po is described by SoCO on its website in the following way:

Sham Shui Po is one of the poorest districts in Hong Kong. It is also the area where most new immigrant families, singletons [*sic*], street-sleepers, newly emerged underprivileged groups and ethnic minorities live.⁹³

⁹¹ Median monthly household income of Sham Shui Po is \$13800 and \$14000 in 2007 and 2010 respectively, which is the lowest among 18 districts in Hong Kong. See *Population and Household Statistics Analysed by District Council District*, Census and Statistic Department, 2008, 2011.

⁹² See Wong Hung and Lam Ching Man, *Current Situation of Poverty Problem and Poverty Alleviation in Sham Shui Po: A Need-based and Asset-based Analysis* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005).

⁹³ Society for Community Organization, "Our Life in West Kowloon", Society for Community Organization, http://www.soco.org.hk/117/bkg_2.htm

This is a description which conforms to other research into the financially-underprivileged inhabitants of Sham Shui Po which indicates that most of the labor population in the district consists of low-skilled workers. One of the reasons for the concentration of poverty in this area stems from the inability of these low-skilled workers to cope with the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, and their consequent inability to benefit from recent economic prosperity. Because of a lack of skills, Sham Shui Po's low-skilled workers often experience decreases or, and at best only very minor increases in their wages; they become working poor. Compulsory early retirement intensifies the problem of unemployment, since such workers still have the ability to work and need jobs to make a living. While a detailed discussion of the problem of poverty in Sham Shui Po is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to understand that the district and its poor communities submit to a way of living little known to the mainstream local society, and thus reflect real social differences in present-day Hong Kong.

The exhibition area extends from the ground floor to the rooftop of the nine-story residential block at 115-119 Kweilin Street in Sham Shui Po. Art works, daily objects and factual and statistical information about poverty are displayed throughout. This kind of old residential block is usually divided into numerous units, such as "caged homes" (籠屋)⁹⁴ and small self-contained rooms, rented at a low

⁹⁴ See, in particular, Bedspace Apartments Ordinance Section2, Hong Kong Ordinance, http://www.hklli.org/hk/legis/en/ord/447/s2.html#bedspace_apartment for a definition of the "bedspace apartment" (床位寓所) which is commonly known in Hong Kong as caged homes (籠屋). According to the definition in Bedspace Apartments Ordinance Section2, "bedspace" (床位) means any floor space, bed, bunk or sleeping facility of any other type, or any part thereof, used or intended to be used as sleeping accommodation for one person; "bedspace apartment" (床位寓所) means- (a) any flat; or (b) where the partitioning wall or walls between two or more adjoining flats in a building has or have been demolished, such two or more adjoining flats, in which there are twelve or more bedspaces used or intended to be used as sleeping accommodation under rental agreements, and for the purpose of determining whether any flat constitutes a bedspace apartment, the existence of partitions in the flat shall be

price, and therefore attractive to low income earners. These rental units are often very small, with insufficient space for carrying out many common daily activities. Tenants of these rentals often have to share facilities like kitchens and bathrooms with other tenants. Thus the living environments such as old buildings are obviously poor and the experience of high-density living is apparent.

The design of home furniture to cope with the problem of insufficient living space in poorer Hong Kong households is of particular importance to an understanding of the connection of Li's red-white-blue nylon folding beds to the collective vision of Hong Kong's identity. Due to the shortage of numbers, restrictive land use, and high population density, housing units in Hong Kong are often densely-packed and small and create in the living space an experience of crowding and insufficient personal space. This is a problem that is often concentrated in low income-earning areas and poorer, underprivileged communities. According to a study by market researcher Demographia on the affordability of Hong Kong housing in 2010, of the three hundreds and twenty-five markets assessed worldwide, "Hong Kong is the least affordable market"⁹⁵. The high prices of private housing and small sized public housing have resulted in severe space limitations in Hong Kong homes. But this has sparked an interest in the designing of furniture that makes maximum use of limited living space. As a response to the cramped living space, flexible furniture design is favoured by many Hong Kong people living in small apartments. In Nuala Rooney's book, *At Home with Density*, the author interviews Hong Kong families living in public housing estates and discovers that furniture that can maximize floor space, such as bunkbeds, folding sofas and folding tables, is

disregarded.

⁹⁵ Demographia, "7th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey," *Annual Survey*, published on 24 January, 2011, <http://www.demographia.com/dhi.pdf> (accessed, March 4, 2011).

commonly found in Hong Kong homes⁹⁶. The author suggests that this type of folding furniture shows flexibility in that families living in cramped space may rearrange their furniture according to the occasion. The use of such flexible, folding furniture is not limited to households located in public housing. Indeed, because it is used by most of Hong Kong's people the function and design of such everyday objects can be understood as reflecting Hong Kong people's everyday experience of high density living and limited space.

The red-white-blue nylon folding bed that forms the centre of Li's work is emblematic of this experience of density in the home sphere. The bed constitutes material evidence of the problem of overcrowding in Hong Kong while at the same time it shows, in its functional design, the flexibility of Hong Kong people to cope with this problem. It is this everyday aspect of the folding bed, together with the cultural connotations of red-white-blue that have developed over recent years, that contributes to a complex reading of Li's works.

The red-white-blue folding bed is the major medium of *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition*. Like the red-white-blue tote bag, the folding bed is commonly used because of its functional features. Apart from household usage, such beds may also be seen providing the temporary dwellings of homeless people. The most commonly seen red, white and blue combination is used. Li commented that the colour combination is highly recognisable among viewers⁹⁷. After the 2004 "Building Hong Kong" exhibition which featured red-white-blue-inspired artworks, red-white-blue has become widely known for its

⁹⁶ Nuala Rooney, "Making House into Home: Interior Design in Hong Kong Public Housing" in *Consuming Hong Kong*, Gordon Mathews and Tai-Lok (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 47-80.

⁹⁷ Author's interview with Tim Li, on 25 January, 2010.

association with a particularised working class image and with a more generally-understood notion of the spirit of the “Hong Kongese (香港人)”. Thus Li’s choice to construct folding beds from red-white-blue fabric, as opposed to any other available colour combination, is explicitly suggestive of such associations. According to Li, when the red-white-blue nylon folding bed was first incorporated in an earlier installation in Venice, Western audiences were unable to immediately recognise it as a kind of furniture⁹⁸. It is for this reason that we can posit that a kind of visual bond is formed specifically with an audience which has experience or knowledge of this type of folding furniture. That is, the red-white-blue folding bed and the relation to the ways and places of living in Hong Kong is readily articulated to most local audiences.

An exploration of the formal qualities of the work must take into account the chromatic contrast and structural harmony formed between the work and the built environment which contains it. As has been mentioned above, the colour of the red-white-blue medium is most visible when the work is exhibited on the rooftop with the buildings of Sham Shui Po forming a backdrop. This creates a strong chromatic contrast between the work itself and the surrounding landscape. Thus the work draws attention to the presence of the Sham Shui Po district with its related social associations. At the same time, the structure and material of the work is in keeping with the built environment of Sham Shui Po. Both the chromatic and structural qualities of Li’s work are features which relate site-specificity and local

⁹⁸ See Artradar, “Embedding the Bed in Public Space – Interview Hong Kong Artist and ParaSite Director Tim Li,” Artradar, posted August 19, 2009, <http://artradarasia.wordpress.com/2009/08/19/embedding-the-bed-in-public-space-interview-hong-kong-artist-and-parasite-director-tim-li/> (accessed, October 21, 2009). Tim Li remembers that “People in Venice have never seen the folding bed. So interestingly, people asked me, “Where did you buy that?” Even in Paris, people posed similar questions, “Where was it made? Did you make it yourself?” They looked at the utilization side of it.”

community.

Fig. 4.2: Tim Li, Unfolding the possible II--Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition (2007). Photo courtesy: Kai Fung

Located on the rooftop of the building, Li's work is situated against the cityscape of Sham Shui Po district where the audience can perceive the colours and form of both nearby and faraway architectural structures. The cityscape of Sham Shui Po is thus subtly incorporated into the work. Its large scale requires that the work be viewed from a non-fixed perspective in order to appreciate it in its completeness. Positioned diagonally across the rooftop, the giant structure causes a partial visual obstruction which stimulates the audience to move around the exhibition space so as to get better or alternative views from different positions (Fig. 4.2). It is inevitable that viewers will perceive the external environment while looking at the work (Fig. 4.3). From the exhibition space, spectators behold the landscape of Sham Shui Po in a way that is different to their perception of it on a daily basis. This confirms Kevin Lynch's observation that the "image of a given physical reality may occasionally shift its type with different circumstances of viewing"⁹⁹. The window-like frames constructed in the work also provide alternative

⁹⁹ Kevin Lynch, *Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 48.

perspectives for viewing by involving spectators in actively framing what it is they see. In other words, the structural arrangement of the work implies movement both physically and visually. The presence of this work constructs possibilities for viewers to re-approach the image of the district they see through the artwork. By standing in contrast to their surroundings, the colour, metal bed frame and the structural totality of the work give a sense of geometric coherence with the crowded, built environment (Fig. 4.4). Despite contrasting chromatically with the surroundings, the structural harmony between the work and the nearby cityscape contributes to an impression that the work is celebrating that specific social context.

Fig. 4.3 Exhibition site and the surroundings. Photo courtesy: SoCO

Fig. 4.4: Tim Li, *Unfolding the possible II--Our Life in West Kowloon* Exhibition (2007). Detail.

In this work, it is noteworthy that Li uses brand-new folding beds instead of used, worn out folding beds that could be read as carrying their own histories. The also creates an interesting chromatic contrast with the far-from-new built environment of Sham Shui Po, and thus generates further readings of both the work and the place. To understand the relation between colour and the image of a city, Donald and Gammack suggest that the

visual form of a city is complemented by its signature colour spectrum, which is at least partly understood as the perceived hues of the natural and built environment under particular lighting and atmospheric conditions.¹⁰⁰

Due to the lack of maintenance and because of weathering, the paint on the external walls of many residential blocks in Sham Shui Po fades, and gradually appears dilapidated. The old buildings of Sham Shui Po district are all of a similar height, and so when viewer perspective shifts from the work to the surroundings, the most immediate image perceived is the cityscape which they form, evoking a sense of the impoverishment of the area. The generic appearance of the numerous old residential blocks creates a rhythmic repetition of visual form, making it possible for this complex physical space to be reduced to a single image or to an abstraction of colours. The grayish tone of the built environment surrounding the work thus intensifies the place's association with the bleak and poor living conditions of Sham Shui Po. The obvious presence of old buildings surrounding the exhibition site means that viewers can also perceive the glossy buildings in the faraway financial districts, as well as other newly-built residential buildings. However these new, prosperous high-rise buildings appear blurred because of distance and of atmospheric refraction caused by pollution. This dull, indistinct chromatic impression of the

¹⁰⁰ Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and John G. Gammack, *Tourism and the Branded City: Film and Identity on the Pacific Rim*, (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2007), 117.

surroundings contrasts sharply with the bright hues of the new red-white-blue of the folding bed.

For Madden, Hewett and Roth, red is a colour generally associated with the “active”, the “hot” and the “vibrant”¹⁰¹; the saturated hue of red is predominant in the work. This bright colour evokes energetic and positive emotions, very different from the almost depressive chromatic impression of the backdrop landscape of Sham Shui Po presented to the viewers. The bright colours and the newness of the red-white-blue fabric generate strong visual stimuli as a counterpoint to the overall bleak impression of Sham Shui Po. The structure of Li’s work, as has been noted, encourages viewing from multiple vantage points and movement in its audience, enhancing their interaction with the work and the environment. It is thus essential for the work to be viewed within the Sham Shui Po district where the chromatic character and the associated social problems all contribute to the unique meaning-making potential of the work.

¹⁰¹ Madden, T.J., Hewett, K. and Roth, M.S., “Managing Images in Different Cultures: A Cross-National Study of Colour Meanings and Preference,” *Journal of International Marketing* 8 (4) (2000):90-107, in *Tourism and the Branded City: Film and Identity on the Pacific Rim*, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and John G. Gammack (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2007), 120.

Fig. 4.5: Tim Li, *Unfolding the possible II--Our Life in West Kowloon* Exhibition (2007). Detail.

It is necessary here to shift the focus of the discussion from the structural features of *Unfolding the possible II* to the process of its creation in order to explore the engagement of the underprivileged local communities with this the site itself. Note has been made previously of the window-like hollows in the structure which provoke the spectators' curiosity; these physical 'gaps' in the barrier-like structure of the work invite visual penetration. Whenever the audience peeks through these gaps, the images they contain frame immediately become the focus (Fig. 4.5) of the viewers' attentions. The gaps have a framing effect that directs audience focus to the changing everyday scene which appears within the frame. So, for example, a person standing on the other side of the work, the skyline of Sham Shui Po, and the distant financial area (Fig. 4.6). By setting up a visual barrier that contains within it a mode for its own traversal, the work suggests permeability. Li has the following to say regarding this particular structural design feature of the work:

[The barrier] symbolizes a thick wall. While it may act as a barrier, it's also a conversation-starter: invisible walls prevent us from seeing specific problems, which makes it difficult to break down barriers.... The fold-up bed installation was arranged to reveal large

and small gaps, giving us a chance to break the ice and to see the world from a different perspective.”¹⁰²

For Li then, the work is an attempt to facilitate communication between different communities (Figs. 4.6, 4.7 & 4.8) in order to provide an alternative platform for the under-represented, marginalised people of the district. The involving local residents and other audience members physically in the work begs questions regarding how their active participation in the making of this work contributes to its conversational function in the specific local context.

Fig. 4.6: Exhibition space also serves as a venue for events open to different audiences invited by the exhibition organiser SoCO.

Fig. 4.7: Artists and residents involved in the making of the work.

¹⁰² Tim Li, “Sharing the same sky,” *Our Life in West Kowloon*, (Hong Kong: SoCO, 2007), 28.

Fig. 4. 8: Residents of 115-119 Kweilin Street involved in the creation process of *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition*.

The local population of Sham Shui Po is comprised partly of small, financially under-privileged communities constituted by new immigrant families, single people, the elderly, ethnic groups and the unemployed. The people living in 115-119 Kweilin Street (where the artwork was made and exhibited) who collaborated with Li in the making of *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* are the very inhabitants of this urban space, and it is their presence and lived experience that is revealed by the work as an alternative way of living when compared to mainstream Hong Kong society. It is an image of the residents that contributes to a problematic marginalised image of Sham Shui Po itself. The mobility of the population in the poorer communities of Sham Shui Po is low, indicating a tendency to settle and stay in the district. This can be attributed in part to the building of community networks in the neighborhoods which act as a supportive determinant for those who remain there. Social and economic forces compel these people to submit to a way of living that is has become associated with the specific location. Due to the existing problem of poverty in the district, inhabitants of Sham Shui Po are sometimes derided in the mainstream media as a social burden. Such a perception

serves to reinforce the marginalisation of these communities from mainstream society and the norms derived from it. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens discuss, with reference to Gil M. Doron, the relation between marginalised groups and places. For them, it is not the place, but rather the people within it who often become marginalised and who contribute to the further marginalisation of a particular space:

Marginality is not necessarily geographical; the sites ... are often in or near the center of cities In fact, marginality is not always the characteristic of a place but ... the characteristic of a group of people or their practices taking place in a space shared with others. It is typically the people and the practices that are stigmatized. If those who are stigmatized make up a majority of the occupants of a space then, by association, the space is also stigmatized, a situation that is all too easily and frequently 'remedied' by removing the occupants from the space and converting it to another, more limited use.¹⁰³

This suggests that denouement of a specific group of people and their lifestyles affect also the particular place they are related to and, as a result, the marginalization of both the people and of the space follows. And since the re-integration of marginalised space into mainstream society often involves the removal of these people, this means that their ways and places of living are threatened with physical removal, and excluded from the mainstream discourse. It is a threat that has in recent times become real with the residents of some of Hong Kong's underprivileged communities, being forced to leave their living space to make way for the city's redevelopment¹⁰⁴. Redevelopment projects in old district like Sham Shui Po are often criticised because the redevelopers do not take into account the needs of local residents, and so the newly built housings or facilities are unaffordable for most of

¹⁰³ Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 171-172.

¹⁰⁴ See Urban Renewal Authority, "All Projects by District," Urban Renewal Authority, <http://www.ura.org.hk/html/c800000e1b.html>. for the announced redevelopment projects.

the local residents¹⁰⁵. In other words, the city's redevelopment projects imply an erasure of the underprivileged communities because they are not considered under the hegemonic push for social progression and development. The result on these already marginalised groups is that they become even further socially and spatially segregated from the mainstream society and its dominant discourse.

Tim Li's work, then, approaches the subject matter of social and spatial exclusion of an underprivileged group differently from Kith Tsang's. The subject matter in both Tim Li's *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition* and Kith Tsang's *One Voice*¹⁰⁶ are similar in that both works address an under-represented group of people who are constantly experiencing social exclusion from the mainstream society. Kith Tsang's work approaches the social inequalities by a representation of the subjects in a confrontational way; the use of large scale, black and white frontal portraits to present the subjects is visually provoking. When the portraits are viewed within the circular space formed by the panels upon which they are mounted a tension is created., viewers are informed about the problem of identity being raised in this work by a brief autobiography written by the photographed person and are free to leave a written comment on the surface of the work. There is in this the suggestion that a form of two-way communication is taking place, but the conversational quality of the work remains debatable given that the articulation of this controversy depends largely on the viewers' prior knowledge of the specific debate on the subject matter in Hong Kong. Moreover, the photographed subjects are presented in representation form and no inter-personal communication can take place. Communication in Tsang's work does not take into account reflexive gestural and

¹⁰⁵ Leung Kai-chi, "When Sham Shui Po becomes SOHO (當深水埗變成蘇豪)", *Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), February 21 2009, Life.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion of Kith Tsang's *One Voice* (2004).

bodily communications.

In contrast, Li's work involves physical collaboration with and from the residents, of a specific area and brings a bodily participation into the process of art-making, highlighting the individuality of these people (Fig. 4.8). Li recalls in an interview, that his interaction with local residents during the process of art-making was harmonious and that he felt strong camaraderie with the residents. Grant H. Kester discusses the specificity of dialogues by noting that "discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori 'content' with other already formed subjects, but is itself intended to model subjected"¹⁰⁷. Li's work, on the other hand, emancipates resistance to the uncontested image of marginalised communities in the mainstream narrative, by highlighting the individual resident as autonomous through their bodily presence rather than the employment of a representation of the group as a whole. Li's personal involvement and direct contact with these local residents is testament to his identification with them.

Stanley Wong's red-white-blue art work projects the notion of Hong Kong identity as, a resilient and hardworking image of the local working class. There is an implication – albeit a somewhat wishful thinking – of the 'hardworking entails success' story of Hong Kong working class; the social reality paints a different picture. SoCO considers that in *Unfolding the possible II – Our Life in West Kowloon Exhibition*, is the people present "their stories present the truth and reality of Hong Kong's grassroots"¹⁰⁸. Li's work incorporates the immediate image of Sham Shui Po district as a point of reference to reveal the contemporary social reality of the

¹⁰⁷ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2004), 112.

¹⁰⁸ "Grassroots" (草根) refers to the low income working class. *Our Life in West Kowloon*, Society for Community Organization, http://www.soco.org.hk/117/bkg_2.htm

underprivileged group. Through the residents' involvement, the work operates as an agent of reconstruction of the space in order that these under-represented communities may express and manifest themselves in their actions. Li's collaboration with the residents in person shows his self-identification with the communities and their values, and expresses an affirmation and celebration of the attitude of these groups of people. The work destabilises the fixed notion of Hong Kong identity proposed in Stanley Wong's work by making visible the under-represented communities. Li which expands on the idea of an art work as social intervention by relocating the red-white-blue folding beds into the public space. The process of site-specific art-making functions as a direct encounter for the public and a confrontation with the dominant forces that control the accessibility of a particular public space. This series of art-actions uses the red-white-blue folding bed as a symbol that intrudes and disturbs the seemingly harmonious spaces of the Hong Kong society.

Dialogue with the bed (2007-2009)

Li has also used the symbolic meaning of the red-white-blue folding bed in an art project entitled *Dialogue with the bed*, which similarly intrudes physically into the public space and contests the power that behind such spatial constructs. *Dialogue with the bed* is a series of artistic interventions which took place in public areas of Hong Kong. During each intervention, a red-white-blue nylon folding bed installation was temporarily set up in a chosen place in Hong Kong, include public spaces and "privately owned public spaces". At the chosen location, a small-scale folding bed is set up and display for only a few hours. After photo documentation is made, the installation is dismantled and all materials removed immediately. The temporary installations are constructed with from two to six folding beds joined or a

single bed simply unfolded. Two to three folding beds are piled up. Sometimes these beds are unfolded and positioned on the ground, resembling their original functional appearance as beds. The locations of such installations include: the open space outside the Legislative Council; the entrance plaza of Times Square in Causeway Bay; the headquarters of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited (HSBC); a pedestrian precinct; a subway; a road junction in Mong Kok; the pedestrian footbridge in Wan Chai; the Ocean Terminal car park in Tsim Sha Tsui; the waterfront promenade in West Kowloon Cultural District; and Anderson Road Quarry in Kwun Tong. On certain occasions, the construction process was disrupted by security guards or police. Li has said that that he has received warnings or complaints from management staff of the public spaces where he conducts his artwork, although these responses are not violent¹⁰⁹. Li says that pedestrians showed much curiosity at his action and work, some would talk with him and photograph the work; the general response from the public is positive¹¹⁰. The discussion of these installations here focuses particularly on two locations – Times Square and HSBC Headquarters – as these two places are of much political, social and cultural significance. It is argued that that the overlapping of the symbolic meaning of these specific places and the nylon folding beds creates tension and opens up room for discussion that points to a pluralistic notion of Hong Kong identity.

Before commencing a close analysis of the artwork, it is necessary to understand the idea of ‘privately owned public space’ and how it differs from public space. Since there is no clear definition of public space and privately owned public space in Hong Kong law, the general definition of public space presented by Stephen Carr is valuable here. Carr states at the beginning of his book, *Public Space*:

¹⁰⁹ Author’s interview with Tim Li, on 25 January, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Public space is the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds. The street, squares, and parks of a city give form to the ebb and flow of human exchange. These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart of the more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, nodes of communication, and the common grounds for play and relaxation.¹¹¹

The idea of privately owned public space was introduced in the 1960s in New York, with the aim of improving pedestrians' experience of the city by encouraging private developers to take responsibility for better the utilisation and management of their corporation-owned space by integrating it with other public space. Kayden understands "privately owned" to mean the legitimate ownership of the land which gives owners the right to determine its use and rights of access. In effect, this means that the public's right of access to such land is not guaranteed since it does not belong to the public or to the city, and the public only have the right of access to such physical space under regulations determined by the owner and needs to be negotiated with the land owners. In the case of Hong Kong these owners are usually private corporations. The concept of privately owned public space was been adopted in Hong Kong during the colonial period for two reasons: it is a concept which encourages large corporations to take social responsibility for the maintenance of the public's right of access to urban spaces; it relieved the the colonial government of the financial pressure of investing in urban development by the selling off of land to private developers. In his article "The Right to the City: Surveillance, Private Interest and the Public Domain in Hong Kong", Alexander Cuthbert argues that the development rights for Hong Kong's land resources have fallen into the hands of private interests partly because of government policies that exert little planning control over the large corporations. Cuthbert also explains that the

¹¹¹ Stephen Carr, et al., *Public space*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

last ten years has seen the reification of finance capital in the physical form of the city through the redevelopment of many central area sites, and the sale of ‘symbolic capital’ to the private sector by the architectural profession. Here the *space of experience* becomes finally deconstructed into *commodity space* or what we may call the *antisocietal space of postmodernism*. Since Hong Kong’s land market retains much of its original strategy in the commodification of land into ‘parcels’ to be sold to the highest bidder, commodity space is conflated to social space. In this context, the citizen’s rights to space only exists in the sphere of personal or luxury consumption, increasingly carried out under the gaze of electronic systems of surveillance.¹¹²

Since the 1980s then, there has been a shift in land ownership to the private corporations and as a consequence the accessibility of these corporate-owned spaces largely depends on the decision of the property owner. Privately owned space thus often overlaps with social space that is generally assumed to be public, making the distinction unclear to Hong Kong people. People’s right of access to these spaces is obscure and Cuthbert describes these spaces in Hong Kong as “ambiguous spaces”¹¹³.

The ambiguity of spaces and the right of access not only affects people’s experience of the space, it also changes people’s form of identification with such space. With reference to heritage and Hong Kong identity, Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather and Chun Shing Chow argue that the relations between artificially produced places and identity in Hong Kong are particularly complex because of the redevelopment projects that bring about major alterations to both the appearance and

¹¹² Alexander Cuthbert, “Under the Volcano: Postmodern Space in Hong Kong” in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, ed. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 145-146.

¹¹³ Alexander Cuthbert, “The right to the city: Surveillance Private Interest and the Public Domain in Hong Kong,” *Cities* 12 (5) (1995): 292-310.

nature of places¹¹⁴. The city's redevelopment has led to the fast-changing appearance and functions of many places. In many cases redevelopment projects also entail a change in lifestyles for residents, further altering people's impression and experience of using a particular space. This frequently changing appearance of place can hardly be expected to engender in users a sense of attachment based on visual impressions and long term localised use and inhabitation. Experience and visual impression of the more traditional places may be consigned to with oblivion under such a redevelopment regime. As a result, people can only experience and perceive the redeveloped urban space in a state of flux and this mode of experience is largely shaped by the private developers and limited by regulations that they have set.

In the following, discussion of the two art interventions in Tim Li's *Dialogue with the bed* series, which specifically intrude into controversial 'privately owned public spaces' – the entrance plaza of Times Square in Causeway Bay and the ground floor of HSBC Headquarters. These art projects drew differing degrees of attention from pedestrians, sometime actively involving provoking a response and sometimes not. The focus here is on how the art works and interventions generate clear interactions between the symbolic meanings and the art works themselves, but also on how different spaces are suggested. Then, turning the discussion to the more audience-engaged work conducted at the HSBC Headquarters the discussion will refer to Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" which is of much use for an understanding of Tim Li's works. According to Foucault, a 'heterotopia' is a single place that combines different types of spaces which are incompatible in nature. Moreover, it is a place in which the sense of time is different from the chronologically understood sense of time. Foucault also stipulates that heterotopias

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather and Chun Shing Chow, "Identity and Place: the Testament of Designated Heritage in Hong Kong," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9 (2) (2003) 93-115.

include systems of opening onto, and separating from the external world, and that they work in relation to that external world, as a form of illusion. It is argued here that the interaction between Li's art intervention and the place it occupies suggests spaces that can be described as heterotopias.

Dialogues with beds series – Dialogue with beds on the square (2008)

Times Square¹¹⁵ is one of the largest shopping malls and office complexes owned by Wharf Properties Ltd¹¹⁶, and is managed by Times Square Ltd. It is a popular destination for local shoppers and tourists. Times Square was opened in 1994, as a redevelopment of the former Hong Kong Tramway Depot (Fig. 4.9) which was demolished in 1989. According to the regulations on the Building Department website, public spaces in Times Square that should be open to the public include the area at the junction of Russell Street and Matheson Road, and the junction between Canal Road East and Sharp Street East. These two locations serve as connecting pedestrian routes, allowing people to walk through these areas in any direction. The entrance plaza of Times Square is also a public space which incorporates a part of the covered passage inside the architecture (Fig. 4.10). As the regulation states, these public spaces should be open twenty-four hours a day, and may contain “temporary structures for exhibitions and displays”¹¹⁷. The public spaces in Times Square have become sources of controversy since 2008 when the owner was found to have been making a profit from their lease, an act described by the Hong Kong Democratic

¹¹⁵ According to the Building Department, Times Square, is located at 1 Matheson Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong. The ground floor area is dedicated for public use is about 3017 square meters. It opens 24 hours and is used as a pedestrian passage and for passive recreation, including temporary exhibitions and displays. Building Department, “Areas within private properties dedicated for public use”, Building Department, http://www.bd.gov.hk/chineseT/DA/HK/dedicated_areas_HK_WC.html

¹¹⁶ Wharf Properties Ltd 九龍倉集團有限公司.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Party as “unjust enrichment”¹¹⁸. In addition, some local pedestrians have complained that the security guards of Times Square have “prevented them from sitting or remaining” in the public space¹¹⁹. A street performer also experienced the same treatment when he was standing in the public space, dressed as the Statue of Liberty¹²⁰. These debates about balancing the public’s right of access and corporate responsibilities and interests are ongoing in Hong Kong society¹²¹.

Tim Li’s performances at Time Squares and HSBC came after the fore-mentioned debate about the legal issues concerning public and private spaces in Hong Kong. Preceding performances of artists like Lee Kit (李傑) and Luke Ching (程展緯) in Time Square is worth mentioning here to make Li’s intervention clearer. On 5 March 2008, a performance titled “*Passive Recreation: Picnic creation of Lee Kit*”(靜態休憩活動：李傑的野餐創作) was organized by Lee Kit and Luke Ching in front of the entrance of Times Square. This performance was initiated by Luke Ching and carried out in the form of a picnic hosted by Lee Kit. Seven other artists including Jeff Leung (梁展峰), Jasper Lau (劉建華), Lee Kai Chung (李繼忠), Lam Tung Pang (林東鵬), Leung Po Shan(梁寶), Man Ng(吳楚文)and Thompson Tong (湯舜) from Hong Kong were invited to join the picnic¹²². In this performance, all participating artists sat on a tablecloth painted by Lee Kit and had a picnic for about

¹¹⁸ Diana Lee, “Democrats Enter Fray in Times Square Rent Row”, *The Standard* (Hong Kong), March 6, 2008.

¹¹⁹ Diana Lee, “Pushy Times Square Guards Raise Hackles” *The Standard* (Hong Kong), March 5, 2008. Local

¹²⁰ Christopher DeWolf, “Hijacking Public Spaces” Urbanphoto, December 23, 2008, <http://www.urbanphoto.net/blog/2008/12/23/hijacking-public-spaces/>

¹²¹ See RTHK, “誰的公共空間,” *鏗鏘集*, 14 February, 2011. RTHK “屋署促時代廣場開放公共用地,” *Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), March 5, 2008. “時代廣場違規出租”*Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), March 6, 2008.

¹²² Lam Ka Man, “Visual Arts and Public Space Issue”, Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2008, May 2009, http://www.hkvisualartsyearbook.org/2008/publicissues_items.php?post_id=10055

two hours. Ching recalls in the report of the performance that security guards interrupted, but other pedestrians expressed their support¹²³. About a week after the picnic on Time Square, Lee Kit organized another performance in front of the tower of International Finance Centre in Central¹²⁴. The performance took place on the grassland that is located between One and Two IFC (國際金融中心一期,二期) and the Central Ferry Piers (中環碼頭). In the performance in front of The IFC, Lee Kit also experienced interruption by the security guards of IFC. Hong Kong artists have responded to the issues concerning public spaces and their privatization through different forms of performances. In the following discussion, focus will be given on two of Li's performances which took place in Time Square and the HSBC Headquarters.

¹²³ Luke Ching, "Passive Recreation: Picnic creation of Lee Kit (靜態休憩活動：李傑的野餐創作)", A Good Idea Is a Smail, March 8, 2008, http://lukeching.blogspot.com/2008/03/blog-post_08.html

¹²⁴ Thompson Tong, "Lee Kit's Picnic-IFC (李傑的野餐 IFC 篇)", WordPress.com, March 17, 2008, <http://peppeppep.wordpress.com/2008/03/17/李傑的野餐 ifc 篇,或升華的過程/>

Fig. 4.9: Above: Hong Kong Tramway Depot in 1980s

Below: Times Square in 2009

Photo courtesy: Group Album of Collective Memories of Hong Kong

Fig. 4.10: Public space inside Times Square

In the same year as the abovementioned controversy over the public space of Times Square, Tim Li conducted an art intervention there. On October 25 and again on November 25, 2008, the artist set up his folding bed installation in the uncovered

area of Times Square – an area designated as public and which has long been used as a popular meeting place for the public. Li did not ask for permission from the Times Square management company in advance.¹²⁵ To conduct these two art interventions, Li adopted ‘guerrilla’ tactics. He brought six red-white-blue folding beds to the destination and assembled these beds immediately. The point where the folding beds stood is away from the main entrance of the shopping mall and so therefore the installation did not cause any obstruction to the flow of people between the plaza and the shopping mall, but were well-placed to draw their attention. Li recalls that some pedestrians and security guards showed curiosity about his actions at the time and asked him for details, but that he experienced no sense of being in any way prohibited in his actions.¹²⁶ The process of intervention was carried out smoothly and peacefully.

Despite the peaceful process of making of the work, the work itself is a site of considerable tensions in that it spatially engages social and personal conflicts. With regard to the artwork’s relationship with its surroundings, the structural feature of the work becomes important. In an analysis of Hong Kong’s cityspace, Wong Kin Yuen¹²⁷ who quotes from Ackbar Abbas, suggests that the Time Square building is “indifferent to its surrounding”¹²⁸ because the appearance of the high-rise building and its nature as a modern shopping mall contrast sharply with other much older, smaller communities nearby, who occupy older architectures and old-style shops. It is useful to consider this commercial aspect of Times Square in relation to the

¹²⁵ Author’s interview with Tim Li, on 25 January, 2010.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Wong Kin Yuen, “On the Edge of Space: Blade Runner, Ghost in the Shell, and Hong Kong’s Cityscape,” *Science Fiction Studies* 27 (2000): 5.

¹²⁸ Ackbar Abbas, “Hyphenation: The Spatial Dimensions of Hong Kong Culture,” in “On the Edge of Space: Blade Runner, Ghost in the Shell, and Hong Kong’s Cityscape,” Wong Kin Yuen, *Science Fiction Studies* 27 (2000): 5.

reading of Li's work.

Fig. 4.11: *Dialogues with beds series—Dialogue with beds on the square* (25 October 2008). Temporary site-specific installation.

Fig. 4.12: *Dialogues with beds series—Dialogue with beds on the square* (25 November 2008). Temporary site-specific installation.

In the intervention on October 25, two stacks of beds were constructed, each stack composed of three half-folded beds piled one on top of the other (Fig. 4.11).

This stacked arrangement indicates that the folding beds were not put there for sitting or sleeping. The work has the appearance of an art work in that these beds were skillfully joined to form a free-standing balanced structure which on the spacious plaza. The work almost appears to be a public sculpture placed in the square to be appreciated. Later, on November 25, the folding beds were fully unfolded and lined up in a zigzag pattern on the ground (Fig. 4.12). The unfolded beds expressed their functional qualities in a clear manner – anyone passing could rest on them, either by sitting or lying down. It is in this second unfolded form that the folding beds will perhaps appear most familiar to people who have experience in using them. But the beds' major function—sleeping—is obviously not appropriate to the site in the busy public space of Times Square.

As mentioned previously discussion about the practical use of the red-white-blue nylon folding beds, these beds are sometimes used by the homeless people, who roam about the city, as markers of their “sleeping places”. An unfolded folding bed positioned in a public space can thus be readily associated with the practice of the homeless people, who often come from the underprivileged communities. Because of these associations, the space evoked by the work contrasts markedly with the image of Times Square as a busy shopping mall and commercial site. These two works then, and especially the latter piece with its opened folding beds, can be understood as transforming the space of Times Square into a heterotopia in the sense that the art works create within Times Square a place that combines the commercial nature of a shopping mall with the personal space of the very poor. Times Square is a modern social space where intense commercial exchange takes place, attracting shoppers from Hong Kong and around the world who visit in search of luxury goods. Because the folding bed is so common in Hong Kong, its reference

to the much simpler and indeed bleak living conditions of the homeless, as well as to low-income earners and the under-privileged can be readily apprehended by the local audience. The spaces suggested by Times Square and the folding beds it contains, contrast markedly. The intervention of the folding bed into a site of large capital flows suggests qualities of heterotopia in that the two incompatible spaces – the highly commercialised space and the living space of the poor – are brought together in the real physical space of Times Square.

The concept of heterotopia is also suggested by the juxtaposition of the highly localised symbol of the low-tech folding bed and the modern technology present in the public space of Time Square. Writing of Times Square, Wong Kin Yuen notes its change from former tram-depot occupied mainly by white and blue collar workers, to busy, “high-tech wonder”, reflecting the prosperity that has resulted from commercialism¹²⁹. Wong’s description of the “high-tech wonder” of Times Square can be understood to refer in particular to the large video wall on the Times Square building which serves the public, when they enter the public space or go near it, with a continuous flow of instant information. This video wall functions primarily for advertising, but also broadcasts live news about the world. This freely accessible instant news and information on the video walls creates a modern spectacle. On the one hand, the global information broadcasts on this video wall links this place and people to the world, suggesting a sense of proximity without geographical and temporal limit; additionally this immediate access to the global information reflects Hong Kong’s engagement to the world – its metropolitan features and self-image. The presence of folding beds installation, on the other hand, brings to the Square the highly specific and socially realistic symbol of local, and especially

¹²⁹ Wong Kin Yuen, “On the Edge of Space: Blade Runner, Ghost in the Shell, and Hong Kong’s Cityscape,” *Science Fiction Studies* 27 (2000): 5.

under-represented communities. An experience of local living space is contrasted with the experience of global space. Through this contrast, Li's intervention again brings to the Times Square public space the under-represented reality of local space particularly as it is associated with the homeless and the very poor.

Unfolding the possible VIII – Dance with the Lion (2009)

Another art intervention in the same series, titled *Unfolding the possible – Dance with Lions* took place in the busy financial district of Central. The public space used in this artwork was the ground floor plaza of Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited Headquarters (Fig. 4.13), a building designed by the famous British architect Sir Norman Foster and opened in 1985¹³⁰. The location of HSBC Headquarters has been the same since 1865, and the present headquarters building is the fourth to be built on the site. As declared by the Building Department, the public space in HSBC Headquarters is to be used as a passageway and for temporary exhibition purposes. Two lion statues, named Stephen and Stitt after two important HSBC bankers (Fig. 4.14) stand at the entrance of the plaza at street level. These bronze lions serve not merely as decoration of HSBC Headquarters, but also provide a signature symbol of the bank. The image of these lions is included in the notes, so familiar to Hong Kong people, which are issued by the HSBC. A local newspaper has described the lions as not merely a logo of HSBC, but a “mascot for witnessing Hong Kong’s economic success.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ HSBC, “Unique Headquarters”, *HSBC Homepage*,
<http://www.hsbc.com.hk/1/2/about/home/unique-headquarters>

¹³¹ “Replica of HSBC Lions Settled in Shanghai (滙豐複製銅獅坐鎮上海)” October 11, 2009, *The Sun*(Hong Kong) http://the-sun.on.cc/cnt/news/20091011/00407_003.html

Fig. 4.13: Ground floor plaza at HSBC Headquarters, Central. According to the Building Department, HSBC Headquarters (1 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong), ground floor plaza (about 3192m²) is a 24-hour open space for pedestrian traffic, exhibitions and displays of temporary structures.

The HSBC lions then, signify an important cultural association for Hong Kong people, as well as being symbolic of their own individual monetary wealth. As *The Standard* describes it, “many Hong Kong people consider HSBC to be the bluest of blue chips”¹³². Also, the term “big elephant”¹³³ is used as the nickname for the shares, chosen presumably to indicate the stable profit-making ability and size of the company; even university students are very keen to buy HSBC shares¹³⁴. When interviewed by *The Standard*, some citizens opined that buying HSBC shares is like preserving their individual wealth and makes them feel secure¹³⁵. These associations of the HSBC with monetary value and financial achievement affect the overall image

¹³² “Big elephant lives on campus” *The Standard* (Hong Kong), March 9, 2009, City Talk. http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=15&art_id=79230&sid=22994838&con_type=1&d_str=20090309&sear_year=2009

¹³³ “Betting on the Big Elephant” *The Standard* (Hong Kong), May 8, 2009. Features.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Benjamin Scent, Katherine Ng and Patsy Moy, “For love or money” *The Standard* (Hong Kong), March 03, 2009. http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=30&art_id=78963&sid=22947828&con_type=3&d_str=20090303&sear_year=2009

of the bank, as well as its material representations: the headquarters and lion statues, which are understood to constitute a monument to Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. The art intervention that took place at the site where the bank has stood for over hundred years, presents another reality.

Fig. 4.14: Bronze lion statue at the street level entrance of HSBC.

HSBC Headquarters is significant to Hong Kong in terms of certain characteristics that are comparable to some features to be found in monuments. Local people's attachment to the HSBC is both historical and institutional. The bank was established in Hong Kong in 1865 and began issuing bank notes in the same year¹³⁶. It has been legislated as one of the note-issuing banks (發鈔銀行)¹³⁷ of Hong Kong. According to the Chapter 65 Legal Tender Notes Issue Ordinance, no more

¹³⁶ Cheng Po Hung, "The Three Note-issuing Banks" *The Voice Online* 4 (2011), St. Jamies' Settlement, ,

<http://www.thevoice.org.hk/thevoiceOnline/article.asp?Position=3&ToPage=4&Class=11>

¹³⁷ Department of Justice, "Chapter 65 Legal Tender Notes Issue Ordinance", Bilingual Laws Information System, June 30, 1997,

http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_ind.nsf/E1BF50C09A33D3DC482564840019D2F4/CC1998094EEAA6EFC825647600771A90?OpenDocument

than twenty percent of the shares of a note-issuing bank can be owned by foreign company¹³⁸, making note-issuing banks symbols of sovereignty. When this historical and institutional attachment is added to significations of white-collar, middle class or upper middle class notions of personal wealth as previously indicated the result is what the *Financial Times* describes as a “love affair”¹³⁹ between Hong Kong people and HSBC. The combination of the long company history, the architecture and lion statues serves to reinforce a fixed and stable association between the bank and Hong Kong’s wealth and, on a personal level, the individual wealth of Hong Kong people. This linkage presumes a socio-economic power relation to exist between people with different socio-economic status. For these reasons it seems reasonable to say that, for Hong Kong locals, at least, the Headquarters displays features and associations typically applicable to those of a monument by reinforcing certain dominate narratives and presuming a collectively shared memory. According to Steve Pile, monuments say what they want to say and, by doing so, they make space incontestable, both by closing off alternative readings and by drawing people into the presumption that the values they represent are shared. Monuments may embody and make visible power relations, but they do so in ways which also tend to mask and/or legitimate and/or naturalize those relationships.¹⁴⁰

If the long-established HSBC Headquarters is understood as a monument to the prevailing notion of Hong Kong identity as intimately related to the region’s economic success, Li’s red-white-blue art work and interventions that caused obstruction in the HSBC public space present a clearly contrasting alternative reading.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Justine Lau and Tom Mitchell, “HK Love affair with HSBC is” *Financial Times*, March 11, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/891006be-0ddc-11de-8ea3-0000779fd2ac.html>

¹⁴⁰ Steve Pile, *The Body and The City* (London: Routledge, 1996), 213

Li's intervention began with the arrangement of dozens of nylon folding bed metal frames – without the red-white-blue fabric – which were piled up around the lion statues (Fig. 4.16). This structure was made into a similar scale to the lion statues, that is to say just over two meters in height (Figs. 4.17 & 4.18). The making of this structure began without pedestrians' assistance. The process began to draw people's attention to the actions of the artist. Li then began to pile up other folding beds into a barrier-like structure in front of the entrance on the street level plaza of the HSBC Headquarters. Although the public space within the HSBC area is relatively spacious, the work still caused a certain degree of obstruction: Li arranged the folding bed from the one end of the plaza's entrance to another end, blocking a large part of the entrance (Fig. 4.20).

Fig. 4.15: The making of *Unfolding the possible VIII –Dance with the Lion* (2009).

Fig. 4.16: Metal bed frames positioned next to the lion statue.

Fig. 4.17: Metal bed frames positioned next to the lion statue.

Li has created a spectacle that draws pedestrians' attention to the work and further, directs them to look at the HSBC public space anew. The installation became a spectacle because of its scale and the brightly-coloured nylon folding beds which contrasted markedly with the surrounding gray modern architecture. The barrier-like folding bed structure almost blocks the major walkway that enters the covered public space of the HSBC Headquarters. Although the folding bed structure does not completely block entry to the HSBC public space, pedestrians' view into the covered public area is certainly obstructed. In addition, the barrier-like structure is suggestive of a border-line clearly distinguishing the covered area and the walkway. This visual as well as physical obstruction piqued pedestrians' curiosity and thus, they became more aware of the HSBC public space. Li's actions eventually attracted the attention

of the security guards representing the owner of this public space – HSBC – and his intervention was threatened with interruption.

The conflict between Li and the HSBC security guards provided a real life demonstration of the power relations between the public and those who have the ownership of the social space. This is a physical interaction that can be explained in terms of Foucault's concept of heterotopias. According to Li, the issue of power struggle is not his initial inspiration nor is it the intended theme of his work¹⁴¹, nevertheless the work's triggered the negotiation of power between different parties in an unexpected way. The security guards of HSBC, the police and pedestrians who partook in the performance became involved in a conversation concerning the work itself and the way in which they use and understand the HSBC public space. To understand the challenge of Li's intervention to the public space, it is useful to compare the different treatments that Li received from the security guards and from other users of the HSBC public space. Unlike the controversy in Times Squares the public's right of access to the public space, the HSBC public space has not been seriously challenged for limiting public access and use of the public space and the HSBC public space usually functions as pedestrian passageway; however, on Sundays it becomes a popular gathering place for Philippino, Thai and Indonesian maids. Although these maids sit in the covered public space of HSBC and obstruct the space to a certain degree, there has apparently been no report of any serious controversy on how they use HSBC public space and they enjoy the acquiescence of the HSBC security guards (Fig. 4.19).

¹⁴¹ Author's interview with Tim Li, on 25 January 2010.

Fig. 4.18: Philippino, Thai and Indonesian maids gathering at the public space of HSBC Headquarters on Sunday. Photo courtesy: Snuffy Photostream

According to Foucault, in an interview by Paul Rainbow, “space is fundamental in any exercise of power.”¹⁴² When Li encountered the HSBC security guards while he was constructing the piece, they urged him not to enter the covered area with these beds because the work might block the walkway¹⁴³. Li’s right of access to the public space and the way he used it was disputed by the security guards representing the HSBC. Policemen on duty intervened however, and explained to the security guards that the public are free to exercise their rights in the public space as long as no obstruction is caused¹⁴⁴. Li then changed his plan of constructing the barrier-structure and instead, the form of the work was reflexively redesigned immediately in order to comply with the guards’ request while simultaneously contesting the way this public space is used. Instead of constructing a static installation, Li invited pedestrians to carry the folding beds and move around the HSBC Headquarters. In this way, a long line of folding beds was formed by joining the fully-opened folding beds (Figs. 4.21 & 4.22). This team of folding bed carriers moved slowly around the HSBC Headquarter, maneuvering the long line of folding

¹⁴² Paul Rainbow, “Space, Knowledge, and Power. Interview: Michel Foucault,” *Skyline* (March 1982), 16-20., in *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagined places*, Edward W. Soja, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 149.

¹⁴³ Tim Li, *Dialogue with the bed* (Hong Kong: Hulu Concept Limited, 2009), 86.

¹⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Tim Li, on 25 January 2010.

beds in a way that Li noted reminded him of the traditional Chinese dragon dance (舞龍) that festive rite involving hundreds of participants as they move a dummy dragon in the air¹⁴⁵. In effect then, Li's art intervention triggered a negotiation of power in a physical space by destabilising the uncontested concept of public space and the public's right to its use.

Fig. 4.19: The making of *Unfolding the possible VIII --Dance with the Lion*(2009). Originally the work was planned to be a site-specific installation positioned on the walkway in the HSBC public space.

Fig. 4.20: Pedestrians holding the folding beds and moving in a way resembling a traditional Chinese dragon dance.

¹⁴⁵ Author's interview with Tim Li, on 25 January 2010.

Fig. 4.21: Pedestrians holding the folding beds and moving (detail).

Edward W. Soja describes heterotopias in terms which display the applicability of the concept to this intervention in that, a heterotopia “mobilize[s] and stimulate[s] a radical and postmodern (spatial) politics of resistance that redraws the boundaries of identity and struggle”.¹⁴⁶ The normative landscape of the HSBC Headquarters is disrupted by the installation as well as by the physical actions of Li and the pedestrians. The performance of the work drew the attention of three parties: the private corporation, the police as governmental authority, and the Hong Kong public. During the negotiation of the public’s rights and methods of access to public space, the dominance of private interests were highlighted. It is the art work and art intervention which initiated the power conflict among different groups of people, through a physical confrontation in the physical space.

To conclude, these art interventions, and the installations produced during the interventions, brought attention to the dominance of corporate power within the urban social space and the public’s right of access of those urban spaces. Due to the geographical and social particularity of the chosen sites – Times Square and the HSBC Headquarters – they contributed essentially to a reading of Li’s art

¹⁴⁶ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989)

interventions and the installations. In addition, the intervention that took place in the public space was charged with economic significance, contrasting local or foreign shoppers with the alternative social reality of the under-represented communities signified by the red-white-blue nylon folding bed. Li's interventions situate social critique in significant or highly-charged urban spaces, thereby opening up room for reflection on the multi-dimensionality of Hong Kong identity.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has offered a reading of works of art that employ the ubiquitous nylon fabric known colloquially in Hong Kong as red-white-blue. Works of art by five Hong Kong artists including Stanley Wong, Kith Tsang, Doris Wong, Siu King Chung and Tim Li have been discussed. The thesis has also presented a discussion of the notions of Hong Kong identity connoted by red-white-blue and the art works that use this commonplace material. The dynamic interactions between artworks, red-white-blue and the notions of Hong Kong identity were analysed.

Chapter One provided a brief biography of red-white-blue and the early development of Hong Kong art in order to lay the groundwork for the analysis of red-white-blue artworks in the specific Hong Kong context. Hong Kong artists have sought through the media they employed in the New Ink Painting movement in the 1960s to explore an expression of localness. This widespread art trend of the 1960s shows how Chinese tradition and modernist influences are irreconcilable and complex in artistic expression. However, popular understanding of Hong Kong art often falls into the 'East meets West' dichotomy which is reductive and which, as I have argued, provoked a reaction from young artists who have explored notions of localness in art by engaging with current social issues and the daily lives of Hong Kong people. This exploration of the more mundane and daily particulars of Hong Kong life is expressed in artists' interest in using industrial materials instead of traditional artistic media such as Chinese ink. The experience of living in Hong Kong also shows artists' sensitivity to the spatial quality of Hong Kong. These features are particularly obvious in the installations that emerge in the 1980s to 1990s. Attention to the changing media, form and subject matter of HK art is

essential for a thorough understanding of the relationship between red-white-blue artworks and the notion of Hong Kong identity.

Chapter Two discussed the works of Stanley Wong including *Show Flat* (2003), *Tea and Chat* (2005) and *From London to Hong Kong to London* (2005) in order to demonstrate the way that Wong's works thematise red-white-blue as a representation of Hong Kong identity. A growing identification of red-white-blue as a signifier of Hong Kong identity has resulted from the promotion of Wong's works in prominent exhibitions. Over time, this identification has affected the reading of other artworks that use red-white-blue. In response to a fixed and unitary notion of Hong Kong identity, the work of Kith Tsang has been shown to demonstrate an alternative focus which is concerned with the social inequality that exists between Hong Kong Chinese and mainland Chinese fighting for the right of abode.

Chapter Three included analyses of *Home-moving furniture* (2002) by Doris Wong and *Practical anatomy of redwhiteblue* (2004) by Siu King Chung, which also address the problematic notion of a fixed Hong Kong identity. The work of Doris Wong has been interpreted as representing the changed significance of the border-crossing experience in present-day Hong Kong as a point of departure to address the unstable aspects of Hong Kong identity. Siu King Chung's work has been shown to suggest the experience of consumption as a generally shared urban experience and as a representation of this experience in the local Hong Kong context. Siu reconstructs a local hawker stall using red-white-blue and integrates the local daily experience of the street market to explore the global influence of consumer culture in the local context.

Chapter Four provided an exploration of the art works and art interventions of

Tim Li that engage with the under-represented communities in the local community and public space. It is argued that by using Foucault's concept of heterotopias Li's art works and interventions, which are carried out in public space, have destabilised the unitary notion of Hong Kong identity; opening up a space for reflection and a rethinking of the nature of Hong Kong identity.

This thesis has examined the complexities of works of art that employ the commonplace red-white-blue material from Hong Kong artists including Stanley Wong, Kith Tsang, Doris Wong, Siu King Ching and Tim Li, with specific focus on the work's contestation and expression of Hong Kong identity. The thesis has also integrated the reading of the connotations of red-white-blue into the interpretation of red-white-blue art work and discussed how such connotations have been assimilated or reinvented by the artistic production. The study has employed an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate the formal qualities of the works and the relevant social particularities in order to suggest the complexity of the nature of Hong Kong identity which is mutable and diverse.

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