University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2005-6: Word & Image

Undergraduate Humanities Forum Research Fellows

4-1-2006

From Pictogram to Pinyin. . .And Beyond

Wun Ting Wendy Tai
University of Pennsylvania

2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

URL: http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/05-06/mellon_uhf.shtml

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2006/16
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

From Pictogram to Pinyin. . .And Beyond

Wun Ting Wendy Tai, College '08
University of Pennsylvania

2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image
Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

Final Project
Artist Statement
April 2006

Artist Statement on *Ice: Hong Kong 2005* Wun Ting Wendy Tai

Some external information is probably needed in order for you to approach this piece with an informed eye, so I'm going to talk briefly about the Chinese writing system, the use of text in contemporary Chinese art, the political situation in Hong Kong and my views about the city, and why I chose to work in this medium.

So first, a brief history of the Chinese writing system. In the West, public squares were dominated by figurative statues of heroes and rulers, but in China, ceremonial inscriptions and texts by a ruler engraved in stone were often found instead. That is an example of how calligraphy is deeply rooted in Chinese history and tradition.

There is a common false belief that the Chinese writing system is entirely pictographic. That was how it was in 1500 BC; nowadays most characters are actually semantic-phonetic, with only less than 3% of all characters as pictographic. Many factors led to the evolution of characters, such as the political, technological and the cultural.

The political include the Qin reforms in 221 BC and Sun Yat-sen's use of calligraphy as an alternative to public speaking at the beginning of the 20th C. The importance of writing within the political sphere was more recently exemplified by the simplification of characters by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s. This was an attempt to standardize the script to promote unity among the hugely diverse Chinese population, to break China's continuity with past literature, and to eliminate illiteracy.

Technology, systems for digitally writing Chinese characters were developed, which led us to reconsider the role of Chinese text in the modern world. The art of brush and ink that had been closely related to the elite for much of its history was challenged by the onset of computerized fonts.

A cultural transformation that is more relevant to my project is the increased interaction with the Western world and globalization that has led to the Romanization of Chinese characters. Romanization system Wade-Giles was superseded by Pinyin in 1979 for Standard Chinese, which is the official Chinese language used in China. These systems act as a bond between the east and the west, and reflect the increasing modernization, or perhaps westernization, of Chinese society.

The history of the Chinese language is related to the work by many contemporary Chinese artists. By making use of language, artists such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan were able to challenge particular forms of ideology, and provide cultural, political, philosophical and social critiques in the 1980s. They sought to introduce serious flaws in traditional artforms like calligraphy so that their works only conformed superficially to tradition. In the 1990s, artists like Qui Zhijie and Song Dong were more interested in using newer mediums, such as video and photography, in almost performative portrayals of such traditions, which sometimes led to transforming the act of writing into a ritual. All these artists use the Chinese language as a basis for ideological

critiques, and it continues to be a source of inspiration for contemporary Chinese artists today.

Now, a little about Hong Kong.It is one of the world's most liberal economies. It is a former British colony and is now administered by the People's Republic of China, under the "one country, two systems" policy. Hong Kong is constitutionally entitled to a relatively high degree of autonomy. Only national defence and diplomatic relations are responsibilities of the central government in Beijing. It is headed by the Chief Executive who is elected by an 800-member Election Committee; presently, there is no universal suffrage in Hong Kong.

There is a population density of 6400 km2 – to put this into context; Philadelphia has a population density of 4300. Due its high population density Hong Kong is a very vertical city. Because of this concentration, the pace of living is extremely rapid and the spread of news very quick. Changes in the social climate occur rapidly – for example, one month the entire population may be extremely driven by a certain cause, and the next month everything would seem to have returned to normal. There is actually a lot I can say about this, but overall, it has led to a society that has a somewhat short attention span; emotions are intense but fleeting; they rise and dissipate quickly.

<< Several factors contribute to this: 1) the general money earning 'survival' mentality of HK people – it is a very business-oriented city, materialistic and consumerism-driven. There isn't a lot of social welfare, and someone who is involved with political activism will not get financial support from the government nor the public, and so many choose not to go down that road. Moreover, Chinese people are generally more subdued and don't actively express our opinions or concerns openly. This characteristic is further encouraged by past colonialism. Many HK people are not politically-minded, nor are they particularly aware of or involved in global issues because of opinion suppression. There is also the fear of consequences for speaking out one's mind from the Chinese government, and so there are many different levels of self-censorship. The media also has an enormous influence on Hong Kong society. We have all forms of media that the US has and perhaps even more (there are tvs on trains, buses, subways), and people are constantly attacked by the media from all fronts, and certainly it shapes our cultural values and the way we think. Therefore, when something happens in Hong Kong, it is usually played up by the media, creating a false impression of many people being concerned with the issue. >>

While doing my research, a major political situation was taking place there. As I was in the US, all personal observations were made halfway across the world; so for me there is a certain sense of decontextualization and distance from the situation. As I mentioned, Hong Kong is not yet self-determinant. On December 4 last year, tens of thousands of people protested for democracy and called on the Government to allow universal and equal suffrage. The protesters demanded the right to directly elect the Chief Executive and all the seats of the Legislative Council. The question is whether the march was a

temporary superficial and physical ‘coming-together’; was it a chance for people to easily voice their opinion, and then quickly revert back to their normal routine?

In my opinion, during the march and the months leading up to it, Hong Kong was in an intensely emotional state. But only a month had to pass after the demonstration for the political and social climate returned back to normal. And that is why I chose to use ice as a medium for this piece; it captures the transitional aspect of the situation, and the ephemeral quality of politics in Hong Kong. I was also influenced by a performance art piece by Wang Jin called *Ice: Central China 1996*, in which he created a sculptural monument as part of the opening ceremony for the city’s first large shopping mall. They made a 30-meter-long wall of ice in which were embedded many consumer items. When the public saw these goods, they began to dig them out, and finally brought down the wall.

So that was Wang’s way of commenting on consumerism in China. Though I am not making a statement about consumerism in Hong Kong, it is relevant in the sense that it is a very consumerist society that is trying to obtain universal suffrage (minzhu), which is encased in the ice (communism – gong3chan4). The ice acts as a contrast to the ‘heated’ political and social debates over the topic of self-determination; like Wang’s glacial order of objects that immobilized desire, the ice is representative of Beijing’s reluctance to grant democracy. The march was perhaps in this sense ineffectual and in the end rendered useless and forgotten.

The development of the project eventually led me to meet the owner of Ice Illusions, Kim Fong. Kim generously offered to teach me how to sculpt ice, but what is even more interesting is that Kim’s parents were born in HK, and then his family moved to Vietnam, so his background had relevance to my sculpture.

And the idea of an ice sculpture after a lunch reception I think is somewhat subversive, in the sense that I have taken something extremely tacky and conceptualized it and placed it in an academic conference.

Minzhú

Minzhú