



## TEACHING LABS | PEARL RIVER DELTA: FROM WORLD FACTORY TO CULTURAL COMMUNITY TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK

Date & Time: June 17, 2017 (Saturday), 10:00am-1:00pm

Venue: A Space, Asia Art Archive

Speaker: Anthony Yung, AAA Researcher

### **I. From World Factory to Cultural Community**

#### Foreword

We will be discussing Pearl River Delta art today, and the seminar's topic is "From World Factory to Cultural Community".

We all know that the Pearl River Delta area in Guangdong was famous for its light industry and processing industry, earning the name "World Factory". A lot of merchandise around the world were once produced at factories in Dongguan and Shenzhen. However, the Pearl River Delta is no longer known as the World Factory. During the course of economic development, many factories have relocated to Southeast Asia and Africa. In Pearl River Delta, a lot of factories have transitioned to high-skilled manufacturing.

I only know little about the Pearl River Delta's economic development. But interestingly, the area has gradually become a cultural community since the late 1990s. In the past, Pearl River Delta was an economic concept. But after the mid and late-1990s, it has been a cultural concept. Such a concept is very interesting and it has become the theme of today's programme.

#### Rem Koolhaas

Rem Koolhaas was among the first to study the Pearl River Delta from a cultural viewpoint. Koolhaas is one of the most famous architects, and his works can be found around the globe. The Dutch architect started paying attention to the Pearl River Delta from 1995 to 1997. His research was visionary, as the Pearl River Delta was only seen as an economy back then.

As an architect and an urban studies researcher, Koolhaas started to observe the

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changes of the Pearl River Delta. He found the area strange, especially when economic growth was at its peak during the 1990s. He brought some graduates he taught at Harvard University's architecture department to carry out research in the area, and the book *Great Leap Forward* was published afterwards. It is a great book. If you want to learn more about the Pearl River Delta, you have to read this.

Koolhaas studied different places within the Pearl River Delta, including Dongguan. He described the city in the delta as "city of exacerbated difference". It is a simple concept. According to his theories, conventional cities went through meticulous design, with the aim of building harmonious cities with rules and discipline. This is called urban planning.

However, this is only a European tradition. In Asia, many cities were developed rapidly, and urban planning in the Western context doesn't exist. Asian cities are huge with dense populations, and it can get quite chaotic. There's no long-term planning as the infrastructure is built to meet expedient needs.

Koolhaas is very interested in the process of urbanisation of the cities in the Pearl River Delta. Without planning, the large area has become urbanised. Koolhaas thinks these cities have displayed another kind of force of life, just like an organism that can reproduce on its own: Different cells and organs are operating, yet they accommodate each other. They fulfil their needs through unabating development, and interact with different units. The delta has become an organic ensemble, and Koolhaas called it a "city of exacerbated differences". He even added the trademark symbol behind the phrase - to show that he created it.

In 1997, Koolhaas had an important exhibition at documenta 10, showing his research on the Pearl River Delta. The Pearl River Delta was introduced to the global art world.

## Canton Express

An exhibition named *Canton Express* will open soon at M+ in West Kowloon Cultural District. It is one of the reasons why the Pearl River Delta was picked as today's theme. *Canton Express* was an exhibition from 2003, and most of the exhibits have become part of the M+ collection. The upcoming exhibition is actually an exhibition showcasing M+'s collection.

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The 2003 *Canton Express* was very interesting. In that year, the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale was divided into 12 mini exhibitions. One of them was called *Zone of Urgency*, with Hou Hanru as the curator. This is what the exhibition looked like. It set out to explore the incidents and feelings of “urgency”, translating the speed of cities, the organic energy of the working class into an exhibition.

Many Asian artists took part in that exhibition, and *Canton Express* was part of it.

*Canton Express* was an ensemble of work by artists living in the Guangdong region. This is what *Canton Express* looked like. The design came from the street markets in Guangzhou. It was an open street during daytime, but at night hawkers would build their stalls with bamboo scaffolds, turning it into a temporary night market. Artist Zheng Guogu designed this structure, which displayed works from different artists.

Hou Hanru, the curator of *Canton Express*, is another important figure behind the development of the cultural concept of the Pearl River Delta. Active internationally, Hou enjoys a great reputation as a curator. Interestingly, Hou was born in Guangzhou and speaks Cantonese. After studying in Beijing, Hou moved to Paris. Now he lives in Rome. Contemporary cities have always been an important theme in the exhibitions he curates.

(Interview with Hou Hanru from “Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990”)

“At that time we would read whatever we could get. We would read multiple books concurrently. I can barely recall now what I wrote or published in the 1980s. Interestingly, as I go down memory lane I realise that I have always been partial to alternatives. In short, I despise anything considered very fashionable. If there is something that seems like splitting hair to other people and receives no attention from them, I intuitively find it interesting. I tend to shy away from anything romantic and lean towards something more... not profound, but peculiar. I think this tendency has something to do with how I conduct myself, especially around the issue of deconstructing nationalism. For example, as a form of resistance, when I read I never think with Mandarin Chinese, only Cantonese. The way I learned English was that when the professors spoken Chinese in class, I’d simultaneously translate the lectures into English. I would keep writing English until they flowed nicely. Language is more than just a tool; it is a state of mind.”

“When I was a kid, the atmosphere in Guangzhou was very interesting. At that time, there were plenty of political rumors going around of which you could surely find a hilarious Cantonese version. I grew up listening to these political jokes from my uncles, aunts, classmates and cousins. Everyone. The day Mao Zedong passed away in 1976 was on the day after Autumn Festival. The night of Autumn Festival was rather unusual and particularly bleak. The moon was white but covered by clouds. The next day we were let out from school at 4pm, we were asked to return to our classrooms by the school for an important news announcement. A thought popped into my mind: “I wonder if ‘grandpa’ died?” I don’t know why this thought came to me, maybe because Zhou Enlai and Zhu De passed away in that same year. As soon as the announcement was made, a couple of my classmates began to cry. The rest of the class burst out laughing. We were laughing at them crying over Mao’s death; we were that rebellious. I was in the 7th year which was the last year in the elementary school. At that time, the six-year system of primary education was cancelled. The atmosphere in Guangzhou was very unique.”

“The more I think about what have happened in China in the past decades, the more I feel that Guangzhou is a “laboratory.” For example, Guangzhou was a hideout for Mao Zedong when he was hunted by assassins; also Lin Biao. Many things and people have gotten their start in Guangdong, including Zhao Ziyang who first rose to prominence in Guangzhou. The earliest modernization attempts in China, and later Special Economic Zone. This fascinating past probably was the reason why I adopt it as the theme when I curated the Guangzhou Triennial exhibition.”

## **II. Pearl River Delta as a diverse concept**

### Geopolitics of the Pearl River Delta

The Pearl River Delta has been seen as a laboratory, and it is an important idea.

Ever since the economic reforms in 1978, the Chinese Communist government has always started their economic experiments in Guangdong. For example, measures like the dual-check system, tax exemption and economic zones were all first introduced in Guangdong. Compared to other provinces and areas, Guangdong has always been subject to less rigid control. Back then, Guangdong enjoyed a lot of favourable policies, making it the most affluent province in the

country within a short time. Quoting Deng Xiaoping's famous words, it was "letting some people get rich first".

A lot of policy experiments were conducted in Guangdong. Of course, there are historical reasons. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Guangzhou was already an important port city in China. Also, Guangdong is far away from the political centre in Beijing, and thus it's safer to carry out different policy experiments. Political regimes do not carry out any experiments anywhere close to the heart of power.

First and foremost, the Pearl River Delta is a geographical concept which includes these places. We can understand the concept this way: On the map of China, the red part is Guangdong province. Even though it is not a large province, but Guangdong has always been highly significant. The pink area is the Pearl River Delta, including nine cities: Zhaoqing, Foshan, Zhongshan, Zhuhai, Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Weizhou.

Later, the people coined a new term, "Great Pearl River Delta," which includes Hong Kong and Macau. Zhuhai and Shenzhen are "economic special zones", while Macau and Hong Kong are "special administrative regions". Therefore, all these special Chinese cities are located in the Pearl River Delta. Guangdong province also includes places like Chaozhou and the city of Yunfu.

In 2012, the Pearl River Delta's population reached 64 million. Even though I couldn't find more recent figures, the current population must exceed 64 million. There's some information for reference. In 2017, 65 million live in the United Kingdom - and that's the population of the whole country. France's population is similar to that of the UK, and there are only 59 million people living in Italy. China has a huge population - there are more people living in this little red dot than the United Kingdom.

#### Guangdong in the global context

The cultural concepts of the "Pearl River Delta" and "Guangdong" are pretty much identical. For example, most places within the delta are Cantonese-speaking. It's called "Yue Yu" in the mainland, while Hong Kongers call the language Cantonese. The Cantonese people also have a long history of migration. There are Cantonese immigrants and their descendants around the world.

The Cantonese people are fiercely proud of their cultural traditions, and they pay much attention to preserving the traditions in daily life, for example the habits of speaking Cantonese. It is difficult to get an accurate number, but there is a large Cantonese-speaking population. According to Wikipedia, there are 100 million Cantonese-speaking people around the globe.

This is a Chinese restaurant in Glasgow, Scotland (In the past, many Chinese restaurants in China towns in Western countries were owned by the Cantonese people. But now there are more Chinese restaurants run by the Sichuanese.) This restaurant is called Canton Express. When Hou Hanru was organising the exhibition, he had a roast duck rice at that restaurant. This is the inspiration behind the name of the exhibition. The exterior of this restaurant looks like a cha chaan teng in Hong Kong from the 1980s.

You wouldn't only see Canton in Glasgow. You can also see Canton in South Africa. You can see Canton around the world.

Hou Hanru has a fascinating story:

When Hou was organising an exhibition for the biennale in Johannesburg, South Africa, he had an unforgettable experience. At that time, he was exploring different modes of exhibition. He hoped that the main part of the exhibition wouldn't be showcased at an art museum, but in the black neighbourhoods in the countryside and towns. It meant that he moved the show to the countryside - and Hou loved doing that.

He played a lot of contemporary art videos at restaurants, bars and cultural palaces. A small bar in the poorest town was owned by a black man in his seventies. He called himself "Umm Jan", Uncle John in Dutch.

When Hou entered the bar, Uncle John asked if he was Chinese, and if he could speak Cantonese. Uncle John started talking to him in Cantonese. How could this black person, who had never left this little town in South Africa, speak Cantonese?

Uncle John was an orphan, and was adopted by a Cantonese family at age four, five. He said if it wasn't for his adopted family, he wouldn't be running a bar here and enjoying a great life.

Hou was deeply touched. He believes all the artistic, cultural work he does is to prove the possibility of communication between people in history and daily life. Cultural topics like globalisation and post-colonialism have always been rooted in life.

Colonialism and globalisation are always discussed in contemporary art and critical theories. At first glance, these theories look complex, difficult and disconnected with the reality. But these are things happening in our daily life - many of these encounters are wonderful.

Using "Guangdong" as an example, you can see it everywhere in the world. In Hong Kong, most of the people are Cantonese and they speak the language. We are in the thick of it and we seldom discuss the meaning of Guangdong culture. But only people living or returning from overseas can tell the distinct values of Cantonese culture.

Hou Hanru is a great example. He only realised Guangdong is such a special place after leaving. Travelling allows us to experience different cultures. I once visited San Francisco, and its China town is just like Hong Kong in the 1980s, with many people from Toi Shan. Therefore, "Guangdong" is not only a small place in southern China. It is not a narrow concept in geography. It is an interesting example of cultural globalisation.

### **III. Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts**

Let us look back at Guangzhou. The capital city of Guangdong province, Guangzhou has a long history in art and nurtured generations of famed artists. During economic bloom, there are lots of cultural activities. The Lingnan school of painting that all of us are familiar with originates from Guangdong. Painter Guan Liang was also from the southern province.

In modern China, after Shanghai, Guangzhou is the most important city in art development. Guangzhou is home to an art school with a long history - Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. It is one of four biggest art schools in the country, and the others are Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing. In

terms of reputation, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts is ranked the third. To this date, many artists from Guangdong are graduates of this academy.

This is Yang Jiechang, who graduated from the department of traditional Chinese painting of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.

( Interview with Yang Jiechang from "Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990")

"Students studying traditional Chinese painting were more conservative. But despite that, there were some unique characters. Chen Tong was one: he was obsessed with Western philosophy. In general, the students sort of looked down upon themselves - they think traditional Chinese painting, compared to oil painting and sculpture, isn't really contemporary art. Many students are more traditional. Even though the academy is often criticised for its conservatism, its biggest merit lies in the lack of famous artists. Students soon realise the quality of teaching is dissatisfactory. So, if you are smart, you realise you have to think about your future and seek knowledge outside of the school. It could be great trouble if you follow a master, because once you idolise someone, it's difficult to stop. Starting from 1979, Yang Zhiguang, the head of the traditional Chinese painting department, brought us to visit famous artists in Beijing, Hangzhou and Shanghai. These exchanges taught me a few things: I realised my limits and the world outside is big. Therefore, it's not about the school - the most important thing is yourself. At that time, I was rebellious and disobedient. There were no teachers at the department worth mentioning. Perhaps this is what sets Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts apart from the art schools in Hangzhou and Beijing."

In contemporary art, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts is well known for its conservatism and fear of new things. Schools are interesting because it can either be a positive or a negative example. For most of the time, the students see the school as a mirror. Whatever the school teaches, they would absorb the knowledge and immerse themselves in contemporary art.

These artists graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and many of them became great contemporary artists. And they are the ones behind the exhibition *Canton Express*.

#### **IV. Key words of Guangdong art**

I want to introduce some concepts using a simpler way. We can discuss Guangdong art with some key words.

##### Self-organisation

“Self-organisation” is an important concept in our discussion. We know that in contemporary Chinese art, most of the important organisations are located in Beijing and Shanghai, with most resources devoted to these two cities. Even though Guangdong is affluent, resources have not been placed in the development of modern art. It has always been the case since the 1980s, but there has been some improvement in the past few years.

Guangzhou-based artists value “self-organisation”. Without state organisations, how can artists do what they want to do? They have to do it themselves. This is a commendable quality - in contemporary art or daily life. Many artists blame the government for the lack of subsidies or a system, but in this regard, I admire these Guangdong artists. From the past to this date, it’s impossible for them to get any money from the government. It was already a lot of help if authorities didn’t shut down the exhibitions. These Guangdong artists are able to carry on with their work without any state support.

In Guangzhou, there’s an organisation with a long history: the Borges Libreria. Founded in the mid-1990s, the bookstore is named after Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. It sells books, but it is also a publisher which plays a significant role in introducing contemporary French literature to China.

On the left, the person in a white t-shirt is Chen Tong, the founder of the Borges Libreria. He’s still running the business today. Without any state support, this bookstore plays multiple roles. Ever since the 1990s, it has been organising exhibitions and different activities. This photo shows its current location. Chen Tong is a painter. He was working on his ink painting in his painting room when we were interviewing him.

This photo shows a typical exhibition in Guangzhou during the 1990s. At that time, the city was undergoing a lot of changes - redevelopment and demolition. Many of the buildings were stuck in limbo, and there were a lot of “empty spaces”. Many artists would make use of these places: sometimes they rented, or even

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snuck to hold exhibitions. These spaces were dimly lit, creating a similar atmosphere to a basement. It wasn't intentional, and the artists had no choices. Guangzhou artists are very sensitive to changes, and they realised as early as in the 1990s that the changes of the city have a huge impact on the daily life of people. "Demolishment" and "reconstruction" have become a constant theme in their art work.

This is fantastic work discussing urban redevelopment by artist Xu Tan. It is called the *Renovations of 14 Sanyu Road*. That was a beautiful building to be demolished and rebuilt, so a few artists used the space to host their own exhibitions. Xu Tan's very much against formats. His work is unique as there is some sort of chaos - it's not easy to tell which is part of his work.

As 14 Sanyu Road was to be rebuilt, he proposed renovation plans. He came up with two proposals: to start a book store, and to start a hair salon. "Hair salon" is not a place to have a haircut, but a vice establishment.

He did serious research for the two proposals. He looked into the cost of starting a bookstore, the renovation design of a bookstore, ways to make profit and what kind of books to sell. He also found out a lot about starting a hair salon: how to bribe the police; how to find the right girls; how to plan the salon's layout and do soundproofing. He even talked to the workers.

The two proposals were done meticulously. Of course, there were some elements of satire, but he wanted to raise a question: in the 1990s, Guangzhou were undergoing tremendous changes, and no one knew how it would look like in the future. Would it become a bookstore, or a hair salon? It remained a riddle in many cases.

Of course, a bookstore and a "hair salon" were very symbolic. A bookstore is considered more cultured and idealistic, while a "hair salon" represents consumption of the most vulgar kind.

## Cultural desert

Xu Tan has always been interested in the rise of consumerism in the daily life, and the changes of the city of Guangzhou. There was a popular notion: Guangdong is a "cultural desert". It is an interesting phenomenon. Within the country, people in the north would say Guangdong is a "cultural desert", while people from

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Guangdong describe Hong Kong as a “cultural desert”. Hong Kong probably doesn’t know what to do in response, maybe they could say the Lantau Island is a “cultural desert” instead. It is an interesting discussion topic.

Xu Tan once said this:

“What I find most interesting and delightful is that we (artists living in Guangdong) look at both international culture and Chinese culture from a distance. Guangdong is a special case, and we are different from the northerners. They have been immersed in the mainstream of the Chinese traditional culture, but we look at it from a certain distance. The same goes for Western culture.” People from Guangdong have been said to be uncultured, and the province is a “cultural desert”. But Xu Tan said it’s enjoyable to walk across the “cultural desert”.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of their stance on culture, Guangdong artists are at the fringe of a mainstream culture. In Chinese culture, Guangdong of course is on the fringe. In a globalised culture, you don’t really know where to place “Guangdong” - perhaps on the fringe of the fringe. Faced with this situation, Guangdong artists have come up with a lot of thoughts and ways to deal with it, and they have gained confidence during this process.

Just like what Xu Tan said, it might be more comfortable to be in a “cultural desert” because people are not burdened with traditional culture. They can be creative in their own ways. Like Xu Tan, his work can shatter all existing formats - but this isn’t as easily done in other places. No matter where you are, it is possible to engage in art and creation with freedom. But for Guangdong artists, they are able to do so because of their confidence built on their “marginal” identity.

## Urban landscape

Another key word is “urban landscape”. Guangdong artists place great importance on the role of the city plays in their life, and it’s a crucial element in Guangdong culture. People from Guangdong and Hong Kong value street life. Eating at dai pai dongs (street stalls) and wandering on the street are their favourite activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Liang Juhui, Chen Shaoxiong, Xu Tan, Lin Yilin, *Transcript of a Meeting of Big-Tail Elephant*, 1993.

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I thought it's the same around the world when I was a kid, but I only realised I was very much mistaken after I grew up. For example, you wouldn't wander on the street in Vancouver. Beijing is another example. Two blocks are a short distance for us, but walking two blocks in the Chinese capital would exhaust you.

Guangzhou is a beautiful street city, so is Hong Kong. In Guangzhou, you can walk from the south to the north. Even though there's the Pearl River in between, you can still walk over the river on the footbridge.

"Veranda" is a great invention in Guangzhou architecture. It is an open-air gallery attached to a building, but we see fewer and fewer of them now. It's a beautiful structure, so people on the street can be shaded from rain or sunshine. Guangdong and Hong Kong have heavy rainfalls, so verandas are important. It's a shame that shopping malls have replaced verandas in serving this function now.

In Guangdong art, street life is an important theme, and *Street* by artist Chen Shaoxiong is a great example. The concept is simple. He took a photo of every object on every street in Guangzhou. Then, he cut each photo into pieces and combined different pieces into another photo showing the look of a street. His goal was to create a photo like this of every street in Guangzhou, and host an exhibition showcasing the streets in Guangzhou.

What was the criticism behind? Many people from Guangzhou and Hong Kong, especially during the 1990s, were obsessed with the West. In the past, a lot of Guangzhou buildings were called "Manhattan", "The Eiffel Tower" or "The Louvre". For a period of time, Hong Kong had the same trend as well. In those property ads, attractive white people are dressed in suits, but you will never see the real residents from Hong Kong. This phenomenon on the living environment and the yearning for the Western way of life is worth reflecting on and critiquing.

Through his work, Chen wanted to bring a taste of a life overseas those from Guangzhou who couldn't move away. At the same time, his work aimed to showing the streets of Guangzhou to the foreign audiences. Those who had never visited Guangzhou would probably find the city fascinating.

## Temporality

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“Temporariness” and “changes” are other ways to understand Guangdong art. Many of the works by Guangdong artists discuss physical and metaphorical changes in the city.

Lin Yilin’s works are interesting examples, as well. He’s a graduate of the sculpture department of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. In the 1990s, he started exploring installation art. He has developed the habit of using heavy construction materials. As shown in this photo, bricks are used. His works show something interesting. We have always assumed construction materials, such as bricks, iron frames or cement, are heavy and immobile. But in his works, these materials have been moved around, and they looked weightless.

Lin’s works are reflections on the urban life in Guangzhou during the 1990s. The speed of changes was astonishing. Buildings are immovable assets, but in China, they are under constant changes. Demolishment and construction can happen at any time, leading to an ephemeral landscape.

This photo shows one of the best works by Lin. It’s called *Safely Manoeuvring Across Linhe Road*. The Linhe Road is in Guangzhou. At that time, an 80-storey office building named Citic Plaza was being built. It was said to be the tallest building in Asia.

Lin used bricks to build a wall running over Linhe Road. There was a lot of traffic on this road. He was constantly on the move, adding and taking away the bricks. When he crossed the zebra crossing, he looked like an animal crossing the road. Vehicles avoided him when he was crossing, and drivers had no idea what he’s doing. But most people didn’t find him strange, because there was a lot of construction and demolishment going on. The whole street was like a construction site. Regular folks thought he was only working. It was such a bizarre yet common scene.

Another work relating to the city is *An hourlong game* by Liang Juhui. He entered a construction site and played video games on an elevator. It’s the simplest video game with simple graphics. In the game, he controlled an aircraft to shoot at the walls. When he was playing, the elevator went up and down. When construction workers were building high walls, he was tearing down a wall in the virtual world. What he did was a move obstructing the construction.

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The forewords by Chen Tong (He was the artist and founder of Borges Libreria I mentioned before) were a succinct introduction to Liang's work:

In the past decade (it was 2005 at that time, so the past decade here meant 1995 to 2005), China has been in a continuous process of opening-up. So, he described modern China as a country in flux. There's no way to oppose the transitory nature, so China has built a lot of skyscrapers to guarantee the "non-temporariness". He called it "the temporary value of eternity", or "the temporariness of eternity". It's like a person can survive even though he has never got a job in his whole life. Some authority figures in the academy thought the work done by the likes of Xu Tan were set up for failure. They were surprised that not only did Xu survive, but he carved out a good life for himself. These figures found it bizarre that these "temporary" people weren't exterminated.<sup>2</sup>

It's funny yet carries a certain amount of truth. In the past two decades or so, commentators have been saying that the Chinese economy is on the brink of collapse. But why hasn't the worst-case scenario happened? Economists around the world have been perplexed over this. Following the same logic, why can Xu Tan still survive? How can ridiculous things keep happening? Why has "temporariness" become a norm? This is a reflection on the development of the whole country. It's a strange phenomenon.

## Rebellious

Another keyword is "rebellious". This work is a good explanation of "rebellious" - both in terms of format and content. This piece is by artist Zheng Guogu. He comes from Yangjiang, a small coastal city in the southern Guangdong province.

After graduating from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, he returned to his hometown. What he did is rare among Chinese artists, as most of them would move to big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing for work. But Cheng said he couldn't work if he left his hometown. So, a commentary on Cheng is called *Work around Home*.

He was doing photography works in the 1990s, which took many by surprise at that time. People were puzzled over how to define his works, since there were no structures in the content. Today, it's easier to comprehend, but most people were

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<sup>2</sup> Forewords by Chen Tong is from "Laboratory of the Pearl River Delta" Talk, 2005.

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startled back then. In fact, the way he worked was quite simple: he was chronicling the daily life of his families and friends with his photos.

The Hong Kong movie series “Young and Dangerous” was all the rage at that time. Many in Guangdong were fascinated by young triad members, and they even dressed like them. Zheng found it interesting, so he asked his friends to re-enact some of the movie scenes, such as fights and wooing girls. His photo collection was then named *The Vagarious Life of Yangjiang Youth*

Zheng’s work is a genuine reflection on life, but it looks bizarre and ridiculous at the same time. In China and around the world, a lot of things looked silly yet realistic. Artists like to explore these themes.

## Hybridity

This photo is by Cao Fei. I want to use this to explain the concept of hybridity. In fact, Guangdong culture is a mixed. It is open to influences from Western, Japanese and Korean cultures. Guangdong culture doesn’t concern itself with cultural norms or traditions, so it is malleable and flexible. Sometimes, it leads to chaos and disorder.

Ever since the mid-2000s, comics and animation (ACG) has become hugely popular among young people. When they turn themselves into comics figures, it was called “cosplay” in the past and is now called “nijigen”. It was a time when the ACG culture started to take root in Guangzhou. When you left home after dressing up as a comics figure, your father could be sitting there reading *Guangzhou Daily*. It was a huge contrast. Cao Fei created a series of works based on this juxtaposition. Not everything in the scenarios was real, but they still carried some truth. It resulted in an odd hybridity.

## Tradition and subversion

Another point is tradition and subversion. In many places in Guangdong, traditional culture has been preserved. Within the country, Guangdong province preserved more traditional culture. The north has experienced a lot of political movements, such as the Cultural Revolution, which led to unprecedented damages to traditional culture. They are not able to keep the culture alive in their life. But Guangdong, as well as Fujian province, are away from the political centre and they were less influenced by the political turbulence. Besides, overseas Chinese are important. Many of the overseas Chinese are actually from

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Guangdong or Fujian, and traditional Chinese culture has been preserved among them, such as habits and dialects. Hoikken is one of the oldest dialects in China.

Tradition is ingrained in our life, but we seldom consider ourselves heirs of traditional culture, and we'd like to challenge traditions. We don't think that some cultures are superior, and we use these elements in our daily life. You can witness tradition and subversion among Guangdong artists, too.

The "Yangjiang Group" is an excellent example. It's the group formed by Zheng Guoju and a few of his friends. They love calligraphy, but they are always tipsy when they practice calligraphy. In this photo, they were performing calligraphy. But there are no rules in their calligraphy, and they'd like to do whatever they want. In fact, they are very knowledgeable in calligraphy, but I never understand what they have been studying. Their calligraphy looks similar every time.

It's easier to understand this photo. They have been tracing modern calligraphy in daily life. "God is dead", "Life is hopeless", "Emptying our warehouse" ... these were phrases written by owners whose shop were closing. The group found these phrases melancholic and their structures beautiful. Some ink was dripping when they were written. They found such calligraphy fascinating and touching, so they wrote these phrases in their works as well.

## Autonomy

The last concept is autonomy. We are not talking about political autonomy but cultural autonomy. It means that they do not rely on other cultural resources, but grow organically. This work by Yang Jiechang is quite amusing. When Hou Hanru was organising the *Laboratory of the Pearl River Delta* exhibition, he invited Yang to participate.

Yang created a flag, which was made of a label taken from his wife's clothes. That means he didn't put too much thought into finding the materials for this "Pearl River Delta Flag". The flag reads: "We know everything, but we don't know how to speak Mandarin." This is important. Of course he's joking, but works from Yang and other Guangdong artists show cultural confidence. In Chinese culture, Guangdong is seen as the fringe. How do they response to that notion? It's not about rejecting others - but we have to have confidence in ourselves. We have to understand our own culture.

### Discussion questions

At last, I thought of some questions. I think they may be good questions for teaching. These questions are connected to our daily life, and I hope that we can have a discussion.

In our ever-changing living environment, how can we understand “temporariness” and “permanence”? In Hong Kong, we have been constantly experiencing changes in culture and urban landscape. As citizens, no matter if we are a student or a teacher, this is a question that we should think about. In our life, what is temporary? What is permanent? How do we look at this?

As Hong Kongers, we can reflect on our relations with the Pearl River Delta. Of course, there are a lot of direct links. For example, where is your ancestral hometown? Do you go back to visit your relatives? Do you interact with those living in the Pearl River Delta? Perhaps you have a cousin in Guangzhou or another cousin in Panyu. Another interesting cultural experience is the encounter of “Guangdong” overseas, especially for students. For example, if you visit the China towns in New York, San Francisco or Vienna, you can witness a lot of elements originating from Guangdong. You can hear Cantonese, or see rice with spare ribs, black beans and pepper. These cultural observations are very interesting.

The third question: I want to know if anyone still uses the term “cultural desert”. It seems that the term has been used less frequently. I remember it was often discussed during my childhood in the 1990s. Have you ever thought that Hong Kong and Guangdong are “cultural deserts”? If we no longer use this term, do we feel anything about our marginality? For me, my answer is yes. For ordinary citizens or young people, it’s easier to think that foreign cultures are superior or more fascinating, and there’s nothing special about Hong Kong culture. People’d like to attend art exhibitions from overseas, and it seems a great thing to attend art exhibitions in other countries. We believe that the things originating from Hong Kong is on the cultural fringe, and assume the best stuff is from other places. This notion is much driven by illusions. How can we understand this? And how can we face this?

I think many students would have some deep thoughts and real-life experiences. Most students are obsessed with Japanese and Korean cultures, and it could lead to displacement in life. For example, many people live in Hong Kong but they

The logo consists of the words "ASIA", "ART", and "ARCHIVE" in a red, sans-serif font. "ASIA" is at the top left, "ART" is to its right and slightly lower, and "ARCHIVE" is below "ART". A red line connects the end of "ASIA" to the top of "ART", and another red line connects the top of "ART" to the top of "ARCHIVE", forming a partial frame.

ASIA  
ART  
ARCHIVE

identify with Japan or Korea culturally. I think we could introduce this concept to students: if they experience displacement, how can they face it? Even though they like ACG, how can you turn ACT into a way of life, and reality? For example, we can understand ACG from new ways other than games or pure entertainment. We hope that it can lead to discussions among all of you. Thank you.