

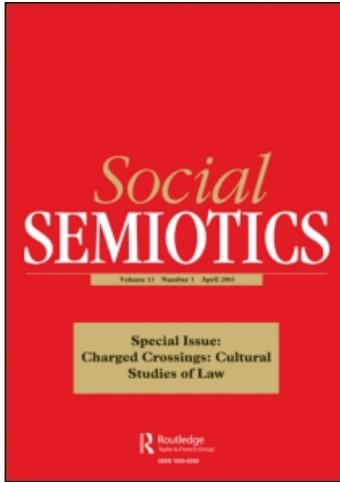
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Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Social Semiotics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713446841>

### Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's tactics of the mundane

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Online publication date: 23 September 2010

**To cite this Article** de Kloet, Jeroen(2010) 'Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's tactics of the mundane', *Social Semiotics*, 20: 4, 441 – 455

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2010.494396

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2010.494396>

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's tactics of the mundane

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*(Received 24 February 2010; final version received 11 May 2010)*

Drawing on the writings of Rey Chow, I aim in this article to show, first, how the performance of ethnic difference is played out in the Chinese artistic field, and, second, how the Chinese nation-state skilfully accommodates critical voices to buttress its global position. Chineseness has become a unique selling point, an ethnic trading card that lubricates the financial and ideological flows between the global art world, the Beijing cultural scene and the Chinese nation-state. The art district 798 serves as a key example for the recent emergence of creative industries in which ethnic difference plays an important productive force. In the third part of this article, I will show how Hong Kong complicates this picture, given that any claim by Hong Kong artists to ethnic difference is bound to be incomplete and impure. The work of Pak Sheung Chuen (Tozer Pak) constitutes a powerful critique on and explores artistic lines of flight out of the issue of Chineseness and its intricate links with an enchanted mode of global capitalism. It does so *not* by developing an artistic critique, which would after all be constitutive of capitalism itself, but by engaging in what I like to term a tactics of the banal and the mundane that are firmly located in the here and now. These tactics constitute, similar to Rey Chow's writing, a micropolitics that may help to move away from the overcoded language of ethnicity and Chineseness.

**Keywords:** ethnic difference; artistic field; Chineseness; Beijing art district 798; Hong Kong; Rey Chow; Pak Sheung Chuen

*To be ethnic is to protest* – but perhaps less for actual emancipation of any kind than for the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation. Ethnic struggles have become, in this manner, an indisputable symptom of the thoroughly and irrevocably mediatized relations of capitalism and its biopolitics. (Chow 2002, 48; original emphasis)

All our firm beliefs in culture ask the questions: Who are you? Who do you think you are? What do you want to become? Or what makes you believe you can become that? Well, what is the basis of this discourse? All we're talking about is: What has happened recently? What is happening now? What will happen in the future? (Ai Weiwei, quoted in He 2008, 39)

So why do we still keep on living? There has to be something that makes us believe the future is still beautiful, otherwise we can't keep on moving forward like that. (Pak 2009, 224)

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### Subway readings

Allow me to start this piece with a personal memory. In 2004, I lived for a few months in Shanghai. The city was in the midst of its dazzling transformation, and the Pudong skyline was gradually overshadowing the Bund. The colonial legacies remained visible, more as markers of a time past. The location where the Communist Party held its first conference was reincarnated as a glamorous shopping and entertainment district called *xintiandi*, an expected consummation of an unexpected romance between the Chinese Communist Party and global capitalism. Since my friends were living in the southern part of the city, myself more North, I frequently used the subway – that key signifier of urbanity, mobility and modernity. There and then, I was reading Rey Chow's (2002) *The protestant ethnic and the spirit of capitalism*. While China's radical make-over was passing by, often obscured by rain or smog, the book pushed me to look at, to look for, its flip side; to reflect not only upon the (ab)use of the disposable migrant workers who constructed this spectacular cityscape, but also upon how ethnicity – Chineseness – is inscribed into the global regime of capitalism.

Chow draws on the work of Weber and Lukács to interrogate the intricate links between ethnicity and global capitalism. She starts with probing into the reciprocal relationship between the West, predominantly the United States, and China, in which political dissidents have become commodities that can be freed in the name of human rights in exchange for improved business relationships. While the regime of human rights has become entrenched in the system of transnational corporatism, the Chinese regime retreats to the grounds of cultural essentialism to debunk the alleged universal moral superiority claims posed by the West:

whereas the West asserts its moral claims on the basis of a universalist rhetoric traceable to the European enlightenment, China is reduced to a reactive position from which it must and can speak only in terms of its own cultural and local specifics, in terms of its own historical differences. (Chow 2002, 20)

Ethnicity and cultural difference have thus become part and parcel of the regime of global capitalism. Labour has become ethnicized, “the ethnic as such stands in modernity as the site of a foreignness that is produced from within privileged societies and is at once defined by and constitutive of that society's hierarchical divisions of labor” (Chow 2002, 34). Chow questions the idea of class consciousness, struggle and resistance as proposed by Lukács, as its modernist focus on “humanity” and “soul” understands ethnic difference in terms of universalist moral claims that are “implicated in violence; this violence, in turn, reproduces the narratives of captivity and resistance, thus necessitating the appearance of more violence, and so on, ad infinitum” (Chow 2002, 42). She draws on Weber's work on Protestantism and capitalism to show how:

precisely this narrative of resistance and protest, this moral preoccupation with universal justice, is what constitutes the efficacy of the capitalist spirit. Resistance and protest, when understood historically, are part and parcel of the structure of capitalism; they are the reasons capitalism flourishes. (Chow 2002, 47)

Chow connects the issue of ethnicity to political-economic questions that have only gained urgency in recent years. Her critique of Chineseness (Chow 1998a), to which I will return later, in conjunction with her coupling of ethnicity to capitalism,

allow us, I believe, to scrutinize the alleged rise of China and Chinese culture in a way that accounts for and helps unpack the intricate ways in which the “West” and “China” are implicated into each other. Her work necessitates a search for a way out of the enchanted ethnicized state of global capitalism. In this article I aim to show, first, how the performance of ethnic difference is played out in the artistic field, and, second, how the Chinese nation-state skilfully accommodates critical voices as to buttress its global position. Chineseness has become a unique selling point, a trading card that lubricates the financial and ideological flows between the global art world, the Beijing cultural scene and the Chinese nation-state. The art district 798 serves as a key example for the recent emergence of creative industries in which ethnic difference plays an important productive force. As Wang (2008) observes, culture has become an integral part of state policies. The accommodated and co-opted performance of criticality one encounters in 798, I will argue, attests to the problematic link between high culture, capitalism and the nation-state. It also lays bare how the politics of ethnic protest intertwines with the logics of both global capitalism *and* the maintenance of the Chinese nation-state.

In the third part of this article, I will move to Hong Kong, the city that on a rainy Tuesday, 1 July 1997, after 150 years of British colonial rule, became part of China. This move is to complicate the picture, given that any claim by Hong Kong artists to ethnic difference is bound to be incomplete and impure. Here I build on Chow’s writing on Hong Kong, in particular in *Ethics after idealism* (Chow 1998b), to show how Hong Kong’s in-betweenness opens up avenues of thought that undermine any monolithic sense of Chineseness, and underwrites artistic and creative practices that move beyond the double duress of the two colonizers. The work of Pak Sheung Chuen (Tozer Pak)<sup>1</sup> constitutes a powerful critique on, and explores artistic lines of flight out of, the issue of Chineseness and its intricate links with an enchanted mode of global capitalism. It does so *not* by developing an artistic critique, which would after all be constitutive of capitalism itself, but by engaging in what I like to term a tactics of the banal and the mundane that are located in the here and now.

### Welcome to creative China

Located in the northeast of Beijing, just outside the fourth ring road, close to the IKEA megastore, the abandoned factory area 798 has changed, within only a few years, from a controversial artistic zone into a showcase of an allegedly new, creative and open China (see Figure 1 for an impression of 798). The site is rooted in architectural culture; it is a massive, solid and monumental space, evoking memories to a communist time bygone. Built in a Bauhaus style, 798 was established in the early 1950s as a joint venture between East Germany and China, as one of the very first steps in the strenuous process of nation-building. A staggering RMB150 million was invested in the military factory complex (Huang 2004, 2). As Luo Peilin, the head engineer of 798 in its construction phase (1951–1956), remarks:

[the then Joint Factory 718] contributed enormously to China’s industrial growth and prosperity and the country and its people put to good the goods produced there . . . All of the loudspeakers at Tiananmen Square and on Chang’An Avenue were produced during the glorious years at Factory 718. (Luo 2004, 12)

The suggested link between the factory and Tiananmen Square – the most politicized space in China, a space saturated with historical significance – is emblematic for the importance of the factory for the nation-state.

The jump in time from the early 1950s to the early-twenty-first century is dramatic, and indicative of the changes China has undergone. It is tempting to insist on the historical significance of 798; in particular, its roots in a utopian trans-communist project and its embedding in the building of the nation-state. Now, 50 years later, it continues to help maintain the nation-state, but linkages are no longer sought to fellow communist regimes, but to a probably less utopian (but not less brutal) global capitalism. In my interviews with critics, artists and architects in Beijing, they would frequently conjure up comparisons with districts like SOHO in New York. To think of 798 as a project solely born out of communist nostalgia is inadequate, as Dai writes:

The choice for and reconstruction of 798 is not out of cultural nostalgia or to memorize a special and heated age, it was to copy and import an international and American way of artistic life to China – a SOHO art and living zone with a loft lifestyle. (2007, 35)

The two tropes – a nostalgic linkage to the past as well as to a contemporary global world – do not exclude each other. It may in fact be read as symbolic: China's spectacular entry into global capitalism is literally built on the grounds of a transnational communist utopia.

The references to the communist past of 798 constitute a specific articulation of Chineseness, not one related to China's assumed long history or its mythic rural origins (Chow 1998b, 146), but one connected to its recent past – a past that sells on the global art market in the form of Andy Warhol-like pop art works, saturated with references to Mao Zedong and other emblematic revolutionary figures and styles. The best-known protagonist from this pop art style may well be Wang Guangyi, who mingles icons of western capitalism such as the Coca-Cola bottle, with posters from the Cultural Revolution. This conflation of the space – 798 – with the work, both of which evoke a feeling of communist nostalgia, imbues the creative zone with a peculiar sense of Chineseness. In this ubiquitous presence of the communist past in 798 – be it the factory space itself, the creations of Wang Guangyi, the porcelain



Figure 1. Pace Beijing gallery in 798 (photograph by the author).

statues of Mao, the numerous communist gadgets-as-souvenirs, or simply the name of galleries such as *The Long March Gallery* – I must add that one also encounters works that pose a clear critique on today's China's situation. However, their inclusion in a zone like 798 renders their display much more ambiguous and, I would like to argue, problematic.

Nostalgia works not only by conveying a sense of loss and melancholy. Chow argues, it “also works by concealing and excluding the dirty and unpleasant elements of social hardships” (1998b, 148). It does so in 798, where the hardships of communism are displaced by a highly commodified theme-park rendition. The nostalgia evoked by 798 and the works on display turn the place into a global creative zone with Chinese characteristics. In other words, communist nostalgia has become a structure of feeling employed by the nation-state in conjunction with the artistic field to produce an allegedly uniquely Chinese creative zone. This change is indicative of a policy shift. In 2006, the national government endorsed a creative industry policy (Keane 2007), aiming to transform China into a country of innovation rather than manufacturing. In doing so, the post-socialist state has – through its complicitous coexistence with the market – “rejuvenated its capacity ... to affect the agenda of popular culture, especially at the discursive level” (Wang 2001, 71; see also Fung 2008; Zhao 2008).

Underwriting this shift is the vested material and symbolic interests offered by the spanning global reach of Chinese art. As Chinese works easily carry a price tag from €10,000 to far above €100,000, those displayed in 798 are invariably priced in European and American currencies – not RMB – while the gallery owners all speak English. Preparing for the ultimate spectacle of the Beijing Olympics, 798 was to showcase an open, advanced and progressive China to the world. It has become a prime tourist spot used in the marketing of Beijing where presidents like Sarkozy are escorted through the area. The International Art and Culture Foundation of Spain has opened the Iberia art centre in 798. Global brands, like Nike, open their “museums”. As Cheng Lei remarks in one of the more recent books on 798:

other visitors include important political figures, the elite of business and many celebrities. Creativity square has recently opened as the largest public space in 798 which will allow more internationally famous names to enter the area and increase the reputation of 798 as an international landmark. (Cheng 2008, 83–85)

Numerous photographs support his text, not only of the buildings and the art works, but also of the celebrities that visited 798, among whom was “the richest man in the world, Warren Buffett's son, Peter Buffett” (Cheng 2008, 85).

It is, however, not my primary goal to critique an alignment of the nation-state with contemporary art; nor do I wish to discuss the intentions of Chinese artists. What I learn from 798 is how political and critical works can be and are mobilized in the production of a specific creative zone that serves as a showcase for a new and open China. A global art world joins forces with the Chinese authorities to produce this zone of alleged freedom and resistance, with Chineseness as its selling point. The ethnic difference is performed through works of art that often evoke a sense of resistance and protest – and, as explained by Chow, resistance and protest is very much part of the logic of capitalism, as the global art world demands ethnic

difference to authenticate and differentiate the art work, haunting Chinese artists with the spectre of Chineseness (Maravillas 2007).

This burden of representation, the burden inscribed in the adjective Chinese in Chinese contemporary art, resonates with the burden Chow refers to for intellectual writing. Whereas “western” academics like Judith Butler can claim universalism in titles such as *Gender trouble*, for a Chinese author it would be deemed indispensable to add the prefix Chinese in the title.

While [Western academics] are thought to deal with intellectual or theoretical issues, [non-Western academics], even when they are dealing with intellectual or theoretical issues, are compulsorily required to characterize such issues with *geopolitical realism*, to stabilize and fix their theoretical and intellectual content by way of a national, ethnic, or cultural location. (Chow 1998a, 4–5)

This problem of the ethnic supplement drives the production of contemporary Chinese art; the artists are required to explain, justify and interrogate their work in relation to its geopolitical context. This “vicious circle of discriminatory practice” (Chow 1998a, 5) is often mirrored in China itself, where an obsessive involvement with Chineseness and with an assumed essential difference with the West dominates intellectual and artistic circles.<sup>2</sup> The accompanying texts to exhibitions in 798 frequently reify an East–West binary. For example, in a show curated by Hu Jiujiu, entitled *West to the East – Aesthetic Context of Intellectuals*, the curator claims in the text that was displayed in the gallery (the SZ Art center) that “the ‘intellectual artists’ have taken on a distinctive cultural position. All of them have studied Western cultures as well as have carried out artistic practices conditioned by the tradition and reality of China”. Examples abound from exhibitions that are framed by a fixed East–West binary and the geopolitical burden of representation.

To summarize, the ethnic card as played out in 798, as articulated through a sense of communist nostalgia – both in the factory space itself as well as the works on display – in conjunction with a discourse of protest and resistance, is part and parcel of global capitalism. Particular versions of Chineseness are commodified that propel the proliferation of contemporary Chinese art on the global art market. Its underpinning discriminatory logic is deeply intertwined with the structure of capitalism as well as with the maintenance of the nation-state called China. This state–global creative industry nexus is built on the leftovers of a utopian transnational communism, the deserted factories, supplying art works that circulate with high economic value in a global economy of art, one that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s “as part of a general financial revolution. Along with hedge funds, international mortgages, and secondary financial instruments of all kinds ... Contemporary art ... expanded globally along an ever-increasing circuit of biennials and international exhibitions” (Buck-Morss 2004, 4). Yet the works are not “only” commodities, nor “just” individual artistic expressions; they also are symbols in the process of nation-state maintenance, symbols that capitalize – literally – on ethnic difference, operating as signs for the authorities to articulate a China that is ready for the twenty-first century. The Bauhaus-style factories are still productive today, not as the heavily guarded supplier of advanced electronic equipment for the army, but as the producer of an assumed new, open and economically prosperous China, a

nation-state that aspires to become a creator rather than a manufacturer, a nation-state that operates in the midst of the workings of global capital.

### Factories and slaughterhouses

A move further down south, to the city of Hong Kong, is not only to complicate the illustrated links between global capital, nation-state maintenance and contemporary Chinese art, but also to offer potential lines of flight. Hong Kong, like Beijing, is eager to promote itself as a creative and cultural city. The Cattle Depot, Hong Kong's art district, is located in a former slaughterhouse in Kowloon (see Figure 2 for impression of the Cattle Depot). Compared with the massive size of 798, the Cattle Depot is a much smaller-scale compound with only a handful of galleries. Although the Cattle Depot, like 798, is a historical site and is part and parcel of the city's creative policies, its history is far less entrenched in grand projects of the nation-state. Built in 1908, the government-owned space housed a cattle quarantine and slaughter centre for more than 90 years,<sup>3</sup> serving people with meat – a means of survival, rather than utopian visions of a transnational Communist paradise as was the case for 798. Space, and the lack thereof, constitutes one fundamental difference from Beijing. In Beijing, enormous factory halls need to be filled with art works, which – however spatially deterministic this may sound – explains why contemporary Chinese art consists often of gigantic canvasses and mammoth installation works. Hong Kong artists are forced to operate on a different, modest scale, which may explain why one encounters often smaller, and more conceptual, work (Cartier 2008). Whereas galleries in 798, as well as artists, often frame the exhibitions and the works in a larger ideological and historical context, in Hong Kong such large claims are relatively absent.

Furthermore, Hong Kong's in-between position – as a city being neither here nor there, but in a perpetual state of becoming – also differentiates the local art world from the Beijing one. Chow (1998b, 157) refers to this disposition as follows: “What is unique to Hong Kong, however, is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, or origins as impure”. Hong Kong's impossibility to claim Chineseness (or, by



Figure 2. Cattle Depot in Hong Kong (photograph by the author).

the same token, Britishness) is translated into the local art world's impossibility to play the ethnic card in the way its Beijing counterpart can do and does.

Hence, when walking in Hong Kong's central district, where most art galleries are located, one generally encounters more lucrative works from Mainland China. Art critic Chang Tsong-zung explained already in 1997, years before the Beijing authorities baptized its creative industries policies, why Hong Kong is more underground compared with Beijing art (quoted in Cartier 2008, 247):

the significant Hong Kong artworks of recent decades are precisely those which have burrowed underneath the city glitter and gone against the grain. In a manner of speaking, Hong Kong art is truly underground, much more so than, say, in Communist China where independent art is thought to be dangerous and is gingerly handled by the authorities. Here, art is ignored.

Jaffa Lam moved from Fuzhou to Hong Kong when she was a child. Considering herself a Hong Kong artist, she was, however, pigeonholed as a *Chinese* artist from Fuzhou when she joined a show in New York. Since Hong Kong constitutes "a third space between the colonizer and the dominant native culture, a space that cannot simply be collapsed into the latter even as resistance to the former remains foremost", its cultural productions are characterized by "a negotiation in which it must play two aggressors, Britain and China, against each other, carving out a space where it is neither simply the puppet of British colonialism nor of Chinese authoritarianism" (Chow 1998b, 157).

Today, more than a decade after the handover, the presence of the Mainland overshadows the memories of a colonial past. At the same time, due to its unique history, Hong Kong continues to be a cultural twilight zone; its artists face marginalization in the global art world as they are haunted by a perpetual lack of Chineseness. Or, in the words of Cartier (2008, 267): "Coded to local Hong Kong contexts, and to places of experience worldwide without easy recognizable geographic coordinates, a good part of Hong Kong art does not travel unhindered in the commercialized global art system that adopts geopolitical frames". This, I argue, does not result in a deprived local art scene; on the contrary, it is precisely Hong Kong's perpetual state of cultural indetermination that provides a fertile soil for artistic productions. As Chang rightly claims, in Hong Kong:

art is practiced as self-defense, rather than as a means to reach out, to proselytize or to attack. This means a concern for personal values and attachment to experiences of an ephemeral and private nature. Opaqueness is the primary color; therefore, some of the most interesting art is created out of paranoiac secrecy. (Quoted in Cartier 2008, 247)

The works of Pak provide a good example of the opaque, personal, conceptual and non-ideological characteristics of Hong Kong art. His works, I like to argue, provide a line of flight out of cultural binaries such as East–West. They do so not by developing a critique or by articulating a political protest, but by a Dadaist tactics of the banal and the mundane, in which the familiar is defamiliarized, in which the city morphs into a public museum and everyday life becomes pregnant with unexpected possibilities. The focus on the banal, mundane and quotidian presents a significant rupture from the more historically, ethnically and ideologically inclined art that we so frequently encounter in 798. The constant focus on the present, on the here and now,

in Pak's works, their implicit rejection of the burden of history, as well as refusal to engage with a utopian future, constitutes another potential point of divergence from hegemonic contemporary Chinese art.

### **Pak's tactics of the mundane**

Pak Sheung Chuen, or Tozer Pak – the uncomplicated use of both an English as well as a Chinese name is already indicative of the impurity of Hong Kong culture – is one of Hong Kong's most prolific artists. My analysis draws predominantly on his 2009 publication entitled *Visualltextual city – odd one in II: Invisible travel*, together with his blog related to his art work.<sup>4</sup> This book deals with a collection of works mostly completed outside Hong Kong. His previous books, *See/walk/what on 1 July* and *Odd one in: Hong Kong diary*, engage clearly with the Hong Kong situation. *Visualltextual city* can be read as an intervention less into the politics of Hong Kong than into everyday life, consistently emphasizing the importance of locality – be it a library in New York, an apartment in Seoul or the streets of Tokyo. In my view, his works transcend the issue of Chineseness, and as such negate the colonizing Orientalistic gaze of the art world; it simultaneously refuses to surrender to the ideological signs of times, but instead explores an ethics of being that builds on a tactics of the banal and the mundane. Gone are the big words that one often encounters in Beijing. Pak's move beyond the ethnic enables ways of seeing that are located neither in a utopian outside nor in an ethnicized inside; his works establish highly personal, micropolitical lines of flight out of the geopolitical ethnic machine.

Chow argues in her text on Chineseness that “the careful study of texts and media becomes, once again, imperative, even as such study is now ineluctably refracted by the awareness of the unfinished and untotizable workings of ethnicity” (1998a, 38). Only with such study, Chow adds:

can Chineseness be productively put under erasure – not in the sense of being written out of existence, but in the sense of being unpacked – and reevaluated in the catachrestic modes of its signification, the very forms of its historical construction. (1998a, 38)

We can extend this call towards art practices. What we need are careful interventions in and readings of the contemporary, into our sense of time and space – and Hong Kong constitutes a prime site to launch this inquiry. To paraphrase Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), Hong Kong can be mobilized as a method to interrogate the geopolitical workings of a global art world and its complicity with capitalism and nation-state building. Let me explore some of Pak's works to grasp the intricate ways in which he puts a monolithic sense of Chineseness under constant erasure, while simultaneously refusing to play the ethnic card as demanded by a global art world.

Time is a recurrent element in Pak's works. He seems to slow down life, to put a stop to the constant flux of reality. In one work, *Waiting for a Friend*, he decided to stand still close to Festival Walk, a local subway station and shopping mall, to wait until a friend would, by chance, pass by (see Figure 3). Then, after a while, indeed a friend appeared. Pak writes, “This time, Jacky appeared at 16:38. He asked me, ‘Why do you know I will walk through there?’ I told him, ‘I don't know . . . But I have waited for you for a long time!’” At this emblematic location of the fast city, Pak's act

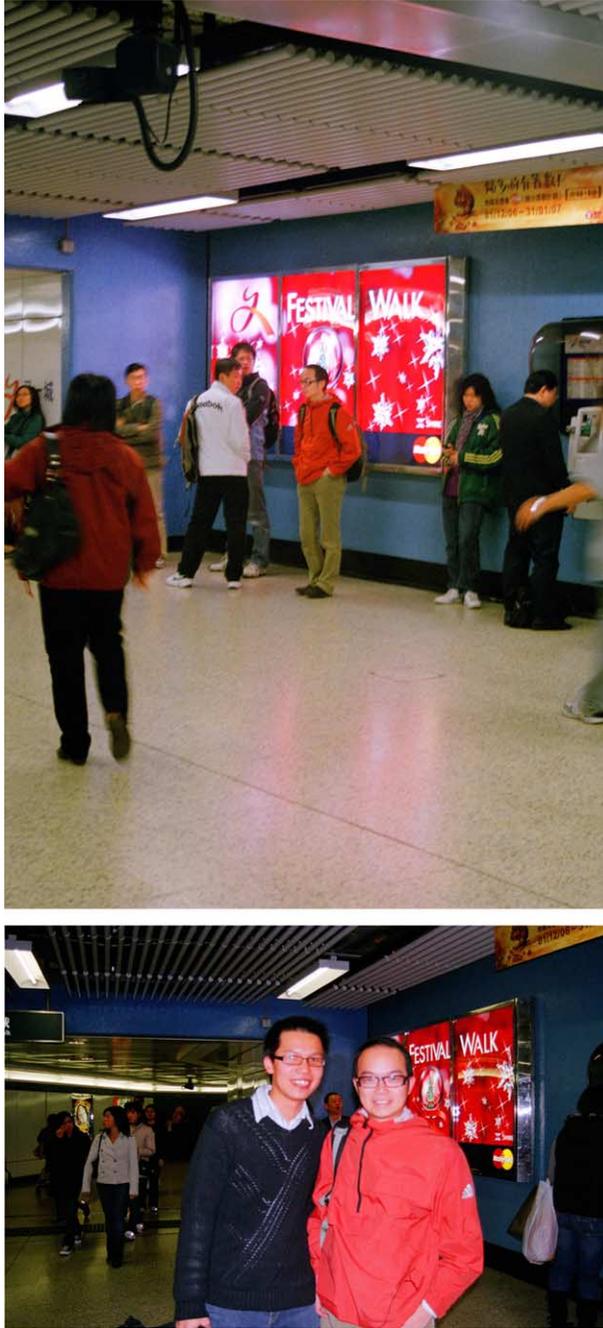


Figure 3. Pak's *Waiting for a Friend* (without an appointment).

puts a stop at the constant rush, presenting an alternative way of experiencing time, of experiencing the city.

A work that shares with *Waiting for a Friend* a focus on the mundane and its temporalities is *Waiting for all the People Sleep*, in which Pak stood in front of a

13-storey building at Sham Shui Po, waiting until all lights went out, until all the residents fell asleep. He waited until 5:00 am. On the five photographs that accompany the piece, we see a “typical” Hong Kong multistorey building, of which the lights are slowly disappearing. One light remained, as he writes, “one person in the building stayed up all night, we wasted one long night together” (Pak 2009, 183). His project injects the concrete of the building with a sense of life, humanizing the city, converting the apartment block into a personal playground, onto which the patterns and temporalities of everyday life are patched. This move towards the mundane temporalities of the everyday and to the here and now pushes the work beyond binaries like East versus West, beyond the confines of Chineseness, and beyond the totalizing narratives of utopian ideologies. Given that the works are exhibited in a Venice Biennale and in shows worldwide, where Pak is framed as a Hong Kong artist born in Fujian (underlining the difficulty if not impossibility to de-ethnicize), his tactics of the mundane can be and should be read, in my view, as a critical intervention in the global art world and its geopolitical demands.

In conjunction with time, space is another recurring element in Pak’s conceptual works. Again, in a slightly Situationist vein – albeit in a mode that strikes me as being inspired less by Guy Debord than by Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel de Certeau – Pak defamiliarizes the familiar when he takes the folds of a map as critical demarcation lines that ought to be scrutinized in reality. Pak explains his work *Mountains Trip* as follows:

I walked along all the folds of a map. The folds were folded or designed accidentally by an unknown person. It becomes my route to travel. I took photos for all the vertical objects (positioned at north), which are positioned at the folds of the map. In case there is no vertical object, I will stand in the north and become a vertical object. (<http://pakpark.blogspot.com/>, see also Pak 2009, 61)

In a similar vein, in *Valleys Trip*, he opened a map book of Tokyo, and walked along all the gaps between the left pages and the right pages, from the south to the north of Tokyo. “The map pages are arched like a mountain, making the gap look like a valley” (Pak 2009, 69). In this work, he stood and took photographs at every point where he crossed the valleys. City maps play an important and recurrent role in his work; not to find your way, but to lose your way, to produce a new sense of space, of locality, to imagine space differently. Pak explains as follows:

For me it’s about imagination. When you look at a map, it shows and gives you lines, figures, words and names. Your mind is thinking about a place that you’ve never been to before, so you try to imagine what it’s like. A map also gives you the chance to look at the world from a different angle. Every day we stand around with our eyes looking forward but a map is a view from above. The view is different, so our imagination can be triggered. (Pak 2009, 220)

In another project, he extended the longitude of Hong Kong northwards and the latitude of Taipei westwards. The two lines happen to cross at: Guangdong province, Shao Guan City, Shi Xing County, Dun Gang City, the 7th North Sector – to which he would consequently travel. There, he claims to find, together with the villagers, a rock in the shape of Taiwan, in the text accompanying the works, he writes about his search for the best stone, the stone that resembles Taiwan the most:

...  
 Look, there are many “Taiwans”!  
 This is Taiwan  
 Flip this one over and have a look  
 It looks a bit similar flipped over  
 It would look more similar rounded, this one too angular  
 What we also have to do is to put it inside some water  
 It looks very similar placed like this  
 This really looks like an island  
 Look, there is a bit of seaweed inside  
 Taiwan is back to China  
 Back to us in Mainland China  
 Ha ha ha  
 We have found Taiwan in China!  
 ...  
 The position of Taipei (City) and Hong Kong found in China  
 The economic development is great in Mainland China  
 It is really OK in recent years  
 For us, Mainland China is OK  
 We can see that  
 As free  
 We basically don’t place step on the farms anymore  
 As free. (Pak 2009, 109 and 111)

In the accompanying photograph reportage we see him looking with the villagers for the perfect stone, both text and image evoking a sense of play with maps, with boundaries, with countries and cultural belongings. His cooperation with the villagers turns this into a community project, creating a “community based on cultural work and social responsibility rather than on the realpolitik coercions of blood, race, and soil” (Chow 1998b, 166). The text is ironic but not sarcastic, it plays with political and cultural sensitivities without ideologizing them. It is a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque mode of engaging with the idea of Greater China as well as Chineseness, and one that is consciously performed with the villagers, blurring the line between artist and non-artist, between Hong Konger and Mainlander and Taiwanese. It is also an example of grotesque realism, in which the serious political issues so many men (more than women) engage with are rendered mundane and banal.

### **Travelling outside the ethnic machine**

My reading of Pak’s works is merely a start, an attempt; more study is required to grasp the subtleties and nuances in his works. Nonetheless, his works have helped me to translate Rey Chow’s call for close study of texts in order to interrogate the issue of Chineseness towards the artistic field itself. In comparison with the art space 798 as well as the works on display from Mainland artists, works that often evoke the Communist past and an ideological critique of the present, Pak’s works open up a world that is more conceptual, more mundane and more banal. This world moves beyond the ethnic confines that characterize the Chinese art world, presenting a potential line of flight out of the ideological, historical and overcoded narratives one frequently encounters in 798. These narratives constitute an art world that is deeply complicit with the workings of global capitalism as well as with the maintenance of

the Chinese nation-state. Yet there is the danger of essentializing a binary between 798 and the Cattle Depot, between Beijing and Hong Kong; with the first figuring as the accomplice of global capital and national politics, and the second as the marginal outsider that helps to pry into and undermine the ethnic calling. For the purpose of this article, I risk the danger.

Drawing on Rey Chow's work, I have illustrated how global capital, the nation-state and the artistic production and proliferation of ethnic difference are deeply implicated with each other. In our current times, a critical analysis of these mutually complicit relationships, as proposed by Chow (2002) in her book *The protestant ethnic and the spirit of capitalism*, has become more urgent than ever. I have shown how the geopolitical workings of the global art world demand Chineseness from "Chinese" artists, a demand that privileges Mainland China, simultaneously marginalizing Hong Kong and Taiwan. This does not render the latter two localities necessarily more critical or open minded, as Chow notes, "precisely because marginalization alone does not necessarily prevent one from chauvinism or violence, one needs to be very careful when approaching questions of coloniality and postcoloniality" (1998b, 187). But it does generate art forms that, instead of being burdened by history, co-opted by the authorities and hyped by a global art world, operate on a different logic, which I have termed the tactics of the mundane, the banal, and the here and now. The more conceptual and often more personal art works from Hong Kong, of which Pak's are good examples, negotiate and often negate the triple burden coming from Beijing, from the former British colonizer as well as from the global art world. These works do not offer a discourse of protest or resistance, a discourse that, as Chow has argued, is profoundly implicated in global capital itself. Instead, they explore lines of flight out of what we may term the macropolitical ethnic machine.

It is not a coincidence that I lightly make use of terms invoked by Deleuze and Guattari. The writings of Chow, in conjunction with the art works of Pak, clearly steer away from the ideological ghosts that haunt so much post-structuralist theory while simultaneously resisting a smooth return to a cultural relativism. Instead, both explore a micropolitics in which one searches for yet uncharted territories, unthought thoughts and not yet actualized possibilities. They do so within rather than outside the realm of the contemporary; indeed, "what Deleuze calls a *line of flight* is not a leap into another realm; it is production within the realm of that from which it takes flight" (May 2005, 128). Chineseness, like ethnicity, can be considered an overcoded segmentary force that is sanctioned and celebrated by the nation-state for its survival, just as it is implicated in global capital. "Segmentary lines are the lines with which traditional theory operates" (May 2005, 135). Both Chow and Pak explore a "micropolitics of perception, affection, conversation, and so forth" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 213), resisting the "abstract machine of overcoding", constantly grasping for mutations, for lines of flight, for deterritorializations of academic and artistic discourse. Micropolitics is not individual politics; it is a politics that resists the dominant structuring of society, which operates always together with a macropolitics – the large political entities, institutions and political forces (May 2005, 127) – probing into "the realm of difference that we are in order to create new and (one hopes) better arrangements for living, in the broadest sense of the word *living*" (May 2005, 133; original emphasis). The promise of forging links between Chow's works and those of artists like Pak lies in its potential actualization of what is

possible yet has thus far remained virtual and unrealized. Explore ways of becoming Chinese, but not quite, of becoming a Hong Kong artist, but not quite, of becoming a cultural theorist, but not quite. Not quite, as there is always more – as both Chow and Pak continuously show us.

## Notes

1. Tozer Pak is the English nickname of Pak Sheung Chuen.
2. Apart from the more ironic pop art of Wang Guangyi (for an analysis of the recurrent theme of Cultural Revolution in contemporary Chinese art, see Jiang 2007), Chineseness is often being deconstructed, as in the work of Xu Bing (see de Kloet 2007), or playfully appropriated, as in the work of Cao Fei (*RMB City*). In general, the young generation of artists – coined the “Gelatin Generation” (see [http://www.shanghaidaily.com/sp/article/2009/200910/20091030/article\\_417876.htm](http://www.shanghaidaily.com/sp/article/2009/200910/20091030/article_417876.htm)) – is considered much less preoccupied with history and Chineseness than with contemporary, global pop culture.
3. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle\\_Depot\\_Artist\\_Village](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle_Depot_Artist_Village).
4. <http://pakpark.blogspot.com/>. Another website engages with his work: <http://www.hongkongartweb.com/hkaw/mixedmedia/paktozer/PAKtozer-gallery1.html>.

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