From Joseph to Tseng Kwong Chi:

Renegotiating Asian American Identity

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved April 2022 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2022

ABSTRACT

The Hong Kong-born Canadian photographer and performance artist Tseng Kwong Chi mostly worked in the United States until the year he died in 1990. Upon arriving in New York in 1979, he started his career with a new name. By dropping his anglicized name Joseph and replacing it with his Chinese given name Kwong Chi, Tseng made a clear statement: this is my staged persona who refuses to assimilate to Western culture.

This thesis deconstructs Tseng's key works, including his party-crashing *Met* series, the decade-long *East Meets West* series, and the extended *Expeditionary* series. With his persona disguised by wearing a Mao suit and a pair of sunglasses, I argue that Tseng was a pioneer in the genre of Asian American performance photography and that his work foreshadowed the cultural jamming movement in his innovative use of *détournement* while it also critically comments on orientalism, cultural fetish, and Asian identity politics. Additionally, Tseng's work served as a bridge, connecting art history with issues of Asian American identity. As a gay artist who worked mostly in the United States, his work was an early example of what Jachinson Chan has suggested as an alternative model of masculinity for Asian American men: that Asian American men can be free, independent, expressive, and willing to embrace femininity with their masculinity. As David Eng has argued, Tseng also bridged the fields of Asian American queer studies and diaspora studies. Moreover, Tseng carried the legacy of the first-generation Chinese American artists in the medium of photography and inspired the next generation of diasporic artists to explore Asian identity, and to contest the image of Mao and the power dynamics between East and West.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and dad. Your unconditional love and support make this thesis come to live.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Claudia Mesch for her wonderful advising. From the beginning till the end, from picking the theme to generating ideas, from proofreading the draft to making comments about the editing, Dr. Mesch has always been super encouraging and patient with me. Thank you Dr. Mesch.

Additionally, I would also like to thank Dr. Meredith Hoy and Dr. Karen Kuo for the advises and comments that make this thesis a better work. Especially, I would like to thank Dr. Kuo for joining the committee since she is from the Department of Asian Pacific American Studies and giving advises from another academic perspective outside art history, which makes this thesis more diverse and interdisciplinary.

Moreover, I'd like to give thanks to all my sponsors. They are ASU School of Art, Philip Curtis Graduate Fellowship and Herbert Smith Graduate Fellowship. The completion of this thesis and my Master of Arts degree wouldn't be possible without the funding you've provided. I'm truly grateful for that.

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PREFACE

The Chinese Canadian artist Tseng Kwong Chi mostly worked in the United States until the year he died in 1990. Upon arriving in New York in 1979, he started his career with a new name. By dropping his anglicized name Joseph and replacing it with his Chinese given name Kwong Chi, Tseng made a clear statement: this is my staged persona who refuses to assimilate to Western culture.

This thesis is a case study of Tseng Kwong Chi, a Hong Kong-born Canadian photographer and performance artist who traveled around the world in the 1980s taking pictures in front of iconic tourist sites such as the Statue of Liberty and Eiffel Tower with his medium format Rolleiflex camera. The thesis deconstructs Tseng's key works, including his party-crashing *Met* series, the decade-long *East Meets West* series, and the extended *Expeditionary* series. With his persona disguised by wearing a Mao suit and a pair of sunglasses, I argue that Tseng was a pioneer in the genre of Asian American performance photography and that his work foreshadowed the cultural jamming movement in his innovative use of *détournement* while it also critically comments on orientalism, tourism and colonialism. Additionally, Tseng's work served as a bridge, connecting art history with issues of Asian American identity. As a gay artist who worked mostly in the United States, his work was an early example of what Jachinson Chan has suggested as an alternative model of masculinity for Asian American men: that Asian American men can be free, independent, expressive, and willing to embrace femininity with their masculinity. As David Eng has argued, Tseng also bridged the fields of Asian American queer studies and diaspora studies. Moreover, Tseng carried the legacy of the first-generation Chinese American artists in the medium of photography and inspired the next generation of

diasporic artists to explore Asian identity, and to contest the image of Mao and the power dynamics between East and West.

I have always been interested in exploring Chinese diaspora artists who deal with cultural and political power struggles between East and West. Ai Weiwei, who was the focus of my undergraduate thesis, and Tseng are two such examples. Tseng was born in Hong Kong in 1950 and worked mostly in America from late 1970s until the year he died in New York 1990. His art speaks critically to a new generation of artists that lives in an age of transnationalism and globalization. His art asks questions such as, what does it mean to be an Asian American in the new era? Is it still relevant to stress one's own ethnicity? Can America be home to the people of color? With the rise of social movements such as Black Lives Matter, the concept of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) and the spread of Trumpism, it is important to address identity crisis in the United States, especially among Asian Americans, a term coined in the late 1960s to denounce the racist and colonial label of "Oriental". Asians instead represent the fastest growing racial group in the United States in the last decade according to Pew Research Center of U.S. Census Bureau.[1] As an art historian, I believe it is critical to study the works of Asian American artists because their work offer us a unique and creative way to address this issue. The purpose of this thesis is to increase awareness of Asian American art as BIPOC by decoding

[1] Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial or ethnical group in the U.S.", *Pew Research Center*. The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 9, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/09/asian-americans-are-the-fastest-growing-racial-or-ethnic-group-in-the-u-s/. (Accessed March 21, 2022)

the discourses and connotations that Tseng's art offers. This awareness will help us better understand how Asian Americans' identity has shifted since the late 19th century.

In a broader context, this research also aims to build connections between art history and Asian American studies through Tseng's work, which bridges both fields. I will examine performance photography, which is a genre of contemporary art that modern artists used to explore gender and sexuality. I will also make connections between Tseng's art and the intellectual dimensions and contexts of orientalism, Asian American masculinity, and diaspora studies. I would also like to examine how Tseng's work speaks to queer and masculinity studies, and how the image and perception of Asian American men has changed throughout history in Western popular culture.

I address the issues above in two chapters. The first focuses on the art historical readings of Tseng's projects and consists of seven parts. This chapter provides the historical context behind each of Tseng's major projects, which allows me to the decode the significance of performance photography, and the iconographic meaning of Mao suit and the gaze of Tseng. Thus, I am able to understand how his art spoke critically to orientalism and how he took on the technique of *détournement* in high art. I will use sources such as past exhibition catalogues to provide detailed information about the artist's career and the motivations behind the project.

Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera is the 2015 exhibition catalogue for the first touring museum retrospective on Tseng, organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and the Grey Art Gallery of New York University. It is accompanied by the first substantial monograph on the artist. This catalogue provides detailed knowledge about how Tseng initiated his projects, such as the choice of Mao suit, the working experience with Keith

Haring, and the comments he made about Nixon's visit to China in 1972. Amy Brandt's "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance", an essay from this catalogue, unpacks the *Met* series and argues that Tseng exposed the superficial fetishizing of Chinese culture by Western elites. "Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art", featuring Tseng's *East Meets West* series, was a touring exhibition between 1994 to 1996 organized by Asia Society Galleries of New York and was curated by Margo Machida. The show explored questions of bicultural identity through the works by twenty foreign-born artists of Asian parentage who came to the United States to live and work. John Kuo Wei Tchen's essay "Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze" in this catalogue provides a historical and theoretical underpinning for how, over the last century, Asian and American identity has been constantly renegotiated. Margo Machida's essay "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America" discusses how Tseng inverted the position of Chinese and Westerners by being a Chinese who has an unlimited access to the Western world, a privilege that is considered to belong only to the Westerners.

Jennifer Blessing's *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography* briefs the history of gender performance in photography and provides insightful readings of key figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman. This book traces the origin of this genre of photography along with key theories of gender study, such as those by Joan Riviere and Jacques Lacan's notion about seeing gender as a type of performance and masquerade. This helped me understand the significance that Tseng, as a gay artist, took from this medium and how his work paid homage to his predecessors.

Dan Bacalzo's essay "Portraits of Self and Other: 'SlutForArt' and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi" provides insights into Tseng's choice of the Mao suit and how it fits with the artist's quest to challenge orientalism. Another important aspect of Tseng's work I discuss in chapter one is the gaze in Tseng images. Ruud Welten argues in his essay "Paul Gauguin and the complexity of the primitivist gaze" that Gauguin criticized Western civilization and longed for pure and innocent beauty in his *Three Tahitians*. The gaze of the Tahitian girl condemns the West as an intruder and colonizer. With Tseng's photograph, I parallel Welten's views of Gauguin's primitivism work, arguing that just like Gauguin's depiction of the Other, or the colonized Tahitians, Tseng's image is not a self-portrait but rather a depiction of the Other as well, the marginalized Asian.

The second chapter lays out other intellectual contexts related to Asian American studies, breaking into four parts. Jachinson Chan's book *Chinese American Masculinities: from Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* gives us a critical analysis of stereotypes of the Chinese American male in mass culture, such as Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, Bruce Lee and Shang-chi. He suggests that as Bruce Lee tried to achieve, Chinese American men choose to embrace hegemonic masculinity, under the pressure of attaining an expected masculinity in American society. In contrast, Bruce Lee shows questionable and ambiguous heterosexuality. Chan calls for a more "ambi-sexual" and feminine model of masculinity for Chinese American men. David Eng connects the diaspora with queerness, and gives valuable insights on Asian American identity and sexuality. He found out that both diasporic Asian Americans and gay men have a belonging issue regarding the loss of home and the pursuit of recognition. As a gay artist in the diaspora, Tseng's work is a model for such matters long before Chan and Eng's suggestions.

Additionally, this chapter discusses how Tseng carries on the legacy of the first generation of Chinese American artists and how he inspired the younger generation to explore Asian identity, cultural conflict and power relations between East and West. Gordon Chang's book *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970* offers a comprehensive history and biography of first-generation Asian American artists on the west Coast of the United States, including the Chinese artists that I discuss. The common ground between them and Tseng can be found in their diplomatic occupation, the choice of subject matter for their art project as the historical location of San Francisco, and the impact of war and diasporic experience on them. For example, Tseng's staged persona "ambiguous ambassador" connects with the actual diplomatic jobs that some of these artists worked, such as Chang Shu-Chi, Chao-Chen Yang and Dong Kingman. As the town for first-generation Chinese immigrants' settlement, quite a few photographers such as Benjamen Chinn, George Lee and Irene Poon based their work on their hometown of the San Francisco Chinatown, where Tseng visited and took a photo in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. War had a big influence on both generations: Tseng's father had fought in China Civil War (1927-1949) for the Nationalist army. Upon defeat, the family fled to Hong Kong where Tseng was born. Tseng's persona in the Mao suit is a stereotype of a Chinese citizen during the Cold War era. In this regard, some of the first-generation immigrant artists had actual experience in the military, such as Benjamen Chinn and George Lee. Moreover, the diaspora was their foremost common ground: Chang Shu-Chi, Chao-Chen Yang, Yun Gee, James Wong Howe were all born in China and then immigrated to the United States, echoing Tseng's diasporic life.

I also discuss the exhibition “Exodus II-Unhinging the Great Wall: Chinese Art Revealed, East Village, NY 1980s”, the most recent exhibition that showcased the work of Tseng among other Chinese diaspora artists, including Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei and Zhang Hongtu. They are among the first generation of Chinese avant-garde artists who moved to the New York City in 1980s and 1990s. Jiang Jiehong’s book *The Art of Contemporary of China* presents a history of the birth of Chinese avant-garde art, including some important early works by Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei. The theme of the “Exodus” show is Chinese and Asian identity, and features Chinese émigré artists in New York who played a vital creative role among New York art circles.

Finally, this chapter discusses Tseng’s disguised persona in the Mao suit and its impact on later Asian artists such as Wang Guangyi, Zhang Hongtu, Shi Xinning, and Yasumasa Morimura, who also contested the image of Mao in using the technique of *détournement*. Alexandra Munroe’s book *Art and China after 1980: Theater of the World* provides a detailed context for how Wang Guangyi and Zhang Hongtu creatively use Mao’s image in their work for the purpose of satire. Amy Brandt’s book *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* takes a closer look at Yasumasa Morimura’s *Red Dream/Mao* portraits and Nikki Lee’s *Project* series, which I discuss later in the chapter and connect to Tseng’s. This association gives us a better idea of Tseng's influence on them in terms of the medium, as a way to comment on Asian identity. Moreover, I compare Niki Lee’s controversial *Projects* series, which deals with racial identity with her disguised persona, to Tseng’s work, arguing that although seemingly likewise in terms of medium and iconography, Lee ingeniously differentiates herself from Tseng.

CHAPTER ONE

MORE THAN DOCUMENTATION: FROM JOSEPH TSENG TO TSENG KWONG CHI

This chapter focuses on Tseng Kwong Chi's photography projects the *Met* series (1980), the *East Meets West* series (1979-1989), and their critical contexts. I discuss how Tseng's project followed the tradition of performance photography in Euro-American art and how it spoke to works by his contemporary, Cindy Sherman and her *Untitled Film Stills* series, and his predecessor, Anselm Kiefer and his *Occupations 1969* series, which also stressed the issue of national identity. Starting with the *Met* series, I suggest that Tseng adopted the technique of *détournement* coined by the Situationist International (SI) and foreshadowed the later cultural jamming movements during the 1980s. With the addition of *East Meets West* series and the extended *Expeditionary* series, I discuss how Tseng challenged the discourse of orientalism and the orientalist gaze, and put forward an iconographic interpretation of the Mao suit that was central to Tseng's art. By replacing Joseph with his original Chinese name and putting on the Mao suit, the artist made a clear and bold statements: Tseng Kwong Chi now is my staged persona, who embraces my Asian identity and refuses to assimilate to the Western culture.[1]

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[1] Tseng's name change means so much more in this age. For example, in my own case, I'm from China and my name is Xin Wei. When I first came to the United States, I had used the name "Ricky" for a very short period of time (for less than one month) when I found people having difficulty pronouncing Xin correctly, even to this day. I switched back to my Chinese name simply because it is on my passport and I don't want to cause any confusion. However, that's not the case for my friends who came from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore, let alone the "ABCs" (American-born Chinese). They all have an

For Tseng, photography is more than just documentation, it is a performance and for him, it started with the change of his name. In China, Tseng's father fought for the Nationalist Army and ended up losing to the Communist army led by Mao. After World War II, the Chinese Civil War continued. The war between Chinese Communist Party and Nationalist army turned out to be a part of the Cold War taking place around the globe. The Tseng family fled to British-ruled Hong Kong, and the artist was born there in 1950. Facing the breakout of the Cultural Revolution and fearing of that Hong Kong would be taken over by the Chinese Communist Party, Tseng's family immigrated to Canada in 1966. After studying painting and photography in Paris between 1972 to 1975, and because of an unsuccessful visa extension there, Tseng moved back to Canada, during which time his first name remained Joseph. Tseng settled in New York together with his sister Muna in 1978, and started his career as a photographer with a new name, Tseng Kwong Chi. It was rare for an Asian American artist to switch back to a more ethnic name since most

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English first name, except for one person I met. There was a person that I met at a local Chinese Christian Church. His name is Jiahao, a very typical Chinese name. He was born in Omaha, Nebraska and English was his first language. When asked why he didn't have an English name, he said that's the name his parents gave him. After a little bit of conversation, I learned that his parents immigrated from mainland China to the United States in the '80s. It's not hard to devise an English name for their son, but for some reason the young couple still preferred a Chinese name, which will be challenging for the Americans to pronounce. This leads to a social question: didn't they want their kid to fit in? Or would they rather trade that off for something they valued more, such as his Chinese/Asian identity. I wish I could have the opportunity to sit down and have a conversation with his parents and perhaps have a chance to get an answer.

immigrants wanted to assimilate to the new culture by having an Anglo name, such as Bruce Lee or Jackie Chen.

Upon arriving in New York in the early 1980s, Tseng was an active member of the New York East Village scene and quickly befriended young artists like Keith Haring, for whom he worked as a photographer, documenting Haring's subway graffiti work. Tseng thus re-attained the spirit of the wandering flaneur,[2] which he had learned about when studying in Paris, as they would wander between underground subway stations all day long.

The *Met* Series

Tseng's change of name was just a beginning. The full revelation of Tseng's Asian identity first occurred when he began to camouflage himself in a Mao suit, which gave him access to places or social circles where he would normally be excluded. This strategy began with the *Met* series, which took place at the reception held by the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum for the exhibition "The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644-1912" on December 9th, 1980. As a freelance photographer as that time, Tseng was hired by *Soho Weekly News* to cover the event. He decided to act as an undercover journalist and disguise himself in his Chinese persona. Tseng crashed this reception, which was attended by more than six hundred guests at a three-hundred-dollar ticket price. It was a fund-raiser and a party for the New York elites. Among them were

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[2] Walter Benjamin defines the term as a figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism. From Benjamin W. "*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism"*, Harry Zohn, trans. (London, 1983), 54.

important people from the art world, fashion, and politics: Andy Warhol, Paloma Picasso, Yves Saint Laurent, Henry and Nancy Kissinger, just name a few. With the help of his Mao suit, Tseng was treated as a dignitary from China; Tseng snapped photos with the people there and interviewed them about the show (Fig.1-5). Very much like how the British comedian Sasha Baron Cohen would later expose the ignorance or prejudice of American culture in his films, Tseng's presence at the reception performed and revealed issues of cultural appropriation, orientalism and relations of power in place at the Metropolitan Museum. As Amy Brandt, who was the curator of Chrysler Museum of Art, stated, "the show transformed the regalia of Chinese empire into a fetishistic, fashionable collection of oriental items to be admired by New York's glitterati,"[3] who treated the royal robes of Qing dynasty as collectable fancy items with no or little historical context, letting alone having an authentic Asian experience. Such superficial admiration is found in the image of Tseng standing with Paloma Picasso (Fig.2). Tseng's Mao suit contrasts sharply with Paloma's Japanese-inspired, fancy gown. For her, as a white woman, the dress was just a party accessory to show off her fetishized idea of Asian culture without acknowledging the real context of it while Tseng presented the marginalized Other from Asian being consumed. Such an unequal power relation between East and West was revealed animatedly in another photograph showing Tseng standing with his arms bending and hanging in the air, mimicking the gesture of the mannequin behind him (Fig.3) as if he has been placed in a situation where the Other was easily manipulated like a doll , thus critically marking the

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[3] Amy Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance," in *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* (New York City: The Chrysler Museum of Art and the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2015), 25-73: 50.

comment: for the West elite circle, Asian art and culture was just a show to be superficially enjoyed.

Additionally, Tseng's photographs exposed how perceptions of power could be easily distorted with a simple tactic of disguise. Being a gay man of color, Tseng clearly was the minority Other who differed from and didn't belong to the white elites; yet he managed to mingle with them at the party. It appears in these performance photographs that all the people were getting along and the elites were showing respect to this "ambiguous ambassador"—a title that the artist assigned to himself after this successful infiltration to the gala, where he appeared in a costume as a "Red China" communist, a culture that had haunted many Americans during the Cold War in the battlefields of Vietnam and North Korean.

The Mao suit gave Tseng with an authoritative manner while protecting him from negative sentiments from being a minority Asian. Thus, this created persona is a combination of distance, power and uncertainty, and enabled Tseng to succeed with his infiltration into white high art society. Additionally, Tseng entered in a costume to crash a "costume gala," as if he were on an undercover investigation of colonial power relations like it were a crime scene, gathering evidence and interviewing the suspects on the spot. The reception was the scene where the Western socialites, who were the suspects, were committing a crime for fetishizing Asian culture. Ironically, similar to the way Tseng crashed the party, the *Met* series seemed to anticipate the rise of China at the turn of the twenty-first century, with its growth in economic power achieved by dumping Made-In-China commodities in the West, as if in a reversed version of orientalism.

The *East Meets West* Series and the Expanded, Global *Expeditionary* Series

After the *Met* series, the momentum of Tseng's artistic creativity peaked with the *East Meets West* series. For an entire decade from 1979 to 1989, only one year before he died in 1990, Tseng travelled around the country and around the world to complete his extended *Expedition* series, taking "self-portraits" in front of renowned landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty, Golden Gate Bridge, Mount Rushmore, and the Eiffel Tower (Fig.6-10), producing more than one hundred images. The sites are representations of the Western power which Tseng's work critically comments on. As a later section of this chapter discusses, the image of the Mao suit was common in the West during the Cold War era; it's a representation of the East with a specific political connotation: The Communists. By juxtaposing the historical U.S. sites as backdrop with him in the Mao suit, Tseng visually created a power conflict: The expressive, privileged, developed West versus the introverted, exotic, Communist East, and thus the *East Meets West* series was born. This epic journey was Tseng's own quest for the Grand Tour, a tradition for young upper-class European men of privilege who would travel around Europe when they come to age (about twenty-one years old) from late seventeenth century till early nineteenth century. It was considered to be a crucial part of education for aristocracy as they would get expose to the rich legacy of art, history, science and humanism of Europe. Elites of the United States adopted the Grand Tour in the nineteenth century as a result of the country's rapid economic growth. In Tseng's case, the journey was also about seeking Asian identity in this multi-ethnic country meanwhile challenging the discourse of orientalism by initiating a conversation between China and America as it should've happened long time ago. Commenting on Nixon's visit to China in 1972, Tseng stated:

> *Threats of war separate people of the world. Art is a universal language. This project began in 1979. When president Nixon went to China, a real exchange was supposed to take place between the East and the West, however, the relations remained official and superficial. My distant attitude expresses the mystery still surrounding China*.[4]

The tourist sites Tseng visited were in his mind the best place to start such conversations, about tourism, neo-colonialism, orientalism and ethnic identity. As West has dominated globalization many developing countries in Asia like China, Indonesia, Malaysia were forced to be transformed into manufacturing bases due to the cheap labor costs and unprotected human rights. Thus, a neo-colonial relationship was built. When the "Chinese ambassador", which represented the colonized and developing Asia, visited tourists' sites, which are the symbols of Western civilization and power, he critically commented on such power relations, especially by wearing a Mao uniform, which not only could be a government official, but also cou;d be a normal Chinese citizen who during 1980s did not have the privilege to travel around the world. This is why Tseng's presence made people around him wonder about his identity and intention. When shooting the photographs, Tseng had to deal with local people's prejudices. As he wrote for a Japanese magazine *Inside* to recall his experiences about the *East Meets West* series:

> *It is not easy being a Chinese tourist. There are stares: A Red Guard on the loose? Then the questions: "Do you speak English?"; "Why do you wear that suit?"; "Where are you from?" Should I tell them the truth, that I am actually a New York conceptual performance artist/photographer carrying on my*

[4] Christine Lombard, *Tseng Kwong Chi: East Meets West*, video documentary, 1984

> *lifetime art project of the East meeting the West. Or shall I really be a tourist from China. It is certainly more fun being a tourist with a camera.*[5]

The early 1980s was the first decade after Deng Xiaoping, the successor of Mao, announced the Open-Door policy, which was viewed as the Communists' first step towards free-market economy and capitalism. In this way, Tseng raised questions about what it meant to be a tourist, which is typically a privileged class voyeuristically visiting the less fortunate world. When this hierarchy was flipped, whereby as a Chinese from the non-first world at that time being a tourist in the U.S. and the world, the stares became more aggressive. People in the West weren't used to seeing a free Chinese traveling around the world since China was still in a process of figuring out how to do business with the West and most of Chinese simply couldn't afford it. Taking the long history of being discriminated in America for Chinese immigrants into consideration, for them seeing a Chinese tourist would be like spotting a monster or an alien. A power hierarchy is revealed when the people of the colonized world, seduced by profit, provide staged performance and limited "authentic" experience of the exotic to the tourists.[6] Ironically, when Nixon visited China, carefully staged performances for the President of the United States took place, such as gymnastics and table tennis exhibition games. By inserting his Asian body in a Mao suit into the photographic frame, Tseng confused the relationship between the privileged visitor and the colonized Other. Instead of being a Western tourist, Tseng's colonized Other toured around, as if asking questions such as: who belongs here, who owns this landscape, or, can a land be owned? By exploring and contemplating famed national

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[5] Tseng Kwong Chi, "Cities", *Inside Magazine*, no. 2(Spring 1989): 5.

[6] Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance," 40.

parks and featured landscapes in these photographs, the *East Meets West* series, along with the *Expeditionary* series, was the artist's comment on colonialism and tourism. Thus, in Tseng's photographs, tourism and capitalism turned the landscape into another form of national identity.

Performance Photography and Tseng's Precursors

There is a deep art historical context and references made within Tseng's images. The *Expeditionary* series often showcases a vast landscape (Fig.11), which recalls the photos of Ansel Adams for their sheer magnificence of landscape, or the paintings by the nineteenth century German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich. Both artist's works feature a prominent figure in the middle of the frame with their back facing the viewer (Fig.12). Additionally, since he had studied traditional Chinese ink painting in the early days of Hong Kong, some of Tseng's work (Fig.13) made reference to Chinese landscape painting, which often featured a solitary meditative figure (Fig.14). In performance photography, the persona of the Other certainly connects not only to his peer Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, but also to his predecessor Anselm Kiefer's *Occupations* series (Fig.15,16). Sherman's photographic persona reflects the images that are projected by the mass media through television shows, films, and magazines. Instead of being "herself," the artist instead dressed in costumes to be multiple "Others" in order to search for what female identity really was and how it was constructed through the media. It is interesting to compare the multitude of female Others by Sherman with Tseng's singular Otherness: His alternative persona, the ambiguous Chinaman. Sherman's diverse roles in her photos reflect the expressiveness of the West whereas the

Tseng's sole role is to be himself as an Asian, hinting at the difference between the freedom of the West versus the monolithic class society of communism.

Tseng's work also followed the footsteps and paid tribute to his predecessor Anselm Kiefer, who used his own body to address identity as well. Anselm Kiefer is a multimedia artist who was born in the last days of Nazi Germany in 1945. His hometown was heavily bombed and the young artist had to grow up dealing with ruins and the terror and cruelty of World War II. The *Occupations* series was shot in the summer of 1969 right before he graduated from art school. Much like Tseng's strategy in wearing the Mao suit, Kiefer's persona spoke to the history of his own nationality by means of the infamously taboo gesture that suggested membership in the Nazi Party.[7] Both the Mao suit and the *Sieg Heil* salute serves not as a tribute but as critical comments on the national identity of the artist. As a way to salute the supreme leader Adolf Hitler, the *Sieg Heil* was a greeting gesture widely used in Nazi Germany by lifting the right arm in a forty-five-degree angle pointing upwardly. It is now illegal in many countries such as Germany and Austria. As much as it might cause trouble, especially taking the history of denazification into consideration, the "*Sieg Heil*" fascist salute presented a history that indeed occurred in Germany and was once powerful and quasi-unanimously accepted by the German people. If the salute was unethical, then it is more important that we should not act as though it had never existed. Ironically, as Tseng pointed out in these images, the fact that communism still prevails in China, Cuba and North Korea. Although done in the 1980s, Tseng's work

[7] Christian Weikop, 'Occupations / Heroic Symbols', in Christian Weikop (ed.), In Focus: Heroic Symbols 1969 by Anselm Kiefer, Tate Research Publication, 2016.

is still relevant, and perhaps more and more relevant today since there is debate about whether socialism or capitalism is better than the other, especially given the fact of the current rising economic power of China and the failing leadership of the United States. The Mao suit might not be as taboo, but it certainly symbolized a history that had brought terror to the people who fled from Communist China, including Tseng's parents who fought against the Communist party during Chinese Civil War. Additionally, both artists traveled to various sites of historical reference: in Kiefer's case, to the statue of the French king Louis XIV in Montpellier or to the Roman necropolis in Alyscamps. Most of Kiefer's sites are places of historical ruins rather than Tseng's choice of tourist sites. However, one particular Kiefer image stands out as an outlier, and shows him standing on a seashore with his back facing the viewer and saluting the sea (Fig.16). This photograph has striking similarities to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, to which Tseng also draws a connection with his *Grand Canyon* (Fig.11). As a Westerner, Kiefer's series connected to a past lived history, while Tseng projected a possible future into these places as an outsider from the East. Such a contrast and connection with Sherman and Kiefer's projects made Tseng a successful successor in this genre with his own innovative Asian nuances.

Both Kiefer and Sherman, like Tseng himself, practiced performance photography. It is then necessary to define how this genre of photography has been discussed in the literature, in order to understand how Tseng connected to the genre and further developed it. For example, in Jennifer Blessing's exhibition catalogue *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rro*se, the genre began with the Dadaists in the period between the two world wars as "the medium

of photography yields the perfect arena for the play of gender and sexuality".[8] Theorists like Joan Riviere and Jacques Lacan laid the foundation for gender study, seeing feminine identity for instance as a masquerade. For Riviere, "femininity is constituted in dissembling or the masking of women's masculinity by burying it beneath a veil of decoration".[9] For Lacan, "in order to be the phallus…that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade".[10] Riviere and Lacan's theories were then applied to gender in the 1990s, stating that "masculinity is a mythic construction that is perpetuated through the performative repetition of stereotypes of behavior and dress".[11] Judith Butler, responding to a work of his own said "gender is an impersonation that nobody actually inhabits".[12] To experiment with such ideas, artists used their own body along with props to create alternative personas. Marcel Duchamp's *Rrose Sélavy* (Fig.17) was his female alter ego, which first appeared in 1920 as an author of some Dadaist works. She later became the spokeswoman for a perfume brand called "Belle Haleine." The notion of sexual mutuality had been a key foundation for Duchamp as seen in his works such as *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (The Large Glass) (1915-1923), or *L.H.O.O.Q*, both of which playfully blurred or connected the lines between male and female sexuality, just like his *Rrose Sélavy*, which was the artist's poignant comment on

[8] Jennifer Blessing et al, *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 8.

[9] Blessing, *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose*, 10.

[10] Ibid., 10.

[11] Ibid., 12.

[12] Ibid., 12.

modern capitalism, advertisement and consumerism. Together they were responsible for the "increasing self-consciousness about self-presentation, artifice, and the dividing line between the sexes".[13]

During the 1960s and 70s wave of sexual liberation, there was an exploration of the fluidity of masculinity. Promoted by mass culture, such as Rock 'n' Roll and pop music, long-haired androgynous rock stars or openly gay musicians such as George Michael, Boy George, or Elton John challenged the normative cis gendered male image. Followed by camp culture and gay liberation movement, gender identity was a hot theme in high art. Andy Warhol appeared in drag in photographic works titled *Altered Image* (Fig.18) by Christopher Makos in 1981 as a homage to Duchamp's *Rrose Sélavy*. Other than just the headshot, Warhol's image shows his full torso where the hair and pose appear to be female while the body, attire and hands show clear male attributes. In this way, the artist confused us with his gender, suggesting a stronger sense of androgyny and reconnecting to the idea that sexuality is constructed, or a performance. Along with his photographic based silk-screen prints and repeated, color-altered self-portraits, Warhol commented on the narcissism and the cult of individuality of this age, hinting that all identity could be conceived and strengthened through performance, including gender identity, which was also "conditioned by repetition…that it entails the maintenance of a performance, one that must be reiterated in order to claim coherence".[14] Warhol's work also spoke to sociologist Erving Goffman's 1959 theory that gender is a form of perception rather than a reality, and

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[13] Ibid., 23.

[14] Ibid., 72.

that the nature of males and females is a capacity of learning to provide the depictions of masculinity and femininity. This capacity is "by virtue of being persons, not females or males…there is no gender identity…only a schedule for the portrayal of gender".[15]

Although it may seem to be subtle, the badge "slut for art" attached to his Mao suit hints at Tseng's homosexuality. Being a "slut for art" is metaphor as if he is a woman who is sexually addicted to art. Thus, instead of being referred as a straight male, Tseng showed his gender preference by being a slut. Being a gay artist adopting the genre of performance photography in the 1980s in the breakout of AIDS seemed to be a natural and smart choice. Tseng clearly followed the footsteps of his predecessors in this medium and explored its connection to gender performance by simply being gay. The significance for being an Asian gay male will be discussed further in chapter two.

Tseng and *Détournement*

Tseng Kwong Chi was also a pioneer in performance art in terms of his use and application of the technique of *détournement*, which was widely adopted by the later cultural jamming movement. *Détournement* originated in 1958 in France by the Situationist International (SI), an underground art collective which aimed to challenge everyday capitalist routines and roles by hijacking or rerouting "present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu".[16] In a more contemporary sense, it involves appropriating mass media images or icons to challenge or expose norms perpetuated by its

[15] Ibid., 72.

[16] G.E. Debord, "Definitions", *Situationist International* (1), June 1958, Ken Knabb trans., https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline///si/definitions.html (Accessed Jan 27, 2022).

original meaning. It is a subversive, humorous and somewhat Dadaist kind of performance art. For example, an image of a black and white comic illustration (Fig.19), which is a popular format of media, featuring a woman's face covered by her left hand, was used and appropriated by the SI with the addition of the text: "my thoughts have been replaced by moving images"— to remind people be aware of how images can be used as to manipulate public opinions.

Tseng adopted such technique with a two-way criticism. By wearing his Mao suit, the *Met* series twisted the public image of celebrities and exposed their superficial and fetishistic taste for Chinese customs and culture. The *East Meets West* series subverted the meaning of the most famous tourist sites, thus critically commenting on tourism, Western power and neo-colonialism. At the same time, the Mao suit, which represented either the globally-recognized image of Mao or that of the average citizen in Communist China, was appropriated by Tseng to inspire criticism against Communist regime for being numb, exotic, or even hostile to the West. Due to the highly political connotation and global recognition of Mao, his image had been widely used by artists in fine art in both the West and the East, such as could be seen in the art of Andy Warhol, Eugen Schönebeck, Yasumasa Morimura, Zhang Hongtu, and Shi Xinning. Based on the portraiture of Mao, artists played with *détournement* by either stylizing Mao's face in the case of Warhol, Schönebeck and Zhang (Fig.20-22), or even replacing the face as in Morimura (Fig.23). Mimicking the style of Socialist Realism, Shi Xinning's photorealistic painting createed a surrealist fantasy by putting Mao into scenes he had never been to, such as visiting a Marcel Duchamp art exhibition (Fig.24) or having conversations with Western celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe at a fancy banquet (Fig.25). These works strongly connect to Tseng's *Met*

series. In each case, the image of Mao was *détourned* or twisted or put into a context that gives it new interpretation, more of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Following Tseng's footsteps in using *détournement* in mass culture, the British actor Sasha Baron Cohen adopts the technique of *détournement* as he poses as a government-hired Kazakh journalist travelling around the United States in order to carry out the mission of *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, which the title of the movie hints at. Together with the sequel film, Cohen's Borat movies similarly investigate and expose issues such as sexual scandal, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in American culture.

The Other in Disguise—Tseng's Mao Suit and the Critique of Orientalism

In the *Met* and the *East Meets West* series, the Mao suit was Tseng's accidental yet ingenious choice for the project. Shortly after settling down in New York, Tseng, Muna and their parents planned to dine in a restaurant for dinner. After being turned down and learning that the dress code for the restaurant was suit and tie, Tseng grabbed a Mao suit that he bought at a thrift store, the only suit he owned at that time. The manager thought the family were government officials of some kind from China and treated them as VIPs. This dinner might have been the inspiration for Tseng's series; the idea of a disguised dignitary whose identity is masqueraded and revealed at the same time. Tseng's own personality disappeared while his original connection to China was exposed. It is both realistic and surreal at the same time for the suit reveals his Asian identity more than anything else yet it is a staged persona, thus covering who he really is. The persona appeared to be emotionless and stoic, whereas Tseng was an outgoing party-goer and an active member of the neo-Dadaist East Village art group of the '80s.

Furthermore, the Mao suit transformed Tseng to the Other, an identity that ties to Chinese Americans for being discriminated and treated unequal. Dan Bacalzo argues that Tseng's choice of Mao's suit fits with the artist's quest to challenge orientalism:

> *This persona is specifically an 'Other', a product of the colonial perception of non-Western peoples as strange and different from their perceptions of themselves. The labeling of someone as "Other" implies an unequal power relationship, where the one being "Othered" is oftentimes perceived as inferior, or at best 'exotic.'*[17]

Edward Said had connected othering to orientalism by arguing that orientalism is one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other".[18] This belief of the Other as inferior dates back to the birth of orientalism, which, according to Edward Said, was developed from European literature and arts depiction the Middle East, at that time characterized as the "near East" but also included the "far East." John Kuo Wei Chen argues that within the logic of orientalism, "Asian" is Other despite where the location for there is a collapse between Asia and Asian Americans. The "eclectic, centuries-old master discourse, still filters virtually all that Westerners perceive of and act upon Asians, and affects even the most recent Asian immigrants".[19] The term "Asian American" was born out of the struggle by activists of the 1960s and '70s to denounce the label of Oriental and

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[17] Dan Bacalzo. "Portraits of Self and Other: 'SlutForArt' and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi", *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 1 (2001): 74.

[18] Bacalzo. "Portraits of Self and Other", 74.

[19] John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Believing Is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze," in *Asian/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York City: The Asia Society Galleries and The New Press, 1994), 12-26: 14.

to achieve a sense of independence and self-definition. By creating a persona of this ambiguous ambassador via a Mao suit and a pair of sunglasses, Tseng exposed his Chinese identity while hiding a true self. As mentioned above, this double consciousness for being both realistic and surreal at the same time disrupted the artistic expression and brought mystery to his work.

The Mao suit or *Zhongshan* suit, is named after Sun Yat-Sen, the first chairman of Chinese Nationalist Party and the first president of the Republic of China founded in 1911. Since then, the suit remained the official attire for Chinese government employees. When the Communist party took power and after Nixon visited China in 1972, the suit became more relevant to the West under Mao's name. In Cold War China, the Mao suit was designated to be the common attire for men to wear in order to erase class differences. Men would wear it for their wedding portrait shot. It was also a widely used iconography in the Socialist Realism art. Such works often depicted Mao surrounded by working class people. Mao was always the prominent central figure adored or worshipped as a semi-god. In Communist China, Mao's portrait was hung on the wall of every household. The Little Red book or the Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung was the bible for Chinese people, and there were hymns about Mao's glorious victory and wishing him to live a long-lived life. Tseng's project drew a great deal of similarities with the Long March series, a public art propaganda in the 1940s, featuring Mao dwarfing the masses and scenery around him (Fig.26). Tseng's images also often featured close-up shots with him disproportionately sized with the scenery or buildings behind him. For Tseng, Mao was a "tremendous hero"

in terms of aestheticism:[20] He was a figure of myth and power generated through images. In the *East Meets West*, Tseng created his own mythology with the quest of seeking dialogue and communication in the places where these conversations should take place at the most socialized level. The tourist sites were the symbols of Western glory and power, yet Tseng disrupted the narrative with the existence as an "Other", someone who didn't belong here, someone who was not Tseng himself, and someone who deviated the attention from the audience onto the persona instead of the magnificent backdrop. By projecting the Other onto the sites with the wearing of the Mao suit, Tseng ridiculed the political agenda of Socialist imagery and "reversed a power relation central to Cold War culture".[21]

The Gaze of Tseng and Primitivism

Another important aspect of Tseng's is his own investigation of the semi-primitive gaze of the Other which questions colonialism and outdated Western ideas about the Orient. Similarities can be drawn from a modernist perspective. Ruud Welten points out that even though Gauguin's primitivism work of Tahitians are not self-portraits of the artist, it is Gauguin's depiction of Other, which lines with Tseng's image, which is strictly speaking not a self-portrait either, but rather a depiction of Other, the marginalized Asians. Welten argues in his essay "Paul Gauguin and The Complexity of the Primitivist Gaze", as showed in Gauguin's *Three Tahitians* (Fig.27), that rather than being simply a method of revealing the truth and beauty of primitive, Primitivism is a way of self-criticism of the

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[20] Bacalzo, 80.

[21] Claudia Mesch, "State-Sponsored Art During the Cold War" in *Art and politics: a small history of art for social change since 1945*. I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013, 15-43: 40

West, a result of colonialism that attacks colonialism.[22] Gauguin treated the Tahitians as the Other, as a culture that was pure and innocent, which was a popular and positive trend during the late nineteenth century in various colonized territories. The gaze with which Gauguin looks at the Tahitians is a primitivizing gaze which longs for Otherness. Rather than simply being a colonialist, Welten defends Gauguin by claiming that the artist wanted a true exile from over-industrialized Europe that was full of lust and ambition. The gaze that the Tahitian girl at the left returns to the viewer is a gaze from the Other who actively seeks out whoever is looking at her. It is a gaze of panic, terror, questioning, and condemnation.

Similar to the "primitive" people of Tahiti, Chinese Americans had a long history of being treated less fairly and of being fetishized. Examples include the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and asexual and threatening stereotypes of Chinese men, such as depicted in Joseph Hull's illustration of "AH SIN" from the Heathen Chinese (Fig.28), or the Canton Delicate Ginger Liqueur poster (Fig.29). With sunglasses and the Mao suit, Tseng transformed himself into this type of Asian stereotype. Scholars like Amy Brandt in her essay "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance" presented in the exhibition catalogue of *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera,* and John Kuo Wei Tchen's "Believing Is Seeing" essay have both argued that colonialism and globalization have turned orientalism into cultural fetishism, a superficial way to treat Asian culture as a product to be consumed, fetishized or showing off with on or little intension for real Asian

[22] Welten, Ruud. "Paul Gauguin and the complexity of the primitivist gaze." *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (2015): 2.

experience. For example, in mass culture, Disney films that depict Asian culture, such as *Aladdin* (1992) and *Mulan* (1996), are superficially fascinated by Westerners. Blocked by the sunglasses, the gaze of Tseng has no direct contact with the viewer and appears inscrutable which is an orientalist stereotype, the inscrutable oriental that Said spoke of who is opaque to Westerners and is also a stereotype of the Chinese. Tseng had created this opaque Chinese gaze that is similar to Gauguin's primitivism gaze, which is never neutral nor passive, but actively asks for a measure of self-criticism from the viewer. Margo Machida states that Tseng's point is "to counter the long history of Orientalist painting and photography by explicitly re-presenting the West as if seen

through a possessive 'Occidentalist' gaze".[23] Tseng's photo did not document himself taking pictures at a tourist site, but rather presented a counter-orientalist gaze. The images are not there for us to just look at; we are expected to be looked at. In the case of Gauguin's Tahitians, we are the voyeurs who sneak into the Other's life. But for Tseng, the viewer lives in the same world with the viewer. Tseng redirects the gaze—that makes Tseng different from Gauguin. Tseng in these images refuses to be presented in any Oriental or Western-fetishizing way, announcing this with his opaque gaze signaling that we will never understand him.

[23] Margo Machida, "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America" in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries and the New Press, 1994), 65-109: 96.

CHAPTER TWO

TSENG'S OTHER INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

This chapter decodes Tseng's work in relation to its connections to other essential intellectual disciplines. As a queer artist, Tseng's work redefines Asian American identity, drawing upon the larger context of masculinity and queer studies. Tseng offered us an early example of what Jachinson Chan has suggested about an alternative model of masculinity for Asian American males and bridges the fields of Asian American queer studies and diaspora studies, for which David Eng has argued. Tseng's innovative use of *détournement* by means of the Mao suit was original among Asian American artists and laid the foundation for future artists of Asia who explored the possibilities of appropriating Mao's image for either political satire or in the search for a diasporic Asian identity. In his references to diplomatic jobs, to the mark of war, and to the site of San Francisco, Tseng continued the work of first-generation and diasporic Chinese American artists. In his development of the medium of performance photography and in exploring the cultural conflict, power relation, and identity politics between East and West Tseng also inspired the next-generation of Chinese/Asian diasporic artists.

Tseng, Masculinity and Queer Identity in Asian American Studies

One manifestation of Tseng's sexuality is shown by the badge on his Mao suit which read: "Slut for Art"—which draws a connection to Marcel Duchamp's Rose Sélavy and Andy Warhol's *Drag* series. Just as important as his Asian identity, this subtle notion of sexuality challenges the existing stereotype of Asian American masculinity represented by Bruce Lee, whom scholar Jachinson Chan has found problematic for being sexually ambiguous. Kelly Chong, a sociology professor at University of Kansas, and Nadia Kim,

a sociology professor at Loyola Marymount University, had also argue that Bruce Lee has the potential of reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity, which had marginalized Asian American males in the first place. Additionally, Tseng's work offered us as an early example long before David Eng, a professor of English and Asian American studies at University of Pennsylvania, argues that there is a common ground between diaspora and queer in Asian American study.

Tseng and Lee are newer additions to earlier mass media stereotypes of Asian American men and more specifically, to the conventions of how Chinese American men have been represented or constructed in the predominantly white hegemonic society of the U.S. Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, and Shang-Chi are earlier filmic examples of American mass media's stereotypes of Chinese American masculinity. Fu Manchu, a fictional Chinese villain created by Sax Rohmer, is an example of the "yellow peril," which puts forward a fearful image of the oriental as a threat to the West. In the Rohmer films he is viciously de-sexualized to the white women characters while he tries to destroy Western society with his evil plans. Created by Earl Derr Biggers as the counterpart of Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan is a detective and a defender of the Western rule of law. However, as heroic as this character is, in these films Chan is immune to sexual attraction or relationships with white women.

As the only non-fictional figure on this list, Bruce Lee is an Eastern alternative to the Anglo macho stereotype as he broke the asexual stereotype of the "Sick Man of Asia", a term originated in the late nineteenth century and coined by the Western media in criticizing the corrupt Qing government. The phrase was quickly adopted by Chinese intellectuals for self-criticism and furthermore to encourage people to overthrow Qing

dynasty. The "Sick Man of Asia" was a severe humiliation to the Chinese, a parallel to the insulting term "Negro" which was applied to African Americans. For quite a long time, the Chinese were living under such shame, and especially first-generation Chinese immigrants. When Bruce Lee showed his unmatched skills in martial arts and succeeded in smashing the image of the "Sick Man of Asia" by out-performing or beating American white men in his Hollywood films, he became a household name and paved the way for his successors such as Jacky Chen, Jet Li and Donnie Yen. When Shang-Chi—a character that built upon Bruce Lee and Charlie Chan and is more normative in terms of his heterosexuality—kills his father Fu Manchu in the Marvel comics, justice is served but meanwhile a contradiction arises. Jachinson Chan has pointed out in his book *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu_Manchu to Bruce Lee* that because of such stereotypes, Chinese Americans must "choose between his/her Asian heritage or American values, as if these options were mutually exclusive".[1]

As discussed in chapter one Tseng's performances critically commented on tourism, and brought new sexual identities into the discussion of Chinese American masculinity, which has a long history of being tied with gayness. The Page Act of 1875, which banned Chinese women from immigrating to the United States, and its sequel, Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, that barred all Chinese labor from immigration, in theory formed Chinese bachelor societies in U.S. Chinatowns, mostly in New York and San Francisco. In these Chinatowns lives of Chinese citizens were turned into staged performances by the tourist

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[1]Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 3.

industry: people were attracted by the exotic, dangerous, and mysterious image of Chinese men and the enslaved lives of Chinese women.

This transformation foreshadows the birth of fictional characters Fu Manchu, which is a model of xenophobia; and Charlie Chan, which is representative of racism towards Chinese Americans who lack English proficiency, have an introverted personality and a "yellow" face. Although Bruce Lee succeeded in breaking through the barriers of a cultural minority and the stereotype of yellow peril, his characters are generally limited to physical strength and rarely display any sexual or heterosexual identity in his movies. Thus, one assumption that might be made is that both figures, Charlie Chan and Bruce Lee, at least have the potential to be homosexual. In other words, Chinese male characters in American film, comics and mass media are often implied to be either homosexual or asexual. Scholars have argued that hegemonic masculinity is deeply connected with patriarchy, heterosexuality, homophobia, classism, sexism, and racism, and additionally has excluded men of color to protect white power.[2] Robert Connell has identified that, according to patriarchal ideology, gayness is a type of inferior masculinity, which treats gayness as the "repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity…hence gayness is easily assimilated femininity".[3] Thus, Asian American men, who are living under the white-dominant or hegemonic model of masculinity and fearful of being identified as feminized, are pushed to abandon their marginalized and emasculated identity and to act out accordingly in order to assert their sexual identity and prove their manhood.

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[2] Chan, *Chinese American masculinities*, 6-14.

[3] Robert Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 78

In dealing with this issue of sexual identity, scholar Jachinson Chan has challenged Chinese/Asian American men to construct an alternative masculinity that rejects a tie with heterosexuality and to take the risk of being labeled as semi-feminine or homosexual.[4] Bruce Lee, along with queer artists like Martin Wong and Tseng Kwong Chi, had provided a potential model. Bruce Lee is an ambiguous model of Asian American masculinity or what Chan calls "ambi-sexual identity," which is "characterized by a non-commitment to reified models of sexual identities".[5] As mentioned above, there is a clear distinction between James Bond movies and Bruce Lee's_movies: Lee rarely shows any interest in female characters nor the other way around, despite the fact that he constantly displays his fit and muscular body and shows his superiority in strength and martial art skills, which film presents to arouse both male and female sexual desire. Thus, Lee blurs the line between heterosexual and homosexual masculinity. He commits to neither, which makes him a potential model of masculinity for Chinese/Asian American males in the manner that Chan has suggested.

However, Bruce Lee is problematic because of his ambiguous sexuality, especially given the fact that he is identified with his power and physical strength, which glorifies and solidifies patriarchy ideology. Secondly, although as a hero he successfully breaks the stereotype of the asexual Chinese man, he generates a simple-minded, chop-socky macho stereotype instead. Additionally, Lee is embraced and adored by Chinese/Asian males who are allegedly under pressure of being marginalized and fearful of being treated as feminine

[4] Chan, 14.

[5] Ibid, 18.

or inferior, which contradicts what Chan tries to argue. In this regard, Tseng contested Lee's masculinity by being openly gay and not trying to be a superior macho hero. Tseng instead embraced who he was as a way to challenge the Western patriarchal and hegemonic hetero-masculinity.

Moreover, Bruce Lee's character aligns with what Chong and Kim call "The Model Man", a new masculine stereotype among not necessarily wealthy Asian American men, as typified in the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), which draws upon second-generation immigrants and beyond. The new stereotype is a synthesis of white hegemonic hetero-masculinity with selected appealing Asian traits: in order to establish romantic desirability to white women, they are geared to match their Caucasian male peers with the same level of socioeconomical capital while being Asian, which usually possesses traits like having less body hair, being caring, good at cooking and family-focused, also being sensitive or nerdy, just name a few qualities. Chong points out that although such a new model may have potential to remap American manhood, it may very well risk reinforcing hegemonic white masculinity; moreover, it "has the potential to oppress all women and other marginalized men".[6] In a perfect world, no minority racial group should feel pressured to prove themselves or to compete with the dominant group. Tseng's artist-persona reminds us that he doesn't try to match himself against or compete with any other race or class, but is simply a Chinese openly gay man, as if posing the statement: I don't have to conform to the Western standard of masculinity and you don't have to either.

[6] Kelly H. Chong and Nadia Y. Kim, "The Model Man: Shifting Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and the Renegotiation of a Racial Hierarchy of Desire", *Men and Masculinities* 1-23, (2021): 16.

Furthermore, as a simultaneously queer and diasporic Chinese Canadian artist, Tseng inserted himself into the discourse David Eng suggests, about building a connection between Asian American diaspora studies with queer studies. Being an Asian American, a marginalized and displaced group in the United States, is hard enough, and being queer is additionally challenging. Eng argues that both diasporic Asian Americans and gay men have a belonging issue regarding the loss of home and the pursuit of recognition. In Eng's own words: diasporic Asians have "a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a nation-state, a home."[7] This theory applies to Tseng's case as he may have been forced to leave Canada, where his queerness was not accepted or respected. He relocated to New York City, a place with much more tolerance and openness to alternative sexualities. Before 1870 it used to be the case that only white male immigrants could naturally gain U.S. citizenship, and Asian males were barred from citizenship until 1943. Thus "whiteness", masculinity and American identity are closely intertwined. Eng suggests that the notion of queerness goes beyond sexual identity, and connects deeply with racial formation for Asian Americans, a racial group "whose historically disavowed status as U.S. citizen-subjects under punitive immigration and exclusion laws, renders them queer as such".[8] In other words, if you are not white, then you not a "normal" man, let alone not a citizen. According to Eng all Asian Americans are thus considered to possess queerness as a social trait, since they were once not able to become naturalized citizens. Given the fact that Asian Americans are an inherently a

[7] David L. Eng. "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies", *Social Text* 52/53. Durham: Duke University Press, (2005): 32.

[8] Eng, "Out Here and Over There", 41.

dislocated group that seeks a new home in U.S nation-state, diaspora and queerness are therefore both rooted in and bonded together within the discourse of Asian American identity. Again, Tseng's project testified to and visualized Eng's theory with a sense of self-satire. The pun lies in his own sexuality and Asian identity. The queerness of Asian American is supposed to be challenged or criticized, yet Tseng chose to accept it by his identity as Chinese and open about his gayness. At the same time, Tseng put himself into a situation of being judged and marginalized, as he invited us to see him as a living example of what Eng has described. Tseng's images then commented critically on the hardship of being Asian American, one who is discriminated against as a homosexual non-citizen and always still looks for a home and acceptance.

Carrying the Legacy of Earlier Diaspora and Chinese American Art

Although he sometimes pursued another medium in his artistic practice, Tseng's photography follows in the footsteps of what earlier Chinese American artists and photographers had set forth. There are connections and crossovers that can be found from their career paths. Diplomacy, war, the city of San Francisco and the diaspora have shaped both generations of artists._In terms of paying tribute to the history of Chinese American photography and art, Tseng's work showed great depth. In this section I will outline some of these multiple historical references to the work of earlier Asian diaspora artists that can be found in Tseng's art.

First of all, Tseng's label "ambiguous ambassador" is an interesting one, since several of the early pioneers of Chinese American art had indeed worked certain types of diplomatic jobs. Chang Shu-Chi, one of the most widely known Chinese painters of his time in the U.S. and the father of Gordon Chang— who is a history professor at Stanford

University and the leading author of *Asian American Art: A History 1850-1970*—was once the "Chinese government ambassador of art" in 1941, when he traveled around North America organizing lectures and exhibitions. His silk painting *Messengers of Peace* (Fig.30) was a gift for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's third inauguration.

Chao-Chen Yang, born in Hangzhou China in 1909, was a photographer and a diplomat. He moved to the United States with his wife in 1933 and worked for the Chinese consulate-general in Chicago, since he had an educational background in foreign relations and had working experience as the director of the Chinese Government Institute's Department of Art in Nanjing China from 1929 to 1933. Yang was transferred to Seattle and worked as Chinese deputy consul in 1939. He continued his diplomatic service throughout World War II. As a photographer, Yang was a pioneer in his field. His solo exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum in 1942 was the museum's first solo photography show. He founded Yang Color photography in 1948, one of the first studios in Seattle specializing in color photography. He experimented with the filmic developing process and had been able to control the color, which was adopted by the industry at that time; Yang died of kidney disease in 1969.

Dong Kingman, a Chinese American artist known for his watercolor paintings, was invited by the U.S. Department of State in 1953 to serve as an ambassador of a cultural exchange program, giving lectures and organizing exhibitions around the world. The lecture tour was documented by James Wong Howe, another Chinese American artist who was a sixteen-time Academy Award nominee and two-time winner, and arguably one of the most accomplished and innovative cinematographers in the film industry. Born and raised in Oakland, California, Kingman was among the first generation of natural-born

Chinese Americans. When Kingman was five in 1916, he moved with his family to Hong Kong, where Tseng was born. There he began his art training, learning both plein-air oil painting and Chinese ink painting.

In 1929, Kingman returned to California and continued his art education at the Fox Morgan School, where his watercolor style started to get recognition. He participated in a group exhibition in 1935 and had his first solo exhibition in 1936. That same year, Kingman won the First Purchase Prize of the San Francisco Art Association. He received a two-year Guggenheim Fellowship between 1942 to1944, during which time he travelled around the United States and completed a lot of work. In 1946, Kingman settled in New York, where he lived until his death in 2000.

Kingman's watercolor painting is an early example of how Chinese American artists would approach the theme of identity, diaspora and the transnationalism of "East meets West". The subject matter is the U.S. cityscape but the medium is Chinese ink. In his *Golden Gate Bridge* (Fig.31), the backdrop is the prominent San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge; yet something smaller in size, a couple of fishermen, catch the viewer's eye in the foreground. Two of them are dressed in the medieval Chinese style, which is reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink painting. This combination creates a strong artistic effect, and positioned Kingman among the finest watercolor painters of that era. His skill allowed his work to become the inspiration for future Chinese diaspora artists. Kingman's impact or legacy can clearly be seen by the work of Tseng, as he also had been in the same location with a similar composition (Fig.32). In Tseng's case, the bridge is on the left-hand side, receding in the background, and the subject in the foreground is more prominent. The location is Western, and Tseng's identity is the Eastern element. Both the fishermen and

Tseng are looking far ahead without any direct eye contact with the viewer, thereby creating a sense of mystery and tranquility, which is a quality that Chinese ink painting values favorably.

Tseng was certainly aware of the significance of this location. More than being a landmark of the west coast in America, San Francisco was the settlement town for early Chinese immigrants who arrived in California in the mid-19th century for the Gold Rush or for the building of railroads on the west coast. San Francisco's Chinatown is the first Chinatown in North America and it remains the largest Chinese community outside of Asia. It has been home to many Chinese American artists and has been the source of inspiration for all kinds of medium from painting to photography.

I am introducing here just a few of these important photographers of the Bay area. Irene Poon, a representative of a younger generation of artists and born in San Francisco Chinatown in 1941, photographed street scenes and portraits in her hometown (Fig. 33-34). Her book *Leading the Way: Asian American Artists of the Older Generation* catalogs twenty-five leading Asian American artists whose careers span from 1930 to 1970, including Benjamen Chinn and Charles Wong. Each of her entries is accompanied with a portrait taken by Poon, who felt the necessity and urgency to document their presence before they are gone. I have consulted Poon's book in compiling this list of artists.[9]

Benjamen Chinn was born in San Francisco Chinatown in 1921, and studied at California School of Fine Arts; he took classes with Ansel Adams from 1946 to 1949. He

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[9] Irene Poon, *Leading the Way: Asian American Artists of the Older Generation. (Wenham: Gordon College, 2001).*

moved to Paris to continue his education at the Académie Julian, then returned to San Francisco in 1950. He photographed many street scenes of Chinatown during the late 1940s and early 1950s (Fig.35); his work is known for its rich tones of black-and-white which often "convey a nuanced specificity of place".[10] George Lee, also born in San Francisco and in 1922, did a portrait series in his Santa Cruz Chinatown community and recorded the last generation of the nineteenth century Chinese immigrants. Charles Wong, born in the same year, based his work in Chinatown street scenes (Fig.36). From 1940 to 1942, and 1949 to 1950, he also took classes with Ansel Adams at the California School of Fine Arts. It should be noted that the landscapes of Tseng's *Expeditionary* series (Fig.11) certainly recall those by Ansel Adams.

Additionally, the impact of war has marked the careers of both generations of Asian American artists. Many first-generation artists were served in the military. Benjamen Chinn served in the U.S. Army Air Corps in Hawaii. George Lee served in the U.S. Navy as a combat photographer both during World War II and the Korean War. Charles Wong served in the Air Force in Arizona during World War II as a ground crew for Chinese pilots' training. While in contrast Tseng was never active in military service, his father fought for the Nationalist Army of China during China's Civil War that ended in 1949, when the communists took over the mainland. It forced Tseng's parents to move to Hong Kong, where the artist was born in 1950. The family then moved to Canada in 1966 as they feared the Communist regime, which the U.S. failed to defeat in North Korea, Vietnam and China

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[10] Gordon Chang et al, *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 305

during the Cold War era. There is no doubt that these wars of the twentieth century shaped and impacted both the older and the younger generation of Chinese American artists.

The careers of the early generation were also marked by diaspora. Nearly fifty percent of them were born in China and then immigrated to America later on, such as Chang Shu-chi, who was born in Zhejiang province and moved to San Francisco Bay Area with his wife during the Chinese civil war. Yun Gee, a prominent modernist painter who was the founder of Diamondism, a style of the late 1930s that aimed at challenging Cubism, was born in Guangdong China in 1906 and immigrated to San Francisco at the age of fifteen. Like Tseng, Yun Gee had resided in Paris during his career from 1927 to 1930 and 1936 to 1939. Benjamen Chinn had also lived in Paris for one year in 1949. James Wong Howe was also born in Guangdong in 1899 and moved to the United States with his family when he was five. The list of diaspora artists is long. As he was also born in Hong Kong, raised in Canada, studied in Paris and worked in New York, Tseng is a perfect example of a Chinese diaspora artist who follows the footsteps of his predecessors.

The theme of diaspora is deeply rooted in the immigration history of Asian Americans. Filipinos arrived in north America during the sixteenth century; a large-scale migration of Chinese arrived on the west coast of the U.S. for the gold rush in the middle of the nineteenth century. For first-generation arrivals, the transition from home to the "promised land" was far from easy, and sometimes even traumatic. Language, culture, prejudice and religion are always barriers to resettling. Because of orientalism in art and literature, a veil of being mysterious, exotic, asexual or even hostile had been placed on Chinese male immigrants, which is typified by Tseng's emotionless face shielded with sunglasses. Such stereotypes had forced viewers to look at Asians through particular lenses

such as Fu Manchu and the “Sick Man of Asia” mentioned above. However, although Asian Americans are among the fastest growing ethnic groups, they remain a small portion of the U.S. population. Asian Americans are thus often marginalized in the dominant black and white ethnic power struggles of the United States. Asian diasporic artists are therefore often concerned with themes of prejudice and stereotyping.

Other *Détournements* of Mao: Mao and Critique After Tseng

Something magical occurs when an artist critiques on his/her own ethnicity. As I mentioned in chapter one, Tseng *détourned* the image of a common Chinese citizen in a Mao suit, which further echoes the image of Mao himself. While Andy Warhol’s *Mao* (1972) already appropriated Mao’s image, Tseng was the first Asian American artist to do so through performance in high art. The significance of Tseng’s own body distinguishes Tseng from Warhol, and makes the image of Mao come to life in Tseng's cunning infiltration or crashing of a party at Metropolitan Museum or in the grand tour of travelling around the world. Tseng almost instantly generated discussions about power relations and cultural tensions between East and West in a way that Warhol’s prints could not. If Warhol’s *Mao* was an artistic experiment by an outsider from the West, then Tseng’s disguised persona was a critique from an insider of the East. Similar to Anselm Kiefer’s *Occupations*, a big part of Tseng’s work dealt with his own ethnic identity. It is then more dimensional, more performative, confrontational and more effective than Warhol in commenting on orientalism, Asian identity and stereotypes. It is Tseng’s own Asian presence that sets him apart. Among Asian artists Tseng set a precedent in how he explored his Asian/Chinese ethnic identity, also by means of his political satire of the image of Mao. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how Asian artists after Tseng have *détourned*

the image of Mao and how Asian-ness plays out in their work as a result. All the artists I mention below have, like Tseng, commented on their own Asian identity or Asian political ideology through the icon of Mao.

The artist Wang Guangyi is mostly known for his *Post-Classical* series (1986-88) and *Great Criticism* series (1990-2007), featuring twisted motifs that are popular and highly recognizable in Western and Chinese art. He is the first Chinese artist who appropriated Mao in fine art.[11] As he is heavily influenced by German philosophers such as Hegel, Kant and Nietzsche, as well as by Pop Art in terms of iconographic style, Wang's art aims at challenging institutional authority and its system of power. The spirit of "East Meets West" and *détournement* can be seen throughout Wang's work: he appropriates popular Western art imagery with his own alternations. In the *Post-Classical* series, Wang strips away "unnecessary" elements from biblical or classical figures, ending with geometrical shapes and compositional devices such as cones and spheres. In Wang's *Great Criticism* series, he places together logos of Western brands such as Nike, Coca Cola, and Chanel with the propaganda art of the time of Chinese Cultural Revolution, featuring highly stylized working-class people or Red Army soldiers (Fig.37). These combinations subvert the meaning of both the Western brands and of Chinese socialism and allow viewers to think critically about issues such as globalization and capitalism within the context of modern Chinese society. In the early 1980s under China's Open-Door policy, a wave of big Western corporations started their business in China. On the one hand, Wang's art can be read as a warning for the resistance from Chinese to those luxury brands, as they

[11] Stephanie Tung, Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World, 98.

are the presentations of capitalism which Mao aimed to defeat and replace with socialism. On the other hand, the dominant and centralized brand logo foreshadows the failure of China's socialism since those Western brands have the potential to take over the market, proving that socialism is nothing more a utopian dream. In *Mao Zedong: Red Grid No.2*, 1988 (Fig.38), Wang covers the face of Mao and disperses it through a red grid, which evokes the measuring aids that are used for sizing up prints. The grid effect almost creates an illusion of an imprisoned figure, by putting it behind bars or fences, which thus implies that the face is being condemned.

Zhang Hongtu also *détourned* the image of Mao. He is mostly known for his satiric Mao's portraits whose faces are often distorted or decorated with strange features like pigtails or Stalin's mustache, while still maintaining a style that is reminiscent of socialist realism. Zhang was born in 1943 Gansu Province and moved to New York in 1983, where he met joined the Epoxy Art Group. In his *The Last Banquet* (Fig.39), a piece made for *the June 4th Exhibition* in October of 1989 at the Asian American Arts Centre (AAAC) in New York, he appropriates Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Zhang replaces the figures of Jesus Christ and all his disciples with Mao in this signature Mao suit. While it can be interpreted as a depiction of admiration for Mao since he sits in the center pretending to be Jesus, Zhang's work demystifies Mao's demi-god aura. Upon close inspection, we find that Mao also appears to be all of the disciples, displaying various human characteristics such as doubting, wondering and admiring. Zhang replaces the tableware with chopsticks, bowls and Chinese brand cigarettes. A spittoon sits at the foot of the central Mao. The wall is filled with scribbles from Mao's *Little Red Book* (1964), a collection of public speeches and writings of his lifetime. It is regarded to be the "bible" for all the Chinese to read during the Cultural

Revolution. Zhang replaces the scenery outside the window with views of the Great Wall that looks like a pencil drawing still in process. The Renaissance perspective is gone and the spatial illusion is flattened. The overall tone of the picture is darkened by the heavy shades on the wall, figures and the table. Zhang successfully erases the holiness of Jesus Christ and the drama of the Last Supper with a sense of kitschness by showing clear brushstrokes and unfinished details—such as the hands of Mao, and the views of the Great Wall—as if this is an omen for the last supper of Maoism in China before its demise.

Another Zhang work is *H.I.A.C.S*, 1989 (Fig.22), a portrait of Mao in the style of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q*, but where Stalin's mustache is added to Mao's face and the title is an acronym of "He Is A Chinese Stalin." It is one of Zhang's series of parody works that aim to challenge the authoritative power of Mao, who is considered to the founding father of People's Republic of China founded in 1949. Although Mao passed away in 1976, his portrait still hangs in front of Tiananmen Square, as if still overseeing all of China. Mao is a quasi-eternal symbol of Communist China. By satirizing Mao with classic Western religious iconography or with clownish facial features of other dictators, both artworks are Zhang's reaction to the tragedy of the Tiananmen massacre.

Shi Xinning, who experienced the Cultural Revolution as a child, also finds favor in using Mao's image in his oil paintings with black-and-white photographic realism, in which the artist envisions what would have happened if China were open to the West. For example, according to Shi, Mao would visit a Marcel Duchamp exhibition to take a peek at *Fountain* (Fig.24), or, he would sit with celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley or Audrey Hepburn (Fig.25). Shi's surreal scenes create humor and satire, given the fact that Mao would have no clue what Duchamp's urinal is about nor have the language to talk

with these Western celebrities. Thus, Shi visually echoes the barrier and lack of communication between East and West. In addition, Shi's work draws a great amount of similarities of Tseng's *Met* series as Tseng, who disguised himself as a Chinese dignitary, literally talked, sat and partied with West socialites and celebrities. In this case, Tseng's performance photographs foreshadowed Shi's art. Shi also likes to *détourne* the power icons of both Western and Asian cultures, putting them side by side and thus building connections between them.

In another parallel to Tseng, the Japanese performance and appropriation artist Yasumasa Morimura impersonates historical figures from the twentieth century in his *Requiem* series. In *A Requiem: Red Dream/Mao*, 2007, Morimura costumes himself as Chairman Mao in a grand and glamorous manner with refined facial details and skin. The particular type of Mao portrait that Morimura imitates was widely used in post-1949 China. One example of it still hangs on the gate of Tiananmen. Thus, Morimura immediately connects this work to a very specific time and place in China and to Mao himself. In Morimura's rendering, Mao goes beyond a status as a leader of the proletariat, and is instead a demi-god figure suitable for worship. From a distance, the viewer cannot really notice the difference between the real Mao image and Morimura's face. Only with a second look, the artist's identity is revealed. Thus, in Moriumura East meets "West" through the artist's own body: Mao's image is from the East and the artist's Japanese presence from the West. Since the time of Meiji Restoration, 1868, Japan has had a long history of Westernization by embracing Western culture, politics and its economic system. To this day, "Dongyang", a Chinese slang word that means the "Eastern West," is still a term used for Japan in Chinese culture. By impersonating Mao as a Japanese, whose country had invaded China

in World War II, Morimura critically comments on history and politics through sly and playful identity displacement.

Asian Artists in Diaspora and Transnationality

Diasporic artists have played an important role in modern art history; for example, Dada was a movement founded by Euro-American artists who were displaced by and responded to the fear and terror of World War I. As I've mentioned, Tseng is an example of a diasporic artist, and his art should be considered within the critical context of the transnationalism of twentieth-century Asian American artists. Images by Chinese diaspora artists reflect a globalized movement that involves artists migrating across the world or across continents. As Tseng's title *East Meets West* indicates, Tseng acted as a forerunner to later Chinese diaspora artists in terms of cultural and political confrontation, and in his exploration of possible connections between the two polarized worlds.

The Star Art Group is considered to be the first avant-garde art group in China and in September 1979, they held their own show called the "Stars Art Exhibition" (Fig.40), which was a Salon des Refusés for Beijing. It was a Dadaistic moment for contemporary Chinese artists. It marked the birth of contemporary art in China.[12] Due to highly political censorship, the group was forced to disband and relocate outside China. Because the break-up of the Star Art Group caused the first wave of diasporic artists in contemporary Chinese art history, it is important to study them in further detail. The Star Art group were amateur artists aiming to challenge official academic or state sponsored art at the end of the 1970s.

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[12] Jiehong Jiang. *The Art of Contemporary China (World of Art)*. Thames & Hudson, 2021: 169

Twenty-three artists participated. Among them were the leaders and the curators of the show, Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, Wang Keping, and Ai Weiwei, who was then still an art student. About one hundred and sixty works were hung on the fences of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing after the proposal for the exhibition was postponed by the government due to the tight schedule. More than 30,000 people shown up during the exhibition before it was taken down by the police only after two days.

Demonstrations were held by the group on October 1st, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, calling for freedom of speech and democracy. The march started from a wall in Xidan Beijing, which later became the oasis for freedom of speech. Tabloids, magazines or newspapers hung on the wall by independent writers, political critics and artists every day. One year later, the *Stars* had their second show, which had the attendance of forty thousand people. Struggling with harsh censorship and very limited support, and meanwhile seeking new inspiration, many of the *Stars* fled the country. Huang Rui went to Japan, Wang Keping and Ma Desheng went to France. Dropping out of the Beijing Film Academy, Ai Weiwei chose to go to New York because he considered it as the capital of contemporary art and he wanted to be on the top.[13]

The first wave of Chinese immigrant artists to New York City happened in the 1980s. As it has been the hub to the European immigrant artists after World War I, this city had homed many Asian artists in diaspora as well and had become a charming place where their lives and art came across with each other. In addition to Chinese artists, diaspora artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan such as Bing Lee, Frog King Kwok, Ming Fay,

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[13] Hans Ulrich-Obrist, "The Retrospective", in *Ai Weiwei: Spatial Matters - Art Architecture and Activism*, edited by Ai Weiwei and Anthony Pins (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 18.

Tehching Hsieh, were also active members of the Asian American art community. Many groups of Asian American artists were formed both on the Lower East Side and in Chinatown, such as the Basement Workshop, Group Material, Asian American Art Network, and Epoxy Art Group. The most recent exhibition that showcased Chinese diaspora art and Tseng's work is "Exodus II-Unhinging the Great Wall: Chinese Art Revealed, East Village, NY 1980s," which took place from March to April in 2020 at WhiteBox Art Center in New York, and was curated by Elizabeth Rogers, Bing Lee, and Anthony Haden. The exhibition features fifteen Chinese émigré artists who played a vital creative role among New York art circles during the '80s and early '90s. The Exodus program at WhiteBox began in 2018 and was dedicated to the works of émigré artists working in New York. "Exodus II" is focused on Chinese and Asian identity. Some of the big names are also included in the show such as Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei. It comes with no surprise that Chinese identity in diaspora is a common theme explored by all of the participating artists in this 2020 exhibition. The exhibition then points to an important and wider context for Tseng's art, which is only now being recognized.

Even though Tseng is not technically considered to be an Asian American artist since he is a Chinese Canadian, the fact that the curator positioned him as a Chinese émigré artist speaks to the power and successful transformation of Tseng's disguised persona. It also points to the common ground of their work, which completely makes him a part of this group. The "Exodus II" show includes Tseng's work along with all other Chinese artists due to, firstly, they all based in New York City, with most of them lived in the East Village, around the same time from 1980s to early 1990s. Secondly, and more importantly, it is the Chineseness and their Asian identity that brought them together. Just as Tseng,

they dealt with their diaspora experiences in the United States and their Asian identity. Many of them had known or exhibited works together with Tseng. To the discourse of Chinese contemporary art, they brought a new modernist artistic language taken from the Western art canon, such as readymade, photography, performance, Dadaism and Pop art, using it to comment on the theme of being Chinese in diaspora. In a broader context, the "Exodus II" exhibition highlights and strengthens the notion of Asian art in the United States. Despite the rising recognition and existence of Asian culture, it is still far from being understood and appreciated in this multi-racial nation. Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei and Zhang Hongtu are three artists from the “Exodus II” exhibition that I’m going to discuss below. The artwork they made in New York have showed strong impact of their diaspora life abroad as well as the connection with Tseng in terms of commenting on Asian identity and the relation between China and West.

Being one of the most important contemporary Chinese artists in the world, Xu Bing’s work is often filled with critical and philosophic thoughts on Chinese culture and history. During his time in America, Xu reflected on the theme of cultural conflicts between China and the United States. Xu Bing moved to the United States in 1990 due to the political turmoil in China after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and settled in New York in 1992. He continued his famed project *Tianshu* or *Book from the Sky*, which had established his international reputation. *New English Calligraphy* (Fig.41) was Xu Bing’s experimental attempt to showcase the differences and the connections between languages. The oversized calligraphy matches the shapes of English alphabet in the lower-right corner. Most of the calligraphies are basic components called radicals and have a similar function as letters. Together with other radicals, they make a character. Some radicals can be free-

standing characters, such as the one with “O”, which means mouth and the one with “W”, which means mountain. Xu makes the connection between Chinese and English interestingly awkward, which echoes the subtle relationship between China and the United States, which is supposed to have been normalized by the visit of Nixon in 1972. Although Xu has successfully matched English alphabets with Chinese radicals, it remains superficial as they have nothing in common other than they are visually alike. Xu's work evokes the awkwardness and hardship of a Westernizing process that could not succeed in modern China society. Since China remains under a Communist regime, exchange and communication with America is never as it might happen in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Xu’s work aligns with Tseng’s images in commenting on the relationship between China and U.S.

While Xu Bing’s approach seems subtle, Ai Weiwei's is definitely more aggressive. Ai lived in New York between 1983 and 1993, and is greatly influenced by Dadaism and Pop Art. His work often combines Chinese iconography with Western artistic language. There is no clear evidence that Ai and Tseng knew each other. However, given the fact that the two had lived in the same city and within the same art circle during the same period of time, it is highly likely that Ai had seen Tseng’s work. A table with a shape of the map of China, which appeared in Tseng’s documentary film by Christine Lombard in 1984 (Fig.42), foreshadowed Ai's *Map of China* (Fig.43), a sculpture made out of wood panels salvaged from a ruined Qing dynasty temple.[14] This artwork evidences how Tseng had been an inspiration for Ai Weiwei, who continues to work on the theme of culture and

[14] Brandt, 32.

history of both East and West. The surface is seemingly smooth, which represented the wholeness of China as one big nation, but the clear zig-zag lines imply it is an assembly of different wood parts. This hints at the diversity of ethnic groups, the complexity of history, and the rich cultural heritage of China.

Taking on Tseng's medium of performance photography, Ai made *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Fig.44) in 1995, two years after he returned to his hometown Beijing in 1993. The triptych consists of three photographs in black and white showing the artist dropping a Han Dynasty urn, which is considered to worth a great value. The left panel shows the artist holding the urn in its complete shape. The middle panel shows the artist letting it go and the urn hangs in the air. The third one on the right shows the urn broken in pieces on the ground. The urn is what Ai called a "cultural readymade",[15] a common and massively produced earthenware during Han dynasty with no value. Just because of its rich historic heritage, this type of urn is highly sought-after by art collectors. By breaking it, Ai tries to prove that not only art can be readymade, but it is also "readily broken". It is improvisational, irrational and provocative, commenting on the fetish of Chinese antiques. If Duchamp's *Fountain* argues that an artwork doesn't have to be made by the artist's hand, Ai argues that the work doesn't have to be made at all. Ai's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* also speaks to the massive destruction of cultural relics by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. During this time numerous religious buildings, historical sites, frescos and books were destroyed or burned. By dropping an antique of great value, Ai challenges the audience's notion of value, and generally bourgeois taste and

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[15] Jiang, *The Art of Contemporary China (World of Art)*, 164.

nationalism. Birgit Hopfener, an art history professor at Carleton University, argues that Ai is “not destroying tradition per se, but a static and essentialist notion of tradition—and related concepts of Chinese art, Chineseness, respectively—in favor of a temporalized and spatialized concept of tradition as continuous cultural transmission.”[16]

Moreover, Ai’s *Study in Perspective* series (1995–2003) (Fig.45) has great similarities of iconography with, and almost acts like a parody of, Tseng’s *East Meets West* series. Speaking on the thoughts about this project, Ai stated,

> *I grew up in a society where self-criticism was highly valued. Chairman Mao taught us that we should simultaneously conduct criticism and self-criticism.*[17]

Therefore, Ai has a critical attitude toward the power and the system around him wherever he goes. “Conducting criticism and self-criticism” is a well-known quote from Mao in China, and aims to discipline the members of the Communist party to be a true servant to the people. Ai is clearly taunting Mao’s quote in his own use of it, as he is neither a member of Communist party nor does he aim at discipline himself to serve the people (although such a method works pretty well for him in terms of generating ideas for his project).

Both Ai and Tseng’s work aims at challenging the symbolic meaning of power and authority presented by the iconic sites, such as Eiffel Tower and the White House. What sets Ai apart is the foregrounded subject. Instead of revealing his identity, Ai places his hand with an erect middle finger in the center of the frame, which is a universal gesture of

[16] Birgit Hopfener. "Tradition and transmission: Shifting epistemological and (art-) historical grounds of contemporary art's relation to the past." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art: Reinventing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, 6,2&3 (2019): 193.

[17] Jiang, 162.

obscenity. Without the depiction of his body, his Asian identity diminishes. The middle finger could be anyone’s. Additionally, Ai visited a place that Tseng had never been to, China. An image from Ai's series features Tiananmen Square Gate in the background. Thus, Ai's series takes a step further and goes beyond the theme of East versus West. It is Ai Weiwei, or anybody, criticizing the whole world, including both China and the West.

Zhang Hongtu is another participating artist in the *Exodus II* show. He had exhibited his work together with Tseng at the Asian American Arts Centre (AAAC) in the 1980s. Even though the two were not close friends, Zhang respected Tseng very much. *In Memory of Tseng Kwong Chi* (Fig.46) is Zhang’s homage to Tseng’s legacy and memorial work to his AIDS-related death in 1990, originally created in 1991 for the exhibition "Dismantling Invisibility: Asian and Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS Crisis." The photos are made from photocopies that are reminiscent of the film negatives of Tseng’s *East Meets West* series, as they are arranged in the shape of a cross with Tseng’s body being cut out. Zhang Hongtu is the only artist in "Exodus II" who made work directly referencing Tseng, showing the Tseng’s influence on him; this furthermore implies Tseng’s inevitable presence among Chinese diaspora artists in New York City during the 1980s. With his body cut out of the image, Zhang removes Tseng’s Asian identity, indicating not only the loss of Tseng, a great trailblazer in art, but also creating a silhouette that echoes the theme of "Dismantling Invisibility," suggesting the world is incomplete without Asians’ presence.

Tseng’s photographs influenced his peers, and anticipated the work of the next generation of Asian diaspora artists as well. It is essential to view them side by side to see how different generations of artists dealt with their identity in their unique way. Then we

are able to see how Asian identity has transformed. In a parallel to Tseng's photographic performance in a disguised persona, Nikki Lee, a performance artist from South Korea, did a series of photographic projects named *Projects* throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s in a variety of personas. Born in 1970 in South Korea, she moved to New York in 1994 to study commercial photography at Fashion Institute of Technology. After graduating, she continued to pursue education and earned her M.A. in photography at New York University.

Lee's *Projects* shares quite a few similarities with Tseng's images. In that she takes on the ability of infiltration, the *Project* series showcases her incredible ability in infiltrating different ethnic or subcultural groups, such as white American seniors, Latinos, African Americans, Jewish people, skateboarders, yuppies, drag queens, with the help of make-up and clothing (Fig.47-51). More importantly, in her process she would study a group and live and hang out with them for months to learn their demeanor, so that she could fully fit in.[18] The unity and homogenous look of her new friends and group members in these images have convinced us that she has successfully transformed herself into others around her, even though her Asian presence still pokes through. As_Amy Brandt puts it, "she has conquered her new identity".[19] For example, in Lee's *Hip-Hop Project (2)* (Fig.51), Lee became an African American street gang member with darkened skin and corn-braided hair. Joined by her two companions on each side, she stands in the middle with hands resting on her waist. She looks at the camera emotionlessly, very much like her gang

[18] Phil Lee, "Indefinite 'Nikkis' in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview with Nikki S. Lee." *Chicago Art Journal* 18 (2008): 77.

[19] Amy Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance", 71.

buddies. Together with props, make-up, gestures and poses, Lee makes herself to be like those around her, but her face stands out as the only Asian. In her images assimilation and disruption coexist. Thus, Nikki Lee created what Phil Lee, an art historian and scholar of Hongik University in Seoul, South Korea, called "hyperreality, where the distinctions between the real and unreal Nikki S. Lee are ambiguous."[20] This draws connection to Tseng's "ambiguous ambassador", a fake Chinese dignitary that raises questions about Tseng's identity wherever he goes.

However, Lee's *Projects* are quite distinct from Tseng's series, starting with her artist name. In contrast to Tseng, who dropped his English name Joseph in favor of his Chinese name Kwong Chi, Lee chose to use the Angelo name Nikki for her artist-name instead of her Korean name Lee Seung-Hee. This is an act of assimilation to Anglo culture. Where Tseng's Asian presence stood out significantly in his photographs, Lee's disguised persona aims at disappearing among the group by erasing her Asian identity as much as possible. This is where we see how the identity politics have shifted. Lee's work comments on globalized identity in a new era of the coexistence of multi-racial and multi-ethnic groups. She also foresees the future that Asian Americans are seen ubiquitously among the people of different color and races, befriended them. She questions whether is it still relevant to stress one's ethnic origin in the circumstance of globalization and universalism. Can we just be people without a label of being Asian, Hispanic, or American? The *Projects* is Lee's statement that identity is fluid and transcultural, and that we belong to where and

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[20] Lee, "Indefinite 'Nikkis' in a World of Hyperreality", 78.

with whom we live at the moment, with the group that surrounds us. This is contrary to Tseng's refusal to assimilate to the West.

As Tseng's *Met* series speaks to the fetish for Qing dynasty attire, which further echoes the cultural appropriation of Asia, Lee's work generates controversy in terms of her cultural appropriation of race and ethnicity. Barry Schwabsky, an art critic and art historian, argues that Lee's images are superficial since "there's no way this Korean could convince a group of Latinos that she's one of them, though it is quite possible for them to act as if that were the case."[21] Eunsong Kim, a professor in the Department of English at Northeastern University, associates Lee's *Projects* with blackface: "Darkening one's skin to pose for a series of photographs in a community one has no affinity with, does not belong to, and as an entertainment project with ongoing profit plan—this is not an interpretation of blackface. It's blackface."[22] Kim believes that Lee takes on the colonist or racist's view towards an ethnic group as the subordinate, since Lee technically doesn't count as an Asian American but a Korean, who possibly thinks herself as superior. Such criticisms are the proof that Asian identity politics have shifted greatly as Asians were once the marginalized minority.

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[21] Barry Schwabsky. "Openings: Nikki S. Lee." *Artforum*. New York (1999): 158-9.

[22] Eunsong Kim, "Nikki S. Lee's 'Projects'—And the Ongoing Circulation of Blackface, Brownface in 'Art'", *Contemptorary*. May 30, 2016, https://contemptorary.org/nikki-s-lees-projects-and-the-ongoing-circulation-of-blackface-brownface-in-art/ (Accessed March 27, 2022).

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Tseng's work under multiple other intellectual contexts, such as masculinity and queer identity in the discourse of Asian American studies, Chinese American art history, *détournement* of Mao among Asian artists, Asian artists in diaspora and transnationality. I have argued that by contesting and distinguish himself from the stereotype of Bruce Lee, Tseng offers a potential masculinity model for Asian American men argued by Jachinson Chan that rejects its tie with heterosexuality and is willing to take the risk of being labeled as semi-feminine or homosexual. Moreover, Tseng acts as a link that bridges the two seeming unrelated fields, queer study and Asian American study, long before David Eng had suggested. Additionally, we have found interesting connections between Tseng's work and the predecessors in history of Chinese_American art from the diplomatic occupation to the location of San Francisco, Chinatown, from the mark of war to the diasporic life experience. Thus, Tseng's pays homage to his predecessors and has showed great depth in connecting to Chinese American art canon. Moreover, Tseng's *détournement* of Mao with his Mao's suit differs and exceeds Andy Warhol's *Mao* due to his Asian identity. He is indeed a forerunner among other Asian artists in appropriating Mao's imagery. Lastly, Tseng's work has been an inspiration among his peers of Chinese diaspora artists in dealing with the theme of East versus West and has anticipated the performance work for the next generation, such as Nikki Lee.

CONCLUSION

I'm impressed with Tseng's work in performance photography and its ties to issues in masculinity and queer studies, and diaspora studies. Tseng is a pioneer in a variety of fields, especially in his use of *détournement* through the imagery of Mao, its critique of orientalism and its ties to Asian American identity. In his use of *détournement* he was the first Asian American artist who adopted the genre of performative photography, which furthermore foreshadowed the cultural jamming movement that later inspired actors like Sasha Ben Cohen. His innovative Mao suit disguise, the first of its kind among Asian artists in appropriating the imagery of the Communist Chinese, inspired later Asian artists to continue to contest the image of Mao. In terms of popular culture, Tseng's snappy tourist-like photos also prefigured selfies of our digital age, especially those that he took within an arms-length, with a shutter release in his hand.

This thesis also lays down the foundation for further interdisciplinary research that bridges contemporary Asian American art and Asian American studies. I believe it is critical to build a connection between the two closely related disciplines and this research has done so in digging into the work of a Chinese Canadian artist. For instance, Tseng had showed us how an Asian American artist can be a potential model of the alternative masculinity for Asian American men long before scholars like Jachinson Chan contested the image of Bruce Lee, as a problematic and sexually ambiguous stereotype, and before Kelly Chong and Nadia Kim devised their new masculine stereotype of the "The Model Man", another model of contemporary Asian American masculinity that tries to align with white hegemonic masculinity. Breaking the stereotype of depressed and asexual Chinaman, Tseng is sexually expressive in being openly homosexual. Instead of conforming to Bruce

Lee’s ambiguous heterosexuality and chip-chop macho stereotype, Tseng is clear about his gay identity, foreshadowing Chan’s later suggestion that Asian American men can be free, independent, expressive, and willing to embrace femininity with their masculinity. At the same time, Tseng didn't comply with “The Model Man” stereotype either, which is all about trying to attract Caucasian white women, simply by being himself as a queer Asian man. Moreover, while exposing the loss and unacceptance of being an Asian in America by putting himself, a displaced gay Asian man into this discussion, Tseng connected diaspora studies and queer studies as David Eng has suggested.

I also find the flexibility of interpretations on Tseng’s work very interesting. On the one hand, it is a criticism of the West's orientalism, racial discrimination, and hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a satire of Communist China not adapting to the rest of the world, or of being exotic. This is what Tseng had stated about his intention for the project: that it would continue the conversation that should’ve happened after President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. That intention had penetrated through to a younger generation of Chinese artists like Wang Guangyi, Zhang Hongtu, and Shi Xinning, who also appropriated Mao’s image in their satirical work, which has similarities to Tseng’s photographs.

Last but not least, the sheer iconographic contrast of Tseng’s images is what interests me first and foremost: on one side is a free, expressive, and powerful Western world; on the other is the lone, exotic, and classless Communist world. As Tseng positions them side by side, the hidden power dynamics are revealed. This theme was furthermore developed by later Chinese artists, as I have discussed in the work of Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei, who are two of the most influential contemporary Chinese artists in the world.

Everything they tried to explore with their work was already to be found in Tseng’s images. It is fair to say that Tseng is a forerunner for Asian/Asian American contemporary art that deals with identity crisis, cultural conflict, and the power relations between East versus West. Looking back at Tseng’s work it is shocking how much the world has changed in the last three decades, as the presence and influence of Asia continues to grow, from the ubiquitous Made-In-China products to Japanese brand vehicles, from omnipresent sushi restaurants to Panda Express, from anime mania among teens to Chloé Zhao’s Oscar-award-winning *Nomadland*. In this regard, Tseng’s art inadvertently foresees the rise of Asia and the anti-hegemonic forces against the West from the East. Tseng’s disguised persona is indeed a representative of Communism (in his case, Communist China) that had haunted the West since the Cold War. With the breaking war in Ukraine, Tseng's art reminds us that even though the Soviet Union had collapsed, there are still forces that refuse to assimilate to the West. These power struggles are manifested with the sense of conflict in Tseng’s photos, as if begging the question: will the two ever cease to be at odds?

I would like to explore further some subjects this thesis has brought up, such as Asian American queer artists, Chinese artists in diaspora and the recurring image of Mao in high art. For example, Martin Wong is another important queer Asian American artist that I would like to research. Together with Tseng, they represent a generation of queer Asian American artists who have redefined a model of sexuality and masculinity for Asian American men. I would like to know more about Wong’s artistic career and more specifically how his work speaks to his queer identity. I would also like to dive deeper into diaspora studies, and explore the intellectual contexts and theories of diaspora art. For example, Kobena Mercer and Tobias Wofford talk about the origin of the Black and other

diasporas and how they relate to the canon of Western art history. It will be interesting to explore how these theories may apply to Chinese/Asian diasporic art. Last but not least, the image of Mao has been appropriated heavily in high art. It will be interesting to explore the history of how this icon been used, the meanings of this face, and how Western and Asian artists differ when taking on Mao as a theme. Mao presents an ideological alternative to Western capitalism. Many view him as the ultimate leader in achieving the utopian dream of communism. I'm eager to know how this romantic symbol of idealism continues to be presented and appropriated by the artists from both West and East.

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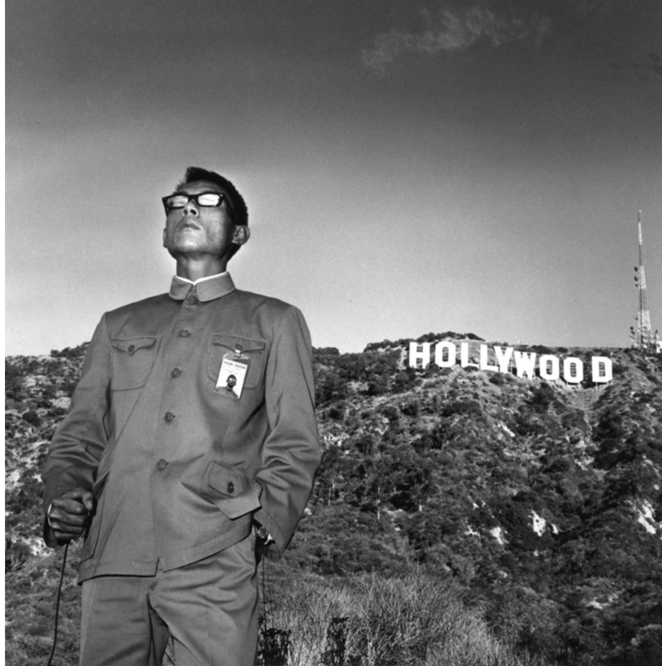

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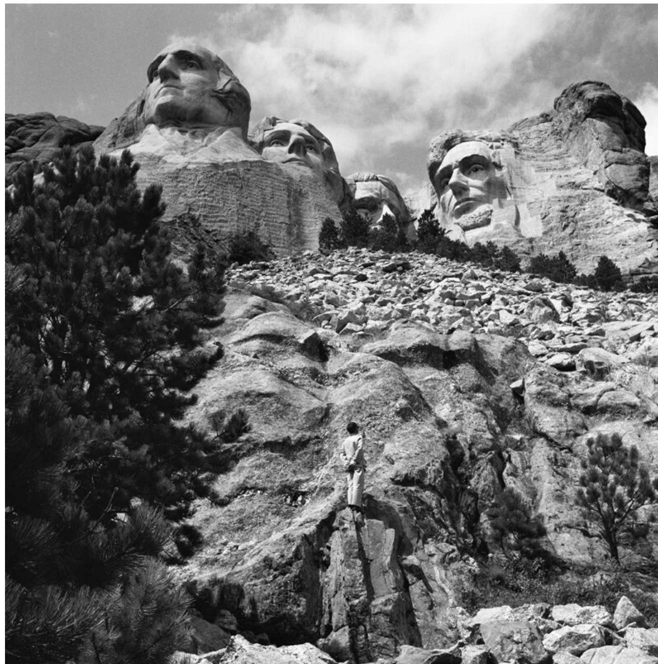

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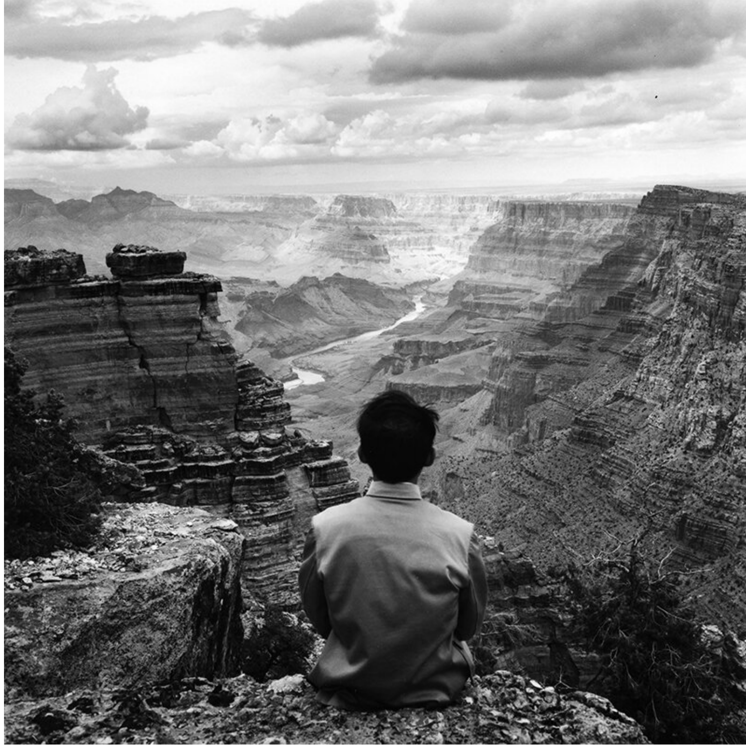

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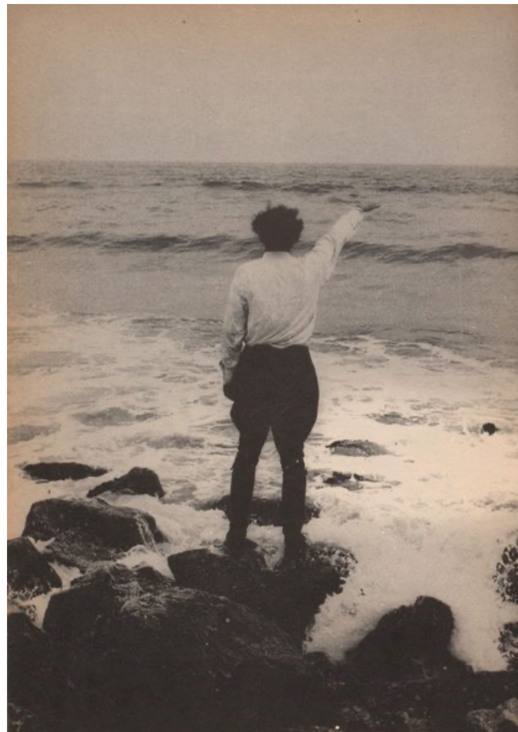

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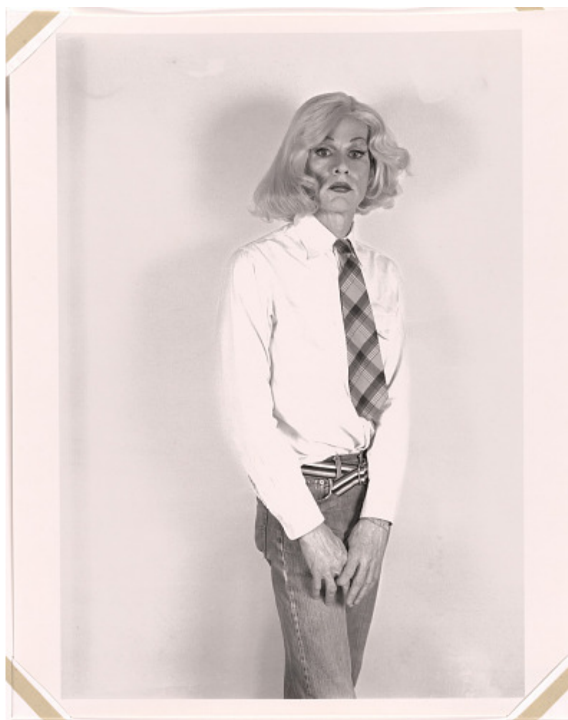

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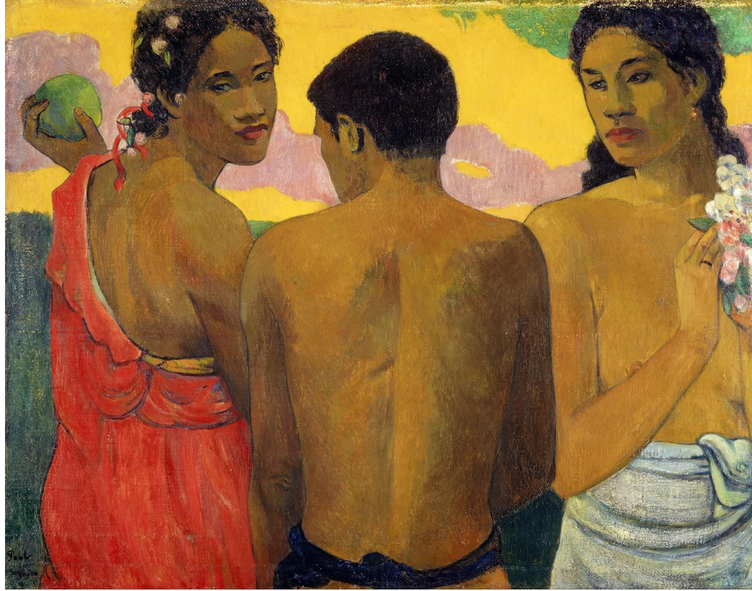

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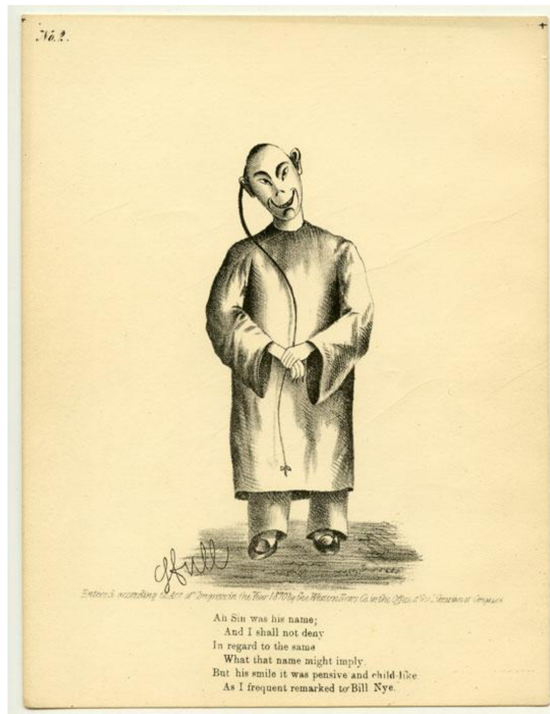

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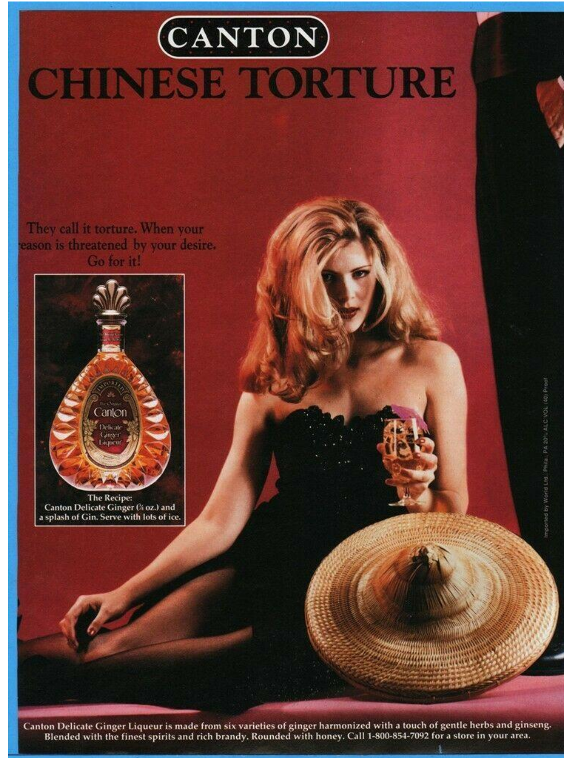

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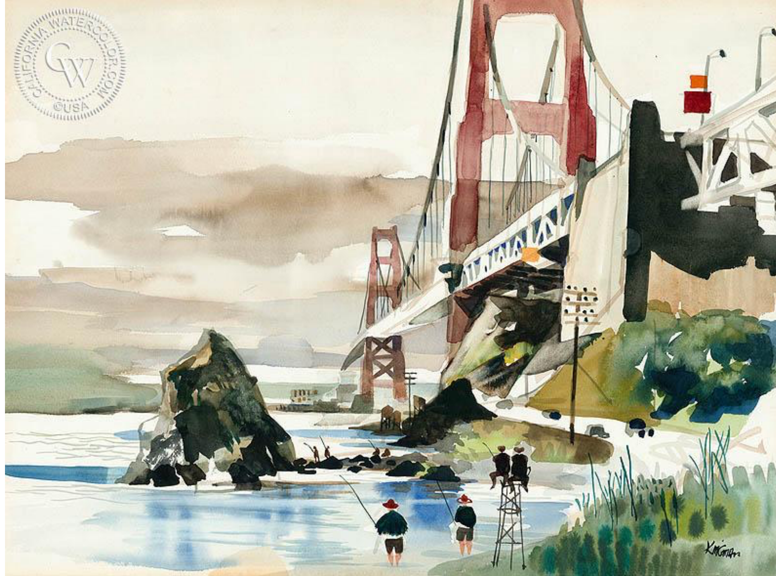

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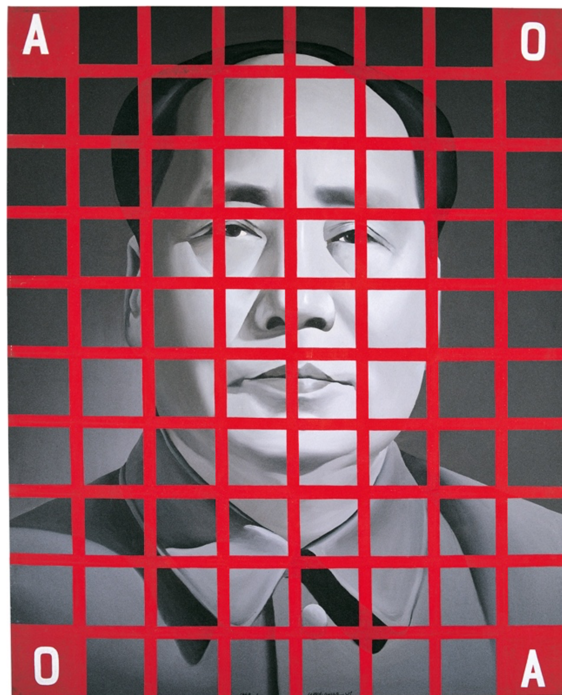

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