

THE NOTION OF “ORIENTALISM” IN THE MODERNIZATION MOVEMENT OF CHINESE PAINTING OF HONG KONG ARTISTS IN 1960s: THE CASE OF HON CHI-FUN

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Reflections on different perspectives of postcolonial writing

I was born and brought up in a British colony that originated as a backward fishing port and then developed into a contemporary international city. It went through all the stages and stabilizations that Stuart Hall listed: industrialization; capitalism; urbanization; formation of a world market; social and sexual division of labor; distillation of civil and social life into public and private spheres; and identification of Westernization with the notion of modernity itself.¹ Hong Kong was – and still is – struggling between an older, corporate, enclosed, defensive mentality that retreats into nationalism and national cultural identity, and a global postmodern one that at the same time overcomes and incorporates differences.² Nothing about the culture of this colony is pure or homogenous, and the nature of hybridity discloses inner differences, contradictions, segmentations, and fragmentations.

I remember I went to a protestant church every Sunday, learning from the Bible that I should not believe in any other God, and came home to eat lunch prepared by my grandmother that consisted of items from the rituals of worship presented to our ancestors.

Questions about cultural identity such as “Who are we?,” “Where do we come from?,” “Which ‘we’ are we talking about when we talk about ‘we’?” and so on did not bother us at the beginning. The Chinese colonized Other, most of whom were refugees from the mainland after Second World War, used to

¹ Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities”, ed. Anthony D. King, *Culture, Globalization and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 45.

² Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity”, *ibid.*, p. 32

know where they came from. But soon the people of Hong Kong experienced an identity crisis, before attaining a sense of belonging and before getting used to the contradictory tendencies that surround us, like the one between localism, new nationalism, and ethnic identities, contrasted with international communication highways.³

The term “Hong Kong People” surfaced for the first time in local newspapers in 1967. Here I agree with Lawrence Grossberg that traditional and simple binary models of the political struggles of colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed are no longer applicable to questions of personal identity. As former colonies become emergent spatial economies involved in particular forms of internationalization and globalization – which also involve new organizations and orientations – we need to ask why identity is the privileged site of struggle within the broader context of this new spatial economy. Grossberg describes the characteristics of this new economy as extremely variable, having an apparent autonomy and, simultaneously, also having an interdependence that intersects local, regional, national, and international flows, forces and interests.⁴

In Hong Kong, we had a horrifying image of Communist China on the mainland, especially during the Cultural Revolution in 1960s when from time to time we saw bound dead bodies floating down Pearl River Delta to the border of Hong Kong.

The reassertion of nationalist discourses relating to problems of identity was based less on the identification of nation and state than on the assumed identity between nation and ethnicity. Within the space of transition between the local and the global, the notion of globalization was introduced into the scene: a notion that connects the national to the international, and that provides a new transnational context.

The question of “colonial” or “postcolonial” was also introduced. Here I accept Stuart Hall’s distinction that colonization indicates direct colonial occupation and rule, and that *postcolonial indicates independence from direct colonial rule*. In postcoloniality, the growth of indigenous capital dominates forms of economic development; there is a neocolonial dependency on the Western capitalist world; and the politics that evolves from the emergence of powerful local elites manage the contradictory effects of under-development.⁵

³ See what Catherine Hall said in “Histories Empires and the Postcolonial Moment”, Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds.), *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 65.

⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “The Space of Culture, the Power of Space”, *ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

⁵ Stuart Hall, “When was ‘The Postcolonial’? Thinking at the Limit”, *ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

Working with this definition, Hong Kong in the 60s had begun to step into the postcolonial and global transcultural context. According to the 1961 census, the population in Hong Kong was more than three million. Over six thousand industrial enterprises had been set up, with about 30 thousand employees. There were also new records set in heavy trading in the stock market. Wages increased, and inflation resulted. During the 60s, colonization made the notion of ethnic absolutism untenable: culture started becoming diasporic.

Colonization operates as a system of rule, power, and exploitation, and also as a system of knowledge and representation, while in the postcoloniality, there involves all forms of transverse, transnational, and transcultural movements that were always already inscribed within the history of colonization. Thus, hybridity, syncretism, multidimensional temporalities, double inscriptions of colonial and metropolitan periods, and forms of transculturation are all assumed in spaces where the so-called decolonization are in effect.⁶

So I agree that the postcolonial is a moment of culture that is preoccupied with questions of identity. It involves a history of the subject's recognition and reworking of memory, which is also simultaneously an active process of forgetting and remembering.⁷

What about postcolonial writings and beliefs? What forms of strategy and problems do they have to consider? It is commonly held that when people are confronted with a particular form of modernity in the form of globalization – that is, confronted with a culture and an economy and a set of histories inscribed elsewhere, and that is so monumental and transmitted with extraordinary speed – local and marginal subjects can only represent and reflect on themselves by their own hidden histories. Thus, the return to the local is often a response, since the space of marginality is also powerful.⁸ We have to agree in any case that ethnicity is the necessary space from which people speak, though when threatened by the global forces of postmodernity, this space can sometimes assume the form of fundamentalism.

We can further explain the ultimate return of identity to history by citing Deleuze: "How is it possible to speak without presupposing, without hypothesizing and subjectivizing or subjecting what one speaks about? How is it possible not to speak on the presupposition of a thing, but to say the thing

⁶ Ibid., pp.251-254.

⁷ Catherine Hall, "Histories Empires and the Postcolonial Moment", *ibid.*, pp. 66-76.

⁸ Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity", *Culture, Globalization and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, pp. 33.

itself?"⁹ Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that this is not a question of history but of orientations and directions: i.e. a question of a geography of becomings.¹⁰ The complication is that ethnic culture is not a static entity. Ethnic culture is always under immediate narration and reconstruction and is animated by subjective desires and interests. Therefore, as many postcolonial scholars have pointed out, the notion of ethnic identity is always historicized, dynamic, and contradictory. Whoever speaks about ethnic identity tends to speak across boundaries and frontiers and tends to construct an ideal identity according to one's perspective.

A number of postcolonial scholars have also discussed the problems of "troubled homecomings." These problems are related to a suspended space in which the subject inhabits an ambivalent position. First, the scholars said that because there is no original home, the subject is always articulating its absence and writing the impossibility of a return to a homeland. The writing is itself the suspended space of a return to selfhood through the dialogic, which is an interrogative encounter in the subject's language with an internal or external other.

The subject's writing is the territory of loss and memory, and is also the site of an imaginary and unfulfilled journey home. Yet at the same time the subject indicates the desire to inhabit a new home in being and becoming, though the subject is not completely assimilated where it is hoping to go. The subject is alienated and displaced from both a native and adopted land, has an obscured and submerged cry, as it negotiates and articulates in the poetic text the dramatic experience of a precarious condition.¹¹

In what follows, I would like to use the work of a brilliant Hong Kong painter to demonstrate the subject's dissonant and conflictual identities, to see how the subject seeks a way of survival by working out a different sense of "home" on the borderline between belonging and exclusion. The painter's work opens up a "distantiating" act of meditation and functions as the poetry of an alienated and displaced subject.¹² If the work is viewed as a response to reality, then this reality should be understood as "becoming," as continuously mutating within and across the space of existence. The reality is defined by the in-between or milieu that it traverses.¹³ The new cultural identity involved

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 23.

¹⁰ Lawrence Grossberg, "The Space of Culture, the Power of Space", Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, p. 180.

¹¹ Demetrio Yocum, "Some Troubled Home Comings", *ibid.*, p. 221.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹³ See footnote 10.

is also a construction that draws on new repertoires, and we will see if its articulation can be read as both a descriptive and political practice conditioned by particular contexts and effects.

Before we proceed, it is worth mentioning another point Stuart Hall made: colonization is part of an essentially transnational and transcultural global process; it produces a decentered, diasporic, or global rewriting of earlier, nation-centered imperial grand narratives; it supplements and simultaneously displaces the binary of center-periphery; and the global and local reorganize and reshape each other. The theoretical value of postcolonial writing lies precisely in its refusal of the distinction of here and there, then and now, and home and abroad. Hall also said that postcolonial writing represents a response to a genuine need to overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world.¹⁴ We should note that identity is always partly a narrative and partly a form of representation. Identity is not something formed outside but is narrated in one's own self. Finally, we should also note Heidegger's saying that the nomadic writing of exile is both the space of alienation and reconnection, where the "far cry" still resounds, and that only our own strenuous hearing could make sense of the sounds.¹⁵

The Case of Hon Chi-fun: His Art and Aesthetics

Hon Chi-fun was born in Hong Kong in 1922, the first child of a cab driver. He was given a set of books on Chinese painting techniques when he was ten by his father. He thought his father must have noticed his burning desire to get started in painting. Just before the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, Hon learned classic Chinese painting techniques from a school teacher. He and his family relocated to Mainland China during the invasion and he got into farming.

In the prewar period of the 40s, Western painters using Western techniques dominated Hong Kong's painting scene, and Westerners who ran local art organizations outnumbered the Chinese painters using traditional Chinese techniques. This situation existed until numerous Chinese painters immigrated to Hong Kong from southern China during the Japanese invasion. Hon returned to Hong Kong for a short while after the war, but quickly left for Shanghai and got into the import-export trade before moving south to Canton. Then he moved back to Hong Kong. This was the period in his life

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, "When was 'The Postcolonial'? Thinking at the Limit", pp. 247-257.

¹⁵ Demetrio Yocum, "Some Troubled Home Comings", *ibid.*, p. 225.

when he had the most contact with China, but it was also a period of loss and ambiguity. In his autobiography he said about this period:

“I seemed to have achieved nothing. I had to release my inner self and live out my true nature. I had to liberate, from pure hidden impulses or unintended scribblings, my passion to paint by actually taking up the brush to work.”¹⁶

During that period, Western artistic techniques had dominated the scene in Hong Kong for several years after World War II. Western painting, still life and realism in particular, flourished in galleries and museums. The work of local painters was not of the highest quality at that moment, as they had only minimal exposure to the great masterpieces as well as to intellectual discourses about “foreign” art. A few Chinese painters who had returned from studying Western art abroad taught the only painting classes.

In Hong Kong in 1954, Hon, self-taught, was painting mostly landscapes and portraits in oil. He sketched freely throughout the territory, capturing breathtaking scenes of sunrise and sunset. He became a friend with Luis Chan, a local painter-pioneer, and the two soon accompanied each other on painting tours. Hon was greatly influenced by Chan, who was also self-taught, mostly by his boldly experimental and aesthetic thinking. Chan’s oil painting did not practice realism. He described art as “creative imagination” and saw beauty as “the expression of consciousness and emotion.”

For Chan creativity was the spontaneous outgrowth of the artist’s communication with nature or objects, and one’s style is a way to create one’s artistic symbols. He had explored schools of modern painting such as Cubism, Expressionism, and Abstractionism, a practice that Hon also picked up, and later favored monotype printing, hard-edged colored-field landscape, and spray-gun painting. The two shared the view that art is the result of the subject’s own interior life, and insisted on the absolute freedom of artistic expression. We should note that this freedom includes freedom from the burdens of both cultural heritage and nationalism.

In 1963 Hon met Lu Shoukun, another pioneer-painter, who told him all about the struggles of being a Chinese artist in the British colony. Hon admired Lu and learned much from his views about the Chinese classic masters and theories of ink painting, though not totally identified with all of his ideas. Lu believed that the growing prosperity of Hong Kong, which by the 60s had become a world-city, provided some favorable conditions for his new painting

¹⁶ Chi-fun Hon, *Space and Passion: The Art of Hon Chi-fun* (Hong Kong: Yan-chi Choi, 2000), p. 18.

movement. The international art community was more interested in a new genre that developed from local cultural innovations than in weak imitations of Western schools. Lu classified modern ideas combined with the Chinese tradition as an “adaptation” that should not be separated from the “root” or foundation.

In traditional Chinese aesthetics the “root” is the spiritual cultivation of the artist, which according to Lu, was based on ancient Confucian principles and teachings such as *Chung Yung* (The Doctrines of the Means) and *Da Xue* (The Teachings), both of which promote self-cultivation and self-discovery in terms of moral reason. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style that would also reflect their personality and ways of life. According to old Confucian teachings, this return to one’s root or inner self could also transcend temporal, spatial, and cultural differences. Lu’s vision did offer solutions to artists struggling with a crisis of cultural identity in Hong Kong, who were often confused and ungrounded in their hybrid cultural situation. The most important goal, Lu believed, was self-discovery. For only through self-discovery could one form original ideas, and this process should always come before artistic form. To achieve innovation in art, he always insisted, was to seek self-knowledge in one’s cultural tradition, a foundation that artists could build on later.

A deeper analysis will reveal a reading connection of Lu’s theory of art with Hon’s works, though Hon might not like to be claimed an identification of his work with Lu’s ideas. In the 50s Hon’s oil paintings focused mainly on scenery, and were generalized as “Western.” Recognized as Fauvist, his strokes were imbued with a strong personal style, in addition to his use of bold and bright colors. In the 60s, Hon’s style went through a great transformation. His colors became more explosive and bordered on an “inertia of the solid” while at the same time began to detach from a “reliance of the solid.” Around 1961-1962, Hon’s artistic identity began to emerge. He entered the abstract period, using black-and-white to highlight the dramatic contrast between the solid and the void. *Black Crack* (Plate 1, 1963) and *Colloquy* in 1964 were representative of this period. These works had been viewed bearing an air of substance, grandeur, and depth while being abstract, “for the sake of expressing the heart of the Oriental individual” in the words of one critic on a local newspaper.

Critics said that the “Oriental” quality in Hon’s works was becoming more prominent. This “Oriental” quality apparently is constituted by a combination of huge swaths made by a big brush and calligraphy made by little brush. Hon worked Chinese calligraphy and poetry into his paintings. Later he even used tracings of stone inscriptions as a substitute for actual calligraphy, and he



Plate 1, *Black Crack*, 1963, 140 x 140 cm, oil on canvas



Plate 2, *Bath of Fire*, 1968, 132 x 132 x 3 cm, oil, acrylic and serigraphy on canvas

experimented with collages of mixed media, like metal, sand, and stones. *Desert Walk* represented this latter period. Soon there was *Bath of Fire* (Plate 2, 1968). The work was composed of square and circle patterns delivered predominantly in strong contrasting red and green, silk-screened with words and with an image of a recent photo of the artist. Critics described it as a fiery autobiography of the artist. From that point on, Hon began to venture into new high-tech materials like acrylic paints.

After finishing *Bath of Fire* in 1968, Hon traveled to Europe and the United States. When he got back to Hong Kong, he simplified his work considerably. His paintings were almost without line, shape, form, or even color: as examples, *Karma Focus* (1971) or *The Way of Lotus* (Plate 3, 1974). For these paintings, Hon obviously employed – instead of the brush – more modern materials, like a spray gun. The spaces he illustrated were neither defined nor abstract, but were somewhat serene, with a detached aura and harmony. Critics said that in the 70s and 80s, Hon rejected the use of forms. He reduced objective images to their purest forms, to the circle, for instance. His personal style expressed his interior world as well as his feeling and understanding of nature and the universe.



Plate 3, *The Way of Lotus* 1974, 132 x 132 cm, acrylic on canvas

Whenever Hon Chi-fun's early works are discussed, they are related to the concepts of the modern and the "Oriental." Did his transition from his early "Western" painting of scenery to the abstraction of his circles in the 60s really reflect the so-called "modernity" of the 60s? Shortly after, he incorporated Buddhist scriptures and Chinese poetry into his paintings like *Mountain Faith* (1971). Do the concepts of the modern and the "Oriental" divide Hon's works into two categories? Can these two concepts be melded grounding on a deeper understanding of a unitary base? Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that this is not a question of history but of orientations and directions: this is a question of a geography of becomings. What could these concepts disclose about the nature of postcolonial expression?

At some point in the 60s when Hon was riding the high tide of modernity, he said that the time of abstract expression in painting was over: "Painting these days is enjoying its pure, orderly and rational form; it no longer emphasizes the individual's spiritual world," he said in 1965. At that time, he longed for the construction of a new "absolute" identity, and he believed that to be modern is to be "perfect" in the scientific era. However, by purity, order, reason, and perfection, he was referring mainly to the spectrum of engravings. Hon rejected his favorite impressionism and zealously tried out all kinds of brand-new images. But he has never been without his personal view. Order and precision, according to him, are the result of personal longing, total commitment, and a reordering of chaos. He said that he experienced an unbearable sensation when he was producing those brand-new images, as he disclosed in an interview that at that time he was emotionally involved with a white woman from the United Kingdom, while still tied to a Chinese Marriage. Under traditional constraints and struggles, the sensation was what set in motion his assault on the limits of reality and his quest for a new world.

In retrospect, Hon's tireless persistence can be interpreted as an artist's venture into the forbidden zone in order to fulfill a desire for rebirth. The attempt to meld what is defined and abstract, what is substance and spirit, could be seen as reflecting the yearning of the lonely artist's soul. So that Hon's artistic endeavors and his emotional upheavals are likewise two sides of the same coin.

In his autobiography reflecting his life of the decade, Hon said:

"Along my journey of exploration, I somehow came across an unbearable sensation. Such sensations sparked off my impulse and my strong resistance against the constraint of reality. Constraints and resistance were interactive and mutually stimulating. I was driven to plunge into new horizons of creativity, and being encouraged to be even more so by friends involved in new thoughts and new art movements. We talked

about Existentialism, the East and the West and the awakening of the modern age. The upsurge of thinking in my mind ignited my strong passion to reveal all in my heart. Those burning desires never ceased to stimulate my creativity, which all came through in my works, be they landscapes or experimental paintings, of realism or abstractionism. While I strove to get away from the past, my sub-consciousness was still considerably bound by tradition. My work was rather the motion of the still, and the stillness of those in motion – a true revelation of my inner self. Excessively occupied by such passion, I screamed alone, only faintly echoed by the darkness around me.”¹⁷

What is modern? When Hon was asked about his view of what was modern, he maintained that what was modern was a question of “being” and “to be”. Creativity at that period was viewed as self-therapy, helping artists to seek alternative satisfaction and to survive in a time of trouble. Not that terribly important to Hon at that time, were prevalent trends in the West, like Abstract Expressionism, Op Art, Photo-Realism, and so on. The precision in his works was not meant to ape the modern trend. Hon said *to be modern was simply to “live to the fullest,”* and that in the context of the production of art, “living to the fullest” was the artist’s existential choice.

In his seminal *Bath of Fire* of 1968, Hon had included the text: “I try to calm myself down, spirit in motion, hands in motion, looking up at the finite body with an infinite, me anxiously painfully undividedly persistently offering heaps of hope and burning faith.” Only the artist himself knew exactly what the terms anxiety, pain, hope, and fire in this text meant according to his own experience. However objective one tried to be, reality would always be simply the point of departure – instead of the result – of the production of art.

Some critics had long been able to point out the explosive strain and spontaneity in Hon’s works. Critics said that his desire for change by the means of the control of reason – expressed by his use of black color in an early work *Black Crack* – was prompted by a powerful urge that he had suppressed. Critics thought that Hon’s suppression – and outburst – of inner urgings drove him to pour out his entire personality and life experiences onto the canvas. What kind of suppression might that be? According to Choi Yan-chi, Hon’s present wife, it might be the desire to break through the old world’s value system into the new, which could be another interpretation of the meaning of the modern. For Hon, being modern is a detachment. Take as an example his use, since the 60s, of the circle, which is a symbol of purity and the ideal. With a perfect understanding of its features, close observation of its texture,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

and accompanied by continual practice and refinement, Hon made the circle the reference point for absolute expression. It seems more appropriate to call his experience of the circle “an adventure of the heart.” In his autobiography, here is what he said about his use of circles:

“Circles add for me a yet more spacious fourth dimension, occupying almost the entire painting while giving the work a symbol of existence. The circle may be you, or me or be the him or her, other than us. Overshadowing the boundless earth, the circle was like a hanging cloud—immersing into infinity. I was determined to crystallize my emotions, and the instinctive enlightenment and everlasting sentiments in my paintings.”¹⁸

To many critics and viewers, the superimposing forms and changing colors of the circle express Hon’s feelings and understanding about nature and the universe. Rather, I would interpret his use of the circle as an idealized projection of his inner life. We can see this when we track the trajectory his early works *Flower Enigma* (1968), *E is the name* (1971), *Chasm Forever* (1971), to his later *White Encounter* (1987), and *Here and Beyond* (1985), which are closer to humankind in their expression of longing, interaction, control, and regret. We can see through this tracking that the mysterious circle carried with it not salvation of a secular religion, but the artist’s inner peace after emotional explosion and unrest.

The circle in Hon’s works seems to be poised on a high level, looking back in contemplation at the turmoil of life, sustaining the painter’s subjective intent, artistically and existentially. Confronted and confused by – and lost in – another world on his return from abroad, the painter had an urgent need for reconstruction, simplification, and order in both his life and his work. And the infinite possibilities of the circle provided an appropriately perfect solution.

When Hon first drew the circle, he incorporated the Chinese character of “I” into more than ten of his works; within, without, above, below, in front of and behind the circle, named them as *My Profiles* (Plate 4, 1969) The Chinese “I” became integrated into the structure and rhythm of his works. How the subject faces up to his current existence best illustrates Hon’s interpretation of what was modern. He said:

“In the beginning, there’s got to be ‘me’. With ‘I’ begets the group and the world. The issue is whether I can let go, if yes, there is progress, if no, I am at least true to myself. The circle is me; my form of existence,

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

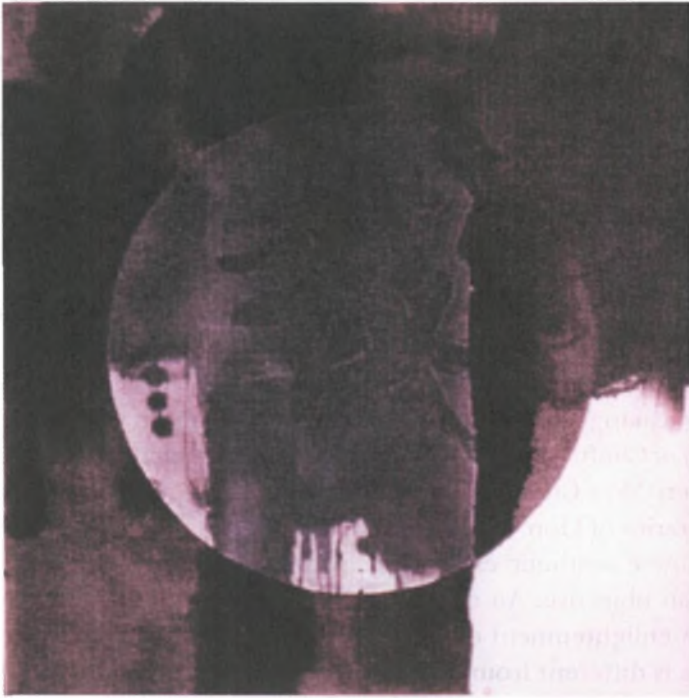


Plate 4, *My Profiles* 1969, 40 x 40 cm, acrylic, serigraph, oil and paper on canvas

the thing I worship. It embodies the contemporary environment and space. It is the perfection I'm after."¹⁹

In spite of Hon's insistence that his work is beyond what people meant by the abstract in art history, a lot of people still associate his work with Abstract Expressionism and consider it as the backbone of his "modernity." If the starting point of the abstract is what is an object's true feature and form, then Hon's work had been abstract for a while before being transformed into a more personal world. That is to say, a world endowed with deeper meaning and points toward a freedom that supercedes everyday existence. The painter knew well the limitation of desire. Yet he found it impossible to find a sense of peace in his environment, and this was why he longed for purification.

But abstraction on a broader sense may also carry a wider meaning than its convention in art history, such as "leading to the emergence of a stable, orderly, and understandable form," "transforming time into space in order to keep time still," "leading to the formation of a new perfect order," and "the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

exercise of strict contemplation to control feelings of subjective consciousness." The meaning of abstraction, then, in Hon's works, is not the disclosure of the true nature of the object, but identification with the artist's ideal.

Besides the modern, people used to discuss the quality of the Oriental in Hon's works. They see the value of Hon's art in his exposure of the "Oriental heart." The following are some common main features: (1) Ink-wash effect and Chinese calligraphy;²⁰ (2) Inclusion of ancient Chinese objects;²¹ (3) Oriental philosophy and words.²² But the one important point about being Oriental is that its implicit expression cannot be achieved in a contrived manner. The above list is derived mainly from the perspective of form.

The nature of being "Oriental" should be a deeply cultural concept of thought. Speaking about aesthetic judgment in terms of traditional Chinese philosophy of Confucianism and Taoism, the interpretations of Neo-Confucian philosophers Mou Chung-san and Tang Jun-I, both senior and respectable contemporaries of Hon, are the most elaborate.

In Chinese aesthetic experience, Mou said there is not necessarily an object or an objective: An objective appearance would disclose itself once there is an enlightenment of the subjective heart about what one wants to know. This is different from objective presentation as defined by "cognitive relationship" in Western epistemology. It is not a question of "presentation" but one of "realization" originating from the heart. Mou said that this realization comes about when the heart is fully illuminated. The "enlightenment" and "illumination" refer to a kind of "Eureka" on a spiritual level. Tang further believed in a kind of "entirety perception" in the interaction between heart and object, whether it is objective or constructive. The subjective heart slowly discards this "perception" and objectifies its content. Selection by the heart (artist subject) would ensue and then evaluative judgment follows.

²⁰ Ink-wash is supposedly in Hon's canvasses. There we find sweeping swaths of big brush displaying the ink in both dark and light shades and also the incorporation of Chinese calligraphy of poetry. The integration is perfectly harmonious, carrying with it a slight literary taste, and stands as an exploration of emptiness and darkness. Strokes are implicit and filled with Chinese imaginary. The concept of blankness is well used. In the balance between in and out, blankness introduces the shift of space.

²¹ Ancient Chinese objects like carved stones of the North-Wei dynasty; metal prints and rubbings of stone inscription are placed onto the canvas. Special care is devoted to the treatment of space, and the displacement between the solid and the void.

²² Hon's fondness for Oriental philosophy and Buddhist scriptures is more a fulfillment of the heart than mere garnishment. He once said the visual form and display of the sutra words like "sumi-e", "stream of forgetfulness" carry with them special beauty; but he nonetheless is more concerned about their symbolic implication, as spiritual tool of communication to ease the troubled mind.

Both selection and judgment are based on the criteria of the life activities and spiritual interest of the subjective self, depending largely on one's aspired form.

Generally speaking, aesthetic judgment refers to the initial stage of contact between heart and object. Western aesthetics divides the cognitive stage into three: intuition, perception, and imagination. This is a conclusion based on the assumed relationship between the subjective according to Western epistemology. On the other hand, Chinese aesthetic judgment focuses mainly on the heart's drive. The purer the heart's activities are (moral entity as in Confucianism), the more refined the object becomes. The sentiment of aesthetic judgment develops under the principle and process of "human nature over feeling." The art of creation reflects the spontaneous response from the heart, which is then objectified and externalized to become an object of art. Artistic creation is an accomplishment achieved in the unified and indivisible spirit between subject and object, reflecting the spiritual and emotional form of the subject's aspired life. This is also the truth about the unity of solid and void, spirit and form in Chinese painting. The following citation from Tang on Chinese art spirit best reminds me of Hon's painting. The citation also helps me to understand Hon's comments on his own work as being neither expressive nor abstract.

"There is no talking of reality, as it is without relative objective existence. To be expressive, there has to be a subject to express. All kinds of Chinese art have a common point, not in the expression of objective beauty or calling from god, but to express the temperament and perspective of the individual."

The subject "I," not simply a pouring out of personal emotional response, releases such an expression after the restraint of selection and evaluative judgment. After studying the precise and insightful related theories by Tang and Mou, one finds in Hon Chi-fun's circle an almost perfect illustration of these theories. Just as some critics have said, after years of interpretation and study, the circle to Hon has been transformed into a "suspenseful tug-of-war" between one's abstract thinking and spiritual yearning, embodying its own implication of thought and philosophy, including the basic and ultimate form of life, the path of the universe, and so on.

The Revelation of Hon's Case as It Relates to National, International, Transnational, and Transcultural

We assume that we need an identity to cope with a world that is so confusing. We want to have some stable points of reference, some still points in a turning world.²³ We assume all this especially in a colony like Hong Kong that is entering the new international division of labor and international capitalism girded by the transnational corporation and production. The subject in this situation is situated in the context of cultural fragmentation, multiculturalism, and the re-articulation of indigenous cultures. The waning of boundaries makes identity the site of conflict.

As critics and theorists of colonialism have pointed out, the logic of identity is very significant in a whole range of political, theoretical, and conceptual discourses. Identity is also an existential reality related to the subject's conceptions of the self; in another words, identity seems to assume the notion of a true self, a sort of guarantee of authenticity concealed behind the various masks of the fictional selves that we present to the world. The question is whether we believe in a transcendental form of the self that is drawn into – and is gradually transformed by – the contingent upheavals, vicissitudes, and ruptures of history. It is also assumed that identity is always in the process of transformations and constructions through human ambivalence and desires, and is therefore never completed and finished.²⁴ Nothing – be it intention, perception, experience, or practice or event – ever guarantees the outcome of identity or of history.

How about the form of ethnicity that Lu had mentioned? It is assumed that ethnicity assures the crucial roles that history, language, and culture will play in the construction of subjectivity and identity. However, as the colonial subject in his struggles moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree displace, reorganize, and reposition different cultural strategies in relation to one another.²⁵

The interpretation is that there is not a closed and limited construction of a pure authentic sign, but an endless and excessive transformation of subject – positions possible within the hybridized.²⁶ Hon, as he himself said in his

²³ Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity", *Culture, Globalization and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, p. 22.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities", *ibid.*, pp. 42-49.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 223-227.

²⁶ Griffiths Gareth, "The Myth of Authenticity", *Ibid.*, p. 241.

autobiography, has a strong emotional and tragic sense of life, which, when manifested in his work, is wholly subsumed within the constraints of a formal painterly unity and aesthetic function. The code of pictorial representation and cultural conventions in Hon's works had been mangle of the East and the West, both of which seem to have equal impact on his artistic and personal life. He used brushes as well as spray-guns, creating bold strokes with the former on top of the perfect order produced by the latter.

I agree with Paul Crowther that the artist's own intentions, feelings, and attitudes, instead of merely being translated into painting, are not actually located in some opaque zone of subjectivity "behind" the medium, but rather embodied and mediated within articulated semantics. Crowther said that painting is a particular way of viewing the world, and that aesthetic experience fuels aesthetic form in a way that generates empathic responses, reintegrates the individual with the lifeworld.²⁷

Hon's works show the same sensibility in the sense that they came from a subjective space that had gone through its own struggles of displacement and reposition, and to some degree had subverted conventional forms of representation, and also had followed an irresistible desire to represent profound spirituality, religion, and tenderness.²⁸ Though when Hon mentioned his struggles with romantic relationships, his experience of modern Western culture and diasporic loneliness, he talked about them as if they were private events, yet they were all events within the context of a colonial space; and he carried this psychic state with him wherever he traveled.

Hon's art, as he explained, is an ethical and religious elevation from emotional turmoil. His work's modern spirit lives on in the experience of rebelling against all that is normative and in the rejection of all that no longer speaks to existence. His work also lives on in the principle of unbridled self-realization, in the demand for authentic self-experience, and in the subjectivism of a hyper-stimulated sensitivity. His work is also against the conventions and values of an everyday life, which has become rationalized under the pressures of colonial economic and administrative imperatives.

Truth, rightness, authenticity, and beauty all inform Hon's form of taste. Here he reminds us of what Habermas said: "The autonomy of the aesthetic sphere could become a deliberate project: the talented artist could lend authentic expression to those experiences he had in encountering his own

²⁷ Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 108-112.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

de-centered subjectivity, detached from the constraints of routinized cognition and every day action."²⁹

Hon's paintings, analyzed above as having a deeper investment of "Orientalism," also reveal a spiritual sense of Chinese aesthetics: that is, manifesting a "history" of the colonized past. There seems to be an attempt to develop a notion of self and identity that links difference to the insistence of speaking in many voices, and to fix a notion of identity that is shifting and multiple. We can also see in Hon's art an act of resistance and self-transformation, a voice of becoming a subject in history rather than being an object. Inside his paintings are inseparable personal stories, issues of survival and resistance, of a modernized subject liberating himself from conservative norms via artistic sublimation, but utilizing colonial privileges and traditional aesthetic beliefs at the same time.

Till now, we may have seen enough ambiguities in Hon's art, but as Larry Grossberg pointed out, it is true that after all, it is no longer a question of globality (as homelessness) and locality (as the identification of place and identity), national and international or transnational and transcultural, but of the various ways people are attached themselves affectively into the world.³⁰

²⁹ Jürgen, Habermas "Modernity versus Postmodernity", eds. Natoli, Joseph and Linda Hutcheon, *A Postmodern Reader* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 99.

³⁰ See note 4, p. 185.