

Henry Tsang

## Wuxia Makes Me Nervous



susan pui san lok, *Trailers*, 2015, single-channel video with sound, 4 mins., and *Roch Fan*, concertina artist book in vitrine, 10.2 x 18.7 x 841.5 cm. Photo: Bevis Bowden. Courtesy of the artist.

I have been aware of *wuxia* since my early childhood, and I loosely followed a televised series of this genre (I can't remember which one) when traveling in Guangdong in the mid-1990s. I am an admirer of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Lee Ang's breathtaking crossover film that introduced *wuxia* to Western audiences, Zhang Yimou's heroic *Hero* (2002), and even Wong Kar-wai's enigmatic and arguably post-*wuxia* film *Ashes of Time* (1994)—all part of this genre. But I did not know who Jin Yong was until I became familiar with susan pui san lok's *RoCH Fans and Legends* project, and I was only marginally aware of his influence on *wuxia* as a transnational cultural phenomenon. The fantastical stories of swordsmanship and heroism in these films and projects stir up a sense of unease, a self-consciousness that reflects a discomfort with depictions of a classical China that I know so little about.

*Wuxia* exposes an anxiety about my own Chineseness. I feel vulnerable to being called out as ignorant of the history that these books, comics, television, and films are at times loosely based upon but that nevertheless represent a culture I have a presumed yet unrequited relationship with.

Having been born in Hong Kong in the 1960s, I had a claim on an identity that was not yet the norm, as the majority of the population there in the 1960s had been born elsewhere. We identified as part of the dominant culture even if we were second-class citizens next to the British.

My family moved away a year after the 1967 riots and in most ways left Hong Kong behind. Canada had just opened its immigration to the larger world. This was a country where, since its founding in 1867 as a nation, the White Canada movement in British Columbia had fomented racism and influenced government policies to disenfranchise and shut out Asians. We arrived only two decades after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which had a lineage dating back to 1885 that began with the Chinese Head Taxes designed to discourage and then eventually prohibit Chinese immigration to Canada.

The Vancouver I grew up in was dominantly WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), and the ruling class was not dissimilar to that of Hong Kong. But the most significant difference was corporeal; I remember the rupture that my body experienced after moving to this part of the world. I felt physically different, with a visceral sense of loss. Perhaps it was the confrontation with a dominant culture that we could no longer identify with. In Vancouver we had become racialized. Our bodies were no longer normal; they had become different, Sinicized, Chinese-ified. Certainly we knew we were Chinese, but in Hong Kong that was seen as “natural”—it was the “foreigners,” the *gwai lo*, who were not. However, like all presumptions based on ethnicity, this perception was inadequate and overly simplistic, sometimes making invisible those who were neither Chinese nor colonizers, such as the many Indians and Filipinos who also called Hong Kong home.



We were part of the first wave specifically of Hong Kongers migrating to Canada—previous migrants came from Taishan and Zhongshan counties years before—and now there are about 500,000 of us, mostly in Vancouver and Toronto.

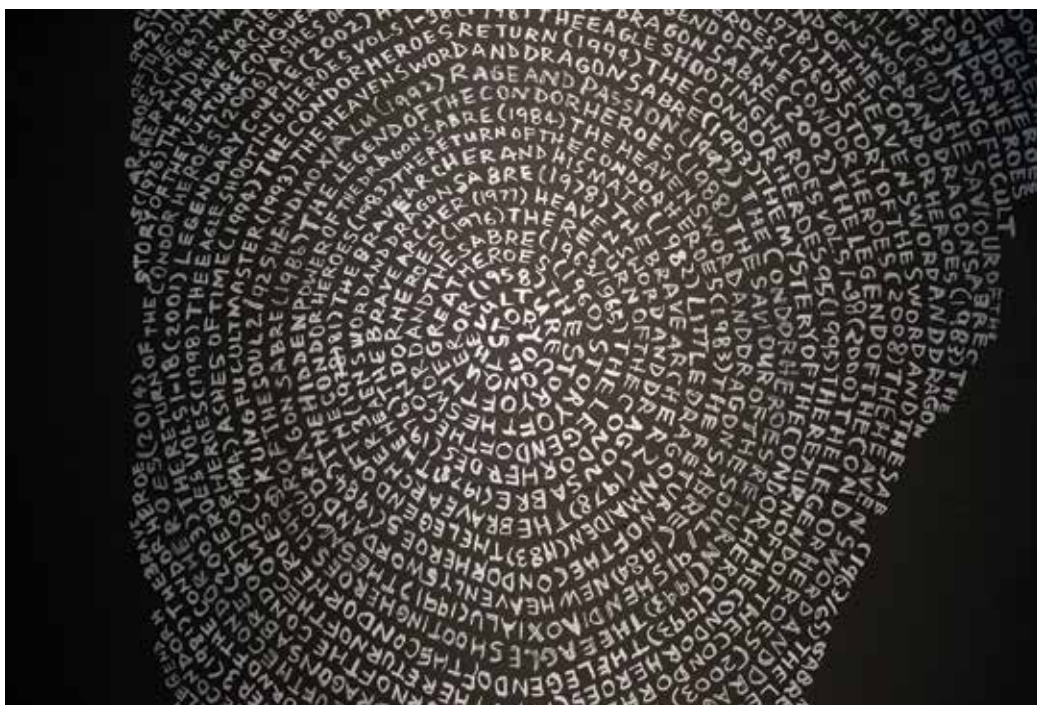
susan pui san lok, *Condor*, 2015, chalk wall drawing. Photo: Charlotte Jopling. Courtesy of the artist.

The second and much larger wave took place after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that sealed the eventual return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. Conversely, Hong Kong has the highest concentration of Canadian citizens in Asia, with approximately 300,000 Canadian citizens of all ethnicities living there.

Our new world was big, exciting, and full of strangeness. It both expanded and contracted, resulting in our stretching and molding to the new environment and unfolding culture while finding commonality, opportunity, and comfort food in the former cultural, ethnic, and economic ghetto of Chinatown, where the non-whites had historically been relegated to live and do business (with the indigenous peoples removed to reservation lands). And even though it was Chinatown where my mother worked, my father had many business dealings, and my sister and I went to daycare;

we weren't an immediate fit with the *lo wah kiu* (老華橋—older overseas Chinese). These older immigrants spoke different dialects, and there were regional and cultural differences that needed to be negotiated if you were a newcomer from Hong Kong.

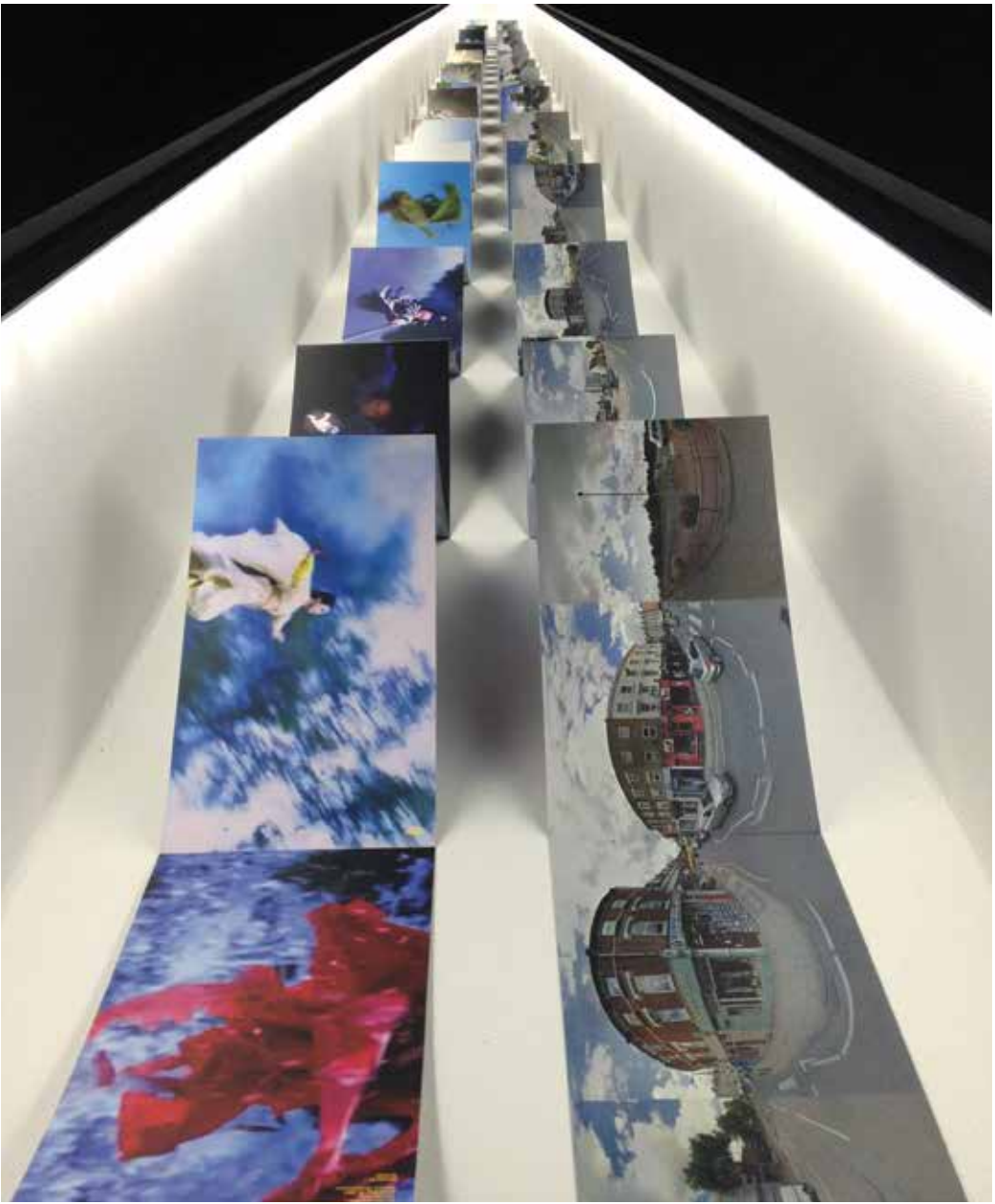
Nevertheless, we managed to maintain a sense of Hong Kong culture. One of the customs that we tried to maintain was afternoon tea, a British tradition that had become a Hong Kong standard, along with Ovaltine, Horlicks, yin-yang tea (half tea, half coffee), and hot Coca-Cola (perhaps not so British). Our family would search for places that served proper tea, and, as a treat, would go to the top of the Hotel Vancouver where my parents would be served tea with milk on ornate trays and my sister and I would have hot chocolate poured steaming hot out of fine silver teapots.



susan pui san lok, *Condor* (detail), 2015, chalk wall drawing. Photo: Charlotte Jopling. Courtesy of the artist.

When my parents would occasionally come across a story in the news or through friends about someone or some occurrence in Hong Kong, they often remarked wistfully about how life might have been if they had stayed there. These moments were an embarrassment to me. I was again reminded of our difference, how we didn't quite fit and probably never could. And I knew that Hong Kong, because it continued to grow and develop while my relationship to it grew more distant with each passing year, became even more foreign than the Vancouver I was becoming increasingly shaped by. I refused to identify with those who kept up with the film, television, and music from Hong Kong because I needed to do the same where I thought I needed to belong.

Within this environment, I refused to attend Chinese school and thereby maintained my illiteracy in Chinese, something I was strangely proud of at the time and later came to regret. My resistance was rooted less in defiance and more in shame. I was somewhat surprised that my parents did not press





me to attend; perhaps they sensed my unease. I lost much of my Cantonese speaking ability; what I retained came forth in a strange, placeless accent. I began to pronounce my surname incorrectly, for the sake of those who weren't familiar with its romanization, but really for my own sake, so I wouldn't attract more attention to myself. I didn't want to feel any more vulnerable than I already was.

susan pui san lok, *Trilogies*, 2015, 3-channel video with sound, 65 mins., installation view. Photo: Bevis Bowden. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite page: susan pui san lok, *RoCH Fan*, 2015, concertina artist book, 10.2 x 18.7 x 841.5 cm. Photo: Charlotte Jopling. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite bottom: susan pui san lok, *RoCH Fan* (detail), 2015, concertina artist book, 10.2 x 18.7 x 841.5 cm. Photo: Charlotte Jopling. Courtesy of the artist.



Like many others from Hong Kong, I found that my relationship with China was unclear and unsettled. Whenever someone conflated Hong Kong with China, I was adamant that the two were completely different, that my Hong Kong was the British Hong Kong—even if I wasn't proud of it, at least it wasn't Hong Kong, China. Since 1997, Hong Kong has maintained its separate identity as a Special Administrative Region, but, yes, it is indeed now part of China. And that is a China different from Taiwan, which also claims to be China. The political violence and instability of the 1960s caused by factions in Hong Kong supporting the two Chinas has caused many since to identify with neither, resulting in families like mine emigrating in large numbers to Anglophone countries abroad.

So when I encounter a *wuxia* fiction or film, an ingrained ambivalence overcomes me. I can identify with the escapism it offers, the action, the pathos of the heroes fighting for justice against the system. I can see parallels with cinematic tropes such as fantasy, historical period pieces, Western cowboy films, and martial arts gung fu flicks. I can appreciate the subtexts of the struggle of Hong Kong and China's colonial and anti-colonial past. But what makes *wuxia* popular to the overseas Chinese causes me to cringe. The nostalgic representation of an idealized Chinese past, however ensconced in unjust power relations, reflects an homogeneity of Chinese tradition and history that belies my experiences and beliefs. What exacerbates this condition is the nag of inauthenticity that I am not Chinese enough to understand or appreciate the specificities referred to in these melodramas. I am caught in the liminal space of knowing some but not enough, the discomfiting state of having just enough familiarity that the stories and references cannot be consumed or desired as purely exotic, and perhaps worst of all, conjures up the challenge to be more Chinese than I am willing to be. How is it that *wuxia* can summon such anxiety?