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CHAPTER ELEVEN

UNDER THE SPECTRE OF ORIENTALISM AND NATION: TRANSLOCAL CROSSINGS AND DISCREPANT MODERNITIES

DIANA YEH

“I always wish my works of art to be me. I always want space and freedom.” (Li 1977a)

Spanning several localities across China, Taiwan, Italy and Britain, the creative practice of Li Yuan-chia 李元佳 (1929–94) raises complex questions regarding the politics of identity in the reception of art and the writing of art histories across borders. Little is known about this artist, in part due to the difficulty of categorising his extraordinarily eclectic art practice into specific movements or styles. Yet, his movement across nation-state boundaries has also contributed to his lack of recognition. Though born in 1929 in Guangxi, China, Li became a founding member in 1950s Taipei, Taiwan of Ton Fan Exhibition (東方畫會), recognised as one of the first Chinese art groups to produce abstract art. In 1962, he moved to Bologna, Italy, where he joined the art group Il Punto, before leaving for London where he participated in the experimental art scene. He then moved to Banks, Cumbria, where he set up and ran the LYC Museum and Art Gallery (1972–82), and spent the rest of his life. Coupled with the tendency of Euro-American art histories to erase the contributions of non-western artists to modern art—and political hostilities between mainland China and Taiwan—this translocal journey has ensured Li’s erasure from art histories, which remain confined to national borders.

In the last two decades, interest in Li has resurfaced amid the appeal of contemporary Chinese art in the international arena, and in new geopolitical conditions shaped by shifting domestic politics within—and international relations between—China, Taiwan and Europe. This interest has generated competing claims that enfold Li’s legacy within specific national art histories. In Britain, the work of his Trustees has coincided with wider attempts to expand the British artistic canon, a process

increasingly institutionalised under the rubric of multiculturalism. Due to his inclusion in *The Other Story* (1989), the first major exhibition to foreground, as its subtitle suggested, “Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain”, his name appears most frequently in work on “black” diaspora art (e.g. Araeen 1989; Hall 2006a).¹ Along with the acquisition of his works by Tate Britain and a 2000 retrospective at the Camden Arts Centre, London, Li has arguably entered British art history, however marginally. Several publications on modern art in Taiwan (e.g. Hsiao 1989) and on modern Chinese art (e.g. Gao 1998) now include Li, yet are limited to his Taiwan days. The reception of his practice thus remains fragmented across national art histories. Positioning his works within the frameworks of Chinese, Taiwanese, British or black diaspora art, each perspective illuminates different parts of his artistic journey and ways of interpreting his practice. Yet, with the exception of Brett and Sawyer (2000), these accounts remain bounded by national borders and thus fail to acknowledge fully the translocal nature of his work.

In this chapter, I relocate Li’s artistic practice within his life’s journey from Cha Dong in the 1930s–40s via Taipei in the 1950s, Bologna and London in early to mid-1960s and to Banks, Cumbria from 1968 onwards. To do so, I draw on three years of ethnographic fieldwork among Li’s family, artistic and social networks and contemporary art critics and art historians in London, Cumbria, Cha Dong and Taipei.² Providing a multi-sited account of his work, I critique East-West dichotomies and ethnonational politics in the reception of art, showing how they erase the complexity of Li’s practice by obscuring its myriad cultural influences and the way it emerges from and contributes to a global traffic of art. I begin by considering Li’s place within the history of black diaspora art in Britain, where his reception initially focused on his Chineseness, and critics produced Orientalist interpretations of his work according to fixed, essentialist notions of a traditional Chinese “culture” frozen in time and space. Discussions of his later works, however, were marked by a notable absence of reference to difference, resulting in an erasure of his reconfigurations and subversions of modern art practices. By appropriating

¹ In Britain, the term “black” has been used as a political category to include “the Chinese”, though arguably in peripheral way. Identity categories such as these, alongside “British”, “Western”, “African Caribbean” etc, are highly contested and used here “under erasure” (Hall 2006b). Quote marks are omitted to ease legibility.

² Deepest thanks are due to all participants, without whom this research could not have been undertaken. All unattributed quotations emerge from fieldwork undertaken between 2004 and 2007.

him into what were characterised as “Western” art trends, such responses provide a vivid example of the failure of Eurocentric art discourses to acknowledge the extent to which the development of modern art has involved artists from all over the world (Brett 2000). To decentre this Eurocentric perspective, I then discuss responses to Li’s works in Taiwan, showing how his practice may be radically re-interpreted within Chinese discourses and highlighting the specificity of responses to modern art among Li’s cohort in 1950s Taipei.

Despite this, I contend that any interpretation of Li’s works that is confined within Chinese discourses also remains inadequate. His practice, I suggest, can only be understood in the context of his specific journey and localised movements across nation-state boundaries. In the final section, therefore, I discuss his distinctive engagement with globalised and hybridised artistic ideas, concepts and languages in the specific political and material conditions of 1950s Taipei. Yet by following Li’s own tracing of his artistic genesis to his earlier life experiences of leaving his natal village of Cha Dong, Guangxi, I discuss how not only artistic but also broader cultural practices “travel” through his work, under localised conditions of modernity. By tracing his journey through specific localities in China in the 1930s, Taiwan in the 1950s, Italy in the 1960s and into Britain from the 1960s onwards, I situate his artistic productions as emerging in the context of, and contributing to, the global “traffic in culture” (Marcus and Myers 1995).

Within but from Beyond Empire

The history of black British diaspora art, in which Li has been included, provides a necessary contextualisation of his reception in Britain. Despite the relative internationalism of the British art world in the early 1960s (Araeen 1989; Overy 2001), the experiences of African Caribbean and South Asian artists were “patchy and dispiriting” (Hall 2006a, 16). Similarly, though well known in artistic circles and to art critics such as Herbert Read (1893–1968), Li was not, as Guy Brett (b. 1942), then art critic at *The Times*, emphasised to me, “written into the *discourse*, because it really was hegemonic”. Though subject to the same marginalisation as African Caribbean and South Asian artists, Li’s story cannot be contained entirely within discourses of postcolonial black diaspora art. Arriving in London on invitation by David Medalla (b. 1942) to exhibit at the Signals Gallery, Li mixed closely with its associated artists, mainly from Europe and Latin, Central and South America. While Hall (2006a, 5) emphasises

that decolonisation liberated black diaspora artists from “any lingering sense of inferiority”, distinctions in attitude between artists from British-colonised and otherwise marginalised societies were articulated during fieldwork. While sharing a belief in modern art “as an international creed” (Ibid., 6), the life-worlds of the Signals artists from Greece, Venezuela and Brazil, like that of Li, had not been framed in the same way by British colonialism. As Medalla declared, “I am from the Philippines, and the Philippines was never a colony of England”.

Certainly, in terms of artistic interests, Li coincided with other Signals artists, and his practice had already developed from previous engagement with other artists in Europe and Taiwan (Fig. 11-1.). Arriving in Italy in 1962, Li had co-founded the “international” artists group Il Punto with his Ton Fan friend, the painter Hsiao Chin 蕭勤 (b. 1935), the painter Antonio Calderara (1903–78) from Italy, and the sculptor Kengiro Azuma 吾妻 兼治郎 (b. 1926) from Japan. Later, the group also included artists from Spain, France and the Netherlands, and had links with Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Piero Manzoni (1933–63), the T-Group and N-Group in Italy, and with the Zero Group in Germany, many of whom had interests in kinetic art. Critical of the emphasis in abstract expressionist trends, especially physical action painting, on “gesture, material and passion”, Il Punto sought, according to Hsiao Chin, a more spiritual approach. Li’s language became increasingly minimal, brushmarks became measured, the ink saturated in simple marks, circles or spheres (Fig. 11-2). It was in Bologna that he further developed his concept of the Cosmic Point and reduced his colours to black, red, gold and white, which he gave symbolic meanings, of origin and end, blood and life, nobility and purity, respectively. Both the Cosmic Point and this colour system remained central motifs throughout his oeuvre. As well as painting, he also made folding scrolls, with fabric mounted on card or between wood covers, and wood reliefs and brass or metal-faced panels.

On arrival in London, he continued making objects and materialised his concept of the Cosmic Point by making wooden discs and painting them. He also began writing poems in fragmented English and taking photographs and combined both with his discs. This led to the creation of participatory art works and “total environment” shows where the points were hung in a space through which the viewer could wander. Through these experiments, as Brett (2000) suggests, his works can be aligned with those of Medalla, Vassilakis Takis (b. 1925), Jesus Raphael Soto (1923–2005), Lygia Clark (1920–88), Hélio Oiticica (1937–80), Mira Schendel (1919–88) and dom sylvester houédard (1924–92). Like them, Li shared an interest in artworks as environments or inexpensive multiples, the

spectator's physical participation, the connections between kinetic art and concrete poetry and a conception of art as proposal, creative gesture and intervention into public space. While influenced by such avant-garde currents, however, Li's response was "to filter them through his own experience and personalise them" (Brett 2000, 34). Indeed, as I show later, in his works in London, Li materialised in his art ideas, practices and values, which emerged from his earlier life in Taipei and Cha Dong.

When Signals closed in 1966, Medalla recommended Li to the Lisson Gallery, where he had his last three solo gallery shows in Britain during his lifetime.³ When the Lisson began focusing on American artists and discontinued representing him, Li continued to exhibit in group shows until the early 1970s. However, with the exception of *Pioneers of Participation Art* (1971) at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, instigated by Medalla, the shows lay on the outskirts of the gallery system.⁴ Afterwards, it was not until almost two decades later that Li was invited to participate in another exhibition, *The Other Story* (1989), which secured his place in the history of black diaspora art. While Li's artistic attitude and practice aligns him more closely with artists who had not directly experienced British colonialism, he is usefully located in the postcolonial paradigm as a racialised artist in the British art world. Yet, within this, the specificity of his location and practice in the context of discourses of Chineseness must also be considered.

The Hypervisibility of Chineseness

Of the few Chinese artists exhibiting in Britain during the 1960s, most were already established figures elsewhere, but it was the allure of their Chineseness, rather than their specific artistic practices, that sometimes appealed to the general public.⁵ According to Medalla, Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983) had "a big exhibition in a wonderful gallery", but the "millionaires who bought his works didn't even know who he was!" It was image that counted: "He was very old, with a long beard. They thought, 'what a wonderful-looking Chinese man!'" This superficial reception of

³ This does not include the exhibitions Li organised himself.

⁴ These include *Pavilions in the Parks* (1968), *Little Missenden Festival* (1970) and *Art Spectrum North* (1972).

⁵ For example, the Grosvenor Gallery showed Zhang Daqian (1965), while the Redfern Gallery showed Zao Wou-ki 趙無極 (1962–2013) and Cheong Soo Pieng 鍾泗賓 (b. 1917–83) (1962).

Chinese artists could extend to art critics. As David Clarke (2002) points out, while critics have played an active role in introducing Asian art to a wider audience, in lacking the richly contextual knowledge required to do so, they often present interpretations in a historical vacuum.

In response to the Lisson's "3+1" show, the Chineseness of Li, Ho Kan 霍剛 (b. 1932) and Hsiao Chin garnered attention in the British press: newspapers remarked that despite hailing from Italy, only Pia Pizzo was Italian—"the other three, surprisingly are Chinese" and have "chosen exile in Milan" (Coutts-Smith 1966, 10). This interest, however, emerged from a mistaken elision of Taiwan and China and historically salient associations between Chineseness and Communism during this period. Despite noting that Li and his friends, were "founder members of Ton Fan, inaugurated in Taipei", in other words, Nationalist Taiwan, the reviewer erroneously concludes: "They are therefore doubly interesting in that they are among the first truly abstract painters to work in Communist China" (Ibid.). This elision of China and Taiwan not only reveals a lack of knowledge about East Asian politics and geographies, but also suggests that the attention to the artists' "origins" emerged less from an interest in their artistic trajectories or the art worlds they had come from, than from the frisson generated by the mention of Communism.

At the level of artistic discourses, Li's work was often discussed in terms of "East-West" artistic exchanges, which raises crucial questions of power in the reception of art. That Li appropriated Western art trends is unremarkable—the convoluted process of cultural borrowings across the globe has, as Mitter (2005, 28) argues, been, "a fact of world art history or cultural transmission right from ancient times". What is key is how these borrowings are judged. As many have suggested, in a colonial situation, "if you imitate a style perfectly, you are really aping or mimicking a western form", yet "if you are unable to do that, you become second-rate" (Ibid.). Though China's relations with the West were only semi-colonial, such judgements have also been applied to Chinese artists. This imitation paradigm, however, precludes recognition "that borrowed elements are given local or culturally-specific meanings; that they are changed, reconfigured, assimilated and even subverted in the process" (Clarke 2006, 77). Clarke (2006) points out, for example, that while European modernism emerged from a crisis in mimetic representation, an emphasis on the possibilities of the medium of paint had been commonplace for Chinese ink painters for centuries.

The works exhibited in Li's early exhibitions in London—paintings, reliefs in card and wood, and brass and metal-faced panels—were praised for their combination of "Chinese" and "Western" aesthetics. Yet only his

inner circle compared his works to those of other Chinese artists thereby recognising differences among them, or transcended Eurocentric paradigms of judgement. Guy Brett, for example, felt that, although “there are many combinations of a Chinese tradition with Western abstraction”, Li’s were the “most exciting”. As he wrote, while synthesis usually emerged at a superficial level, Li’s work exceeded this:

Nobody could have foreseen the synthesis of the concrete space of abstract art and the symbolic space of Chinese art that he has made, precisely because it is a personal perception of space and not an intellectual synthesis of styles (Brett 1967, 44).

Medalla also compared Li favourably to other Chinese artists working in Europe and America: while “very much more modern” than Zao Wou-Ki, he was “certainly very Chinese” unlike the “figurative and American” Dong Kingman 曾景文 (1911–2000), and it was this combination that was “very beautiful”.

The two also recognised that Li’s practice involved culturally specific reinterpretations and subversions of Western art. Brett (2000) points out that despite the visual similarities between Li’s abstraction and that of artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), Calderara or Fontana, Li introduced symbolism, which was rigorously excluded by the others. Medalla concurred: “his abstraction was not really based on Western concepts, it was based on Chinese symbolisms”—if not Li’s individual life story. In a box-set of ten prints, made in 1965, each engraving bears small white points embossed on a white background and appears completely abstract. Yet, an included annotation indicates that the work symbolically represents Li’s autobiography, in terms of his changing spatial relations with his family.

Many British-based art critics, however, were unable to recognise such reinterpretations or reconfigurations in Li’s work. In their criticism, some simply rehearsed Orientalist discourses in identifying in his works “flaws” that art critic Thomas Hess (1920–78) had claimed in 1951 “so often mar Oriental painting”—“understatement to the point of preciousity and restraint to the degree where statement is innocuous” (Abe 2006, 57). Hughes (1966), for example, declared that “the defect” of Li’s reliefs was that “they lack plasticity: they are seductive, but so timid and over-refined that space never becomes an issue”.

Others were able to discern central features of Li’s artistic language and identify the hybridity of his works. However, in absence of a discourse that allowed modernity to exist alongside Chineseness, in attempting to explain their value, they too resorted to Orientalist narratives of Chinese

art. In noting the spiritual qualities of Li's art, for example, one critic suggested that while Li's works maintained a "purity and refinement reminiscent of some New York 'Nart' artists", his "surface has not become total object" as he humanises it with a minute mark, a "vitalising accent" (Coutts-Smith 1966, 10). Yet, because of this, Li was likened to "the classical Japanese potter who deliberately mars a perfect vase by a contrived crack" (Ibid.). While the purity and refinement of Li's work is located in the modern West, its spiritual element is located in a classical Oriental tradition. However, Li's spirituality could not be so easily located. As Medalla dryly commented, "he didn't go around singing mantras, pretending to be Daoist or Buddhist, it was a deeper spirituality".

Others appreciated Li's art for its power to effect a displacement of being—the space and freedom that Li sought. While one critic simply suggested that his work "carries us far beyond an experimental gallery's walls into realms where the mind is purged of all extraneous thought, a wonderful and lasting experience" (Williams 1966), others cast this in overtly Orientalised terms:

One feels oneself in some temple where thought is not an aggressive movement but a rarefied displacement of being [...]. The whole exhibition [...] gives us a chance to withdraw ourselves for a space from the world where Western Time goes so fast (Blakeston 1966).

Li's works provided refuge from the Western world—located in a temple, i.e. Oriental culture; it is defined as being outside Western time and space.

For others, it was Li's refusal to chase art fashions that was refreshing, at a time when the "internationalism of art" simply meant that "a fashion in painting likely to sell will be known from Chelsea to Sao Paulo, Vienna and New York in no time" (Laws 1966: 11). Against the "stink" of this "culture of international hotels and mighty liners", critics were impressed that Li "had not been bothering with recent Italian aesthetics or the doctrine according to Mondrian as understood in Rome, St Ives or Los Angeles", but had "stuck to the world that he can really know with his hands and feet and local education" (Ibid.). This world, however, was described as one of "the delicacy, love for space and unvitiated material of some traditional Chinese art" (Ibid.). Others noted that Li's work is "what art does when it does not do precisely what it is supposed to do according to the functions assigned to the different art movements which have a theoretical or ideological basis" (Reichardt 1969, 227). Yet the idea of intuitive or anti-theoretical art practice itself arguably constitutes a part of Orientalist discourse (Abe 2006).

While the recourse to Orientalised discourses of Chineseness in the reception of Li's works seems peculiar given the recognition of the uniqueness of his practice, this emerged in response to the recognisably "Chinese" elements of his early reliefs and paintings. With the radical departures of Li's new experiments, as these motifs appeared to vanish, he attracted less press. In the responses that did emerge however, critics no longer discussed his works in terms of cultural orientation, or provided analyses informed by long-held assumptions about Chineseness.

The Imperceptibility of Chineseness

In 1968, *The Times* declared: "The word 'multiple' is making some little stir in the English artworld" (Lucie-Smith 1968, 11). As the article suggested, the emergence of inexpensive mass-produced artworks challenged long-held understandings of art, which had tied artist to work through the process of making, and raised controversial questions over the authenticity, uniqueness, quality and value of works of art. Such debates were not entirely new, as artists elsewhere in Europe and the US had already produced multiples. In Britain, however, with the work *Cosmagnetic Multiple* (1968), Li Yuan-chia was at the centre of this stir, lauded as having "designed one of the first 'multiples' to be made in this country" (Overy 1969, 3).

Despite this, it appears it was in fact Nicholas Logsdail (b. 1945), director of the Lisson Gallery, who proposed the name *Cosmagnetic Multiple* for Li's work, and Li just "probably went along" with it. Devising a series of 2ft by 3ft steel panels, painted red, gold, black or white, each with four moveable magnetised points for the viewer to play with, and priced at £9 each, Li materialised his belief that the appreciation of art should not be dependent on monetary value, but involve the spectator through the freedom of play. In this he was successful. With these "fascinating [...] aesthetic toys", he was cited as "offering to pull art out of [the] golden rut of unaffordability" (Lynton 1968, 6). Praised as "beyond preciousness and untouchability", critics saw that "games, emotional or aesthetic can be described on them with limitless permutations" (Anon. 1968). However, the fundamental premise of the multiple—its mass production via technological means—sat uneasily with Li. In the following year, when he exhibited *Mathematics* (Fig. 11-3), a series of circular magnetic discs, 4ft in diameter, floating and rotating in space, and each with attachable, moveable points, Logsdail (1969) described the works as an extension of the multiples concept, but acknowledged,

the only thing the works really have in common with multiples is that they are sold at a ‘multiples’ price. In fact they are all originals: each geometric form has an undefined size, a different finish, a changing tactile quality and possibly a different colour [...] each piece is different.

Once again, Li had turned a burgeoning artistic concept on its head. His “extension” of the multiples concept in fact entailed subverting its defining principle, and he wanted this to be known. As he emphasised in the exhibition catalogue, “It is very important for you to understand that all these new works have been completely finished by my own hands” (Li, 1969).

It was around this time that Li also developed the notion of Toyart, which meant his works, like toys, were “very simple”, but had “many possibilities” and were “good for everyone, from children to old men (women)” (Li 1968). Again, the spectator’s physical participation was key and Li wanted to be recognised for this departure from artistic convention: “I would like to ask you one question: have you seen in any gallery or museum an artist’s work that you can touch or play with?” (Ibid.) He began expanding this idea by creating a series of “total environment shows”, so that “people can walk round inside it and become a part of it—not just look at something on a wall” (Hutton 1971). Using “cheap and easy-to-come-by, things and shapes and colours, in a poetic way”, Li wanted to encourage people, “to find art everywhere, to make it themselves, to see it at home or in the streets” (Reichardt 1969, 227). This was demonstrated in the environment he created at the Little Missenden Village Festival in 1970, from polythene sheets, coloured paper birds and discs, lit up from below (Fig. 11-4). The work fascinated children so much that Li spent most of his time showing them how to make paper birds. His aim was to dissolve the market value of art, indeed, the boundaries between art and life, to enable others to recognise that “Art isn’t just a painting on the wall that costs £10,000” (Hutton 1971).

In contrast to the reception of his earlier works, reviews of Li’s participatory experiments in multiples, toy-art and environments rarely acknowledged his Chineseness or interpreted his practice in terms of Oriental traditions. Critics focused instead on the formal qualities of his work, referring to the “universality” of his artistic language. While this could be viewed as a positive shift, indicating an end to the “burden of representation” (Mercer 1994, 233), it in fact merely allowed critics to appropriate Li into a discourse that continued to characterise emerging avant-garde art trends as European and American. Such interpretations failed to engage with the specific intentions and subversions of Li’s works

or acknowledge that modern art forms could be developed by an artist whose practice had been shaped by distinctive local conditions of modernity in China and Taiwan.

Soon after this period, Li was to make the final move of this life—from London to Banks, a rural village in Cumbria, where he set up the LYC Art Museum and Gallery. This entailed spending almost a year renovating an old dilapidated farmhouse, and undertaking most of the building, plumbing and electricity single-handedly. After it opened in 1972, Li held over 330 exhibitions, concerts and poetry readings for local, national and international artists, poets and musicians, including now well-known figures such as Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956), David Nash (b. 1945), Bill Woodrow (b. 1948), dom sylvester houédard, Michael Longley (b. 1939) and Frances Horowitz (1938–83). While reportedly attracting some 30,000 visitors a year, as much as an art gallery or museum, the LYC is remembered as “community space” of artistic practice and belonging (Fig. 11-5). As Li had typed in his fragmented English, he wanted to:

Bring people all link together throughout the world come here to Bankside LYC Museum to learn it to teach it to make real good friends and to feel like a home a real warmthly house (cited Brett 2000, 46).

To do so, he wanted to:

encourage EVERYONE, not only to become aware of and to begin to appreciate all new forms of art, but also to begin to express themselves and to develop their own natural talents, in fact to make art a part of their everyday lives rather than just something in a museum or gallery (Li 1977b).

While this period in Li’s life is often described as a moment when he stopped making work, the LYC can be seen as an extension of Li’s participatory and total environment works. The fact that Li captured its making on film highlights its performative significance, and it can be aligned with several unofficial, artist-run projects in London that had begun to emerge, including David Medalla’s *Exploding Galaxy*, in which a group of artists lived and worked together, staging dance dramas in public spaces, and in which Li participated. Yet, it was also an expression of his “self”—the “LYC is me”, as Li would say (Brett 2000, 14). Only by adopting a translocal perspective of his journey does such an interpretation come to light.

Chineseness Re-visited: Views from Taipei

While most art critics in Britain interpreted Li's works either in Orientalist terms or subsumed him into western art discourses, the artists and critics in Taiwan I spoke to offered alternative interpretations. Like those in Britain they often stressed Li's Chineseness but interpreted it differently. While claiming that Li "belongs to Chinese art" and emphasising that despite living in Britain, his works had the "logic" and "sensibility" of a Chinese artist and emerged from an engagement with Chinese philosophy, participants stressed that Li's practice reconfigured and subverted Western art forms. My experience in listening to their narratives was similar to that of Michael Sullivan (1997, 199), who, among artists in 1970s Hong Kong, heard:

the dynamic confrontation of areas of pure colour in Hard-Edge painting interpreted as an expression of the interaction of opposites enshrined in the yang-yin concept, and kinetic art as an expression of the state of eternal flux that both Buddhists and Taoists see in the natural world.

Taiwan-based participants suggested that these were precisely the specific conceptions active in Li's works, from his earliest monochromes to his later performative and participatory experiments. Artist Chu Wei Bor 朱為白 (b. 1929) emphasised a conceptual difference for Eastern and Western artists in the use of black and white, by referring to their interdependence in yin-yang, rather than polarity in Western thought. He also suggested that Li's proposed art performance for his *All and Nothing Show* (1967)—drawing a frame in the air with his finger—emerged not from Western concepts of performance art but mediations on Ch'an Buddhism:

He used Ch'an to think what art really is. He took ideas from nature, pointed to a view, using his finger to draw a frame. You can't touch it but at that moment you can see the artist's work. And you can still talk about it now.

Certainly, when Li created an environment, simulating stars by hanging discs in the air and placing masses of crumpled white tissue paper on the floor to "give the feeling of walking on clouds", he described it in Daoist terms: "Everything will be very gentle, flowing smoothly, changing all the

time.” (Hutton 1971). In the *Golden Moon Show* catalogue, Li (1969)⁶ also reiterated:

I express in my art ideas which are based upon the religion and philosophy of the Chinese and the spirit of Western art. These influences combined, form the basis of my art—simplicity, humanity, sensibility and symbolism.

Despite this statement, Li in fact cared little about the politics of the reception of art. He preferred to leave interpretations of his work to the viewer, “as if”, as Sawyer (2003, 71) suggests, “no one, not even himself, was entitled to have the last word”. As Li (1977b) once wrote:

You can look at my work symbolically
you can think of it conceptually
you can play with it as a kind of toy or game
or you can appreciate it for its own beauty.

Addressing his audience in writings, Li proposed that art could be aimed at “your eyes, your sense of rhythm, your mind” or the “way it feels to your hands” and that in some works “you might find all these aspects” (Li, n.d.). Giving little weight to art historical discourses or the politics of cross-cultural translation, Li felt that, “It is not necessary to understand to appreciate” (Ibid.). The value of art resided rather in the personal feelings it aroused in the viewer: “To respond to a painting or sculpture needs no knowledge, only a little feeling [...] the key to each work of art lies inside you—and all the works in the world cannot be a substitute for your response” (Ibid.). Li’s work was an intimate act of communication to “you”, whoever “you” were. But, as Medalla suggested, in attempting to open art to as many people as possible, Li was not a populist either: his work “needed the effort of someone coming across to his art to really meditate and think what he’s trying to do”. As Brett (2000, 12) suggests, “Li dared to be simple”, but knew that, “The simpler a thing is, the more likely it is to be misinterpreted or even dismissed” (Li 1977a). It was a risk not only worth taking, but one that had to be taken. As I argue, Li’s art practice was a means of continually enacting the self, of identity in the making. As he said, “I always want my works of art to be me” (Ibid). In the following sections therefore, I discuss Li’s artistic development prior to arrival in Europe, tracing his individual trajectory through the specific

⁶ This catalogue is unpaginated, as are the artist catalogues that Li produced himself at Boothby and the LYC.

local political, economic and artistic conditions of 1950s Taipei and to his natal village in Cha Dong.

Becoming an Artist in Taipei

Far from emerging out of Communist China, as British art critics assumed, Li's art practice in fact evolved specifically under the conditions of fleeing China as the Communists gained power in the civil war in 1949 and arriving as a refugee in Taiwan, which had been under Chinese rule since 1945. Under Nationalist martial law, "the White Terror" period ensued, marked by material scarcity and political fear. It was this experience that led Li, like other Ton Fan members, to art. For these young men, arriving in Taipei alone and penniless, in some cases at the age of only 15 or 16 years old, art became a form of salvation, liberating them from their experiences of separation from their homes and families and from the repressive conditions of Taiwan. As Li later wrote, "Only through art could I find the means to express my own inner freedom and create my own beautiful world" (Li 1977a). However, in 1950s Taiwan, cultural activity was either repressed or used to bolster political and militarisation efforts, and when Li and his friends entered Taipei Teachers College to train as art teachers, they encountered a strictly conservative education.

Nonetheless, while British art critics of the 1960s often located Li's works within a classical Chinese tradition, outside Western time and space, the art education that Li received in 1950s Taipei already had an international trajectory. Art in Taiwan was shaped by diplomatic links with Europe and the US, as well as by successive colonial rule, by artists from Japan and then China, who worked in styles that emerged from centuries' long engagement with Western art. Thus, the conservatism of Li's college was confined to teaching not classical Chinese traditions, but strictly realist techniques. Dissatisfied with this education, the young students sought artistic guidance under Li Chun Shen 李仲生 (1912–84), an independent art teacher, today recognised as "the father of modern art in Taiwan". It was through him that the Ton Fan friends soaked up stories of a modern art history built upon the travel of artists, ideas and cultures across national boundaries. They learnt of Li Chun Shen's own journey during the 1930s, when he left the conservative fine art schools in China to train in Japan with the painter and printmaker Tsuguharu Foujita 藤田 嗣治 (1886–1968). They heard stories of how Foujita, in turn, had left a rigid art education in Japan in 1913 to travel to Paris, the international nexus for avant-garde art. There, Foujita became associated with the *École de Paris*,

“all foreign artists”, as Hsiao pointed out—“Picasso had Spanish identity, Kisling had Polish identity, Pascin had some Bulgarian identity”. Foujita was the only one with an East Asian identity. In the minds of these young students, he achieved a near mythic status: “He was the first Oriental artist who established himself in the West as an Oriental artist. He was the first one.” The message of his example was clear: “You have to go to the world, but you have to have your own identity”.

From the early 1950s, then, the key question for Li and his friends was, as Hsiao put it, “how to use knowledge from Western countries without depending on western culture as the foundation”. While this question was pertinent among Li’s postcolonial contemporaries in London, Clarke (2006, 77) argues that generally, the response to modern art among Chinese artists has not resulted in the same kind of “abjection” found in other cross-cultural encounters. Certainly, Li Chun Shen would teach his students:

Modern art has progressed towards a new state that is “anti-Western tradition” [and] approaches the high level of imagination and creativity of “the Chinese tradition” (Hsiao 1991a, 89).

In suggesting that with modernism, art was finally reaching the high level of artistry inherent in the Chinese tradition, Li Chun Shen turned western hierarchies of culture belly up. It was the West that was catching up with the East. Such a perspective filtered down to Li and his friends. When, in 1956, they decided to form an avant-garde art group, they chose the name *Ton Fan* 東方 (literally “Eastern”) for its connotations that “the sun rises in the East, and with it, new life”. Translating their catalogues into English, they positioned themselves as an international art group. Nonetheless, their continued use of the transliteration “Ton Fan” (opposed to its English translation) was an act of declaring difference.⁷ The engagement of Li and his friends in Western art trends were shaped less by a postcolonial abjection than by a sense of an alternative modernity, and a concomitant desire “to emphasise and claim emergent power, equality and mutual respect on the global stage” (Ong 1999, 35).

⁷ This contrasted their philosophy to that of the “Fifth Moon”, the other key modern art group in Taiwan at that time, who used an English name to emphasise their allegiance with the west. While some of *Ton Fan*’s early catalogues bore the translated name “Oriental” or “Eastern”, Hsiao Chin emphasised that these were mistakes made by translators, and subsequently avoided.

However, while teaching his students that “spiritually”, a modern Chinese art had to retain “Eastern qualities” (Hsiao 1991b, 30), Li Chun Shen also emphasised the importance of individuality:

We want to develop each person’s own creative instincts, have independent creative expression, establish an individual painting language (Hsiao 1991b, 30).

Each student was thus faced with bringing to his work his own interpretations of Chineseness, his individual “personality” and “artistic language”.⁸ A comparison of the works by the eight original members of Ton Fan shows the extraordinary diversity with which the artists responded. While Li was inspired by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) as well as the philosophy of Laozi 老子, calligraphy, porcelain and ancient cave paintings (Li 1977a); others sought inspiration variously in Surrealism, Buddhist imagery, folk art and culturally specific customs and practices (Hsiao 1991b).

Despite these differences, Ton Fan members shared an interest in abstraction, and their first show in 1956 created a huge political furore as one of the first abstract art exhibitions in Taiwan. As a result of this history, Ton Fan are now recognised as among the first Chinese art groups to produce abstract work, and Li was the second in the group to do so.⁹ Clarke (2006, 77) has argued that in the 1960s abstract expressionism appealed to Chinese artists in Taiwan and Hong Kong for three main reasons: it signified modernity; employed a familiar language of brushwork; and was recognised as having been influenced by Chinese and Japanese art and thought. While his analysis certainly pertains to Ton Fan members almost a decade earlier, Li’s abstraction also emerged from his particular artistic language. Invoking Vincent van Gogh (1853–90), Hsiao Chin explained: “Academically speaking, he wasn’t a good painter, he didn’t know how to draw but because of this, he was more original. Li Yuan-chia was a little bit like that.” Certainly, at Taipei Teacher’s College, where teachers stressed technical accuracy, Li’s works had his “professors shaking their heads” (Lu 1993, 52). Disliking “photo-images”, Li wanted instead to “look at things as a child would—simply; to get closer to

⁸ With one exception, all of Li Chun Shen’s first students were young men.

⁹ According to Li’s own account, he began making abstract art in 1952. Hsiao Chin, however, remembered that Chen Dao Ming 陳道明 (b. 1933), who later abandoned art as a career, was the first of the Ton Fan members to create abstract pieces in 1953, with Li starting about a year later in 1954.

nature” and show “the essence of a thing” (Li, n.d.), “what the human eye cannot see: the purity and simplicity, the beauty and wonder of the world” (Li 1977b). His abstraction arose not from an imitation of Western art, but from his own artistic language and ways of seeing.

Thus far, I have considered Li’s practice as rooted within specific local political and artistic contexts, though, always framed by the global and individualised. Yet, the specific material conditions of 1950s Taipei also shaped the Ton Fan group’s engagement with modern art. Partha Mitter (2005, 26) has shown how the circulation of Cubism in reproduction impacted upon its reinterpretation in India. This recognition of the material processes of “borrowings” enables a re-conceptualisation of “influence” that moves beyond the imitation paradigm. In Li’s case, his first encounters with modern art had unfolded during Li Chun Shen’s Sunday teahouse meetings. In a period marked by material scarcity, the young art students had limited art resources—“no library, no magazines, nothing!” beyond some very old Japanese magazines with photos so small that “you couldn’t even see them!”, as Hsiao Chin told me.¹⁰ Without visual material, they depended on their teacher’s verbal descriptions. As he recalled further:

He described all the kinds of modern or abstract painting he saw in Japan by Western artists. He just described, you know, and we tried to figure out how it was with Klee or Miro, or Braque, or Kandinsky and tried with our fantasies to make experiments based on each of our stories.

As this suggests, Li’s encounter with modern art was “very conceptual!”, formed through a convoluted process of translation from original to reproduction, from visual experience to verbal description and from Europe via Japan in the 1930s to a Chinese context of interpretation in 1950s Taiwan. This mode of engagement with art trends in Europe continued until Li left Taipei in the 1960s, later through Hsiao Chin’s letters from Europe.

The basic material conditions in Taipei also affected their art practice. In make-shift studios, the Ton Fan group fashioned art materials from

¹⁰ Due to diplomatic links with the US, contemporary international movements in art, particularly the post-war New York School, were known in Taiwan, though perhaps did not filter down to the young students. As Hsia et al. (2000, 21) point out, “Only those who understood Japanese could read Japanese art collections and information about new art trends; only those who understood English could browse through English art magazines in the library of the American News Bureau. There was hardly any information in Chinese”.

sundry resources, substituting emulsion paint or lacquer for oils, carving sugarcane wood and using rice sacks or old parachutes stretched over discarded timber as canvas. With no money to pay models, the city became their subject as they walked around the streets, sketching people waiting at bus stations, carrying babies or laden with baskets of vegetables and live chickens, slumped fast asleep on benches at railways, or washing clothes in a stream. Li's later experimentation in London with everyday "cheap and easy-to-come-by" materials, and his dissolution between the spaces of the art gallery and the world outside had earlier roots in his artistic practice in Taipei.

Indeed, the disarticulation of art and monetary value in Li's work in Britain also had earlier precedents. As Chu recalled, when participating in the first National Chinese Art Show in Taiwan in 1956, Li exhibited a very abstract ink painting. As one of the earliest shows to include abstract works, "no one could understand the work, or what he was trying to do". Despite this, Li, an unknown art student, priced his work at ten times the amount asked by well-established painters. Recalling the shocked audience response, Chu laughed, "The work was very free, very simple, yet *so expensive!*" It was a conceptual gesture.¹¹ When I asked Hsiao whether the artists hoped to sell their works, he laughed, "Nobody would sell. We threw all the paintings away—we had no place to keep them!"

Far from reviving a classical Chinese tradition, or merely imitating western avant-garde trends, Li's creative vision in London and Cumbria in the 1960s and 1970s had earlier precedents in his practices as an artist in Taipei. Yet, his creative genesis had an even longer history. For if Li and his friends first turned to art as a form of salvation on arrival to Taipei, this was only one of several enforced migrations that Li had experienced in his young life. In one of his self-made catalogues, *Water+Colour=56/7=Li Yuan-Chia* (1977), Li traces his artistic beginnings back to the moment he left his natal village at the age of eight.

"I Arrived on this Beautiful Earth" (Li 1977a)

Throughout my fieldwork, in attempting to understand Li's decision to set up an avant-garde gallery in such a "remote spot" as Banks in rural Cumbria, Li's friends in Britain always joked that the nearby Hadrian's Wall reminded him of the Great Wall of China. Yet, home, for Li, was not

¹¹ Many participants in Taiwan hailed Li Yuan-chia as the first Chinese conceptual artist.

nation, but, as he wrote, “Kwangsi [Guangxi], South China”, where he “arrived on this beautiful earth” (Li 1977a). Nonetheless, parallels between his natal village of Cha Dong and Banks are remarkable. When Li arrived in Cumbria in the 1970s, his poems expressed a joyful sense of self-discovery through a familiar natural landscape: “I know my whole heart with me come to the country [...] I walk/I breath/From this tree to other trees/From this mountain to other mountains [...] My heart belong nature/nature belong my heart” (Li c. 1968).¹² Li’s “vivid sense of the cosmos, of the universe”, which infused all of his works, emerged from his childhood in Cha Dong, Guangxi, and was rediscovered in Banks.

Both Banks and Cha Dong share elemental “otherworldly” mountainous landscapes for which the wider regions of Cumbria and Guangxi have become internationally renowned sites of beauty and centres of tourism. Yet, Li’s cosmic sense was “as much the dirt beneath our feet as [...] interplanetary space” (Sawyer 2003, 72). At some distance from the key scenic spots of Guilin and the Lake District respectively, both areas are also known for their harsh conditions of survival. Isolated from the wider economy and subject to extreme weather conditions, they have also lacked infrastructure, with electricity only available throughout the Banks in the 1950s and Cha Dong in the 1980s, and roads only built to the latter in 2001. In current day Cha Dong, subsistence levels remain low, but this could not compare to the harshness of Li’s childhood in the 1930s. As his brothers recalled:

We didn’t play games; we worked. In the morning, there was school and in the afternoon, we took care of the water buffalo, while our mother and father took on the hard work. It was a difficult life. The family had no land but many children. Some people had land and got enough rice, but eighty per cent of the village were poor. We children would help the village landlord to bring home a little money. In the growing season, we would help to plant the rice, in the harvesting season, we would help to crop the rice, and finally we would help by grinding rice. Each child took on a part-time job to help the family.

As in the LYC Museum and Art Gallery, life in Cha Dong revolved around ritual communal physical activity undertaken in impoverished conditions, but nonetheless providing participants a sense of belonging. As Li’s brothers built a new house from scratch and harvested sacks of rice before me, it seemed unremarkable that Li’s artworks were “all about

¹² Quotations from Li’s unpublished writings are cited from sources held in the Li Yuan-Chia archive, The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, UK.

physical effort, hopes and aspirations” (Sawyer 2003, 72). The intense labour Li put into building, maintaining and expanding the LYC Gallery almost single-handedly—and the idea that such a project was even conceivable—were rooted in the basic material conditions of his early life in Cha Dong. Yet, this was also a place where houses were always open, people dropped by, and children roamed freely even as they worked. The strong sense of communal life cannot be idealised: not only was it enforced by state policies, but also internal disputes and hierarchies of power are palpable.¹³ Nonetheless, for a child of eight to leave this home and enter a “highly disciplined institutional life” (Li 1977a) in a series of orphanages was to lose what Li spent the rest of his life searching for: “space and freedom” (Ibid.).

For, as one of the cleverest children in the village, Li was given the rare opportunity to enter a home for deprived or orphaned children. In doing so, he was the first in his family to leave the land they had lived and worked on for twenty-two generations. With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the arrival of the Japanese army in Guangxi, Li’s orphanage fled on foot as they moved from place to place for over a year in a journey of thousands of miles. After the war ended, Li was again moved from orphanage after orphanage, spending “Whatever spare time I had [...] reading books on construction, architecture, art, [etc], doing drawings and making all kinds of things” (Ibid). An old schoolmate of Li recalled:

Li was very sad at his new home and cried a lot. He always wanted to go home but never did. His two favourite pastimes were carving and playing with marbles that he made himself by slowly working pebbles into spheres.

The hand-made element of Li’s work, his later concept of the cosmic point and of toy-art, his commitment to introducing art to children and his belief in the role of art in helping one to “express an inner freedom” and “create a beautiful world” had a basis in these earlier life experiences. All these aspects became increasingly visible in his artistic practice in London, and arguably culminated in the LYC Museum and Art Gallery in Cumbria. After ten years, however, Li decided to close the LYC. Despite creating a space of freedom and belonging for so many, Li remained isolated, and, under pressure from tax-inspectors, local planners and arts committees, “longed to be free—travel again and not to be bound to time and place—to

¹³ The village used to run on a collective basis where families turned in their rice crops to village heads for redistribution.

stones and buildings” (Brett and Sawyer 2000, 50). This desire became stronger when in the late 1980s, China began opening up its borders. Thousands of people outside China were finally able to contact their families again, including Li—after forty-odd years of separation. Yet, by that time embroiled in legal battles over the LYC building, Li was unable to leave Britain to visit them. It was then that Li began telling friends that it was “a stupid idea” for a man to live in a country other than his own. From once producing abstract works that expressed a cosmic sense of space and freedom, Li began producing hand-coloured photographic self-portraits of a man desolate, angry and trapped (Fig. 11-6). In the end, it was not only his artworks that were bounded by the borders of nation.

Conclusion

Due to his translocal journey from Cha Dong in the 1930s, Taipei in the 1950s, Bologna and London in the early 1960s and Banks in Cumbria from 1968 onwards, Li Yuan-chia’s art practice has been fragmented across national art histories and the complexity of his works continually shrouded under the spectre of Orientalism and nation. In 1960s Britain, the reception of his works usually either located him within a fixed classical Chinese or Oriental tradition or appropriated him into purportedly Western modern art trends. Such interpretations thus failed to recognise the extent to which his practice emerged from a series of local engagements with modern art in Bologna and London in the 1960s, and in Taipei in the 1950s, as he crossed paths with artists and artworks from all over the world. In doing so, they were also unable to account for the locally and culturally specific ways in which Li appropriated modern art forms, and reconfigured or subverted them in the process.

By relocating Li’s practice within his translocal journey, I have shown that key features of his work in London and Cumbria revived in new ways certain practices and conceptions of art and culture rooted in the specific political, economic and artistic conditions of his earlier life. Li’s Taipei days vividly bring to light the complexity of the global traffic in art, showing how modern art produced in Europe, travelled into Taiwan, via Japan in the 1930s or directly in the 1950s, though largely through a verbal, rather than material, process of circulation. These art forms, ideas and languages were translated conceptually via Chinese philosophical and artistic discourses that inverted Western hierarchies, such that the “West” was perceived to be finally catching up with the “East”. Despite the value of postcolonial approaches in understanding Li’s location as an artist in

Eurocentric discourses, existing histories of black diaspora art in Britain have yet to account adequately for differences in local engagements with modern art across the globe, and which, in Li's case unfolded amid specific discourses in 1950s Taiwan, under Chinese and not European colonial rule.

Nonetheless, as I have argued, Li's works cannot be limited by recourse to nationalist discourses of Chineseness either. Shaped by the political repression and material scarcity of martial law Taipei, his works were also characterised by a distinctive artistic language and vision that grew out of his earlier life experiences. By tracing Li's artistic genesis to Cha Dong in the 1930s, and the moment he was forced to leave his natal village, I have shown that not only artistic but also broader cultural practices and life-ways travelled in his work, via Taipei, Bologna, London, and ultimately into Banks in Cumbria in the last decades of the twentieth century. Spanning multiple localities, Li Yuan-chia's creative practice vividly demonstrates the necessity of reconfiguring modern art histories to include complex translocal crossings and discrepant modernisms that continue to be obscured by Eurocentric and nation-state discourses.

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