

Henry Tsang

CHINESE PICTURES

Henry Tsang: A family Name

BY GU XIONG

Artist's Statement (2006)

HENRY TSANG

Biography (2006)

BY MARGOT LEIGH BUTLER



Henry Tsang
Chinese Pictures, 1986

ink on graphed vellum
(182 x 91cm)

SAG 1996.03.01

acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association
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Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Henry Tsang: A Family Name

By Gu Xiong, 2004

I first met Henry Tsang at the Banff Centre for the Arts in the fall of 1986 when I was a part of the artist in residence program through the Canada / China cultural exchange agreement. It was my first time in Canada. Without speaking any English, I was in culture shock. I felt isolated in the beautiful Rocky



Henry Tsang, *Chinese Pictures*, 1986, ink drawing on graphed vellum (182 x 91cm) SAG 1996.03.01 Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program / et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil les Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Mountains. At the welcome party, I saw another Chinese person. I felt so excited and immediately walked up to him and shook his hands. I began to speak Chinese with him and I felt that all of my isolation had completely melted away. But an unexpected surprise shocked me when I heard him say, "Sorry, I don't speak Mandarin." What! This Chinese doesn't speak Chinese? I couldn't believe it and I became very upset. This person was Henry Tsang.

After this shock, we became friends. Henry, who looks Chinese but grew up in Western culture, was searching for his cultural background. I grew up in China but was facing a strange new culture. I needed to be accepted by it. We came together from different cultural backgrounds. Slowly, we started to understand each other and learn from each other.

The concept of the family name was the first thing we had to deal with. I didn't understand why Henry's family name came after his first name. In China, a person's family name comes first because the family structure is very important in Chinese culture. It is the foundation for society. A person's name usually has three characters. The family name is an icon to perpetuate family roots and histories. The middle name represents the generation of the family that the person belongs to. The individual first name comes last. When I asked Henry why his family name came second, his explanation helped me to understand Western culture, where the individual is important. Different cultural values were seen through a simple thing such as the placement of the family name.

One day, Henry asked me to write his family name and to teach him how to write calligraphy. To practice Chinese calligraphy, one has to learn from a master calligrapher's writing. There are many different styles to choose from, and many calligraphy books are available. This learning process involves a daily

ritual of repeatedly writing words. This long process often takes many years, and is the only way to learn how to write and to build your own style.

I demonstrated how to write Henry's family name for him, and he practiced his calligraphy in his studio every day. After a while, his studio wall was covered in his calligraphy writing. He didn't just write in a traditional style, he started to enlarge his family name on canvas until it was life-sized. Instead of writing, he started to paint his family name. This was a way for Henry to revisit his family history and claim his cultural background, lost in his youth. When he was young, he wanted to be an ordinary child rather than "Chinese" in school. He didn't want to learn Chinese at the time. Being Chinese had little meaning for him. It was only when he graduated from university and worked in society, that he found he was not just an ordinary "Canadian." He began to realize he was "Chinese-Canadian." He faced dual cultures. Through his search for his family history, he started to find his experience in Chinese culture, and build his hybrid cultural identity.

A family name is very normal - nobody pays attention to it in our daily life. But in his series of drawings and paintings called *Chinese Pictures* (1986, Surrey Art Gallery Permanent Collection), Henry's family name, is constructed as a cultural icon. The culture was with him since he was born, though he ignored it for a long time. When he discovered it, he transformed his experience of being within two cultures from calligraphy to painting. His family name was not done by a Chinese brush in one single moment as in calligraphy, but was constructed with many Western brush strokes and paint layers. Also, he painted arrows around the family name, as are used in calligraphy books to help direct people to write the word correctly. In Henry's painting, these arrows

symbolize his journey, his search for his cultural path that leads toward his complex identity.

His family name painting, *Chinese Pictures* (1986), is like a cultural door in a personal psychological space, with each side representing a different culture. Opening the door and letting fresh air flow inside, was like the cycle of his identity, moving from a "Canadian" to a "Chinese-Canadian." In the end, he has come across himself.

Canada is a country of immigrants with diverse cultures. In this land, people are able to mix different cultures together through an individual's experience. A new cultural identity is born as individuals remake themselves through their own cultural practice. Henry's painting is evidence of this tremendous history and change that surrounds us everyday.

Artist's Statement (2006)

Chinese Pictures is a series of drawings and paintings based on the Chinese character for my family name. It is an act of reclaiming a cultural heritage that was, while I was growing up in Vancouver in the 1970s, at odds with how "Canadian" was defined by the dominant white culture. However, as I am illiterate in Chinese and untrained in calligraphy, I asked my friend Gu Xiong, an artist from China now living in Vancouver, to paint the ideogram for Tsang" (or

"Zheng" if using the current Pinyin system of romanisation). I then appropriated his rendition of my name in various attempts to mimic, analyze, iconicize and normalize an image and name that had been alienated from my West Coast experience.

Biography

By Margot Leigh Butler, 2006

Henry Tsang's work explores the relationship between the public, community, cultural identity and the self in the new global order. His art practice entails a number of aspects: making and exhibiting art (locally, nationally and internationally) which incorporates digital media, video, photography, language and sculptural elements; curating exhibitions and projects; writing essays; mentoring and teaching artists; and participating as a cultural activist and public intellectual in various forums.

His artwork, in many media, spans both temporary site-specific installations and permanent commissioned public works; for instance, the text installation "Welcome to the Land of Light" (1997), featured on the seawall handrails along Vancouver's False Creek. The two rows of text are translations of real estate speculation phrases in English and Chinook Jargon, a 19th century West Coast lingua franca, made up of Chinook, English, French and Nootkan (Nuu-chah-nulth) which resulted from the need for cross-cultural trade. Many of Tsang's artworks focus upon the mixing and interaction of languages, cultures, social institutions and nations. Tsang's works are engaging, disorienting, and often humorous instances of globalizing, diasporic mixings in significant contact zones - and create a kind of judder which nudges audiences out of their everyday assumptions, and open spaces for new insights and practices to occur.

Tsang's work in began with an examination of his own cultural roots in Hong Kong, manifest in "Chinese Pictures" (1986) and other early works. His landmark curatorial projects "Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver" (1991,

with Lorraine Chan) and “Racy Sexy” (1993, with Karin Lee), along with Paul Wong’s “Yellow Peril: Reconsidered” (1990) in which Tsang exhibited, contributed hugely to the success of the Asian Canadian artists’ movement, especially on the West Coast. In fact, right from the start of his practice, Tsang has been part of a very active generation of Asian Canadian artists and writers which includes Laiwan, Richard Fung, Paul Wong, Diana Li, Jin-me Yoon, Ken Lum, Sharyn Yuen, Lani Maestro, Scott Toguri McFarlane, Haruko Okano, Hiromi Goto, Karin Lee, Monika Kin Gagnon, Ashok Mathur, Larissa Lai, Rita Wong, who were inspired by the preceding generation’s Roy Kiyooka, Fred Wah, Joy Kogawa,

Roy Miki, Chick Rice, Paul Wong and Jim Wong-Chu, amongst others.

He has also worked with artists’ collectives which produce temporary public art installations on shared political concerns, including The Noncommercial and Collective Echoes Youth Public Artists Collective, and has mentored many young artists through Surrey Art Gallery’s Youth New Media program. He received a BFA from UBC in 1986, an MFA from University of California, Irvine in 2003, and the VIVA Award in 1993. He is an Assistant Professor at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver.

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