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Collecting and Constructing Identity: Subversions of Chineseness in the Paintings of Hung Liu and Martin Wong

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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Collecting and Constructing Identity: Subversions of Chineseness in the Paintings of  
Hung Liu and Martin Wong

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Morgan Matthews

Thesis Committee:  
Associate Professor Roberta Wue, Chair  
Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki  
Associate Professor James Nisbet

2023



## DEDICATION

To my family  
who have taken me everywhere and taught me everything

“i am nothing but a mosaic of the people i’ve met & the things they’ve carried.”

— Samuel Miller, *A Lite Too Bright*

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Collecting and Constructing Identity: Subversions of Chineseness in the Paintings of

Hung Liu and Martin Wong

by

Morgan Matthews

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Associate Professor Roberta Wue, Chair

The cases of Hung Liu (1948 – 2020) and Martin Wong (1946 – 1999) emerge as uniquely peripheral in the context of Chinese American art as the two oil painters, similar in age but vastly disparate in their styles and subject matter, both find themselves and their art deeply misunderstood by the limitations of their assigned identities as Chinese American artists. Do these artists not engage with Chineseness or do they engage in a way that does not suit the Western imagination? What about these artists has enabled them to resist the reframing of their identities and consequently relegated them to the sidelines? In this paper, the category of “Chinese American artist” is to be questioned by examining and challenging the assigned identities of these two artists’ self definitions of their own Chineseness as depicted in their own artworks. Through an analysis of both artist’s personal backgrounds, collections of Chinese objects, and visual analysis of paintings that feature Chinese and Chinese American subjects, alternative narratives of the Chinese American experience are revealed.

## *Introduction*

With identity at the forefront of contemporary interests, the self-promoted identities of Chinese American artists Hung Liu and Martin Wong challenge the false dichotomy between Western and Eastern cultures: the former being characterized as progressive and industrial, while the latter is traditional and spiritual. Cross-cultural migration and the assimilation of diaspora groups in multicultural hubs hybridize pre-existing notions of cultural identity – establishing the general definition of a “Chinese American” as one who is ethnically Chinese, but has immigrated to (or descended from an immigrant) the United States whose cultural otherness replenishes the cosmopolitan worldliness of American culture. A “Chinese American artist” is therefore one such “Chinese American” (defined by the above) who creates art that investigates the differences between Westernness and Chineseness often overlaid with themes of belonging, displacement, and narratives of trauma. Alternative definitions of Chinese American artists have been proposed in order to account for the globalized contemporary world, one such example being the thesis of the 2009 exhibition *Outside in: Chinese X American X Contemporary Art*. Acknowledging that the Western art world has excluded many genres and styles of Chinese art and has allowed only the Chinese avant-garde to represent its entirety. Co-curator Jerome Silbergeld rejects this limitation, arguing that “Chinese art” is defined by “a conscious artistic engagement with...[the] historically and culturally Chinese.”<sup>1</sup> However, despite shifting perspectives in the Western art world that are becoming increasingly “resistant to...reductive labels,”<sup>2</sup> Western institutions retain a remarkable power to assign Chinese American artists the labels “Chinese” or “un-Chinese,” dictating the legacy of such artists and redefining their identities in order to suit the interests and worldview of

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Silbergeld, “Chinese Art, Made In America: An Encounter with Geography, Ethnicity, Contemporaneity, and Cultural Chineseness,” essay, in *Outside in: Chinese X American X Contemporary Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Silbergeld, “Chinese Art, Made In America: An Encounter with Geography, Ethnicity, Contemporaneity, and Cultural Chineseness,” 132.

the American and international art communities. The canon of Chinese American artists remains noticeably sparse, with many being relegated to the periphery despite their repeated and explicit engagement with Chinese history and culture.

As an immigrant personally impacted by the communist regime in China, drawn to the United States for artistic freedom, and with an oeuvre that focuses heavily on Chinese subject matter, Hung Liu should appeal to Western interests in Chinese American artists; yet, when investigating the cultural impact of her career and her role in the canon of Chinese American art, she falls to the wayside, relegated to the low status of an unremarkable, conservative figure painter. Critical discussion of Liu's Chineseness is largely compressed into a hyper-specific orientaling and othering narrative, searching for any semblance of exotic identity through her paintings, exaggerating and dramatizing any findings in order to comfortably situate Liu into the role of the typical troubled immigrant. In the 2020 virtual exhibition *Dis/placements: Revisitations of Home*, Liu's work and her life are molded to suit the exhibition's theme of "displacement from [one's] ancestral homeland."<sup>3</sup> Curator Katie Hirsch writes:

Liu's last vital connection to China died with one such woman—her mother—who passed away in early 2011... With this relationship, Liu maintained an intimate relationship with China. She could smell the streets of Beijing, weigh in on local news stories, and know how her art would be interpreted in the country where she was born. With that tie severed, Liu is further displaced from her homeland, further adrift in an identity that floats between the words in the term Chinese American.

Hirsch conflates Liu's ethnic and political identity with her familial ties, attributing the entirety of her Chineseness to a temporally finite relationship. Despite the fact that the death of a parent is a universal experience, the death of Liu's mother is not met with empathy and is instead

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<sup>3</sup> "Dis/Placements: Revisitations of Home," *Displacements*, <https://displacements.org/about/>.

abstracted into a mechanism of cultural identity. Hirsch asserts that, without her mother, Liu has lost her Chinese identity, denying the artist the autonomy to possess Chineseness herself and the ability to self identify her own relationship with her mother and the country of her heritage.

Conversely, the urban American subject matter of Martin Wong's paintings seemingly contradict all expectations of the Chinese American artist. A third generation immigrant born and raised in the United States with an oeuvre highlighting Americana and the reality of life in the Lower East Side, Wong is often considered more a New York City artist than a Chinese American one. Supported by Wong's self-identification as a *jook-sing*<sup>4</sup> – a Cantonese slang term which refers to a westernized Chinese person – his Chinese identity is largely dismissed in favor of his association with other identities and subcultures, namely hippie culture, prison culture, and the cultures of the Latin-American and gay communities. In the rare attempt to discuss Martin Wong's Chineseness, critics like Lydia Yee search for social commentary on identity politics, noting how his paintings “verge towards stereotypes”<sup>5</sup> and praising the way in which “he refuses to overlook the problematic history of representations of Chinatown and of Chinese-Americans.”<sup>6</sup> This assignment of social commentary onto Wong's paintings, despite the artist's general tendency away from the subject, illustrates the interests of the critic: the struggle of otherness.

Though Liu and Wong have little in common vis-à-vis artistic style and personal background, the two are united by their relegation to the periphery of the limiting label of “Chinese American artist,” both choosing to instead reject the connotations and expectations associated with such a label and cultivate their own self-identities through artwork that highlight

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<sup>4</sup> *Martin Wong Portrait by Charlie Ahearn*, Charlie Ahearn, (Stanford Digital Repository, 1998), 10:10, <https://purl.stanford.edu/sc633pb4842>.

<sup>5</sup> Lydia Yee, “Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown,” in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1998), 55

<sup>6</sup> Yee, “Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown,” 62.

objects collected by each of the artists. Examining selected work from these two artists as case studies in conjunction with analyses of their personal backgrounds, the reasoning behind their misrepresentation as identity politics-focused social commentators reveals itself as being the artistic portrayal of hidden histories – narratives of Chinese and Chinese American people that run silently parallel to the dominant historical and art historical canon that remain obsessed with the exoticness of the cultural other and retain interest in the individual Chinese person only so long as they are granted access to the struggle of assimilation and into the world of Chinese identity. The Chineseness expressed in Liu and Wong’s art is not necessarily cultural or political, but personal, reflecting the artist’s lived experiences as Chinese Americans: a first generation immigrant whose empathetic engagement with history as an active, malleable narrative challenges static notions of Chineseness and a third generation Chinese American whose radical acceptance of hybridized, kitschy Chinese American subjects entirely circumvents the Western interest in the struggle of otherness.

*Hung Liu: History as a Verb*

Amongst all of Hung Liu’s self-portraits, the painting *Resident Alien* (fig. 1) offers an overt sample of the artist’s self-definition of her own Chineseness in relation to the society that validates such identification. Through this recreation of a resident alien card, it becomes obvious that Liu is well aware of her status as a foreigner in the United States and is comfortable parodying the stereotypes associated with her Chineseness. The resident alien card distills Liu’s entire identity to select pieces of information – photographic, biographical, and biometric – all ironically impersonal and unconcerned with matters of self identity. The composition of the painting emphasizes the ID photo as the largest and most authentic representation of Liu; however, the artist employs both the style and connotations of socialist realism as the ID photo is

reminiscent of a photograph of Liu taken during military training at Beijing Teachers College (fig. 2), but carefully cropped to exclude the rifle on her back and the rural fields to which she was relocated during the Communist Revolution. This careful editing recalls the propagandized media produced in China and defies the expectations of authenticity that the ID card presents. The replacement of her given name with “Cookie, Fortune” and her birth date with the date of her immigration signifies the way in which Liu acknowledges that she is equally a participant in the culture of the United States as much as she is a victim of its eurocentric biases. Here, “fortune cookie” plays upon the origins of the food itself and on the concept of consumption. In the United States, fortune cookies are associated with Chinese food and are therefore assumed to be authentically Chinese in origin, piquing Liu’s interest because “[t]he first time [she] went to a Chinese restaurant in the U.S., they served fortune cookies. Everybody said, ‘You should know what that is.’ But it was invented by a Japanese man near Golden Gate Park; it has nothing to do with the Chinese at all.”<sup>7</sup> This misconception of authenticity is a representation of the entitlement with which westerners ascribe Chineseness to objects and people. In appealing to the history of the Chinese American fortune cookies, Liu erases her name and her identity, transforming herself into a snack made for consumption or disposal at the hands of the western audience that created them. The often low-quality crackers contain a slip of paper that reveals some kind of mystical truth and the cracker is often discarded in favor of the fortune within, paralleling the way in which Liu satirically defines herself as a vessel to be pried open and investigated, then disposed of when her status and work no longer suit the desires of her western audience. The version of herself that Liu presents in *Resident Alien* is that of a socially-aware woman who challenges typical eurocentric notions of identity and value.

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<sup>7</sup> Moser, “Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu,” 89.

Such subversions of the stereotypical conception of immigrants reveals Liu's philosophy of history as a verb: "History to me is not a noun. It's a verb. History is constantly changing...when you have new discoveries in terms of evidence, materials, and witnesses, new kind of recall, or maybe a regime change, history can be rewritten."<sup>8</sup> This realization originated from her experiences during the Cultural Revolution when "one high-ranking comrade was somehow ousted as the public enemy...there were images that were erased from historical photographs,"<sup>9</sup> and Liu would continue to be affected by constructed narratives throughout her career. Having attended Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts – one of China's most prestigious art schools – Liu was trained in painting and the style of representational socialist realism. Although already divergent from the traditional *zhongguo hua* brush-and-ink style of imperial China, this painting style became the governmentally recognized national style of Chinese art. However, China's internal identification with socialist realism did not extend beyond domestic borders and did not reflect the international perceptions of Chinese art. American interest in both brush-and-ink painting and socialist realism was severely lackluster as the American conception of Chinese art originated from the experimentalism of the 1980s, characterized by bright, bold, and graphic politically-driven art, and non-traditional media such as installation and performance art. The West had rewritten the narrative of Chinese art, relegating the conservative styles of *zhongguo hua* and Liu's work to the periphery of Chinese art despite their recognition as authentically Chinese styles of art making within China itself. Although Liu found a comfortable degree of fame during her life and postmortem, her marginal role in the greater art historical canon reflects and enhances her efforts to bring attention to those who lost their identities to the passage of time.

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Gross, "Art Talk with Hung Liu," *National Endowment for the Arts*, 2012, <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2012/art-talk-hung-liu>.

<sup>9</sup> Gross, "Art Talk with Hung Liu."

Through this philosophy of history as a verb, Liu's collection of photographs enables her to challenge and deconstruct the narratives of historical photographic subjects by recontextualizing their images in her paintings, thoroughly developing a relationship to her subjects as she paints them. Liu's repeated use of historical photographs with anonymous subjects underscores her fervent passion for humanizing those who have had their entire identities relegated to a single abandoned snapshot. In the cultural climate of the Cultural Revolution, Liu grew to understand photographs as ephemera that should not be freely created or possessed, contradicting the typical connotations of permanence associated with photography. The visual documentation of Liu's family history was not an immortalization of her heritage, but a threat to her family's safety as "Liu's family was educated and her mother and her mother's father were teachers, they were seen as a threat to the government."<sup>10</sup> With so few surviving photographs of her own family for fear of persecution by the Red Guards, Liu recalls that "[y]ou couldn't keep anything personal [during the Cultural Revolution]. It was dangerous. That is why I'm so interested in old photographs. They are rare."<sup>11</sup> This rarity, however, was not valued by her contemporaries and old photographs were considered undesirable and were either abandoned or sold in flea markets for extremely cheap prices. Liu was able to benefit from this discarding of the past as her use of historical photographs as the basis for her paintings began after she discovered an abandoned box of 19th century photographs of prostitutes in a photo studio in Beijing. Rather than casting them aside, a fate to which most historical photos had succumbed, Liu began a collection and they provided the reference materials for a large body of Liu's work. Liu collected these photographs in order to preserve the heritage and memories that she had been

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<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Moss et al., "Interface," in *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2021), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Hung Liu and Rachelle Reichert, *Qianshan: Grandfather's Mountain* (New York, NY: Nancy Hoffman Gallery, 2013).



denied for her family's safety. In valuing photographs to such a degree, Liu's prolific artistic career centers the narratives of historical and contemporary photographic subjects as links to a shared cultural heritage. Liu would superimpose the image of the prostitutes onto imagined backgrounds, recontextualized in a new, non-commercialized space. The care with which Liu reconstructs the image of these women does not dismiss the historical contexts from which they derive, but offers personal connection and empathy for their humanity and their positions in historical society. Abandoned historical photographs of Chinese prostitutes cast aside in a photo studio, personal family photographs protected from the Red Guards, posed self-portraits, and current political events become one lineage through the transformation of photograph into painting, embodied by Liu's "goddess" character – a figure based on an image by the travel photographer James Ricalton of a woman baring her bound feet. It is through the reclaiming of these subjects' lost narratives that Liu is able to connect their images into a history that is relevant to the contemporary art world and Liu's process of individuation.

The historical photograph with which Liu was so enamored originates with the tradition of Western 1860s photographers who "paid or coerced poor women to unwrap their binding cloth,"<sup>12</sup> and Ricalton's dedication to photographing these exposed lily feet emphasizes the powerful fascination that the West had with the East and the voyeuristic compulsion that drove his photographic pursuit. As noted by Dorothy Ko, "[w]hat distinguished the westerners... was not their imaging machines, but their inquisitive spirit and all-seeing eyes."<sup>13</sup> The desire to see and understand was fostered by traditions of colonial photography, and this power imbalance emboldened photographers like Ricalton to value their own curiosity over respect. Despite the West's characterization of footbinding as barbaric and their acknowledgement of the pain

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<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, 72.

inflicted, Ricalton shows no mercy for his subject. Knowing fully well the impropriety of women baring their bound feet for a man, Ricalton recounts his quest to find a woman willing to pose for this photograph as if a conquest.<sup>14</sup> He describes each girl as a specimen, praising some as “comely” and dismissing others as “unsatisfactory,” claiming “art purposes”<sup>15</sup> for this objectification. Ricalton himself and the photographs he took appeal to the erotic, as he searches for beautiful women among low-class prostitutes, who were the only women who would even entertain the idea of having their bare feet photographed. He describes the multiple attempts that he and his guide made at convincing a willing sitter: first, a girl running away upon the suggestion that she bare her feet; second, a house full of girls who Ricalton deemed “too ugly for consideration;” third, a successful photograph of an “unsatisfactory specimen”<sup>16</sup> Instead of accepting these numerous refusals and disappointments as a sign that he should turn away, Ricalton perceived these resistances as temporary setbacks and persisted in his attempts at bribery until he found a girl who conceded for the price of four silver dollars solely because “necessity has no choice”<sup>17</sup> (fig. 3). His persistence is intrusive, crossing over sexual boundaries for the viewing pleasure of himself and his Western audience. Ricalton dehumanizes his subject, imploring his audience to be simultaneously appreciative of the woman’s exotic face and disgusted by her disfigured feet, stating “she underwent the humiliation, and the result is now before you for inspection.”<sup>18</sup> With Ricalton’s objectifying gaze and his dismissal of his subject’s humiliation, the woman in the photograph is made deliberately anonymous, so that she may be dissected, othered, and dehumanized without the opportunity to be shown empathy.

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<sup>14</sup> James Ricalton and Christopher J. Lucas, *James Ricalton’s Photographs of China during the Boxer Rebellion: His Illustrated Travelogue of 1900* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ricalton and Lucas, *James Ricalton’s Photographs of China*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> Ricalton and Lucas, *James Ricalton’s Photographs of China*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Ricalton and Lucas, *James Ricalton’s Photographs of China*, 118.

<sup>18</sup> Ricalton and Lucas, *James Ricalton’s Photographs of China*, 118.

Liu first encountered Ricalton's photograph in the same commercialized way that photographs of bound feet had been traditionally distributed – bought from a shop in Chinatown.<sup>19</sup> However, unlike the objectifying eyes of Ricalton's Western audience, Liu approaches this image with sympathy, derived from personal experience as she recounts her first encounter with bound feet as a child in China:

I remember this relatively old lady who had tiny bound feet—we asked about it, and she unwrapped her bandage. It was horrible. [Ricalton's] photograph reminded me of those. The standard size of these disfigured feet was three inches—men called them the three-inch golden lotus. I thought it was horrible, like mutilation, a constant reminder of women's hobbled condition.<sup>20</sup>

Liu's immediate link between Ricalton's image and the symbolism of bound feet as a visual representation of subjugation for women and Chinese people lays the foundation for her transformation of the anonymous prostitute into the goddess. Liu's selection of Ricalton's photograph as the basis for her goddess character connects this overarching theme of reintroducing lost people into society duels with the violent history of colonial photography. Liu's repeated reference to Ricalton's photographs signifies a deep engagement with the subjugation of Chinese women at the hands of Western fetishization, and reinserts the anonymous prostitute into the historical narrative by linking her pain with contemporary events. Conversely, Hung Liu's approach to her subjects is based in empathy, not objectification. Having discovered many of her subjects through photographic objects, she subverts Ricalton's process of dehumanizing living people and extracting their image to be immortalized and disseminated in an object. Instead, Liu states, "I paint from historical photographs of people; the majority of them

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<sup>19</sup> Joann Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," *American Art* 25, no. 2 (2011): 76–103, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," 89.

had no name, no bio, no story left. Nothing. I feel they are kind of lost souls, spirit-ghosts. My painting is a memorial site for them.”<sup>21</sup> This humanization of the subjects of lost photographs highlights Liu’s tendency towards forming connections and relationships between the living and the dead, and her respect for the subjects of her portraiture.

From 1989 to 1993, Hung Liu produced four paintings featuring the goddess figure: *Goddess of Love/Goddess of Liberty* (1989) (fig. 4), *Red Shoe/Golden Lotus* (1990) (fig. 5), *Virgin/Vessel* (1990) (fig. 6), and *Madam X* (1993) (fig. 7). These four images reference two of Ricalton’s photographs, putting the woman’s unwrapped feet on full display at a massive scale – canvases ranging from 18.7 to 48 square feet. Despite the immediate inspiration to employ Ricalton’s photograph as a symbol for liberty and justice, the woman with bound feet did not transform into the goddess until after the Tiananmen massacre in June of 1989. Amidst the protests that preceded the tragedy, a statue was constructed by the school which Liu had attended, entitled *Goddess of Democracy* (fig. 8) and often called the *Goddess of Liberty*. The statue’s title was intended both as a label of its symbolic importance, but also to protect the demonstrations as any attempts by the government to dismantle the statue would be a literal attack on democracy and liberty. The defensive intention for the *Goddess of Democracy* eventually proved unsuccessful as the statue was destroyed five days after its completion during the massacre. Upon hearing of the tragedy, Liu – living in Texas at the time – grieved for China, and concluded that “a goddess in China was really crippled and had bound feet, not really able to do anything or hardly walk. So that was the true condition of liberty after June 4, 1989.”<sup>22</sup> With the concept of the goddess now linked to the image of Ricalton’s photograph, Liu began work on her many renderings of the goddess in order to share in the grief that followed the Tiananmen

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<sup>21</sup> Moss et al., *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Moser, “Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu,” 89.

massacre, the pain that was broken into the bones of every woman with bound feet, and the histories that were being written and rewritten by the government and its protesters. This task was an act of disruption to not only the communist establishment, but also to the mainstream narrative of history, as Liu would be inserting into a revolutionary moment a woman who had been subjected to not only Chinese socioeconomic pressures, but also orientalist colonial pressures. Such disruption was the driving force behind Liu's dedication to the image of the goddess, as she "want[ed] to startle the audience and convey the pain felt by our mothers."<sup>23</sup> Although the many iterations of the goddess convey different meanings, the repeated use of her image in works of art that relate to Liu's relationship with her heritage, her homeland, and current events embrace the anonymous woman as an extension of Liu herself.

The first two paintings are the more ostensibly political of the four, created in direct response to China's political situation and the Tiananmen Massacre, both covertly and overtly referring to injustice, inequality, freedom, and propaganda. The first iteration of the goddess, entitled *Goddess of Love/Goddess of Liberty* is a split canvas, shared by an image of a porcelain pot decorated with erotica and a painted representation of Ricalton's photograph. *Goddess of Love* is one of multiple works that Liu created in the wake of the massacre, all united by the theme of trauma – a term that aptly serves as the title for another of Liu's painted reaction to Tiananmen (fig. 9) and as the title for an exhibition held at the Women's Building in Los Angeles, which included an untitled plywood installation of the goddess figure (fig. 10).

A gentleness and even a sadness pervade the installation, where one would expect to find angry indictments. The installation thus takes one of the richest tacks that politically

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<sup>23</sup> Elaine H. Kim, "'Bad Women': Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 3 (1996): 573, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178131>, 589.

oriented art can take. By casting a familiar subject in a radically new guise, it invites new and differing interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than wielding the outrageous events of Tiananmen as a weapon against the Chinese government, Liu's empathetic composition allows space for grief to take its natural course, focusing on the victims of the massacre as individuals, embodied by the single fallen protestor. The gentleness of the installation is expressed through the goddess' slightly averted gaze that cannot meet the body beneath her disfigured feet, empathizing with the pain of the protestor who was, like her, bound to a cultural narrative that oppressed the freedoms of women and political dissidence and physically manifested in imposed injury to the body. In the installation, *Trauma* (1989), and *Goddess of Love*, the body is shown to be the carrier of trauma as the scientific diagram parallels the broken feet of the goddess, displaying sites of pain as the focal point of the composition. The stored trauma in the goddess' feet parallels the struggles of people in poverty during the Cultural Revolution as both were traumas caused under false narratives of social mobility – one under the guise of beautification and the other under the guise of political improvement – that ultimately revealed themselves as harbingers of pain through limited physical movement and authoritarian abuses of power.

The erotic pottery on the left side of the pot offers a less obvious commentary on the restriction of liberties, but nonetheless references containment. Given the long history and cultural significance of porcelain in China, the vessel itself connotes the longevity of culture, its contents codified and elevated. The woman illustrated on the pot is shown to have bound feet, still wrapped in the depicted moment of intimacy, conveying the long-standing establishment of the practice and the strict adherence to this oppressive tradition despite its painful effects. The

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<sup>24</sup> Leah Ollman, "Paintings, Text Speak of the 'Trauma' in China's Body Politic," *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-09-15-ca-94-story.html>.

work also includes installation elements which further emphasize Liu's feminist and revolutionary themes, notably the blank chalkboard which "symbolize[s] the erasure of memory" and the broom which highlights "the subordinate status of women."<sup>25</sup> The broom connects the current political condition of China, Liu's own artistic background, and the condition of women in the 19th century, as it is a tool that was used to clean up the bloodstains in Tiananmen, "functions symbolically like a big paintbrush,"<sup>26</sup> and its Chinese translation (*zhou* 帚) in combination with the word for "woman" (女) forms the traditional character for "wife" (*fù* 婦). Although the many elements of *Goddess of Love/Goddess of Liberty* appear disparate and unrelated, Liu employs them to unite past and current social conditions with her own hand and her own experience as a Chinese American woman.

*Red Shoe/Golden Lotus* pairs a different image of the goddess with an image from a 1972 production of "The Red Detachment of Women," a ballet adapted from a 1961 film of the same name. The original film follows the story of a housemaid, Wu Qionghua, who is oppressed and abused by a feudal landlord and finds refuge and freedom in fighting against him and his socioeconomic class as part of a company of female soldiers called the Red Detachment of Women. Concluding with the death of the landlord, sentenced by Qionghua herself in a moment of righteous justice and equality, the story was so well received by the PRC and was so deeply representative of the government's narrative that its adapted ballet was performed for President Nixon during his visit to China in 1971 and became one of the "eight model plays" as decided by Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao.<sup>27</sup> The painting of the goddess in the right panel of the diptych references another of Ricalton's photographs which captures the subject's lily feet

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<sup>25</sup> Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," 89-90.

<sup>26</sup> Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," 89.

<sup>27</sup> Joe He. Thesis. *A Historical Study on the "Eight Revolutionary Model Operas" in China's Great Cultural Revolution*. Thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1991.  
<https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds/170/>.

wrapped and fitted into lotus shoes (fig. 11), emphasizing the shape of the foot as a parallel to the ballet dancer's shoes, rather than highlighting the eroticism of unwrapped feet. In this way, the goddess is shown to be engaging in another type of performance, fitting into the societal beauty standards and resigning herself to the colonial gaze. Ricalton's presence is made concrete by the inclusion of his photograph superimposed onto the goddess' chest, the orientalizing perspective ever-present in the core of the goddess. Tying Ricalton's photograph and the then-contemporary propaganda to Liu herself is a small portrait of the artist beneath the reaching arm of the dancer: a photograph of a uniformed Liu holding a semi-automatic rifle during military training, taken in the same year as the film release of "The Red Detachment of Women" ballet.<sup>28</sup> Once again, Liu inserts herself into the narrative of Chinese women, militarized like the dancer and physically restricted from changing her status like the goddess – all three trapped in a performance celebrating the mainstream narrative of Chinese history.

The third image, *Virgin/Vessel* is most similar to *Goddess of Love* as it once again pairs an erotic vessel with the image of bound feet, and is installed with a chalkboard and a broom as installation elements. However, the composition of the two subjects is layered rather than side-by-side in a diptych, internalizing the vessel as another hidden layer within the goddess rather than an associated cultural commentary. With a year separating the Tiananmen massacre and the creation of this painting, the broom's feminist aspect is more emphasized than in *Goddess of Love*, and the conception of a proper traditional Chinese wife becomes the object of Liu's commentary. The vessel – now a titular subject of the painting – is lidded, not only containing, but sealing away its contents. The erotic illustration on the pot is now ostensibly a scene of domination. Where in *Goddess of Love*, the scene could be interpreted as a willing

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<sup>28</sup> Roslyn Bernstein, "Scholar-Artist: Hung Liu," essay, in *Hung Liu: The Year of the Dog, 1994* (New York City, NY: Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1994), 6.



engagement within a larger oppressive structure, the scene in *Virgin/Vessel* lacks emotional intimacy between its subjects who are no longer facing each other on equal ground. The positioning of the vessel on the chest of the goddess is reminiscent of Ricalton's photograph in *Red Shoe*, but serves to represent the repression of genuine sexuality, sealed within the vessel, allowing only a power fantasy of a sexual encounter to be revealed and performed. The goddess is here named a virgin, another measure of desirability, which is both contrary and complimentary to the erotic bearing of her unwrapped feet. The very existence of her image is evidence of her sexual appeal, as Ricalton had selected only the most beautiful specimens to be photographed and published. Additionally, *Virgin/Vessel* incorporates ancient Chinese script, which further extends the lineage of female oppression. Liu once again links herself to this lineage through the paintbrush-like broom, acknowledging her own role as a woman in society and empathizing with women of the past through shared experience under the patriarchy.

The final image *Madam X* offers the least compositional changes to Ricalton's photograph, but still undergoes meaningful changes with the image blurred by stylistic drips of thinned paint that would later be described as "weeping realism." With so few compositional changes and added elements, Liu's perspective is blended with Ricalton's, prompting the viewer to decipher whether this painting perpetuates orientalist ideas, magnifying a woman's humiliation and amplifying Ricalton's pseudo-scientific intentions, or if it is a reclaiming of the woman's autonomy, respecting the sacrifice that the woman made in order to support herself in a patriarchal society. With the title alluding to John Singer Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X* (1884) – a controversial portrait of Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau – Liu's painting evokes similar discourse regarding the temptations and enticements evoked through the balance of the exposed and the obscured. Both Madame X and the goddess are clothed, draped in fabric that pools and

drapes around them, but parts of their bodies are carefully and deliberately uncovered, revealing sensual and erotic features – décolletage and unwrapped feet respectively. Although the nature of *Madam X* as a portrait implores the viewer to look closely at the expression of the subject, the audience encounters a vacant gaze, looking to the side, deliberately not confronting the viewer, as the sitter did not confront Ricalton. This evasion of contact is almost negated by the mirror behind her as she denies Ricalton her gaze, but he nevertheless strives to see all of her – her unwrapped feet and the nape of her neck at the same time. However, unlike the confident Gautreau who confidently turned to display her bold side profile, denying the viewer the privilege of her gaze, Liu characterizes the goddess’ averted gaze as neither ashamed nor empowered; it is instead an empathetic rendering of a challenging moment for a hesitant sitter, frozen in time. Speaking of this empathy for her subject, Liu states, “...I have no connection with her at all, but somehow you need to make a connection...especially [when] you paint her face. You’re face to face with her.”<sup>29</sup> Although Liu cannot change the goddess’ gaze due to her dedication to truthfully replicating the photograph, Liu understands that she is not the same individual who compelled the goddess to turn her head in deference, and approaches the goddess with the dripping weeping realism style, “add[ing] a layer of empathy...[and] creat[ing] emotion.”<sup>30</sup> The “unifying and dissolving”<sup>31</sup> drips blur the line between mainstream and hidden historical narrative, acknowledging the pain that the anonymous woman underwent as a result of the culture that perpetuated footbinding and her poverty which surrendered her to Ricalton’s camera and consequently the colonial gaze of all who encountered her photograph. This stylistic change to the goddess’ image is the culmination of Liu’s reframing of her story.

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<sup>29</sup> *KQED Spark - Hung Liu. YouTube*, 2009. <https://youtu.be/LV8e43K2zCI>, 0:41.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Saenger, “Honoring the Past With Art and Tears,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> *KQED Spark - Hung Liu*, 6:00.

The repeated image of the goddess is therefore a subversion of the propagandization of photography in China, highlighting the personal narratives of individuals who have been overlooked by history rather than promoting orientalizing stereotypes. Rather than employing photographs as a method to create and control narratives that cause harm to their subjects, Liu references photographs as a method of reconnecting lost souls with their descendents, reentering them into history, not as a footnote, but as a main character. What we see in the repeated image of the goddess is not simply the humiliating image of a mutilated specimen as Ricalton intended. The goddess is not an image of an antiquated foreign practice, but is a representation of heritage. Although Liu's paintings are a form of social commentary, the personal empathy that Liu exhibits in order to connect disparate people through common threads of heritage and gender eliminates the notion that Liu's engagement with Chinese images is for the purpose of lamenting or reconciling her own identity as a Chinese American. As exemplified by *Resident Alien*, Liu's understanding of her hybrid identity is self-assured, codified as the government document she parodies. Instead, Liu's references to Chinese historical photographs appeal to her identity as a woman and a former citizen of China. The China that Liu represents is not a reflection of her own personal identity as a Chinese American, but is instead a political state which has erased the identities of its citizens through both domestic and global propaganda and censorship. This understanding of China as a nation contributes to Liu's liminality as she states,

I feel I can never be a blue-blooded American because I'm...talking about history as a verb. My status is 'becoming American,' like all the first-generation immigrants...I sometimes feel I want to go back to China, at least emotionally and in spirit...I catch up when I go back, but also I can never be the same, as though I had never left China.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," 103.

To Liu, being Chinese American is not a status that erases one's connection to China as Hirsch claimed. Instead of allowing Chinese Americanness to replace Chineseness, becoming American is a process that enables Liu to embrace the fluidity of history as a verb and empowers her to make artistic commentary that changes historical narratives.

*Martin Wong: Radical Acceptance, Defining Identity through Collection*

As described in Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library," collections are active – a reflection of the collector born out of their growing and shifting identity and interests – "ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have with objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."<sup>33</sup> Martin Wong's near-obsessive compulsion to collect embodies this philosophy as the sheer size of Wong's collections overtook most of the space in both his New York City apartment and his family home, but the possessing of those objects proved tangential to the far more consequential practices of sourcing and selecting – the primary effect of his collecting directed inwards as an exercise in connoisseurship. Although Liu's collection of photographs was similarly expansive, the process of collecting was a means towards the end of recontextualizing those images in her artistic practice. Liu's "almost...urgent need to look at a lot of historic photographs"<sup>34</sup> was born out of her compulsion to preserve mementos of the past due to lingering fears from her experiences with the destruction of memory under threat of the Red Guards. The photographs collected by Liu are therefore not the physical embodiment of Liu's own personal identity, but rather a reflection of her value of memory and the development of history. However, for Wong, collecting is an act of self-cultivation and connection to the histories that he shares with the objects and his lifelong dedication to careful connoisseurship embedded his spirit into the collections he curated. Wong amassed multiple

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1978), 67.

<sup>34</sup> Moser, "Interview a Conversation with Hung Liu," 89.

different collections throughout his lifetime, including an expansive collection of graffiti<sup>35</sup> dating from the 1970s to the 1990s. Not only was this a reflection of his artistic sensibilities, but his collection was another strategy through which Wong maintained his relationships with different groups of people as he remained close friends with many of the graffiti writers whose work he had acquired and whose careers he had supported until his death.

Collection was also the method through which Wong fostered a powerful relationship with his family in San Francisco, especially with his mother, Florence Wong Fie. Memorialized through the 2013 exhibition *IMU UR2*, Wong's family collection was a result of the combined labor of his entire nuclear family, as "[Wong] initiated Florence into collaborative collecting...[and Ben]...amiably drove them to countless shops...build[ing] shelves in the basement for the scores of...accumulating miscellany."<sup>36</sup> The mother and son duo developed their connoisseurship in a close partnership: "[I]tters between Florence and Martin during the New York Years involve a lot of back-and-forth about acquisitions and prospective purchases – from cartoon figures to 'that Ching dynasty bowl' to an Andy Warhol Campbell's tomato juice box, as well as instructions on what to hold on to, what to sell and when, etc."<sup>37</sup> This collection contained a vast array of Americana and Chinese knick knacks – porcelain statues and kitschy figurines (fig. 12). Visible amongst the near-innumerable objects on display in the exhibition are Wong's paintings and sketches, figurines of Chinese deities and spirits, Disney memorabilia (ranging from toys to branded dishware), nativity scenes, books, Thai Buddha statuettes, various

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<sup>35</sup> First exhibited in Wong's Museum of American Graffiti, the collection was donated upon the institution's closing and donated to the Museum of the City of New York as the Martin Wong Collection of Graffiti.

<sup>36</sup> Julie Ault, "Some Places It Will Always Be Eureka and in Eureka and in Eureka It Will Always Be Valentine's Day," essay, in *IMU UR2: Julie Ault, Heinz Peter Knes, Danh Vo, Martin Wong* (Köln: König, 2013), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ault, "Some Places It Will Always Be Eureka and in Eureka and in Eureka It Will Always Be Valentine's Day," 4.

sculpted hamburgers, oddly shaped cookie jars, blue-and-white porcelains, wooden mask sculptures, stereotypically anti-black americana (mostly racialized figurines and vintage posters). Though enormous in scale and extraordinarily diverse in content, the collection remained perfectly maintained after Wong's death entirely due to his mother's "devot[ion] to preserving and displaying everything that is Martin Wong, and the myriad of collections that Martin and she accumulated."<sup>38</sup> Curator Danh Vo's impetus for the creation of the IMU UR2 exhibition derived from this collection and the dedication with which it was curated and preserved by Wong and his mother. The collaborative activity fostered a positive relationship between Wong and his Chinese heritage as he would develop and grow his knowledge of relevant information regarding Chinese objects and their histories, amassing a mental collection of Chinese motifs in addition to the physical collection that grew in both his New York apartment and in the family's San Francisco home. In his death, Wong and his mother's unique blended connoisseurship is embedded in the collection, preserving and immortalizing Wong within objects of his Chinese heritage.

With various expansive collections constructing numerous vastly different facets to Wong's identity, reconciling these disparate aspects to synthesize the whole of the artist's identity proves a great challenge. However, Wong's display of connoisseurship in *My Secret World, 1978-1981* (1984) (fig. 13) permits access to a more straightforward and focused view of the artist's cultivated self-identity, which lays the foundation for further interpretations of Wong's larger body of work. Painted after the artist's relocation to New York City from San Francisco, *My Secret World* depicts Wong's bedroom in the former Meyer Hotel on South Street – a lease that was as informal and spontaneous as the Lower East Side culture with which Wong would soon become enamored. Painted the year after Wong's vacancy of the hotel, the memorialization

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<sup>38</sup> Ault, "Some Places It Will Always Be Eureka and in Eureka and in Eureka It Will Always Be Valentine's Day," 5.

of the artist's three-month turned three-year tenancy of the room reveals Wong's nostalgia and appreciation for the spontaneity and coincidental fortune that enabled his residency in New York. Carefully curated in the windows of the brick building is the entirety of Martin Wong's constructed identity: a collection of books, a selection of the artist's paintings framed and hung on the wall, photographs of the artist's collections from his family home, and a stack of suitcases labeled SFO. Although the painting does contain the surface-level hallmarks of Wong's identity, i.e. the prevalence of bricks and signature sign language paintings, the perfectly framed contents of the artist's bedroom grants the viewer access into understanding Wong's value of memory through his collection of books and knick knacks, his value of his family and home through his still-TSA-approved suitcase, and most significantly his value of belonging. Each object is in its rightful place (completely contrary to the artist's cluttered real-life apartment), expressing Wong's ability to curate a selection of objects and reconcile disparate elements into a cohesive space. Each of these elements reflects an aspect of Wong's personal history and they are all perfectly aligned and pushed to the front of the picture plane in full view, building on one another in order to create a painted assemblage that culminates in the multifaceted entirety of Wong himself.

As exemplified in *My Secret World*, Wong's Chineseness was not at the forefront of his personal identity or of his artistic concerns. Wong's status as a born-and-raised American relieved him of the burden of language and cultural barriers to the American art world where he was free to embrace 1970s San Francisco hippie culture and the grimy New York art scene in the majority Hispanic Lower East Side in the 80s and 90s. Prominent themes of Wong's work derive from these American subcultures in which he was embraced by each community and granted belonging into these worlds. During his college years in the California Bay Area hippie culture,

Wong was heavily involved in communal theater as a set painter for the Angels of Light, a performance art subgroup of the Cockettes. The community provided a high energy, drug-assisted welcoming of diverse participants, hosting the famous drag queen Divine as a collaborator<sup>39</sup> and promoting the popular social climate of sexual liberty. This free spirited community fostered the relationship driven mindset that Wong would inspire his artistic career in New York. Having moved to the Lower East Side from a temporary living situation in a hotel in Seaport, Wong's work during the 1980s became deeply rooted in the stories and relationships he built in this neighborhood. Meeting his muse and partner Miguel Piñero at a local poetry reading, Wong built a tight knit community of friends who integrated Wong into the largely Hispanic Lower East Side Community. They, especially Piñero, told him stories of their experiences in prison, which served as the inspiration for Wong's plethora of paintings that featured jail and imprisonment as subject matter.<sup>40</sup> Rather than creating a body of work based upon the tragedies of immigration and belonging, this decidedly un-Chinese artistic focus is the physical culmination of belonging, as Wong stated, "[e]verything I paint is within four blocks of where I live and the people are the people I know and see all the time."<sup>41</sup> An entire decade of Wong's work was dedicated to the Lower East Side because of the local community that embraced him, which in turn enabled Wong to reciprocate such acceptance through his friendships and his paintings.

Having been so deeply associated with the local people and landscape of the Lower East Side for most of his professional painting career, Wong accepted his deviation from the

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<sup>39</sup> Antonio Sergio Bessa, "Dropping Out: Martin Wong and the American Counterculture," in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 15.

<sup>40</sup> Yasmin Ramirez, "Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview," in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 116.

<sup>41</sup> Bill Berkson, and Steven A. Nash, *Facing Eden: 100 Years of Landscape Art in the Bay Area* (San Francisco, CA: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995), 155.



expectations associated with being a Chinese American artist, self-identifying as a *jook-sing*: “[one of those] Chinese people who are only really Chinese on Sunday when they go to Chinatown for dim sum.”<sup>42</sup> However, this self-definition is equally a construction of the Western notions of cultural belonging as the metaphor from which the term derived is not truly applicable to Wong’s life and interests. Described at length in Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, *jook-sing* literally means “bamboo node,” metaphorically related to cultural identity as “bamboo nodes obstruct water”<sup>43</sup> and the hollow nodes are isolated on both ends from one another in a pole of bamboo like a westernized Chinese person is isolated on both sides from Chineseness and Westernness.<sup>44</sup> Kingston’s character expresses that “sometimes they scorn us for having had it so easy, and sometimes they’re delighted,”<sup>45</sup> and the contradictory positive and negative perceptions of *jook-sing* status pushes the identity further into the periphery, highlighting difference, rejection, and exclusion over multicultural liminality as it “implies ‘hybrid’ or ‘bastard’ which is...derogatory and epitomizes the American born Chinese’s dilemma and its disadvantages...[as] [t]he white dominant society denies their American identity...[while]...[t]he Chinese scold them for... not being ‘authentic’ Chinese.”<sup>46</sup> This in-between status is perceived as an absence of culture and essentialises “authentic” culture as a binary status that can only be fully obtained or not experienced at all. The compulsion to adopt the label “*jook-sing*” is therefore born out of the false dichotomy between Eastern and Western identities, an idea propagated by eurocentric tradition. Although

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<sup>42</sup> *Martin Wong Portrait by Charlie Ahearn*, 10:15.

<sup>43</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (London: Picador Classic, 2015), 182.

<sup>44</sup> HJ Seto, “Bamboo Pole or Earth Born,” *Chinese Canadian in Translation*, May 13, 2017, <https://setohj.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/bamboo-pole-or-earth-born/>.

<sup>45</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Ken-Fang Lee, “Cultural Translation and the Exorcist: A Reading of Kingston's and Tan's Ghost Stories,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 29, no. 2 (January 2004): 111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4141821>.

Wong's personal background is similar to that of Kingston's character who is also labeled *jook-sing*, Wong was neither isolated from Western culture nor Chinese culture, experiencing a hybridized life as a third-generation Chinese American who had social fluency in both American culture and the Chinese American subculture that was fostered in Chinatowns.

Wong's non-Chinese themes of americana, bricks, and codes culminate in his sign language paintings – such as *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983) (fig. 14) – should solidify his distance from Chinese art, but Wong asserted “basically, I’m a Chinese landscape painter. If you look at all the Chinese landscapes in the museum, they have writing in the sky. They write a poem in the sky, I do too.”<sup>47</sup> Taken literally and without context, this statement characterizes Wong as a misunderstood Chinese American artist attempting to merge the styles of contemporary New York with his traditional Chinese heritage. However, given that Wong seldom made other statements regarding traditional imperial Chinese painting, this statement can be considered a semi-satirical commentary on the expectations that western audiences project onto Chinese American artists and definitions of “Chinese art.” Through this reading, it can be extrapolated that Wong believes that the American mainstream values Chinese artists so long as their work relates to the exotic mainland and its foreign visual language. Having worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and absorbed information on traditional Chinese landscape paintings, Wong seems to satirize westerners who follow a literal interpretation of calligraphy inscriptions in the sky within the picture plane. Although seemingly half-joking, Wong acknowledges that his oeuvre does not align with the mainstream interest in multinational identity politics or the growing interest in contemporary Chinese art, appealing to that mainstream interest only to emphasize his unique position as an assimilated and well-adjusted Chinese American.

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<sup>47</sup> Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” 109.

Though both the art world and Wong himself diminished his connection with the identity of a Chinese American artist, Chinese motifs and settings make frequent appearances as subjects of his paintings. With two 1993 exhibitions curated around the themes of Chinatown – *Chinatown USA* at New York’s P.P.O.W. Gallery and *Chinatown Paintings* at the San Francisco Art Institute<sup>48</sup> – Wong displayed an unusual focus on his heritage through paintings like *Canal Street* (1992) (fig. 15), *Grant Avenue, San Francisco* (1992) (fig. 16), and *Chinese New Year’s Parade* (1994) (fig. 17). Wong’s comfortability in cultural ambiguity and self-assurance in his identity as a Chinese American is best exemplified in this series of paintings, which highlight Chinese settings and represent Chineseness in a curated picture plane, flattening space to the foreground and carefully framing each element to democratize and elevate each painted object. Through this careful cultivation of the image, “Wong’s paintings become a portrait of the artist in the unending process of analyzing and interpreting his environment, searching for points of access and identification that are resonant with his own experience.”<sup>49</sup> As with many of Wong’s paintings, the meanings of these works are protected by layers of secret codes, with no finger spelling or constellations to indicate how they might be translated and revealed. However, these works are united by their grounding in locations significant to Wong’s life, and his collections in his family home are the framework through which his paintings of Chinatown can best be understood. The Chinatown paintings recall Wong’s personal experiences living in Chinatowns on both coasts – a foundational aspect of his childhood and a major contributing factor to his understanding of Chineseness in America. In a 1996 interview Wong noted that “the Chinatown series is something [he] always wanted to do when [he] first came to New York, but [he] didn’t

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<sup>48</sup> Jim Herron Zamora, “Martin Wong,” *SF Gate*, 1999, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Martin-Wong-3070656.php>.

<sup>49</sup> Dan Cameron, “Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong,” in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1998), 5.

have the technical facility yet [and that] it took [him] about 20 years to accumulate all of the source material.”<sup>50</sup> Putting to use his collecting experience, the Chinatown series is a lifetime’s worth of acquired materials and understanding that accesses and translates the spirit of the neighborhood from the eyes of a local. What can be extrapolated from this series is that Wong did not draw from life, but from memory. His lived experiences imbue these works with the specificity of a single perception rather than a generalized, outsiders’ idea of Chinatown or Chineseness. Wong’s paintings of Chinatown are collages of collected objects, people, and places that have been woven together into a cohesive image through memory. Rather than being marginalized and rejected from both Americanness and Chineseness, Martin Wong was deeply attached to both identities, and in turn, both cultures equally embraced him.

*Canal Street* (1992) is the only painting of the Chinatown series to feature New York’s Chinatown of Wong’s adult life rather than the San Francisco Chinatown of his childhood. The painting closely resembles the real-life building on the intersection of Canal Street and Center Street, recognizable by the street address, storefronts, and bilingual “Golden Empire Jewelry Center” signage. As accurate as the architecture and businesses are to the real New York Chinatown, the image of the city is doubled, duplicating the building, the street lights, payphones, and subway station, all divided by an almost imperceptible black line. The differences between the two images being only the contents of the windows and the singular self portrait of the artist, the nearly identical buildings align Wong’s identity with the characteristics of the left building. As described by Lydia Yee, the two buildings are gendered with the left building framing six women in the windows of the upper floors, and the right building housing a single well-dressed man seen through a glass door, the windows now advertising a beauty

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<sup>50</sup> Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” 119.

salon.<sup>51</sup> The self portrait itself reflects the way in which Wong was interested in cultivation and styling for himself as well as his work. The artist's appearance was a thoughtfully designed image that combined Wong's personal style with intentional subversion and parody of societal expectations thrust onto him, and this subversion is amplified in *Canal Street*. Pictured here with his signature cowboy hat, the self portrait is generally true to the real life characteristics of the artist as seen in a photograph from the decade. The figure on his hat appears in another self portrait (1993), where the image of Jesus Christ and the crown of thorns is made obvious in painted form. Its deliberate placement on the left side of the painting suggests that Wong's self identity is aligned with that of the feminine and of the commodity rather than the typical business-minded patriarchal man. *Canal Street* ultimately becomes a manufactured and gendered representation of Chinatown as it relates to Wong's personal identity as an LGBT Chinese American.

*Grant Avenue* (1992) similarly highlights Chinatown's architecture, but emphasizes cultural hybridity in its joining of Chinese motifs in the design of architecture and clothing with the universality of the characters and their actions. The architecture of Chinatown had been reconstructed after the 1909 earthquake according to the business plan of Look Tin Eli, who had promoted the idea of Chinese style architecture as a draw for tourists, resulting in American-style buildings with "colorful pagodas with curled eaves and dragon motifs on top," akin to "an Oriental Disneyland."<sup>52</sup> The stereotypically Chinese aesthetic is emphasized in the exaggerated verticality of the pagoda roof building with other oriental motifs compounding upon one another throughout the scene in the lantern shaped street lights and chop suey font signage, creating the signature look of an American Chinatown that caters to Western expectations of China. The

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<sup>51</sup> Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown," 59.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Gonzales, "Rebuilding Chinatown after the 1906 Quake," *NPR* (NPR, April 12, 2006), <https://www.npr.org/2006/04/12/5337215/rebuilding-chinatown-after-the-1906-quake>.

apparent Chineseness of the architecture is mirrored in the clothing of the central figure, Wong's aunt Eleanor "Nora" Wong. Dressed in a blue qipao, Aunt Nora acts as a symbol of pop culture, femininity, and Chinatown's hybrid culture. A notable beauty, having been named Chinatown's 1940 Miss Firecracker Queen,<sup>53</sup> Aunt Nora stares directly at the viewer with a knowing gaze that appears cheekily aware of the men who defy the "no stopping at anytime" signage to stare behind her back. Her elevated status both in the painting and in her life is one that emphasizes the multicultural nature of Chinatown as the beauty pageant from which her title derives and her subsequent popularity as an emcee in Chinatown's nightclubs are based in the values and cultures of American beauty and nightlife. Behind Aunt Nora and the men in her orbit are a multitude of other figures living parallel lives to the splendor of such popularity: shadowy figures rushing in the crowded street, faceless children surrounding a birthday cake in the tall building's window, and a loving couple entangled in the window below. The scenes of these mundane activities are heartwarmingly universal and blend seamlessly with the site-specific architecture and non-western mandarin collared costumes. For Wong, *Grant Avenue* appears not as a satire of the stereotypical aesthetic of Chinatowns through the orientaling western perspective or as a socio-political assertion of the Americanness of Chinese Americans and Chinatowns, but as a documentary image that immortalizes the liveliness of Chinatown and the richness that such a culture provides for the lives of its inhabitants. The density of the canvas and compression of the varied activities to the front of the picture plane acts as a visual equalizer that values both the mundane and extravagant aspects of life in Chinatown, as "his gleaming outlines weave Chinatown's residents into a single tapestry, a continuous social fabric, united by ornament."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown," 60.

<sup>54</sup> Marci Kwon, "A Secret History of Martin Wong," *The Present Prospects of Social Art History*, 2021, 12.

The themes, motifs, and processes exemplified in these 1992 works culminate in the 1994 painting *Chinese New Year's Parade*. The painting depicts the artist as a boy turned away from the viewer, enamored with the scene before him – a gargantuan dragon towering above and blue spirit-ghosts parading the street led by Chinese opera performers in full costume. Using historical photos, objects from his collection, and his own memory as references, Wong captures an image that is not informational or representative of Chineseness or Chinese culture, but a particular image distorted by his personal experience. In a casual interview with the filmmaker Charlie Ahearn, Wong insists on the specificity of San Francisco's Chinatown as a site of childhood memory as opposed to the New York Chinatown that he was experiencing in his adult life.<sup>55</sup> Wong shares a collection of childhood photographs with Ahearn, each serving as a reference for the final painting either for direct visual translation (the back of his childhood self) or for experiential inspiration (crowds). Effortlessly locating pieces from his collection of porcelain figures from his cluttered apartment, Wong selects an object shaped like a miniature theater filled with a stack of expressive heads and masks as the reference for the blue spirit-ghosts. Like *My Secret World*, the scene is compressed toward the picture plane, perfectly framing the dragon and the green-skinned figures, carefully capturing the full expression of the character to the lower left. The composition evokes a sense of completeness as if the edge of the painting is where his memory ends, contributing to the otherworldliness of the image. With the dreamlike scene grounded in the reality of Wong's historical photos and collected Chinese objects, *Chinese New Year Parade* negates any notion of perpetuating orientalist stereotypes. The exoticized opera singer and the kitschy spirit heads defy orientalism because Wong chose to embrace their images and validate their Chineseness by equating them to the authenticity of the traditional Chinese New Year celebration due to their presence in his life as a Chinese American.

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<sup>55</sup> *Martin Wong Portrait by Charlie Ahearn*, 2:02.

As exemplified through these Chinatown paintings, “Wong presents history as imagination not to discredit either category, but to relive the lived experiences that fall out of grand historical narratives,”<sup>56</sup> and as such, the secret history that is revealed through this series of paintings is simply the overlooked experiences of the liminal Chinese American. The direct confrontation of stereotypical depictions of Chinese aesthetics for which Yee praises Wong is not a criticism or even an acknowledgement of its problematic origins, but rather a radical acceptance of those stereotypes. As Wong is unafraid to embrace all aspects of his lived experience, he faithfully renders even the most orientalizing motifs to reflect the role they have played in creating the environment by which he was shaped. The flattened storefronts of Chinese laundromats, the curling pagoda rooftops of Chinatown buildings, and the kitschy Chinese knick-knacks – although all created by orientalizing Western sensibilities and the exclusionary American economy – are deeply ingrained into the experiences of the Chinese diaspora in America. While this long-standing establishment does not necessarily grant the status of “authentically Chinese,” they are authentically Chinese American and therefore cannot be classified solely as orientalizing. It is Wong’s acknowledgement and acceptance of the simultaneously manufactured and authentic nature of Chinese Americanness that enables his value of Chinatown as a lively diverse community that shaped his contentment with his own hybrid identity. Although the Chinatown paintings differ greatly from the bricks and prisons for which Wong is best known, they are the satisfying conclusion to his painting practice – the artist reflecting only three years before his death, “everything I’ve ever wanted to paint, like the Chinatown paintings, I’ve painted. When I was younger, I was always paranoid that I would die before I could finish my paintings and at a certain point I actually finished them.”

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<sup>56</sup> Kwon, “A Secret History of Martin Wong,” 115.



*Defining the Self Within and Beyond “Chinese American Artist”*

The relative obscurity of Hung Liu and Martin Wong speak to the connotations of the Western category of “Chinese American artist.” Both artists struggled to find relevance in comparison to their more notable, more experimental contemporaries such as Ai Wei Wei and Tehching Hsieh, overlooked in favor of those who engaged directly with the Chinese politics that were at the forefront of the American conception of China in an avant-garde style that appealed to the Western art world. Contemporary interests in identity politics similarly exclude the works of these two artists as Liu’s engagement with Chinese identity is aimed towards recontextualizing the narratives of others and Wong’s self-assurance in his identity (and general disinterest in Chineseness as a subject of his paintings) evade socio-political commentary on the trauma of displacement. By rejecting the stylistic niche carved out by American definitions of Chinese art Liu and Wong were simply considered not interesting enough to be offered a space in the Western category of “Chinese American artist.” Not labeling these artists as “Chinese American artists” may well be a positive development, freeing people of color from their racialized niches; however, as the work of Liu and Wong evidences, the label “Chinese American artist” or the lack thereof does not determine an artist’s level of engagement with Chineseness and attempts to do so are, in fact, often overlooked when the engaged narrative diverges from the Western conception of the cultural other. In investigating these two artists, the significance of an assigned label is called into question, suggesting that self definition without the connotations of existing eurocentric labels allows for a more nuanced understanding of not only artists as individuals, but also of identity as a whole especially as related to the multicultural experience.

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