

Personal Abstraction: Shiau-Peng Chen's *China Series*

Julia Gwendolyn Schneider

I Don't Belong Here but There (2009-2012) is a sequence of six square-shaped paintings with vertical and horizontal composition as well as flat color surfaces. At first glance they evoke associations with the style of Piet Mondrian, but unlike the modernist tradition of geometric abstraction, the emphasis in Shiau-Peng Chen's work is not based on "purity" in the sense of American art critic Clement Greenberg, who formed the orthodox view of abstract art where form matters, not the content. Nor are they based on spirituality, which is also often associated with Mondrian's paintings. Chen's abstract art is based on culture, politics and power relations related to the Taiwanese artist's life.

The six paintings belong to Chen's *China Series* (2008-2014) and show a geometric composition that gradually changes with each iteration. In the first painting a blue square takes up most of the picture plane. To the right a small blue rectangle is located on the white canvas, and towards the bottom of the big square on the edge of the painting lies a small purple square. A thick beige line frames the entire composition, and a horizontal line of the same width and color is drawn above the purple square along the full length of the canvas, dissecting it from the large blue square lying above it.

What we see in this sequence of images are simplified geometric compositions of a regional geopolitical map with beige lines representing borders. The large square can be seen to symbolize China, the small one Hong Kong and the rectangle Taiwan. With a gradual change in the color of the geometric shapes and the thick beige lines appearing or disappearing, the artist refers to historical points of rupture in the distribution of political power in the Greater China Region since 1949, and makes predictions for the future.

In the first painting the blue color represents the Kuomintang (KMT), also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party. The KMT are still on the Chinese mainland, it is the time before the end of the Civil War fought between the KMT and the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party. The war resulted in the Republic of China's loss of mainland China and the KMT's retreat to Taiwan in 1949. This development is shown in the next painting where the big square has turned red. The red color represents Communist China and now a bordering beige line can be found not only to the South, but also to the East separating Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, from the People's Republic of China.

The third painting is a snapshot of 1997 after the British had left Hong Kong. They are represented by a purple square in the first and second painting—Chen used a mixture of the colors from the Union Jack to symbolize the British rule in the former colony. The Hong Kong handover was the formal passing of authority over the territory of the then colony of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. Through this event Hong Kong became a special administrative region of China, with China agreeing to keep its existing structures of government and economy under a principle of "one country, two systems" for a period of 50 years. Therefore, Hong Kong has largely continued to maintain its economic and governing systems distinct from the ones of mainland China. Chen indicates this by the remaining line separating both red squares in this painting.

The fourth painting stands for the year 2000. Since the mid-1980s Taiwan had undergone democratic reforms and in 1986 the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) formed and became the first opposition party to counter the KMT. In 2000 the DPP won the election and the first

non-Kuomintang president came into power. This is shown by the transformation of the blue rectangle into a green one. The next composition shows the rectangle representing Taiwan in half green and half blue. This two-colored shape indicates the emergence of polarized politics with the formation of the Pan-Blue Coalition, led by the KMT, and the Pan-Green Coalition, led by the DPP.

As is apparent now in 2021 the Chinese Communist Party has been gaining increasing control over Hong Kong. This is something the artist foresaw in 2009 when she made this series of paintings: She starts to leave out the bordering line between China and Hong Kong in the fifth picture of the series. And in her final image all three geometric shapes have turned red while the grid that previously separated them from each other have disappeared. Chen's last picture appears to be a comment on the Chinese government's threat to Taiwanese democracy and independence. As Chen elaborates, her painting is a satirical nod to the concept of "one China," the aspiration being there, but maybe never to be fulfilled. [1]

China's imperial ambitions can be traced through the evolution of the paintings' visual language, and Chen hints at the ambivalences in the debate over Taiwan's future, specifically the question of reunification or independence. The artist has developed an abstract system as a method for reflection, while positioning herself within the scenario she outlines: Through the *China Series* the artist is searching for her own position, articulating herself through her art, as the title *I Don't Belong Here but There* indicates. It summarizes the underlying confusion about where Chen—as a Chinese Taiwanese—belongs, a confusion she thinks holds true for many Taiwanese people. She explains that even if Taiwanese speak Chinese, and have Chinese culture, many do not think they belong to China. "Many of us are confused about where 'there' is, or what 'there' is and how to make a definition about 'there.'" I think everybody has their own imagination about 'there.'" [2]

In a more direct way *The Color of Monochrome—What Color am I?* (2009) is related to the question of where to position oneself in regards to China from a Taiwanese perspective. The series consists of five portrait-sized paintings in red, green, blue, and white—the last painting in the row showing the blurred portrait of a person. Each color stands for one political party's viewpoint, and one can choose to stand in front of any of the monochromes mirroring one's political conviction, or choose the white image, which Chen provides for those who do not want to take a stance, or don't have an opinion. [3] Here a passage in Kuan-Hsing Chen's book *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* comes to mind, where the author states: "Since the late 1980s, a group of us in Taiwan had taken what we called a "popular democratic" stand in an attempt to move beyond the rigid binary structure that demanded a choice between unification with mainland China, and independence from it." [4]

Having the freedom of choice is also an aspect of the first work Chen created for the *China Series* titled *My China—To Be or Not to Be* (2008), extending geopolitics to the cultural imaginary. The artwork consists of four wooden boxes, which together comprise 280 rearrangeable wood blocks in four different colors (white, red, brown and yellow). Through a color-coded system Chen uses the small wooden cubes to create her own Chinese characters, which she has constructed according to the principles of a geometric and pixilated system that refers to the traditional Chinese characters used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

Chen spells out the words "China" and "Shanghai" with her characters, Shanghai being the first city she visited in China. Both words consist of two characters and the images in the four boxes represent one character each. It is Chen's intention that everyone can use the wood blocks

like a game of tangram or a puzzle and assemble their own images or words. The artist provides the audience with the possibility to imagine and to decide about China's future for themselves. [5] This pluralistic approach brings the praxis of democracy into play, in a performative way the wooden cubes evoke the idea of personal choice about one's identity: Every Taiwanese can choose if they are Chinese or not, as indicated in the title: "To be or not to be."

In the work *Xu Bing is My Good Friend* (2013) four prints illustrate and contextualize Chen's approach to creating her Chinese character sets. The difference between traditional Chinese characters and simplified characters used in China and Singapore are shown, and Chen presents an homage to the internationally renowned artist Xu Bing. She depicts two characters written by Xu's imaginary calligraphic system, which he developed for his famous artwork *A Book from the Sky* (1988), an unreadable text, using characters that resemble real Chinese ideograms inspired by letters of the English alphabet devoid of semantic context. Under the title "Contemporary Chinese Characters" Chen presents her own characters alongside those of Xu.

With *Malevich, Xu and Chen* (2014) Chen makes another reference to the Chinese characters she created: four prints on white paper show small black abstract geometric forms, which came out of the creation of the two characters that represent the word "China" in the aforementioned works. Chen states about these black shapes: "While they still retain some connection to the physical form of the characters, they also transcend the readability and recognition of the characters." [6]

The characters have become a secret code, but for Chen "the pairing of black color blocks against a background of white paper conveys the texture of universality that Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist work imparts." [7] With the series—and its title—Chen places herself among two of her favorite artists, Xu and Malevich. Chen's art shows an enduring affinity especially for the hard-edged forms of Malevich and Mondrian, her admiration for their work, and the influence their approach to painting had on her. At the same time a work like *I Don't Belong Here but There* can be read as parody or appropriation of Mondrian's famous grid paintings. Chen uses his renowned style to communicate her own reality and thereby positions herself next to this master and inside a global discourse of abstract art.

--

Notes

[1] Shiau-Peng Chen in an interview with the author on November 11, 2021.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 117.

[5] See Shiau-Peng Chen, *Shiau-Peng Chen Archives* (Taipei: Mind Set Art Center, 2014), 12.

[6] Chen, *Shiau-Peng Chen Archives*, 17.

[7] Ibid.