



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Identity and the Visual Arts Curriculum in Colonial and Postcolonial Hong Kong

Ma So Mui

Visual Arts Research, Volume 36, Number 1, Issue 70, Summer 2010, pp. 1-11  
(Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/var.2010.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/398067>

## Identity and the Visual Arts Curriculum in Colonial and Postcolonial Hong Kong

Ma So Mui  
Hong Kong Institute of Education

*This essay examines identity politics reflected in primary and secondary school art curricula before and after the reunification of Hong Kong with China in 1997. Strategies used by the previous British colonial government and the current Chinese government to control the local people and to maintain harmony among them are compared. As early as 1967, the British promoted the inclusion of Chinese art in the art curriculum, presumably to avoid conflict with China. After the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the local Hong Kong government emphasized the need to increase the Chinese content in the visual arts curriculum, though no noticeable effort was made to translate this value into action. From the colonial years to the present day, art from cultures other than the West and China has been limited, and local art has been consistently marginalized. This practice reveals that both colonial and the postcolonial governments in Hong Kong have used the same politics of control.*

As a result of the Opium Wars (1839–1842), China surrendered Hong Kong Island to the British in 1841. The New Territories on the mainland were later leased to the British in 1898 for 99 years (i.e., until 1997). In the 1980s, the British and the People's Republic of China (PRC) governments held discussions on the future of Hong Kong and agreed on the concept of *one country, two systems*. This meant that Hong Kong returned to China but as a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), keeping its existing social, political, and legal systems. The return of Hong Kong sovereignty to China called into question the British–Hong Kong identity that had for decades been adopted by the Hong

Kong people. At the same time, there was growing concern among them (95% of whom are ethnic Chinese) with the assumption of their identity as Chinese nationals. The prolonged separation from and lack of information about China and the harshness of the Cultural Revolution (together with a riot<sup>1</sup> in 1967 led by pro-China parties) produced a fear of Communist China among people in Hong Kong. Moreover, the pressures of globalization are particularly strong in Hong Kong because it is an international hub. As a result, the question of identity became a major issue in Hong Kong in the 1990s and continues to be so.

Governments, whether colonial or postcolonial, typically attempt to shape identity within their domain, and one way they do that is by influencing the curricula of the public schools. This effort can be seen in the development of the Hong Kong school curriculum both during and after the British colonial years. The British government sought to maintain a Western colonial identity, and the Hong Kong art curriculum was dominantly Western in orientation.

The change of sovereignty to China has given the HKSAR government a dual task: to prepare pupils as citizens of the PRC and to ensure stability in its governance (Morris, 1988). After 1997, the HKSAR government emphasized the *one country* concept over the idea of *two systems*. A mode of *self-censorship* was adopted by bureaucrats, academics, and publishers (Vickers & Jones, 2005, p. 182), in that they tended to avoid sensitive issues that might be found offensive by the mainland Chinese government. This is reflected in the choice of artworks presented in the postcolonial visual arts curriculum. There is no discussion of the Cultural Revolution in the curriculum and no examples of the propaganda art popular during that time. Neither is there any example of the many local artworks that concern the identity issues arising from the handover of Hong Kong. Vickers and Jones observe that the postcolonial government of Hong Kong has continued to “downplay the significance of any distinctive sense of local identity,” just as the British government had done (p. 172). Today, Hong Kong people have noticed this marginalization of their local identity, and the issue has been addressed by a number of scholars, Wong Siu-lun (1999) being one of them.

In this essay, I investigate how the visual arts curricula in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools were affected by these political changes, including the previous educational strategies used to secure British influence and to maintain harmony among the Chinese ethnic population, and the recent changes in the period since 1997. I focus on how the visual arts curriculum has been used as a tool to promote identity.

## Western Influences on the Development of Art Education in Hong Kong

Prior to the establishment of an official curriculum, British educational thought was introduced into Hong Kong by means of various educational and govern-

ment publications. For example, the *Creative Children's Picture-Making* (1949), by Wen Shiao Tung, claimed to have adopted the ideas of Cizek from the West (Ng, 2000). In the book *Suggestions for the Teaching of Art in Hong Kong Schools* (1955), Helen O'Connor emphasized individuality and children's enjoyment in art rather than the accurate representation of nature (Ng, 2000).

## The Art Curriculum

### *The Child-Centered Approach*

From the 1960s onward, the major means of control over art education in Hong Kong was through officially approved and formally published education guidelines for the school curriculum. During the British colonial period, the term *syllabus* was used in Hong Kong to refer to the curriculum for schools: for example, the *Syllabus for Primary Schools: Art and Craft* (Education Department, 1967) and the *Syllabuses for Secondary Schools: Syllabus for Art and Design (Forms 1–3)* (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982a). The art syllabi were revised three times: during the 1960s, 1980s and 1990s. This was followed by the Hong Kong government's curriculum reform of the 2000s.

The development of these syllabi closely followed the trends of British and U.S. art education theory and discourse. The early syllabi reflected the child-centered movement of Viktor Lowenfeld and Herbert Read. Taylor (1992) observes that, under the influence of the child-as-artist concept advocated by Roger Fry and Herbert Read in the 1960s, the role of a teacher was perceived as being that of a provider of materials, encouragement, and the relevant environment. Protection from adult values and influences was vital. In the syllabus at that time, examples of the required attitudes of teachers toward students were indicated: "To teach art by any rule of thumb methods is damaging and useless" (Education Department, 1960, p. 2) and "The children must be given freedom to express themselves" (p. 9).

### *Modernist Art Philosophies*

The idea of *modernity* involves an emphasis on rationality, freedom, and individual rights. *Modernism* is the cultural outcome of the social experience of living in the modern world. *Modernist art* involves the concepts of rationality; disinterestedness; the rejection of representation; an emphasis on freedom, imagination and formalism—a focus on elements such as shape and color; and originality (Meecham & Sheldon, 2005). From the 1960s to the 1970s, Hong Kong art syllabi were heavily modernist, exclusively preoccupied with technique-based studio practice and favoring formalism. In the 1980s, following the British trend, Art Appreciation and History of Art were added to the syllabi. These ele-

ments widened the scope of the art curriculum to include the study of artistic traditions from different regions. For example, “totem poles of the Indians of Northwest America,” “sculpture of Egypt,” and “masks of Africa” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981, p. 24). However, British influence remained dominant throughout the syllabi.

Western modernist aesthetic theories conflict with traditional Chinese artistic attitudes in a number of areas. Conflicts include the issue of copying and originality, artistic themes, and the ways in which they should be expressed. Traditional Chinese paintings usually feature representations of landscapes, human figures, plants, birds, insects, and fish. Copying is considered essential at the initial stage of learning because it is believed that the skills acquired in this process provide a firm foundation for creativity at a later stage. However, the art syllabi during this time indicated that “the copying of the teacher’s or Old Master ‘style’ could not be considered valid art work” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982b, p. 10) because of “the need to go beyond the old realistic copying of a model” (Education Department, 1967, p. 1), “[s]ince all art work from students must be original” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982a, p. 25). Copying was unacceptable because it goes against the modernist ideal of originality and individual expression: “Individuality and competency in visual expression through constant practice should be stressed rather than ‘likeness’ or proportion” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981, p. 7). In addition, the modernist ideal of progress and change could be seen in the art syllabi: “Everything should be experimental and free, so that emotions may have their full effect upon the result” (Education Department, 1960, p. 11). The ideal of “simplicity and purity in form” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981, p. 24) was even extended to the selection of Chinese sculptures for appreciation (in contrast, the Chinese aesthetic would focus on stylized forms and symbolic meanings).

The modernist emphasis on formalism was particularly strong in Hong Kong art syllabi, especially in the 1980s. It was believed that Basic Design was “the foundation of elementary visual ‘grammar’” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982a, p. 1), and exercises in visual elements and design principles, such as form, line, and proportion, were suggested. The aim was “to let children know the basic elements of visual communication and the principles governing their application, so that children can relate these concepts to their daily life and to the things they create” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981, p. 14). This emphasis on visual elements and principles of organization persisted into the 1990s and 2000s. All of the aforementioned is evidence that Western aesthetic values dominated over traditional Chinese aesthetic values during this era. Colonial influence was extended through the concepts of Western modern art.

### *Colonial Attitudes Toward Traditional Chinese Art*

The early Hong Kong art syllabi of the 1960s were drafted mainly by British expatriates such as Mr. Michael Griffith and Miss Helen Stewart (Ng, 2000). These British expatriates usually worked as inspectors of schools and lecturers at teacher-training colleges in Hong Kong. This might explain why the syllabi displayed a negative, sometimes mistaken, view of Chinese art. For example, in the 1960 syllabus the use of *perspective* by Chinese students was regarded as a *mistake* because the authors believed that “perspective is totally absent from all great Oriental paintings” (Education Department, 1960, p. 3). Readers should understand that perspective is actually used in Chinese painting, although not in the same way as in Western painting. In traditional Chinese landscape paintings, a haze is shown between mountains to indicate distance while more detail can be seen on mountains that are closer to the viewers. Moreover, the syllabi also often depreciated Chinese traditional art. For example, the 1960 syllabus suggested that color should not be used in Chinese paintings, only black ink. It claimed that the colors used in Chinese paintings were comparable only to “unsatisfactory European colors of cheap grade” (p. 21). There are two possible reasons for this statement: To maintain Chinese art in its ancient tradition—that is, in black ink—is a sign of the colonizer’s resistance to acknowledging the contemporary development of Chinese culture; or it might indicate a rejection of the multicolored trend in Chinese painting that began in the 1600s. The syllabus also rejected the *meditative method* of Chinese painting, which was considered as merely a type of *memory training* and *secondhand* experience, and it recommended following the Western way of “drawing from life” (p. 21). In fact, the use of the meditative method in Chinese painting is related to the Chinese philosophy of work: Before setting brush to paper, the painter must conceive a well-composed draft in his mind, drawing on his imagination and store of experience. The resulting piece of work depicts the mind picture and ideal of the artist rather than his observation of real life. The Chinese believe that there is a higher order of thinking that is above the material world.

Attempts to transform Chinese art into Western art can be seen in the syllabi from the 1980s. Students were encouraged to employ a Western style of learning the traditional Chinese drawing technique by means of “experiments with tools, materials” and the “drawing of modern scenes with traditional Chinese technique” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982b, p. 14). Traditional Chinese painting emphasizes control of the Chinese brush, Chinese ink, and mineral pigments on *xuan* paper. The Westernization of Chinese painting among Chinese artists had been taking place since the 1960s. Some of them used a synthesis of Western artistic concepts and techniques and traditional Chinese techniques: for example, by splattering and dripping Chinese ink on *xuan* paper to create modern, abstract

landscapes (e.g., the work of Liu Guosong); some introduced Western materials, such as acrylics, into Chinese ink paintings, while others adopted a modern sense of color and composition and painted Chinese paintings on Western themes (e.g., the work of Lin Fengmian). These influences from the West have been widely accepted in Hong Kong since the 1950s, and the syllabi reflected this development.

The modernist emphasis on styles and aesthetic choice continued in the syllabi of the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, there was a sudden increased emphasis on Chinese art, with numerous examples of an attempt to promote a Chinese national identity. For example, Chinese art was claimed to be “a great cultural heritage of mankind” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982b, p. 44); some artworks were produced by prestigious individuals: the artworks of Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 (960–1279) of the Song dynasty, for instance, were chosen as representative of the *huayuan* 畫院 style of painting; and China was recognized as one of the earliest civilizations: for example, “late Chou Silk Paintings excavated in Changsha” (10th century) (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982a, pp. 32–33). The Chinese artworks that were selected, however, had all been produced in the distant past. This is evidence of the emphasis of the syllabi on high art and its association with Chinese national pride. This celebration of both the values of the modern West and the glories of a past Chinese civilization in the art syllabi minimized the challenges to the legitimacy of either the Chinese or the British colonial authorities.

The aforementioned Chinese art contents were drafted by members of the local Chinese elites (mainly economic elites: people possessing a good educational background, proficient in English, and serving as members of government committees or holding other key positions), and the increase in Chinese art content seemed to foster “the sense of being at the periphery of both the Chinese and the Western worlds,” as Bernard Luk (1991, p. 650) argued. Vickers maintains that the British were able to manipulate and reform economic and political structures to make the Hong Kong people collaborate. In the late colonial period, British rule was preferred by many Hong Kong people to rule by Communist China “for fear of something worse” (Vickers, 2005, p. 27). Enhancing Chinese culture in Hong Kong was expected to benefit both Chinese culture and British colonialism because both were able to survive in the shadow of the Communist threat. This threat was associated with the propaganda mode of expression used by Communist China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when both Chinese culture and traditions came under attack; and the overwhelming influence of this movement on the youth in China had also alarmed the colonial government in Hong Kong. By the 1990s, Beijing had toned down its Communist orthodoxy and put forward the *one China* principle. It promoted homogeneity by celebrating past

Chinese achievements and a reintegration of Hong Kong culture with that of the motherland. In the postcolonial period, local elites were also able to adapt to the need to collaborate with the new sovereign Chinese power.

In contrast to this collaborative attitude, however, some resistance to foreign rule can be seen in Hong Kong art syllabi. The importance of knowing “why many painters of the Ch’ing [Qing] Dynasty adopted an escapist attitude” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1982b, p. 44) was emphasized: for example, the painting that referred particularly to the *Four Monks* was listed. All of the four monks—Hongren, Kuncan, Bada Shanren (originally called Zhu Da), and Shita—lived through the fall of the Ming dynasty (1644). They all remained deeply loyal to the fallen dynasty and became monks in order to escape the rule of the foreigner: that is, the Manchu (Yang et al., 1997). An artwork by Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626–1705) was also selected as one of the *Ten Chinese Paintings*, a teaching resource published by the Curriculum Development Council in 1993. Zhu Da is well known for the anticolonial sentiments expressed in his paintings. The artwork that appeared in the *Ten Chinese Paintings* featured a pair of birds with upturned eyes that express a sense of grievance (this expression symbolizes resistance to foreign rule). In this case, the Qing might be used allegorically to represent British colonialism in the Hong Kong context. For the Chinese, “to become a ‘remnant subject’ (*yimin* 遺民: that is, one who ‘refused to serve two dynasties,’ . . . [has been] widely recognized as honorable” (Li, 2006, p. 5).

### *Postcolonial Hong Kong*

After the handover, the new HKSAR government attempted to nurture patriotism by emphasizing the need to strengthen the Hong Kong people’s sense of a Chinese national identity. The need to inculcate in pupils a sense of Chinese identity and the desire for Hong Kong people to be loyal to the Chinese nation were discussed in the “First Policy Address” presented by the first Chief Executive of the HKSAR, Tung Chee Hwa, in 1997. His policy ideas of strengthening a sense of national identity were also promoted in the new curriculum by affirming the need to make students more “committed to improving the nation and society” (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, p. 23). Moreover, the problem of too strong an emphasis on Western arts was acknowledged in the curriculum in 2002. However, nothing related to traditional Chinese art or aesthetic theory was mentioned in the visual arts learning objectives (Curriculum Development Council, 2003). The reliance on Western art in the new visual arts curriculum persisted. The education system remains similar to the system established during the colonial years. Tung’s efforts to strengthen the sense of a Chinese national identity had no apparent effect on the art curriculum that was subsequently developed.



## The Issue of Local Identity and the Depreciation of Hong Kong Art

Local culture has been suppressed in colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong alike. Vickers (2005) observes that Hong Kong culture is often featured as “a subset of the greater Chinese whole” (p. 260) and thus local Hong Kong identity is belittled. He considers this reluctance to assert the distinctive culture of Hong Kong as “Beijing’s strategy for the post-handover re-absorption of the territory” (p. 273). In the development of the art curriculum, elements of local identity have been included in art syllabi, but not always in a positive way. In the 1960 art syllabus, local examples of design were actually presented in order to demonstrate “bad taste” (Education Department, 1960, p. 20). This was blamed on the purported limited supply of designers in Hong Kong. In the 1981 art syllabus, local art was identified as a means of encouraging children to appreciate art. However, artworks by local adult artists were not mentioned. Some changes occurred in the 1990s. The study of local culture was stated as one of the aims of secondary schools: “To enhance students’ awareness of the unique situation of Hong Kong—its cultural, social, economic and political characteristics” (Curriculum Development Council, 1997, p. 8). However, in contrast to the detailed descriptions of famous Chinese or Western artists, *local culture* was presented only in comparison with the work of “overseas artists” (Curriculum Development Council, 1995, p. 28) and in terms of the use of “local materials” or “local features” (Curriculum Development Council, 1997, p. 10). The subject content remained vague and nonspecific: for example, “*Good* [my emphasis] paintings of local artists” (Curriculum Development Council, 1995, p. 140). Local Hong Kong references have disappeared in the more contemporary *Visual Arts Curriculum Guide* (2003), and mainland Chinese culture has been strengthened: “Experience and analyze the arts and culture of the motherland and different parts of the world” (Curriculum Development Council, 2003, p. 16). These emphases and omissions further exemplify how the marginalization of the local Hong Kong identity and culture has persisted from the colonial to the current postcolonial period.

## Global Influence in the Visual Arts Curricula

Instead of shifting the focus from Western arts to Chinese arts as a means of decolonization, as advocated by the first chief executive in the early postcolonial years, in the late 1990s Hong Kong educational policy makers recommended a balance between Chinese and Western arts (Curriculum Development Council, 2002) and a move toward a global perspective. The new focus in the curriculum was on “help[ing] students meet the challenges of a knowledge-based, interdependent and changing society, as well as globalization,” taking into consideration the

“different perspectives of international development” (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, p. i). The stated aim—to meet the challenges of globalization—may also be an attempt to dissolve long-standing tensions between the Chinese and Hong Kong identities.

Two views of globalization are suggested by globalization theorists: as homogenization and as hybridization. The former conceptualizes globalization as dissolving local cultures, and as a result the cultures of the world become homogenized, mainly like the West. The latter view regards globalization as blending foreign and local cultures to create new forms (Schirato & Webb, 2003). In the case of Hong Kong, as early as the 1990s the need to learn about other cultures had been acknowledged in the art syllabi: “Distinguish local and overseas artists of different culture and media in one’s society” (Curriculum Development Council, 1995, p. 28). However, little commitment to this goal was found in the art syllabus itself. All the examples of artwork mentioned in the *Visual Arts Curriculum Guide* of 2003 were either Western or Chinese traditional masterpieces. Most aspects of the visual arts curriculum, such as the curriculum framework, the learning domains, and the learning targets, were adopted from Western educational models. Limited cultural traditions were mentioned. The commitment to either globalization or localization in the visual arts curriculum is questionable. Vickers (2005) observes that, in the name of the one-China orthodoxy, the official Beijing-inspired national cultural identity will be promoted over the local Hong Kong identity. The change in the locus of power from Britain to China has made no difference to the marginalization of the local identity.

Hong Kong government strategies have affected the art curriculum during the colonial years and the postcolonial period alike. The British colonial government controlled the curriculum by introducing Western systems and values. In the postcolonial years, there are growing demands to strengthen Chinese values: for example, “Cultivate national commitment” (Curriculum Development Council, 2003, p. 17). The *great* glorified pieces remain Chinese and Western; local Hong Kong identity is still downplayed. Curricular claims regarding globalization seem to be a means to hide this intention. The same politics of domination and subordination persist in Hong Kong: the British colonial politics (prior to 1997) and the current Chinese national ones (after 1997).

The development of the visual arts curriculum in Hong Kong demonstrates the different methods of political control employed by the colonial and postcolonial governments. The curricula drafted by British expatriates in the 1960s were dominated by colonial values, followed soon afterward by the influence of British and U.S. trends in visual arts education. British influence was concealed under the name “Western” or “modern” art. In the 1980s, Chinese art was introduced into the curriculum to counteract the potential threat of Communist China. In the

postcolonial curriculum, Western art concepts, aesthetic theories, and history still play a significant role. Local elites, who were responsible for drafting the curricula at different periods, have adapted to political changes by shifting their identities: from adherents to traditional Chinese ethnic values, to an emphasis on patriotism by strengthening the Chinese national identity; and from ignoring the local identity and other cultures to an increased but modest attention to local culture and globalization. The 1997 handover made the Hong Kong people aware of the identity crisis they face, something that previously had remained hidden from them. With this new understanding, it is now time for teachers and policy makers to think critically about the future of the visual arts curriculum: In light of the struggle among colonialism, nationalism, localization, and globalization, what do we expect our curriculum to consist of?

### Note

1. The Hong Kong riots in 1967 were led by pro-Communist parties in Hong Kong. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution then taking place in the PRC, they turned a labor dispute into demonstrations against British colonial rule, and mounted violent attacks on ordinary people and on those who voiced disagreement with them.

### References

- Curriculum Development Committee. (1981). *Syllabus for primary schools: Art and craft*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Committee. (1982a). *Syllabuses for secondary schools: Syllabus for art and design (Forms 1–3)*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Committee. (1982b). *Syllabuses for secondary schools: Syllabus for art and design (Forms 4–5)*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council (1993). *Ten Chinese Paintings*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council. (1995). *Syllabus for primary schools: Syllabus for art and craft (Primary 1–6)*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council. (1997). *Syllabuses for secondary schools: Syllabus for art and design (Forms 1–3)*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council. (2001). *Learning to learn: Life-long learning and whole-person development*. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Curriculum Development Council. (2002). *Arts education: Key learning area curriculum guide, Primary 1–Secondary 3*. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Curriculum Development Council. (2003). *Arts education key learning area: Visual arts curriculum guide, Primary 1–Secondary 3*. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Education Department. (1960). *Suggested syllabus for art in Anglo-Chinese secondary schools*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Education Department. (1967). *Syllabus for primary schools: Art and craft*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

- Li, W.Y. (2006). Introduction. In W. L. Idema, W.Y. Li, & E. Widmer (Eds.), *Trauma and transcendence in early Qing literature* (pp. 1–72). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Luk, H. K. (1991). Chinese culture in the Hong Kong curriculum: Heritage and colonialism. *Comparative Education Review*, 35(4), 650–669.
- Meecham, P., & Sheldon, J. (2005). *Modern art: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Morris, P. (1988). The effect on the school curriculum of Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 20(6), 509–520.
- Ng, H. S. (2000). *The development of Hong Kong art education in sixty years*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Education.
- Schirato, T., & Webb, J. (2003). *Understanding globalization*. London: Sage.
- Taylor, R. (1992). *The visual arts in education: Completing the circle*. London: Falmer Press.
- Vickers, E. (2005). *In search of an identity: The politics of history as a school subject in Hong Kong, 1960s–2005*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and the University of Hong Kong.
- Vickers, E., & Jones, A. (2005). *History education and national identity in East Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- Wong, S.-L. (1999). Changing Hong Kong identities. In G.-W. Wang & J. Wong (Eds.), *Hong Kong in China: The challenges of transition*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- Yang, X., Barnhart, R., Nie, C., Cahill, J., Lang, S., & Wu, H. (1997). *Three thousand years of Chinese painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.