

A  
Dialogue  
*Still*  
In  
The  
Making

2002/2018

*With the voices of Que Chan, Jade Chao,  
Michelle Loa Kum Cheung, Richard Chung,  
Carô Gervay, Ada Hao, Yuxin Jiang,  
Anthony Key, Parinot Kunakornwong, Anthony Lam,  
susan pui san lok, Kimvi Nguyen, Jia Qi Quek,  
Nicholas Tee, Mayling To, Korinna Veropoulou,  
July Yang, Howl Yuan, and Mengting Zhuo*

Bettina Fung  
&  
Erika Tan

A Dialogue *Still In The Making* (2002/2018) is a collaborative work between artists Bettina Fung and Erika Tan. It includes the voices of their peers from two points in time, separated by 16 years. The conversations focus on each artist's questions around the framing of art production and their own lived experiences. These questions have shaped and continue to inform the dialogues that take place in real time and through the process of editing, have resulted in this publication.

'A Dialogue In The Making' (2002) was part of a presentation 'Flights-Fights, Connections-Corruptions', written and presented by Erika Tan at the Arts Council England, British Council and London Arts Board's 'Connecting Flights: New Culture of Diaspora' conference, London 2002. The voices and words represent conversations and contributions by Anthony Key, Anthony Lam, susan pui san lok, and Mayling To.

Bettina Fung's texts were written in response to 'A Dialogue In The Making' (2002) and created out of conversations and discussions during her research residency at Asia-Art-Activism Research Network (Raven Row) in 2018. The voices and words represent conversations and contributions by Ada Hao, July Yang, Parinot Kunakomwong, Nicholas Tee, Jia Qi Quek, Korinna Veropoulou, Mengting Zhuo, Kimvi Nguyen, Carô Gervay, Jade Chao, Yuxin Jiang, Que Chan, Richard Chung, Michelle Loa Kum Cheung and Howl Yuan.

Bettina Fung is a Hong Kong born British-Chinese artist, based in London. She is currently taking part in Syllabus IV, an alternative peer led artist development programme.

Erika Tan is an artist, curator and lecturer, based in the UK and originally from Singapore. She teaches on the B.A Fine Art programme in Central Saint Martins and is currently the Stanley Picker Fellow in Fine Art.

**Voice:** Terminology such as 'diversity', 'difference', 'inclusion', 'mainstream', 'British Chinese artist', 'diverse artist', 'diaspora artist' seem contingent and sometimes, out of choice, can be productive, critical, tactful, playful, or even deployed...

**Voice:** Or avoided, with bold quotation marks and countless qualifiers...

**Voice:** Or at other times imposed, lightly or heavily, tolerated or shrugged off. Shouldn't this really be about how 'we' define ourselves and what strategies for naming we use?

**Voice:** I have always considered myself a 'Diasporic Chinese' with a family background that includes South China, Mauritius, South Africa, Britain and Canada. Earlier in my life I desperately wanted to belong somewhere. Now, finally I feel comfortable being 'British', or put it another way, I feel comfortable with myself and just happen to be in Britain.

**Voice:** My own position, is that of being second generation Chinese, born in Britain of emigrant parents. I feel more forced to consider, a 'British-Chinese' identity.

**Voice:** But what does this mean, 'British-Chinese'? Is it a 'naturally constituted unity'? An 'identity' that is, all-inclusive and without internal differentiation?

**Voice:** Very often we are confronted by the simple question "Where are you from?" and if the initial answer was not satisfactory, in other words, not an Asian country, this usually leads to "but where are you really from?" How much time should I spend telling my life story to this stranger?

**Voice:** Or why do I have to explain to the person who has just shouted "ni hao" at me why I don't speak Mandarin?

**Voice:** My identity crisis of not being an 'authentic' Chinese, as I speak Mandarin with a Cantonese accent, was diminished when I got to the UK as the difference didn't matter to them.

**Voice:** For a long time, I found it weird to say I am British, even though I am, legally. Growing up, it felt like Chinese identity was externally imposed on me and I rejected my Chineseness, going to Chinese school and hating it, but now these days I am trying to learn it on my phone. I don't know where to position myself. When someone says I am not Chinese I would feel upset but I don't feel like I know enough about China and the culture, so I don't feel like I could represent or speak about it.

**Voice:** Every time there is a question involving Asia in a pub quiz, my friend who is English would turn to me. I am a person from Asia. I am not an expert in Asia.

**Voice:** When we talk about 'British Chinese' are we talking about Chinese who are currently living in Britain, Chinese who are born in Britain, or those who are of mixed British and Chinese heritage? Do Chinese who experienced living in British colonies count?

**Voice:** I think one has to consider the multiple implications of the term – does it refer to Artists of Chinese descent practising in Britain? Or the hybridity of two cultures? As there is no publicly recognised ‘British Chinese culture’ many of these arguments are in a state of flux. Despite the fact that Chinese takeaways and restaurants have become part of British culture, there is a problem of ‘non-existence’...

**Voice:** Returning to the issues of naming – perhaps another way of approaching the issue of naming is by a multiplicity of names, by inconsistency and excess, or just purely annoying or amusing those who might seek to pin us down... For example “Susan Pei San Lok: Susan P-E-I, S-A-N (two words, no hyphen) Lok: L-O-K... Or Lok6 Pui3 Saan1... Or Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3 Saan1... Or Susan, Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or Susan Lok... Or Loc... Or Locke... Or Susie / Sue, or Su-without-an-e... Or Susan Pui San Lok: Susan P-U-I, S-A-N (two words, no hyphen) Lok... Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3-hyphen-Saan1... Or Susan Pui San (one word, no hyphen) Lok... Or (no caps) susan pui san lok...”<sup>1</sup>

**Voice:** “Young (Black) British (- Anglo – Asian-) Chinese (- Yellow – Red – White – and – Blue – Wo/Man) Artist Writer hybrid”.

**Voice:** A sort of verbal terrorism that defies closure and fixity.

**Voice:** In that case, is this the same for biographies? Should mine read as: “Britishborn-south-eastern-bred-northern-trained-London-based-HongKong-Chinese-Englishbroken-Cantonese”.

**Voice:** But where do biographies lie? What role do they play in shaping the interpretation of the work, or in positioning us?

**Voice:** Biographies can provide a useful context in which the audience can engage with but also can hinder the work in negative ways in terms of interpretation or ammunition for critics. For example, I make work that strives to maintain an openness to its interpretations, but this openness often creates a tension that’s difficult to deal with.

**Voice:** And what constitutes as Chinese? Someone who was born in China? Someone with Chinese citizenship? Someone whose ancestry is from China? What happens when the linguistic and cultural heritage is lost?

**Voice:** My solution to prevent losing contact with my heritage is to cook a lot of Asian food. Food has always been a huge part of how I viewed my heritage since I was a kid.

**Voice:** One of my first experiences in the UK was that a well-meaning English person insisted on calling me by my Chinese name, even after I introduced myself with my western name. That was kind of them but that sparked a lot of questions within me on what my real name is and who defines it? Is my western name less real? Even though I kept referring to myself in my western name, which was what I preferred - as they were not able to pronounce my Chinese name correctly, they still kept calling me by my Chinese name.

**Voice:** In biographies and art statements, I tend to put my English name and my Chinese name written in Chinese together, side by side.

**Voice:** Don’t you think the audience tend to automatically dig into your biography when reading your work? Asian artists are pigeonholed and there is a pressure to perform otherness. You cannot avoid it. When the audience sees an artist who looks

**Voice:** *Biography can also create closure in the reading of a work.*

**Voice:** *So how can we subvert essentialised ethnic positions endowed on us by the mainstream population.*

**Voice:** *Or media.*

**Voice:** *Or art world.*

**Voice:** *Undermining stereotypes, using irony, satire, humour, or ambiguity isn't without its drawbacks. The intended point of satire can be misunderstood by the audience, because the point is subtle, ambiguous or threatening. Besides misunderstanding the message of satire, the audience may mistake satire for seriousness and vice versa.*

**Voice:** *In a way I feel caught between the dynamic of a so-called 'essentialist' viewpoint and a position of 'ambivalence.' On the one hand, I could play on the essentialist mimicry of the stereotype and subvert it. Or from a position of ambivalence, I could try and make a more sophisticated and open-ended language of stereotype. Yet, this creates a confusion as to what my position really is. And how I am placing my audience. It seems that my work does not slot into something easily and it is difficult to pin down...*

**Voice:** *Or even if the art press understands where you're coming from, the tabloids always act predictably which is to fall back onto stereotypes, poke fun at the 'Chinese takeaway Art', and limit any movement from the position they assign to you.*

*Asian, there will be an automatic expectation on what their work is about. They will interpret an Asian artist's work with their own associations with the artist's supposed homeland.*

**Voice:** *Art school tutors also have a tendency of reading Asian-ness into works by Asian students when the work is not about Asia at all.*

**Voice:** *A venue once changed the description of my work without my consent. They wanted to put an emphasis on my Chinese heritage even when it was not relevant to the work. They labelled my work as a 'Sino-British' immersive theatre piece. I felt that they put me in the programme without checking what the work was really about and it made me feel that I was included in order for them to tick a box for equality monitoring.*

**Voice:** *I think you could face the audience's expectations and stereotypes head on. I have a project where we created performances out of two questions: Should we consume our identity, and how do we consume our identity? If we are going to consume our identity, we will push it to the extreme.*

**Voice:** *I have also done performances in the past that involved taking space as an 'othered' body. I would climb up on white men and pull needles out of my head. I would either pull them out face to face whilst clinging onto them or get them to pull them out. I guess there is some sort of consent but not in the normal way in consented performances and with white men I don't feel they get a say whether or not they get to give consent. I am very much into getting into their space and invading their space.<sup>ii</sup>*

**Voice:** *But what about location or placement?*

**Voice:** *I have concentrated on a British context, it is where I find myself. I decided to construct an art practice which included – Pop Art, Minimalism, Tao Buddhism and Chinese Food. Having identified my ingredients, I needed a subject area to focus it on and that became the Chinese Stereotype. For me the Chinese takeaway is still the place, the interface, where British and Chinese meet on a daily basis, so that's where I locate my work.*

**Voice:** *For myself working in different contexts presents new dilemmas and challenges. I don't want to make work for a solely British context, which is not what I do intentionally, but I carry the awareness of who my likely audience is going to be... work necessarily changes with site, location, new parameters...*

**Voice:** *But location is also about 'choice' or lack of it... I've found that when there are limited opportunities in the exposure of your work, especially within the British art world, 'choice' can be very limited and frustrating.*

**Voice:** *I still get offered slots in the exhibition programme in February to coincide with Chinese New Year or in the autumn for Autumn Moon festival – and offers of educational workshops; gallery talks for Chinese, Korean or basically 'oriental' artist shows. It might be the case that I deal with issues of cultural identity in my work but I like to think it doesn't mean that I can't show in other exhibitions with a different curatorial premise.*

**Voice:** *But it's often down to what you are offered. I have been in other shows where my being of Chinese descent isn't an issue, where the curatorial framework is about humour or about the medium of film and video.*

**Voice:** *I often ask myself if I can afford to be choosy given the desire for visibility...*

**Voice:** *And equally, perhaps we should ask if we can afford, not to be?*

**Voice:** *Carrying on with audience expectations and stereotypes, have you shown work in Asia or places where the audience are predominantly Asian? And if so, how was the work read?*

**Voice:** *No. Actually, I have rarely performed in a space where an Asian audience are the majority.*

**Voice:** *Actually, I have rarely shown in a show where Asian artists are the majority. There tends to be concerns of being ghettoised.*

**Voice:** *Exploring the subject of identity is interesting, but it shouldn't be limited to solely Chinese identity. I am Chinese, but this is not all I am about.*

**Voice:** *Yeah, I distance myself from the idea that my practice represents Chineseness. There is so much more to me than me being Chinese. With my current project, I am trying to deconstruct and dissolve this idea of collective identity, in my case Chineseness, by looking at the mundane everyday details of things that wouldn't add up to it.*

**Voice:** *On the other hand, can a non-Chinese adopt Chinese culture? Can Chinese brush be used in calligraphy and ink work that is not related to or doesn't attempt to connect to Chinese art? When does cultural exchange become cultural appropriation?*

**Voice:** *Why is it, that if a non-white artist makes work about cultural identity, it's not very fashionable in the British art world and is received with mixed and opposing reviews. But, if a white artist like Mark Wallinger for example, makes work about identity it's deep and meaningful...*

**Voice:** *What if we move on from 'choice' to the policies that might create more choice.*

**Voice:** *Or might inhibit it further.*

**Voice:** *Policies effect possibilities and limitations; practices might bounce off or become penned in by existing frameworks and work consequently celebrated or maligned.*

**Voice:** *In some cases, such signposts or demarcations might illuminate the work for some, but as an artist, it's probably necessary to think ahead and beyond them.*

**Voice:** *On the whole isn't there something to celebrate in a shift of focus from a position of 'minority Chinese in Britain' to 'diasporic Chinese globally'?*

**Voice:** *Well, the first indicates the increased visibility of an 'imaginary community' within a specific ethnic-national context, while the second alludes to a vague historical recognition of wider dispersals of Chinese the world over; such visibility and awareness are important, though easily de-historicised and romanticised.*

**Voice:** *Both imply a problematic notion of community and culture (once whole, now fragmented), raising questions of ethnicity and nationality; the shift adds further complexities to the ways in which I might position myself and my work.*

**Voice:** *There needs to be criticality alongside celebration; the impulse to accommodate 'diversity' will not necessarily result in a woolly cultural 'harmony'; tensions and conflicts need to be articulated and addressed.*

**Voice:** *Can a non-Asian person make, quote unquote, Asian art?*

**Voice:** *Lately, I've been encountering more conversations around this cosmopolitan drive towards mobility, the desire of a nomadic lifestyle with the freedom of not being from any one place versus the desire for naturalisation, to find an anchor, which provides a sense of belonging.*

**Voice:** *I actually really enjoy the feelings of displacement. It is really liberating to be moving from place to place.*

**Voice:** *The term nomadic implies a certain degree of autonomy, a sense of being able to move around as you wish, where as I feel I am at the mercy of the immigration officials; it is not so nomadic but more like being pushed around from one place to*

**Voice:** *And let's not forget that 'diversity' itself is unequal, differences unstable, identities perpetually blurred...*

**Voice:** *The thin line between being placed in a position where one can express oneself only so long as you speak of your 'otherness'.*

**Voice:** *Or on the other hand, that although cultural diversity is now more visible than ever within the contemporary international art world, the unspoken rule is that you would look dumb if you made a big deal out of it.*

**Voice:** *But what about 'responsibility'?*

**Voice:** *You mean 'the burden of representation'...*

**Erika Tan**  
(2002)

*another because you just have to move. Nomadic is for people who have access to mobility, being able to travel, to move because they have dual citizenship or money that allows you to be a nomad.*

**Voice:** *When the word cosmopolitan is mentioned, diversity comes into mind. I heard a story once, where someone was filling in a survey and in the bit about ethnicity, 'diverse' was one of the options and was suggested to be selected - to which they asked "what am I diverse from?". Whenever we have adjectives to describe ourselves, it is always with reference to white people. Yellower than what? East of where? Whose centre and periphery are we focusing on?*

**Voice:** *Sometimes it feels like you live in a system that isn't designed for you. Growing up, there was a lack of Chinese representation and this affected me unconsciously in terms of how I interacted with people and felt about myself when I was younger.*

**Voice:** *I don't know how many years we'll need to put up with this...*

**Bettina Fung**  
(2018)

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<sup>1</sup> susan pui san lok, 'Notes To Let You Down', 1996. Excerpt from artist statement for solo exhibition, Un- (Retrospectre, Part VI), Chinese Art Centre, Manchester. Subsequently a recurring performance/video, Cards, 1996-2018, 40 seconds.

<sup>1</sup> Performance by Nicholas Tee, performed at 'All These Things' at Ed Fringe 2018, Edinburgh, UK and Gestures 01 at The Old Baths, London,