

Navigating Contexts: A Periodization Methodology for Understanding Hong Kong

Wong Chun Fan, Lingnan University, Hong Kong

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This article examines the periodization methodology of Hong Kong art, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding its evolution through distinct historical phases. By analyzing the unique socio-political context of Hong Kong, especially the influences of colonialism, globalization, and cultural hybridity, the study proposes a nuanced periodization that reflects both local and global artistic developments. The article proposes new genealogical approach by critiquing existing methodologies that often overlook the complexities of local contexts and proposes a multi-faceted approach that incorporates stylistic, thematic, and cultural dimensions. By integrating the contributions of significant artists and movements within each identified period, the study highlights how Hong Kong art serves as a reflection of its dynamic socio-cultural landscape. Furthermore, it traces the genealogical connections between artists and movements across these periods, revealing how earlier practices and ideas have been re-appropriated, challenged, or transformed by subsequent generations. It also emphasizes the role of institutional frameworks, such as art fairs and galleries, in shaping public perception and promoting artistic discourse. Ultimately, this periodization methodology aims to provide a more inclusive and representative understanding of Hong Kong art history, fostering deeper engagement with the region's artistic practices. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on art history and periodization, offering insights that are applicable to other cultural contexts facing similar complexities, particularly in understanding how artistic lineages evolve and adapt in response to changing socio-political landscapes.

Keywords: Hong Kong art, genealogy, arts theory, art history

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Hong Kong's art history is a dynamic and multifaceted reflection of its unique socio-political trajectory, shaped by colonialism, globalization, and a vibrant interplay of cultural influences. Existing approaches to periodizing Hong Kong art often struggle to capture the nuances of this complex landscape. This article proposes a refined periodization methodology that not only accounts for stylistic, thematic, and cultural shifts but also incorporates a genealogical perspective, tracing the evolution and transformation of key artistic lineages across distinct historical phases. By examining how artists and movements have built upon, challenged, and reinterpreted earlier traditions, this study offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Hong Kong's rich artistic heritage. The following abstract outlines the key periods identified, the methodological approach employed, and the significance of this genealogical lens for illuminating the dynamic relationship between Hong Kong art and its ever-evolving context.

Literature Review

The academic study of Hong Kong art history is a relatively recent but rapidly growing field, reflecting the increasing recognition of the region's unique cultural identity and its significant contributions to global art discourses. While early scholarship often focused on individual artists or specific movements, more recent work has sought to develop comprehensive frameworks for understanding the evolution of Hong Kong art within its complex socio-political context. Simultaneously, the genealogical approach, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and others, has gained traction in art history as a means of tracing the historical development of artistic ideas, practices, and institutions. This literature review examines the key trends and debates in Hong Kong art history scholarship and explores the application of genealogical methodologies in the broader field of art history.

Hong Kong Art History: Establishing a Field of Study

Early publications on Hong Kong art tended to be exhibition catalogues or surveys that provided descriptive overviews of artistic production in the region. These works often highlighted the influence of Western art on Hong Kong artists, reflecting the colonial context and the dominance of Western art historical narratives. However, in recent decades, scholars have increasingly sought to challenge these Eurocentric perspectives and to develop more nuanced understandings of Hong Kong art that acknowledge its unique hybridity and its engagement with both local and global concerns.

Several key themes have emerged in the academic development of Hong Kong art history (Brancaccio, 2023):

- **Colonial and Postcolonial Identity:** A significant body of scholarship examines the impact of British colonialism on Hong Kong art, exploring how artists have negotiated issues of identity, cultural hybridity, and resistance. This work often analyzes the ways in which Hong Kong artists have adapted and subverted Western artistic conventions to express their own cultural experiences. (Said, 1979)
- **The Search for a “Hong Kong Identity”:** Following the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, there has been a growing interest in defining a distinct “Hong Kong identity” in art. This research explores how artists have responded to the changing political landscape and the increasing influence of mainland China, often using art as a means of asserting cultural autonomy. (Trail, 2023)

- **Globalization and Transnationalism:** Hong Kong art has always been shaped by its position as a global hub, and recent scholarship has focused on the transnational flows of ideas, people, and capital that have influenced artistic production in the region. This work examines how Hong Kong artists engage with global art discourses and how their work circulates in international art markets.
- **Institutional Frameworks:** The role of museums, galleries, art fairs, and other institutions in shaping the development of Hong Kong art has also been a subject of scholarly inquiry. This research explores how these institutions have promoted certain artistic styles and narratives, and how they have contributed to the construction of a “Hong Kong art world.”

Genealogical Approaches in Art History: Tracing Lineages and Power

The genealogical approach, inspired by the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, offers a powerful tool for analyzing the historical development of art. Unlike traditional art historical methods that focus on linear narratives of progress or influence, genealogy emphasizes the discontinuities, ruptures, and power relations that shape artistic production.

Key characteristics of the genealogical approach (Foucault, 1977) in art history include:

- **Deconstructing Origins:** Genealogy challenges the notion of fixed origins or essential identities, instead focusing on the multiple and contingent factors that contribute to the formation of artistic concepts and practices.
- **Tracing Power Relations:** Genealogy examines how power operates within the art world, shaping artistic taste, canon formation, and the distribution of resources.
- **Emphasizing Discourse:** Genealogy analyzes the discourses that surround art, including critical writing, curatorial practices, and institutional narratives, to understand how meaning is constructed and contested.
- **Focusing on the Body:** Some genealogical approaches also examine the relationship between art and the body, exploring how artistic practices are shaped by social norms, gender roles, and medical knowledge.

While the genealogical approach has been widely applied in Western art history, its application to non-Western contexts, such as Hong Kong, requires careful consideration of the specific historical and cultural factors at play. Scholars must be mindful of the potential for imposing Western theoretical frameworks onto non-Western art and of the need to develop methodologies that are sensitive to local contexts.

Methodology

This research employs a genealogical approach, drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault's methodology for tracing the historical development of discourses and power relations, to investigate the evolution of Hong Kong art history. Moving beyond conventional art historical methods centered on linear narratives and stylistic progressions, this approach underscores the discontinuities, ruptures, and power dynamics that have shaped artistic production and its interpretation within Hong Kong.

Key Principles

To refine this genealogical analysis, principles of genealogical periodization are integrated, focusing on the transmission of artistic ideas and practices.

Focus on Influence

Identify key “ancestors” or influential figures in Hong Kong art history. These are artists whose work, ideas, or teaching had a demonstrable impact on subsequent generations.

This principle stems from traditional art historical methods of tracing influence and lineage, but it's adapted here to emphasize the impact on artistic practice rather than just stylistic resemblance. It acknowledges that influence can be direct (through mentorship) or indirect (through inspiration).

Mentorship & Pedagogy

Examine formal and informal teaching relationships within the Hong Kong art world. Identify who taught whom, and what ideas and techniques were transmitted.

This principle comes from the understanding that art is often learned and transmitted through direct interaction and instruction. Examining pedagogical relationships reveals the pathways through which artistic knowledge and values are passed down.

Shared Ideas & Movements

Group artists who participated in common artistic movements or explored similar themes. Analyze the manifestos, exhibitions, and critical reception of these movements (Baxandall, 1985).

This principle is rooted in the traditional art historical focus on movements and styles, but it's used here to identify shared intellectual and artistic concerns that bind artists together, rather than just superficial stylistic similarities.

Breaking With Lineage

Recognize moments when artists intentionally rejected or subverted established traditions. Analyze their motivations and the strategies they used to break with the past.

This principle is derived from post-structuralist thought, which emphasizes the importance of rupture and discontinuity in historical processes. It acknowledges that artistic innovation often involves a conscious rejection of established norms.

Multiple Lineages

Acknowledge that artists can belong to multiple, overlapping lineages. An artist might be influenced by one teacher in terms of technique, and by another in terms of conceptual approach (Harris et al., 1993).

This principle reflects the complexity of artistic influence and the fact that artists are rarely influenced by a single source. It acknowledges the hybridity and fluidity of artistic identities.

Result and Discussion

To understand the intricate web of relationships that form the Hong Kong art scene, a preliminary study of its artist networks, connections, and traditions is essential. This investigation reveals that the lineage of artistic influence extends far beyond stylistic similarities. Even in cases of direct mentorship, an artist's mode of expression, chosen art form, or thematic focus can diverge significantly from their mentor's. A more profound and enduring influence is often found in the transmission of a fundamental attitude towards the nature and purpose of art itself. This underlying artistic disposition is shaped more by observation and deep engagement than by direct instruction.

To better illustrate and analyze these nuanced genealogical relationships, a focus-perspective matrix is proposed. This analytical tool is inspired by the philosophical concepts of Martin Heidegger, particularly his inquiries into the essence of art.

Traditional art history often traces lineage through stylistic similarities or shared subject matter. However, this approach can be limiting. For instance, an artist and their mentor might have vastly different visual styles, yet share a fundamental approach to art-making that connects their work on a deeper level. This is where the proposed matrix offers a new lens for analysis. It shifts the focus from superficial resemblances to the artist's core intentionality.

Genealogy Matrix

Table 1

Genealogy Matrix of Hong Kong Art

Focus/Perspective	Disclosure	Production
World	World-Disclosure Unconcealment of Social/Cultural Truth	World-Production Creation of New Cultural Forms
Earth	Earth-Disclosure Unconcealment of Material Truth	Earth-Production Creation of New Material Forms

Source: Heidegger (1993)

The proposed matrix is structured around two axes, drawing inspiration from key Heideggerian concepts to plot an artist's orientation:

The Focus Axis: The “What” of the Artwork

This axis represents the primary subject of the artist's creative inquiry. It explores what the artist is fundamentally concerned with in their work. At one end of this spectrum is a focus on the “World,” which, in a Heideggerian sense, refers to the cultural and historical context that gives an artwork its meaning. An artist with this focus creates work that is deeply embedded in and reflective of a particular cultural moment, community, or set of shared understandings. At the other end is a focus on the “Earth,” representing the raw, self-concealing materiality of

the artwork itself—the medium and its intrinsic properties. An artist with this focus is more concerned with the formal qualities of their work, such as color, texture, and form.

The Perspective Axis: The “How” of the Artwork

This axis describes the artist's mode of engagement with their subject matter. One perspective is that of “Disclosure” or “Unconcealment” (Aletheia), where the aim of the artwork is to reveal a truth about the world or the medium. This aligns with Heidegger's belief that art is a way in which truth comes to be. The opposing perspective is one of “Production” or “Creation,” where the emphasis is on the act of making and the generation of new forms and ideas, without necessarily being tied to the revelation of a pre-existing truth.

Mapping the Artistic Genealogy of Hong Kong

By situating artists within this four-quadrant matrix, it becomes possible to visualize their genealogical connections in a new light.

World-Disclosure

This quadrant is for art that seeks to reveal a truth (Aletheia) about our shared cultural, social, or political reality (the “World”). These artists often act as social commentators, activists, or critical observers, using their work to uncover hidden structures, challenge dominant narratives, or bring suppressed issues to light.

Illustrative example Artist can be Kacey Wong (黃國才). Kacey Wong is arguably one of Hong Kong's most recognizable artists in this quadrant. His practice, which spans performance, sculpture, and installation, is almost entirely dedicated to responding to Hong Kong's political and social climate. His work is a direct act of “disclosure.”

For example in his work *Paddling Home* (2009), Wong paddled a miniature, 4x4-foot floating replica of a Hong Kong apartment block in Victoria Harbour. This performance didn't just produce an object; it sought to reveal the absurdity and crushing reality of the city's housing crisis, making the invisible psychological weight of unaffordable housing visible and tangible.

Wong's primary goal is not aesthetic production for its own sake, but the use of art as a vehicle to lay bare the truths of Hong Kong's contemporary “World.”

Earth-Disclosure

Artists in this quadrant are deeply engaged with their medium (the “Earth”). Their work aims to reveal the intrinsic properties, potential, or essential nature of their chosen materials. The process is often one of experimentation and exploration, pushing the boundaries of a medium to let its own “truth” emerge.

Illustrative example Artist can be Lui Shou-kwan (呂壽琨). As the master and guiding figure of the New Ink Movement in the 1960s and 70s, Lui Shou-kwan's work is a quintessential example of Earth-Disclosure. He was not content with merely reproducing traditional ink painting styles. His mission was to revitalize the medium of ink (“Earth”) itself.

Lui sought to find a modern, Hong Kong-based spiritualism within the ancient medium. His abstract and semi-abstract works were not just pictures; they were meditations on the properties of ink, water, and paper. He let the ink bleed, splash, and flow, believing this process could disclose a deeper, universal truth or energy (qi 氣) inherent in the material.

He taught his students to look for the “spirit” within the medium, rather than just mastering technical production. This focus on unconcealing the essence of ink had a profound impact on generations of Hong Kong ink artists.

World-Production

This quadrant describes artists who engage with the cultural context (the “World”) but whose primary mode is one of creation and construction (“Production”). They build new narratives, create stylized worlds, or produce new aesthetic forms that comment on or reimagine their environment. They are less about revealing a pre-existing truth and more about producing a unique vision of the world.

Illustrative example Artist can be Wilson Shieh (石家豪) is known for his meticulous, figurative paintings in the traditional Chinese gongbi (fine-brush) style, which he uses to depict contemporary Hong Kong life with a distinctive, often surreal or satirical, twist.

Shieh produces a highly constructed vision of Hong Kong. His figures—swimmers, musicians, architects—are rendered in anachronistic settings or classical styles. This juxtaposition doesn't aim to “disclose” a hidden political truth. Instead, it creates a new, fictionalized world that reflects on themes of architecture, music, post-colonial identity, and masculinity in a highly aestheticized way.

His series on Hong Kong architecture reimagines buildings as figures in a choir or characters in a play. This is a clear act of production—creating a new metaphorical language to understand the urban environment, rather than documenting or revealing it factually.

Earth-Production

Artists here are focused on their materials (“Earth”) and the act of making (“Production”). The emphasis is on craftsmanship, technical skill, and the creation of new forms and aesthetic objects. The artwork's primary reason for being is its own formal existence, celebrating the beauty and potential of the medium through skilled production.

Illustrative example Artist can be Fiona Wong Lai-ching (黃麗貞). Fiona Wong is one of Hong Kong's most celebrated ceramic artists. Her work is deeply rooted in the material of clay (“Earth”) and the process of its transformation through skilled craftsmanship (“Production”). Wong's sculptures are often inspired by natural forms like scholar's rocks, fruits, or parts of the human body, but they are abstracted into elegant, refined objects. Her focus is on the texture, color, and form that can be produced from clay. She is a master of glazes and firing techniques, using this knowledge to create objects of immense aesthetic beauty.

Unlike an artist in the Earth-Disclosure quadrant who might let the material's randomness take over, Wong's work is characterized by immense control and precision. The final object is a testament to the artist's ability to produce a specific, intended form from the raw material.

The artwork is not a window to a hidden truth; it is the thing itself—a beautifully made object.

This framework allows for a more dynamic understanding of influence and tradition. Mentorship can be seen as the transmission of a particular “attitude” or starting point within this matrix, from which the mentee then forges their own artistic path. This approach acknowledges that artistic evolution is not a linear progression but a complex dialogue between inherited traditions and individual innovation. By mapping these relationships, we can gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of the forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, the vibrant and multifaceted art of Hong Kong. This method of visualizing artist networks can help to uncover non-obvious connections and challenge dominant narratives in art history.

At the conclusion of the illustrative example, it is important to highlight a necessary footnote that should not be overlooked. The primary aim of the matrix is not to categorize artists into rigid groups; rather, it seeks to summarize the similarities between their previous works and those of the artists within our genealogical network. It is essential to recognize that even a single artist can exhibit varying approaches over time (Shiff, 2006). Therefore, the proposal should be understood as a spectrum rather than a definitive classification.

Moreover, every artist has the potential to influence others across different groups, underscoring the interconnectedness of artistic expression (Crow, 1996). The matrix serves merely as an interim classification proposal and should not be viewed as the sole method for constructing a genealogy of Hong Kong art. There are numerous ways to interpret and represent the relationships among artists, and this matrix is one of many tools that can facilitate a deeper understanding of the rich and diverse landscape of artistic practices in Hong Kong.

Recommendations for Further Research

The proposed Heideggerian-inspired focus-perspective matrix offers a novel lens for analyzing the genealogical and attitudinal underpinnings of Hong Kong's art history. However, to develop this conceptual tool into a robust analytical framework, and to unlock its full potential for generating significant art-historical insights, two primary avenues of further research are recommended.

Develop a Detailed Rubric

A specific set of criteria and guiding questions should be developed for each quadrant. This rubric would serve as a practical tool for researchers to classify an artist's work.

This can be achieved by creating a detailed rubric with specific guiding questions to help classify an artist's primary orientation, which should then be validated through pilot studies to ensure inter-rater reliability. This process would also allow the framework to be enhanced to capture nuance, such as by plotting an artist's career as a trajectory across different quadrants over time or by acknowledging hybrid classifications.

Macro-Level Application for Periodization Analysis

Once the framework is refined, it can be applied at scale to map the entire Hong Kong art scene. This would move beyond individual analysis to reveal large-scale patterns, trends, and structural shifts over time.

This would involve systematically grouping a significant number of artists into a comprehensive database, enabling a quantitative and qualitative study of how the structure of the artistic community has shifted. By correlating the concentration of artists in different quadrants with key moments in Hong Kong's socio-cultural development—such as the rise of the New Ink Movement, the period surrounding the 1997 Handover, or the political upheavals of recent years—researchers could empirically trace the art world's response to its changing environment and map the interaction and evolution of artistic trends. Such an analysis would also illuminate the dynamics of influence, revealing how artistic attitudes are transmitted through mentorship and offering a more profound understanding of the genealogical networks that underpin the Hong Kong art scene.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research proposes a robust methodology for analyzing Hong Kong art history through a genealogical lens, enhanced by principles of genealogical periodization. By moving beyond traditional art historical approaches, this framework emphasizes the complex interplay of discourses, power relations, and historical contingencies that have shaped artistic production in the region. The integration of genealogical periodization principles—focusing on influence, mentorship, shared ideas, breaks with lineage, and multiple lineages—provides a more nuanced and insightful understanding of the transmission of artistic ideas and practices. This approach not only allows for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of artistic influence but also facilitates a more meaningful periodization of Hong Kong art history based on shifts in genealogical networks rather than mere chronological markers. Ultimately, this methodology offers a powerful tool for deconstructing dominant narratives, revealing hidden power structures, and illuminating the multifaceted nature of artistic expression within Hong Kong's unique social and political context, contributing to a richer and more critical understanding of its art historical development.

References

- Baxandall, M. (1985). *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. Yale University Press.
- Brancaccio, L. (2023). *Visualizing Local Identity: Artistic Expression in the Post-2020 Hong Kong*. Lund University.
- Clark, T. J. (1973). *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. University of California Press.
- Crow, T. (1996). *Modern Art in the Common Culture*. Yale University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In D. F. Bouchard (Ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (pp. 139–164). Cornell University Press.
- Harris, J., Frascina, F., Harrison, C., & Wood, P. (1993). *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*. Yale University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1993). The Origin of the Work of Art. In D. Krell (Ed.), *Basic Writings* (pp. 139–170). Harper Collins.
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Shiff, R. (2006). Art History and the Jealousy of Criticism. *Art Bulletin*, 88, 1, 8–24.
- Trail, G. (2023). "Multimedia performance and contemporary Hong Kong art." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 10(1-2), 131–156.

Contact email: chunfanwong@ln.hk