

Going Home:

Negotiating Identity in Tang Da Wu's Art

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In a public conversation in the Japanese city of Fukuoka in 1999, Tang Da Wu, then on a six-month residency with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and Japanese art historian Masahiro Ushiroshoji (b. 1954) discussed Tang's shift in identity from Chinese to "something else".¹ Elaborating on this matter, Ushiroshoji noted that Tang was born in 1943, when Singapore was occupied by the Japanese; hence he was at first Japanese. (Tang has even made a work titled *I was born Japanese*.) The British returned to Singapore in 1945, so Tang then became British. In 1963, Singapore formed part of newly-independent Malaysia, before separating in 1965, so Tang was subsequently also Malaysian, and then Singaporean.²

Tang moved to London in 1969 and lived there for twenty years, except for a one-year stay in Singapore between 1979 and 1980 (when he made and exhibited *Earth Work* at the former National Museum Art Gallery).³ In a recorded conversation with the curators and volunteers at Fukuoka

Asian Art Museum (FAAM), also during his 1999 residency, Tang spoke broadly about his life in London and his current stay in Fukuoka. With rare candour, he talked about his personal life, including his loneliness and lack of close friends in Japan, how much he missed being away from his son, as well as about his previous marriage to British artist Hazel McIntosh.⁴

Tang Da Wu's art practice is often discussed in relation to social and environmental issues. However, it is seldom considered with respect to his personal history and identity, as touched on in the conversations described in the opening of this essay. This paper aims to contribute to the existing knowledge of Tang's practice through a detailed analysis of two key performances, *...and the Pants Remain* and *Home*, which have not been studied to date. Both performances took place during his 1999 residency at FAAM. This essay concludes by positioning these works within Tang's broader practice.

Tang Da Wu is a contemporary artist who has become an iconic figure in the art scene in both Singapore and elsewhere in Asia. He is the founder of The Artists' Village in 1988, an experimental and multidisciplinary collective of artists that was Singapore's first artists' colony. Tang is particularly known for his performance and installation artworks, many of which employ mythological narratives to discuss social and environmental issues.

The “social” works

Following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in what is now Ukraine, Tang Da Wu began addressing social and ecological issues in his art, believing that art should provoke discussion instead of merely providing aesthetic pleasure or entertainment. Between 1989 and 1991, he made three key works addressing the practice of animal poaching. All three works are held in the Singapore National Collection and have played a major role in informing the general understanding and perception of Tang’s artistic practice.

They Poach the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink was made in 1989 as a response to the hunting of rhinoceroses for their horns for use in traditional Chinese medicine. A combination of performance and installation, the work comprises a life-sized papier-mâché rhino laid on the floor, ringed by bottles of liquid medicine. The rhino’s fragility is emphasised by its construction from paper and glue, and its horn is missing. A white axe, placed on the floor alongside, alludes to the rhino’s impending extinction.

The second work, *Tiger’s Whip*, was made in 1991, and continued to address the implications of man’s actions in driving the extinction of an entire species. In this work, Tang constructed ten tigers from linen and wire, positioning them around a large wooden bed. He performed with this installation in front of medicine halls in Singapore’s Chinatown which sold tonics made from tiger penises for their supposed aphrodisiac qualities. The following year, he made *Under the Table, All Going One Direction*, which referenced the unrestrained hunting of crocodiles for their skin in the production of leather goods.



Tang Da Wu, *Tiger’s Whip*
Collection of Singapore Art Museum



Tang Da Wu, *Just In Case*
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

These three works have been widely discussed by scholars and curators, and *Tiger’s Whip* and *Under the Table* have been exhibited several times at the Singapore Art Museum. Together with works such as *Tapioca Friendship Project* (1995), which appealed for friendship between Japan and Singapore despite the history of the Japanese Occupation⁵; *Just in Case* (1991), which looked at the way justice has been denied in Myanmar; and *Don’t Give Money to the Arts* (1995), which commented on the place of the arts in Singapore society, it is unsurprising that Tang is regularly



Tang Da Wu, *Don't Give Money to the Arts*
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

thought of as an artist who engages mainly with social and political issues.⁶ However, this framing does not account for many of his works, including several paintings recently acquired by National Gallery Singapore, which I will discuss towards the end of this essay.

...and the Pants Remain and Home

Tang presented five performances during his 1999 residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. I will focus on two in particular: *...and the Pants Remain*, performed on 20 November, and *Home*, performed on 4 December.⁷

...and the Pants Remain took place in the Artist's Gallery, a large rectangular space in the museum. It began with Tang running up and down the length of the gallery, balancing a long wooden beam on his head. Repeatedly crying out, "What

do you want?" he leapt and hurled himself against the white gallery walls, arms grasping futilely for something above his head. In the centre of the space, leaning against the wall, was another pair of long wooden beams: hanging from one was a long-sleeved red shirt; from the other, a pair of pants.⁸

In the first half of the performance, Tang put on the red shirt and pretended to be Santa Claus. Carrying a large white bag, he went around the audience, asking them what they wanted for Christmas and drawing whatever they stated onto the white bag. In the second half of the performance, Tang removed the red shirt and hung it back on the end of the beam. Balancing the beam on his shoulders, he ran after the shirt, telling it, "Don't go away from me!" He finally "caught" the shirt and brought it back to the middle of the gallery, proceeding to do the same with the beam carrying the pants, telling it, "I go where I want to go". Finally, he carried both beams, with the shirt hanging in front of him and the pants behind him. "Where my legs go, where my body goes, where my heart goes. Make up your mind! What do you want?". Stumbling around the gallery, Tang repeated variations of these phrases, as the shirt pulled him in one direction and the pants in the other. Finally, he lifts up the white bag full of "things" and tries to bring it home with the red shirt, but the pants insist on going in another direction.

It is clear that the performance deals with Tang's struggles with his divided identity. If the red outfit is a symbol of Tang's body, then the separation of the shirt and the pants could refer to his dilemma on where to live: London or Singapore. It could also refer to his roles as a father and an artist, which might entail conflicting desires. Similarly, the reference to Christmas is also linked to the idea of family, such as being home for Christmas. However, Tang would be spending Christmas in Japan that year, away from his friends and family.

In the performance, he literally asks the audience: “Where should I go? Follow my head or follow my heart?” and tells himself to “make up your mind!” In the end, he solves the problem by sawing the wooden beam into two to bring the shirt and pants closer together and calls it a “compromise”. But clearly, it is not much of a real solution and he finally leaves the pants behind, telling himself to “never settle” even if “you can’t have both”. The performance ends with Tang cutting up pieces of the outfit and giving them to the audience.

Home, on the other hand, is a more literal presentation of Tang’s desire to find “home”. Performed in the same space, Tang created several “homes” ranging from paper tents to a cardboard house, similar to what homeless people use on the streets. During the performance, Tang lamented: “I want a home” and “I still can’t find a house”. In his search, he drew different elements of a home onto the cardboard – a door and windows, even a cat and a Christmas tree. He also invited the audience to enter his structures and draw their representations of home. At the end of the performance, with all the homes “filled” with objects, Tang ran frantically between his different homes and cried “Home, come back!”⁹ Again, we see Tang’s dilemma in choosing between his lives in London, Singapore and perhaps even Japan. The performance also asks the audience to think about what makes a home: material possessions or perhaps something more intangible.

Both performances expressed Tang’s current struggles with his life. But more than that, through his engagement with the audience, typical of his performance practice, he also provoked wider reflection on familial relationships, identity and even materialism. His interest in such issues can also be seen in the series of public workshops he conducted as part of a project called “My Life”. Held over seven sessions with different participants, Tang

invited people to take photographs that expressed themselves and described their personal histories. Thus it seems clear that his work in Fukuoka was not merely an outlet for his own loneliness, but a broader investigation of human relations. This led to a series of powerful performances that could translate well between cultures.

dA dA bAA bAA and *sofA sonAA*

In 2016, National Gallery Singapore acquired two paintings by Tang made in 1986, the year that his son, Zai Tang, was born. Painted in London, the paintings express his struggles with his decision to stay in the UK. *dA dA bAA bAA* depicts Tang and a goat, which is another representation of himself. (The goat is his Chinese zodiac animal.) It is an expressionist self-portrait that depicts the artist almost collapsing beneath a goat bound within a red frame. The grey background and dripping paint streaks adds to the feeling of melancholy. The second painting sheds more light on his feelings during this period: *sofA sonAA* shows Tang’s giant hand moving towards the Union Jack. The Chinese characters running across the painting read 近山远水, meaning “near to the mountain, far from the water”. Here, Tang’s mountain is artistic success, for which he studied and subsequently stayed in the UK, while water represents his home and his friends in Singapore. His hand is nearing that mountain, yet he still feels torn about being away from Singapore. Tang, of course, chose to return to Singapore in 1988 and continues to commute between the two cities.

I offer these two examples to show that Tang’s Fukuoka performances were not a sudden shift in his practice, nor an aberration. Even in the 1980s,

he was already expressing a certain introspection through his works, including his longstanding internal dilemma about his home. (Until today, he maintains residences in both London and Singapore.) Such works give us an insight into Tang's life and therefore, might then provide a better understanding of his other works. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the personal and social aspects of his work are not mutually exclusive. Tang acknowledges that much of his interest in social issues arose during his time in London, and it was also in London that

he felt most "Chinese".¹⁰ The relationship between his self-identity and his practice is a complicated one and deserves more attention. Unfortunately, many of his performances presented overseas, for example, are not well-known in Singapore, and hundreds of his paintings, particularly in Chinese ink, remain completely un-documented. Given Tang's extremely prolific artistic practice, spanning over four decades, much still remains to be done in terms of cataloguing and analysing his work. I hope that this essay, in some small way, goes towards addressing this lack. □

Charmaine Toh is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Melbourne. Her research in Fukuoka was made possible through the Cultural Diplomacy Fund established by Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth in 2014.

Notes:

1. Fast Moving Asian Contemporary Art: Tang Da Wu and His Works. http://www.asianmonth.com/prize/english/lecture/pdf/10_05.pdf. Accessed on 1 March 2017.
2. In my conversation with Masahiro Ushiroshoji on 28 August 2016, he explained that Tang had described himself as having these four nationalities when they had met in Singapore in 1990.
3. More on *Earth Work* is discussed in my essay "Notes on Earth Work" in *Earth Work 1979* (exh. cat., National Gallery Singapore, 2016).
4. The interview is kept with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
5. *Tapioca Friendship Project* was inaugurated on 15 February 1995, the fifty-third anniversary of Singapore's surrender to the Japanese during the Second World War.
6. The latter two works are also in the National Collection.
7. The other performances were *I think about it* on 12 November 1999 and *I came back for it* on 29 February 2000, both at the Enjoy Space Daimyo, and *Ghost* on 12 March 2000 at Ajibi Hall.
8. A full video recording of this performance is kept in the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
9. A full video recording of this performance is kept with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
10. Fast Moving Asian Contemporary Art: Tang Da Wu and His Works. http://www.asianmonth.com/prize/english/lecture/pdf/10_05.pdf. Accessed on 1 March 2017.