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An abridged conversation in acts

As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, a scheduled meeting in Singapore was cancelled, and a series of online conversations about the current project, *Abridge*, developed between February and late March 2020. Wei Leng Tay had been developing the project since 2018.

Protests in Hong Kong revealed forks in the road, narrative tangents that turned the camera on the process itself, prompting Tay to look back through layers of her practice, across shifts in time, place and media. As the pandemic has impacted the creative and curatorial process, it was difficult to resist the strange resonance between the current sense of inert urgency and displacement, and these narrated memories of migration, hardship, and uncertain identities. In much of Tay's work, there is an implicit tension between lives lived and the administrative, national or cultural boundaries that attempt to define them, and across which, in practice we continue to move.

Abridge develops from the earlier project, *The Other Shore* (彼岸), in which Tay explored 'Mainlander' identity through a group of young students and professionals whose studies, work opportunities or family migrations had brought them from Mainland China to Hong Kong. While none of the subjects is identified, they resist forming a coherent group, with each image a new encounter for Tay and the viewer alike, complicating rather than simplifying the assumptions the project set out to confront.

For *Abridge*, Tay turned to the stories of an older generation of Southern Chinese migrants in Hong Kong—often the parents or grandparents of today's protest generations—their personal journeys and complex sense of place, set against the massive infrastructural development and administrative integration being promoted across borders that have hitherto defined their lives, their memories. This border, that had been both a dangerous frontier and a barrier defining Hong Kong as a safe haven, today is dissolving in a web of rapid development across what the central government styles as the Greater Bay Area. While this official idea has given rise to unprecedented construction, as well as economic and administrative integration across the Pearl River Delta, many hallmarks of this 'development' formalise what has long been an organic and often clandestine circulation of goods and people back and forth across successive generations of borders.

The following text combines excerpts from a series of conversations¹ recorded between February and March, with vignettes from interviews Tay had undertaken since 2018, on her return trips to a Hong Kong in flux.²

¹ Conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese, a dialect from the Dongguan/Guangdong area, and interspersed with English

² For this essay, the subjects of interviews are referred to as 'Auntie', 'Mom', 'Dad'—this is an informal way of addressing them, and does not mean a family kinship. For her work, interviewees are kept anonymous.



*Kai Yuen Lane missing sign, date unknown.
Fuji RVP100F slide (Kodak E100VS discontinued), 120mm
2019
Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist*

Auntie 文化大革命後就已經 forget 啦 in a way, 唔再諗。我 try to go through 我個心理。70年呢, 我記得好清楚㗎, 去廣州見哥哥家姐, 爸爸有去, 嗰陣時係坐火車嘅。一上咗大陸深圳嘅火車, 就有嗰啲歌聽, 我係嗰陣時會喊嘅, 聽嗰啲歌會喊嘅。哩個就係嗰陣時嘅心理。It just recalls 你嗰個……你嗰陣時會成日想, 會發夢返屋企啊, 冇得返呢即係唔係成日冇得返呢, 即係我嗰時嘅學校啊, 乜啊。噉就, 幾時開始有咗哩啲噉嘅夢呢, 我就……應該係文化大革命開始淡咗啦。到六四啦就, no more, 即係好 clear cut 嘅。

Auntie After the Cultural Revolution, I started to forget, in a way. I stopped thinking about it. At least, that's what it felt like. But I remember very clearly, when we went back in 1970, we went to visit my older brother and sister in Guangzhou; father went too, we took the train. As soon as we got on the train in Shenzhen, there were Mainland songs playing, and when I heard them, I cried. I cried when I heard those songs. That's how I felt back then... Back then, you'd dream about going home, because you couldn't go back all the time. When did I stop dreaming of that? Well, it probably started from the Cultural Revolution. But after June Fourth, that was it, no more. It was a really clear cut.

OK Walk me through again, what it is that you're doing...

WLT I was thinking about the people that I was talking to. When I spoke with them, they were trying to remember or articulate their lives for me; they were trying to present themselves. Some were trying to make sense of what had happened to them before with what was currently happening when I was talking to them, which was the protest. For one of the aunts who went to Hong Kong in 1960, it was a process of constantly toggling back and forth between then and now, because I think the protest was so much on her mind, and undoubtedly related. She talked about herself as a child of China. She looks at a lot at Chinese media too, but she is clearly for the protests.

For a lot of the people I was talking to, I think it was a matter of them trying to figure out, OK, what do I tell her, and how do I tell her this? It was then that I realised that I couldn't, or rather didn't want to actually show any images of these people. I was thinking, how do I photograph this, beyond the kind of infrastructure and those scenes that I was already making with video and photos? I started thinking about the pictures that I've been making in Hong Kong since 2005 or so; you don't see those kinds of images anymore — like the photographs that I have taken of the Hong Kong families.

A lot of places where I would photograph them were in their daily lives. It was about looking at how they were living with different layers of history, in their own homes or things like that. That seems, not flippant, but unimportant at this point. Is it a bit indulgent or is it necessary? It's also because I was using medium format film, and right now that feels archaic.

WLT As I interview people I ask myself, why am I doing this? Am I simply doing something that many other people have done? And beyond talking to people about their lives, that kind of information, what else am I actually doing? Over the last few years, it's become increasingly problematic for me if a work is in an exhibition setting and is purely informational. Even though I'm interviewing particular people, I don't want that voice to be representational, or the images I make to represent them. With *The Other Shore*, we did that in terms of thinking about how the voice becomes a context or an environment; how the voice could move people through space, or create certain visceral reactions. And then you're not just thinking about that information in terms of a voice, you're thinking about the quality or nature of that voice, the age of that voice, and what it can do beyond such 'information'.

WLT How did Hong Kong people see those coming over?

Mom There was definitely a difference.

Dad They didn't like it so much; they didn't like people coming here and bothering them.

Mom We are even in the movies — Ah Chan! [laughs]. They didn't imagine we would be so hardworking.

Dad Those of us who came out back then, we weren't afraid of dying, we weren't afraid of hardship.

WLT For this project, all the people who were talking to me, they know that their story is part of a narrative that's been retold. When I asked how people perceived them, one of them told me it's like 'Ah Chan.' He said, "We've all seen the shows, we all know the characters." So, talking to people who have to narrate their own lives to me alongside all these stories that they have watched and heard, all these stereotypes about themselves, that also became an important part of the process.

Dad I had thought about it way earlier; it was just a matter of when I would leave.

Mom At that time, many people were leaving.

Dad Everybody dreamt of Hong Kong. Those songs we would hear from the radio back then, we would get Hong Kong radio and songs of that period.

Mom It was illegal...

Dad Hong Kong seemed interesting, very free, like it was easy to find work there. That's what we thought. One day I heard rumours that Hong Kong was opening up. I was pretty much done with the construction work, so I went back to my village. I took some chicken biscuits and escaped, and walked over to Hong Kong.

WLT How did you walk?

Dad I just walked, and walked, and walked...

Mom He walked for five days...

Dad No, I walked three days and three nights.

Mom From Shenzhen?

Dad What are you talking about? Shenzhen? From our front door!

Mom Back then, if you didn't reach Hong Kong in five days, and your family at home didn't hear from you, they would worry. [laughs]

WLT I've been very interested in Southern Chinese migrants, people who were crossing or migrant workers. When I started thinking about who to talk to for *The Other Shore*, it was interesting for me to talk to these younger, more privileged Mainlanders; it's a new generation, a new type of immigrant whose coming into Hong Kong, because of policies, because of new wealth. And with this new wave, there's a lot of money being put in and it's changing the landscape of the city.

I remember a time in Hong Kong when the brands, the electronics, started becoming Chinese; all the jewellery shops that started appearing, all the pharmacies, all the changes... where even in Causeway Bay, close

to where I used to live, where the things that you thought you could get in the areas near the small shops across from Lee Theatre, you couldn't get anymore because it all became these shops for tourists. So it was affecting all parts of your life... So talking to the young Mainland Chinese felt like the first step, as talking to Hong Kongers felt like a very big or difficult task. From there it became more natural to start talking to older people, but it's also harder because it's a different generation, a different way of communicating. And I'm finding them through the kids of these people in different demographics, so some people are suspicious.

One of the things that I was thinking about as I was doing this, and while I was thinking about *The Other Shore*, was that the works are so much about Hong Kong. For my other works, I try not to think about them as place-specific; they deal with certain relationships or issues. In the Pakistan or Singapore works,³ if you want to categorise them in terms of issues, there is statelessness, migration, displacement. But in terms of Hong Kong, even though they do deal with those things in a way, the history of the people who have settled in Hong Kong is very specific, the type of regimes and events they had to flee, in terms of the way that they crossed the border. Of course, you can also say this is reminiscent of other situations with border relations.

OK This could also reflect the fact that it's the place you've done the most work, where you're most familiar, even compared to Singapore.

WLT Yes, my understanding of Hong Kong is more so than my understanding of Singapore. Since I spent the majority of my adult life there, it makes sense.

OK Going back to this question around the medium, back to the photos you had produced in Hong Kong, with film. You've been thinking about that also in relationship to the recent protests, or would it be the Umbrella?

WLT I think with the Umbrella movement it was different because I was there. I was in the middle of making *The Other Shore*, and things got really tense. One of my friends called me a China sympathiser because I was making work with Mainlanders.

OK In the first exhibition, showing a bit of that work in Hong Kong, people accused you of being pro-China or too sympathetic.

WLT They were also writing comments [in the exhibition book] like, "If it's this hard for you, why don't you just go home," to the people in the project.

But I've always thought the work isn't about giving voice; it's not a question of empowerment, of bringing certain situations to light, that's not the point of what I'm making. But nonetheless it was very interesting

³ *And this is the lady and her pond* (2015-2018); the first chapter it starts with the horses (2017-2018); "you think it over slowly, slowly choose..." 「你就慢慢考虑, 慢慢选择……」 (2018). These works were exhibited in Singapore in a 4-part solo exhibition *Crossings* at NUS Museum from 8 March 2018 – 4 May 2019.

to see the comments. That was quite preliminary, that phase. I wanted the people who were in the project to see what I had done and to hear comments, if they had any, on what was being done with their likeness and their words.

OK How did that work?

WLT Quite a few of them came; many didn't say anything. Some of them did. Some were actually quite interested in hearing what people like them, who had come to Hong Kong from China, had to say for themselves. Because they had been artificially lumped by me into a peer group, some of them were actually very interested in hearing what their 'peers' had to say...

Auntie My brother and sister? I've never talked to them about this before. We're blood relations, but we're not close. After we came out [in 1960], they came out after they were grown up and one had a kid [in the mid-70s]. We were already distant. Our backgrounds were different, language... They can't speak proper Cantonese; they don't understand Hong Kong society. They're Hokkien and live in North Point, they don't have many Cantonese friends, just colleagues. Unlike me, they aren't integrated into Hong Kong society, even now. I understand everyone's Hokkien in North Point. Because of language, they can't communicate naturally, that's to say, they might be able to talk to you, but they can't really communicate with you. The majority can't, even the ones who are younger than me. Many have returned to China to live; they come and go. So you heard in North Point the Hokkiens came out to beat people up; they don't think about integrating. They want the benefits, but don't feel any ownership. I can understand that this is their condition. But if they think it's so good there, why don't they go back?

WLT But that was one of the times when I started realising the spatial dimension of the voices... How do you juxtapose that kind of seemingly benign image with these voices, when they might not necessarily be saying anything controversial, but the fact that they're speaking in Mandarin, when most people in Hong Kong, or in the gallery at least, actually have difficulty understanding—that creates a very specific response in many people. That was actually a good lesson for me in the kind of visceral reaction voices, sounds or images, can create.

WLT I think the turn the project has taken is because of the protest. When I first started interviewing people, I was making video interviews, and when they were speaking about themselves and why they came, they were relating things about their own lives. But this was many months before the protests. After the protests started, it was difficult to talk to people, because they were busy, and it was more difficult to move around. There was an increasing sense of fear or worry, perhaps on my part also, that when you ask people to speak of these things, of fleeing China, of leaving, and why it was bad—perhaps it's not the best idea to show their faces. So I decided to just have audio for the interviews, which really changed how the audio was being used, because when I

was working with the video image, what was interesting for me was how people were presenting themselves and recounting their own lives to me, then that whole part of the work fell out. It made me wonder how I would show that.

At the same time, as I was going back from Singapore to Hong Kong, I kept asking myself, why am I doing this... because I left, right? I was thinking about what I had done before in Hong Kong, about the images, but then thinking over these things through talking to people in Hong Kong.

OK To somebody who's even more of an outsider, you're actually not that far from this context. It seems to be quite natural for you to empathise with some of the narratives, the sense of history and movements across borders; intergenerational issues, in terms of family narratives and personal identities. All of that feels familiar, although different to your other work. I feel like you're making a point about it as though somehow you shouldn't feel comfortable in that space or you shouldn't see yourself as an insider because you are not really, but it seems like degrees.

WLT If you're talking about, as a person who has lived in a place where I don't quite belong, I'm not from there, or who has moved around — in that sense, then I would be an insider, when you are thinking about those experiences. But in terms of thinking about Hong Kong politics, I feel that I'm an outsider. If you look at recent events, the chant of the *heunggongyan* ('Hong Konger')... I do not consider myself, and I've never been seen as, a *heunggongyan*. Even though I'd lived there for 15-16 years, I was never a *heunggongyan*. In that sense, I felt like an outsider. But where you are talking about a kind of displacement or migration, then I am an insider, so to speak. For me, the danger with the work is when it falls into the latter kind of politics.

OK That brings us back to the sort of work that you're doing right now, printing. You're looking back at slides mostly.

WLT I'm looking at slides, I'm also looking at contact sheets.

OK What's the process; how do you start?

WLT I'm asking myself that a lot actually, because I keep telling myself to have a system, but when I go through the images I end up not having a system. I choose images that I want to re-photograph, sometimes because I can remember the instant when I was photographing them. I remember what people said to me or how I felt. But some images, I have no recollection of whatsoever. In a way, it's led by my memory of these different things. And one of the reasons why, for example, I wanted to work with the Pansy Ho image⁴ is because it speaks to me of a different time in Hong Kong.



Barney Cheng fashion show, 2001.

Fuji RMS slide, 35mm

2020

Archival pigment print, 60 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist

It was at the Barney Cheng⁵ fashion show, early 2000s, with all these rich Hong Kong socialites. It was that kind of Hong Kong scene that I was photographing, and I remember things that happened when I was photographing.

WLT But often it doesn't work. For example, when I showed you those pictures of the grandpas playing kickball in Central, they used to be there all the time, but now you don't see them anymore. Don't know where they are now. They were such a staple, in a way, of the weekend. They were almost iconic... But then it's also a question of working through this, having to push against that sense of nostalgia. I think it's quite important in the work. I don't want to fall into the trap of 'those good old days.'

Dad At the Shenzhen border, there were a lot of high-powered spotlights. They would shine the lights everywhere, and spotlight you. We were chased and chased by PLA⁶ soldiers. We had already avoided them once, but they caught us off guard. We had passed them, and for no reason they turned around. That first time I didn't have enough experience; I didn't think to crawl into a drain — I would have gotten all wet — so I got caught. The shoots of grain weren't tall enough at the time.

Mom Didn't you lie flat in the fields?

Dad Lie down!? I didn't want to get my clothes all wet. So, when they surprised us, we got caught.

⁴ Canadian-Hongkong billionaire businesswoman (b. 1962); she is the daughter of Macau-based billionaire, Stanley Ho.

⁵ Hongkong luxury fashion designer

⁶ People's Liberation Army

Mom It wasn't like that for us. For us, we passed the border. In the paddyfields, it was like we were swimming. Yeah... Their lights were so strong, their dogs were barking so fiercely.

Dad It was very dangerous to do that. One could die...

Mom Yes, it was a gamble.

WLT In terms of making new images from the old images, how much representation is actually needed in the image itself? That's one of the things that I've been thinking about. There are some pictures where I am photographing the film as object. But then there are also some where it gets too close, where I cannot focus because of the focal length of the iPhone, so it creates that compression, that blurriness. There are different layers in the image that I'm making: where I'm layering the background of where it is photographed, let's say it's Hong Kong or Singapore. Then you have a juxtaposition of the present and the image, that history in that photo. Or there are reflections: one photo I actually really like—which makes me question what a good photo is—is a photo of a photo that I made of Kai Yun Street, where I used to live.



*View from Kai Yuen Street, date unknown.
Fuji RVP100F slide (Kodak E100VS discontinued), 120mm
2019*

Archival pigment print, 90 x 120 cm. Courtesy the artist

You can see my hand and my iPhone, I'm taking the picture and you see the window right in the middle of it. I like that photo, that act.

One of the things that made me turn back to photographing my own pictures from the past was how photographs were being used when I went back to Hong Kong. I actually felt a refusal to make new photos, although I did in the end. I was thinking about not wanting to make images. It felt like consumption and rather gratuitous, because then what do those photos do? I made that work⁷ because I was staying at a friend's place and there was one evening when things really exploded and we couldn't go out for a few days.



Live streaming, Prince Edward, 12/11/2019, 23:35:05-6.

25 frames per second, 1920 x 1080

2019

25 archival pigment prints, 22.5 x 40 cm each. Courtesy the artist

WLT As I was watching a lot of the streaming, I realised this was how a lot of people must be experiencing the protest, on their screens. So I took one second of the video and made 25 frames (because it was in PAL); in a way, having a document of the mediation of the protest. That is also one of the reasons why I'm using the phone to photograph as opposed to a proper camera, because of the ubiquity of the image. Everyone uses the phone, that's how we often make images and how we understand photographs now. So I wanted to use this to look at my own work.

Mom I always say, if it comes to a point where they have to choose, should Hong Kong become China? They will definitely say no. And yet, now they will not stand up and fight. I am not saying they're all like that. I see many Hokkien kids out fighting for Hong Kong. They will. But, for example my mom, who's 100 years old—when she hears that I go to the protests, she doesn't like it. Of course, there are many things— your DNA, your character, whether you will show up or not, whether you are scared or not. That all makes a difference. But frankly, nobody wants Hong Kong to become like China, if you ask me.

⁷ This work comprises 25 images, each image corresponding to one of 25 frames in a single second of PAL format video of the protests in Hong Kong at that time.

OK Are you re-photographing more at the moment?

WLT There is more that needs to be done, like when I make photographs of the surfaces. On some of them, for example *Causeway Bay*, which have very smooth surfaces, the photograph becomes quite impenetrable. You can't actually see it, but then it's there.



Causeway Bay, 2001.
Contact sheet, Kodak Tri-X 400, 120mm
2020

Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

OK It's funny, you think it's impenetrable, yet that looks to me like a moment of respite, because it's detailed, partly in focus. Your eye says, "I know what I'm looking at, I'm looking at a reflection." And ironically, because of the power of the lens, you can focus on the surface. Whereas in some of the other images, you're looking at something which you wouldn't actually really see. Going back to this protest image: you might register what it is, but it's not how you typically would see images. It looks like a mistake. Whereas the other image just looks like it's an abstract image, but the resolution, the focus, is all there.



Article 23 protest, Causeway Bay, 1/7/2003.
Contact sheet, Kodak 400VC negative, 35mm
2019

Archival pigment print, 45 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist

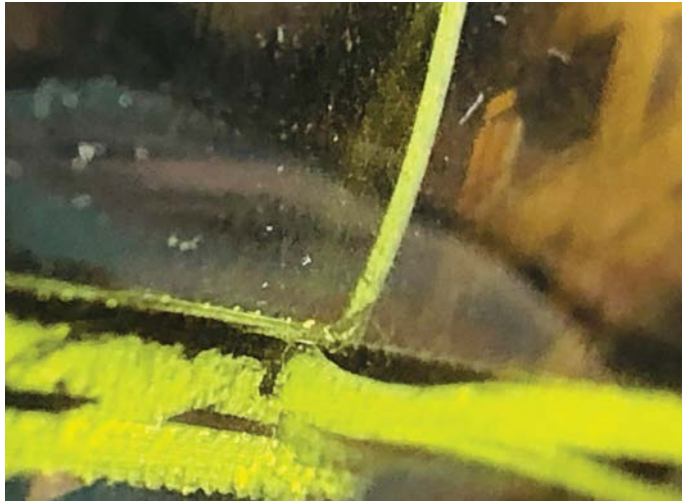
WLT

There's a different sense of flatness to this image, *Article 23 protest*; it's doing something quite different. It's not really an object anymore, it's become a graphic; the texture is not really a texture. It's digital, the image is falling apart. Whereas *Causeway Bay* feels almost like the opposite; there's actually a sense of solidity, and that's what the lens is focused on. Which is not to say that one is the right way and the other's not. It's just I see those things in different ways, and that seems to bring out the tension. The way that the image is disintegrating distracts you from the reality that it once was supposed to represent.

I think that's a good observation. One of the things that I've been having trouble with is—what can I do as I'm photographing? What do I focus on? How can I think about that flatness? How can I think about that surface? How can I visually show how I'm trying to think about the event?

Abridge will be exhibited at the Verge Gallery, University of Sydney, from 15 April to 22 May 2021. It will comprise photographic prints (some of which are included here), a video and a sound installation based on the interviews above. The exhibition is supported by Verge Gallery and The University of Sydney: China Studies Centre.

This conversation between Wei Leng Tay and Olivier Krischer was transcribed by Cheang Chu Ying. Cantonese transcription of interviews was by Wing Chan.



Ming Yuen West Street II, 2010.

Kodak E100VS slide, 120mm

2020

Archival pigment print, 45 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist



A boy at Repulse Bay beach during SARS, 2003.

Kodak E100VS slide, 35mm

2019

Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist



Ming Yuen West Street, 2010.

Kodak E100VS slide 120mm

2020

Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist