



LEE KAI CHUNG

CRISSCROSSING  
TIME

BY CHLOE CHU



*The Shadow Lands Yonder*, 2022, still from septuple-channel video: 24 min 30 sec.

History as fiction, fiction as history—over the last five years, in his multimedia projects encompassing video installations, sculptures, and publications, Hong Kong-based artist Lee Kai Chung has been unraveling official narratives of the Second Sino-Japanese War to reveal their ideological inflections and omissions. But far from being simply analytical, Lee's works present their own fictions. Beneath their often-torpid rhythms and multiple, fragmented storylines, his videos capture moments such as the possible shoulder-grazes between passersby who may have unwittingly influenced one another's fates, and the psychological tensions experienced by individuals during conflicts and in their aftermath. For example, in *The Shadow Lands Yonder* (2022), his most ambitious video to date, viewers are brought to ponder the cultural identities of the Japanese farmers who worked the lands of Manchuria for over a decade before being repatriated at the end of the war. *The Shadow Lands Yonder*, which was shown at Hong Kong's Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile until August, is part of a larger project on wartime diasporas and traumas, *The Infinite Train* (2020–), which Lee will continue to develop as the 2022 Robert Gardner Fellow in photography. I spoke with the artist about his approach to artmaking, how he navigates the tribulations of historical research, and what keeps him going.

**Your semi-autobiographical video *George and the Swimming Pool* (2019) recounts that for a still-life drawing class, your art teacher brought out a human skull that was dug up along with two swords from under your secondary school, which was repurposed as a military hospital during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in 1941–45. Is this what led you to study the 20th-century history of China, Japan, and Hong Kong, a subject that runs through many of your artworks?**

As a secondary-school student, I was interested in art but not yet in history. It was really only in around 2018 that I started to systematically study 20th-century East Asian history. Synchronicity plays a huge role. Every time I start a project to do with a particular

subject, related things happen in the world. Or maybe it's that events unfold in history and I subconsciously become invested in them, and that leads me to do research. Certainly a lot of my works since 2018 have touched on Japan, armed occupations and expansionist policies, and war-induced diasporas. These histories continue to shape Asia and how we conceive it. For instance, on September 7, before Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping met for the first time since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin made a speech where he said Europe is on the decline and Asia is at the forefront of a new world order. He envisions Russia as part of Asia. We can relate this rhetoric to how China, through schemes like the Belt and Road Initiative or economic ties, aims to connect different Asian as well as African countries. These approaches might be outside of warfare, but the goal for a greater Asia nevertheless resonates with some of the expansionist and anti-West ideas of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere that Japan envisioned in the Second World War. Perhaps I'm serendipitously called to these histories by the way that they bleed into life today.

The focus of *The Narrow Road to the Deep Sea* (2019–20) project, of which *George and the Swimming Pool* is a part, was also the result of synchronicities. *The Narrow Road* examines Japan's bacteria-based biological warfare in China. I started my research during a residency in Japan in 2019. Not long after that, news of the pandemic started to spread. No one knew how serious it would become. I remember returning from Japan and going to Guangzhou to do field research. I was the only one wearing a face mask. Then, disease was on everyone's mind.

It was only during the Japan residency that I recalled my secondary school had been turned into a military hospital, and, speculating that it might have been where one of imperial Japan's bacteriology laboratories was based, I decided to incorporate it into my work.

**Your research into the bacteriological experiments that the Japanese performed on Chinese prisoners led you to create *The Containers* (2019–20), a series of replicas of the ceramic vessels that were used in the tests. But these remade jugs and canisters each have shards of protruding debris. Why?**

*The Containers* came from a visit to the site of Nanshitou Refugee Camp, a former detention camp in Guangzhou. The history of the camp, where the Japanese held refugees from Hong Kong, has largely been obscured as, after the war, the prison was repurposed into factories, which have subsequently been razed. Other factories nearby have suffered the same fate—the local government is gentrifying the area and wants to transform it into a cultural district. Local residents spoke out against the demolishing of these buildings as they are part of Guangzhou's heritage, and the local government was ultimately persuaded that the histories of these sites need to be preserved. Yet, authorities changed the plaque that used to mark the camp's purpose during the Japanese occupation to say that it was a Kuomintang prison instead. That is also true. Before it was a Japanese detention camp, the site functioned as a prison for the Chinese nationalist government. But which history is foregrounded and which is obscured reflects China's international relations and ideologies at the time.

When I went to the razed detention camp, before the archaeologists started unearthing various artifacts, I saw those vessels. I was intrigued because if you detach them from the context, they could just be normal containers used for daily purposes. What the nearby construction workers were using looked similar to these containers used in the war. There was an ambiguity in their story. So I decided to take debris from the site and embed them in the replica vessels. I imagined that a bomb had dropped, destroying the buildings and causing shrapnel to fly into the objects; the vessels are frozen in that particular moment.



Left: Installation view of *The Narrow Road to the Deep Sea*, Part VI: *The Containers*, 2019–20, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, at "The World is yet to Come," Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) Taipei, 2021. Courtesy the artist and MoCA Taipei. Right: *The Narrow Road to the Deep Sea*, Part I: *George and the Swimming Pool*, 2019, still from single-channel video: 10 min 26 sec.

**Just as *The Containers* imaginatively intersects two periods of time—the contemporary destruction of the factory buildings, and the Japanese invasion in the early 20th century—fiction plays a role in *George and the Swimming Pool*, which interweaves the speculative past of your school with a war-criminal tribunal in 1946, where a Japanese corporal was questioned about the purpose of the ceramic vessels found in Nanshitou. The video opens with the narrator distancing himself from the narrative with the line, "Pretend what I'm telling you is someone else's story. Then forget it." Is he acknowledging he is an unreliable narrator?**

That narrator is me. I tried to remove myself from a lot of *The Narrow Road* because when I was making *George and the Swimming Pool*, for example, I could not find any first-hand records. I went to the national archive in Guangzhou as part of my research. They have a huge cabinet with index cards—that's basically their search engine. I had to go through each of the small drawers. When I tried to check out some of the documents, my requests were denied because I am not a Chinese national—I don't have the Chinese ID card. What I could get was from the internet, including past interviews written by scholars. I felt a little insecure.

**What was your first encounter with an official archive?**

From 2013 to 2017, I was researching the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, and I spent a lot of time in the Public Records Office. In this process, I came across materials to do with British strategy in Hong Kong, like the colonial government's plan for how to hand Hong Kong back over to China, and so called Far-East tactics that concerned not just Hong Kong but East Asia. I saved a lot of those documents and sorted them into categories without a specific purpose for them. They have turned out to be very useful.





Archive of the People, 2013–14, photo from multimedia installation, dimensions variable.

**But then you made the photo-and-audio installation *Archive of the People* (2013–14), in which you visit the Public Records Office under pretense as a representative from a document-management company. The audio recordings from this work uncover the Office’s mishandling of the archives, including how staff can discard boxes of papers without reviewing their importance and with impunity. *Archive of the People* subsequently grew into a collective of the same name. How did this group come about? What did you get from this experience of collectivizing?**

That was a short-lived collective. At the time, the group members and I thought that besides intervening as individuals in issues to do with the management of public archives, we could act as a collective. We had very different methodologies but we could not find a way for this to be reflected in the art itself. We also did not have very clear objectives. In retrospect, my position was too strong within the collective, and I think the other members felt they were trying to help me, instead of them initiating something new. I ended up questioning myself and whether art was the best avenue. Nevertheless, the Archive of the People was a transition in the way I thought about archival issues and individual versus collective art practices.

I now collaborate a lot with my wife, Shen Jun. She is an independent curator and researcher. We are currently working on



*Can't Live Without*, 2017, still from single-channel video: 19 min 47 sec.

the Phantom Archives, which is an online archive that I expect will be launched next year. I collect a lot of interviews and images during my projects. I want to disclose these materials and show an alternative method to the official handling of archives, so we are concentrating on this.

**Archival materials are not just references but a subject in *Can't Live Without* (2017). The single-channel video has multiple storylines, including ones about a ghost in an archive, imperial burial mounds on Choan Mountain in Seoul, a deceased artist whose posthumous retrospective never comes together, and a song. Why this fragmentary approach?**

*Can't Live Without* was fun. I was at an artist residency in South Korea. I bumped into a researcher who was studying the practice of a Korean artist, whose archive and artworks are kept by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. I imagined that the artist's spirit lingers like a parasite on the records, and yet he is not heard. He and his family have little say over how his artworks will be represented in his posthumous retrospective, which ultimately did not happen. By chance I was living nearby Choansan, where the imperial maids and eunuchs of the Korean court were buried. Again it was like there were spirits talking about Korean history. I was also emerging from post-Umbrella Movement trauma, so I layered in the Gwangju Uprising by researching songs from the pro-democracy movement. I came across "The song of May" and asked my friend to hum the song. She was born after the movement, but I wanted to know how the younger generation interprets that bit of Korea's past.

**There seems to be a similar idea of exploring the tenors of history by way of the body in *I could not recall how I got here* (2019), which comprises a script that was performed live and in a three-channel video. There are three protagonists: a British intelligence office in Hong Kong, a Chinese prisoner of war who guards a gravesite for the Japanese army, and the wife of the Japanese architect who designed the graveyard's monument. They each speak in monologues, but halfway through, we learn that the wife and prisoner had perhaps met and had an affair. How did you come up with the story, and why the live reading?**

The main storyline in *I could not recall* is about how the bronze Queen Victoria statue in Hong Kong was looted during the Second World War and then later returned to Hong Kong. The work started



*I could not recall how I got here*, 2019, still from triple-channel video: 21 min 46 sec.

with an archived British intelligence report about a possible sighting of the statue in Osaka or Tokyo. But I also wondered about the people who are not included in the archives, what they might have thought, and about the brief encounters between them that history didn't register. That's why the man and woman meet in the story, but there's ambiguity around what happened on the night of their encounter.

The live reading came about when I published a book that brings together the three characters of *I could not recall* with the protagonists in another video from the same project, *The Retrieval, Restoration and Predicament* (2018). Some of them meet each other in the videos, some of them appear in the same scene but they do not communicate. I wanted them to appear in the same physical space, through a book. The brief that I gave the book designer was to imagine that I had tripped while holding a pile of archival documents and scattered the pages everywhere. The book is bound such that the pages can be taken out easily. The performance was another way to get the characters together in the same space. The actors and actresses took the script and rearranged the order.

**Your latest film, *The Shadow Lands Yonder*, is about the Japanese famers who were sent to Manchuria to cultivate the land during the Japanese occupation. After the war, some were repatriated but many were left behind in China. The film has the largest cast of all your works. How was working with the actors?**

I tried to look for the descendants of the Japanese agrarian settlers in China to play the roles but that was impossible. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, premier Zhou Enlai reconnected China with other countries to revitalize the economy and international relations, and one of his priorities was Japan. He used the Japanese war orphans still living in China as a kind of diplomatic gift, returning them to their homeland while peddling the story that China had nurtured them. That was not true, but that's another story. In the end I had to do an open call for actors through the Wonderland Club, a hub for cultural practitioners in Shenyang, one of the biggest cities of what was Manchuria and is now Dongbei.

During my workshops with the actors, I realized that they felt like they don't belong to this moment or to Dongbei, though they're ethnically Chinese. They belong somewhere else. They felt lost. Their identity is not as clearly defined as what is on their passport or ID card. This is unusual in China. If you ask people in Shanghai or Beijing, for example, they would probably be proud citizens, but in Dongbei it's different.

Dongbei is still a sensitive topic for the Chinese government because in the early 20th century, Manchuria was an international economic hub located advantageously in Eurasia. During the Japanese occupation, local industries and technologies advanced. After the war, the Soviets occupied Manchuria for three years. It took some of the machinery and people back to Siberia and Russia. Eventually, the Communist Party took over Dongbei and inherited its modernized industry. But because of poor governance, Dongbei



Installation view of *Imperial Crown on the Throne*, 2019, bronze, 40×18×50 cm, at Landskrona Foto, 2020.

devolved into what is now called the Chinese Rust Belt. People started to leave. Today, the Dongbei provinces still have the lowest GDPs in China. That's why the young people in Dongbei grow up thinking they need to move elsewhere. Some even think they should bring the glory days of Manchuria back—an idea that people have been imprisoned for. But Manchuria was not something that they had experienced. They just imagine that it was a better time. The work takes this sense of fluctuating identity and explores it in the context of the farmers who moved from Japan to China and back.

**You worked with a collaborator for *The Shadow Lands Yonder* named Isaji Yugo. Your artist statement admits that you and Yugo had different perspectives during your research process. Could you tell us about these differences?**

Isaji is Japanese. I'm not particularly nationalistic, as a Chinese person who has lived in Hong Kong my whole life. We had hugely conflicting views on how the Japanese people in Manchuria thought of their own identities. Isaji thinks that they considered themselves Japanese and felt detached from the Manchurian culture and land. But identity is a complicated thing. I think they were farmers—the land was what was most important to them. The imperial Japanese government appealed to the younger sons and daughters, who, according to tradition, would not have inherited any of the family land in Japan, unlike the eldest son, and promised them land ownership in Manchuria. The government also waived army duties and taxes. That is why a lot of people were willing to go to a place that they knew nothing about. Whether they thought of themselves as Manchurian or not, they were landowners.

**In August, you won the Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography, which includes USD 50,000 for the completion of a project. What is the plan?**

I will spend more time, hopefully, after travel restrictions are lifted, in the border area between northern China and North Korea. I made a lot of artist-friends there and have met some of their families. They are ethnically Korean but over several generations they have started to forget the Korean language. There is a feeling of loss because they are something in between Korean and Chinese. I will try to understand the mentalities and lives of these people through interviews.

**Displacement, war, violence—do you ever feel overwhelmed by the heaviness of the subjects in your works?**

Sometimes, yes. But conversely, pain, sadness, and misery can also be motivators. I feel like I have to speak for the people who are lost in history or who cannot be mentioned, and for these emotions, which are often not documented. I can represent a very clear timeline of a history with my work, but I'd rather emphasize the emotions.

Similarly, the roadblocks that I encounter fuel me more. I'm going to publish a book with my field research for *Shadow Lands*. My plan was to publish and print it in China but no printer would take the job. They have to submit drafts to the Cultural Affairs Bureau, and if the authorities find banned keywords, like "Manchuria," the printers would be in deep trouble. *Shadow Lands* was also censored at a triennial in Hangzhou. The Bureau blacklisted me because I research history and archives—that was the message passed on to me through the museum and curator. But outside of official rules, people in China are curious. They look for new knowledge and they cherish chances to see works. This kind of resistance gives me motivation.



Installation view of *The Shadow Lands Yonder*, 2022, seven-channel video: 24 min 30 sec at "Spinning East Asia Series II: A Net (Dis)entangled," Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile (CHAT), Hong Kong, 2022. Courtesy the artist and CHAT.



Top and bottom: *The Shadow Lands Yonder*, 2022, stills from septuple-channel video: 24 min 30 sec.