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## A Monument of Resilience: Lap See Lam's "Tales of the Altersea"

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When the first attempt at Chinese shadow play was made 2,000 years ago, it was because of love. Emperor Wu (or Han Wudi) was in such pain when his beloved concubine Lady Li passed away that a scholar from Qi (a former state in China) projected her shadow on a tent wall to alleviate his sorrow. At least this is how the collectively written *Book of Han* (206 BCE to 23 CE) traces the tradition of Chinese shadow theater. It's precisely this tradition that is every time evoked anew when speaking about the history and development of (Chinese) cinema.

Naturally, the arena, audience and narration of Chinese shadow theater largely evolved over time. Originally performed in the imperial palaces of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 CE), shadow play served to project illusions in remembrance of deceased relatives or to visualize eternal love.<sup>1</sup> In Buddhist temples of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE), the creation of intricate moving figures enabled the reproduction of a multitude of deities central to the contemporary belief system. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), the practice reached local markets, tea houses, and restaurants, eventually turning into a popular folk art. This form of entertainment seamlessly blended real historical events with old legends and fairy tales. By dissolving societal differences, it became a vessel for cultural identity and collective memories among the diverse populace of imperial China.

The history of puppet theater is also one of displacement. In the 18th century, French missionaries, making use of the Silk Road, first brought the “ombres chinoise” (French for shadow play) to Marseille before other performances took place across Europe.

However, in China, the trajectory of shadow theater took a different turn following the White Lotus Rebellion<sup>2</sup> in the Qing Dynasty. Concerned about potential unrest against the regime, authorities enacted a ban on shadow theater as a public gathering, leading to the arrest of its artists and the decline of its prominence. Despite experiencing a brief revival after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, shadow plays faced ultimate prohibition during the Cultural Revolution, as part of a broader campaign targeting traditional culture and religion nationwide.

The shadow play became a reflection of the country's historical and contemporary developments and its relation to the world. Shaped by political shifts and technological progress, traditional shadow play adapted to the evolving needs and interests of changing times.

The links between the moving images of the shadow play and those presented in what we now know as cinema are already present in Mandarin etymology. While “yingxi” (影戏), meaning “shadow play,” consists of “ying” (影) for shadow, image, photograph or human presence, and “xi” (戏) that can be translated as “to play” or “to have fun.”, the Mandarin translation for cinema, “dianying” (电影), differs only by the character “dian” (电) meaning “electric.” Literally translated as “electric shadow,” “dianying” expands the traditional notion of shadow play and speaks of media evolution.

Over the course of the past years, Swedish artist Lap-See Lam has been invested in extending the technique of shadow play with modern video technology. Her recent work *Tales of the Altersea*<sup>3</sup>, commissioned by and presented at Portikus in 2023, is set in the complex history and present of Hong Kong and its diaspora.



Lap-See Lam, 'Tales of the Altersea', Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023, photo: Tomás Maglione

Before entering Lam's contemporary take on the shadow play, however, visitors first had to pass under a portal located on the Portikus bridge, depicting two dragons hunting and collecting a pearl (*Portal*, 2023). The symbol, probably known to most visitors merely from Chinese restaurants in Europe and therefore often misunderstood by the Western gaze, stands here as a signpost for the shadow play that you would see inside the gallery. Representing the rain deity in Chinese culture, the water dragon dangles among clouds playing with a pearl. In Taoist religion, the benevolent dragons collect the pearl of wisdom in the fog of chaos.<sup>4</sup> The pearl, referring to the moon, the sun, or existence itself, also evokes the city of Hong Kong, which, originally founded as a village for fishing and pearl harvesting, is often called "the pearl of the Orient".

Upon entrance of the exhibition space, the audience was asked to take off their shoes – a ritual sometimes conducted in Chinese households, restaurants and tea houses. Once inside the gallery, the story of two twins, Julie and Dahlia, unfolded in semi-darkness, lit only by moving figures and a green light alluding to a pearl. Two blinking eyes above the entrance quietly follow the spectacle. *Tales of the Altersea*, Lam's immersive 8-channel video installation, tells the story of these two twins, who on their way to Europe, encounter different figures, cultural and religious references, elegantly interwoven by the artist. Throughout the play, they meet Emperor Wu, a freedom swimmer and the

legendary figure Lo Ting. They witness their transitions, mutations and metamorphoses.



Lap-See Lam, 'Tales of the Altersea', Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023, photo: Alwin Lay

The freedom swimmer, representing the thousands of people who attempted to swim from mainland China to Hong Kong

between 1950 and 1990, undergoes a shapeshift, embodying the legendary figure Da Peng, a giant bird that mutated from a Kun Fish. Acknowledged as a legendary entity with roots tracing back to the ancient text of Zhuangzi, the Kun Fish was frequently interwoven in symbolism with the phoenix:

“In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don’t know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the Peng measures I don’t know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven....”<sup>5</sup>

This passage from Zhuangzi’s writings alludes to the twins’ transformative journey from Hong Kong to Europe, accompanied by the benevolent power of the phoenix.



Lap-See Lam, 'Tales of the Altersea', Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023, photo: Alwin Lay

Lo Ting, a man-fish hybrid, emerges from Hong Kong mythology, transitioning from oral tradition to historical records, and is considered the ancestor of the people of Hong Kong living on land and at sea. The first mention of Lo Ting is found in the *Records of the Unusualness in Lingnan* from the Tang Dynasty (618–907), referring to the region south of the Nanling Mountains and its rich diversity of cultures, such as the Hakka, the Teochews, and the She.<sup>6</sup> Both Da Peng and Lo Ting



occasionally reappear as benevolent signs along the path into the unknown.

In Lam's play, the unknown, the waiting, and nocturnal darkness are signified by a figure named Hunger, and allegorically allude to the absence of light. The obscurity of the shadow play, here, may refer to the famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the following Cultural Revolution, sparking waves of emigration to Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup> If the history and tradition of shadow play itself is one characterized by displacement, then Lam's tale, whose imagery is taken from 3D scans she conducted of Chinese restaurants in Sweden, further speaks of the struggles immigrants face on their way towards an unknown future in a foreign country.



Lap-See Lam, 'Tales of the Altersea', Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023, photo: Alwin Lay

What is so remarkable about Lam's piece is that the artist reinvokes traditional elements and production methods, while transforming ancient origins into a timely, immersive, and multidimensional experience. The artist skillfully links historical figures such as Emperor Wu from ancient China, the modern-day freedom swimmer, and mythical characters like Da Peng and Lo Ting from Chinese folklore and presents them in a contemporary 8-channel-video-projection. In a masterful fusion of high-technology with traditional storytelling, Lam convincingly demonstrates the enduring relevance of shadow theater today. Lam's work offers an immersive experience accessible to all, constructing a bridge from the roots of shadow play to a vision

of its possible future forms. Beyond its status as a cherished cultural treasure, this expansion generates new meaning while preserving memories for today's ever-evolving identities.

In this regard, *Tales of the Altersea* not only stands as an immaterial monument to the people of Hong Kong and its diaspora but also becomes a symbol of hope for the numerous ethnic, national or religious groups threatened with land loss and displacement due to war, hunger, poverty, or climate change. Lam's work resonates with those seeking new paths in uncharted territories, as a testament of resilience in the face of the unknown.



Lap-See Lam, 'Tales of the Altersea', Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023, photo: Alwin Lay

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1 Leilei Jia, Jing Wang: "On Yingxi (影戏): exploring the origin of Chinese film aesthetics" in *International Communication of Chinese Culture* (2022): 3. ↑

2 The White Lotus Rebellion (1794-1804) was lead by the White Lotus Society, a secret Buddhist religious group, that intitiated a

tax protest in the provinces of Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi, that became a real thread to the declining Manchu led dynasty. ↑

3 “Altersea” is a fictional terminus for the region of Southeast Asia, invented by a group of academics and activists forming the Altersea Conference. ↑

4 Taoism is one of the five main religions that are written down by the Peoples republic of China to prevent the cultural heritage of old times: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Protestantism/Catholicism. ↑

5 Zi Zhuang, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (Columbia University Press: 1968), trans. Burton Watson: 29–31. “Li” (里) is a traditional Chinese unit for distance and has a standardized length of 500 m or 0,311 miles. ↑

6 See Liu Xun, *Records of the Unusualness in Lingnan* (Lingbiao Lu Yi, 嶺表異錄), Tang Dynasty (618–907). ↑

7 The Great Leap Forward was the initiative of Mao Zedong to recreate the country from an agrarian to an industrial state. The number of deaths was unknown until the 1980s due to the strict information policy, and vaguely remains between 15 and 55 million today. While student protesters in the West still held high the Mao Bible, millions had already been killed by his politics. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a nationwide campaign to fight contra-revolutionary thought and caused another famine, in which 30 million people died. ↑

## Mutant Creature Making Books

Manuel Cirauqui, María Mur Deán

2022-10-20

## Notes on Jochen Lempert’s exhibition.

A, B, C, D, E ...

Melissa Destino

2022-06-05

## Flux and Reflux – A Selection of Moving Images: Razia Barsatie