

Podcast Recording - Gu Xiong

Diane Wong (3:29):

Welcome, Gu. Please tell us a little bit about your background and how you have come to find yourself in Vancouver.

Gu Xiong (3:37):

Well, I came to Canada in 1989 because the Banff Centre for the Arts invited me to be an artist in their residence program in 1989. So that's why I came to Canada the second time because I came to Banff Centre in 1986. That was my first visit as an exchange artist from China. I made a tremendous change during that one year in Banff. I was from two-dimensional work, moved to installation, performance, video, and photography. So it was a wonderful time for me, even though I had to go through a culture shock. In 1989, in September, I arrived in Banff Centre, and I was there for a year. After that year, I decided to move to Vancouver because during my stay in Banff, I came to Vancouver to visit my friend Alvin Balkind, who was a curator. So through him, Vancouver Art Gallery also asked me to give a public talk about China Avant-Garde exhibition in February, 1989. So that's why I came. Then I found Vancouver is pretty much like my hometown Chongqing. The weather, I mean, river, mountains, oceans. So we don't have it. In Chongqing, we only have the Yangtze River, right? Then I found this is a very interesting place, also with the diversity cultural groups in Vancouver. So that's why I stayed up to now. It is interesting, you know, for me to start my life in Canada as an ordinary person, not just as a visitor, you know, it's meaningful to me to go through the difficulty at the beginning to rebuild up my identity, then start to show my art from here to reach different communities from Canada to move forward.

Coco Zhou (6:13):

That was really interesting. I also wanted to just note that 1989 obviously is like a very pivotal year in Chinese state history as well. And this leads us into our next question. So this podcast project is funded by a heritage grant. And so we've been asking our speakers about how the notion of heritage relates to their work. And you are someone who has been long interested in histories and patterns of migration, as well as the emotional experiences of displacement. How does this personal history, as well as your kind of practice and research, affect the way you approach heritage and cultural memory and what those terms mean to you?

Gu Xiong (7:04):

Yeah, I think that it is important for an immigrant artist to start their new life. I came here for freedom to make art, but at the right beginning, I found that I lost my abilities because the language, you know, suddenly stuck me in the bottom of the society. So I had to work in a low-paying job, try to make living, and also try to support my family. But the most important thing I want to do is to do my art, something I couldn't do in China. But that is a big challenge for most people to make art, to make living. But I guess as a contemporary artist, you have to do both. There is no easy way. It was difficult. I was well-known in China. I was a university teacher in China. But to be a busboy, start at a UBC cafeteria. That was my real ground. I was placed in the bottom of the society. But

at that time, I was no choice, but I was so high in my choice to choose to do those low-paying job, to experience this society, and also to understand this culture, from the bottom, and also to stand up. So that was a very important time. I remember my mentor, Alvin Balkind, who said if you want to do contemporary art, then that is something you have to do from the very beginning. Walking in the bottom of a society doesn't mean they are very known, but some of them are very, very interesting people. But walk on it, then time will change. He said, if you make commercial art, then your work can sell \$1,000, but that will be all. It won't go up. But if you do your own work, through exhibitions and through times, then people will be waiting to know you and accept you. So you live to know what could be, right? So he encouraged me to go through the difficulty situations. Then I told myself, I have to do this. When I was sent to the countryside as a youth, doing the Cultural Revolution, in the countryside for four years, that was a very difficult time. I was 17, 18 years old. There was nothing you can hold, except hard work. But I start to do my sketch at that time, recording my everyday life. My thought, my ideas. Then for four years in the countryside, I did around 25 sketchbooks. That is the first step for me to start to do my art, to consider art is meaningful to my life at that time. So when I became a busboy at UBC cafeteria, I always encouraged me, I could go through this again in Canada. But also here are possibilities for everybody to try their best, reach their goal. So 1990, I moved to Vancouver. Then 1991, I had my first exhibition called Gu's World at the Diane Farris Gallery. That show exposed me to the Vancouver public. People start to like my work from that exhibition. Then year by year, I was solo or group exhibitions. So that kind of personal history practice in different cultural background, that gave me a lot of confidence. I found the personal history very important. If we move our experiences to an academic level, then we'll become part of the whole history. I say immigrant, where we come from, how the pioneer came to this land, who make their living to add their value to this place. Something just like I did myself. So then I start to pay attention to the heritage, especially to the memories of those places. If we don't get those memories back, those historical memories will be lost.

Diane Wong (12:09):

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us. It's always very inspiring to share your story because of the amount of struggles and tenacity you held, especially when you first moved to Canada. And during your foray into the Vancouver art world, you have worked with Centre A on a lot of different projects, like the solo exhibition you had back in 2020. But what was the most memorable instance of collaborations for you with Centre A?

Gu Xiong (12:38):

Yeah, Centre A is important to my art support and to have a foundation to rely on. I remember in 1998, through Centre A, they organized the Jiangnan project to involve over 14 art galleries to be a part of the project. So I was one of the artists in Jiangnan Project. My exhibition was at the Artspeak Gallery. So Canadian Art has an article to review the Jiangnan Project, also to talk about my installation, the river. So it was a very good publicity through the whole country. So that was something to think about local artists around Centre A, who could help local artists move to the national and

international communities. That was a very good example. But also for my recent exhibition at Centre A in 2020, *The Remains of a Journey*, also was a very good experience at the time, because it was difficult doing the hand-band-make. To prepare for this exhibition, I had taken my spectacle from UBC to focus on my research, to go through the five Chinese historical sites, two in Vancouver, three on Vancouver Island. Also conducted research from BC Museum and Archives. From right beginning to the end of the exhibition, it was a close relationship with Centre A, with the people from Centre A. I really appreciated what I received help from the whole thing, through Centre A and the Canton Saline. You know, that kind of cooperation with Centre A became a part of my work, part of my link to the community.

Coco Zhou (14:55):

Thank you so much. That was really nice to hear. And we're curious about the *Remains of a Journey*. The part that was shown at Centre A was a process of you going to these three different historic sites in BC, which you are kind of doing the work of excavating the history of 19th century Chinese immigration. So there was the destroyed bone house of Harling Point, there was the leopard colony on Darcy Island, and then there was the burned down Chinatown and Cumberland. What was it like for you to encounter these sites and kind of be there in person?

Gu Xiong (15:34):

I, from time by time, I think since 2011, I started to pay attention to the community, Chinese community, immigrants' community history. I want to know what happened in British Columbia, in Vancouver and Victoria, or Vancouver Island especially. So first, I went to Harling Point. You know, that was a very shocking sight. You know, around 800 Chinese immigrants, their bones were buried there because their bones couldn't return to China during the Second World War. Their tombstone is all facing the Pacific. I went to those graves several times. One time I went there was the bright moon, you know, shining the side of the cemetery. So I was really moved at that moment. The bone house starts from the beginning of 1900. They were not house, like a very simple thing. Chinese immigrants after they buried for seven years and took out, then shipped across Canada to Harling Point to be washed, then use a white cotton to wipe the bone, then put into a small wooden box, then ready to ship back to China to Canton to their hometown to be buried. That was all of people's wishes. After they die, they still want to return to China. The hometown became the most important place in their life. But linked to globalization, in 19th century, they ship those small wooden boxes of people's bones, back to China. But now it looks like those cargo ships carrying on those metal containers across the Pacific to Canada and the world. The things not tremendously changed, but that kind of emotion as individual, the tombstones, tells the story.

Then later on, I went to Cumberland Chinatown. I was also shocked. You know, I went to many Chinatowns in the world. When I travel to other countries, the things I want to see is Chinatown. But I was also shocked at that time. You know, there was only the Main Street there, but on the two sides were those houses, totally despaired by those jungles. You know. So when I walk on that street, I try to imagine what happened through some information board on the two sides of that Main Street, of Compton, to tell

what building was there, what people were there running their business. To talk about over 3,000 Chinese mining workers and their families lived at that place for over half a century. Yeah, that kind of history. Oh, despaired. I tried to discover some objects on the two sides of the Main Street in the bush. I did find out both containers and the foragers to show the Chinese immigrants were there. But also to see those apple trees they planted there, still there to grow the apples. But also in that Harling Point, the Chinatown area, you can find those charcoals. And you could see the yellow flowers around that area. This place disappeared, but something still remains there. I remember I went to Barkville in 2009 for my research. So Barkville had the federal government funding to rebuild the Barkville Chinatown through over 15 to 20 years, but they did that. So it is for the tourists, but also for the history, of course.

So I wish Cumberland could be like that. But in another way, building Chinatown like that, also is a vision of the history. If we don't pay attention, what could happen? For Cumberland, they also have the Chinese cemetery outside of the city. Over 200 people buried there, hide their tombstones, but also side by side with the Japanese side of the people who buried around that place. But the most important place for me to go was Darcy Island. From around 1875, the BC government started to send those Chinese rippers to Darcy Island to isolate them. You know, there was no drinking water. The government only sent living supplies, like food and water to them every three months. So basically, those people had to survive by themselves. I found this history wasn't that much people know about this history. It was an empty place, only had some house foundations, but they had a display board to talk about this history. On the east side of the Darcy Island, on the west side of Darcy Island, which is a lot of Chinese leper patients were living there. After the beginning, there are still some Chinese leper patients. Then they decided to move to another island. So there was only one plate on a stone made by Victoria government. It's from the year 2000 or sometime. They finally recognized those people, I think around 14 people who died on that island who has names. So that's why they put those names there.

So I went there two times, 2016 with my wife, the second time with my daughter and her husband Tom, because two of them were helping me to make a drawn video for the installation, you know, for my exhibition. I went there also with the park people to help us to document those histories. I tried to imagine what are those Chinese people doing every day, right? After they die, at the beginning, they try to bury each other, but at the end, they couldn't do that because they don't have energies. Then they just use the white sheet to wipe the body, and then put it into the water to let the ocean take the body away. So those three places, which are the most disappearing, died. If we don't keep those memories, it will be gone after 50 years or even sooner, because the grass will take over. But also in Vancouver, there are two places, like the Fraserville Chinese Immigrants Cemetery. Those hundreds of Chinese immigrants, they decided to bury their bodies there. For me, they must want to make their statement. They belong here. So that also touches me a lot. Those cemeteries are the open museums to be discovered by younger generations. So I also told to Chris Lee, because for the Asian immigrant study at UBC, I said, I think it's very important to bring those students to this

site. And also another one is Westminster Chinese Cemetery, but now replaced by the high school. So that was a place even though totally wiped out.

But I'm glad Centre A paid lots of attention to those histories, to those individuals, and also to help artists to make such exhibitions to link to those issues. If we talk to people about those memories, that means the history is alive, the people are alive.

Diane Wong (25:35):

Yeah, thank you so much for answering that question for us in such depth. It's really great to hear about, you know, your research behind the project and how you want this to be passed on to next generations as well. I know that you give, for context, for listeners, I'm in the curatorial program at UBC, so I know you give a lot of the book to MFA students when you were teaching them. I see them carry them around. It's very nice to know that it's passed on as well. I guess kind of our last question is that since, you know, *The Remains of a Journey* ran from peak pandemic time, from November 20 to February 2021, how did the politically charged atmosphere of the pandemic and also all the anti-Asian racism that was arising influence the way that your work was received, especially in relation to the leper colony of Darcy Island? Did that kind of change the way that you view the exhibition?

Gu Xiong (26:44):

At the time, during the pandemic, it was difficult. We never know this show may be open or may not be. Also, how many people could come? We all have no idea. That kind of uncertainty is always there. But people come to the opening, even though they wear the mask. And some of them talked to me, they told me, if they don't see those images, they still have no idea about what happened. Especially during the pandemic, people at the beginning, Trump, you know, talked about the Chinese disease. But that was linked to the history during the Darcy Islands, Chinese leper things happening at the time. They talked about the Chinese disease. There was no change. Those immigrants came to Canada looking for opportunities to make money and bring money home. And later on, they couldn't return. Then they tried to make this place their home. As a labourer, working hard, working seven days a week, no holidays. That is the thing you can change in reality. Looking to what they sent back to home, they make big wooden chests, then put everyday supplies like rice flour, cooking oil, and toys or whatever. They sent back to home. Those objects as part of their passion and memories. So that is something, you know, linked to myself at the beginning. When I walk in the cafeteria, I start to teach as a session teacher in a car for the weekend or evening course. To bring that labour from physical to the intellectual, together, start from the beginning for my practice. So later on, I taught in SFU, Quentin University College. I became a session teacher at UBC in 1998 before I became a full-time teaching professor. So that was something interesting when I looked back. That labour is something we have to look into, what labour is produced for individuals, but also for society, for culture. I'm glad you put that history there.

Coco Zhou (29:33):

Yeah, thank you so much. I was thinking about the paintings of the crushed soda cans and that series of work is just like really fascinating to me because it's such an interesting kind of condensed take on, there's a history of commodification there too, and consumption, but also, yeah, is linked to your job as a cafeteria worker.

Gu Xiong (29:58):

I'm glad you mentioned that. That was the beginning. So how do I find my reality as a busboy in the university cafeteria? How do I find the meanings of the job? Whatever I do every day, that crushed cans was an inspiration to think about my identity. When I saw that in the cafeteria, I saw students put their feet to crush cans after a drink. They want to hear that crushing sound. I saw those crushed cans. They are unique. You cannot find the two exactly the same shape of the cans. I also like to mention that if you look into my crushed cans, then you look at Andy Warhol's soup can. That is a very different thing. Andy Warhol's soup can talks about everyone like everyone under mass production. But for me, those individual crushed cans are from no life to become life, to be that individual after crushing.