Beyond the Marginalized Asian Other: From Tseng Kwong Chi's *New York, New York* (1979)

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On the evening of December 9, 1980, over six hundred guests of New York's cultural, economic, and political elite circle attended the MET Gala for the opening of the exhibition *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644–1912*, which showcased lavishly embroidered imperial robes worn by Chinese emperors and empresses.[1] Tseng Kwong Chi, a Hong Kong-born New York-based conceptual and performance artist, also gained access to this Party of the Year as a journalist representing the *Soho Weekly News*.[2] With his grey "Mao suit" and Asian appearance, Tseng stood out among the crowd of Caucasian-looking guests, who dressed in luxurious formal wear adorned by "a kind of New York Chinoiserie" style.[3] Since many mistook him for a Chinese diplomat, Tseng took advantage of his masquerade, snapping photos with many major figures of the art, fashion, and political world, which were later featured in his *Costumes at the Met* series.[4]

In one of the MET Gala photos featuring Tseng with Paloma Picasso, the daughter of Pablo Picasso and Françoise Gilot, Tseng was standing rigidly in his Mao suit with a smile on his face (Fig. 1). Besides him, Picasso wore a long black dress featuring a plunging v-neckline. An intricately embroidered frock was wrapped around her shoulders, with billowing sleeves inspired by Japanese kimonos cascaded at the front.[5] According to curator Amy Brandt, she sees Picasso's dress as lacking cultural specificity, thus leading to the fetishization of the Orient, while Tseng in his Mao suit represents the non-white Other, who are marginalized in the dominant Western representations and narratives.[6] Therefore, she argues that the contrast between Picasso and Tseng "raises questions about the authentic experience of Asian culture."[7] However, what does "authenticity" mean? Is there such a thing as the authentic Asian experience? Focusing on *New York, New York* from his *East Meets West* photography series as a compelling case study, I argue that Tseng uses the in-between fluidity of his Asian-American identity to deny a single flat definition of authenticity or the "authentic Asian experience" through the seemingly transparent, readable-at-once and repetitive rendering of his work (Fig. 2). His photograph not only challenges the cultural non-specificity and superficiality of how mainstream Western culture fetishizes Asians or non-Westerners in general, but also offers a more nuanced understanding of the marginalized Other beyond a static label.

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1 Amy Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Politics of Performance," in *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera*, ed. Amy Brandt (Norfolk: Chrysler Museum of Art, 2015), 50; Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, "On Infiltration," in *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera*, ed. Amy Brandt (Norfolk: Chrysler Museum of Art, 2015), 87.

2 Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi," 87.

3 Brandt, 18; Muna Tseng and Ping Chong, "Slutforart." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no.1 (2000): 119.

4 Brandt, 50; Chambers-Letson, "On Infiltration," 87.

5 Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi," 52-53; Chambers-Letson, "On Infiltration," 88.

6 Brandt, 51–53.

7 Brandt, 51–53.

Left
Figure 1
Tseng Kwong Chi, *Paloma Picasso and Tseng Kwong Chi*, 1980, printed 1997. Gelatin silver print, 7 x 7 in. (image); 10 x 8 in. (sheet). Image by courtesy of Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York.

Below
Figure 2
Tseng Kwong Chi, *New York, New York*, 1979, printed 2016. Silver gelatin selenium toned, 51 x 40.8 cm (print), 38.2 x 38.1 cm (image). M+, Hong Kong.

Within the square frame of this black and white *New York, New York* photo, Tseng was captured wearing the same Mao suit and standing in front of the Statue of Liberty, a popular tourist attraction in New York City, as well as a symbol of freedom, democracy, and welcoming of immigrants.[8] Rather than looking into the camera and presenting a smile as in the *Costumes at the Met* series, Tseng gazed out into the distance and concealed any sign of emotion behind those reflective sunglasses. His left hand rested casually in his pants pocket, while his right hand raised slightly and gripped a shutter release, from which a connected cable dangles out of the picture frame. Since the camera was positioned at a lower angle solely focusing on Tseng, his scale loomed large, thereby shadowing the Statue in the background. This photograph is part of a larger body of his most well-known works the *East Meets West* series and later evolved into the *Expeditionary Series*, which were taken between 1979 and 1990.[9] Donning the same Mao suit, wearing sunglasses, and sometimes with a fake identification badge, Tseng took photos for himself in front of popular tourist destinations, from New York City, where he was based, to across the US and later around the world.[10]

While specific compositional details vary in the *East Meets West* series, such as whether Tseng was wearing sunglasses or the ID badge, his posture, the setting, and the camera angle, the Mao suit consistently occurs in every photo. Although Tseng accidentally came across the idea of donning the Mao suit, how he used the embodied social and historical context signified by the uniform to construct a seemingly simple but inherently complex narrative is worth exploring. Much existing literature mentioned the following incident as the starting point of Tseng's adoption of the Mao suit.[11] In 1979, Tseng scheduled to dine out with his family at an upscale New York restaurant, but realized that he did not own any suits that adhered to the dress code. Throwing on the only suit he owned—a Mao suit purchased from a thrift store in Montreal, he was mistakenly greeted as a Chinese dignitary by the restaurant staff. Inspired by this experience, this uniform was transformed from a random pick to a go-to masquerade outfit in his *East Meets West* series. Appearing across a hundred photographs in the Mao suit, Tseng's identity was gradually replaced by a mistaken yet obviously displaced Chinese Communist dignitary.[12]

What Tseng constructed as an "ambiguous ambassador" moved away from the nineteenth-century American visual portrayal of the "Chinamen," which used narrow eyes with epicanthic folds, blouses, and a long, braided cue to convey a sense of Chineseness or Asianness.[13] Facing the influx of Chinese immigrants as cheap laborers in the wake of the Qing Dynasty's decline, examples with the Oriental lens, such as Bret Harte's poem *The Heathen Chinee* (1870) (Fig. 3) or the costumes note for George Baker's play *New Brooms Sweep Clean* (1871) (Fig. 4), depicted the Chinese male as unmasculine, sexually unattractive, yet slightly eerie, which manifested the fear of the mainstream white American society towards the non-white Other.[14] Inspired by Nixon's visit to China and his meeting with Mao in 1972, Tseng, standing astride in his Mao suit, evoked a sense of anxiety and curiosity towards a shifted Chineseness engineered by the US government during the Cold War. This emergent imagination envisioned Communist China as a rising world power under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who emphasized socialist rather than capitalist modernity, standardization rather than diversity, and collectivism

8 Malini Johar Schueller, *Locating Race: Global Sites of Post-Colonial Citizenship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 115.

9 Lynn Gumpert, "Introduction," in *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera*, eds. Amy Brandt (Norfolk: Chrysler Museum of Art, 2015), 11–12.

10 Gumpert, "Introduction," 11–12.

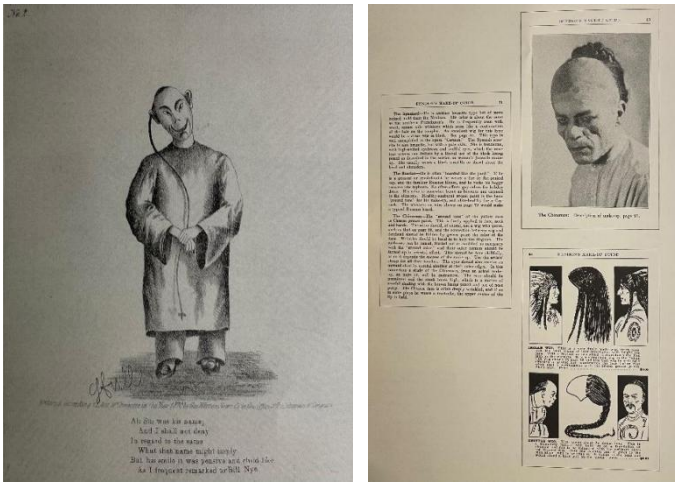
11 Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi," 29; Iyko Day, "Tseng Kwong Chi and the Eugenic Landscape," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 91; Malini Johar Schueller, "Claiming Postcolonial America: The Hybrid Asian-American Performances of Tseng Kwong Chi," in *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, eds. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 175; Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 223.

12 Warren Liu, "How Not to See (or, How Not to *Not* See) the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi," *Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 2 (2014): 37.

13 Christine Lombard, "Tseng Kwong Chi: East Meets West," filmed 1984, 16mm film, 6:30 min; Metzger, *Chinese Looks*, 38;

14 Metzger, *Chinese Looks*, 36; John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze," in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, eds. Margo Machida (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 17–18.

rather than individualism.[15] By donning the Mao suit and thus amplifying his racially marked body, Tseng staged himself as "out-of-place" to disrupt the continued and normalized Orientalist discourse in the US, which upholds the dominant white mainstream culture while marginalizing the non-white Other by imagining a fetishized inscrutable Orient and a feared yellow peril.



Left
Figure 3
Hull, Joseph. Visualization of Bret Harte's Ah Sin from the *Heathen Chinee* poem, 1870, in John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze," in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Margo Machida (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 17.

Right
Figure 4
The Chinaman makeup from *Denison's Make-Up Guide for Amateur and Professional*, 1932, in John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze," in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Margo Machida (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 16.

While reading Tseng's Mao series as a deconstructive critique of the stereotypical Oriental Other, it is important to note the risk of overemphasizing Tseng with his Mao suit as simply signifying a stable racial or ethnic identity. As Anne Cheng reminds us, "the attribution of subversive intentionality…does not get us away from the problem that, when it comes to the spectacle of the stereotype, execution and parody look uncomfortably similar…[S]ubversion, after all, replays rather than sidesteps the fetish."[16] Although Tseng utilized his Asian appearance with the Mao suit to construct a recognizable and seemingly credible Chinese dignitary figure to gain access to the MET gala, reading into his biography nonetheless complicates his Asian-American identity and challenges the notion of authenticity. After the Communist Party took over mainland China in 1949, Tseng's family, with his father formally serving in the Kuomintang, fled from Shanghai to Hong Kong, where Tseng was born in 1950.[17] He immigrated to Vancouver with his family in 1966 and continued his art education in Paris. In 1978, he decided to move to New York to develop his career as a photography and performance artist until he passed away in 1990.[18] Tseng's life journey embodies an Asian diasporic experience, which traversed across diverse cultures and geographic locations. The fact that Tseng never returned to China after leaving Hong Kong in 1966 challenged the practice of racializing bodies with appearance and clothing and simply labeling them as having the most authentic or original experiences without considering the complex background of each individual.[19] Adding another layer of ironic twist, what Tseng thought of as a Mao suit was, in fact, invented by Sun Yat-sen and adopted as the Nationalist Army suit, which was later worn by Communist leaders and ordinary Chinese citizens. Therefore, I argue that Tseng's work challenges attempts that flatten and simplify race, ethnicity, or any other identity category into labels or stereotypes and demands a critical examination of the socio, cultural, and historical impact on each individual, who has been racially labeled and stereotyped in the past.

Apart from the Mao suit, the shutter release that Tseng held in his hand, which conflates him as the photographer and the subject at the same time, is another consistent visual element that appeared not only in *New York, New York* but in every photo of the *East Meets West*

15 Warren Liu, "How Not to See," 37; Metzger, *Chinese Looks*, 168, 226, 228.

16 Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42.

17 Brandt, "Tseng Kwong Chi," 26.

18 Schueller, "Claiming Postcolonial America," 174.

19 Warren Liu, "How Not to See," 34.

series. Although Tseng started photographing himself because it was practical and inexpensive, being both the photographer and the model meant he could not only decide the costume, props, and settings during the photo shoot, but also how the photos would be edited, printed, and circulated during the post-production stage.[20] As Ariella Azoulay argued, photography consists of a "dynamic field of power relations" that distributes power (albeit unevenly) among photographer, subject, space, apparatus, and viewer(s).[21] Here, I would like to bring in the photography works by John Thomson, the first Western photographer to travel through China and document images of Chinese royals, government officials, and ordinary people in the nineteenth century, to further explain how Tseng's work combined multiple sources of power, thus assigning agency to the often passive non-white Other as the subject in photographs.[22]

Although Thomson claimed that his photographs were faithful representations of China and its people, the central aim of his project was to capture "characteristic scenes and types," which imposed the Victorian English belief on the hierarchy of race and civilization on the unfamiliar Orient Other to facilitate and justify the extension of the British Empire.[23] Taking the *Machu Bride in Her Wedding Clothes* (1871-1872) as an example, we observe a woman with her servant sitting in front of a portable monochromatic screen, a prop that appeared in numerous other of Thomson's negatives (Fig. 5). Behind the screen, unfocused glimpses of pillars, stairs, and doors leak out, which proved to be the domestic space of a government official, Yang Fang, who befriended Thomson and invited him into his home.[24] Thus, the power dynamic in this photograph is divided between Yang, the male head of the household, the woman with her servant, and Thomson behind the camera. Both the smile on the woman's face, as a sign of being at ease, and the invitation from Yang, as offering normally impossible access into a private home, revealed Thomson's photographer status as

Figure 5
John Thomson, *Manchu Bride in Her Wedding Clothes*, 1871–1872. Wellcome Collection, London.

dependent and vulnerable. However, the screen as the backdrop not only helped reclaim his compromised control over the arrangement of the photo shoot, but also alluded to how he would later crop the background details on the periphery to isolate the woman with her servant from their contexts in an attempt to position them as a static "type" simply labeled as a "Machu bride" viewed under the Victorian imperial ideology and anthropological practice. The final product would be similar to this photograph entitled *A Machu Bride* (1871-1872) with a neatly cropped background and an emphasis on the upper body, especially the head (Fig. 6).

Similar to Thomson's work, Tseng's *New York, New York* seemingly captured a Chinese dignitary figure with Tseng's racially marked body donning the Mao suit. Compared to the woman as Thomson's model who had no control over the arrangement of the photo shoot and

20 Gumpert, "Introduction," 11.

21 Ariella Azoulay, Rela Mazali, and Ruvik Danieli, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 112; Sean Willcock, "The Aesthetics of the Negative: Orientalist Portraiture in the Digitized Collodion Plates of John Thomson (1837-1921)," *Phootoresearcher* 30 (2018): 96–110.

22 Willlock, "The Aesthetics of the Negative," 96–110.

23 Thomas Prasch, "Mirror Images: John Thomson's Photographs of East Asia," in *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*, eds. Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 55.

24 Willlock, "The Aesthetics of the Negative," 96–110.

Figure 6

John Thomson, *A Manchu Bride*, 1871–1872. Wellcome collection, London.

the post-production process of developing, cropping, and circulating, Tseng combined the power of the photographer, subject, space, and apparatus into a single sovereignty, which became strong enough to allow him to infiltrate into the elite class that Tseng himself did not belong to, such as in the occasion of the MET gala, and challenge the only source of power left, the viewers' stereotypes towards racial and ethnicity identities.[25] With his mobility to travel across the US and the world when most people in China were not able to do so, he chose to pose not against a Communist Chinese background or in front of a monochromatic studio screen like what Thomson did, but physically in front of the Statue of Liberty, a neoclassical sculpture of the Roman goddess of liberty, Libertas, which became synonymous with values of freedom, equality, and democracy that the US claim to uphold. By juxtaposing the Chinese dignitary persona with the symbol of the US, Tseng disrupted the power dynamic between the dominant white culture and the marginalized non-white Other, arranging this out-of-place alien-like ambassador to intrude into both the physical space and the photography surface. This juxtaposition not only allows Tseng, as an Asian-American gay artist, to disrupt the exclusive institutions of the art world that have traditionally denied access to artists of color, women, and queer, but also diminishes the safe distance for the dominant culture to imagine the marginalized other, smashing the fetish and fear right in front of their faces.[26] Here, I propose that Tseng's work goes beyond a simple binary distinction that divides between West and non-West, white and non-white, but inspires the critique against how the dominant oppresses the marginalized, allowing further room to encompass a spectrum of identities and denying a simple stable racial or ethnicity divide.

In this essay, I mainly highlighted two central formal elements: the Mao suit donned on Tseng's racially marked body and the shutter release with a dangling cable held in his hand in Tseng's photograph *New York, New York*. They offer viewers an opportunity to explore how Tseng constructed a distinctive yet displaced persona of a Chinese dignitary to critique how the dominant culture controls the marginalized Other with the Orientalism discourse and further challenge any practices that label and stereotype identities.

25 Chambers-Letson, "On Infiltration," 97, 102, 107.

26 Chambers-Letson, 107.

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