

## ***Testing, Contesting***

*susan pui san lok*

### **TESTING, TESTING**

One, two

One, two

An awkward punch, a double hit  
Something to do with the stance, the mix?  
Two sweeps and you ('you'?) are forgotten  
Two swipes and we ('we'?) are flattened

'British Chinese' or 'Chinese British'?  
A question of legality, legitimacy?  
Or birthright and citizenry?  
Or cultural priority?  
Misdirection, perhaps

Right, left, right – pivot  
Left, right, left – pivot  
See / hear 'BBC'  
Hear / see 'British-Born Chinese'

Post-war, post-'Auntie'  
Our heritages barely known, rarely seen  
We less beloved, uncommon 'Beeb'

Three letters – make haste to claim and escape

How to speak to and note the sudden shifts, the subtle drifts  
Slips and glitches between generation-entangled-geographies-entwined  
Enamoured and otherwise beside our selves  
Between tongues and ties

I say, I say, I say –  
Ha, ha, say, say –  
Say what?  
Name! Name!

Provisional, divisional, always the same old

Un-same  
Un-name  
Hold on – in the face of the fixing, to fastening  
Let go – of identities taken, mistaken

One, two  
One, two

Testing  
Contesting

We con and we test  
We trick and divest

Cheat and fool  
Pull the wool  
Whose eyes and ears?

*Con* – thoroughly –  
Thoroughly with –  
With and against

I am not what I am but what I do

\*

### THREE MOMENTS (MORE AND LESS)

1997 (1998)  
London / Hong Kong / London  
*97 Proofs and Witness*

Between East and South (the Black Lion pub in Plaistow and 198 Gallery in Brixton), I cook up some proofs. Ninety-seven slogans to commemorate the Handover – the return of Britain's last colony to China, and the so-called 'end of Empire'. Ninety-seven declarations, provocations, accusations – wilfully inauthentic; invoking the thriving trade in fake goods and the ubiquity of Handover memorabilia; playing on colonial clichés, imperialist sentiments, and orientalisating impulses.

Armed with bad puns and bad copies yet disarmed in the face of the Historical Moment, my wordless testimony fills a white cube with paper – blank strips of cash register rolls suspended, a sombre forest of colourless ticker tape. Rough audio caught on a Dictaphone fills the air with sounds from a mid-century mid-rise in Hong Kong. Cantonese opera on the radio, cooking sounds, traffic noises.

Some words to myself:

live, heavy and light  
[...]  
Far West and shifting  
Sifting dialects, modernities, minorities  
[...]  
Neither here and / nor there  
This movement, belonging  
[...]  
live, heavy and light  
[...]  
Here, not here, in flux  
Air dense with un- and not-yet-said  
  
[...]

(2003, 2005, 2006) 2007 (2014, 2015, 2017, ongoing)

Berkeley / London / Hong Kong / Montreal / Guangzhou / Venice

*Golden (Vistas, Songs, Years, Lessons, Notes, Untitled (Ballroom / Pavilion / Shower)*

From a temporary home in the Berkeley Hills, I dream multiple strands interweaving, opening up endings, into the fray. I aspire towards a critical diasporic aesthetics, a dispersed imaginary space (or spaces), seeking to evoke the movements and co-temporalities of languages, cultures, histories and subjects in flux. No guarantees. Some consolation, perhaps, in the seemingly familiar. Affecting or disaffecting more by happenstance than design. Here and/nor there, aspirations to 'settle' and 'return' might not be contradictory. Here and/nor there, 'nostalgia' might be mobilized in more complex ways than a 'backward' gaze. Inhabiting and performing identity and culture as movement, as language; as language in movement. The route 'towards' may lie behind; the path 'back', before us. Nostalgia and aspiration as mode or medium for inscribing, inhabiting, disrupting, mis/translating our displaced subjectivities, memories and territories. Nostalgia and aspiration as entwined romances, sentiments and fantasies. How to be alert to the partiality of the past, and our partiality in the present? How to be remember the incompleteness and sided-ness – the habitual blindsiding, and resist?

[...]

In the video triptych, *Vistas* (2005), the Golden Gate bridge fades in and out, present and absent. An emblem of possibility, prosperity and despair; a suicide landmark. A frontier, a feat, a mirage from three perspectives: before, beside and beyond, over bay, strait, and ocean waters. From afar, the threshold, gateway and portal appear at once concrete and elusive, at turns shadowy and solid. Shrouded by clouds or skimming sheet-metal waters, bridges recede into a succession of romantic skies. A boat trip in the bay brings hard structural edges into view, then dissolving as they double and disappear. Beyond the bridge, the Pacific lies in wait, placid waters from afar replaced by violent waves.

In the sound pieces, *Songs I – VI* (2005-2017), instances of the lyric ‘golden’ collide to produce a series of audio interludes, condensed choruses at turns joyful, plaintive, and wistful. *Songs I, II, III* were conceived as a disconnected soundtrack to *Vistas*, derived from iTunes search results. *Songs IV* came together in an afternoon workshop with musicians and artists from Montreal. *Songs V* was composed between Hong Kong, China and London, tracks nominated by artists and curators involved in the Guangzhou Triennial. *Songs VI* was made in London for Venice, tracks nominated by the artists and curators of the Diaspora Pavilion, to whom it was dedicated.

In *Years* (2006), fifty short sequences span two cities, two screens and five decades, alluding to the negotiation and tending of memory and territory. Between Hong Kong and England, in coterminous and uneven relation, original and archival footage aligns ballrooms and allotments, cultural displays and contact improvisation – disparate yet complementary spaces of cultivation, interrupted by the informal, habitual gestures of everyday conversation.

In *Untitled* (2006, 2015, 2017), a shimmering curtain suggests a temporary wall and enclosure, mutating from permeable border to intimate architectural body. In Lambeth, south London, the upper floor of a nineteenth century Ragged School becomes an ad hoc (*Ballroom*), rematerializing ten years later on the third floor of the Guangdong Museum of Art. In Venice, the shimmer multiplies and doubles across two floors of a Gothic palazzo. (*Pavilion*) obscures the portico with a succession of undulating gold screens, an immersive and disorientating dream-space that flickers and sways with the light and movement of bodies. Upstairs, amid ruby tiles and an avocado suite, (*Pavilion*) contracts and expands into a (*Shower*), an inviting yet claustrophobic alternate space of reverie.

In *Mobile Ballroom, Mobile Chorus* (2006) and *DIY Ballroom/Live* (2007/2007), these various exercises in engineered spontaneity bring voices and gestures into momentary collective action, acts of participation, interruption, unity and dissipation.

In *Golden Hour*, the opening and closing bars from every track in my parents’ vinyl collection form a makeshift medley of unfinished songs – disjuncture and possibility in perpetual loop.

[...]

(2013, 2015, 2016) 2017 (ongoing)

Hong Kong (China, Taiwan and Singapore) / London / Hong Kong

*RoCH Fans and Legends*

When I am four, Hong Kong sees the first television broadcasts of Jin Yong’s *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and *Return of the Condor Heroes*. I watch it on a London/Essex border, on bootleg video.

When I am four, Maxine Hong Kingston recalls her semi-fictive, tongue-tied younger self: 'What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?' I find *The Woman Warrior* some fifteen years later, in a Wakefield charity shop.

When I am twenty, Hong Kingston's woman warrior affirms what I know but struggle to say – that there is no essence of 'Chinese-ness' and 'Chinese culture' to be found – that everything, in a sense, is 'stories' – that there are no disciplines or traditions of literature, folklore, poetry, that cannot be breached or broached – that translation is necessary to speech.

She invites us to remember and imagine ourselves among our biological, adoptive, cultural and fictive female forebears and peers; romantically, sentimentally, critically. As swordswomen, warriors and/as martial artists, we are perhaps more often engaged in prosaic than poetic battles. Nevertheless, we search for ways to see and be seen, to wield words and images according to our commitments and promises, to adopt guises across ages, to ventriloquise, and animate ghosts. To keep translating, and moving. Or conversely, to still the motion, kill the speed, for a moment.

[...]

Louis Cha, AKA

Cha Leung-yung / Zha Liangyong / Jin Yong

susan pui san lok, AKA

Susan Pei San Lok: Susan P-E-I, S-A-N (two words, no hyphen) Lok: L-O-K... Or Lok3 Pui3 Saan1... Or Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3 Saan1... Or Susan Lok... Or Susie / Sue, or Su-without-an-e... Or Susan Pui San Lok: Susan P-U-I, S-A-N (two words, no hyphen) Lok... Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3-hyphen-Saan1... Or Susan Pui San (one word, no hyphen) Lok... Or Susan, Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or (no caps) susan pui san lok

[...]

When I am forty, I begin to wonder about my dislocated and repeated encounters with *The Condor Trilogy* – its iconic scenes and amorphous dreams reinvented and recurring.

*Story of the Vulture Conqueror* (1958)  
*The Story of the Great Heroes* (1960)  
*Story of the Sword and the Sabre* (1963/1965)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1976)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (1976)  
*The Brave Archer* (1977)  
*Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1978)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1978)  
*The Brave Archer 2* (1978)

*The Brave Archer 3* (1981)  
*The Brave Archer and his Mate* (1982)  
*Little Dragon Maiden* (1983)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1983)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (1983)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (1984)  
*The Hidden Power of the Dragon Sabre* (1984)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1984)  
*New Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1986)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1988)  
*The Saviour of the Soul / 91 Shen Diao Xia Lu* (1991)  
*The Saviour of the Soul 2 / 92 Shen Diao Xia Lu* (1992)  
*Rage and Passion* (1992)  
*The Condor Heroes Return* (1993)  
*The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (1993)  
*Kung Fu Cult Master* (1993)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1993)  
*The Mystery of the Condor Hero* (1993)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1994)  
*Ashes of Time* (1994)  
*The Condor Heroes Return* (1994)  
*The Condor Heroes 95* (1995)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (1998)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (1998)  
*The Eagle Shooting Heroes, vols. 1-38* (1998)  
*The Eagle Shooting Heroes, vols. 1-38* (2000)  
*Shachou Eiyuuden – The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (2000)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (2000)  
*The Legend of the Condor Hero* (2001)  
*Return of the Condor Heroes, vols. 1-18* (2001)  
*Legendary Couple* (2002)  
*Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (2002)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (2003)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (2003)  
*The Return of the Condor Heroes* (2006)  
*Ashes of Time Redux* (2008)  
*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (2008)  
*The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (2009)  
*The Romance of the Condor Heroes* (2014)  
*Legend of the Condor Heroes* (2017)

[...]

One day in early 2013, I enter variations of ‘Return of the Condor Legends’ into Google, and save the image search results. Later, in a derelict gallery, I print and hang these as a series of

scroll-like images. The 'global archive' accelerates ways towards innumerable adaptations, translations and circulations, signalling particular and generic iconographies, and the uneven, overlapping visual-linguistic circuits of transmission. These gallery-hung *Entries* are followed by digital *Variations*, the images redacted to shift attention from celebrity to archetype, and generic *wuxia* stylings. A VCD of the popular 1983 Hong Kong TVB production of *Return of the Condor Heroes* plays in the space, Cantonese soundtrack and Mandarin dub simultaneously audible. A circular heap of origami condors or eagles or vultures rests on the floor, a further pile of paper inviting additions. Translation as a folding process; systematic, without sameness. On the wall I write:

/ Shen2 Dia01 Xia2 Lu3 / San4 Diu1 Haap6 Leoi5 / San Diu Hap Lui / Sun Diu Hap Lui  
/ Sin TiauW Hiap Lui / Shin Chou Kyou Ryo / Shin Cho Kyo Ryo: Kondoru Hiro / Than  
Dieu Hiep Lu / Kembalinya Sang Pendakar Rajawali / Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight /  
The Legendary Couple / Return of The Condor Heroes / Romance of the Condor  
Heroes

[...]

Later still, contravision vinyls cast *wuxia* shadows through an arts centre's revolving doors. Wallpaper transforms the gallery foyer into a peach blossom isle, denoting fictive televisual idylls and an actual location in Zhejiang, China. In the darkened gallery and online, *Trailers* samples the title sequences, theme songs and publicity shots from some twenty adaptations of the trilogy, interweaving mundane Google street views and mythical landscapes with fantasies of fight and flight. In a further gallery, gravity-defying figures leap continually across three screens. Here, *Trilogies* draws on fan uploads of thirteen televisual versions of the trilogy made between Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Singapore, between 1983 and 2015, condensing 400 or so hours of footage into a catalogue of lightness, weightlessness, and perpetual flight.

Simultaneous gestures and similar movements, repeated encounters and exchanges – yet the digital grain, stylisation and captions, differentiating by language and technologies, intimate the disparate generations and geographies to which multiple subtitles and dubbed voices speak.

[...]

'RoCH' refers both to a popular abbreviation of *Return of the Condor Heroes*, and to its many spectacular returns – its numerous regenerations and degenerations, its tropes, fantasies and archetypes, its 'bad copies', 'poor images' and 'pidgin translations'. Appropriated and disseminated online and off, re-making and un-making *wuxia*, how might we interrupt and transform the narratives of diasporic nostalgia and aspiration, escape the narratives of escape? How to witness and resist the exhaustion of global and local movements, how to recall and attest to gravity's and history's effects?

AABACUSS / ADDEDASS / AGNES D / ASIAN FLEW  
 BB&G / BROKEN BOND / BRUTE LEE  
 BBUCKCHOI / BUNK OF CHINA / CATTY SPECIFIC  
 CCHINA CHURL / CHINA DROLL  
 CCHINESE JUNKIE / CHINESE TEASE  
 CCHINK IN ARMOUR / CHOICE SUM  
 CCOMMIE HILFRIGGER / COOLIE BRITANNIA  
 CCOUNTERREVOLUTIONARY / CUSTOM MAID  
 DDIM SUM / DKHK / DONNA SHARON / FAKEAWAY  
 FFREE DELIVERY / FRIED QUID  
 FFRUIT OF THE BOOM / GAVIN KLEIN  
 GGOLDEN PHALLUS / GOOD BUY  
 HHANDOVER FIST / HOME BRIDE / HOME PRIDE  
 HHONG KONG BUNK / HONG KONG FOOLERY  
 HHUGE BOSS / KOW LOON DIS-EASE / LEVY  
 MMALE ORDERED / MARTIAL ART  
 MMIND THE GAP / NICKED / ORIENT TALLY  
 PPOT TIPS / REVEL ON / ROLE LAUREN  
 SSET DEAL / SHOW GUN / SOME SANG  
 SSSPRING ROLL-OVER / SWEAT & SOUR  
 TTALLY HO / TYPHOON T / VAGRANT HARBOUR  
 VVITREOUS CHINA / WELL HUNG / WONTON  
 VWRANGLE / YELLOW PEARL

susan pui san lok, *97 Proofs*, 1998, text / performance, various dimensions and durations.  
 Digital image. Commissioned for *DEAL*, 1998, two-person show with Mayling To, 198 Gallery,  
 London, and various locations.







susan pui san lok, *Golden Hour*, 2006, audio, 57' 24". Digital collage of record covers. Commissioned for *Golden (Lessons)*, 2006, solo exhibition and residency at Beaconsfield Contemporary Art, London, and broadcast on ResonanceFM, 10 November 2006. Part of the project *Golden*, 2005-ongoing, various works across moving image, sound, installation, text and performance, various media, dimensions and durations, presented at Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester; Beaconsfield Contemporary Art, London. Presented at MAI (Montréal Arts Interculturels); *1st Asia Biennial* and *5th Guangzhou Triennial*, Guangdong Museum of Art; and *Diaspora Pavilion*, Palazzo Pisani Santa Marina, Venice.



susan pui san lok, *Trilogies (Legend of the Condor Heroes)*, 2015, three-screen installation, 65'. Digital stills collage. Part of the project *RoCH Fans and Legends*, 2013-ongoing, various works including moving image for gallery and online, drawings and artist book multiples. Commissioned for solo exhibitions at QUAD, Derby and CFCCA, Manchester, in partnership with University of Salford and Animate Projects.



susan pui san lok, *Trilogies (Return of the Condor Heroes)*, 2015, three-screen installation, 65'. Digital stills collage. Part of the project *RoCH Fans and Legends*, 2013-ongoing, various works including moving image for gallery and online, drawings and artist book multiples. Commissioned for solo exhibitions at QUAD, Derby and CFCCA, Manchester, in partnership with University of Salford and Animate Projects.



susan pui san lok, *Woman Warrior I*, 2017. Digital stills collage referencing *RoCH Covers*, 2014, drawings, and *Covers I and II*, 2015, animated drawings. Part of the project *RoCH Fans and Legends*, 2013-ongoing, various works including moving image for gallery and online, drawings and artist book multiples

## WORKS REFERENCED

*97 Proofs*, 1998, ink on paper, frames, dimensions variable  
*Witness*, 1998, installation with paper and sound, dimensions variable  
*Vistas*, 2005, video triptych, 5'  
*Songs I to VI*, 2005-2017, audio, various durations  
*Years*, 2006, alternating two-screen silent video, 50'  
*Mobile Ballroom*, 2006, participatory performance, duration variable  
*Mobile Chorus*, 2006, participatory performance, duration variable  
*DIY Ballroom / Live*, 2006, single-channel video for outdoor screen with live events, 13' loop  
*Untitled (Ballroom)*, 2006, installation with shimmer, dimensions variable  
*Untitled (Ballroom)*, 2015, installation with shimmer, dimensions variable  
*Untitled (Pavilion)*, 2017, installation with shimmer, dimensions variable  
*Untitled (Shower)*, 2017, installation with shimmer, dimensions variable  
*Golden Hour*, 2006, audio, 57' 24"  
*Faster, Higher*, 2006, five-screen moving image installation, 20'  
*RoCH Fans & Legends (Entries)*, 2013, series of 30 inkjet prints, various dimensions  
*RoCH Fans & Legends (Variations)*, 2013, photoshopped screenshots  
*Figures*, 2015, site-specific vinyls, installation  
*Peach Blossom Isle*, 2006, site-specific wallpaper  
*Trailers*, 2015, single-channel video for gallery and online, 4'  
*Trilogies*, 2015, three-screen moving image installation, 65'

All works and images © susan pui san lok