

Extra weight also limited my day-to-day life in ways many people cannot imagine. Walking was tiring; after 15 minutes, I needed to sit down and rest

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# LIFE

## ARTS & CULTURE



Tsang Kin-wah's "Alongsen ten ce", a site-specific project at the Yalu River Art Museum in Dandong, which uses texts from history, religion, politics, society, literature and lyrics. Photos: Yalu River Art Museum, Cheung Hok-hang

# No place like home

Tsang Kin-wah and Mark Chung are the first Hong Kong artists to exhibit at Yalu River Art Museum in Dandong

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This summer, Hong Kong artists Tsang Kin-wah and Mark Chung escaped the city's stifling heat by heading to Dandong, the mainland city best known for its border crossing with North Korea.

Far-flung and with fewer than a million citizens, Dandong has become an unlikely magnet for contemporary artists and art lovers from all over the world.

The reason is the Yalu River Art Museum, perched on a resort island just 500 metres from North Korean soil. The museum was founded in 2006 by businessman Ji Dahai, a Dandong native now based in Hong Kong.

Over the years, the museum has built a solid reputation and is today considered one of the most cutting-edge contemporary art institutions in mainland China. Artists who have shown there include Beijing-based Song Dong, Robert Zhao from Singapore, and Swiss sculptor Katja Schenker.

The two Hong Kong artists are the first from the city to exhibit at this singular institution, and they are creating some of their most experimental work there.

Tsang, whose comeback exhibition was among the most talked-about shows during this year's Art Basel Hong Kong, has been working closely with Ji and Wang Luming, a renowned Chinese artist who also serves as the museum's artistic adviser.

Below, from left: The museum in Dandong; part of Chung's work, *Red Neckerchief*; the Yalu River Broken Bridge, which was one of Chung's inspirations.

What has emerged is an exhibition called "Alongsen ten ce" that contains Tsang's signature use of phrases pasted or projected onto walls, stripped of words, letters or – if they are in Chinese – strokes, rendering them illegible.

Enveloped in light, the sparse installations are mysterious and immersive.

A key element is Tsang's first ever sound work – inspired by what he has seen in Dandong.

He recalls watching North Korean guards on the other side of the Yalu River seemingly working on some kind of construction project. It was unclear what they were building – perhaps they were working for the benefit of viewers on the China side. They were joined by singers from the Korean People's Army, which raised the seemingly performative aspect a notch higher.

In a parallel gesture, Tsang has asked the museum's security guards to occasionally read out his fragmented texts through a loudspeaker, while gesturing for the audience to do the same without giving any verbal instructions.

According to Tsang, the presence of the security staff gives a fake air of authority, order and command – though that unravels when the audience takes over and plays with the nonsensical texts, stumbling over the incomplete phrases or making up words in an attempt to create meaning.

Simultaneously, computer-generated Mandarin and English readings are broadcast

through megaphones and interwoven with video replays of previous audience performances.

The entire space resembles a stage or laboratory, allowing different performers to collaborate, explore and express the various possibilities of language and meaning.

This is just the start of what will be a year-long residency. Tsang plans to expand on the work daily after a morning walk, adding a single sentence to the museum walls about something he encountered that day in Dandong or from the news.

For lunch, he often pops into a restaurant serving Pyongyang Naengmyeon – cold North Korean buckwheat noodles. Unlike the more sweet-and-sour South Korean version that has been exported around the world, this one is more restrained. The dishes are served by North Korean waitresses – women sent across the border by the state to earn yuan. In Dandong, such restaurants are common; their presence is part of the city's curious dance with its secretive neighbour.

In the early 20th century, Russians, Koreans, Japanese and Chinese shared Dandong's streets. It was a site of conflict during the First Sino-Japanese war, the Russo-Japanese war, and later, the Korean war.

After China's "Reform and Opening Up" policy, launched in 1978, economic liberalisation transformed Dandong into an industrial powerhouse.

Chung found himself swept up by the city's dramatic history, so much so that, on arriving, he quickly abandoned the original idea he had proposed for his solo project at the museum.

A chance conversation sparked something new: Chung asked a local how he felt about the Yalu River Broken Bridge. The man recalled standing there as a child, a communist red scarf knotted around his neck, looking out over the broken span.

The bridge was built in 1911 by the Empire of Japan when it was in control of Northeast China, linking the Korean peninsula to the Eurasian rail network that ran all the way to France. Bombed by American forces during the Korean war in 1950, the bridge stops abruptly in the middle of the river – half bridge, half monument – drawing tourists eager to glimpse the edge of another world.

The strikingly poignant image provided by the stranger led Chung to view the city as a vast theme park of national memories, carefully curated to reinforce national pride and identity.

For his work, Chung directly transferred composite photos of Dandong onto the museum floor by silkscreen printing with shoe wax. These barely there images are only visible when illuminated. Delicate and fleeting, they symbolise a path of resistance away from overbearing official narratives that can suffocate artistic expression. He calls the piece *Red Neckerchief*, echoing the man's



Artist Mark Chung at the Yalu River Art Museum.

childhood memory, and explains that it is a work in progress that he hopes to refine in the future.

Chung's work is part of an ever-evolving group exhibition styled upon Germany's influential Documenta. The exhibition is a vast survey of younger artists. In it, one can find how many Dandong-born artists have drawn on the city's layered past.

Bi Jianye's grandparents went to Dandong as soldiers during the Korean war and stayed there for the rest of their lives. Growing up, Bi listened to their battlefield stories. His grandparents' brothers took a different path: members of the Kuomintang, they fled to Taiwan after the civil war. For decades, the family remained divided by politics and sea, until the 1980s finally allowed letters to cross the strait again.

Bi has collected the envelopes and uses them as a canvas, showing how the sweep of national destinies can reach into the smallest corners of family life – a topic that resonates far beyond this remote corner of China.

Dandong-born artists, like Hong Kong ones, are peripatetic. Many prefer to work and live in major art centres such as Beijing or Shanghai. But memories of home continue to nourish and inspire. And now, at this unusual art museum, their works – and those of the two Hong Kong artists – bounce off each other, resulting in a frank and engaging dialogue.

The Yalu River Art Museum can be reached by flying to Shenyang or Dalian, followed by a one-hour bullet train journey to Dandong.

