

Very unexpectedly in 2016, it was a legal treatise, *The Developing World of Arbitration*¹ that led to the artistic collaboration between Hung Fai and Wai Pong-yu. Arbitration is a method by which disputes are resolved outside the courts. Essentially, it is a way of bringing irreconcilable differences to an amicable settlement. So too, is Hung and Wai's *Arbitration Reform 1* (2016), the ink-on-paper drawing commissioned for the cover of the book, composed of four panels and spanning almost 1.5 metres in width. The work brings together two strikingly dissimilar artists who ultimately find singular focus and direction through dialogue and discovering connections. For Hung and Wai, the line – a fundamental component of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting – is central to their respective artistic practices. Their use and interpretation of this core element stands in stark contrast to one another. *Arbitration Reform 1* was the first in what became their ongoing collaborative series “Same Line Twice” (2016–).

Just as in the Chinese calligraphy and painting tradition where the line reveals the individual hand of the artist, Hung and Wai have each forged an artistic vocabulary that is uniquely his own. Born in 1982, Wai graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He makes his art with ballpoint-pen and bases his oeuvre on the rhythms and movements of lines. Each line follows the previous one in a parallel direction, always moving forward without tracing itself or breaking. His abstract, painstakingly rendered ballpoint-pen-on-paper drawings create a meditative realm of undulating patterns formed of lines

¹ Anselmo Reyes and Weixia Gu eds., *The Developing World of Arbitration: A Comparative Study of Arbitration Reform in the Asia Pacific*, Oxford, expected 2018.

and dots. But this belies an undercurrent of severity and forcefulness. In gliding his hand along the surface of the paper to create these fluid lines, it is not uncommon for him to tear or destroy the paper.

In contrast to Wai's freehand style, Hung, who hails from the same alma mater as Wai but is six years younger, forms his lines by an elaborate and methodical process. Hung begins each work by first heavily saturating a sheet of *xuan* paper. While the paper is still wet, he presses a heavy ruler on the surface and then uses an ink pen – his chosen mode of expression – to draw a line, marking individual dots across and letting the ink diffuse spontaneously. He starts from the bottom of the paper, and continues systematically upwards. Each drawing in his series “Wild Grass” (2014) is remarkably composed of hundreds of horizontal lines delineated by tiny ink dots. There is a calmness that emanates from Hung's work, but the physical act of pressing the weight of the ruler onto the paper is, in fact, violent.



Bringing together these dissimilarities was initially a challenge. Wai, in his recollection of *Arbitration Reform 1*, says he felt “intimidated”, as his lines “repelled” Hung's from opposite corners of the paper. Moreover, Wai and Hung each used his own tool: ink pen and ballpoint-pen respectively, accentuating their differences. In spite of the difficulty of this endeavor, they felt inspired to develop the collaboration further. Since the first drawing, they have worked on adapting to each other's methods and styles in order to forge a common language. In doing so, Wai relinquished his ballpoint pen and adopted the same ink pen as Hung's. In some drawings, Hung saturated the paper, giving Wai no choice but to adapt to the wet surface, a new territory for him as he has always drawn on a dry surface. In others, they used a dry surface, challenging Hung's processes.

The early drawings in this series already demonstrate a compelling language of coherence and compatibility. The composition of *Same Line Twice 2* (2016) is based on Hung's “Wild Grass” series. On the left side of the paper are Hung's straight lines

Right: Wai Pong-yu,
Lightwave Memory 12,
2007, 145.2 x 169.8 cm,
Ball pen on paper (detail)

Opposite Page: Hung Fai,
Wild Grass XI, 2017, 180 x
97 cm each, 180 x 291 cm
combined, set of 3, Ink on
paper (detail)



and dots, and on the right side are Wai's rhythmic, flowing lines. In the centre of the work, there is a small gap left between the two artists' lines, symbolizing an impasse – or plane of resolve. The gap gradually diminishes from the bottom upwards, until eventually the lines meet impeccably at the top. By contrast, *Same Line Twice 3* (2016) more closely resembles Wai's individual style. Working on a dry surface, the artists gave themselves complete freedom of space and composition. Instead of each artist staying on his side of the paper, there is a collision of forms, although no one overwhelms the other. Hung's lines slice across the width of the paper at irregular angles. Intertwined with them are Wai's unpredictable lines and chaotic forms.

Hung and Wai have continued to develop their dialogue. *Same Line Twice 7* (2017) was inspired by *Lightwave Memory 12* (2007), Wai's own drawing of the concentric circles of a tree trunk. Eschewing his ruler, Hung took to using a compass to draw the circles, letting the ink dots diffuse in the same manner as those of his straight lines. In counterpoint to the circles, Wai drew irregular patterns of coils on top, imbuing the image with movement and depth. Here, his ink-pen touch was so vigorous that it tore the surface of the paper, peppering it with small holes and unexpectedly giving the drawing more texture.

Harmonious exchanges aside, tension and conflict are also laid bare in the collaboration. *Same Line Twice 13* (2017) is a cacophony of lines and colour. Hung started by using a tight cluster of ink-pens to place his dots on the paper. Wai responded by placing brightly coloured marker-pens across the surface, which resulted in swaths of colour to diffuse liberally.

As a retort, Hung splashed water over the colour, in the attempt to remove and wash it away. The final outcome is dissonance: a harsh combination of lines, diffused ink, and clashing colours. The reconciliation we seek after this confrontation comes in the subsequent drawing, *Same Line Twice 14* (2017). In this work, Hung and Wai used the same ruler simultaneously, delineating lines on opposite sides. The two took turns in controlling the direction and movement of the ruler, whereby whoever was moving the ruler would disrupt the drawing of the other. For the first time in his practice, Hung's lines are not straight, as they bend in response to Wai's movement.

There is a strong political consciousness in each artist's individual practice, so it is not unexpected that their collaborative work also examines social issues and tensions. The unlikely motivation for *Same Line Twice 12* (2017) were the study notes Wai had taken in his Latin copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In order to understand the complex sentence structure, Wai underlined each word of the text in different colours, corresponding to its grammatical role. These patterns of multi-coloured straight lines became, on the bottom right, the beginning of the drawing. According to Wai, the intention of using different colours is to highlight each individual in a society, which is the opposite to Hung's interpretation on the left side. Like his "Wild Grass" series, inspired by Lu Xun's (1881–1936) prose poem collection of the same name, Hung's monochromatic lines and dots represent weak, oppressed people in everyday life who gradually fade into obscurity over the course of time. The work progresses with Wai tightly compressing his coloured lines, leading Hung to deconstruct his into tiny, precise dots, as a reaction. In some areas, Wai has drawn coloured lines on top of Hung's, in the effort to give prominence to Hung's forgotten individuals. With Wai taking mythology as his starting point, and Hung history, they have established a rapport and reached a shared emotion – albeit one of tragedy and futility.

Achieving resolution in a collaboration between two artists with distinct practices of his own may seem improbable, but Hung and Wai have negotiated their contrasting artistic styles to create a body of work that strives towards coherence. The words, "The pen is mightier than the sword", coined by the English novelist and playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, come to mind. The collective journey of these two young artists offer us hope and optimism in the chaotic world we live. While arbitration – the original impetus for this collaboration – may be well known only in the field of law, Hung Fai and Wai Pong-yu's perfect partnership shows us that attaining harmony through resolving discord has the power to speak, and inspire, beyond jurisdictions.