



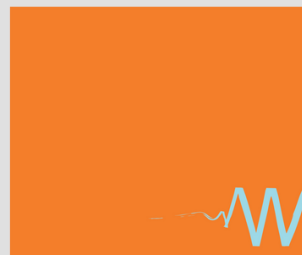
Letters from Lalalam



# Letters From Lalalam

Yin Yin Wong

9th September - 7th October 2023



**Wei-Ling** Gallery



# Foreword

Wei-Ling Gallery presents '*Letters from Lalalam*', marking the first Malaysian solo exhibition by multi-disciplinary Dutch-Chinese-Malaysian artist, Yin Yin Wong. With '*Letters from Lalalam*', Wong invites us to have a closer look at the lives and everyday realities supporting the Asian service industry.

In 1977, Wong's parents emigrated from Malaysia to The Netherlands in search of a better life. Here they opened their own restaurant named 'Choong Kee [松记]', named after Wong's father, and served local diners for over ten years. Wong's mother works in the service industry to this day, while Wong's father became estranged after the closing of the restaurant.

Growing up in the family establishment, Wong witnessed up close the long hours and repetitive labour performed by their parents and the toll it took on their bodies, a fate that remains largely unseen and under-recognised in the social fabric of Dutch society. Through their practice they look to explore themes of marginalisation experienced in the South-East Asian diaspora, which manifests in public space predominantly through services catering to the body in the West (in the form of restaurants, massage parlours, sex work, nail salons etc.) They question the meaning of commodifying one's own culture for the purpose of consumption by others.

The title of the exhibition, '*Letters from Lalalam*', refers to the colloquial pronunciation of 'Rotterdam' by the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands. Rotterdam, the city where Wong is based in, is home to the biggest population of East and South-East Asian immigrants in the Netherlands. In their new sculpture series, Wong touches on the plight of these immigrants through the visual vernacular of shop fronts and their eclectic use of language. Together with other recent works, the artist invites us to engage with the intimate lives that support the economic and cultural landscape of the Netherlands while continually navigating the margins of their own diverging set of cultural and social identities.

Yin Yin Wong, who uses 'they/them' pronouns, identifies as non-binary, which is a term used to describe gender identities that are not solely male nor female.

This exhibition is generously supported by the Mondriaan Fund, Creative Industries Fund NL and Bekker-la Bastide-Fonds.



## Remembering Pinetrees

Acrylic raised letters, acrylic paint, lightboxes  
190cm x 200cm x 190cm, 190cm x 200cm  
2023

In 2021, Wong hired a private tutor to learn how to read and write in Chinese. The first signs that they learned how to read were the characters that adorned the facade of the restaurant they grew up in ‘松记’. They knew the signs were a combination of their fathers name ‘Sung (松)’ and the sign ‘Kee (记)’ designating a brand, as commonly used in Chinese establishments but they never knew the original meanings of the characters.

Literally translated, and interpreted by a non-native Chinese reader, the signs read ‘Pinetree’ and ‘To remember’. The phrase ‘To remember pinetrees’ stuck with them and opened up the possibility to read signs as common as those denoting a family restaurant as a poetic call to remember an unsung landscape, or perhaps to remember a man of whom only a name in signage remains.







*Remembering Pinetrees*

Acrylic raised letters, acrylic paint

190cm x 200cm, 190cm x 200cm

2023





Installation view



## Holaan Travel Service

Lightbox, acrylic paint

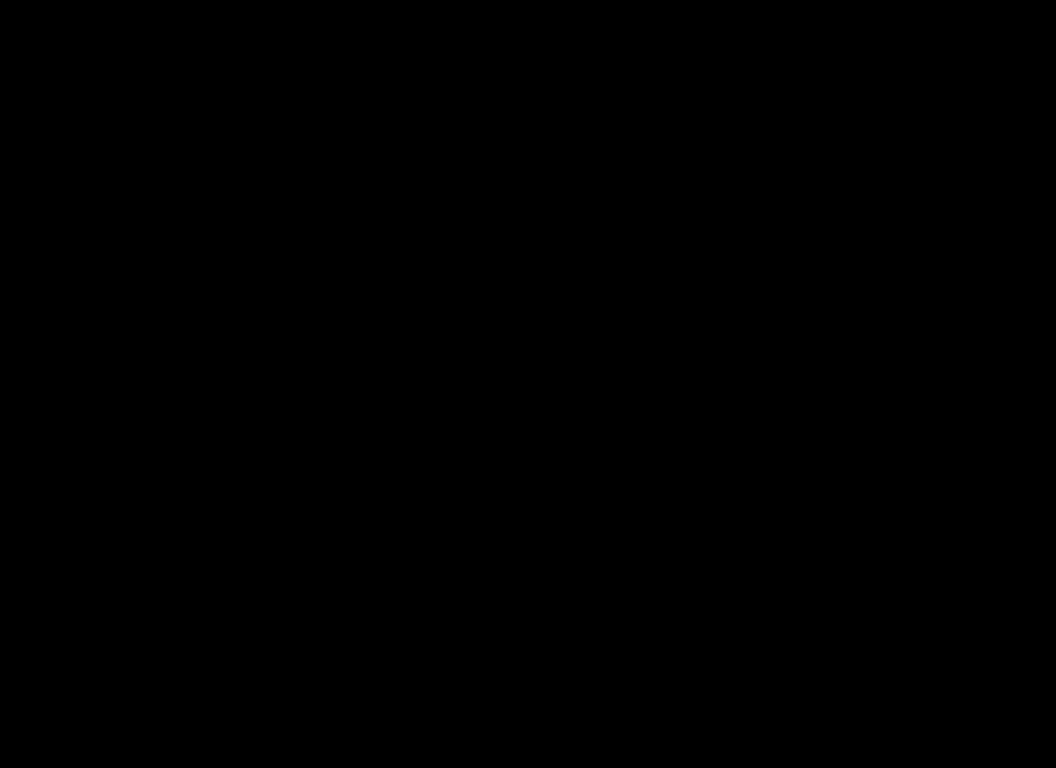
87cm x 87cm

2023

This lightbox plays with the words 'Holaan' and 'Lotus', which both start with the character 'Hé (荷)'. Wong's mother once stated that one should never pick a lotus flower in the wild, as they grow near quicksand, and picking them could mean getting stuck and drowning in the process. Wong heard in this a metaphor for the leap their parents and immigrants like them took to venture to the West in search of a better life.







*Holaan Travel Service*  
(Front & back view)  
Lightbox, acrylic paint  
87cm x 87cm  
2023





*Holoan Travel Service  
(Close-Up view)*



## Exit

Etched acrylic light sign

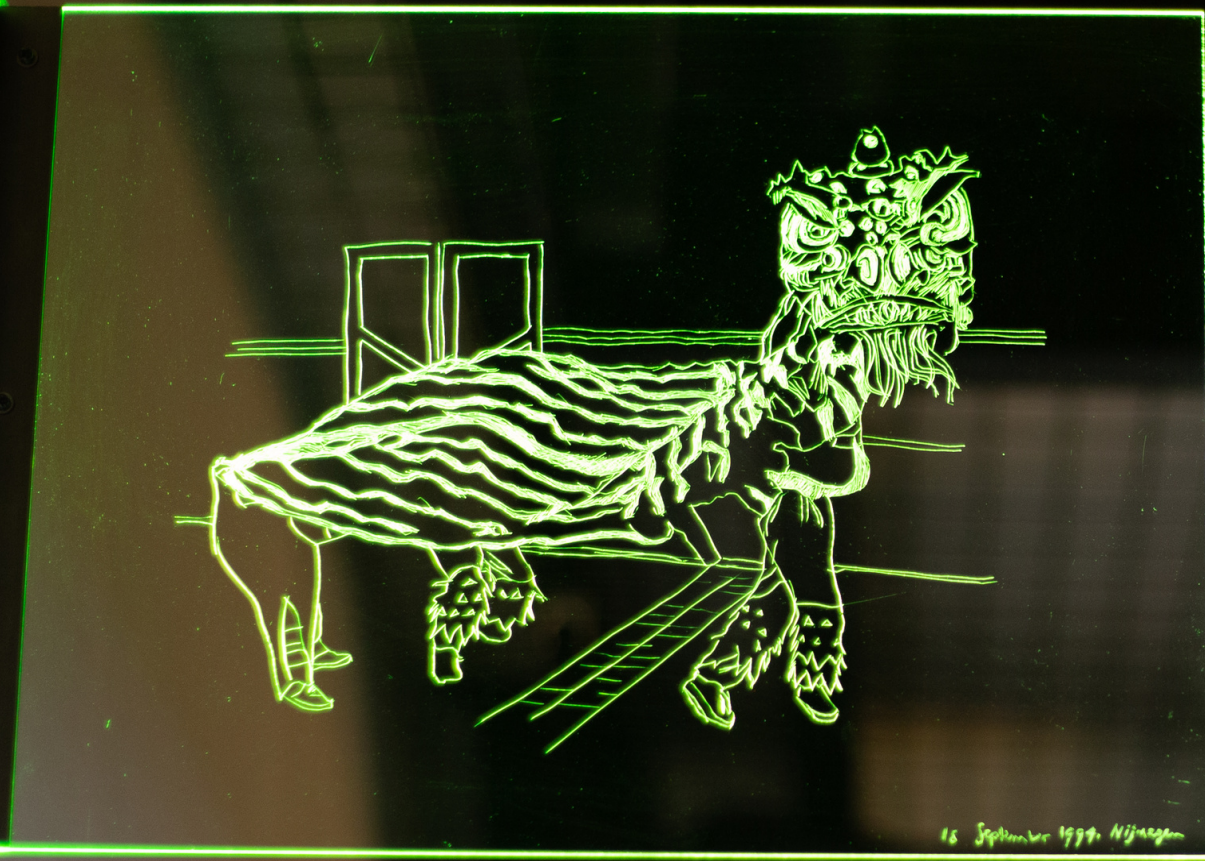
32cm x 47cm

2023

A traditional lion dance for good luck and the casting away of bad spirits was performed during the opening of Wong's family restaurant on the 18th of September, 1994 in Nijmegen. The restaurant Choong Kee (松记) would thrive for ten years following that day until family conflict and turmoil upends and closes the business. 'Exit', combines the mythical lion and its silent roar with the banality of an exit sign, a safety requirement for all establishments in the Netherlands.

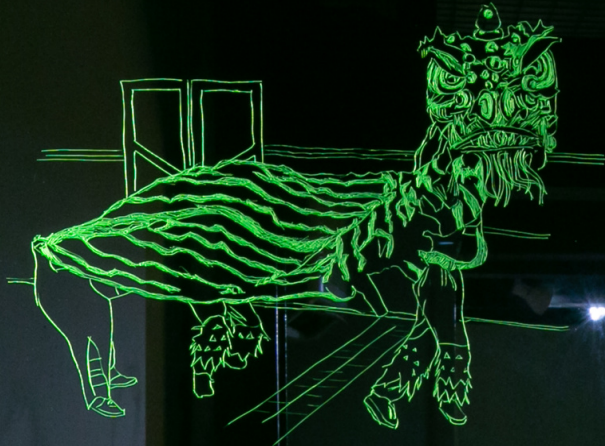






*Exit*  
Etched acrylic light sign  
32cm x 47cm  
2023





16 September 1999. WJ/age

CHINESE MASSAGE  
**LUCKY STAR**



Installation view



## KANT. REST.

Lightbox, acrylic paint

76cm x 120.5cm

2023

Abbreviations such as 'Kant.', 'Chin.', 'Spec.' and 'Rest.' are commonly found in restaurant signage in the Netherlands. They are abbreviations denoting the cuisines and specialities served in the restaurant. Often these abbreviations are stacked according to the local immigrant population and tastes to appeal to a broader audience. 'Kant.', 'Chin.', 'Spec.' 'Rest.' stand for 'Cantonese', 'Chinese', 'Specialty', 'Restaurant', respectively. In Rotterdam it would not be uncommon for Chinese restaurants to adopt a few recipes to include 'Ind.' ('Indonesian'), 'Sur.' ('Surinamese') and 'Jav.' ('Javanese'). On the back we see a man in a kitchen presenting a suckling pig, his eyes are cropped out. With this Wong questions whether the 'specialty' being offered is the meal or the person preparing the meal.







*KANT. REST.*

(Front view)

Lightbox, acrylic paint

76cm x 120.5cm

2023





*KANT. REST.*

(Back view)

Lightbox, acrylic paint

76cm x 120.5cm

2023



UAR



CHINESE MASSAGE  
**LUCKY STAR**

Installation view



## Lucky Star

Wood, acrylic paint, water hose, electric wire

58.5cm x 168cm

2023

From all the shop facades Wong encounters, the shops designating Thai or Chinese Massage are the most confronting. Shops of which the blinds are more often than not closed— words bold and direct in red or black. More often than not, the shop signs are the worst maintained; letters peeling, neon lights flickering— they are places Wong has never seen the inside of, knowing that many of them are places offering illegal sex work. The labour of physically servicing another's body in order to survive is the stark reality of many South-East Asian women in the Dutch diaspora.







*Lucky Star*

(Front view)

Wood, acrylic paint, water hose, electric wire

58.5cm x 168cm

2023





*Lucky Star*

(Back view)

Wood, acrylic paint, water hose, electric wire

58.5cm x 168cm

2023





Installation view



## Self portraits

Various materials

Varying sizes

2021—2023

From late 2021 to early 2023, Wong aimed to make a self portrait every day. They made over 300 self-portraits in this time. The selection of twenty-four drawings shown here at Wei-Ling Gallery are the first to ever be exhibited. What started as a meditation practice and also an exercise to return back to drawing, slowly evolved into a practice of seeing oneself. As someone growing up in the Netherlands, where Wong found little to no representation of a queer, gender non-conforming and Asian person like themselves, they have lived most of their life by proxy. Placing themselves in the shoes of the icons in the art historical canon that they were taught, the protagonists in the stories that they consumed, the beauty standards that were upheld societally, most of which was defined by a straight, white and male perception of the world.

Through looking at themselves they are searching—searching for resonance, for belonging, for a home inside the body they were born with.







*Self portraits*  
Various materials  
Varying sizes  
2021–2023







Installation view



# Lotus Flowers

Short film

8:45 minutes

2022

In this short film, Wong asks their mother to teach them how to fold the lotus flower napkins that they used to have on their restaurant table setting. During the folding tutorial, they talk about different connotations surrounding the lotus flower and memories of their restaurant Choong Kee (松记).

In the film Wong asks their mother whether she had ever seen a lotus flower in real life. She answers that she has seen them in Malaysia, in the wild. She follows that wild lotus flowers should never be picked, as those who try get caught in the surrounding quicksand and drown.

In this Wong heard a metaphor for the diasporic experience— many Asian families venture to the West in search of a better life, only to get stuck with no way back.







然后你有见过莲花吗?  
...Have you ever seen a lotus flower?

*Lotus Flowers*  
(Video still image)  
Short film  
8:45 minutes  
2022





Installation view



## YIN YIN WONG (B.1988, NL)

Yin Yin Wong (B.1988, NL) is a multidisciplinary artist working across a range of media including film, sculpture, drawing and site-specific installation. Through an auto-ethnographic lens they explore and question the dominant frameworks that govern the various marginalised identities and cultures they embody. Previously as a graphic designer and art director they worked around the notion of democratising access to visual culture through the publishing of artist books and the curation of exhibitions and public programmes.

Currently they are researching possible bridges between their modernist graphic design education and their Chinese-Malaysian diasporic upbringing. By focusing on themselves as a site where different legacies and languages converge and complicate each other, Wong looks for a common ground that speaks cross-culturally. Recently Yin Yin's work has been presented at A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam; Framed Framed, Amsterdam; Natasha– Singapore Biennale '22 and Venice Biennale '22.







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To accompany the exhibitions 'Letters from Lalalam' from 9th September - 7th October 2023

**Wei-Ling Gallery & Wei-Ling Contemporary**

No. 8 Jalan Scott, Brickfields

50470 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

T: +603 2260 1106

E: [info@weiling-gallery.com](mailto:info@weiling-gallery.com)

W: [www.weiling-gallery.com](http://www.weiling-gallery.com)

PROJECT DIRECTOR | Lim Wei-Ling

DESIGNED BY | Mikhail Vanan & Lim Siew Boon

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