

**The Journey of Minds:  
Chinese Modernity and  
Chinese Ink-Painting in  
Singapore**

# Abstract

This essay traces Singapore Modern Chinese-Ink Painting back to the period when China was in search for a Modernity that was relevant to them. While the Chinese Intellectual went about searching for a Modernity relevant for China, the Journey of Minds into Singapore further the art scene here, resulting in Singapore being an art centre in Chinese Modern Art in the region. Artists in Singapore analysed the Finds of Chinese Modernity and continued the journey on a different trajectory. The development of a Chinese-Ink Painting Style that eventually took a path influenced by the confluence of thinking between the West and then evolving Chinese modernity. An underlying thread of ideas possibly laying the foundation of a Singapore identity in a portfolio of unique ways of creating Chinese-Ink paintings.

# Content

1.	Introduction .....	4
2.	In Search of Modernity: The New Culture Movement .....	14
	A. The Motivation Behind the New Culture Movement	
	B. In Search of Modernity	
	C. Western Painting Concepts and Chinese Visual Art	
	D. Traditional Chinese-Ink Painting Concept	
3.	The Journey of Minds and Nanyang .....	37
	A. Arrival into Nanyang	
	B. Bringing Modernity to Nanyang	
	C. The Art of Nanyang	

4.	Singapore Chinese-Ink Painting – Beyond Nanyang .....	62
	A.    The Artworks of Lim Tze Peng (林子平)	
	B.    The Artworks of Tan Oe Pang (陈有炳)	
	C.    The Artworks of Terence Teo Chin Keong (赵振强)	
5.	Conclusion .....	87
	Bibliography .....	93
	List of Illustrations .....	99
	List of Charts .....	120
	An Art Interview with Terence Teo Chin Keong .....	126
	Acknowledgements .....	141

# List of Illustrations

- Image 1: Put down the Whip, 1939 by Xu Beihong (1895 -1953)
- Image 2: The Three Stallions by Xu Beihong (1895-1953)
- Image 3: Perspective Illustration of a block with corresponding parallel sides on a plane.
- Image 4: Court Ladies (Tang Dynasty) - Artist Unknown
- Image 5: Gathering on a Spring Day by Yuan Jiang (c. 1671–c. 1746)
- Image 6: Nude (c. 1934) by Lin Fengmian (1900-1991)
- Image 7: The Fiery Battle of Red Cliffs by Lin Fengmian (1900-1991)
- Image 8: Boats in Soochow, c. 1946 by Georgette Chen (1906-1993)
- Image 9: Kallang River, c. 1953–1955 by Georgette Chen (1906-1993)
- Image 10: Indian Musicians 1972 by Liu Kang (1911-2004)
- Image 11: Herons, c.1990 by Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991)
- Image 12: Untitled (Undated) by Cheong Soo Pieng (1917-1983)
- Image 13: Going to Sea at Dawn, 1967 by Chen Chong Swee (1910-1985)
- Image 14: Singapore West Coast 1962 by Cheng Chong Swee (1910-1985)
- Image 15: Bustling Streets of Chinatown by Lim Tze Peng (b. 1923)
- Image 16: Memory of the Past at Red Cliff by Su Shi. Calligrapher: Lim Tze Peng (b. 1923)
- Image 17: Highway in Hougang, Singapore, 2005 by Tan Oe Pang (b. 1947)
- Image 18: 一切圓 "Yi Qie Yuan", 2013 by Tan Oe Pang (b. 1947)

Image 19: Rain Forest Series -Refreshing 5, 2010 by Terence Teo Chin Keong (b. 1953)

Image 20: Melodic Summer, 2018 by Terence Teo Chin Keong (b. 1953)

## List of Charts

- Chart 1: Art Forum: between 1937 and 1941
- Chart 2: Art Exhibitions Statistics between 1937 to 1941  
(before World War 2)
- Chart 3: Solo Art Exhibitions by Artists from China
- Chart 4 (i-iii): Art Exhibitions by Local Institutions and Resident Artists (1937-41)

## 1. Introduction

"Put Down Your Whip (放下你的鞭子)" (see Image 1) was a street drama acted by the famous actress Wang Yin (王莹) acting as Xiang Jie (香姐) during the 1930s. Chen Liting (陈鲤庭) wrote the script. The drama depicted Xiang Jie escaping with her father from Japanese-occupied Northeast China. They earned their living by performing on the streets, singing about their hardship and sufferings from the Japanese control. One day, Xiang Jie performed badly due to hunger and her father became angry. He father took out a whip and whipped her. The audience was stunned and urged the father to stop beating her. A young man (an actor in disguise) jumped out of the audience, shouting, "Put down the Whip". The young man scolded the father. Unexcitingly, Xiang Jie would respond with these words: "I don't blame you, my father. It was not you who beat me. It was all those foreign devils ..." and she would recount her family's plight, telling them that they were refugees escaping disaster, exploitation they faced in their hometown and the cruelty of the Japanese invasion. Through the performance, they moved the hearts of their audience and canvassed support for the anti-Japanese war in China. Wang Yin's performance also captured the attention of the Chinese both Malaya and Singapore.

Wang Yin, together with three other theatre members, arrived in Singapore on 30 September 1939 and stayed at Nantian (南天) Hotel on arrival. Wang Yin was

born in Anwei but raised in Nanjing. She schooled in a well-established institution like Fudan University and Jinan University. When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, Wang Yin and her theatre group ("Theatre of the Rescue of China", which she founded) toured around fifteen provinces in China. She acted and vice-chaired the theatre group to raise support for anti-Japanese activities.

Xu Beihong was, then, in Singapore on his way to India. After watching the drama, he was deeply moved. He painted the portrait depicting Wang Yin and her audience in the background (Image 1) in the next 10. His trip to India was delayed. The painting was completed on 27th October 1939. Xu signed the painting with the words: "Well respected heroine Wang Yin" on October 28', Singapore, by Beihong" "Xu Beihong's masterpiece sold at a record price for Chinese painting"<sup>1</sup>. Such were the artist-intellectuals that passed through Singapore prior to the last World War for both the promotion of art and the patriotic task of raising support to save their motherland from being ruined by aggressors. And that is when "The Journey of Minds: Chinese Modernity and Chinese-Ink in Singapore" began.

"The Journey of Minds: Chinese Modernity and Chinese-Ink in Singapore" explores the influence of Chinese Modernity into Singapore and how painting developed through the years by Singaporean Chinese artists through the

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<sup>1</sup> "Xu Beihong's masterpiece sold at record price for Chinese painting", People's Daily, @ [http://en.people.cn/200704/08/eng20070408\\_364660.html](http://en.people.cn/200704/08/eng20070408_364660.html) 2007-04-08. Retrieved on 2 July 2018.

influence of Chinese Modern artists coming from China and some eventually took up residence here. There are two streams through which, Chinese-Ink Painting techniques arrived into Singapore. Firstly, there were those Chinese who had arrived in Singapore before the New Culture Movement. They brought with them classical Chinese paintings practiced during the Qing Dynasty. The next wave was the other group that came here as they were going about in search of a relevant framework of modernity, suitable for a modern China. This essay focuses on this second group of the art movement and traces the development of Chinese paintings in Singapore from two aspects:

1. The entry of Chinese modern art into Nanyang (Singapore)
2. The journey towards a unique Singapore style of painting.

Chinese-Ink Painting in Singapore is intimately intertwined historically with the modernizing of China and its search for new expression in art. The Chinese émigré artists, who were involved and/or influenced by the search of Chinese modernity, arriving from China into Singapore in those years, before and after the 2nd World War, had massive influence in the Singapore art scene.

Chinese artists in China were engaged in a search of modernity to enable an ideological transformation of China because foreigners were ravaging the country. China needed not only to catch up with the progressive West but also to inspire and thrust the Chinese people into a new progressive mindset, as they faced their aggressors who were bent to change China forever. The first Minister of Education after the liberation, Cai Yuanpei through his wisdom saw that art

would be a powerful tool that could be used to motivate and propel the Chinese population to rise up and to take up the task to rescue the nation.

As Chinese artists from China went about in search of a modernity that could be relevant to China, support from the overseas Chinese was also sought to help suppress the aggressors in the area of funding and in return they shared the newly found zeal in their art practice. That second mass migration of Chinese into various part of Southeast Asia had a different profile from the previous. Lai Chee Kien had this observation: "The second group of Chinese immigrants had cultivated their literary and aesthetic sensitivities in major cities of China, and who is now estranged from the cultural environments by the decision to migrate to communities forming in various part of Southeast Asia. The formation of art and literary groups were in some ways to re-establish their familiar cultural and intellectual milieu in new locations<sup>2</sup>." Singapore was one of such major location that the Chinese artist-intellectuals had set their eyes on, in part, due to the higher population of Chinese living here at that time compared to other locations and also Singapore was a popular transition hub for travel between the East and the West. Singapore offered unique opportunities for the east and west to interact, which was illustrated by the art exhibitions held by the various cultural groups that either lived or passed by Singapore in the years prior to the Second World War. This essay will trace the journey of the search for Chinese modernity to Chinese-Ink painting in Singapore.

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<sup>2</sup> Lai Chee Kien, "Translation Notes" in *A Brief History of Malayan Art* written by Hsu, Marco, (Millennium Books, Singapore: 1999), p. ix.

In Chapter 2, we will assess the motivating factors that drove China to see the need for a transformation of their ideas and strategy for nation building and how arts got to be part of the journey. There will also be a discussion of the major western influences that had affected art making in China since.

In Chapter 3, we will discover the art activities in Singapore prior to and after World War 2. In this journey, we will also discover how Singapore as a core location in the Nanyang region benefited from the search for modernity that would be relevant to China. The new findings among the artists from China as they went about in search for the modern were cascaded to the artists here in Singapore. Many of those artists from China also sought residency in Singapore and dominated the art scene here. The idea of "Nanyang" epitomized the art scene as the artists settle down in their new environment and painted with zeal. We will briefly discuss the issues of finding a common thread linking the 'Nanyang-style' of paintings in the attempt to theorize the 'Nanyang-style,' as an idea of an art category like Impressionism and Expression in Europe; or the Avant-Garde Art of modern China.

In Chapter 4, the discussion will focus on the new approaches to Chinese-Ink Painting practice in view of the unique geo-cultural position of this island-state. In the last 50 years after Independence, there also have arisen a very fragmented group of art practices that have exhibited local uniqueness beyond 'Nanyang-style'. Are we seeing the development of Singapore-style Chinese-Ink painting

that we can eventually claim to be our own? We look at examples of those paintings in this essay.

Chapter 5 will conclude the essay by bringing together the key thoughts and impression in the Journey of Minds. The discussion will reflect on recent works produced by selected Singapore Chinese-Ink artists that have demonstrated the journey to a new milestone in the art history of Singapore. This includes both the local expression of modernism and beyond also the idea of modernism in Chinese-Ink Painting. In doing so, we can contemplate if the approaches to Chinese-Ink Painting in Singapore is tending toward a likely category that we can consider as having a Singapore identity.

## **2. In Search for Modernity: The New Culture Movement**

### **A. The Motivation Behind the New Culture Movement**

In 1919, Beijing University was where student representatives from thirteen different local universities drafted a 5-points resolution for their demonstration. That afternoon, students from different schools marched out from different locations to assemble in front of Tiananmen to oppose the Paris Treaty of Versailles. That was the beginning of May 4th Movement or also known as the New Culture Movement (新文化运动)。

The Chinese people were upset with the Treaty, which was drafted to end World War 1. The treaty recognized Japan's claim to Shandong, which was previously a concession area to the Germans<sup>3</sup>. That led to a huge display of nationalistic sentiment on May 4, 1919. The Chinese rejected the Confucian system as they felt that they needed a transformation through modernizing China via western science and democracy so that they could stand up against the western powers. This led to an outpouring of nationalistic sentiment on May 4th, 1919 and hence

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<sup>3</sup> The term Beiyang (北洋) originated toward the end of the Qing dynasty, and it referred to the coastal areas of Zhili (直隶) at Liaoning, and Shandong are in the Northeast of China. The Viceroy of Zhili held Minister of Beiyang's (北洋通商大臣) position. He looked after trade relations and occasionally foreign affairs. The Beiyang government secretly ordered the Chinese delegation to sign the Treaty of Paris.

the "May 4th Movement" to reform Chinese culture through the adoption of Western Science and Democracy was etched into the annals of Chinese history. A strike in Beijing and across the larger cities of China among the students erupted from the following day, joined by patriotic merchants and workers. Students were arrested and Chancellors from thirteen universities called for the release of a student from prisons. Cai Yuanpei, the principal of Beijing University resigned in protest. It was a significant turn in Chinese history. Traditional Chinese values from then were being challenged in public and the demand for Chinese modernity became a national demand.

Prior to 1919, when Cai Yuanpei was still the principal of Beijing University, many intellectuals of the days that had graced the hallway of Beijing University including Qian Xuantong, Liu Bannong, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Shen Yinmo, Gao Yihan, who were professors of Liberal Art in the Beijing University. Foreign faculty members included John Dewey from the United States, Bertrand Russell from the UK, Paul Painlevé from France, and Max Planck, the founder of quantum mechanics. According to 1918 statistical data, there were 217 faculty members (including 90 professors), and 1,980 students (148 including graduate students). Various societies were also established, among which the influential ones were The Debate Society, Morality Advancement Society, New Trend Society, National Magazine Society, Marxist Research Society, Journalism Research Society, Socialist Research Society, Society for Civilian Literacy Lecture, Philosophy Society and Music Society. Some of the publications that had considerable influence in the public sphere were, including New Trend, Nationals, Young

China, News Weekly, National Heritage, Mathematical Journal and Music Magazine<sup>4</sup>.

There was also Chen Duxiu, editor of the radical journal, New Youth and who, in later years, a founder of the Communist Party. There was Hu Shi, a leader of the literary revolution and a key figure in introducing Dewey's ideas to China. Liu Shipei and Huang Jigang, defenders of the traditional literary style and Gu Hongming, a supporter of the autocratic monarchy<sup>5</sup>.

The legacy that Cai left in Chinese education policies and educational system have been etched in the minds of Chinese people all over the world. For the Chinese artists, the fact that Cai had seen art with such high respect and art was placed as a mainstream emphasis in the Chinese education system, was a tremendous recognition for artists as there were being considered as equal intellectuals to their counterparts in the other academic disciplines. This brings us again to that emotional moment in 1939 when Xu Beihong painted the well-known portrait of Wang Yin, now entitled "Putting Down the Whip." In that painting, it embodied the thought of Cai Yuanpei that forever changed the direction of art education in China.

However, the journey of reformation was not a smooth one. There were the feudalist rulers and warlords that needed to be ordered; and then, the Sino-Japanese War was still raging on and the internal struggle of the Nationalist

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<sup>4</sup> "Peking University around the May Fourth Movement", at Beijing University website at [http://english.pku.edu.cn/intro\\_PKUhistory\\_2.shtml](http://english.pku.edu.cn/intro_PKUhistory_2.shtml) (retrieved on 16 July 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Zhang, Lizhong, "CAI YUANPEI (1868-1940)" Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 1/2, p. 147-157. ©UNESCO: International Bureau of Education, 2000. p. 6.

Party. There were campaigns and chaos. In all those struggles, artists were much involved in the practice of their artistic skills to put up information and propaganda so the Chinese people were kept informed, mobilized to action for supports and struggles.

## B. In Search of Modernity

As early as the 17th century, the idea of prints and western concept of perspectives (single point perspective) and the rendering of mass through shading were experimented by Chinese artists but it was not till the 18th and 19th century that Chinese artists integrated those techniques more freely into their practice, mainly in ceramics decoration and printmaking, for exports to Western destination to suit their customers' taste. The demographic changes in China and, particularly, in the commercial city of Shanghai, where the search for customers for their artworks was keen, and soon, saw their customers' base shifted from the elites in the bureaucracy to the business community. An extended range of imported pigments had by then been made available to the artists and they were adopted enthusiastically. All those factors gave Chinese artists the push required to adapt their techniques<sup>6 7</sup>.

There were also some small reforms introduced by the late period of the Qing government, including the area of education in both Chinese and Western styles in government academies from 1906; with the idea of training designers for the production of craft products for export. Students were sent to the Tokyo School

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<sup>6</sup> Kao, Mayching, "European Influences in Chinese Art, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in "China and Europe, Images and Influences in 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries" ed. by Lee, C.H., Thomas, (Hongkong: The Chinese University Press), p. 251-266.

<sup>7</sup> Ledderose, Lothar, "Chinese Influence on European Art, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries" in "China and Europe, Images and Influences in 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries" ed. by Lee, C.H., Thomas, (Hongkong: The Chinese University Press), p. 222-224.

of Fine Arts in Japan to be trained. The fall of the Qing dynasty brought about changes in both the political system and an accelerated desire to change and to modernize so as to enable China to go back to the forefront of nations.

By then, there were already Chinese artists traveling outside China on their own expense to learn Western art concepts and techniques. Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), Gao Qifeng (1889-1935) and Chen Shuren (1883-1949) studied in Japan and were also active in the 1911 revolution<sup>8</sup>. The 1919 May 4th Movement and the ensuing years saw the struggle between the idea of "total Westernisation" and the vehement opposition to that view, was being distilled with the aim to synthesize the best parts of both the sides: modernity with Chinese characteristics.

After the success of the Revolution, the Lingnan School of Painting, closely linked to the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) dominant in the early 20th century after the fall of the Qing Dynasty was active in the Chinese art scene. They, and in particular Gao Jianfu often included images of modernity in their paintings and wrote texts that indicate their connection to the struggle of the Nationalist government.

The Chinese Nationalist Party understood the value of art and art patronage. It wanted to sustain their claim to safeguard the country's heritage and also the glory of China's past history and that led the government of the day to allow

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<sup>8</sup> The Lingnan School of Painting, Art and Revolution in Modern China 1906-1951, (<http://www.lingnanart.com/lingnanschool-eng.htm>. Retrieved on 19 July 2018.)

some of its most important imperial treasures to travel to London in 1935 for an exhibition there to raise the country's profile.

Another early 20th-century contributor to the modern art scene in China is Liu Haisu (刘海粟, 1896-1994). In 1914, he established the first art school of modern China: 'Shanghai Institute of Fine Art' with his friends, Wu Shiguang and Zhang Jinguang. He started coeducation and used nude models to teach paintings. He was the first artist to do such things in China and caused much controversy. People called him a traitor of the arts. His books: "Biography of Jean-François Millet" and "Biography of Paul Cézanne" were instrumental in introducing western arts to the Chinese. However, he got support from Cai Yuanpei, the principal of Beijing University. In 1918, he began to teach at Beijing University. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Liu organized a number of national and international exhibitions, traveling first to Japan and then Europe, where he studied Western oil painting techniques<sup>9</sup>.

Paintings, sketches, woodblock prints, and the performing arts were different forms of art that were used during the struggle of China to be freed from foreign control and the political agenda to unite the country in during the chaotic period of the latter part of the first half of the 20th century. Lu Xun through his New Woodcut Movement revived woodblock printing in the years between 1930 and 1940. He saw that woodcut could be an effective tool for propagating and exposing the social inequalities of China. Drawing on the emotional intensity as

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 42-51.

seen in German Expressionism, powerful black and white images with strong angular lines were used to portray the hardships and sufferings that common people were going through under harsh conditions. The idea of German Expressionism in woodcut also caught the artists' interest, as that was considered modern in art. This art form of woodcut printing was also introduced to the artists in the Nanyang region, especially Singapore, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

A new genre of ink painting, particularly out from Shanghai, involving the re-interpretation of the age-old literati paintings also emerged, led by Wu Changshuo. With the abandoning of classical education, literati paintings struggled to ally with the aspiration to modernize and to play a crucial part in the various revolutions. Art and cultural reformations were actively discussed and practiced during that era, as part of the New Culture Movement.

## C. Western Painting Concepts and Chinese Visual Art

Another key contributor to the Modernisation of the Chinese art scene was Xu Beihong. In 1918, Xu Beihong was given a teaching position at the Beijing University's Art Research Association. In that year, he presented a paper, "Methods to Reform Chinese Painting." In the paper, he opined that Chinese paintings needed modernization. He proposed the introduction of Western theories of art into traditional Chinese paintings and supported the idea that Chinese paintings should reflect the activities of the people including thorough observations of the subjects of the artworks in the natural world.

Xu went to France in 1919 to further his study. He attended the Académie Julian and the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts under a government scholarship. He also studied under Arthur Kampf who was President of the Berlin Academy of Art, when he lived in the German Germany from 1921 to 1923<sup>10</sup>.

In late autumn of 1925, while Xu Beihong was in his third year in Paris, funding from the Chinese government halted. Through the Chinese Consul-General Zhao Songnan (赵颂南) in Paris, Xu met Huang Menggui (黄孟圭), from Fuzhou Education office, whose older brother was Huang Manshi (黄曼士) living in

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<sup>10</sup> Lai Kin Keung, Edwin, Wan Q.L.; Encyclopedia Britannica on "Xu Beihong", (last updated: 15 July, 2018). Retrieved at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xu-Beihong> on 20 July 2018).

Singapore. Huang Manshi was a prominent community leader in Singapore at that time. Huang Menggui wrote for him an introduction letter and encouraged Xu to go and visit his brother in Singapore. Xu arrived in Singapore and became close friends with Huang Manshi and others. Xu found firm friends in Singapore and he made a number of trips subsequently to Singapore. His friends sought painting commissions and help him organized exhibitions<sup>11</sup>.

In 1927, Xu returned to China and continued teaching. He advocated strict adherence to the teaching of the Western Academies. He began exhibiting his artworks in China and Europe in the 1930s. After the Communist Revolution in 1949, he served as the President of the All-China Federation of Artists and the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Surprisingly, Xu's inclination to the art form taught in the art academies over the modernists' art such as Matisse and Picasso had him concluding that modernists' art was evidence of the decadence of the western capitalism. While he was credited for the effort of art reformation in China, he was, also, later criticized as a hindrance to the development of art in China.

Image 2 titled "The Three Stallions", demonstrates the use of a western concept of perspective in a Chinese artwork painted by Xu. The Western view of perspective recognized that parallel lines on an image plane projecting from an

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<sup>11</sup> Cite speech by "Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Information & the Arts and Second Minister for Trade & Industry, at the opening of the Exhibition 'Sojourn in Nanyang: Works by Xu Beihong' on 26 Jun 98 at 6.30 pm." (<http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view.html?filename=1998062503.htm> retrieved on 20 July 2018).

object will converge towards a hypothetical vanishing point behind the object.

The scientific theory behind this view is that of projective geometry.

The photograph-like perspective is made possible by constructing pictures using the Western Perspective Concept (refer to image 3, titled "Perspective Illustration of a block with corresponding parallel sides on a plane."):

- Parallel lines (in object space/the real object) converge to a vanishing point behind the image on the image plane from the observation point.
- The vanishing points for all horizontal lines, which is the edge of the block lies at the horizon.
- A common vanishing point for all vertical lines behind or below the image on the image plane.
- If the image plane is parallel to any set of parallel lines of the object, then they will appear as being parallel in the image plane. That means, the vanishing point is at infinity, (not illustrated in the illustration.)

The first written account of a method of constructing pictures in correct perspective is found in a treatise written by the learned humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404 – 1472)<sup>12</sup>. This scientific approach to perspective enabled western

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<sup>12</sup> William M. Ivins Jr, 'On the Rationalization of Sight', Paper No. 8, (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, I 938).

artists to create the illusion of perceptual volume and space, and such effect as Anamorphosis<sup>13</sup> and Ames illusionary effect.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, classical Chinese artists approached paintings (Chinese classical paintings) differently. Cameron observed that: "The Chinese artist does not paint his subject while observing it; he may walk in the woods, looking at the trees and mountains, and then return to his studio to paint what his mind's eye remember. He sees with his spirit or as the Chinese would say his 'heart-mind'<sup>15</sup>".

Image 4, titled "Court Ladies" is a Tang Dynasty era painting. The artist had used a flattened perspective. The width of the far side of the table is wider than the side nearer to the viewer. It is as if the artist was looking from the far side of the table, at the viewer or from the top. The lack of the western concept of perspective gives liberty to the imagination to the viewers to interpret the painting. However, the visual integrity of the plane is preserved in terms of the width proportion of the lines regardless of distance. The suggestion of the object's depth is also preserved as the parallel lines that do not converge to a point. Da-Wei in his book wrote: "The Chinese concept of perspective, unlike the scientific view of the West, is an idealistic or supra-realistic approach, so that one can depict more than can be seen with the naked eye. The composition is in a ladder of planes, or two-dimensional or flat perspective."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7IRU8rHmAQ> retrieved 2 August 2018.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJhyu6nlGt8> retrieved on 2 August 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron, Alison Stilwell, *Chinese Painting Techniques*, (Dover Publications, Toronto 1999), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Da-Wei, Kwo; "Chinese Brushworks in Calligraphy and Painting: Its History, Aesthetics and Techniques", (Dover Publications, New York, 1990), p.70.

However, in Chinese landscape paintings, we notice that the Chinese classical artists do use the idea of atmospheric perspective in their artworks. This painting (Image 5 titled "Gathering on a Spring Day" by Yuan Jiang) illustrates the Chinese artist's use of atmospheric perspective in a landscape painting, which is typical in paintings down the ages. By softening of edges, decreased details of objects in a painting, placing the image higher in the entire image frame and/or varying the dimensional proportion in the various mid and faraway planes, as the image regresses into a distance can create an illusion of depth. This method is used both in Chinese and Western paintings. In Chinese landscape paintings, clouds are also frequently used to reduce the details of the objects in the intermediate and the far away planes in the building. However, objects consisting of parallel lines are still painted without any notion to the concept of linear perspectives that Western paintings had used for centuries. (Note the construction of the pavilion in image 5 where the back of the pavilion seemed visually longer than the front.) This is interesting because the pavilion is the focus of the painting and also from which the narrative of this painting takes its meaning. It is, as if the artist was part of those in the pavilion, experiencing the beauty of the surrounding. The ability of the Chinese artist to use this concept of atmospheric perspective effectively contributes to the poetic beauty of the painting.

While the Chinese traveled to the West to discover a linear perspective, which dominated Western painting until the end of the 19th century, Paul Cézanne flattened the conventional Renaissance space in his paintings. The Cubists and other 20th-century painters abandoned the depiction of three-dimensional space altogether and hence had no need for linear perspective. This is an interesting exchange of direction, which perhaps indicate support Charles Taylor's Acultural Theory of Modernity, which views assumed that the dissipation of traditional beliefs implies that the different paths of civilization are bound to converge and hence, modernity will consequent all cultures looking the same, or become one. This idea of modernity (in the singular) as a point of convergence is imbued in the logic of acultural theory<sup>17</sup>.

Another major contributor to the Chinese Modernity in the area of Visual Art was Lin Fengmian. Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), the founder of Chinese modernist painting, went to France in 1919 to study painting. He went to Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. It was round about that time when Xu Beihong (1895-1953) made that same journey. He studied in the studio of Fernand Cormon, where renowned painters like Vincent van Gogh, Emile Bernard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec were trained. While Lin advocated the modernist's way of painting, Xu was in favor of the art of the art academies, emphasizing the importance of linear perspective derives out of projective

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor, Charles; "Two Theories of Modernity" in *Alternative Modernities* edited by Goankar, Dilip Parameshwar, (Duke University Press, 2001), p. 172-175, 181.

geometry. In fact, Xu saw the modernist's art as evidence of decadence of western capitalistic ideal<sup>18</sup>.

Parisian modern art flourished in the 1900s. The post-impressionist period gave rise to the many ways that modern art could be expressed. Meanwhile, the art academies were still thriving. It was at that time that Chinese men like Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and others arrived at the shore of France. To them, realism was as new as the art of the modernists and they took up different views and brought back to China their views of what the art of modernity should or can look like.

Lin Fengmian returned to China in 1925 he became the principal of the Beiping Vocational Art School, now known as the Central Academy of Fine Arts. In 1928 he was appointed President of the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Those trained in Lin's art academy included renowned modern artists like Wu Guangzhong (1919-2010), Zhu Dequn (1920-2014), and Zhao Wuji (1921-2013). Japanese soldiers destroyed many of Lin's early art-works during the Sino-Japanese War. Later, more of his later works were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution<sup>19</sup>.

Image 6 (titled 'Nude' by Lin Fengmian) is likely to have been completed in around 1934. It is executed in the manner of Fauvism. Fauvism is the precursor

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<sup>18</sup> Edwin Lai Kin Keung Q.L. Wan, "Xu BeiHong: Chinese Painter" in Encyclopedia Britannica (last updated 15 July 2018), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xu-Beihong> retrieved on 7 August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 42-51.

to Cubism and Expressionism. Leaders of the movement include Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault, George Braque, Kees Van Dongen, and others. They drew inspiration from works by artists like Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Edvard Munch.

A dominant feature of Fauvism was the radical idea of separating color from the original object allowing it to exist on the canvas as an independent element. It allows color as an element in the art-piece to, independently, express the mood as the artist desires, without having to be true to the original object. The forms are also simplified and together with the colors take in the inherent flatness of the canvas or paper surface so as to give a strong and unified impression that each element of the painting plays in the piece of artwork. The element of perspective is ignored in this art concept.

This painting (Image 6 titled "Nude") had not seen light after being completed and was kept in Lin's studio for 10 years until it was found in the home of an American buyer. Both the subject matter and the way the painting was executed spelled taboo to the conservative Chinese Society during that time<sup>20</sup>.

Lin's painting style spanned between Fauvism and Expressionism. Expressionist artists attempt to convey a turgid feeling by using exaggerated brushstrokes, forms or colors. It is a powerful way to represent urgencies and urbanizations and; the isolations and forgotten amidst the energy and anxieties.

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<sup>20</sup> Clunas, Craig; "Art in China", (Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London 2007), p. 208-209.

The Battle of Red Cliffs was a decisive battle fought during the period of The Three Kingdoms in Chinese history. It was fought in the winter of AD 208 <sup>21</sup>. The allied forces of the southern warlords Liu Bei and Sun Quan were on one side facing the huge military of the northern warlord Cao Cao. Liu Bei and Sun Quan frustrated Cao Cao's attempt to conquer the land south of the Yangtze River. It was a fiercely fought battle, which was important to the survival of the southern warlords. That victory at the Red Cliffs gave Liu Bei and Sun Quan control of the Yangtze region<sup>22</sup>. That also enabled the establishment of the two southern states of Shu Han and Eastern Wu later on in history. Poems were written down the ages describing that campaign (though there are different interpretations of that campaign in history) and also often used that part of history in Chinese poetry to infer the meaning of life. The precise location remained uncertain.

Lin in his painting entitled: "The Fiery Battle of Red Cliffs" (Image 7) used a red background to invoke the fiery scene in the battle. Chinese masks painted in simple forms were used to depict the various characters in the battle. The painting invokes an emotion of hostility, ferocity and decisiveness. The way that it was painted is not typical of traditional Chinese painting though Chinese ink and pigments were used on Chinese "xuan" paper and the motifs were all typically Chinese. The flatness of the painting and use of colors, the form suggesting the masks representing the different characters in the battle were

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<sup>21</sup> de Crespigny, Rafe (1990), "Generals of the South: The foundation and early history of the Three Kingdoms state of Wu", (Australian National University: Canberra, Internet Edition 2004), p. 264. ([https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/html/1885/42048/gos\\_index.html](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/html/1885/42048/gos_index.html) retrieved on 11 August 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 273

western concepts of the painting of the post-impressionism era. However, if we look at this painting, it did not integrate all the Six Principles of Harmony in Chinese Painting (the 谐和 Principles) that Chen Chong Swee strongly advocated in his teaching of Chinese Ink Painting and his own practice. This art piece of Lin would have been considered as having compromised. (The views of Cheng Chong Swee and Xie He's Six Principle of Harmony in Chinese Painting will be discussed later in this essay.)

## D. Traditional Chinese-Ink Painting Concepts

As Chinese-Ink Painting developed over the centuries, theoretical proposals were advanced for the appreciation and appraisal of the art form. The two important concepts, usually considered are the Concept of Yi-Jing (意境) and the Six Principle of Harmony in Chinese-Ink Painting (the 谐和 Principles).

The concept of Yi-Jing (意境) in Chinese art (both in paintings and literary works) has its origin from Chinese literature. Literally, Yi-Jing can be taken to mean "the realm of meaning" (Yi: "meaning" or "idea" and; Jing: "realm" or "sphere")<sup>23</sup>. Interestingly, this "realm of meaning" must be accessed beyond text or image whether in literary works or visual art. It has to do with the readers or viewers' active imagination and artistic experience in a piece of literary work or painting. It is intricate, ineffable and yet imbued with meanings. Yi-jing is essential to Chinese poetries as well in Chinese artistic paintings. Good poetries or paintings must have this criterion: Poetry in art and art in poetry. (名畫要如詩句讀 – a reputable painting must read like poetry).

The concept of Yi-Jing (意境) was first brought up in a literary context by Wang Changling 王昌齡 (689-756). Wang was a prominent poet during the golden age of poetry of the Tang dynasty, which witnessed the consummation of the poetic genre in the newly established form jin ti shi 近 / 今體詩 ("contemporary-style

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<sup>23</sup> Yutang, Lin (林語堂). (1987). 論譯詩 [On translating poetry]. In 詩詞翻譯的藝術 (*The Art of Translating Poetry*). (China Translation and Publishing Corporation, Beijing 1987).

poetry"). In his "Principles of Poetry" ("Shi Ge" 詩格), Wang Changling proposed that poetry had "three realms" (san jing 三境): the realm of things (wu jing 物境), the realm of emotion (qing jing 情境), and the realm of idea (yi jing 意境), there must be a harmonious interaction and cross-reference between the subjective mind (xin) and the objective reality (jing) (in his words: chu xin yu jing, shi jing yu xin 處心於境, 視境於心). This concept of Yi-Jing had since been expressed in a different manner by scholars over the centuries to distill its meaning. Su Shi 蘇軾, also known as Su Dongbo 苏东坡(1037-1101) express the idea using the phrase 境與意會 ("the meeting of realm with idea") and Jiang Kui 薑夔 (c. 1155-c. 1221) rendered his understanding as 意中有景, 景中有意 or "there is scene in thought, thought in scene" among the others Chinese scholars who had address this topic.

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In the early years of the Republican Period in China, a well-known scholar, Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877-1927), adopted this idea of Yi-Jing as a standard for critiquing literature. Wang Guowei grouped the three realms of poetry proposed by Wang Changling into one realm called Yi-Jing. He wrote: "Concerning the writing of poetry, what can fully express the author's feelings internally and touch the reader to the heart externally are none other than two things, Yi (意) and Jing (境). The best work of poetry features the fusion of the two. Next, come

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<sup>24</sup> Yanfang Tang, "Translating across Cultures: Yi Jing and Understanding Chinese Poetry" in *Intercultural Communication Studies XXIII*: 1 (USA 2014), p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> Zhang BOWEI Wang, Changling (王昌齡) (689-756 AD). (1996). "詩格 [Principles of Poetry]," in *全唐五代詩格匯考* [A complete textual analysis of the principles of poetry in the Tang and Five Dynasties] edited by Zhang BOWEI. (Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House, Nanjing 1996), pp. 172-173.

the ones that either excels in Yi (意) or in Jing (境) respectively. In either of these two scenarios, both Yi (意) and Jing (境) must be present; otherwise, it would fail to be called poetry. The two aspects of Yi (意) and Jing (境) are often intermingled into each other. The author can emphasize one more than the other, but cannot abandon one for the other. Whether a poem is considered to be of high quality depends on whether it has Yi-Jing (意境) or whether its Yi-Jing (意境) is profound or otherwise. (文學之事, 其內足以攄己而外足以感人者, 意與境二者而已。上焉者, 意與境渾, 其次或以境勝, 或以意勝, 苟缺其一, 不足以言文學。 .... 故二者常互相錯綜, 能有所偏重, 而不能有所偏廢也。文學之工不工, 亦視其意境之有無與其深淺而已)<sup>26</sup>." " While poetry expresses one's inner feeling and it must also the capacity to affect others. It goes down to the two components of 'idea' and 'realm (scene)'. In best writing, the two are integrated thoroughly. He went on to point out that if either is lacking altogether, then it cannot be called literature (or painting)<sup>27</sup>. He went on to coined the idea of as Jingjie (境介 "aesthetic state or consciousness") or Yi-jing ("aesthetic idea") to denote a complete aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene<sup>28</sup>. This concept of Yi-Jing as a Chinese poetry concept is applied faithfully into Chinese aesthetics. A piece of good Chinese artwork is seen as the equivalent to a good poetry (名畫要如詩句讀 – a reputable painting must read like poetry). Chinese poetry and painting are seen to be intimately related and inseparable in

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<sup>26</sup> Nie, Zhenbin (聶振斌), "王國維美學思想 [Aesthetic Thoughts of Wang Guowei]", (Shenyang: Liaoning University Press: Liaoning, China 1997), p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> Yao-T'ing, Wang, "Looking at Chinese Painting" translated by the Stone Studio, (Nigensha Publishing Co. Ltd., Tokyo, 1996), p33.

<sup>28</sup> Adele Rickett, Wang Kuo-wei's Jen-chien Tz'u-hua hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism, Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff.

the traditional view of Chinese visual art. Yi-Jing is what draws the viewer into the Chinese painting so that the viewer becomes part of the painting narrative.

While Yi-Jing explained the concept as to how painting should be viewed (and felt), the Six Principles of Chinese Painting (繪畫六法) attempt to describe the visual structure of a Chinese painting. The Principles were established by Xié Hé. In his preface to his book "The Record of the Classification of Old Painters" (古畫品錄) in around 550 CE, he stated six points to consider when judging the quality, a painting. Osvald Siren interpreted the principles as follow<sup>29</sup>:

Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement

Bone Manner (that is, Structural): Use of Brush

Conform to Object to Give Likeness

Apply the Colours according to the Characteristics

Plan and Design, Place and Position (that is Composition)

The transit Models by Drawing (Copying)

The precise explanation of the Principles varies among art practitioners and art history academics although there is a general agreement to what the Principles require. In the original writing, each principle was stated in the traditional form with four Chinese characters. Each Chinese Painting Period had interpreted the principles in a way that suited them. Nevertheless, Chinese painting is still unique and recognizable in spite of theoretical fluidity through the generations.

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<sup>29</sup> Siren, Osvald, "The Chinese on the Art of Painting," (Schocken Books, New York 1963), p.227-229.

Chen Chong Swee (陈宗瑞, 1910-1985) born in Shantou, Guangdong was educated at Xinhua Academy of Fine Art, Shanghai. He painted in both using Chinese and Western painting technique, though he majored in Chinese-Ink painting. Chen saw Chinese-Ink painting as being synthetical emphasizing spirit resonance and harmony instead of mere rationality. He still saw the Six Principles of Chinese Painting (繪畫六法) as the basis for unchanging aesthetical ideals of Chinese-ink painting<sup>30</sup>.

Both the idea of 'Yi-Jing' and the six principles of Chinese paintings are still applicable to Chinese painting today. They are still taught in formal Chinese painting classes and the Chinese Art Academy for the training of Chinese artists and for the appreciation and appraisal of paintings. While the traditional concepts of Chinese-Ink Painting are still considered valid for the appraisal of modern Chinese artworks, the strict interpretation has and need to be reviewed in the light of progressive and breakthrough in Chinese art practice. New ways need to be assessed to better describe Chinese-Ink Painting and as the genre developed over time and cultural evolution.

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<sup>30</sup> Chen Chong Swee, "A Diverse Discussion on Chinese and Western Painting," in *Unfettered Ink* ed. By Low Tze Wee and Grace Tng and translated by Chow Teck Seng, Goh Ngee Hui and Ng Kum Hoon, (National Gallery, Singapore 2017), p. 15-16.

### **3. The Journey of Minds and Nanyang**

#### **A. Arrival into Nanyang**

By the early 20th century, Sun Yat Sen had established his Tongmenghui in Singapore as its headquarters for South East Asia (or what would have been known to them as Nanyang). Both Sun Yat Sen and Kang Youwei had been to British-controlled Singapore to garner support for their political activities back on the Chinese mainland to revive China as a respectable sovereign nation. While the previous wave of Chinese immigrants were mainly laborers and people from the business community, the, then, new wave of visitors and migrants were intellectuals and patriots that were the concern for the survival of China. Among them were also visual artists like Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu and performance artists such as Wang Yin.

Before 1950, the British colonists in Singapore kept a relatively quiescent presence in the art scene on the island. This could be one factor for the reason for the dominance of Chinese arts and Chinese art in Singapore. The following charts give an idea of the activities of Chinese artists in Singapore, as early as before the Second World War.

## B. Bringing Modernity to Nanyang

According to Zhong Yu's account in "Malaysian Chinese Art History by 1929, there were already five private art studios operating in Singapore<sup>31</sup>. They were:

- Wei Guan Art Studio by Yang Mansheng opened in 1922 (later renamed Man Sheng Art Gallery);
- Min Sheng Art Studio by Cheng Minsheng opened in 1923;
- Tan Mei Art Studio by Yang Zhiai opened in 1929;
- Ru Qi Art Studio by Zhang Ruqi opened in 1929 and
- Shi Quan Art Studio by Zeng Fankai also opened in 1929.

In the 1930s, Zhang Ruqi together with his brother-in-law opened another art studio and was named Peng Te Art Studio. Zhong Yu also noted another six art studios opened between 1930 and 1941. They were:

- Le Tian Art Studio by Liu Wencai;
- Xin Dao Art Studio by co-founded by Huang Zunsheng and Lin Ruozhou;
- Man Tian Art Studio by Lian Aitong.
- Tianshi Art Studio by Zhong Ming Shi (the studio was renamed after the Second World War as Tian Shi Art Company);
- Kai Nian Art Studio Fu Yongnian;
- Jin Qi Art Studio by artist Wu Shushan;

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<sup>31</sup> Zhong, Yu (钟瑜), "Malaysian Chinese Art History 1900-1965 (马来西亚华人美术史 1900-1965)," (Zheng Shan International Art Group (正山国际设计艺术集团) and Malaysia Art Academy, Eastern Art Research Centre (马来西亚艺术学院东方艺术研究中心), Malaysia 1999), p. 13.

- Da Ying Art Studio by Xu Junlian and Lin Daoan;

Members of the alumnus of The Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University of Art and Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts was said to have met in Singapore at a restaurant at Great World Amusement Park on 15 April 1935 for a reunion. The idea of forming an art society germinated. At first, it was decided to name it as 'The Salon Art Society'. Lin Daoan and Xu Junlian were also tasked to put on draft the idea of organizing an art exhibition. At that time they also restricted membership to the three art academies. Due to the strict requirement, there were not sufficient members to form the society and the idea was shelved.

Those in attendance included: 蔡竹贞 Cai Zhuzheng, 李云扬 Li Yunyang, 林道庵 Lin Daoan, 徐君濂 Xu Junlian, 张伯河 Zhang Bohe, 林天 Lin Tian, 陈升平 Chen Shengping, 刘恭熙 Liu Gongxi, 黄清泉 Huang Qingquan 和 李魁士 Li Kuishi.

They met for the second time at the same venue in that year. An agreement was reached to enlarge the society's membership, and art lovers were sought from Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries to be included in the membership list. In the following year (1936), the Society was renamed as the Singapore Chinese Artists Society. The Society was officially established on 20 January 1936.

In that second meeting (which was dated 17 November 1935), 张汝器 Tchang Ju Chi, 张汝器 Zhuang Yiuzhao, 卢衡 Lu Heng, 赖文基 Lai Wen Kee, 高振声 Gao Zhengsheng and 陈宗瑞 Chen Chong Swee were also in attendance<sup>32</sup>.

What was interesting about the early members of the Chinese Artists Society was the fact that some of its members were exposed to the modernization effort that was happening in China. This meant that the artistic orientation of the Society was unlike the form of Chinese classical art practice advocated by artists of the, then, existing United Artists Malaysia. Members of the Chinese Artists Society were already familiar with Western art forms such as the Realism of the Western Art Academies and the Impressionism and Post Impressionism of Western Modernism. Many of them were also inspired by the education policy of Cai Yuanpei and his view on the importance of art education and communication through art. There was also a fundamental change in terms of attitude and appreciation of art in that art was not just an elitist activity, residing in the domain of the rich and the famous. This can be seen by the activities that culminated, following the establishment of the Chinese Artists Society, which saw the rise of art institutions and art teachers in Singapore after its founding.

Further, in the area of art education, there was also increased numbers of art lectures delivered by artists from Mainland China via cultural institutions and schools and also over the broadcasting media. Chart 1 showed those art lectures that were delivered between 1937 and 1941.

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<sup>32</sup> Information regarding the Society of Chinese Artists is found on <http://www.soca.org.sg/about.html> (retrieved on 15 August 2018).

Referring to Chart 1: Art Forum: between 1937 and 1941<sup>33</sup>. The fact that those speakers were renowned personalities and they took time to speak in art forums in Singapore testified to the fact that Chinese in Singapore were regarded as an important part of their strategy to support the struggle for the future of China. In 1937, the Marco Polo Incident (also known as the Lugouqiao Incident 盧溝橋事件) sparked off the Sino-Japanese War. Subsequently, the war spread to other parts of China and there were those who had to leave China for foreign shores.

The topics that they discussed can be divided into two large categories. Firstly, there were those topics that discussed Chinese art development in the light of modernity, Chinese and Western art principles and methods, the essence of Chinese art and topics in terms of artistic development and techniques. For example, Xu Beihong tended to emphasize Western Realism.

The other group of topics focuses more on art education in relationship to politics and character building. Weng Zhanqiu spoke on the topics such as "The progress of War: Effect on Hope of Malaysian Chinese Youth" and "Win the War, Build the Nation." Liu Haisu also spoke on: "Youth and Art" and "Character Education". The objective was to encourage overseas Chinese to support the War against the Japanese."

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<sup>33</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in *Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore* (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p.161.

Referring to Chart 2: Art Exhibitions Statistics between 1937 to 1941<sup>34</sup> (before World War 2), the chart divided those Art Exhibitions held from 1937 to 1941 into three categories. They were:

- The solo art exhibitions by Chinese artists coming from China.
- The local artists and others. This group included all the art exhibitions organized local institutions and artists living in Singapore.
- The solo art exhibitions by Western foreign artists.

The numbers of Art Exhibitions in Singapore during the five years before the war took its toll in 1942 were consistent. In the five years, there were 50 art exhibitions and 19 art forums. That was at least one art activity per month. The statistics also showed a significant difference in terms of the number of art exhibitions held between the Chinese and Western artists during this period of Singapore history. This could probably suggest that that influence of Chinese artists were more dominant compared to Western art influence.

According to The Singapore Government Press Release (7MC/OCT/16/77), reporting on a speech given by Ow Chin Hock, Parliamentary Secretary (Culture) at end NTUC seminar,<sup>35</sup>

the transient population of Singapore estimated 600,000 in 1931. Male immigrants seeking fortunes here dominated the demographic movement. By 1937, when the Sino-Japanese War broke out, immigration escalated. Between

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<sup>34</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/och19771010s.pdf> (see p. 2, retrieved on 21 August 2018).

1931 and 1947, the population rose by about 500,000 and another half a million between 1947 and 1957, bringing the population to 1.46 million by 1957.

We can see from Chart 3: Solo Art Exhibitions by Artists from China<sup>36</sup>, that most of the art exhibitions held by the Chinese artists were shown at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. This could suggest the Chinese artists had a strong link with the Chinese business community in Singapore, who in turn were likely the main sponsors for their art activities. The Chinese community was passionate about the political condition in China and they were zealous in their effort to support the rebuilding of the Chinese nation.

The frequent themes adopted for the art exhibitions had to do with the topics of the Sino-Japanese War, which was, then, being waged in China; and supports for the Chinese army and refugees. The exhibitions were well attended and some exhibition had even a visitor-ship of up to 20,000 visitors. The Chinese media were very supportive of the exhibitions with extensive promotions and reports being made. The local literati community would also compose prose and poetry to complement the artists and their works. Those art exhibitions had also introduced the western communities to Chinese paintings and Chinese views of arts. A major distinctive of these exhibitions was that the organizing committee would work very diligently to engage the business community to support by

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<sup>36</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in *Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore* (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p. 167.

purchasing the artworks, of which the funds collected would go to the support of the various refugees' relief funds. That was a very emotional aspect of the art exhibitions.

The patriotic spirit of the Chinese artists from China was something that must have been instrumental in stirring the passion for arts and art education in Singapore during that time. They also knitted a strong kindred spirit between Chinese artists from China and Chinese artists in Singapore, and even till today. We still see the various art societies in Singapore going to China and vice versa annually for exchanges in art views and art appreciation by organizing exhibitions, forums, and outdoor painting trips.

All those efforts put in by the Chinese artists from China during 1930 to 1940s saw many successes in art exhibitions and art forums. Those efforts were also a motivational force for the establishment of Chinese art studios, the Singapore Chinese Artists Society and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, which signified that the Chinese community here had begun to grasp the importance of art and art education, not so much as a luxury but a discipline of the mind and a way to express the innermost feeling and desire of humanity as advocated by Cai Yuanpei.

Chart 4: Art Exhibitions by Local Institutions and Resident Artists (1937-41)<sup>37</sup>, shows that there were altogether 31 art exhibitions organized by local institutions and resident artists between 1937 and 1941. The first art exhibition organized by the Singapore Chinese Artists Society was held in 1936 and thereafter, annually. Those five exhibitions held before the War consisted of a colorful combination of Chinese and Western paintings; a feast to the eyes.

Then there was the annual local Inter-Schools Art Exhibition that was organized by St. Andrew's School beginning in 1936. Rev J. Romanis Lee was the principal of the School (from 1912). He was considered one of the greatest benefactors of the School. He made many significant changes to the school (including building the premise at Woodsville and was opened just before the War in 1940 but unfortunately, the school had to stop lessons during the years of War). He also brought about many modern characteristics to the School. Art as a subject flourished under his leadership. The art exhibitions organized by the school in the school's premise enabled many art-loving students from other schools as well to participate and to learn from each other.

From the chart, we can also see that the local Chinese community were also concerned with the political and social situation in China. That kindred fire that warmed the hearts across geographical borders burnt with the same zeal among

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<sup>37</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in *Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore* (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p.169-172.

the local Chinese and the Chinese arriving from China. Art Exhibitions were also used as a mean to raise funds for refugee relief and to support the fight against the Japanese in China.

By 1941, just before the War, according to Yeo Mang Thong's record, there were already three art societies established and six art educational institutions. The three art societies were:

- Singapore Art Club 新加坡美术俱乐部, (which held one art exhibition between 1937 and 1941.)
- The Singapore Chinese Artists Society 新加坡中华美术研究会 and
- Singapore Commercial Art Society 星州美术广告研究会

The six art educational institutions were:

- Angelic Fine Arts Institute (天使美术学院) founded by Zhong Ming Shi (钟鸣世): Graduated from The Fujian Normal University (福建省立高等师范美专比业).
- White Heron Fine Arts Institute (白鹭美术学院) founded by Lin Zunde (林俊德): Graduated from 美国外俄盟大学美术科.
- North-West Fine Arts Institute (西南美术学院) founded by Jiang Xiuhua (江秀华): Graduated from Japan Culture University (日本文化大学美术系比业).
- Westlake Fine Arts Institute (西湖美术学院) founded by Deng Qiyi (邓期艺) and Chen Daju (陈达琚).

- Meng Yasigen Fine Arts School (蒙雅斯根美术学校) founded by Russian artist, Meng Yasigen.
- The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (南洋美术专科学校) founded by Lim Hak Tai (林大学): graduated from The Fujian Normal University (福建省立高等师范美专毕业).

Additionally, Zhong Yu recorded existence of another art educational institution founded by Lin Youfei (林犹飞) in 1929 named Rose Art Institute (玫瑰艺院)<sup>38</sup>

The fact that leading those foreign artists and art educationists chose Singapore to be their center of influence in South East Asia stamped from the fact that there was a concentrated population of Chinese people to whom they could relate to and share their concerns both in the education of art and also the concerns of the events happening in China. The strategic geographical location of Singapore would be another factor. Singapore served as a stopover hub for many traveling to India and Europe. Furthermore, many early Chinese migrants had already settled in Singapore by that time and they had family links in China. These are some of the contributing reasons why Singapore, by before the Second World

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<sup>38</sup> Zhong, Yu (钟瑜), "Malaysian Chinese Art History 1900-1965 (马来西亚华人美术史 1900-1965)," (Zheng Shan International Art Group(正山国际设计艺术集团); Malaysia Art Academy, Eastern Art Research Centre (马来西亚艺术学院东方艺术研究中心), Malaysia 1999), p.34.

War had already an active art scene and a center for the propagating of Chinese art in South-East Asia.

What was more exciting was the fact that, by then, Singapore was updated with the latest knowledge of Chinese Art development in China through the visits of artists and art educationists from various part of China? It also can be argued that the entry of Western modern art into Singapore could well be attributed to those Chinese artists and educationists who came to Singapore with zeal and willingness to share, to teach and to update the overseas Chinese with the progress that China was going through.

In the evaluation of paintings, there are, at least, two aspects to assess. There is the objective and the subjective aspect. The objective aspect includes those art principles and skills that artists need to acquire, to execute his works professional Historically, Chinese scholars had prescribed the skills and principles of paintings required for the art practice and the assessment of Chinese artworks. Those principles are used as a standard to measure the quality of the painting in the first instance: assessment by the trained eyes. Then, there is the subjective aspect of painting, which is the idea. Ideas will differ due to the preference of the artist, art connoisseurs, and the masses that may be colored by their exposure to art and worldviews. After having acquired the skill-set to paint and having understood the principles of art making, the artist continues his journey by translating his ideas into images. His journey should include the refining and maturing of his ideas so that his artworks can be like a stream of living waters that can refresh the world around him. And artists living in

Singapore, painting with Chinese and pigments had the benefit of learning their skill from authentic teachers, without having to go to China, where it all started. Having acquired those skills, the story of Chinese painting in Singapore continues.

The dawn of the Second World War saw a halt to blossoming of the art scene in Singapore as people suffered much in the hands of the invaders. Lim Hak Tai (林学大, 1893-1963) was born in Amoy, Fujian in 1893. He was educated at Fuzhou Provincial Art Teacher's Training College and Amoy Art Teacher's College. He arrived Singapore in 1937 at the outbreak of Second Sino-Japanese War and taught painting at The Chinese High School and Nan Chiau Girls High School (now Nan Chiau High School) for a year. In 1938, he was appointed as the first principal of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was closed during the war years but very quickly Lim Hak Tai re-opened the school at 49 St. Thomas Walk with 30 students, 40% were international students in 1946.

## C. The Art of Nanyang

In this section, we will do a brief visit to what is popularly called the 'Nanyang-style' of paintings and the definition of "Nanyang-ness". It will not attempt to solve the issue arising from the use of the terminology. Instead, we will raise this as an issue to be further research, as part of the journey from the search of modernity in China to the modern painting of Singapore. The Nanyang artists, referring to the artists from China that had taken residence in Singapore and had contributed much to the modern art scene of Singapore should not be forgotten in the journey of Singapore art development. Besides acknowledging their contribution to our art history, it is also important to register their roles and their works in the art history of Singapore in the same light as the Impressionists and Expressionists in the European art history.

So, where is Nanyang? Nanyang (南洋 South Sea) is a very Sino-centric word that was used to describe the countries that are south of China, mainly refers to the South East Asian countries, just as Xiyang (西洋 Western Sea) meant the Western nations and Dongyang (东洋 East Sea), referring to Japan. Nanyang has been, in a way, important to China in that Nanyang has been the recipient of 3 mass migrations of Chinese people, with the first in 1644, when the Ming Dynasty fell. The second wave of migration was in the early Qing dynasty period when the people were escaping from the oppressive rule of the Manchurian emperors and the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (太平天国运动) and the third being first half of the 20th century when Chinese arrived in Nanyang in search of work in

the rubber plantation, tin mines in Malaya due to the chaotic state of the nation, engaged in wars against aggressors while attempting to resolve the internal politics. The flow of immigrants increased during the Sino-Japanese War period when starvation became rampant. They also came to work as laborers in the Singapore Godowns, a warehouse development, especially along the Singapore River.

The idea of "Nanyang" was shaped through centuries and crystallized to the present form by the early 20th century. When Zhenghe (郑和) sailed to Southeast Asia and South Asia during the Ming Dynasty, those voyages were termed as "Zhenghe went down to the Western Sea (郑和下西洋)" although neither Southeast Asia or South Asia was in the western seas as Chinese knows it today.

Another Chinese phrase that was synonymous in meaning to Nanyang (南洋) was Nanhai (南海). Both phrases meant the South Sea (although some would distinguish them: to mean 'sea' and 'ocean' respectively). Nanhai, can also mean the South China Sea, where many Southeast Asian nations reside. Also, there was Nanhai County (南海縣), a former county in Guangdong Province, China, named after the South China Sea. Now, Nanhai District, is a district of Foshan, Guangdong, China. Kang Youwei in many of his calligraphies styled himself as the "Sojourner of Nanhai (南海游人). He was born in the Nanhai County in 1858.

Wang Gungwu (王赓武), an Australian historian of overseas Chinese descent, who studied and wrote about the Chinese diaspora, thought that the word 'diaspora' use to describe the migration of Chinese from China give the wrong impression that all overseas Chinese are the same. He pointed out that the term 'Nanyang' was first used in the early 14th century by the scholar Chen Dazhen (陈大震) in his work in Dade Nanhai Zhi (大德南海志, 1279-1307)<sup>39 40</sup>. It contained the record of the maritime activities in the Southern Ocean during the Reign of Dade of the Yuan Dynasty.

By the time, Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) set up his headquarter in Singapore in 1905. It was obvious that his headquarter was meant to coordinate the effort to support the Chinese revolutionary cause in Nanyang. Nanyang was touted as the "Mother of the 1911 Revolution" (南洋华人实为辛亥革命之母)<sup>41</sup>; which saw the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the emergence of Sun's regime. Sun saw the Chinese Diaspora in British Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Philippines (the Nanyang region) could be tapped to help support and fund the struggle as many still had emotional ties back to their kins in China.

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<sup>39</sup> 陈大震, 吕桂孙; "元大德南海志残本" edited (编) by 广州市地方志编纂委员会办公室, (广东人民出版社, 广州史志丛书, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> "大德南海志"中的東南亞地名考釋 (<http://www.world10k.com/blog/pdf/303-320.pdf>, retrieved on 30 August 2018.)

<sup>41</sup> Li Jianli, "Writings on Sun Yat-sen, Tongmenghui and the 1911 Revolution: Surveying the Field and Locating Southeast Asia" in Tongmenghui, Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese in Southeast Asia : A Revisit, edited by Leo Suryadinata, (Chinese Heritage Centre: Singapore, 2006), p. 97-98.

The term 'Nanyang' was in common use by that time of the early 20th century. Kwok Kian Chow recorded that: "...Relative to the visual arts, literary activity of Singapore Chinese migrants had an earlier beginning with the publication of Xinguomin zazhi (新國民雜誌), the associate magazine of the daily newspaper Xinguomin Ribao (新國民日報) in 1919. By the late-1920s, there was a tendency towards vernacularism in literary works. Emphasis was placed on local (Nanyang) subject matter and this gave birth to the term "Nanyang-style" ...<sup>42</sup>"

Attempts to define a "Nanyang -style" in visual art followed thereafter. The proposed criterion to define the 'Nanyang-style' included:

- Paintings of a group of émigré Chinese artists living in the Nanyang region around the period of the 1930s to 1960s.
- Paintings that syncretized Western Modern techniques and Chinese Painting techniques
- Paintings that embodies subject that was connected to, represent or gave a flavor of what Nanyang was.

Leading artists in the period of 1940s to the 1960s were said to have painted in the "Nanyang Style" included Georgette Chen, Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, and Chen Wen His (for ease of reference, we will refer to them as "Nanyang Artists"). However, there were also other prominent artists that should have been listed as part of this group but the in this discussion we will

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<sup>42</sup> Kwok, Kian Chow, "Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Beginnings of the "Nanyang School" as viewed in <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/arts/painters/channel/7.html> retrieved on 28 August 2018.)

include only the ones mentioned in order to manage the length of this essay.

While we will take examples from Western Paintings, the focus will be on Chinese-Ink Paintings.

At least, there are two questions that will require more discussions to establish the idea of a 'Nanyang Style' painting if we were to enter the category with the same definition of Impressionism and the like. The two questions are:

1. Was there a broad attempt by the "Nanyang Artists" to syncretize Western Modern techniques and Chinese Painting Techniques?
2. What is "Nanyang-ness" in term of visual art?

Looking at Georgette's paintings in Image 8 (titled "Boats in Soochow") and 9 (titled "Kallang River"), it can be argued that it is difficult to distinguish which is a 'Nanyang-style' painting without a look at the painting's title. The painting styles are typically Georgette's post-impressionism.

Image 8, depicted a scene in Suzhou, would likely fit the criterion to get it into a "Nanyang-style Painting' Exhibition if it was not for the title given to the painting. For image 9, the title of the painting indicates that it was a Singapore scene and the year that it was painted, which was about the period when Georgette took residence in Singapore. So apart from the titles of the painting and the year they were painted, it is difficult to see the Nanyang-ness of the paintings.

Image 10 (titled "Indian Musicians") painted by Liu Kang, consists of an Indian theme. Painted with oil on canvas using Western painting technique, there is an absence of Chinese Ink painting feature. The three dancers on the wall in the background are like western sketches. The content is more Indian than the usual 'Nanyang' objects. Even the title of the painting, simply stated as Indian Musicians' gave no hints about the setting of this painting. Could Liu Kang have painted this piece of artwork in India or from an impression he had of an Indian performance rather than to portray "Nanyang-ness"? How do we decide if this is a 'Nanyang-style' painting, except if we have a historical record of the painting? The painting style is basically Western Modern Post Impressionism.

Even Chen Wen Hsi's painting entitled "Heron" shown in Image 11 invoke the same query. Though this piece of artwork was done on Chinese 'xuan' paper and pigment the content was a western post-impressionist depiction of 'herons'. The artist attempted to build into his work some kind of rhythms with flattened forms and colors that did not necessarily conformed exactly to the actual colors of the object; much like the painting that Lin Fengmian did in his 'Red Cliff' painting illustrated in Image 8.

Cheong Soo Pieng's painting in image 12 (untitled), shows Cheong's Cubist-like technique laid out in a Chinese-Painting format. He used basic Chinese line-works to frame his composition with Chinese ink and Chinese pigment for colors. However, the flattened appearance of a cubist technique was compromised by his attempt to incorporate western perspective to the bridge at the lower frame

of the painting. We, also, see a deliberate attempt to use basic line-works seen in Chinese-Ink painting in the western painting structure he set up in this piece of artwork. This piece of artwork showed that Cheong Soo Pieng was attempting to fused Chinese and Western Painting techniques and may be one of those that can be used to make a case for the 'Nanyang-style" Chinese painting. However, in the main, we do not seem to see the rest of the émigré artists; attempting to establish a painting style that syncretized Western Modern techniques and Chinese-Ink Painting techniques as the same enthusiasm as Cheong Soo Pieng did.

Chen Chong Swee, a contemporary to Cheong Soo Pieng wrote: "If I were asked how the content and form of Chinese painting might be renewed, I would think of the following<sup>43</sup>:

- It should integrate and recast techniques from Western paintings
- Accommodate new subjects
- Be able to express modern life.

However, in an essay written by Chen Chong Swee in 1948, Chen provided his opinion of Western Painting. "As for the loveliness of lines and forcefulness of brushwork, I believe a paintbrush of hog bristles dab in paint can never ever come close to the restraint achievable with a goat-hair brushed dabbed in ink.

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<sup>43</sup> Chen Chong Swee, "A Casual Discussion on Innovation in Painting," in "Unfettered Ink" ed. By Low Tze Wee and Grace Tng and translated by Chow Teck Seng, Goh Ngee Hui and Ng Kum Hoon, (National Gallery, Singapore 2017), p.190.

Only in the aspect of colors is Western painting somewhat richer than its Chinese counterpart. Even so, Chinese painting possesses a certain refined elegance not easily attainable in Western painting.<sup>44</sup>

Then, in 1974, in another essay, he humbly opined that: "Recently, I had the opportunity to observe works of art in China's major cities... Yet I do not think that the problem of featuring new things in paintings has been solved because I feel that all sorts of disharmony in the images I saw. It is very difficult for me to articulate precisely what it was. Metaphorically speaking, the images were like a piece of Chinese classical writings peppered with grammatical particles such as 'de', 'ne', 'ma' and 'ya' to the point that the text could not be read smoothly. It was as if the painting had conformed to a Western style of painting and been compromised, or Chinese painting of a high level of artistic refinement had been forced to take the form of a piece of folk art or street poster<sup>45</sup>.

Chen wrote about the difficulty of synthesizing Western painting technique with Chinese-ink painting technique as certain aspects of the Principles of Painting in both techniques have their uniqueness. Chinese painting requires the artwork to flow like poetry (名画要如诗句读 古琴兼作水声听). Chinese-Ink Painting focuses very much on the emotional aspect of the artworks. Whereas, Western

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<sup>44</sup> Chen Chong Swee, "A Diverse Discussion on Chinese and Western Painting," in "Unfettered Ink" ed. By Low Tze Wee and Grace Tng and translated by Chow Teck Seng, Goh Ngee Hui and Ng Kum Hoon, (National Gallery, Singapore 2017), p.16.

<sup>45</sup> Chen Chong Swee, "A Casual Discussion on Innovation in Painting," in "Unfettered Ink" ed. By Low Tze Wee and Grace Tng and translated by Chow Teck Seng, Goh Ngee Hui and Ng Kum Hoon, (National Gallery, Singapore 2017), p.190."

artists see painting and poetry as two different discipline. Western aesthetics is viewed very much with a cognitive-rational logic.

Liu Qingping in his essay published in 2006, contrasted traditional Chinese aesthetics and Western aesthetics as being deeply rooted in the fundamental difference in their philosophical view of arts. He wrote: "While Western aesthetics mainly manifested a cognitive-rational spirit, traditional Chinese aesthetics portrayed a practical-emotional (or effective) spirit. Correspondingly, they explore and explain the aesthetic relationship between human and nature in different ways. Western cognitive-rational spirit focuses on cognitive activities of human beings, especially those that are governed by rational principles, and regards human and the world as mere subject and object of cognitive activities respectively. They consider 'beauty' as a pleasant attribute or property of objective things in the external world and human beings as a subject that has the ability to feel and perceive beautiful objects through their cognitive activities either rational or perceptual. In contrast, the Chinese practical-emotional spirit gives attention to the practical activities of human beings especially those that are governed by emotion and effective principles. It highlights harmonious unity between human and the world and thus unites human with the natural world (heavens)<sup>46</sup>".

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<sup>46</sup> Liu Qingping, "The Worldwide Significance of Chinese Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century" in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* edited by Guiren Yuan and Han Zhen, (Brill, Netherlands, 2006), p.34-35.

Both Chen and Liu perceived and expressed the difficulty of syncretizing painting and Western painting. The difference lies in the different philosophy of aesthetics; the way of seeing. Chen also emphasized the difference in brush handling, which is crucial to good painting. Hence, when we look at Chen Chong Swee's watercolor painting and his Chinese ink painting, the absence of an attempt to syncretize the Western approach and Chinese approach is noticeable.

It is noteworthy that Chen kept his Western painting skill and his skill in Chinese-Ink painting apart (without a real attempt to syncretize the two techniques). These two paintings (Images 13 and 14) were painted in 1967 and 1962 respectively, some after 30 years after he arrived in Singapore. However, both painting would have been considered "Nanyang Style", not because of any attempt to merge Western and Chinese painting technique but the typical 'Nanyang' scenery

Artists, that had arrived, began to paint local objects and scenery in their new environment known to them as Nanyang. It was natural for artists having settled in a new location, to explore and express what they saw with their artistic skills. How can we attempt to summarize their paintings as a common style of an era, a marker in our nation's art history? Perhaps we need more time to better understanding and analyze the paintings of this era from different angles and also to have a more robust discourse to clarify the alternative proposals.

On the other hand, can the paintings of European artists like Arit Smit, Adrien le Mayeur and the like who had lived and painted in Indonesia (mainly in Bali), like

what Liu Kang , Cheong Soo Pieng and the others did, painting with oil on canvas using Western painting technique be also considered as having painted 'Nanyang-style'? They also painted 'Nanyang subjects' in like manner like the Chinese artists from Singapore that had set foot on Indonesian soil to paint an oeuvre of artworks that had been often touted as 'Nanyang-style'.

Native Chinese artists in search of modernity arrived into Singapore bringing with them ideas that had forevermore changed the art scene in Singapore. In a very real sense, modern art arrived into Singapore with the arrival of native Chinese artists rather than the colonization effort of the British. On the other hand, the colonizer had been open to the Chinese's influence in the area of art in Singapore. That could well be that most of the population in Singapore was, then, still Chinese speaking and while the British took charge of the politics, administration, and economy, their influence among the Chinese (and probably among other races, too) was limited. Further, the loyalty among the Chinese in Singapore, then, was still very much linked back to what they see still as their homeland, or in Chinese, the called it 家乡 or 主国. And they saw that the rebuilding of China was very much an obligation they had to fulfill.

The founding of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts by Lim Hak Tai indeed contributed not only to the art education in Singapore but also to Singapore art history beyond the Academy. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts still exists today and has expanded both its curriculum and reach.

Art education flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the visual art of painting and many art societies and associations were formed to accommodate the various interest groups in arts. By 1992, it was seen that a coordinating body to represent all the art societies was needed. Singapore Art Society, which has the largest membership, initiated the idea of forming the Federation of Art Societies, Singapore; together with several leading art groups. The list of members can be found on the Federation of Art Societies, Singapore Member Organisations website<sup>47</sup>. International art auction houses including Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams have established their offices in Singapore although their art auction activities are held in Hong Kong. Regional art auction houses that have offices in Singapore and are active include Masterpiece, 33 Auction, and Larasati.

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<sup>47</sup> Federation of Art Societies, Singapore, (<http://fass.org.sg/en/our-organisation>, retrieved on 10 September 2018).

## **4. Singapore Chinese-Ink Painting – Beyond Nanyang**

### **A. Going Beyond Nanyang**

Having been a sovereign state for already more than 50 years, it is time for us to look at something, which we can begin to call 'Singapore' moving forward from the 'Nanyang' past. While it is useful and important from a historical perspective to better understand the 'Nanyang' past, the reality is that we have, as a nation, already began to forge an identity that is unique in the region.

Among the various developments, there has arisen, albeit silently, a new genre of paintings that have gone beyond the 'Nanyang-style' of the mid 20th century. There has yet a label/s being coined to badge this collection of paintings. The common thread in this collection is the western ideas of interpretation and aesthetic comprehension expressed on traditional Chinese rice (xuan) paper with Chinese brush skill.

The early emphasis of English as the main medium for education after Singapore broke away from Malaysia and became a Sovereign state has partially caused the appreciation of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting to be neglected somewhat as the country urbanized. However, being a crossroads of the East and the West, Singapore has the benefit of grasping the nuances of the different worldviews

more effectively due to the exposures received from the constant interactions of the different cultural thoughts. Chinese-ink paintings in Singapore developed against such a background. It is interesting to discuss a sample of works and explore if it is expedient to frame Singapore Chinese-ink paintings to reflect the uniqueness of the development.

For the rest of this essay, we will focus on looking at the paintings of three living Singaporean artists and see how they have developed Chinese-ink paintings in this country. The artworks are from Lim Tze Peng, Tan Oe Pang, and Terence Teo Chin Keong. The reasons for these artworks to be chosen are based on the fact that they were locally nurtured artists and their different entry points into the development of Chinese-Ink painting here. Further, their artworks demonstrate a thought pattern that is more or less similar to the generation they represented. Lim Tze Peng would be representative of the artists that dominated the period of the migrant artists of the early to the mid 20th century that dominated the Nanyang scene. Tan Oe Pang had learned art making from that previous generation of Chinese artists, but he and his peers have moved on and have attempted in the merger of the Western concept of ideas beyond painting styles. They explored different thoughts in the Modern and Postmodern worldviews. Terence Teo was a student of the Chinese art teacher that had learned directly from the migrant artist. His artworks demonstrate a different path from the previous generation in that his focus has been in the area of rhythmic aesthetics, which seemed to have re-surfaced, where aesthetics is regarded as a priority over narratives.

The artworks were chosen to help us see the evolution of ideas against the changing views of society as artists transferred their skills and thoughts from one generation to the next helping us to trace the movement of ideas within the paintings in Singapore through time.

## B. The Artworks of Lim Tze Peng (林子平)

Born in Singapore in 1921, Lim Tze Peng is a self-taught artist. Lim studied at Guangyang Primary School and later at Chung Cheng High School. His love for calligraphy was nurtured in his formative year in Chung Cheng. Lim learned calligraphy via Liu Gongquan's (柳公權) script. Wong Jia Ling recognized Lim's talent and encouraged him to Kang Youwei's "A Pair of Oars of the Boat of Art: 广艺舟双楫", a discussion on Chinese calligraphy<sup>48</sup>.

This book would be the most comprehensive thesis on Chinese calligraphy during the late Qing Dynasty and it had influenced calligraphers for an entire generation. This document comprised, originally of six scrolls and twelve chapters. It was written during the darkest hours of his (Kang Youwei's) life, as he pondered over how to rescue China from its decadence. The first two scrolls explained the origin and development of calligraphic scripts. The next two scrolls deliberated on the quality of stele scripts and the last two scrolls discussed the skills of using Chinese brushes. The various aspects of calligraphy such as the standard and requirement of both writing and the structuring of the scripts were discussed in the book. The book also discussed the four changes of thoughts in calligraphy during the Qing Dynasty<sup>49</sup>. Lim Tze Peng also went on to practice

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<sup>48</sup> Kang Youwei (康有为), "A Pair of Oars of the Boat of Art 广艺舟双楫", (Beijing Press 北京图书馆出版社: Beijing 2004).

<sup>49</sup> The first period would be during the reign of Kangxi (康熙) (1661-1722) and Yongzheng (雍正) (1722-1735) and the representative work would be that of Dong Qichang (董其昌). The second change was during the reign of Qianlong (乾隆) (1735-1796) and the representative works would be Zhao Zi-ang (赵子昂). The third change was during the reign of Jiaqing (嘉庆)

stele scripts and that had also become part of his foundation in the calligraphic line-works in his paintings.

Lim became the principal of Xin Ming Primary School till he retired 32 years later. He continued to pursue his art interest and was active in painting trips around Southeast Asia with artists like Chen Chong Swee, Yeh Chi Wei, Cheong Soo Pieng and others. In fact, he was part of the 10 men group headed by Yeh Chi Wei.

He began painting in Western watercolor but painted mostly in oil, thereafter. He cited Paul Cezanne's paintings (a French Post-impressionist artist) as an inspiration to his artistic creation and he was engaged primarily in Western modern techniques in the early years of his artistic practice. Lim became interested in painting and was fascinated by Li Keran's (李可染) water buffalos done in Chinese Ink. He tried to paint the water buffalos (like those of Li Keran) in watercolor but he could not achieve the same effect as Li had achieved with Chinese ink on Chinese (xuan) paper. That was when we began to move his focus on to Chinese-Ink Painting in the early 1970 and that has become his preferred medium of painting, since.

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(1796-1820) and Daoquang (道光) (1820-1850) and the representative works of the period would be that of Ouyang Xun (歐陽詢). Kang Youwei referred to these three periods as the Classical periods majoring mainly on the manuscripts from the Jin Dynasty and stele of the Tang Dynasty. The fourth period was the period spanning the reign of Xianfeng (咸丰) (1850-1861) and Tongzhi (同治) (1861-1875). He referred to the fourth period as the Contemporary Period. The focus was on the Northern stele (北碑), referring to stele during the Northern and Southern dynasties of China (南北朝时期) and the Seal scripts of the Han Dynasty. The representative works are those by Deng Shiru (邓石如) and Zhang Lianqing (張廉卿). Kang Youwei advocated the study of the stele scripts and seal scripts in Chinese calligraphy and his influence impacted artists like Qi Baishi and Wu Changshuo.

Image 15 (titled "Bustling Streets of Chinatown") is an artwork showing how Lim Tze Peng combined his experience in Western painting and his Chinese calligraphy practice to complete this Modern Chinese art piece. The painting is done on Chinese (xuan) paper with and pigments using Chinese art brushes. Therefore, in terms of the material used to complete this painting, it is entirely Chinese. However, unlike a classical painting, we can see the use of Fauvist concept of forms and colors, in that the forms and colors were separated from the original colors and forms of the object. Colour contrast is introduced to give a more attractive effect. Orange-brown tone complementing with blue is used as the overall color scheme. Blue with a triadic red gives a sense of excitement to the window structures. The colors relationship conforms to the color wheel theory.

Furthermore, Chinese calligraphic lines done with brushes are utilized to structure the forms. Details are recorded by using a network of lines rather than broad brushstrokes in this painting. The layout of the painting is Western evidenced by the Western perspective used in framing the painting. Lim combined this concept with a Western Perspective to give a very different feel. Three-dimensionality is achieved in the absence of deliberative light and shadow. The signature on the right, bottom of the painting is signed in a horizontal, left to right manner ending with his seal. The way the painting is signed is typical of Western painting.

This is an interesting example of syncretizing Western principles with Chinese bush skill and material. In the next example, we will see how Lim progress to syncretized Chinese art principles with Western worldview.

Chinese written characters originate from pictograms (象形) and ideograms (指事) and a combination of these forms into the entire Chinese vocabulary. In essence, when we view a piece of calligraphy, we are seeing a combination of images and ideas that have been formalized into different structures and combine to form a message or a description of the world around the respective composers of poems and proses; and re-express on Chinese (xuan) paper with Chinese Ink by the calligraphers. From that angle, a piece of calligraphy can be likened to a Chinese painting. It is interesting to know that traditionally when a Chinese paints, he is said to be writing a painting like xieshi (写实), which literally means "writing realism" or xieyi (寫意), which means "writing the idea." In this respect, we can see how Chinese relates painting also very closely to calligraphy.

Image 16 (titled "Memory of the Past at Red Cliff by Su Shi") shows a work of calligraphy by Lim Tze Peng, written on Chinese (xuan) paper using Chinese ink. The content is a poem entitled "Memories of the Red Cliff (念奴娇·赤壁怀古)" composed by Su Shi (苏轼) and also known as Su Dongbo (苏东坡). The poem could likely be Su's reflection concerning the turbulences he faced in life, and in particular his dealing with the officials in the Imperial Court but yet there were also moments in his life that were filled satisfaction and gladness that had made

his life worth living<sup>50</sup>. Su concluded the poem by stating his view of life and living<sup>51</sup>.

The calligraphy of Lim Tze Peng in Image 16 transcribed that poem, which began with a brief description of the location and the setting of the battles at the Red Cliff, which was on back of the Yangtze River. The waves beat fiercely against the shoreline. Countless brave men came to mind. People have speculated that during the period of the Three Kingdoms, Zhou Yu had constructed his fortification at the west of the Red Cliff. The poem went on to depict the intense battle. Rocks flew across the sky while the tumultuous waves were beating relentlessly and the snows were piling up, and that happened against the picturesque view of the Red Cliff and countless brave men gave up their lives. The poem took a sudden turn and it was a scene of a wedding occasion. He recalled the account of the wedding of Zhou Yu (周異) to Xiao Qiao (小乔), it was such a glamorous affair. There was an air of valor and excitement, silk scarf and

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<sup>50</sup> Su was from a family of scholars and he succeeded in a court official examination where he was very young and became a well-known court official, respected by emperors. However, the Imperial Court Officials disliked him because he was from a different school of thoughts from the majority of the officials. Moreover, he had a very straightforward approach in his dealing with his peers and even the senior officials. They could not tolerate his straightforwardness and his intellectual ability and he was often sent to problematic counties and provinces to govern there, which in turn offered opportunities for him to demonstrate his talent. This was a poem that Su composed when he was at the trough of his life. It was a time when he had to endure the hardships of exile from the Imperial court. The exile was the result of the Wutai Poem Incident (烏台詩案). That was during the reign of Emperor Shenzong in the Yuanfeng (元豐) era of the Song Dynasty.

<sup>51</sup> The Battle of Red Cliff is one of the key episodes of "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms." Su Shi was also known as Su Dongbu composed the poem: entitled (念奴嬌·赤壁懷古)." The poem was structured using antithetical parallelism of ideas of the scene of the Battle at the Red Cliff and the Wedding of General Zhou Yu to Xiao Qiao. After that, he concluded that life is but a dream.

feather fans ... and Lim Tze Peng stopped the poem in his calligraphic artwork at that point and he signed off his work.

The calligraphic work did not complete the transcription of the entire poem. The conclusion, which the audience is waiting for is missing. It is as if Lim was telling his audience that the antithetical parallelism that he has inscribed was enough and it is the audience's turn to conclude the poem by opining their views of life and living, just as Su Shi did in his conclusion of the poem. There was no need for the audience to know the poet concluded the poem or accept the poet's conclusion as authority. The audience is asked to complete the picture in their own mind.

Roland Barthes spent the early 1960s exploring the theories of semiotics and structuralism. In 1967, he wrote the essay: "Death of the Author," which signified his departure from structuralism. He argued that the unknowable state of the author's mind and the complexity of languages make the ultimate meaning of text impossible. He proposed that the observer (reader) must separate the author's work from the author so that the observer (reader) can be freed from interpretive tyranny. Hence, the determination of the essential meaning of a piece of work was passed from the author to each of the destined audience<sup>52</sup>. This is an essential tenet of Post-modernism.

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<sup>52</sup> Barthes, Roland; "Death of the Author," translated by Howard, Richard, (<https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf> retrieved on 13 September 2018), p. 5.

The calligraphy of Lim Tze Peng made a similar call. There is no need for the audience of this piece of artwork to be tied down by the poet's view of life or even the poet's way of presenting the Chinese characters of the poem. Each of his audience is asked for their own views after having read the calligraphy; to interpret it the way that it makes sense to them.

On another level, the calligraphy in image 16 is presented visually to look like a stele or a rubbing of the stele inscription. It has the appearance of a worn-down stele that had stood the test of time and climatic conditioning. The calligraphic characters are barely intelligible. Nevertheless, the content was, once, vivid and gave meaning to the observers/audience. Is Lim Tze Peng also attempting to express the content in a pictorial way; to hint to his audience as to how the poet concluded his poem? That life is an illusion, that life is like a dream (人生如梦).

Muddled Writing (糊涂字) is a phrase that has been coined to describe Lim's contemporary calligraphy. This phrase gives the connotation of 'being confused' but in my view, this is a misnomer. On the contrary, Lim had, in fact, brought to the art world of Singapore a different way to appreciate and interpret Chinese poems and Chinese calligraphy. Both artworks were done with Chinese Ink (and pigments) on Chinese (xuan) paper, using Chinese brushes and Chinese calligraphic line-works. It also contains Western painting principles and worldview, created in Singapore.

## C. The Artworks of Tan Oe Pang (陈有炳)

Born in Singapore in 1947, Tan Oe Pang is a multi-disciplinary artist, working with a wide variety of mediums, which includes, Chinese calligraphy, oil painting, seal-carving, sculpture, mixed media, and poetry. He studied traditional painting under the tutorship of Fan Chang Tien, a third generation master of Haipai (海派) after Wu Changshuo and Wang Geyi.

Tan has exhibited his works in Brazil, Chile, Germany, Holland, Scotland, South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA. He also participated in the 1985 International Biennial of Arts in Sao Paolo, the 1989 International Biennial of Arts Valparaiso in Chile and the 1992 International Biennial for Ink Painting in Shenzhen. He has achieved in his paintings effective ways to express western concepts, whenever he needed to do so.

"Structuralism is a philosophical view that sees the reality of the objects of the human or social sciences as relational rather than substantial. It generates a critical method that consists of inquiring into and specifying the sets of relations (or structures) that constitute these objects or into which they enter, and of identifying and analysing groups of such objects whose members are structural transformations of one another<sup>53</sup>."

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<sup>53</sup> Caws, Peter, 'Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible,' (Humanities Press International, Inc.: Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1988), p. 1.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist laid the foundation for many significant developments in both linguistics and semiotics in the 20th century<sup>54</sup>. He contributed a two-part model of what constitutes a sign in semiotics: the "signified" and "signifiers" through which communication takes place and meaning is being inferred. This idea was instrumental to have brought about the idea of the subjectivity of meanings and the authority to interpret in the post-modern era. They related to the study of signs and symbols and their use in the interpretation of meanings. The signifier, embedding the idea into symbols (like words seen or heard, or images in a picture); and the signified referred to the mental meaning or the concept that is received by the observer to figure out the reality of the message. The issue of idea and reality is the dominant theme in structuralism.

In visual art, the objects served as signifiers, and the artist translates them into symbols by using forms and structures from the archive of their art knowledge. The mental concepts or interpretations are the signified to the observer (inquirer) of art-works. Regarding the question of how signifiers create meaning and how do we know what that meaning should be, Saussure contended that a sign needs to be understood against the agreed background relationship (social agreement of rules governing the symbols) between the components that make up the signs or images in a community. Saussure argued that the meaning of a

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<sup>54</sup> Robins, R. H. 1979. 'A Short History of Linguistics, 2nd Edition,' (Longman Linguistics Library. London and New York.) p. 201.

sign or symbol also "depends on its relation to other words (images) within the system<sup>55 56</sup>."

"Visual culture works towards a social theory of visibility, focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes<sup>57</sup>." The artwork in image 18 (titled: "一切圆 "Yi Qie Yuan"), by Tan Oe Pang, shows how he brings the concept into Chinese calligraphy.

But let's look, first look at "Highway in Hougang, Singapore, 2005" (Image 17) where the artist, Tan Oe Pan chose a vertical format to frame his subject. The composition of this painting is exciting because of his attempt to accommodate urban objects, often seen as Western, into a format that has been typically Chinese. He was not concerned if the linear length on the highway was fully represented or the image integrity to the objects in the painting was faithfully reproduced. Nor was he exacting on the comparative height of the highway to the HDB flats<sup>58</sup> in the background. He focused more on the reality of his idea over the realism of the object.

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<sup>55</sup> Chandler, Daniel, 'Semiotics: The Basics', (Routledge, New York 2002) p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Eagleton, Terry, 'Structuralism and Semiotics', in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1983), pp. 91-126;

<sup>57</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, 'Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture', (Routledge, London 2000) p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> These are public housing built by the Singapore Housing Development Board (HDB).

In the painting, the subject consists of a structural pair, viz, the juxtaposition of HDB flats housing the population that stood vertically as the background, and carriageway accommodating vehicles that inter-penetrates diagonally across the stable form of the vertical buildings. The relational proportion was an artistic treatment over targeting at perspectival accuracy. The idea of urbanization is obvious in the way the painting is structured. The feeling of emotional tension came through via the oblique depiction of the carriageway against the tall vertical structural in the background, highlighting a symbolic change, interrupting the stable form in the background (the vertical structures). Tension and competition in an urbanized society were portrayed by the height rivalry of the structural pair accentuated by the vertical format of the painting. The human mind is accustomed to a stable structure but when 'difference' is introduced; the human mind becomes sensitive to the change.

The tightness in the framing of the subject enhanced the observer/inquirer's mental assumption of crowding and pressure. The image of the queuing vehicles in the lower right of the painting and the implied human population in the painting is another 'difference' pair, which also signifies the corresponding feeling of the population pressure that the composition of the subject in the painting attempted to portray.

The artist uses the typical Chinese Ink and paper, Chinese brushstrokes and framing concept for this painting to depict the tension of urbanization. The conceptual approach to this piece of artwork was one of Western worldview. The courage to explore beyond the traditional principles of Chinese painting and the

intellectual prowess to conceive the composition is key to this interesting variation in contemporary Chinese painting. Let's continue to look at his calligraphy.

"Post-structuralism is not 'post' in the sense of having Structuralism killed off. It is 'post' only in the sense of coming after and of seeking to extend Structuralism in its rightful direction<sup>59</sup>." Structuralism attempts to look at a piece of work (literary text or image in painting) and tries to explore the meaning of the work by examining the symbols and their relationship. But, in Post-Structuralism, the emphasis is on the interaction between the work and the reader/viewer, a movement of focus from the signifier to the signified in Saussurean's language<sup>60</sup>. De-constructionism is a concept in the Post-Structuralist's worldview, derived by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s.

The Structuralist's emphasis on the 'structures' of human meanings was the product of a certain shared system of signification. The Structuralist's pairs challenged by deconstructionism are characteristically 'binary' but also 'hierarchal.' One part of the pair is taken to be the primary component while the other is the secondary. Examples will be like: good and evil, presence and absence, light and darkness, with the previous being primary to the latter of the pair.

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<sup>59</sup> Sturrock, John, 'Structuralism,' (Paladin: London, 1986), p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> Sarup, Madan, 'An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism, 2nd Ed.' (University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia), p. 3.

On the other hand, to 'deconstruct' a structure is to explore the tensions, and contradictions between them. Through this exploration, the meaning is supposedly determined. The deconstructionist objects that one component of the pair should be seen as superior to another in the pair. For example, in the binary pair of 'good' and 'evil', good is often seen as superior and evil. It implies that 'good' is essential for the existence of 'evil'. However, in the process of deconstructing, one would ask if without 'evil', how then could 'good' be understood. As such, deconstructionism is a continuous process of query and rediscovery that could go on and on as more subjectivism is being introduced. The process of inquiry in Deconstruction Theory is the responsibility of the observer (inquirer) as opposed to the author. The next painting (in image 18), also done by Tan Oe Pang shows how he brings the concept into Chinese calligraphy.

The calligraphy in image 18 (titled "一切圓 "Yi Qie Yuan") comprises of three Chinese characters (words), '一切圓 (Yi Qie Yuan)'. The prima facie meaning of the phrase is that everything (all) is round. It is a Buddhist adage that illustrates the doctrine of Cause and Effect. The middle character (word) '切 (qie)' of the adage has been used in several ways in Chinese literary works. The visual depiction in the artwork gives the appearance that there are four characters, which has been written in two parts: the component '七 (qi)' and the radical '刀 (dao)'. For the Post-Structuralist proponents, they would see the responsibility for interpreting the artwork belongs to the signified (that is, the

observers/inquirers) and hence open the possibility to several ways of looking at the meaning of the phrase and corresponding subjectivity.

Let us, first, examine the radical (dominant component) '刀 (dao)' in the character '切 (qie)'. This radical, in itself carries, at least, two meanings. It can mean a 'knife' or a 'classifier' (collective adjective, a measurement) for a stack of 100 sheets of paper.) The other component '七 (qi)' which is the numeral seven can again be deconstructed into two sub-components and there are '一 (yi)' and '乚 (yin)'. '一 (yi)' as a radical can mean 'one' or 'unity'. '乚 (yin)' as a component has the meanings of hidden, mysterious, secret, to conceal or small (minute).

Putting together the '一 (yi)' and '乚 (yin)', the word '七 (qi)' has the inclusive meanings of a mystery (hidden secret) or something that is concealed.

In the artwork, we see the two deconstruct pairs as in:

- The components '七 (qi)' comprising of '一 (yi)' and '乚 (yin)' and the character '切 (qie)', and
- The final character '切 (qie)' comprising of '刀 (dao)', the radical (dominant component) and '七 (qi)' as the other component in the phrase '一切圆 "Yi Qie Yuan"'.

Therefore, in the deconstructed meaning of '切 (qie)' the usual meaning being primarily derived from the dominant component '刀 (dao)' that has to do with

cutting; or ‘切 (qie)’ having the meaning "everything" or "all" as in “一切” from the idea of being “cut out” (designed) in destiny. An underlying idea of the Chinese traditional understanding of Cause and Effect.

Taking the Deconstructionist’s approach in rejecting that the radical as having to be dominant (superior) component in the binary pair, a query is opened to explore if the meaning of the word could be better understood by considering both components in the word as having equal weight. Hence, would the meaning ‘splicing open a mystery,’ give the word ‘切 (qie)’ a more robust exactness in this case.

And, while ‘一切圓 "Yi Qie Yuan"' read as it is, convey the point that ‘everything is round’; will the meaning : "a mystery to be solved through the understanding of infinity or eternity" be a better interpretation of the 3-words Chinese phrase through taking into account that in this case that ‘切 (qie)’ should be more appropriately understood to mean "splicing open (solving) a mystery" from an observer point of view? The word ‘圓 yuan’ while describing roundness or a circle has also the implication of ‘eternity’ or ‘infinity’. This understanding can be an interesting approach to explore the mystic of Cause and Effect. And so, the query and discovery can go on as the observer/inquirer further explore.

Deconstructionism, as in Post-structuralism majored in the subjectivity of interpretation. While Structuralism was advocating that things are defined by what they are not, like good is not evil, or man is not a woman, in a Structuralist's

pair by the 'author,' Deconstructionists see that those pairs as unfair power structure in Western culture, which Michel Foucault majored in his thesis on the 'Concept of Power'. Therefore, Deconstructionist's approach is to explore the differences in the binary pair. He looks at the discourse as a contextual whole, by the inquirer/observer rather than the author (those under a power structure rath than those in power).

The two pieces of Tan Oe Pang's work above shows how western intellectual aspects of things were incorporated into Chinese-Ink paintings. The curiosity of the artist that led him to explore the opportunities that have been made available in this cosmopolitan city in terms of intellectual and cultural experiences had made available for us an oeuvre of artworks that is not only an aesthetics feast but also intellectually stimulating. Indeed, giving Xieyi (写意) type of painting a much richer meaning.

## D. The Artworks of Terence Teo Chin Keong (赵振强)

Terence Teo was born in Singapore in 1953. He was trained in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts as a graphic artist in the late 1970s and graduated in 1980. He learned Chinese landscape ink painting from Chen Shaoyi (陈绍易), who in turn, was a student of Fan Chang-Tien. Terence's paintings have been exhibited in Singapore, Korea, China, Germany, Japan, and Taiwan.

In conversation with Terence, he has consistently associated his paintings with rhythm and music. He pays much attention to nature and landscape in his daily living and in his travel: the colors, movements, characteristics, the moods, the dews that hang on and their appearance against weathers and seasons and time of the day. In fact, among his solo art exhibitions, two of the exhibitions were themed with music: "Symphony of the Rainforest" in 2014 and "Expressionistic Symphonic" in 2015. The path that Terence has taken in his artistic creation seems to point to an academic aestheticism: an intellectual perspective with an emphasis on aesthetic values rather than a social-political theme. The focus of this art ideology focuses on being beautiful rather than exploring intrinsic meaning of an artwork, the idea of "art for art sake"<sup>61</sup>.

As early as the first century AD, Augustine of Hippo developed ideas about rhythm as being pertinent to his aesthetic theory. The idea of rhythm was

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<sup>61</sup> Denney, Colleen, "At the Temple of Art: the Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890", Issue 1165, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Madison, NJ, 2000), p. 38.

expounded in Augustine's "De Musica". He theorized that rhythm is immutable and eternal because its source is Divine. Just as mathematical human beings can only discover the truth, but not determined, Augustine claimed that is likewise for rhythm. Human beings cannot invent it<sup>62</sup>.

Beardsley explained that though Augustine did not systematically present those elements, that the characteristic of beauty contained, they can be found, often in relation to one another, throughout his writings. Those elements referred to were: Unity, Equality, Number, Proportion, and Order.

In Unity, it refers to the existence of a unified whole, of which apart, there can be no discussion of aesthetic beauty. In other words, existence precedes aesthetic beauty. In explaining the elements of Equality, Beardsley wrote: "The existence of individual things as units, the possibility of repeating them and comparing groups of them with respect to equality or inequality, gives rise to proportion, measure, and number<sup>63</sup>. " Here, a number is referred to as the base of rhythm, and it begins from unity. The Latin word 'numerus', which Augustine used in "De Musica", can mean either "rhythm" or "number". The word 'rhythm' was used throughout in Martin Jacobsson's translation of Book VI of De Musica<sup>64</sup>. Since rhythm is based on a number, which Augustine believes is immutable, then it follows that rhythm is likewise immutable. In Proportion, he referred to like

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<sup>62</sup> Augustine (of Hippo), "Of True Religion," trans. by J. H. S. Burleigh, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968).

<sup>63</sup> Beardsley, Monroe, "Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History," (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 94.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, "Aurelius Augustinus: De musica Liber VI," Translated by Martin Jacobsson. (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2002)

symmetry. The view was that symmetry [or proportion] is needed to give pleasure, preserving unity and making the whole beautiful in aesthetic appreciation<sup>65</sup>. Augustine also viewed that: "everything is beautiful that is in due order<sup>66</sup>." In other words, everything has its own place and beauty results from having things in their respective places<sup>67</sup>.

Terence Teo's artwork (image 19 titled "Rain Forest Series – Refreshing 5) is untypical of Chinese traditional painting in terms of its aesthetic presentation although he uses Chinese Ink and pigment with Chinese brushes on Chinese (xuan) paper. This piece of work completed in 2010, depicts trees composed with visually asymmetric forms, where the total balance of the work is stabilized by the perceived weight of the forms, split in the middle defying the common one-third rule. This is an interesting expression of proportion and order in the language of Augustine. While symmetry was the preferred way to frame a painting during the Renaissance period, a practice of asymmetric composition, with powerful emotional content and movement came to the fore during the Baroque period. The concept of proportion and balance as viewed by Augustine was reconsidered and the comprehension of visual weight refined.

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<sup>65</sup> Augustine (of Hippo), "Of True Religion," Translated by J. H. S. Burleigh, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968), p. 55.

<sup>66</sup> Augustine (of Hippo), "Of True Religion," Translated by J. H. S. Burleigh, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968), p. 77.

<sup>67</sup> Heller, Karin, "Justice, Order and Peace: A Reading of Augustine's City of God, Book XIX, in the Light of His Conversion Experience," (Presented at the 2007 Conference on the Cardinal Virtues, Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wisconsin, April 13, 2007), p.2.  
([https://www.viterbo.edu/sites/default/files/centers/d.b.\\_reinhardt\\_institute/justiceorderandpeace\\_areadingofaugustinescityofgodbookxixinthelightofhisconversionexperience.pdf](https://www.viterbo.edu/sites/default/files/centers/d.b._reinhardt_institute/justiceorderandpeace_areadingofaugustinescityofgodbookxixinthelightofhisconversionexperience.pdf) retrieved on 24th Sep. 2018).

Blotches of green colored pigments of varying tonal values also overshadow the forms in Terence's painting. While the pigmented blotches suggest leaves of the trees, they are also there to give the rhythm of the overall composition. It is a bold experiment of Augustine's "numerus" or rhythm; a visual rhythm that suggests life and movement of the subject. The green pigment evokes a feeling of youthful energy mixed with a little umber that reminds observer that the trees have reached a certain maturity. His use of colored blotches is interesting to depict movement and life, which is little seen or not seen before in Chinese classical paintings.

Image 20 (titled "Melodic Summer") is another painting by Terence Teo. It is painted in 2018, some eight years after the painting in 2010, seen above. Some saw his paintings as having similarity to that of Jackson Pollock. While Pollock claimed that his paintings were the result of automatism (which more likely was controlled paints dripping), the pigmented blotches in Terence's paintings are deliberate structures formed using Chinese brush skill technique. While both material and brush strokes are Chinese, the visual appearance of the artwork is Western. This is the result of the use of the colors and the layout of the subject matter. There is an also hint of color-field technique in the composition of image 20.

Color-field painting is a tendency of Abstract Expressionism. Proponents of this type of painting include Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. This type of painting gives a feel of mysticism and seemingly expresses a yearning for transcendence and the infinite. Suggestions of figures are absent. The expressive power of color

is deployed in large fields and it dominates the observer's view. Barnett Newman had likened this way of painting to the concept of ideograph: a "character, symbol or figure, which suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name<sup>68</sup>."

The dominant color in Terence's painting is a tinted umber with a hint of light yellow ochre that radiates a warm earthy feeling. There are also blotches of bluish-green and reddish brown of different tonal values; and black and white streaks that are set radially symmetrical gravitating towards the center of the painting, amidst the seeming randomness in the placement of the blotches and streaks. This idea of symmetry here is quite different from Augustine's idea of symmetry. Here, Terence uses the concept of radial symmetry. The balance of visual weight is maintained from a point at the center of the painting so that the entire image is not lopsided.

There is a certain amount of intuition that gives the feeling of rhythm in the painting process. The rhythm of things therein gives a feeling of visual tempo. It was random but not haphazard. This is an interesting comparison to Pollock's claim of automatism in his painting process. Did they both achieve the desired result of a rhythmic application of paints with that same mental-spiritual state? Terence mentioned that in his case, his feelings of music during his painting

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<sup>68</sup> Newman, Barnett, quoted in *The Ideographic Picture* (pamphlet) (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1947) ([https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService/?id=AAA-AAA\\_parsbett\\_10309&max=1300](https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService/?id=AAA-AAA_parsbett_10309&max=1300) retrieved on 15 September 2018.)

process is vital to the outcome of his work for that day. In other words, his artwork is technically not duplicable.

The Augustinian idea of order can be largely seen in Terence's work through his use of radial symmetry. The blotches and streaks are functional, and in this painting, they function to emanate an ideographic picture of a parched ground on a summer day reminiscent of a spring that has gone by. The idea that "everything has its own place", having things set in their respective places that resulted in beauty" exists in its own way in this piece of artwork.

Aesthetic emotion in art is a difficult concept in paintings. The difficulty begins with its definition and yet it is a concept that has been long discussed. Aesthetic conceptualization and judgment are not merely cognitive processes. They involve human emotions. The lack of relevant 'measurement' methodologies and more objective references for emotion especially in the area of aesthetic appreciation or judgment makes the discourse of art from the angle of aesthetic approach inadequate but yet an important issue in artistic appreciation.

## 5. Conclusion

### A. The Arrival of Modernity

The education policy of Cai Yuanpei has a far-reaching impact among Chinese both within and outside China. In particular, his position regarding art education. Through his vision, art received mainstream emphasis in the Chinese education system and artists were recognised as equal intellectuals to their peers in the other academic discipline. The new found zeal in the Chinese art world, propelled artists to be in the forefront of reformation both in term of reforming the thoughts of the Chinese populace and also the efforts in raising funds to support the fight for freedom and dignity against the aggressors. There was much suffering in China as the struggle for freedom and national sovereignty prolonged.

The history of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore is inevitably linked the history of China in the first half of the 20th century. After they arrived on to Singapore's shore they were still emotionally involved with their homeland as they had left their families to seek for jobs and money in Nanyang in hope of returning to China one day to live a comfortable life with their families.

Never did they know, that many of those native Chinese artists who came to Nanyang, Singapore, eventually remained and made this island their home. It

was through such circumstances we saw the entry of modernity into Singapore. We can sum up, in retrospect, that while Chinese native artists went all over the world in search for modernity that could be relevant for China or in today's language, modernity with Chinese characteristics; modernity came to Singapore and took on a Singapore characteristic.

However, eventually the maturity of modernity in Singapore took a different path from what China took. With a multi-racial population and British dominance on the island, the ubiquitous intersection of ideas influencing the everyday thoughts of the residents, eventually, shape the island-state with a unique approach in viewing the world around them. Still, the root of modern Chinese-Ink Painting in Singapore is not an isolated genre from Traditional Chinese-Ink Painting and its modernized form from China. Chinese Ink Painting artists in Singapore went through the training rigorosity of Chinese Ink art taught by Chinese artists who had arrived here and the skills are still passed on to those who are willing to learn. Nevertheless, as time passed, there is now arisen a genre of Chinese ink paintings in Singapore that require a different conversation as discuss in the previous chapter. This group of artists comprised mainly of Chinese-educated Singapore artists, born in Singapore, but are exposed to western worldviews in their daily lives through the news they read and the ways of doing things, but they continued to paint with Chinese ink on Chinese 'xuan' paper. Many of them might have learned some Chinese-Ink Paintings from established art teachers and grounded in Chinese Ink and Brush basics. However, they went on to experiment in their practice, aesthetic

concepts and narratives that are not bounded by the traditional Chinese way of expression and subjects for their artworks.

In our studies of the artworks of the three artists in the previous chapter, the three artists had firm basics in traditional Chinese-Ink Painting and Calligraphy. The paintings do display the footprints of modernity that the native Chinese artists in search of modernity had left behind in Singapore. The western perspective advocated by Xu Beihong, though not modern from an academy's approach, and the flatness of postmodern impressionism as advocated by Lin Fengmian and life drawing introduced to China by Liu Haisu had influenced the Chinese-Ink artists in Singapore. At the same time, the artworks of the three artists we discussed demonstrate that the Chinese-Ink Painting after the "Nanyang" era has moved on.

## B. Singapore Chinese-Ink Painting

As the émigré artists of the mid 20 century settled down in Singapore, they began to explore their new surroundings and recorded in their own personal styles their perception of Nanyang and in particular what they saw in Singapore. They went on an expedition as a group and individually further afield and were fascinated by what they saw and experienced: the light, the colors and the differences in culture within what was known to them as Nanyang. Hence, we see in those paintings; the recordings of artists' expression of their new experiences. Many of the artworks were carried out en Plein aire, or re-enactment of what

they saw and like, as in still life arrangements. That was the oeuvre of works that we see of the artists in the period.

As time moved on, local artists were being trained and the local art scene matures and the art of Singapore moves beyond the art of the "Nanyang Days." The works of the three artists discussed demonstrate the movement of: styles and idea, the narratives and the way of expression, the subjects and the way of seeing them, have evolved in the Chinese-Ink Painting in Singapore through the last 50 years.

Lim Tze Peng being closest to the group of artists, in terms of his generational positioning to the era of artists touted as "Nanyang" artists (the earliest group of artists painting modern art in Singapore) shows in his artworks the maturity of the idea of syncretizing the West and East (Chinese) style of painting, which Chen Chong Swee had been critical about in many of his essays. Lim too managed to incorporate the idea of western perspective and post-impressionist colors into his Chinese-Ink paintings. He even introduces the idea of post-modern in his calligraphy (image 16) as discussed above.

Tan Oe Pang develops the art form further in that he incorporates western worldviews and modern narrative into Chinese-Ink Painting (image 17). The generation of artist-intellectuals he represented was conversant with both Chinese and Western ideas of art expression beyond painting styles the concept of perspective or modern flatness in expressing their works. Tan Oe Pang's artworks often offer philosophical discussions that are both modern and also

postmodern. His works, besides being good quality visuals, are also platforms where minds meet, not necessarily always in agreement but robust and probing, providing the serious connoisseurs' food for thoughts.

Terence Teo's artworks represent a new generation of artworks that query the meaning of aesthetics in abstractionism, through the application Chinese-Ink technique. This evolution can, perhaps be understood against the background of the pursuits and values of what Singapore, now, embodies. Since Independence, Singapore, in quiet ways, been developing an unique identity of its own.

Possessing material abundance and also being an intersection of global ideas and locals largely maintaining the respective cultures and cultural values of each race, there is being developed several layers of value logic in the community of diversities. The development of abstract aesthetics, alongside the idea of a post-modern interaction of idea could be seen as complementary and perhaps also to fill up the gaps of needs and desires. These ideas explore the sense of beauty beyond realism and query the very meaning of what art is.

There are other artists' works contemporary to those discussed above that will need to be also research on and to further explore the dominant narratives between them and how those narratives parallel one another. It will be interesting to find out if it is possible to categorise the arts beyond Nanyang using dominant narrative groupings and understand what their underlying concerns.

The thread that passes through the search of modernity for China and into the art history of Singapore has in significant ways not only shaped the Chinese-Ink Painting in Singapore and but could be considered as a sub-category of the larger definition of Chinese-Ink Painting in Chinese Art History. Singapore Chinese-Ink Painting can be viewed as a Chinese art form being developed along the history of globalization in the sense of another way of expression within a larger culture. Having said that, the uniqueness of this oeuvre of artworks developed in Singapore in the last 50 years, certainly deserved further attention and research effort by art historians to capture and stake its position in the art history of mankind.

To be a great nation of the world, the art history of Singapore needs to be robust, just as our art scene needs to flourish. Even though, until now, our art ideas may be "... a common experience through the amalgamation of different sources and traditions ...<sup>69</sup>," as we should be planning to mature and proudly own an art narrative that we can call our own.

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<sup>69</sup> Hsu, Marco, "A Brief History of Malayan Art" trans. Lai Chee Kien, (Millennium Books, Singapore: 1999), p. 133.

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# **List of Illustrations**



Image 1

Put down the Whip, 1939

Xu Beihong (1895 -1953)

Oil on Canvas

144 cm by 90 cm

Collection of the National Gallery of Singapore



Image 2

The Three Stallions

Xu Beihong (1895-1953)

Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on Paper

56.5 cm x 67 cm

Christie's Auction Fine Chinese Modern Paintings  
in Hong Kong on 28 May 2010

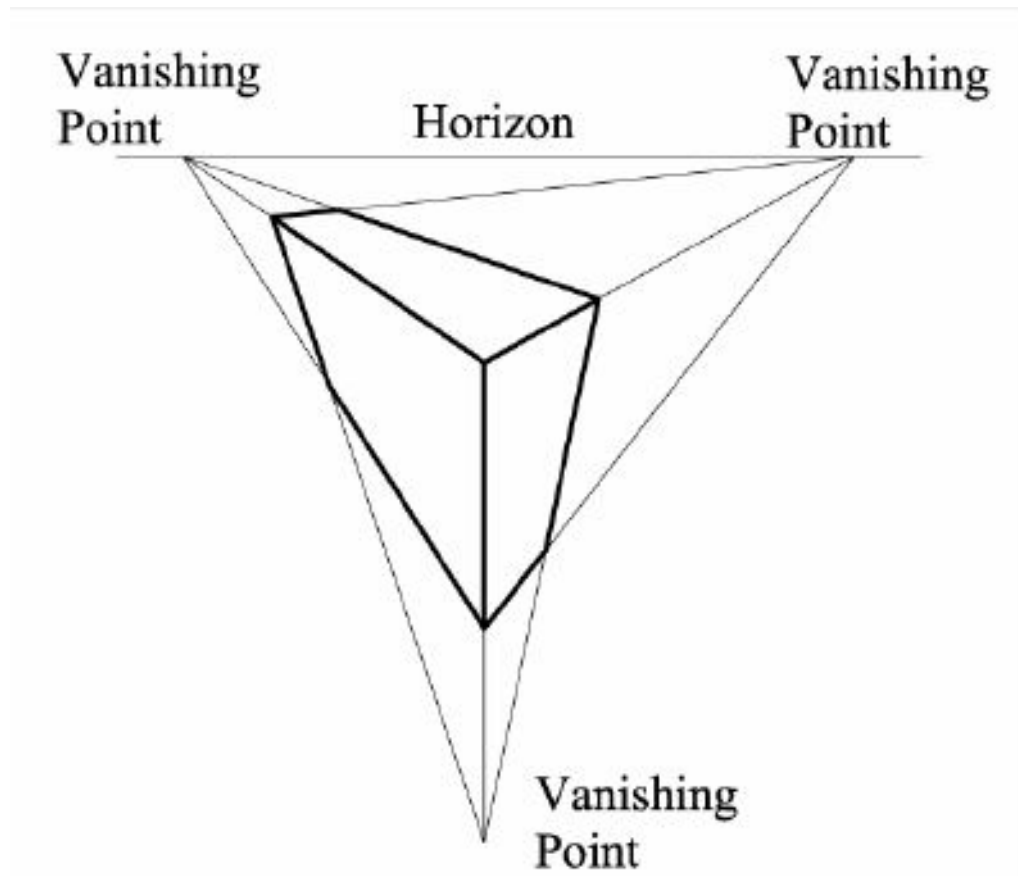


Image 3

Perspective Illustration of a block with corresponding parallel sides on a plane.



Image 4

Court Ladies (Tang Dynasty)  
Artist Unknown  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigment on Silk  
48.7 cm × 69.5 cm  
Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei



Image 5

Gathering on a Spring Day  
Yuan Jiang (c. 1671–c. 1746)  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigment on Silk  
57.5 cm x 39.4 cm  
Christie's Fine Chinese Classical Paintings and Calligraphy  
Hong Kong on 25 November 2013



Image 6

Nude (c. 1934)  
Lin Fengmian (1900-1991)  
Dimension Unknown  
Oil on Canvas  
Private Collection



Image 7

The Fiery Battle of Red Cliffs  
Lin Fengmian (1900-1991)  
68.5 cm x 67.1 cm  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on Paper  
Sotheby's Auction, Hong Kong, 2013

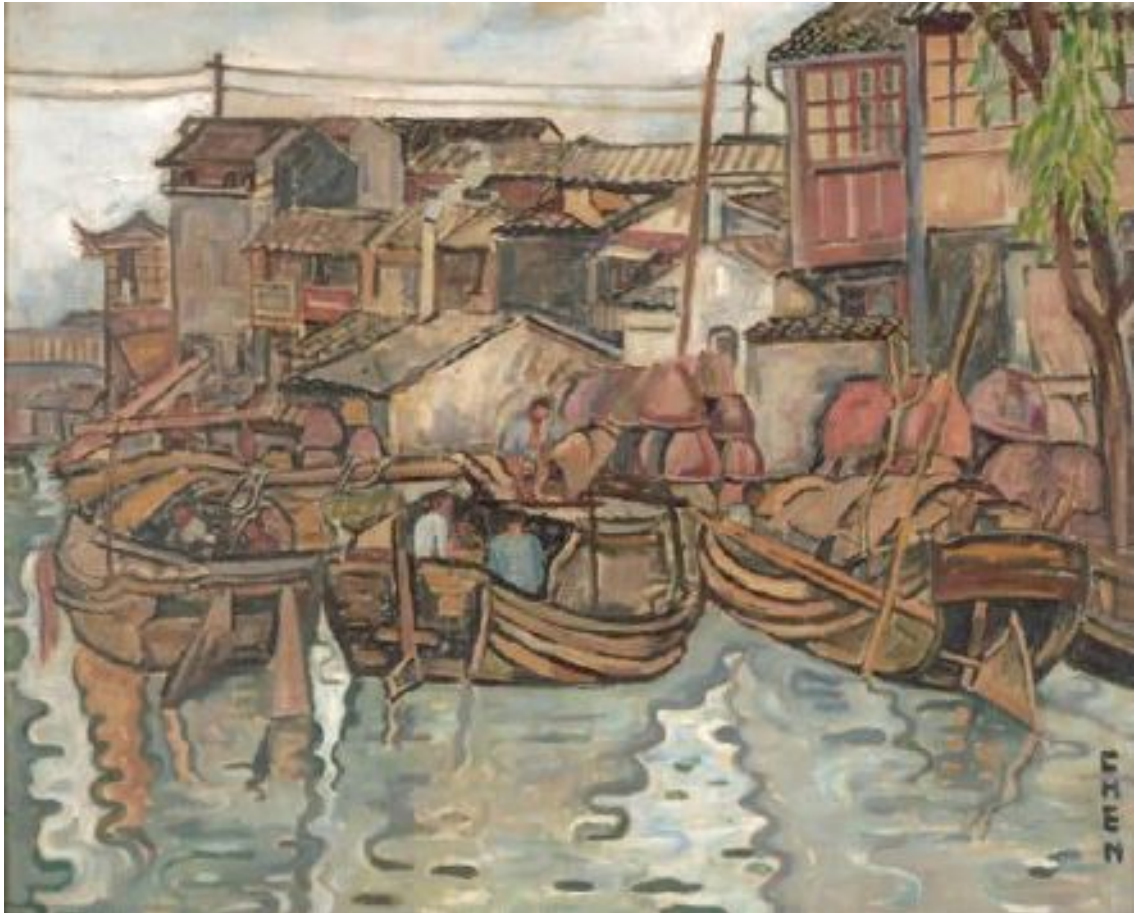


Image 8

Boats in Soochow, c. 1946  
Georgette Chen (1906-1993)  
50.2 cm x 60.7cm  
Oil on Canvas  
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore



Image 9

Kallang River, c. 1953–1955  
Georgette Chen (1906–1993)  
53.7 cm x 64.8cm  
Oil on Canvas  
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore



Image 10

Indian Musicians 1972

Liu Kang (1911-2004)

Oil on Canvas

73 cm by 94 cm

Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore



Image 11

Hérons, c.1990,  
Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991)  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigment on Paper  
157 cm x 297 cm  
Collection of Singapore Art Museum



Image 12

Untitled (Undated)  
Cheong Soo Pieng (1917-1983)  
117 cm x 66 cm  
Chines Ink and Colour Pigment on Paper  
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore

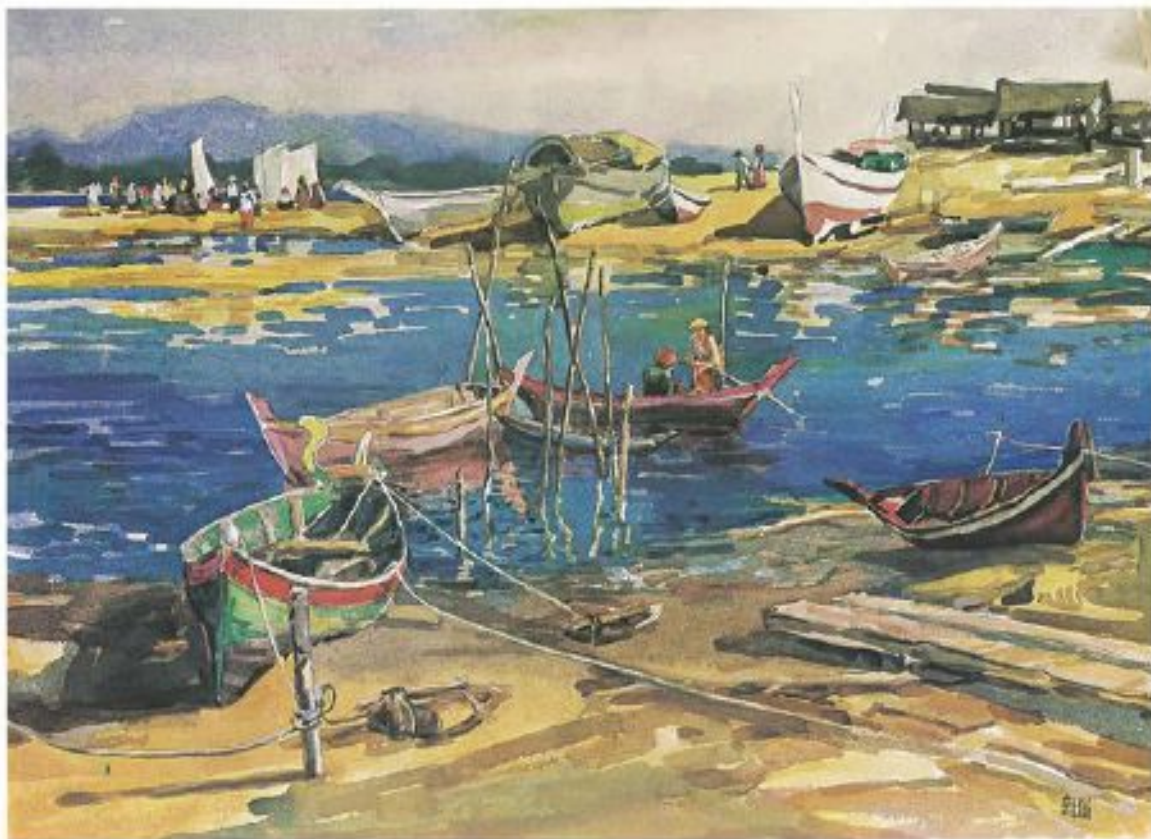


Image 13

Going to Sea at Dawn, 1967

Chen Chong Swee (1910-1985)

Watercolour on Paper

56 cm x 78 cm

Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore



Image 14

Singapore West Coast 1962

Cheng Chong Swee (1910-1985)

Chinese Ink and Colour Pigment on paper.

70 cm x 124 cm

Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore

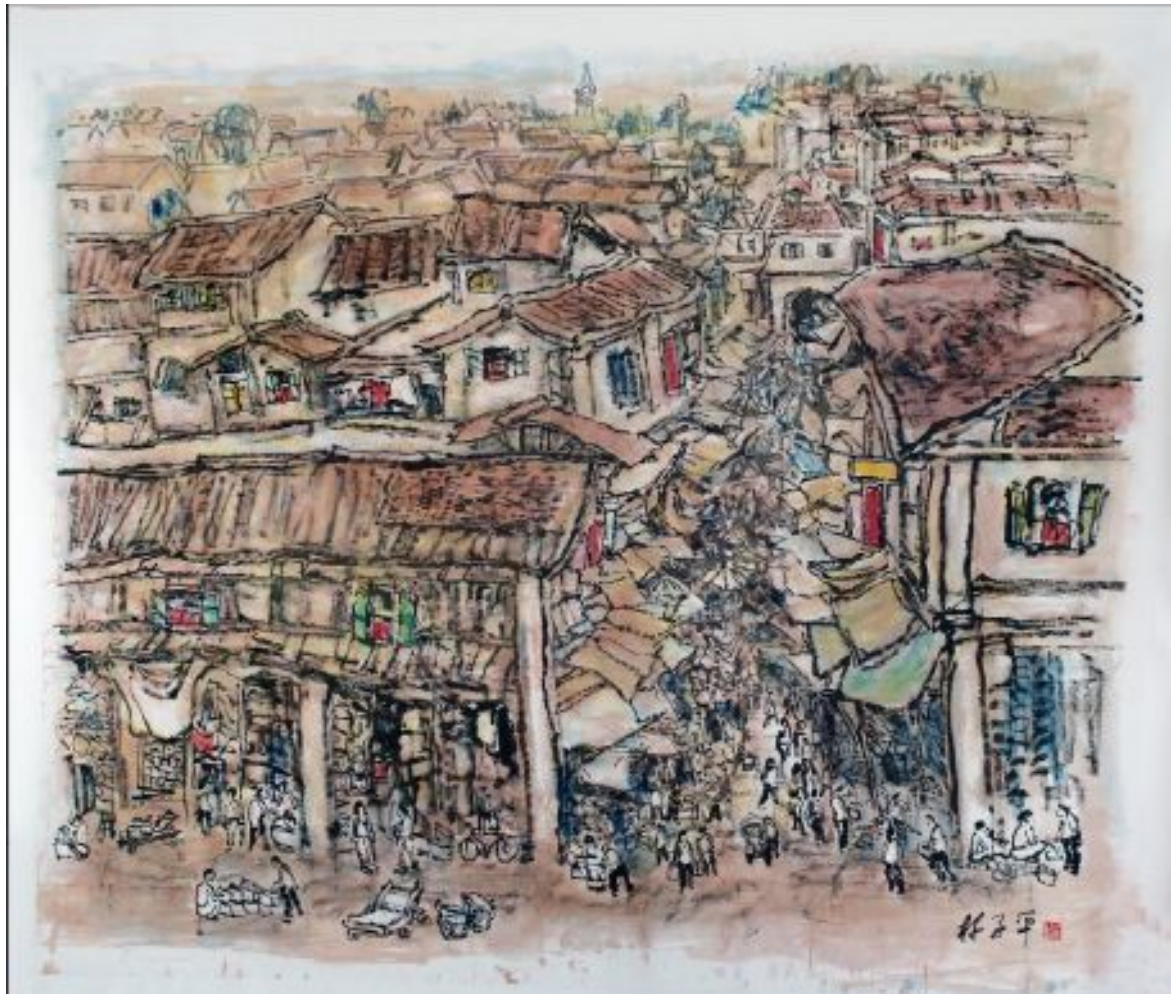


Image 15

Bustling Streets of Chinatown  
Lim Tze Peng (b. 1923)  
200 cm by 235 cm  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on (xuan) Paper  
Private Collection



Image 16

Memory of the Past at Red Cliff by Su Shi  
 Lim Tze Peng (b. 1923)  
 180 cm by 97 cm  
 Chinese Ink on (xuan) Paper  
 Private Collection



Image 17

Highway in Hougang, Singapore, 2005

Tan Oe Pang (b. 1947)

137 cm x 68.5 cm

Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on Paper

Private Collection, Singapore



Image 18

一切圓 "Yi Qie Yuan", 2013

Tan Oe Pang (b. 1947)

190 cm x 45 cm

Chinese Ink on Paper

BreadTalk IHQ



Image 19

Rain Forest Series -Refreshing 5, 2010  
Terence Teo Chin Keong (b. 1953)  
92x105cm  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on Paper  
Private Collection



Image 20

Melodic Summer, 2018  
Terence Teo Chin Keong (b. 1953)  
105x105cm  
Chinese Ink and Colour Pigments on Paper  
Private Collection

# List of Charts

## Chart 1

Art Forum: between 1937 and 1941<sup>70</sup>

Art Forum Speakers	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	Total
Wang Qiyuan 王济远		1				1
Zhang Danyi 张丹衣		1				1
Weng Zhanqui 翁占秋			2			2
Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿			4	1	2	7
Yu Shihai 喻世海			1			1
Liu Haisu 刘海粟					7	7
		2	7	1	9	19

## Chart 2:

Art Exhibitions Statistics between 1937 to 1941 (before World War 2)<sup>71</sup>

Art Exhibitions	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	Total
Chinese Artists (Solo)		4	4	3	2	13
Local Artists and Others	8	6	4	7	6	31
Western Artists (Solo)	2	3			1	6
	10	13	8	10	9	50

<sup>70</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p.161.

<sup>71</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p. 157.

### Chart 3

#### Solo Art Exhibitions by Artists from China<sup>72</sup>

Artist	Exhibition Venue	Dates	Exhibits
Rong Dakuai 容大块	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	18-20 Feb 1938	No Record
Wang Qiyuan 王济远	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	9-12 Apr 1938	104 pcs
Hu Chengxian 胡呈祥	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	14-18 Aug 1938	130 pcs
Zhang Danyi 张丹衣	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	8-15 Oct 1938	170 pcs
Shen Yishan 沈仪杉	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	6-14 Jan 1939	No record
Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿	Victoria Memorial Hall/Chinese Chamber of Commerce	15-16 Mar 1939/18-28 Mar 1939	171 pcs
Weng Zhanqui	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	17-26 Jun 1939	No record
Yu Shihai/Ning Hanzhang 喻世海 / 宁函章	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	27-31 Oct 1939	300+ pcs
Chen Tianxiao 陈天啸		23 August 1940	No record
Wang Aiduo 王霭多	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	27 Sep-1 Oct 1940	500+ pcs
Li Feihong 李飞鸿	Raffles Hotel	21-24 Nov 1940	100 pcs
Yang Shanshen 杨善深	Lingnan School (Branch)	10-12 Jan 1941	60+pcs
Liu Haisu 刘海粟	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	23 Feb-4 Mar 1941	200+ pcs

<sup>72</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p. 167.

## Chart 4 (i)

Art Exhibitions by Local Institutions and Resident Artists (1937-41)<sup>73</sup>

Artist/s	Exhibition Venue	Dates	Exhibits
China Modern Artist and Calligrapher Exhibition Huang Manshi 黄曼士	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	21-28 Jan 1937	No Record
Inter-School Art Exhibition (organised by St. Andrew School)	St. Andrew School	17-18 May 1937	350 pcs
1st Malaysian Chinese Comic Exhibition (organised by Youth Mission Society)	Youth Mission Society	1-5 Jul 1937	185 pcs
Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 and other well-known Calligraphies and Paintings Exhibition	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	3-5 Jul 1937	100+ pcs
Chinese Artists Society Art Annual Exhibition	Young Women Christian Association	1-5 Aug 1937	147 pcs
Motherland Refugee Relief Art Exhibition (organised by Chinese Artists Society)	Great World Amusement Park	1-3 Oct 1937	No record
Jiang Xiuhua 江秀华 (Organised by 广帮筹赈会)	New World Amusement Park	4-6 Dec 1937	No record
Rescue Comic Exhibition (organised by Chinese Artists Society)	New World Amusement Park	4-6 Dec 1937	No record
Inter-School Art Exhibition (organised by St. Andrew School)	St. Andrew School	24-28 May 1938	200 pcs
Meng Yasigen 蒙雅斯根	Young Women Christian Association	11-19 Jun 1938	115 pcs
Chinese Artists Society Art Annual Exhibition	Young Women Christian Association and Chinese Chamber of Commerce	4-6 Jul and 8-10 Jul 1938	230 pcs

<sup>73</sup> Yeo, Mang Thong; "A Study of the Artistic Activities during the Five years before World War 2" in Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore (Singapore Asia Research Institution (新加坡亚州研究学会), 1992), p.169-172.

Chart 4 (ii) (Continuation)

Artist/s	Exhibition Venue	Dates	Exhibits
Singapore Commercial Art Society 星州美术广告研究会	New World Amusement Park	05-Aug-38	
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Progress Exhibition	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	19-21 Aug 1938	200+ pcs
Deng Siyi/Chen Daju 邓斯艺 / 陈达琚	Westlake Art Academy	28 October 1938	100+pcs
Chinese Contemporary Artists Exhibition	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	23 March 1939	No record
Singapore Art Club 新加坡美术俱乐部	Young Women Christian Association	1-3 Jun1939	123 pcs
Chinese Artists Society Art Annual Exhibition	Victoria Memorial Hall/Chinese Chamber of Commerce	11-13 Dec 1939/16-18 Dec 1939	
Inter-School Art Exhibition (organised by St. Andrew School)	St. Andrew School	1939	No record
Combined Calligraphies and Paintings Exhibition (organised by Sin Hua Relief Fund Society)	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	9-15 Feb 1940	300+ pcs
卡尔。杜迪希 Sculptures Exhibition	No. 3, St Thomas	1-3 Aug 1940	75 pcs
Shi Xiang Tuo (See Hiang To) 施香沱 (organised by Sin Hua Relief Fund Society)	Chinese Chamber of Commerce	9-11 Nov 1940	180 pcs
Si Tuqiao 司徒乔	Tanglin Apartment	19-20 Nov 1940	50+ pcs
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Progress Exhibition	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts	16-Dec-40	No record
Chinese Artists Society Art Annual Exhibition	Victoria Memorial Hall	19-21 Dec 1940	207 pcs
Inter-School Art Exhibition (organised by St. Andrew School)	St. Andrew School	1940	No record

Chart 4 (iii) (Continuation)

Artist/s	Exhibition Venue	Dates	Exhibits
Singapore Commercial Art Society 星州美术广告研究会	Happy Word Amusement Park	21-15 Jan 1941	No record
Madam 霍斯根	Raffles Hotel	23-30 Jan 1941	69 pcs
Inter-School Art Exhibition (organised by St. Andrew School)	St. Andrew School	1941	No record
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Progress Exhibition	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts	16-Jun-41	No record
Zhang Bohe 张伯河	Thong Teck Press 同德书报社	14-16 July 1941	
"Fighting for Freedom" Exhibition (jointly organised by Chinese Artists Society and Singapore Art Club)	Victoria Memorial Hall	11-16 Sep 1941	UK Refugees Relief

# **An Art Interview with Terence Teo Chin Keong**

Interviewee: Terence Teo Chin Keong (TT)

Interviewer: Woo Fook Wah (WFW)

Date; 29 August 2018

Venue: Cape of Good Hope Gallery at Bras Basah Complex

WFW: Mr. Teo, thank you for accepting this interview so that we can talk about art creation in your lifetime. Let's begin by you telling us how you got into art studies and the training you received.

TT: If I were to begin from where I started, it would be a long story to tell. My love for art began when I was in primary school. I began to practice calligraphy when I studied at Tuan Mong School. I even had a third placing in a calligraphy competition. That love for art was manifested when I was in secondary school. During those years, when many Chinese artists came to Singapore to exhibit their artworks, we would gather around them and watch them demonstrate their artistic skill. They would demonstrate painting bamboos or even landscape and I would try to go to the back and climbed up to a higher spot so that I can see the demonstration from above, getting a clearer view. Some of my friends commented about my interest, as I was not, then taking art as a subject in school.

When I was still in secondary school, I took a Technical Drawing as a subject, drafting technical designs. I still can remember very clearly, whichever projection we drew, we were required to measure with a ruler and calculate to

determine the measurements and proportions accurately. These are foundations for building and the like. Accuracy is important. I drew those technical plans for about 4 to 6 years. From that training, I learn about the importance of measurements and proportions. It was good training for me. At the same time, I also discovered that I love music, photography, and singing. Hence, during my secondary school day, my inclination towards art and aesthetic became obvious to me. I participated in the painting of posters during those cleaning campaigns that were organized by the school. I conducted in the school choir and painted backdrops for National Day programmes.

After completed secondary school, I began to learn painting from a friend. I began painting plum blossom, orchids, bamboos and chrysanthemums as foundation training. After a few years, I started to paint landscapes. I still remember that the teacher teaching me landscape painting was Mr. Chen Shaoyi (陈绍易). Till now, he is not a professional artist, in that he has his own career and he paints when he has the time. I adopted an attitude of pressing on with what I thought is aesthetically good and walk towards that path instead of just concentrating on forms although I am also familiar with the Chinese forms. This attitude has established my style of painting right from the early days, even though I was unaware.

Another experience was: as I progress in my art journey, I began to go on painting trips other artists like Lim Cher Eng; who were older and more experience. I would listen to the sharing of advice from those artists and friends. Through those discussions, I discovered that in painting, the artist is not

restricted only to painting traditional subjects or copying paintings of past Chinese masters but also painting plein air. This realization was an important milestone in my art journey.

I often go on painting trips with Cher Eng. I noticed that in the daytime, he would usually concentrate on sketching. He would use brush and ink to sketch the scene, and also with different shades on black. The sketches were a little different to western sketches. Eventually, I also adopted Cher Eng's habit of painting. After dinner, we would stay in the hotel and paint. On completion, we would hang the paintings on the wall. Perhaps, if we framed up the paintings and hang them in the room, the hotel or the room may uplift the status of the hotel. His paintings were expressions from his heart. All those experiences left in me a very deep impression.

WFW: In the art journey of your lifetime, what were other experiences and thought that you would share with me?

TT: From the time when I painted for the fun of it till the time when I also learned calligraphy from him for a period of time till now, where my art-making continue to evolve into the art creation stage. I can summarise my art journey into three phases. The first phase was when I was learning from my teacher and learning from famous Chinese artists like Wu Changsuo and those Chinese master artists through copying. I also went to experience outdoor painting; painting kampung, rivers, bridges and coconut trees. I did not do that often. I consider this phase of my art journey as one that reflects the style of my teacher.

There was not much creativity. I was happy just to prepare one or two paintings for some annual exhibitions. During one National Day Art Exhibition during those early years, having been encouraged by Cher Eng, I prepared a painting for the exhibition. On the first day of the exhibition, the painting was sold for \$180. The organizer called me and asked for another painting to replace the sold painting. I replied that I do not have another painting to replace. I enjoyed that moment.

I reckon the second phase was when I begin to have a very personal feeling for the artwork I produced and when I had that interest to explore a style of painting of my own. I begin to introduce more of my personal interpretations in my outdoor paintings. I remember that time when I was on a painting trip in Cambodia. I was out painting in the morning. After I completed the painting, I felt satisfied and so I called it a day. Usually, we work on a painting in the morning and one in the afternoon. I was various serious in my outdoor painting trip. I remember after I return to the hotel, just before dinner, I saw the sun among the huge sculptures. It was very beautiful. It was very unlike those advertisement photos, where they would emphasize on the boldness and the enormity of those huge monuments. So, I put in painting what I saw: a sunset that was imbued with the mystery of sort. I was very satisfied with the painting. I felt that if I did not add the colors that I did, then the painting would look similar to other paintings. From then I begin to understand that I should be looking west in the development of my Chinese painting. In fact, by then, I had already started to put my emotion into my paintings. Although while I painted, I did not realize that was happening. I remember painting a lotus flower. It was a very simple flower.

Perhaps, due to the sunlight and the backlighting, I added many colors. After I have completed, there were comments that the painting looked like an oil painting. Although these days, I spend more time painting indoor in my studio, I pay much attention to traveling and outdoor painting and I prefer those outdoor painting trips are customized to suit my agenda, instead of just painting with a group of painters in general.

And in the third phase, the recent 10 years, after a period of diligence and pondering, I manage to create an oeuvre of artworks that are very exclusive and personal in style. Simply puts it, they are still painting, using Chinese ink and Chinese (xuan) paper, Chinese brushes and Chinese color pigments. However, the colors, presentation in my paintings look Western. Amidst the Western flavors, there remains that Eastern aesthetics element, which I have determined to maintain in my artworks. In our personal development and our thoughts are, perhaps, made up of majority (80 to 90%) Eastern outlook 10- to 20% is foreign or of Western appeal. So, when an artwork is created, that creativity that flows out from our heart would naturally be inclined that way and I think that the direction I have taken is correct. A person may be able to create a nice artwork by copying the style of other artists or by imitating sketches. But the lack of understanding of what underpinned the aesthetics uniqueness of another artist's work makes the whole effort futile.

Although some think that my painting is running the abstract route, I prefer to see them as Chinese 'xieyi' (写意) painting, a Chinese style of painting, which focuses on the essence over the realism of forms. In abstractionism, the subject

of work has no definite meaning by in my 'xieyi' painting, at least you can feel the essence undergirding the muted form, such as expression of the four seasons, a sense of mystery or an emotional appeal. I attempt to tread the edge of extremity in my art creation. In my attempt express of extremity, I might perhaps, paint a very crowded feeling today by adding yellow gold and red into the painting. On another day, when I feel calm, I might express seriousness by using black and white, deep blue or deep green colors into the painting. Regardless whether the colors are heavy or light, the manipulations of lines and forms, amidst the main color are treated carefully. What I mean is that I try and bring my mood into the painting, and pushing the boundary to the extreme. If I want my painting to have a crowded appeal, I will portray that crowded feeling to an extreme with many layers of colors but at the same time, I am careful to balance it, like ensuring that a sense of 'zen' is present. This is where people feel that my work is unique. I am very careful regarding the use of material and the way to express my artistic ability.

I attempt to differentiate my works from works produced by other artists in terms of the final appearance of the completed artwork. As such, I am constantly pursuing innovation and evolution in my skills and creative ideas. For example, in the early days, I like the way that Huang Binhong painted. I might add to my painting some element of Huang Binhong's later techniques and further complement those elements with modern appeal. Hence, the overall result is something that others might not have explored. Those innovations may not be obvious and the reasons for doing it that is to preserve the aesthetic appeal (avoiding abruptness and disharmony) and to give my paintings a lasting appeal,

where repeat viewings will offer new insight into my paintings. This is a constant goal in the creation of my works.

Why did I mention Huang Binhong? The brushwork of the later paintings of Huang Binhong was very energetic and exciting. This is due to his constant practice but due to his failing eyesight, he depended on his feeling to paint and there was that unique appeal. However, if I try to imitate this technique of him, it will not have a good result. Although we need to learn from the old masters we also need to have expression of our own uniqueness so that the artworks will not have a mere superficial appeal. I see this as important in my pursuit of my art journey.

Another point I like to share is that (some ten years back), perhaps many people cared for me. They advised keeping my artwork simple. However, to me, I looked at this matter differently. Although in the past, Chinese paintings were very simple, emphasizing on excellent line works painting subjects that are generally accepted like the plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, and Chinese landscape, but to me living in this present time, I should be painting modern and recent subject matters.

Having owned and run an art gallery for more than 30 years, I have seen and understood the aesthetic appeal of others. My aim is not just in selling paintings. I try to understand the aesthetic appeal of my clients and attempt to incorporate it into my painting style. In other words, I do not try to create works that are difficult to understand and appreciate. However, I am also open to the possibility that one

day if I do discover (maybe when I am a hundred years old) some important principles or aspects of painting, I might change my direction. I have a temperament that tends to move along with the natural order of things.

WFW: How long have you been painting?

TT: If we look at it from the point of time when I started working with Chinese brushes (that is including calligraphy and painting), it would have easily been 40 to 50 years. I am now 65 years old. However, it was when I reach adulthood that I became very serious in my art creation. That was when I was 20 plus years old.

WFW: Can you share who are the art masters or art writings that had an important effect on your artworks and how they affected you?

TT: The influence of these (art masters or art writings) would not affect our art creation directly, as it were. Earlier, I mentioned Huang Binhong. In the early period of Chinese art practice, I was impressed by his work. However, during that time I was not able to understand fully his work. It was after a long period of practice that I begin to understand what an iconic work is and what a unique work of art is. There is a need to accumulate sufficient fundamental knowledge and practice to understand the various advanced techniques of the masters like the proportion of ink and water to achieve the various effects. The ability to judge what is aesthetically beautiful can only be attained with experience.

I like music and singing. These have a strong influence on my later development of art. This is an important point. Also looking at Western those modern European masters like Monet and Picasso, which hear much about, eventually we would go and look for books and try and understand their works. Most of their best works happened in the later part of their lives. Perhaps, during those times, their artworks were yet fully understood. For example those works of Picasso that contained subjects like dismembered heads, or earlier movement like Fauvism, there are all very extreme in their conception. For a beginner, those works are difficult to understand. However, when you like the works and you believe in those works, you will go and search for answers. Through that search, be it through books or art essays, learning takes place and through that learning, a feeling is being developed and then comes the understand why the artists painted the way they did. It all requires a journey, beginning with the practice of form to image and to be able to capture the unique character of presenting the subject matter. Finally, the uniqueness from the artist's personal character is assumed in the artwork. Upon the market acceptance of the final work, the artist has successfully developed his personal style. It requires a step-by-step approach to learning and understanding.

Fundamentally, we would go and seek for material to understand the works of the art masters that we hear off. Often, the original works are too expensive and no one is willing to show those works, so we could only look at the printed works of those masters. Sometimes we would also travel to places like France and visit their museums to look at the original works where we can look at both the early and late works of the artists. From such visits, we can see that all famous artists

had to start by mastering basic techniques in the early part of their journey and then developed their work step-by-step. Perhaps, an artist might be talented, but it is when time and opportunity coming together that these artists finally became famous. Both past and contemporary art masters had to walk the same journey to fame. I have the opportunity to see the iconic artworks of Zao Wou-ki including those up to twenty feet. I also saw the original work of Zhu Deqin in Shanghai Music Hall. When one had seen enough of an artist's works, we will then be able to see why the artist took the direction that he did. It is after having seen the works of art masters and receiving advice from good friends like Chinese artist Hong Ling, who is strong in art theory and produces artwork of strong character, that I learn what is aesthetic beauty and aesthetic peak are. Often, over a period of traveling together, discussing and debates and sometimes feeling hurt in the ego, I reflect learn all those lessons on aesthetics. And I still believe that there is no such thing as an aesthetic peak. There will always be someone in the future who will surpass the current best as the human race becomes more and more intelligent and evermore increasing in its ability. It is to the end when you return to nature that you will be able to lay down everything and it is then that you will realize the peak you have to achieve and perhaps others may feel the same. The world also improves in the same way.

WFW: Can you share what goes through your mind in the process of your art creation?

TT: As I am still running a gallery, often I address myself as a part-time artist. However, there are those who commented that I am more diligent than full-time

artist and I do agree. In the early part of my art journey, I often paint only when I wanted to participate in a competition. In the later phase of my journey, I often ponder and paint with an innovative mind. My main subject matters include landscape, the four seasons, and extreme emotions. There are times when I do actually get emotional while executing an art piece. It could be the ambiance and the feeling affecting me at those moments. For example, yesterday I might have painted a spring scene, a simple but very satisfactory piece of work. Although I feel that if I can paint the same subject again and do a better job but when I get down to paint again with the mind to have a breakthrough over the piece, I painted the day before, I suddenly find that I am not able to do it again. In my later paintings, I add many layers to my painting. These layers are very unique. There is no particular format that I follow in the structuring of my painting like what the old masters taught. I am very informal in my approach to creating my artwork. The approach is so relaxed that I can easily turn a painting of a spring scene into autumn. I am not able to turn a painting with a spring scene into a winter scene but I can turn it into an autumn scene. This shows that when I paint, I am very relaxed and informal. It can be so relax when I paint to a point that I am unable to guarantee the outcome of the final work while painting. When I discussed with art masters, I discovered that they have the same attitude and feeling. Why are they able to create their own style using their own skill? This is because when they paint, continued to think and adjust. Hence, the final outcome becomes more exciting and different from the work that they painted just before. Other people may think that the artist must have been doing deep research but in reality, the outcome often is spontaneous. I want to emphasize one point. If that spontaneous outcome was good, we need to recognize it and

maintain it on the artwork instead of casting it away or work further on it and change the result. I often faced this kind of situation in the last 10 to 15 years.

As a result of this realization, I venture into my first painting of the four seasons painted into one scene. Traditionally, in Chinese painting, the four seasons are done in four paintings. Three years ago, while I was painting a tree, and that tree evolves, somehow, into a scene with the four seasons. In the process of painting, I was faced with some minor issues. I found difficulty in harmonizing the transitions so that the four seasons flow into one another as a complete scene. The skill to make a painting look complete is vital. Some people may feel that a painting is overdone whilst others may think more work can be added. That ability to judge and decide when the painting is completed at its optimum point is an essential ability an artist must have, eventually. In such a process, I continuously challenge myself. At times, I felt frustrated but I continued painting. For example, after completing a few pieces of works, I may feel that I have found a comfortable mixed of different mixed color tones. After that, I might experiment by adding some darker tones to the main color scheme and further add another layer of colors, so as to create a unique appearance. Through this process, I discovered a personal technique, which I feel is unique to my artwork. Some years back, when I was in Myanmar, I bought some gold-colored powder. I think it is acrylic. I admit that I do use a little acrylic in my works, especially for the white and the gold colored powder. I will use it when the works require them. My view is this: whether it is the gold colored powder or the white, I can control the opacity by adding water or even semi-opaque. So, in the later development, I can control my work wherein some are the colors are opaque

while others are painted with transparent colors. Some feel that the paintings look western but on further scrutiny, they also conclude that they are Chinese paintings. Perhaps, other artists may have also painted in the same way occasionally, but as for me, this has become part of my painting style. I feel contented because I am able to judge when the painting should be considered completed. Though my judgment may not be perfect, I am still satisfied because I can see that my clients had been willing to spend their money to buy my artworks including those who did not know me personally. So, from that point I move forward, setting higher goals for my art creation. In my journey of art creation, I often meet with these kinds of challenges. I am glad to have these challenges because as a result, I can further my knowledge so that I can further innovate and develop. I majored in the painting of the four seasons with the forms of trees for nine years. Now, I move on to paint the four seasons as sceneries. For example, I might depict a mountain range against a background with the feeling of spring or winter. Painting the four seasons with trees is simpler because I can use the color of the tree to express. It is more challenging to paint the four seasons with mountains. There must be differences between the sky at spring and in summer. The challenge is how to harmonize the transition in the painting.

This morning I continued working on a painting that I began painting yesterday in an attempt to complete the painting. Let me reveal a secret. When I use a broad brush to produce line works and when I use a fine brush to produce line works, the results are very different in terms of their final appearance. The painting I work on this morning is not a large painting. The subject matter as in

other of my artworks consisted of water reflection and it is semi-abstract. In the reflection, I depicted the four seasons. It was unexpected. If I succeed in painting this work, this piece of work, this piece of artwork will definitely be one of its kinds; perhaps even worldwide, or at least I have not seen such kind of artworks previously.

Diligence will finally bring about success. It is not correct to think that if a painting can sell, then just reproduce another similar piece. In reproduction, the forms and structure may be replicated but it will lack the touch of emotion, like the display of boldness or strength and similar energy in the execution of the brush and ink on the painting. Whether one paints in oil, acrylic or, the need to innovate and create something new is always inevitable for a professional artist and that is what set a professional artist apart from amateurs.

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