



PROJECT MUSE®

Foreword

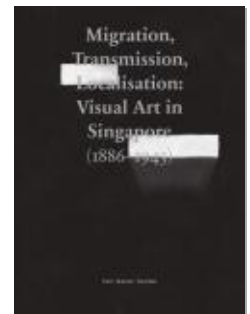
Published by

Yeo, Mang Thong.

Migration, Transmission, Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886-1945).

1 ed. National Gallery Singapore, 2019.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.110040>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/110040>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[172.69.7.34] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 23:15 GMT)

Foreword

—SENG YU JIN

Does Singapore's modern art history stretch back to the 19th century? The exhibition *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, launched at the inauguration of the National Gallery Singapore in 2015, showed that it was in fact an active period of art-making and cultural transfer, with itinerant and diasporic artists from China, Europe, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world sojourning to Singapore. Many would later choose to make Singapore their home. This long-term exhibition on Singapore art at the Gallery would not have been possible without the significant contributions of groundbreaking research by researchers such as Yeo Mang Thong. Despite full-time employment as a civil servant, Yeo has over the past 30 years made immense contributions to advancing scholarship on Singapore's art history during the 19th and early 20th centuries, which is even more remarkable considering that he has neither a background in art history nor is trained as a curator.

Research into this early period of modern art in Singapore poses several difficulties. The lack of archival sources such as artists' letters, photographs and even artworks, many having been lost over time, is a reality that hinders scholarship. Even if available, access to these materials presents another barrier for researchers, as they may reside in private rather than public collections. Historical events such as World War II also resulted in the catastrophic destruction of archival materials and artworks. Some artists were killed during the *Sook Ching*, a systematic purging of Chinese men suspected of being anti-Japanese during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, making

it impossible to conduct oral interviews. This brings us to the issue of methodology: as many artists have already passed on, and surviving family members may not remember or be familiar with their artistic activities as they were likely very young then, oral histories are limited. Memory and remembering are important approaches to constructing histories but can also be unreliable due to distortions in recollections that are altered over time.

Despite these challenges in conducting research into this early period of our modern art history, Yeo has adopted methodologies that include the examination of Chinese daily newspapers such as *Lat Pau*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Po*, and literary supplements like *Wenmen Jie* (The world of literature and cartoons) and *Xingguang* (Starlight) edited by artist-writers Dai Yinlang and Tchang Ju Chi respectively. Guided by his background in Chinese studies, Yeo has pored over Chinese-language newspapers at libraries to reconstruct an active pre-war Singapore art scene invigorated by visiting artists from overseas, fundraising exhibitions, public lectures and other artistic activities organised by art societies. His research into Chinese sources, which he started for his first book, *Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore* (1992), proved to be important in foregrounding artists like Tchang Ju Chi, Dai Yinlang, and others who travelled and settled in Singapore. In comparison, this new book pushes back his timeframe to the 19th century, drawing on a methodology of examining subtle shifts in the use of inter-related texts and images in Chinese newspapers. His approach highlights the urgency for scholars

who write and work in different languages to find common platforms to share knowledge fragmented by language barriers, so that it can be reconnected and critically engaged with. Besides Chinese newspapers, so critical to our understanding of pre-1945 modern art in Singapore, access to English newspapers such as the *Singapore Free Press* and *The Syonan Shimbun*, a wartime newspaper issued in Japanese and English editions, require researchers with diverse language abilities. The translation of Yeo's book into English is one such initiative by the Gallery to bring together scholarship in different languages and make it more widely accessible to researchers and publics interested in the art history of Singapore. It also enables more scholars to cite each other, taking a significant step towards a broadening of art-historical discourse here.

Sojourning artists such as Situ Qiao, Liu Haisu, Xu Beihong and He Xiangning contributed to transfers of artistic knowledge, stimulating artists here to actively participate in cultural debates and issues concerning China as the "motherland" during the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945. Yeo's research into sojourning artists, not only from China, but also others like Austrian sculptor Karl Duldig (born in present-day Przemysl, Poland), will enable a deeper understanding of their contributions here through exchanges and interactions with cultural producers in Singapore. This may eventually lead to a change in our understanding of the cultural transfers that took place in Singapore during this period, enabling a reappraisal of sojourning artists as having a historically significant impact on artistic developments here.

In this book, Yeo pushes the scope of his research by including an analysis of advertisements published in Chinese newspapers. These advertisements are historically significant because they reveal a shift towards incorporating images and symbols of Nanyang cultures, customs and scenery that speak to an audience in Singapore—Yeo terms this as "*Nanyang fengqing*," or Nanyang flavour. He also expands on his methodology by analysing the changing iconography of texts and images of such advertisements. This marks a significant step forward, both in scope and methodology, in relation to his broader research into the diasporic communities in Singapore.

Yeo has not only extended his research back into the 19th century for his second book, but also expanded beyond art history to encompass aspects of visual culture that includes advertisements, signboards, woodcuts, cartoons, and storybook illustrations. His close analysis of popular culture has enriched his study of this period, allowing him to make important connections between fields of cultural production such as literature, woodcuts and cartoons as "sister arts." For example, someone like the artist Tchang Ju Chi straddled various fields with his roles of editor, cartoonist and painter. Cartoons and storyboard illustrations are relevant and vital manifestations of modernity and modern art, and they remain undiscussed within art history in Singapore. Should art museums also research, collect and display such materials to bring out their resonances with paintings? This book offers important propositions for art museums as

well as researchers to consider redefining and potentially expanding what “art” means within multiple contexts and modernities.

Yeo is an exemplary scholar. He has tirelessly and meticulously used newspapers as an important source to construct histories of art that would have otherwise been unknown—artists fade from memory with their passing, artworks are lost in time, and archival materials remain scattered and scarce. This series of essays demonstrates that Singapore’s early modern art history can be knowable if we widen our horizons to include an expanded scope of visual cultural material that usually fall outside the ambit of art history. Decentring our research away from the “fine arts” circumscribed by painting and sculpture to include image-making practices like advertisements and cartoons, equally sensitive to a changing society, will enable us to understand the interconnections between the different visual practices that artists were involved in. Yeo has shown that artists like Tchang Ju Chi and Dai Yinlang bridged the worlds of literature and art. They were painters, cartoonists, intellectuals, newspaper editors, and woodcut artists all at once. It is therefore critical for scholars to extend their research across the different fields of cultural production that our artists inhabited. More research still needs to be done, but this publication marks an important step towards a reimagination of modern art in Singapore as an expanded field.

Seng Yu Jin is a Senior Curator at National Gallery Singapore. His curated and co-curated exhibitions include *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency* (2006), *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (2008), *FX Harsono: Testimonies* (2009) and *Cheong Soo Pieng: Bridging Worlds* (2009) and the 2013 Singapore Biennale. A PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, Asia Institute, he currently researches the art activities of Southeast Asia, focusing on the region’s exhibition histories and artist collectives.