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7 Survey of Art Activities in Singapore During the Five-Year
Period Before the War (1937-1941)

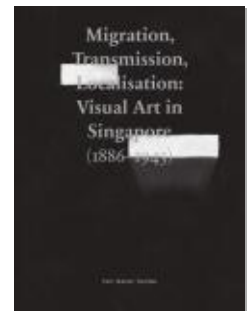
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CHAPTER VII

SURVEY OF ART ACTIVITIES IN SINGAPORE DURING THE FIVE-YEAR PERIOD BEFORE THE WAR (1937-1941)

TO SET THE CONTEXT, I would like to first provide an overview of the art activities of Singapore between 1925 and 1936.

During that time, there were exhibitions organised by foreign art dealers and artists, including solo shows featuring Chinese artists like Zhang Yi'ou, He Xiangning, Hu Bin, Fu Baxiong, Gao Jianfu, Zhang Shanzi, and Xu Qifu. There were also fundraising exhibitions, such as the ones organised by Li Zhongqian and He Xiangning. The former, which was held at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, featured poetry, prose, calligraphy, paintings and seal carvings, and was organised to raise funds for a proposed Confucianist university in China. The latter was organised by the Singapore China Relief Fund for the Chung Kai Agricultural and Industrial School; the exhibition drew a fair amount of response and attention at that time.

Other exhibitions were initiated by the émigré community in Singapore. These included the 1927 show featuring works by Chinese students who trained in France; the posthumous exhibition of Yang Zhi'ai works in 1929; the *Singapore Fine Art Exhibition* organised by the Nanyang Youth Lee Chee Association in the same year; the exhibition organised by the Southern Star Fine Arts Society in 1931 featuring the works by artists such as Zhang Bohe and Wang Shilong and the exhibition of Qiu Jingsha's collection of calligraphy and paintings from the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, organised by the Chang Chow General Association.

The 1929 *Singapore Fine Art Exhibition* was actually was actually a misnomer. What was presumably a display of artworks by local artists turned out to focus on calligraphy and paintings by famous artists in the collections of local art connoisseurs, something which the newspaper reports of the day covered

extensively. On the other hand, local artists who had their works on display at the exhibition—such as Tchang Ju Chi, Zhang Bohe, Huang Cheng Chuan, Liu Kaishang, and Cai Zhuzhen—were hardly mentioned. Attention was diverted away from the Singaporean artists and their thunder was stolen. Even when Yong Mun Sen and Chong Pai Mu organised a joint painting exhibition to aid the flood victims from their hometowns after the 1931 catastrophic flood that devastated China,¹ artists living in Singapore did not respond or take action. The lack of response might be an indication of how stagnant the art scene was. Perhaps this was because there was very few local artists at the time, even though the Chinese population in Singapore had already grown to a sizeable 418,640 by 1931.²

Probably because of the low number of artists, the arts scene at that time was far from vibrant. This was evident in the fact that in *Xingguang* (Starlight)—the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* pictorial supplement that was founded in 1929 on 15 July, the same year that the main newspaper was founded—the cartoon drawings were mainly contributed by the editorial team, which consisted of Tchang Ju Chi, Hu Bin, Chen Shengping, Hsu Chunlin and Lin Dao'an. The cartoon drawings took up a quarter of about each issue. *Wenman Jie* (The world of literature and cartoons), a weekly supplement to *Nanyang Siang Pau*, was launched quite a few years later on 24 May 1936.

Local artists set up studios to provide both commercial art services and private art lessons. Tchang Ju Chi established Ju Chi Art Studio; Chen Shengping Nanyang Studio of Newspaper Cartoons; Zhang Bohe, with others, Southern Star Fine Arts Society; Chen Minsheng Minsheng Art Studio; Liu Wencai Letian Art Studio; Huang Zunsheng and Lin Ruozhou New Island Art Studio; and Lian Aitong Mantian Art Studio.

This establishment of newspapers and studios by local Chinese businessmen led to a rise in demand for artistic talent. However, the first fully established art association mooted by a group of Chinese artists—the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA)—was formed only in 1936. SOCA's inaugural art exhibition organised in June 1936 displayed a total of 165 works contributed by 20 artists from Singapore and Malaya.

Based on the events described, we can draw a few conclusions about art activities in Singapore between 1925 and 1936. Firstly, art exhibitions were not frequently organised. Apart from the exhibitions by Li Zhongqian, He Xiangning and Gao Jianfu, the other exhibitions did not attract much attention or response from local audiences. Secondly, even though there were private studios providing art lessons, the quality of teaching varied greatly from one school to another.

In general, the art scene in Singapore endured a long period of darkness before the first rays of light broke out in 1936 with the birth of an active art society, a newspaper supplement devoted to fine arts, and an art exhibition featuring the works of Singapore and Malayan artists. The art scene became even livelier in 1937, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident when anti-war efforts ramped up China. The suffering and persecution of their fellow Chinese citizens spurred artists into action, and many of them travelled to Singapore to raise funds through art exhibitions. At the same time, a steady stream of cultured individuals, including many artists, fled south to Singapore. The Singapore art scene saw its talent pool grow, and the scene began bustling with activity; the number of art activities soared, with a significant increase in the number of art exhibitions, art schools and talks about fine art.

Hence, 1937 can be regarded as a milestone in the pre-war art activities of Singapore, and

it will be a significant undertaking to study the art activities that took place between 1937 and 1941 in Singapore. 1937 not only marked the start of the critical period that propelled Singapore art forward, but also the time when the seeds of growth for Singapore's art scene was planted, resulting in today's colourful and exciting art scene in Singapore.

This essay examines art activities during the five-year period before the outbreak of war in Singapore through five sections: (I) art exhibitions; (II) talks by artists; (III) newspaper art supplements; (IV) art groups and (V) art schools.

ART EXHIBITIONS

This section can further divided into three categories: (1) solo exhibitions by artists from China; (2) exhibitions by Singapore-based artists, art groups and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and others; (3) solo exhibitions by Western artists. An overview of the number of exhibitions held between 1937 and 1941 can be found in Appendix 5.

Solo Exhibitions by Artists from China

Between 1937 and 1941, a total of 12 exhibitions were held in Singapore by visiting artists from mainland China and Hong Kong. Apart from those featuring the works of artists like Jiang Zhenhua, Rong Dakuai, Chen Tianxiao, and Yang Shanshen, the majority were fundraisers in aid of injured Chinese soldiers and war refugees. Most of the time, these events were held at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (see Appendix 6).

Among the monographic shows, there was Rong Dakuai's exhibition, centred on showcasing the "magnificent mountains and rivers of China for the viewing pleasure of

fellow countrymen living overseas.” Wang Chi-Yuan’s works, many of which had a social message, depicted the suffering of homeless refugees on the run; this theme was also apparent in many of the allegorical inscriptions that appended Wang’s paintings, such as “Amidst the sweeping wind and rain, the Double Ninth Festival approaches; the entire country continues to fight the war in a display of national pride and glory. But how many more loyal citizens and patriotic souls must we sacrifice, how many more battles must we fight before we can reclaim our territories and restore our land?” Another artist whose works often carried inscriptions was Chang Tan Nung, who was renowned for his brilliance in painting and poetry and was a skilled seal-carver (figs. 7.1 and 7.2).³ There was also Ong Schan Tchow, famous for his renditions of the chrysanthemum; his paintings of the flower had a lyrical appeal, as seen in the juxtaposition of the stalks, the crafting of the colophons or fashioning of the seal impressions. And then there was Yang Shanshen, a young talented artist from the Lingnan school, whose works demonstrate how he broke into the art scene with his attempts “forging a synthesis of old and new techniques.” This is in contrast to the exhibitions of woodcut prints and cartoons, such as the one organised by the Kunming Branch of the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists, which were group exhibitions. The one by the Kunming Branch had the aim of exposing the horrors and destruction afflicted by China and Japan.

The more popular exhibitions were the ones featuring works by Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu, and attracted a steady stream of visitors. Visitorship for the Xu’s solo exhibition was approximately 20,000 people, which would imply that the exhibition was, to a certain extent, effective in promoting the

appreciation of Chinese art to both local and European audiences. Similarly, Khoo Seok Wan commented in the catalogue of Liu’s works: “Wielding his brush on rice paper, he left the Europeans in awe and admiration and the Americans gasping in wonder.” Both shows enjoyed a long run and collected substantial amounts of funds. It was reported that Xu Beihong’s exhibition raised 15,398 Straits dollars and Liu Haisu’s 20,000 Straits dollars. These noble and charitable initiatives brought real benefits to Chinese war refugees and victims.

Before the start of each exhibition, an exhibition organising committee was usually convened to take charge of publicity, exhibition set-up, hosting duties and so on. The artworks were then priced, ranging from tens of dollars to above a thousand dollars each. To optimise their fundraising efforts, it became common practice for organisers to send teams of representatives to sell art vouchers to local businessmen. This method of raising funds, by making personal visits to potential sponsors and patrons, was a distinctive feature of art exhibitions held in Singapore before the war. To promote these exhibitions, the Chinese daily newspapers would not only publish detailed reports on the fundraising exhibitions, but also special supplementary issues to generate greater publicity for these events. Examples include the *Special issue on Mr Liu Haisu’s Solo Art Exhibition*; *Special issue on Mr Ong Schan Tchow’s Solo Art Exhibition*; *Special issue on the Cartoon Exhibition organised by the Kunming Branch of the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Art Workers* among others.

Many cultured individuals in Singapore would compose prose or poetry in response to these fundraising exhibitions. Examples include *A Personal Opinion on Tian Heng and his Five Hundred Warriors* in *Xu Beihong’s Solo*

Exhibition written by Chen Zhenxia; *Professor Xu Beihong's Art Exhibition and other matters* by Zong Sheng; *Alternative Perspective on Professor Xu Beihong's Works* by Lin Huixiang; *After visiting Ong Schan Tchow's Solo Exhibition* by Wen Tian; *A discussion on the Chrysanthemum—Remembering the Fundraising Exhibition of Mr Ong Schan Tchow's Paintings* by Lin Shicang; *After a Visit to the Exhibition (featuring cartoon art by Yu Shihai and Ning Hanzhang from the Kunming Branch of the All China-Resistance Association of Writers and Art Workers)* by Da Bai; and *My Thoughts after Visiting Madam Wang Aiduo's Solo Exhibition* by Wu Yin. Apart from Chen Zhenxia's controversial remarks about Xu Beihong's works, the other pieces contained nothing but praise for the various exhibitions they visited.

Exhibitions by Singapore-Based Artists and Art Groups, and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

Between 1937 and 1941, there was a total of 30 exhibitions (see Appendix 7) organised by Singapore-based artists and schools. For example, the series of annual exhibitions presented by SOCA in this five-year period created much excitement in the pre-war art scene in Singapore. These annual exhibitions featured both Chinese and Western art, allowing audiences to compare them. Another institution that had an annual exhibition was St Andrew's School, which launched its annual inter-school art exhibition in 1936. These provided students with a passion for art view works by others, and to learn from them. There was also the *First Malayan Chinese Cartoon Exhibition*, a groundbreaking effort in the history of Singapore art. One Singapore-based artist who held an exhibition was the Russian artist V.A. Zasipkin, who had lived in Shanghai and Harbin for many years before his

arrival in Singapore; he displayed numerous works depicting the scenery of Suzhou, and also had a nude painting that was priced at a record high of a thousand Straits dollars. Another example of a Singapore-based artist is Karl Duldig—someone who had suffered much political persecution—who impressed the audience with his awe-inspiring sculptures; Duldig's exhibition was the first sculpture exhibition in the five year pre-war period, and was an unprecedented showcase of the There was also Mrs. E.F. Watkins, an accomplished British artist who produced drawings of ethnic Chinese and Malay people.⁴

One of the most significant exhibitions was the one of See Hiang To's works. See was the first, among those who arrived in Singapore before the war, to be featured in a large-scale solo exhibition organised by the Singapore China Relief Fund in aid of war refugees.⁵ The five-page record that See made of who was invited to the opening ceremony of the calligraphy and painting exhibition contained more than three-hundred names. See, who even provided details on how to invite those on the guest list, was heavily involved in the preparations for the exhibition. Clearly, he was keen on helping the war victims who were facing tremendous hardship and suffering (figs. 7.3 to 7.5).

Another trailblazing exhibition was *Wei ziyou er zhan* (Fight for Freedom), held in November 1941, which broke new ground by bringing Chinese and Western artists of different nationalities and races, with different painting styles, together in the name of fighting for the freedom of humanity. The following verse reflects the common goal of artists who participated in the the *United Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition*: "Fearful that the war victims will die of hunger, I took the liberty to donate my calligraphy and paintings in exchange for food that will help save lives."

All in all, such exhibitions records reveal that calligraphers and painters like Goh Teck Sian (1893–1962), Chern Yet Siew (1911–2002) and Koh Joon Cher (1890–1960) (fig. 7.6) were already active in the Singapore art scene before the war. The calligrapher Goh Teck Sian was a diligent student of the calligraphy style originating from Wei dynasty steles. His calligraphy works, which exude a simple and understated elegance, show stylistic influences from ancient stone and bronze inscriptions. His seal carvings, executed with finesse, are solid and effortless. One of his seal carvings, featured here, describe the period during the Japanese Occupation when Goh sought refuge in Malaya in Linggi, Malacca; his seal carving, *geng mu san zai* (three years of farming and raising livestock) in red characters described this period of his life (figs. 7.7–7.9).

Chinese daily newspapers of the day carried special features on these exhibitions such as the first cartoon exhibition featuring Chinese artists in Malaya, the *United Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition*, and the solo exhibition of See Hiang To's works. Local cultural personalities also contributed articles in response to these exhibitions, such as "A Discussion on the Malayan Chinese Cartoon Exhibition" by Hsu Chunlin; "A Visit to the Cartoon Exhibition" by Er Ke; "After Viewing the [Fundraising Cartoon] Exhibition in Aid of our Motherland" by Tie Er; "Sculptor Karl Duldig's Farewell Exhibition" by Situ Qiao; "Record of a Visit to the Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists" by Yi Ming; "A Discourse on the Art Exhibition Organised by the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists" by Sha Li; and "A Review of the fight for Freedom Exhibition" by Xu Feng.

Solo Exhibitions by Western Artists

Between 1937 and 1941, there were seven

art exhibitions held by European artists in Singapore (see Appendix 8). Of the seven, one of the exhibitions featured the works of the German artists Mr and Mrs J. Wentscher, while two of them were exhibitions of Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Mepres. The Wentschers depicted the landscapes and peoples of the East Coast of Malaya, as well as the lives of the Temiar tribespeople, in watercolours and oils.⁶ Le Mayeur, on the other hand, portrayed Balinese scenery in his sketches and oil paintings (fig. 7.10). When Le Mayeur visited Singapore for his solo exhibition in 1937, he was accompanied by his Balinese wife, Ni Pollok, who performed Balinese dance at the drill hall of the Singapore Volunteer Corps along Beach Road.⁷ Le Mayeur's second exhibition in 1941 was a solo exhibition, and it achieved remarkable success by raising more than 10,000 Straits dollars from the sale of the works.⁸ Fellow artist Chen Chong Swee was deeply impressed with Le Mayeur's figure paintings: "Be it sketches in light washes of colour or paintings executed in oil, his works were bathed in brilliant tropical sunlight. The toned, graceful figures of the female dancers dressed in colourful costumes, or the feminine forms of weavers kneeling beside their looms weaving sarong cloth are vivid expressions of the idyllic, tranquil life of the Balinese. They were evocative of a dreamlike, poetic realm filled with the strains of an enchanting melody."⁹

Based on the discussion of the three types of exhibitions above, it is important to note the following:

- i. In 1937, SOCA took the lead by organising a fundraising exhibition to support the war effort in China. As anti-war sentiments raged on in

1938 and 1939, the number of art activities in the pre-war period reached its zenith. On average, a fundraising exhibition was held every two months during that time.

ii. In 1940 and 1941, only two Chinese artists—Wang Aiduo and Liu Haisu—came to Singapore to hold fundraising exhibitions for the injured soldiers and war refugees of China. There were not many more fundraising exhibitions by local artists; specifically, there was only the solo exhibition of See Hiang To's works and the *Joint Exhibition of Calligraphy and Paintings*. By this time, British authorities had intervened with fundraising activities—with the onset of World War II in Europe in 1939, they wanted to divert fundraising efforts to Britain, away from China. In one instance in 1940, SOCA was forced to abandon its plans to stage an art exhibition featuring works by Singapore Chinese school students after the authorities got involved. This resulted in the drastic drop in the number of fundraising exhibitions in 1940 and 1941, creating a stark disparity with the situation in the two preceding years. In 1940 when Jin Shan, Wang Ying and others formed the “New China Drama Troupe”, and Li Feihong organised an art exhibition, both supported an “Aid Britain Before China” fundraising cause.

iii. With the onset of the war in Europe in 1939, local fundraising efforts also widened in scope, moving beyond helping injured soldiers and war refugees in China to include the British war relief fund, European war fund, as well as the British cum Chinese war fund.

iv. In general, the most common type of exhibition in the five-year period before the war was fundraising exhibitions held by visiting Chinese artists, followed by exhibitions featuring local artists' works. Both were equally important in promoting the development of Singapore art.

v. The solo exhibitions staged by Chinese artists in Singapore, the annual exhibitions organised by SOCA, and the solo exhibitions featuring works by European artist had a direct impact on local art practitioners and art enthusiasts. At the Xu Beihong painting exhibition held in 1939, artworks by local artists such as Tchang Ju Chi, Hsu Chunlin, Lim Hak Tai and Kao Fei Tse were also on display. Participation in the exhibition not only served as a form of recognition for the artistic accomplishments of these artists, but also encouraged and motivated them in their pursuit of art. Exhibitions featuring both Chinese and Western art also became more common, becoming a platform for the bridging and fusion of ideas and practices from Chinese and Western cultures. By visiting these exhibitions, audiences gained exposure, knowledge and insights into art.

vi. While there were articles introducing readers to selected exhibitions, rigorous art reviews were extremely rare. While spiteful comments would have ignited conflicts, constructive criticism would certainly have helped enhance the artistic knowledge and insights of art practitioners.

TALKS BY ARTISTS

Visiting artists from China were often invited by cultural organisations, schools and radio stations to give talks. The names of these speakers and the number of talks they gave in Singapore are listed in Appendix 9.

Some of the talk titles include: “The Path of Chinese Paintings in the European Art Scene in Recent Years” by Wang Chi-Yuan; “Knowing Chinese Paintings and its Brief History” by Chang Tan Nung; “The Direction of Art, Differences between Chinese and Western Art, Art Education and the International University of Rabindranath Tagore, and Art of India” by Xu Beihong; “The Influence of the West on Oriental Art, The Differences between Chinese and Western Paintings, Modern Art, The Spirit of Chinese Painting and Traditional Chinese Painting” by Liu Haisu. The insightful comments and art reviews from these artists provided the Singapore art scene with much food for thought.

The artists also gave talks that focused on current affairs to instill anti-war sentiments among the local Chinese population. These included: “My hopes for Malayan Chinese youths during the war of resistance” and “Certain victory in the war of resistance and sure success in building a nation” by Ong Schan Tchow; “Spirit of a real gentleman” and “In memory of Rabindranath Tagore, the sage of poetry” by Xu Beihong; “Chinese students living in critical times” by Yu Shihai; and “Youth and art” and “Character education” by Liu Haisu.

Apart from giving talks, these artists also contributed articles. For instance, Liu Haisu’s essay on “The origin and development of Chinese painting,” published in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, provided a concise analysis of the sources of artistic tradition that would have inspired past artists. Such an analysis would have enabled the reader to understand

the development of Chinese painting and its changes.¹⁰ I even paid Liu a special visit in Shanghai to get a first-hand account of his artistic activities during his sojourn in Singapore before the war (fig. 7.11).

NEWSPAPER ART SUPPLEMENTS

It was during the five-year period before the war that the two largest Chinese daily newspapers in Singapore launched supplementary sections focused solely on the fine arts. *Nanyang Siang Pau* started the weekly art supplement *Jinri Yishu* (Art Today) on 10 January 1937; a total of 29 issues were circulated, with the last one published on 13 August of the same year. *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, distributed a total of sixteen issues of the weekly supplement *Yishu* (Art) from 7 April to 28 July 1940. These supplements had the artistic mission of publishing articles that emphasised using art as a weapon to promote national liberation, and the role of the artist in these efforts.

Jinri Yishu focused on the genre of cartoons. Editor Dai Yinlang, himself an experienced and talented artist, devoted himself to the promotion of cartoons and woodcut illustrations. Dai spared no effort in encouraging the making of cartoon and woodcut illustrations, and the 29 issues of *Jinri Yishu* were an important platform for cartoon illustrators and woodcut artists to publish their work. In particular, he advocated for them to be imbued with a Nanyang flavour. His efforts, coupled with the inputs from contributing artists, resulted in the publication of numerous superb cartoon drawings with a Nanyang flavour. Among the 40 artists that participated in the *First Malayan Chinese Cartoon Exhibition* in 1937, as many as

14 had contributed to *Jinri Yishu*. The exposure that the supplement provided to these artists should not be understated.

Yishu was effectively a publication by SOCA that used editorial space provided by *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. It had a mission of “strengthening the national salvation front,” which was announced at the launch of its first edition. The supplement focused on exploring general topics related to art, such as introducing the reader to the art scene in the west, and discussing the link between art and counter-war efforts.

Both *Jinri Yishu* and *Yishu* also featured many articles from China, reflecting the desire of the editors to raise the standards of their publications. From another perspective, the lack of local art writers could have led the editors to rely on material from China. The reproduced articles helped to broaden the readers’ horizons, and were usually about the cultural activities in China, particularly those related to art and the war efforts. To a certain extent, such articles strengthened anti-Japanese sentiments among local artists, influencing the subject matters depicted in their art.

ART GROUPS

During these time, there were three active art organisations. All of them were established with the aim of forging friendships, promoting art and meeting the needs of fellow art practitioners.

Singapore Art Club

Founded as the *Xiesheng julebu* (Life Drawing Club), it held its first exhibition on 6 December 1881. It changed its named to the *Xinjiapo meishu julebu* (Singapore Art Club) on 8 March 1882.¹¹

Singapore Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA)

SOCA was established on 20 January 1936. The society was initially housed at 181 Tank Road, before moving to 167 Geylang Road in 1939; it relocated again in 1941 to 919 Serangoon Road. SOCA had a large pool of talented members, and many of its members were graduates from the Xinhua Art Academy and Shanghai Art Academy. Past presidents of the society include Tchang Ju Chi and Hsu Chunlin.

From the time of its inception, it was standard practice for SOCA to hold an annual art exhibition. SOCA also actively participated in fundraising initiatives, as well as foreign art exhibitions such as the ones organised by Chinese artists in Penang. The 1937 political cartoon exhibition that SOCA organised to raise funds for China’s war effort took the art scene by storm. The exhibition even travelled to Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, to further promote its mission. In 1940, the society had planned to organise an exhibition to display works by students from Chinese schools in Singapore. Unfortunately, the event did not take place due to unforeseen circumstances. To a certain extent, the annual exhibitions put up by the SOCA helped boost the development of art in the local Chinese art community.

In addition to organising exhibitions, SOCA also assisted in setting up exhibitions featuring visiting Chinese artists such as Shen Yibin and Xu Beihong. It also played host to other visiting Chinese artists, such as Zheng Ke, Wang Chi-Yuan, Xu Beihong, Yu Shihai, Ning Hanzhang and Liu Haisu. As part of its regular activities, SOCA organised group sketching and painting sessions on a monthly basis, allowing members to interact with and learn from each other.

Singapore Commercial Art Society

The Singapore Commercial Art Society was established in 1937. Initially located at 1 Kreta Ayer Road, it moved to 73 Neil Road a year after its founding. In terms of organisational structure, the society was managed by its president, vice-president, secretary of general affairs, treasurer and secretary, as well as executives in charge of its various divisions. The committee members in 1941 were president Lin Yingcan (president), Xie Huantang (vice-president), Xu Xiaofeng (vice-president), Ou Ruoping (secretary of general affairs), Xian Guoliang (deputy secretary of general affairs), Shao Xuebai (treasurer), Chen Jiaming (deputy treasurer), Li Wenjian (secretary), He Shuxiong (secretary of social affairs), Chen Chanqing (deputy secretary of social affairs), Tang Yew Choy (secretary of art education), Chen Zhinong (deputy secretary of art education), Rao Liji (research division), Zou Bingnan (advertisement division), Mei Xingwang (life drawing division), Liang Youying (library division), Chen Gengyao (music division), and Fang Zhaoji (sports division). Although the society has never held any annual exhibition of its own, it did contribute actively to various fundraising exhibitions.¹²

SOCA and the Singapore Commercial Art Society excelled in their own domains of fine arts and commercial art respectively. Notably, members of SOCA often served in other capacities. Some were appointed as art editors of Chinese daily newspapers (for example, Tchang Ju Chi, Hsu Chunlin and Dai Yinlang), while others were professionals in the advertising industry (for example, Tchang Ju Chi and Tang Yew Choy). A large number were also art teachers in primary and secondary schools, playing a significant role in teaching and introducing art to local students. Wu Tsai Yen taught at Tao Nan School; Liu

Sien Teh at Yeung Ching School; Tchang Ju Chi, Zhang Bohe, Chen Chong Swee, and Chen Fu-Chie at Tuan Mong School; Chang Tan Nung and Yeh Chi Wei at Chung Cheng High School; Huang Cheng Chuan at The Chinese Industrial and Commercial Continuation School (today Gong Shang Primary School); and Yang Yong Queh at Khee Fatt School (today Qifa Primary School). Other than teaching at primary and secondary schools, many SOCA artists were also faculty members of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Founding principal Lim Hak Tai and teachers Kao Fei Tse, Chong Beng Si, Huang Pou Fong, Chen Fu-Chie, Chong Pai Mu, Lu Heng and Li Kuishi were all SOCA members.

These organisations' remarkable efforts in cultivating the barren art scene in Singapore should be given due recognition. If these SOCA members can be considered as first-generation artists in Singapore, then it would not be far-fetched to say that the second generation of artists flourished under their nurturing and guidance. That so many Chinese and Western art organisations sprung up in Singapore in the 1970s is a testament to the contributions these artists made.

ART SCHOOLS

After the surge in the number of artists arriving in Singapore, there was an increase in the number of art schools established here—many of these artists made a living by teaching art. The establishment of the NAFA in March 1938 was a major milestone for art education in Singapore. Unlike commercialised art schools, NAFA had a very strong faculty and offered a rigorous curriculum.

This is a list of art schools that were also active during this period:

- (A) *Tianshi Meishu Xueyuan* (Angel art academy), founded by Chong Beng Si, graduate of the Fujian Provincial Teachers' Training College.
- (B) *Bailu Meishu Yuan* (White egret art academy), founded by Lin Junde, graduate of the University of Wyoming, Department of Fine Arts.
- (C) *Xinan Meishu Xueyuan* (Southwest art academy), founded by Jiang Xiuhua, graduate of Nihon Bunka University, Department of Fine Arts.
- (D) *Xihu Meishu Xueyuan* (Westlake art academy), founded by Deng Siyi and Chen Daju.
- (E) V.A. Zasipkin School of Art (Apollo Studios), founded by Russian artist V.A. Zasipkin.
- (F) NAFA, founded by Lim Hak Tai, who graduated from the Fujian Provincial Teachers' Training College with a certificate in applied arts.

SOCA and alumni of Jimei High School in Xiamen, China were closely related to the establishment of NAFA. The idea of setting up a “Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts” was first mooted by Yong Mun Sen in December 1937, a watercolourist from Penang, Malaya who was then vice-president of SOCA. Yong’s proposal was approved by the SOCA committee, who immediately started to draw up plans for setting up the school. However, the plans had to be halted due to the lack of funds. At around the same time, Lim Hak Tai became a member of SOCA and came to know of Yong’s proposal for a school. Coincidentally, Tan See Siang, the son of Tan Kah Kee and a Jimei High School alumnus, was planning to open a school in Singapore at the time. Lim, who was personally acquainted with Tan, shared Yong’s proposal with Tan. With Tan’s support, NAFA eventually opened its doors in 1938, with Lim

Hak Tai at the helm as founding principal.¹³

The following is an excerpt from a letter by Hsu Chunlin to me (fig. 7.12), in response to my question on how SOCA was involved in the establishment of NAFA. His account paralleled my own research, which was based on newspaper reports.

“As to your question regarding the establishment of a fine arts school that Yong Mun Sen, vice-president of the Society of Chinese Artists, had proposed, I remember that Mr Yong had presented this idea at the first annual meeting of the SOCA. However, the proposal was subsequently abandoned due to a lack of sponsorship. Not long after, Mr Lim Hak Tai brought up the subject of setting up the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts—by then, the proposal had gained support from Tan See Siang, son of Tan Kah Kee. With the financial lifeline from Tan, many problems were readily solved.”

Credit must be given to the Penang watercolorist Yong Mun Sen for his proposal of setting up a fine arts school, Tan See Siang for his financial support, and Lim Hak Tai for his perseverance and fortitude. With the establishment of a well-organised school for fine arts in Singapore, those who aspired to a career in art could finally pursue further studies in a formal institution (fig. 7.13).

Lim, the founding principal of NAFA, often expressed his belief that art should draw from its environment and its times. For example, in his 1940 article “My views on modern art,” pointed out that true art comes from life, and as result, cannot be separated from reality and the ideological trends of the times.¹⁴ Similarly, at NAFA’s opening ceremony in 1939, Lim stated that “given Singapore’s strategic location in the Nanyang

region, the objects, culture and landscape of Singapore embody the unique characteristics of the tropical milieu.”¹⁵ Together, these two statements form the basis for Lim’s idea of Nanyang art: to depict the natural landscape of Nanyang, and to ensure that art reflects the ideological trends of the times.

Lim’s oil painting *Horrifying Moment* (fig. 7.14) is a good illustration of the notion that “true art comes from life.” Drawing inspiration from the Anti-Yellow Movement, which centered around getting rid of all forms of pornography, among other vices,¹⁶ the painting depicted a topless young woman putting on heavy makeup in front of the mirror that showed a skeleton. The message behind the painting is that with the rampant spread of yellow culture, vain and materialistic girls who have no sense of self-respect and modesty would easily be lured into pornographic activities and prostitution, becoming doomed to suffer a wretched fate. When the artwork was displayed at SOCA’s 1954 annual exhibition, a critic opined that “the theme and its rendering on canvas is unique. The use of bold and bright colours conjure a picture that is incredibly stirring.”¹⁷

Clearly, *Horrifying Moment* was a commentary on what was happening in Singapore society at the time. Another similar artwork is the 1954 oil painting *Searching*, by Lim Yew Kuan. In the work, a young man in tattered clothes seeks earnestly for “the truth” in broad day light with the help of a flickering candle flame (fig. 7.15). People on the street look at him scornfully, and even a little dog on a leash held by a well-dressed couple barks at the man. There is also a monk licking his thumb and counting cash in the foreground. The question that the painting raises is “what is the young man looking for?” The painting, laced with symbolism, shows how a young man is treated with hostility by society. In an

interview with the author, Lim Yew Kuan said that “The only way to become a true artist is to experience life and understand the essence of matters.”¹⁸ These definitive works by Lim Hak Tai and Lim Yew Kuan bear testimony to the turbulent period of the 1950s.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

(A) Situated strategically between Europe and Asia, Singapore was a cultural hub that facilitated artistic exchange between China and Malaya. Chinese artists such as Rong Dakuai, Wang Jiyuan, Chang Tan Nung, Shen Yibin, Ong Schan Tchew, Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu held their exhibitions in Singapore, before bringing the exhibitions to other parts of Malaya. These artists not only promoted Chinese art through their exhibitions—which often doubled up as fundraisers—they also boosted anti-Japanese sentiments through their choice of subject matter. With their brushes, the artists wielded influence that was indirect yet powerful. This is aptly captured in a lyrical expression by poet Xie Yunsheng: “The brush speaks of nothing but unending sorrow.” In 1941, on the eve of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, an unprecedented wave of unity swept through the literary and art circles, culminating in the formation of an anti-Japanese association. Members of the association came from institutions like SOCA, the Anti-Japanese Association of Chinese Woodcut Artists and Cartoonists in Singapore, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the Singapore Commercial Art Society, and *Xingguang* Pictorial Publishing. Notably, Lim Hak Tai and See Hiang To were key members of the association, which demonstrates their commitment in contributing to the war efforts in Singapore and Malay.

(B) Among the visiting Chinese artists, Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu and Mr and Mrs Situ Qiao stayed in Singapore for extended periods of time. Xu left many of his calligraphy and paintings, as well as numerous literary works, behind for the Malayan Chinese art and literary scenes. Examples include his writings about his sojourn in India, his lyrical exchanges with Huang Menggui, the poems that Huang composed for Xu's works, the poetry collection of *Shuangyu Lou* by Feng Yimei, and the poetic inscriptions written by Yu Dafu for the paintings of Liu Haisu. At the same time, artists like Xu and Liu were often invited to inscribe colophons on artworks by local artists—these poetic inscriptions bear testimony to an elegant undertaking engaged in by artists from a bygone era. (figs. 7.16 and 7.17).

(C) Many artists travelled to Singapore to hold fundraising exhibitions during this five-year pre-war period; during this, there was also a surge in the number of cultured individuals who arrived in Singapore to flee the war in China. The war, while destructive and devastating, brought about new developments in this region—who would have expected the nationwide anti-war efforts in China would have a direct impact on the growth of art in Singapore? Today, the seeds of art planted half a century ago by artists from China and the West have bore fruit. With today's flourishing economy and the high educational standards among our citizens, I strongly believe that if we adopt an open mind and have a broad artistic vision, we can look forward to outstanding artists emerging in Singapore.

- 1 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 25 Dec 1931 and 29 Dec 1931.
- 2 Wang Gungwu, *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese*, trans. Zhang Yishan, (Buffalo Book Co., 1969).
- 3 *Union Times Evening Edition*, 8 Oct 1938. The three seals in fig. 7.1 were from a publication in Ms Wu Mei's family collection, *Zhang Dannong yin cun* [Seal prints of Chang Tan Nung] (1941), and not from Chang's original exhibits.
- 4 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 20 Jan 1941.
- 5 Yeo Mang Thong, "Shi Xiangtuo," *Xinjiapo zhanqian meishi lunji*, [Essays on the history of pre-war Chinese art in Singapore] (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1992), 138–9. See Hiang To's *Banana Tree Chrysanthemums and Birds* (fig 7.3) was one of the exhibits then. The inscription on the painting by Xu Beihong was also published in "Xinghua chouzhen dahui zhuban longxi huiguan Shi Xiangtuo xiansheng shuhua yizhan chouzhen tekan" [See Hiang To's Charity Exhibition Art Catalogue]. See *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 8 Nov 1940.
- 6 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 17 Feb 1937.
- 7 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 26 Feb 1937.
- 8 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 22 May 1941.
- 9 Chen Chong Swee, "Sishi nian lai Xinjiapo yitan huigu" [A Look Back at The Forty Years of Singapore's Art Scene], *Singapore Art Society Pictorial* (1969).
- 10 Yeo Mang Thong, "Liu Haisu zai Xinjiapo" [Liu Haisu in Singapore], *Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji*, 145.
- 11 Hsu Yun Tsiao, *Xinjiapo yibaiwushinian dashi ji* [Major events in 150 years in Singapore] (Singapore: Youth Book, 1969), 73.
- 12 *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 17 Feb 1941.
- 13 Yeo Mang Thong, "Nanyang meishu de yaolan", *Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji*, 59-71.
- 14 Singapore Society of Chinese Artists, *Sin Chew Jit Poh Sunday Edition*, 26 May 1940, Art (8).
- 15 In 1955, Lim Hak Tai outlined six principles for art education. The fifth was for art to demonstrate a tropical flavour.
- 16 In Oct 1953, a female student, Chong Geok Tin, was raped and murdered in Singapore. One month later, Chung Cheng High School initiated an anti-yellow culture movement, believing that "yellow culture," in the form of raunchy films and lewd songs and dances, created societal problems.
- 17 Low Sze Wee, "Lin Xueda—yishu yu shenghuo" [Lim Hak Tai: Art and Life], in *Crossing Visions: Singapore and Xiamen: Lim Hak Tai and Lim Yew Kuan Art exhibition*, exh. cat. (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts: 2011), 19–28.
- 18 Lim Yew Kuan, interview with author, 23 Apr 2017.

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