The Nanyang Artists: Eclectic Expressions of the South Seas

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The story of the Nanyang artists began with a small group of artists who had a simple vision – to promote and cultivate art in British Malaya. These artists were part of a larger group of Chinese immigrants who travelled to Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 30s to settle and work. The term “Nan-yang”, which means “South Seas”, was commonly used to refer to Southeast Asia as the region south of China. A large number of these immigrants settled in Singapore (which was part of the Straits Settlements in British Malaya), the “centre” of Nanyang. The influx of artists and art educationists, who found teaching and administrative positions in Chinese schools in British Malaya during this period, fostered the promotion of art activities. Various art groups were formed, art exhibitions held and art activities, which up till then had been unheard of, were promoted.

Then, in 1938, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was founded in Singapore with Lim Hak Tai as the principal. NAFA was the first fine arts academy in British Malaya. Its earliest group of teachers consisted mostly of graduates from the fine art schools in Shanghai. Within the following two decades, NAFA would come to play a significant role in the proliferation of artworks that have been recognised as highly innovative and eclectic, and uniquely Southeast Asian because of their integration of regional cultural influences and essences.

The concept of “Nanyang” when used in relation to place or people has been problematised as a geographical as well as a cultural space. The term “Nanyang”, when used to refer to these Chinese immigrant artists in Malaya and Singapore, infers a transitional political and cultural status—these artists were beginning to lose ties with mainland China and form a “Nanyang” or Southeast Asian mentality. In this essay, the term “Nanyang artists” specifically refers to those who taught at NAFA, those who graduated from the academy and those who shared close relationships with them and played important roles in the shaping of an eclectic approach to art-making. The pioneer artists who emigrated from China and taught at the academy are referred to as “first generation” Nanyang artists, while
those who were born in Malaya and were taught or influenced by the pioneer artists are referred to as “second generation”.

The crucial roles played by Nanyang artists in the development of artistic practices during the 1940s onwards were noted in 1965 by art writer Marco Hsu. The significance of these artists was cemented when the National Art Gallery organised a retrospective exhibition of the Nanyang artist in 1979, featuring the work of 40 artists, over the period 1938 to 1965. Curator Redza Piyadasa published an exhibition catalogue that highlighted the pictorial concerns shared by the artists and the diverse factors that shaped their directions, and discussed the term “Nanyang Style”. The two essays, by Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy respectively, although intended to spark further dialogue on these subjects, have become canonical texts which have since been much quoted and commented upon.

Although the academy started with only 14 students, by 1940 enrolment had reached 50. Its first batch of teachers included Kao Fei Tse who taught drawing, Chang Meng Tse who taught design, Lin Deshan and Chiu In Wei. Lim Hak Tai taught watercolour and oil painting. The academy held exhibitions as a way to collect funds to maintain itself. In 1941, the Japanese invasion forced the academy to close temporarily. It reopened its doors in 1946. During the 1940s to 1960s, several influential artists were invited by Lim Hak Tai to teach at NAFA, who contributed significantly to the academy, including Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen, See Huang To, Tchang Ju Chi and Chong Pai Mu.

The Nanyang artists were distinctive because of their commitment towards alternative solutions based on new modes of visual perception from the West. Their aim was not to preserve Chinese arts and culture as previous art associations had attempted to do, neither was it merely to include Western modernist art traditions in their oeuvre. Spearheaded by Lim Hak Tai, the Nanyang artists responded to questions and problems posed by the new generation of Chinese artists in Shanghai during the early 20th century, as well as to challenges related to new conditions of living in Malaya.

The Nanyang artists were caught in an era of change that straddled the ideals of tradition and ideas of modernism. They had to negotiate between two opposing methods of artistic perception and representation —

ink painting from the Chinese tradition versus artistic idioms from the Western tradition. What is more, their artistic commitments were divided between concern for their homeland and identification with their newfound land. They were a people in transition and their artworks were diverse and interesting because they reflected these very challenges.

These considerations must have shaped Lim Hak Tai’s concept of an artistic direction for the academy. His vision was expressed in the following “objectives”:

1. Fusion of art of the East and West
2. Integration of the cultures and cultural essences of the four races
3. Development of the spirit of science and trends of modern thinking
4. Expression of a local tropical flavour and the creation of a Nanyang art style
5. Emphasis on the educational and social functions of fine art.

MULTIPLE ARTISTIC DIRECTIONS IN SHANGHAI DURING THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE NANYANG ARTISTS

In early 20th century Shanghai, many Chinese artists were divided in their acceptance of modern Western ideas in art. There were some who insisted that such modernisation processes demanded a rootedness in the traditional principles of Chinese art. Others felt that their country’s survival depended on rejecting backward ideas of the ancients and embracing new Western objective approaches in the arts. Within this split, there emerged yet another debate amongst those who were willing to accept Western approaches and techniques in art — what Ralph Crouzier has called the modernist-traditionalist debate.

The term “traditionalist” here refers to Chinese artists who had accepted the techniques and approaches of the Western academic tradition in art. This included a combination of naturalistic and realistic representations of form that were based on the Neo-classical and Romantic movements, which were in turn, based on a 15th century Renaissance model.

The term “modernist art” on the other hand referred to the type of art which broke away from such conventions - specifically art which emerged in Paris during the late 19th century, to artworks emerging from the School of Paris, such as those of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Cubists and Fauvists. The traditionalists felt that the scientific approach of
what they deemed as Western "traditional" painting (academic art) was superior and especially apt for "...a China [which] was just beginning to assimilate Western culture and science" while the "modernists" wanted to heed the call for innovation and do away with conservatism. This latter group did not only adopt a Western objective approach in art but emphasised individual creativity and self-expression, the two distinctive beacons of modern art.

During the same period in Shanghai, Lu Xin began a woodcut movement that would add another dimension to the already heated debate between traditionalism and modernism. Although woodblock printing was considered an ancient art form in China, its popularity as a communicative medium was renewed during the early 20th century, following the May 4th movement (1915–1921). A seminal leftist writer, Lu Xin was heavily influenced by Russian anti-imperialist ideas and encouraged the progress of revolutionary woodcut art in China as a tool for spreading ideas on reformation, introducing Soviet woodcuts and those of the Russian artist, Kathe Kollwitz, to the Chinese Public.12

The Nanyang artists' oeuvre reflected these multiple considerations. There were two distinct groups in the academy that would emerge out of this period.13 One group concentrated on finding new pictorial structures and expressions to reflect the tropical environment, the multicultural aspects of Nanyang and cultural themes rooted within the region. Four pioneer artists who made a historic painting trip to Bali in 1952 veered to this first group: they were Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang. Their well-publicised trip became a flashpoint in their efforts to search for local themes in art that were located in Southeast Asian contexts. It cultivated the beginnings of a unique approach to picture-making that has come to be known as "Nanyang Style", influencing many second generation Nanyang artists.

Another group pursued contemporary and social themes, emphasising the social aspects of art. Formed in 1956, this group became known as the Equator Art Society, and was influenced by Lu Xin's call for social relevance in art.14 Its artistic concerns centred on the social functions of art rather than formalistic approaches, dismissing the type of art that was based on the artist's expression or individual creativity as irrelevant and self-serving.

"NANYANG STYLE"

The first pioneering group of artists associated with the Nanyang Academy, led by Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang and Geogette Chen [22] are better known in the context of local art history, and are recognised as the progenitors of "Nanyang Style".14

Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang in 1979 sought to "provide some answers" to "those who question whether a so-called 'Nanyang Style' actually exists".15 Even now, a description or definition of this Nanyang Style remains somewhat elusive, seeming to refer to artworks characterised by an eclectic approach towards picture making, fusing different artistic traditions and at the same time reflecting the Southeast Asian milieu.

In his essay for the catalogue, T.K. Sabapathy writes of how "the Nanyang artists adopted an experimental approach, using styles and techniques derived from two sources: Chinese pictorial traditions, and the School of Paris", and expands on the appeal of the latter:

"In addition to proposing an attitude towards art activity that readily identified it as being modern, the School of Paris provided for the Nanyang artists a variety of pictorial schemas in which the obligations of traditional iconography were either minimised or neutralised by formal and technical considerations. The absence of such an iconography released the need to root the art object in a clearly defined ideology or value system. Consequently, artists were free to select from the available schemas features which were suitable to their own aspirations, without having to adopt any supporting ideology. The selection was governed primarily by formal (stylistic) requirements."16

Sabapathy pointed out a number of themes which we may take as starting points for the discussion of a Nanyang style. These themes include "interpretations of Cubism", "use of pictorial schemas from the Chinese tradition", "varied approaches towards abstraction", "multiple viewpoints in still life" and "creation of figure-types". Two particular themes may be highlighted as useful introductions to understanding the stylistic context of these Nanyang artists' works. The first is the use of figure types — that is to say, the repeated use of certain stylised treatments of the human figure, in Soo Pieng's work, and its influence on second generation artists such as Khoo Sui Ho, Cheah Yew Sawk, Tew Nai Tong and Seah Kim Joo, who later employed these figure-types as schemas for depicting human form [10, 11, 39]. The second discusses and compares the technique of
composition used in the Chinese handscroll in relation to the requirements of easel-painting practice in Western art.

Even though the Nanyang artists may not have had an agreed manifesto as with some Western art movements, there is a common thread that runs through their artistic productions, which may be attributed to Lim Hak Tai’s vision for the school. Second generation artist Chung Chen Sun, an active and influential alumnus of NAFA, notes that his decision to start a school in Kuala Lumpur (the Malaysian Institute of Art) was largely influenced by Lim Hak Tai’s ideas on art education. Many others have attributed the nature of their work to his petition to depict the “localness” of Nanyang, his call to paint as people who now live in Nanyang (rather than China). 17 Lim Yew Kuan’s thoughts on the Nanyang style reveal this underlying idea:

“...because we live and experience life here, what we produce is always naturally Nanyang. The Nanyang Style emerged as a natural result, not as a conscious response. What is important for the Nanyang artists is to be able to translate their experiences as people who live in Nanyang, into their paintings. It doesn’t matter if you studied Chinese or Western art.” 18

As such, the “five principles” written by Lim Hak Tai (cited earlier) provided a sort of framework for these Chinese immigrant artists. They appealed to these artists to espouse an avant-garde stance in art, advocating innovation, open-mindedness and diversity. They adopted an all-encompassing outlook which included various calls towards modernism. As such, even though their artworks forked in multiple directions, it can be suggested that this forward-looking attitude held them together towards the development of a Nanyang Style.

The term “Nanyang Style” can at times seem to refer loosely to paintings which possess a local look or have a local essence which is “Nanyang”, as opposed to, say, being “Japanese” or “English”-looking. The common thread that runs through all the artworks commonly referred to as “Nanyang Style” is actually the eclectic approach of mixing and matching different techniques, media, compositional formats or modes of representation within a single painting, coupled with the use of local subject matter. The “Nanyang experience” as described by Lim Yew Kuan was translated by employing modes of representation from the Chinese and Western painting traditions rather than painting traditions originating from Nanyang itself. This is a significant point of departure which lends Nanyang Style its uniqueness and also its complexity.

From a formalistic point of view, the artworks produced by the Nanyang artists reveal that what is being referred to as Nanyang Style comprises a combination of techniques and approaches from the School of Paris, Chinese traditional ink painting from the literati tradition, as well as the Shanghai School. Therefore, in attempting to establish linkages between these diverse artworks, it is useful to approach them as solutions to different sets of artistic problems. 19

Not one, but three distinct categories of artistic problems may be identified here. The first and most distinctive category involves the problems of fusing elements from different artistic traditions, originating from the Far East or the West. Since these techniques and methods are intrinsically related to different, often conflicting artistic theories and worldviews, combining them was a challenge requiring inventive approaches and experimentation. On top of that, the subject matter expressed was particular to Southeast Asia, differentiating these artworks from those produced in China. 20 For example, Waterside Village (1961) by second generation artist, Lai Foong Moi, is unique in that it seems to employ the combination of a Western fixed point perspective and a moving focus typically used in the Chinese horizontal scroll format. 20 While the objects further away in the landscape decrease in size, the foreground (indicated by the boats on the left) is separated visually from the middle and background (indicated by the boats on the right), rather than overlapping, creating a left-to-right reading. Following the footsteps of Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi—the two pioneer artists most well-known for this Nanyang approach, many of the second generation Nanyang artists continued to deal with this problem of fusing elements from different artistic traditions, subsequently producing innovative artworks that do not fit neatly into modern art classifications.

The second category encompasses the problems of incorporating local or Nanyang subject matter into Chinese traditional painting. When the Nanyang artists were presented with new subject matter such as planes, cars or kampung houses, they could no longer depend on old texts concerning the principles of Chinese painting, since these principles referred to subject matter specific to Far Eastern traditions, symbols and ways of life. They were compelled to come up with new modes of
representation within this traditional art form. On top of this, it should be noted that the term "Chinese traditional painting" at this juncture referred to various ink painting styles from the literati tradition and the Shanghai School, each carrying different emphases on method, brushwork, expression and composition. In Kampung Melayu (1964), although Chen Chong Swee employs a "bird's eye view" perspective, he maintains this perspective consistently throughout the painting [30]. Besides this, the foreground, middle ground and background are clearly connected to one another rather than being visually separated by mist as is common in Chinese traditional paintings. Moreover, he uses naturalistic colour in his depiction of coconut trees, kampung houses and rivers.

The third category includes the problems of formulating a distinctive Southeast Asian expression through the use of a combination of styles from the Western tradition. The Nanyang artists did not merely express Southeast Asian subject matter using styles from the School of Paris or styles from Western academic art. Early traveller-artists produced artworks employing tenets of Western naturalism and in doing so their artworks attained a "look" typical of any other Western painting – their tone, colour and composition betray a Western interpretation of subject matter. The Nanyang artists dealt with this problem by consistently searching for a visual vocabulary suitable for the expression of Southeast Asian subject matter through the appropriation of styles from the Western tradition. Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng were two pioneer Nanyang artists who were most daring in their use of colours. Besides discovering a whole new palette of colours suitable for the depiction of Nanyang, these artists demonstrated their perceptiveness in their sophisticated stylisation of different cultures [10, 11].

"Nanyang Style" may refer to any of the works described above. By employing an eclectic approach, the Nanyang artists combined various elements from different art historical traditions in order to address these three sets of artistic problems. Towards the end of the 1960s, as more artists travelled overseas and became exposed to new artistic influences and socio-political circumstances, new problems surfaced as old ones became irrelevant. As a result, these early artistic problems became less pertinent and thus less explored by a younger generation of artists. As they turned towards newer considerations, these early artistic problems lost their original drive and purpose.

THE EQUATOR ART SOCIETY

Although the proponents of the Equator Art Society were well-informed about the activities of the reformists and revolutionists who visited Malaya from China in the hope of securing financial aid, many of them were not politically involved in these activities. Rather they felt that as artists, they had a social responsibility to "speak the truth" and paint only what they saw. Its most influential members included Lim Yew Kuan (Lim Hak Tai's son), Lee Boon Wang, Tan Tee Chie, See Cheen Tee, Choo Keng Kwang, Chua Mia Tee and Koeh Sia Yong. [06, 08]

On the formation of the group, its new president Lim Yew Kuan commented, "We had no choice really... what else could we do but to speak about what was happening around us? We were all affected during the Japanese Occupation...". His own brother was taken captive by the Japanese during this time, and his painting Night Arrest (1954), records the night his brother was taken away while he, his father and sister looked on [07].

"My father taught me one thing: art is education. Through art we train ourselves to observe our surroundings. Art does not just allow us to produce 'beautiful things.' It educates us to think independently... Art will reveal what is truth..." [22] This stress on the communicative function of art impacted a number of second generation Nanyang artists. Koeh Sia Yong for instance, was influenced by Lim Yew Kuan and reiterates the latter's point: "... [art has] the potential to move people. [Art is] about educating people, it is able to promote peace or whatever is good in our society. Some artists may like to portray 'nice looking pictures', well that is their prerogative... but many people are suffering and poor, as artists we have the power to awaken society to their needs." [23] During the 1950s and 60s, Koeh Sia Yong produced numerous oil paintings as well as woodcuts that focused on the oppressed.

Chen Chong Swee's work characterises similar sentiments in the quest to paint honestly. Although he has not been considered part of the Equator Art Society, his work answers the call for social relevance, so crucial to the Equator artists, whilst paving the way for formalistic innovation in Chinese traditional ink painting. He advocated the incorporation of contemporary social and geographical circumstances into Chinese painting, suggesting, for example, the use of English or Malay inscriptions, and the inclusion of elements of modern life such as aeroplanes and tarred roads.
A number of artists in the Equator Group demonstrated a keen interest in lived experiences, capturing vignettes of life particular to their time and place, such as Chua Mia Tee and Lim Mu Hue. Lim Mu Hue is well-known for his depictions of Chinese opera performers or street performers. "I am drawn to aspects of local life which are fast disappearing... women playing congkak, women using thread for hair removal... the bullock carts... all these things are no longer being practised like they used to be... We should be painting such things." 25

just as Lu Xun appealed for relevance in art and literature in China, so the members of the Equator Group also persisted in locating an avenue of expression that could relate candidly to society and make art more accessible. Their combination of refined artistic techniques and pertinent subject matter make the artistic productions of the Equator group a remarkable contribution to the art of the region. In a 2007 exhibition titled Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency at the Singapore Art Museum, works by artists from the Equator Group were reconsidered in the context of the Malayan Emergency, informing our understanding of the role of art during the Emergency in regards to nation-building and the creation of cultural identities. 26 The show underscored the significance of this group and the controversial role it played in shaping perception and revealing hidden ideologies. 27

Today, the artworks of the Nanyang artists remain an interesting and unique phenomenon in the art history of both Malaysia and Singapore. Their wide ranging oeuvre and their consistent artistic innovation especially during the 1950s to 60s have sparked off stimulating discussions on a formalistic level as well as from an art historical perspective within concepts of nationhood and nation-building. More recent art writings have also attempted to shift away from nationalistic readings of their work by locating their work within larger regional and global contexts and processes. 28 Situating the Nanyang artists within frameworks that move beyond national boundaries to include those tied to the larger history of diaspora, migration, colonialism and modernism will no doubt enrich our study on the engagement of modern art within Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

1. The first recorded art group in Malaya was the Amateur Drawing Association, established in Singapore (1909). However, art activities within the association during that time were less concerned with artistic expression, and treated more as a social activity and as such driven by commissions.

2. Among the more notable art groups emerging during this period were the United Artists of Malaysia (1929), in Kuala Lumpur, in Penang Museum Studio (1910), the Peranakan Impressionists (1920s) and The Penang Chinese Art Club (1936), and The Society of Chinese Artists (1935) in Singapore.

3. One of the earliest exhibitions in British Malaya to be recorded was held in 1924 by Lim Xian Ong. Other significant art exhibitions held by visiting Chinese artists during this time included the Exhibition of Chinese Artists from France in 1925, and the notable Singapore Art Exhibition in 1929 which featured Ku Behong who studied art in Japan, France and Berlin, and Qi Baishi who was highly skilled in depicting nature in the Chinese traditional ink medium. Besides them, artists like Chang San-Tau and Chang Da Chien who exhibited Chinese traditional landscape paintings in Singapore at the Chin Wok Association also continued to make an impact even after they returned to China. Marco Hsu, A Brief History of Malayan Art, trans. Lai Chee Kien, Singapore: Millennium Books 1999, p. 64.

4. The term eclectic is used loosely here to describe the combination of three or more elements, each originating from a different art historical tradition.

5. Marco Hsu, A Brief History of Malayan Art was first published in Chinese in 1963, and translated by Lai Chee Kien for publication in English in 1999.


10. Ibid., p. 135.


12. Jehan Chan notes that these two groups of artists had very distinct ideas about art and constantly debated such issues as the role of the artist, and the functions of art. Personal interview, 17 January 2004.

13. Nanyang artist Tan Tice Chie attested to the fact that the Equator Art Society had their roots within Lu Xun's woodcut movement which was in turn influenced by the Russian woodcut movement. Personal interview, 23 March 2004.

14. Although Georgette Chen did not go for the Bali trip in 1952, her artworks have also been recognised as embodying the "Nanyang" style. Her selection and portrayal of Nanyang subject matter, particularly in her portraits of the local community and the use of light and space in her still life paintings influenced many second generation Nanyang artists.


17. Based on personal interviews with second generation Nanyang artists.


19. Here, it is useful to adopt Margaret Finch's explanation of style, where style refers to a set of solutions - composed of subject matter, form and meaning - which corresponds to a particular problem. She derives this from George Kubler's idea of style and sequence, in the book Shape of Time. Margaret Finch, Style in Art History: An Introduction to Theories of Style and Sequence, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press 1974.
It is not my intention to draw a line that neatly separates these artists' works from those in China, but to highlight that while some of their artistic problems and formulations may have been an extension from the artistic debate in Shanghai as mentioned earlier, there is a difference between their artworks and those subsequently produced in China.

Lim Yew Kuan, personal interview, 20 July 2004.

Ibid.


Lim Mu Hue, personal interview, 24 March 2006.


In 1968, an exhibition by the Equator Group was closed prematurely because certain works were deemed politically sensitive.