To the Equator Society, the Nanyang painters must have lacked a certain realism in their work—their paintings were disengaged from social reality, and did not speak to the public sphere. In part the rejection was born of the exigencies of their moment: by the late 1950s “Western” modes of painting seemed too compromised, too tainted with memories of a colonialist past.  

Kevin Chua, 2006

Among the Equator Art Society, some do not believe the art that they pursued can be categorised as being part of Nanyang art. However, isn’t the gaze directed toward the local Malay, their peculiar customs and poverty in the countryside the same gaze towards the aborigine and their customs in peripheral areas like Bali? Perhaps the artist who pursued social themes took these subjects under their gaze, turned works that are based on reality at times, and at other times turned into works full of Nanyang sensibility.  

Toshiko Rawanchaikul, 2002

Marco Hsu gave a contemporary account of the Equator Art Society, which was established in 1956 in Singapore, and other realist artists active in the 1950s and 1960s in Malaya as sharing “a common melancholic tone and realist tenor expressing the anger, sadness, and injustice for the unfortunate.” Artist and art historian Redza Piyadasa cites Chung Cheng Sun, a graduate of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), as recalling a group of realist painters such as Lim Yew Kuan, Chua Mia Tee

Lim Hak Tai Points a Third Way: Towards a Socially Engaged Art by the Nanyang Artists, 1950s–1960s

Seng Yu Jin
group of artists. This essay adopts the use of “Nanyang artists” to refer to a loose grouping of artists, most of whom emigrated to Singapore and Malaya from China, either before or soon after World War II. (Although this was the general trend, it does not preclude the possibility of Chinese artists who emigrated to other parts of Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines. The region was conceived broadly as the “Nanyang” [South Seas], a general geographical direction relative to China.) These artists produced a new art form that this essay terms as “Nanyang art,” characterised by a synthesis of practices from Chinese ink painting and the School of Paris (movements/styles associated with Paris such as Cubism and Post-Impressionism), as well as local and regional subject matter.

Redza Piyadasa, “The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts,” in Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang, eds. T.K. Sabapathy & Lee Boon Wang who had graduated from NAFA. Although these realists had been under the tutelage of the Nanyang artists at NAFA, their works were radically different compared to their teachers.⁴ According to Chung, these Equator Art Society artists and social realists were “responsible for emphasising a more socially oriented approach toward creativity, based on the depiction of the harsh realities of everyday life devoid of any romantic or sentimental implication.”⁵ However, are we certain that the Nanyang artists did not produce works that were socially engaged?⁶ Hungry (fig.14.1), a painting by Cheong Soo Pieng, one of the leading Nanyang artists, challenges this view of the Nanyang artists as socially disengaged. In the work, a boy is depicted holding a scrap of food in his hands. His misery is registered in his expression as he looks dejectedly at the morsel of food he has, insufficient to satiate his hunger. Painted in 1950, Hungry depicts an ubiquitous scene in a Singapore that was recovering from the ravages of World War II and the Japanese Occupation. Food was scarce and many buildings were in the midst of being rebuilt, just as its people were rebuilding their own lives. Hungry is an example of a socially engaged work, painted with empathy—Cheong’s bold, thick and richly layered brushstrokes capture the intensity of his emotional response to the plight of this boy who represents the multitude of other similarly suffering children Cheong must have seen daily. A crescent moon shining on the boy, in the atmosphere of a dark night, illuminates his desperate situation—a reality that cannot be ignored and forgotten. It is hardly possible to describe a painting like Hungry as romantic, idealised and disengaged from the reality of society.

In light of Cheong’s Hungry, are there other works by the Nanyang artists that are also socially engaged and if so, how do we account for them art historically? To reconsider the oeuvre of Nanyang art to include works that are socially engaged demands that we scrutinise the art historical discourse on both Nanyang art and social realism in Singapore. In this regard, Piyadasa’s dominant narrative of the social realists and the Nanyang artists deserves closer study. According to Piyadasa, the social realists adopted a socially engaged artistic practice as their subject matter focused on themes such as social inequalities and injustices faced by the working classes, thereby rejecting the works of

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⁴ Art historian and curator Low Sze Wee proposed that both the Nanyang artists and artists who produced social realist works could be considered as proponents of Nanyang art. Please refer to Low Sze Wee, “Lim Hak Tai—Art and Life,” in Crossing Visions—Singapore and Xiamen: Lim Hak Tai and Lim Yew Kuan Art Exhibition (Volume on Lim Hak Tai) (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2011), 38.

⁵ Ibid. Lim Yew Kuan was cited by Marco Hsu as one of the important artists connected to the founding of the Equator Art Society. See Hsu, op. cit., 103. However, there is no evidence of Lim Yew Kuan’s works being shown at the Equator Art Society exhibitions. This could be due to Lim’s departure from Singapore in 1957 to further his studies at the Chelsea School of Art in London.

⁶ Art historian and curator Low Sze Wee proposed that both the Nanyang artists and artists who produced social realist works could be considered as proponents of Nanyang art. Please refer to Low Sze Wee, “Lim Hak Tai—Art and Life,” in Crossing Visions—Singapore and Xiamen: Lim Hak Tai and Lim Yew Kuan Art Exhibition (Volume on Lim Hak Tai) (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2011), 38.
the Nanyang artists, including Lim Hak Tai, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang and Georgette Chen, as being “romantic and sentimental.” This narrative of the social realist artists was first constructed in Piyadasa’s writings published in the exhibition catalogue of Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang, the seminal first survey exhibition on Nanyang art held at the Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia in 1979. This narrative has been perpetuated in art historical discourses since. Art historian Ken Chua’s assessment of the Nanyang artists as making pictures that lacked realism and were disengaged from social reality reinforces Piyadasa’s narrative of the adversarial aesthetic and even political positions of the Equator and Nanyang artists. T.K. Sabapathy, a leading art historian on the Nanyang artists, in an illuminating pictorial analysis, describes the Nanyang artists’ representational schema as “using styles and techniques derived from two sources: Chinese pictorial traditions, and the School of Paris.” Sabapathy’s representational schema of “scroll meets easel” explains Nanyang art as synthesising the pictorial schema of Chinese ink painting (in the hanging and hand scroll formats), and techniques and brushstrokes from the School of Paris (dominated by avant-garde styles such as Cubism, Fauvism and abstraction), which were based on the easel format. Circumscribing Nanyang art chiefly in these two pictorial schemas supports Piyadasa’s view of the Nanyang artists and the social realist artists as two opposing groups as it excludes the possibility of a socially engaged Nanyang art based on realism.

Curator Toshiko Rawanchaikul questions the dominant art historical discourse that has established the Equator and Nanyang artists as adopting mutually exclusive artistic and aesthetic positions: the former based on a socially oriented realism and the latter on romanticised representations of local and regional subject matter using representational schemas from Eastern and Western pictorial traditions. She questions and problematises the paradoxical aesthetic position taken by the Equator artists who were equally guilty—as the Nanyang artists—of their romanticised representations of “the Other.” But is this necessarily a contradiction given that the work of the artists of the Equator Art Society could also have been described as Nanyang art as suggested by Rawanchaikul?

This essay looks at the distinction between Nanyang artists and Equator artists by examining the writings and works of Lim Hak Tai, the first principal and founder of NAFA. An
analysis of Lim’s ideas that bridge the seemingly oppositional aesthetics posits him as an interlocutor between the two groups of artists. Lim’s call to depict the “realities of the South Seas,” (the term “South Seas” is a reference to Nanyang), provides a possible third way: a socially engaged form of Nanyang art, besides the other two sources derived from Chinese ink painting and the School of Paris as formulated by Sabapathy.

This essay challenges rigid categories like Nanyang artists and social realist artists as being mutually exclusive. For example, pioneers of Nanyang art such as Cheong Soo Pieng are known to have produced socially engaged woodcuts in the early 1950s. The category of Nanyang artists is also problematic as artists like Tan Tee Chie produced both Nanyang art, as seen in his romanticised Chinese ink landscapes of the region, and also woodcuts that depict local social realities. In addition, not all the social realist artists were members of the art societies that advocated social realism in the 1950s and 1960s like the Equator Art Society and/or the Singapore Chinese High Schools’ Graduates of 1953 Arts Association (henceforth in this essay, the SCHSGAA); an example being Choo Keng Kwang. Furthermore, while most of the prominent artists in the Equator Art Society were graduates of NAFA, the academy was not affiliated with the society. As such, this essay argues that such categories are problematic when applied rigidly in our understanding of social realism and Nanyang art.

Socially engaged Nanyang art is distinguished from the social realism of the Equator artists. Socially engaged Nanyang artists depict social realities, such as the suffering of labourers, to raise social awareness without participating in or forming an artists’ society with a manifest desire to pursue sociopolitical aims, such as independence from colonial rule. Nonetheless, this essay asserts that both the Nanyang and social realist artists share a common concern for social issues as seen in their artworks. Socially engaged Nanyang art and social realism are, in turn, distinct from Socialist Realism; the latter seeks not to generate social awareness or effect social change but to glorify, propagandise and “depict the revolutionary development” of a communist state as it transforms into an ideal Communist society. A nuanced understanding of concepts such as socially engaged Nanyang art, social realism and Socialist Realism is important in unpacking the contradictions in why there is evidence of social engagement in the works of the Nanyang artists and why there are only a few instances of what can be considered social realist works produced by the Equator Art Society. The majority of the paintings exhibited at the six Equator Art Society annual exhibitions (from its first exhibition in 1958 to its last exhibition in 1968) were academically realistic still lifes, portraits and landscapes. Social realist paintings such as Chua Mia Tee’s *Epic Poem of Malaya* and *National Language Class*, Lee Boon Wang’s *Indian Workers* and Lai Kui Fang’s *Bedok Flood* were exceptions rather than the rule. These paintings are considered social realist rather than Socialist Realist as they do not glorify a communist leader or a communist state. Instead, these works seek to evoke a desire for social action by involving the viewer not as a passive observer but as an active subject in the picture, a part of it and inspired with agency for social change. However, the technical competence and conceptual maturity required to produce such social realist works meant that only a few artists in the Equator Art Society were able to produce these works successfully. This distinction of exciting a desire for social action, for change, in social realist works distinguishes it from socially engaged Nanyang art that only seeks to raise social awareness in the viewer. Lastly, this essay will unpack the concepts of “reality of the ‘South Seas’” and to “depict the localness of the place we live in” as cardinal directions set by Lim Hak Tai that Piyadasa and Sabapathy have attributed as aes-
the aesthetic frames for Nanyang art. Sabapathy’s framing of the “scroll and easel” (where Nanyang artists synthesised representational schemas from Chinese ink painting and the School of Paris) provides an important framework for understanding Nanyang art that focuses on formal experimentation without social engagement. This essay will use the term “aesthetic Nanyang art” to describe this body of work. This essay will also examine the third source proposed by Lim in his writings and artworks. These materials provide entry points to map similar socially engaged practices and artworks by Nanyang artists that have been overlooked in current scholarship on Nanyang art (fig. 14.2). This essay conceives socially engaged Nanyang art, not as a style that is primarily visual, formal and perceptual, but one which conceptually and cognitively, through allegories, symbols and metaphors, make visible the “reality of the South Seas,” and engages with the public sphere, comprising the working class, rather than the social and economic elites.

**Lim Hak Tai Points a Third Way**

Art is a reflection of social ideology, and therefore is closely linked to the commercial and industrial sectors of society. Commercial art is testament to this. In contrast, art has little relevance to common labourers and farmers in the past. This is because in a capitalist society, art is viewed as something decorative, to be enjoyed by the scholarly and affluent classes with time on their hands. But this is not the case in new art movements.

*Lim Hak Tai, 1949*

Lim Hak Tai was the founder and principal of NAFA, a pioneer of art education in Singapore and Malaysia and a visionary who, Sabapathy argues, provided artistic direction for Nanyang art based on depicting the “localness of a place” and the “reality of the South Seas.” Nanyang art departed from the then predominantly practised academic realism and traditional Chinese ink that depicted subject matter from Europe and China, by representing local contexts and conditions instead. What has been overlooked is how Lim played a critical role as an intellectual force in shaping the social realist movement in Singapore and the social engagement demonstrated in some of the works produced by the Nanyang artists, including Lim’s own paintings. Lim’s ideas were crucial to both the development of NAFA as an art academy and Nanyang art. As Piyadasa writes, Chung Chen Sun, a graduate of NAFA, recalls that Lim’s “greatest influence lay in his thinking” for it was his ideas that attracted students from all over Singapore and Malaya to study art at NAFA, which was remarkable considering the absence of an art market, museum and
other art institutions then to support a career in art.\textsuperscript{15} In \textit{Art and Life}, Lim saw art as a form of social ideology, and foresaw new art movements that would challenge the capitalist view of art dominated by the “affluent classes,” as decorative with “little relevance to common labourers and farmers.”\textsuperscript{16} Art as a form of social ideology formed the basis for his idea of a socially engaged Nanyang art that resonated with the working class rather than the affluent. This message that was broadcast over radio must have had a huge impact on the then young artists, who were stirred by nationalist sentiments against the social injustices of colonialism and who would later form the socially engaged realist movement with the Equator Art Society at its centre. He did not have to wait long for this new art movement—a Social Realist movement—to arrive.

In 1956, the SCHSGAA organised an art exhibition at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce that propelled social realism into the limelight.\textsuperscript{17} The foreword of the exhibition catalogue proclaimed:

Art belongs to society—it is public, and should serve the public. We want to reflect public life and to produce artistic form and content that the public likes; and to create opportunities for our art to be closer to the public in order for them to accept it. Only then will art have life and shine in this heroic age, which is the aim of our exhibition.\textsuperscript{18}

The social realist artists in this exhibition called for art to serve and awaken the political consciousness of the working classes, instil a Malayan nationalism, and depict the social, political and economic realities of the people. The artists from the SCHSGAA, an organisation that was subsequently replaced by the Equator Art Society in 1956, used the broader term “\textit{xieshi}” or “realism” to describe their practice of creating realistic works based on observations of their environment and everyday phenomena.\textsuperscript{19} This is an accurate description of the majority of their works, which include still lifes, landscapes and portraits. \textit{Shehui xieshi} or “social realism” is evident in a minority of these realist works. This essay uses the term “social realism” specifically to refer to a small body of social realist works that is different from the majority of the realist works that do not engage in social and political critique.\textsuperscript{20}

As such, this essay uses the term “socially engaged realism” instead of social realism or Socialist Realism to denote a specific mode of realism that engages in social and political critique that is historically closer to the writings and ideas of these realist artists. Author Marco Hsu described the artworks shown in the ex-

\textsuperscript{15} Piyadasa, ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Lim, “Art and Life,” in \textit{Lim Hak Tai: Quintessential Nanyang}, 75.

\textsuperscript{17} This exhibition also travelled to the Federation of Malaya.


\textsuperscript{19} Hsu noted the SCHSGAA “faced great external obstacles, and it soon ceased to function” and many members joined EAS. Hsu, op. cit., 102–3.

\textsuperscript{20} Art historian Kwok Kian Chow uses the term social realism to describe the practices of the SCHSGAA and the Equator Art Society but does not elaborate on the distinction between the small body of social realist works and the majority of academically realist works produced by the Equator Art Society. See Kwok Kian Chow, \textit{Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art} (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1996).
hibition as “mainly realist in nature […]. The subject of these works is drawn from farming, workers and public life, with many portraying the cries of injustice, calls for compassion and encouragement for unity.”

It was therefore not surprising that Lim was invited to write an epigraph for the SCHSGAA catalogue, showing the high status accorded to him and the mutual respect between him and the socially engaged realist artists from the SCHSGAA.

As early as 1940, Lim was already a leading art activist, championing support for China which had been at war with Japan since 1937 (the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945). He wrote about how art should be used as a weapon for national salvation: “Art must possess the spirit of resistance to allow it to become a finely-edged weapon, to establish the value of fine art, and on the other hand to give it depth in meaning.” The concept of art as a “finely-edged weapon” would have been embraced by the social realist artists of the SCHSGAA.

While Lim’s ideas of art as a weapon gained currency with the social realists, his ideas on Nanyang art remained influential as well. His preface in The Art of the Young Malayans (1955) represents the accumulation of his ideas since 1938 concerning Nanyang art. In it, he presented six precepts, which he had revised extensively and expanded from the initial four precepts outlined five years before. It offers insights into Lim’s views as an art educator and artist regarding the direction of art in Singapore and demonstrates how his ideas bridge the ideologies of both the Nanyang artists and the social realists. Lim’s six precepts are:

1. The fusion of the culture of the different races
2. The communication of Eastern and Western art
3. The diffusion of the scientific spirit and social thinking of the twentieth century
4. To reflect the needs of the peoples of the Federation of Malaya and Singapore
5. The expression of tropical flavour
6. The educational and social functions of fine art

21 Hsu, op. cit., 100.

22 The epigraph reads: “Art should not be the grandson of the nature, or the son of nature but the father of nature,” published in Huwen biye ban tongxue Xinzhou yiju wusan niandu yishu yanyujuhui zhuan meishu xunhui zhanlan tekan, unpaginated. Author’s translation.

23 Lim Hak Tai, “Using Art as a Finely-Edged Weapon,” Nanyang Siang Pau, 17 December 1940. In 1940, the “national” referred to China as most Chinese immigrants to Singapore continued to regard China as their motherland.

24 The original four precepts were recorded in Lim Hak Tai, preface to First Painting Collections of NAFA (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 1950), unpaginated. The four precepts are:
   1. To spread the culture of our Motherland (“Motherland” refers to China)
   2. To provide a supplement to overseas Chinese education

25 Lim Hak Tai, preface to The Art of Young Malayans (Singapore: NAFA, 1955), 1.


27 Toshiko Rawanchaikul notes that it is not clear if the interest in social themes by the Nanyang artists was influenced by the younger generation of social realist artists, or if the opposite is true. Rawanchaikul, op. cit., 35.


30 Refer to David Brett’s essay on the possibilities of social realism as a strategy that could be extended to contemporary practices, such as installation art. See Brett, op. cit., 17.
Lim’s fifth precept, “the expression of tropical flavour,” has been identified by Sabapathy in his essay “Hak Tai Points the Way,” as the call to Nanyang artists to produce paintings that embody local and regional subject matter and aesthetics. What has not been discussed are his third, fourth and sixth precepts in particular, whose sources can be traced to the May Fourth Movement that promoted not only scientific enquiry but also, and more importantly, the idea that art and society are inseparable. Lim, who was both a teacher at the Xiamen Art Academy and the Jimei Teachers’ Training College in China before he came to Singapore in 1937 and established NAFA, would have been exposed to these ideas. Lim’s call for a “scientific spirit and social thinking” in precept three, “to reflect the needs of the people in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya” in precept four, and the “social function of art” in precept six embody the ideologies of the May Fourth Movement that focused on science and the need for all knowledge, whether scientific or artistic, to be socially engaged, regardless of whether in the realm of ideas (i.e. social thinking), or in everyday life (i.e. reflect the needs of the people and social function of fine art). Art historical discourse on Nanyang art as shaped by Sabapathy and Piyadasa have located Lim’s ideas (in particular precepts one to five) as the wellspring from which Nanyang artists have developed their new representational schemas and aesthetics. However, precept six that proposes a socially engaged Nanyang art has been neglected. Lim’s ideas about socially engaged art form the conceptual bridge between the Nanyang artists and the social realist artists as revealed in their shared strategies expressed through different narrative modes.

Lim’s emphasis on social thinking, education, the social function of art, and for art to reflect the needs of the people, distinguishes socially engaged realism from other realisms or representations of reality. Lim maintained that social reality is not visual and perceptual, but is instead conceptual, represented in pictorial form. Social realism goes beyond the representation of reality, beyond what we see before us, as social reality cannot be depicted directly. Instead, it seeks to apprehend underlying reality, to reveal the truth as a form of knowledge. In this way, the task of a social realist artist is to develop artistic strategies to create knowledge that makes visible the otherwise invisible systems of power that generate and perpetuate social injustices, corruption and inequalities. Lim’s belief in the role of the artist in society can be seen in his admiration of Lu Xun, a revolutionary social realist writer. Lim’s Lu Xun Shrine pays homage to the writer, who is depicted in a dignified pose as a towering intellectual beside a stack of books. Lu Xun famously proclaimed, “We must establish the relationship between art and social life, its inherent existence and value.” Like Lu Xun, Lim regarded art and social life as inseparable. As such, the social function of social realist art is education, a means for people to apprehend social realities for themselves. Realism as a style that is naturalistic and representational is inadequate for the task of dealing with social reality. Art has to be socially engaged, and more importantly, socially critical, which requires a socially engaged realist artist to adopt conceptual strategies that expose these social and political structures that institutionalise exploitation and inequality. The strategies of social realism cut across stylistic categories of realist or Nanyang art, as well as affiliations with art societies and art academies, to include narrative modes centred on the use of allegories, symbols and metaphors that will be explicated later in this essay, evident in a relatively small but significant body of socially engaged artworks produced by the Nanyang artists in the 1950s and 1960s. Allegory, Symbolism and Metaphor in a Socially Engaged Nanyang Art

Allegory is a rhetorical device that has been deployed across different art forms such as lit-
erature, music and visual art for its ability to seem “to be other than what it is. It exhibits something of the perpetually fluctuating, uncertain status of the world it depicts.” Allegory penetrates social reality to reveal uncomfortable tensions and uncertainty as it subverts and destabilises institutionalised systems of authority. More than that, allegory as a strategy “encourages its readers not only to aspire towards some world of perfect fulfilment, but to direct attention to the limited world of which they are a part.” It is a kind of interpretation aligned with Lim’s precepts of art—to inculcate social thinking, educate and fulfil art’s social function of increasing the social and political consciousness of the people. Manifest in symbols, motifs and metaphors, the use of allegories enables us to express values and utopian visions of the world.

Lim’s call for artists to be guided by the “social functions of fine art” in his sixth precept opens up the possibility for a socially engaged Nanyang art. This call was not only restricted to his writings and ideas, it extended to his artistic practice as well. *The Tyranny of Time (Inner Beauty)*, painted by Lim in 1954, employs a surrealist alternate world that critiques vanity as shown in the picture of the woman applying lipstick while a skull looms ominously as her reflection in the mirror. The skull, a symbol of mortality, conveys the message that the blind pursuit of beauty can only lead to one’s ruin and death. The reflection in the mirror recalls Lim’s earlier statement of how “art is a reflection of society” and as a tool, how art can be used to effect social change. In *The Tyranny of Time (Inner Beauty)*, Lim adopts a form of realism that departs from academic realism, a faithful verisimilitude as one would see in the real world. Instead, a surreal world of dripping red, blue and green paints on the walls of a dark and forbidding room create the psychological atmosphere of drug-induced hallucinations that result in shifting perceptions of reality. After all, beauty cannot last forever and only inner beauty is timeless. *The Tyranny of Time (Inner Beauty)* employs didacticism as its strategy to produce a socially engaged Nanyang art that was critical of society’s obsession with beauty at the expense of morals and values. Lim’s use of surreal allegories that were didactic in nature was furthered by his son, Lim Yew Kuan.

Lim Yew Kuan graduated from NAFA in the early 1950s and was regarded by Hsu as one of the key members of the Equator Art Society. *Searching* (fig. 14.4), by Lim Yew Kuan, is an allegorical painting of a fictional world that makes visible the evils of capitalism. In the painting, a monk, who would have typically renounced material possessions, is seen counting money in the left foreground, while a bourgeois couple is at the right. The couple’s dog is barking at a barefooted man wearing a torn singlet who is holding a lit candle at the centre of this picture. On a literal level, this painting is absurd as the man is holding a lit candle in broad daylight, which forces the viewer to ask: What is the man searching for in this fictional social space? The candle illumines the reality of social and economic inequality and the exploitation of the working class. The working class itself is represented by the man holding the candle, who faces the sneering faces of all the other figures. He is alone and thus powerless to fight corruption and greed. The lit candle offers the only possibility of destabilising this absurd world where equality and justice are all but absent. *Searching* and *The Tyranny of Time (Inner Beauty)*, painted a year apart, can be seen as companion pictures that adopt didactic allegories for the betterment of humanity. As can be seen, both Lim Hak Tai and Lim Yew Kuan were known to have painted didactic allegories which adhered to the sixth precept, “education and social function of art,” to create socially engaged Nanyang art without romanticising local social realities. Lim Hak Tai’s strategy of didacticism places a responsibility on art to educate its viewers and raise their consciousness of problems in society.
The Mother-and-Child Theme

The 1950s became an important decade in the history of social realism with the emergence of the woodcut movement. *A Selection of Woodcuts and Cartoons by Singapore and Malayan Artists*, edited by Ho Kah Leong and Ong Shih Cheng (pen name Ong Yih) is a catalogue that documents woodcut’s importance in the art history of Singapore and Malaya. Both Ho and Ong were influenced by Lu Xun in seeing woodcuts and cartoons as “sister arts,” that could “provide art for the masses who might not have time or means to view it in galleries” and bring about improvements in society through social change. 35 Most of the issues raised by the works in this landmark book concerns morality, values, the anti-colonial struggle and Chinese education. The editors were also graduates of NAFA and would have adhered to Lim’s call for art to be used as “a forceful weapon.” By turning to woodcuts and cartoons, they were engaged in a transactional strategy of social realism: the search for alternative modes of exhibiting beyond galleries, which were viewed as part of the capitalist process of commodifying art and alienating “the masses.” 36 This transactional strategy seeks to present artworks in a manner that extends the meaning of the work beyond itself. The printed media, such as Chinese newspapers, magazines and literary publications, became an alternative mode of exhibition initially featuring woodcuts and cartoons only and which later included paintings as well.

One of the earliest of such publications was *Wenman Jie*, an arts supplement of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* edited by Dai Yinlang, a member of the Society of Chinese Artists in Singapore who promoted woodcuts and cartoons here. 37 Woodcuts and cartoons printed in newspapers and magazines enabled these artworks to reach a wider audience beyond a gallery exhibition to achieve the goals of creating knowledge and promoting critical thinking on social and political issues among the public. More importantly, these artworks were seen in tandem with similarly thought provoking essays that “challenged readers’ conceptions of art, and introduced new works and ideas to the masses.” 38 Literary supplements such as *Gengyun* and *Shidaibao* that were critical of politics and society in Singapore also published woodcuts and cartoons.

The fact that Nanyang artists were also involved in the woodcut movement by creating their own socially engaged pieces further complicates the neat distinction between the Nanyang artists and the social realists. Cheong Soo Pieng, a leading Nanyang artist, produced woodcut prints in the late 1940s and early
Joyce Fan discusses the repeated theme of the mother and child in woodcuts by Singapore artists, such as Tan Tee Chie’s *Motherhood* and *Waiting (Beyond the Wall)*, as well as Koeh Sia Yong’s *Scene at Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, within the context of recognising the contributions of women towards society, which could be traced to China’s New Cultural Movement. Joyce Fan, “Social Commentary in Prints during the 1950s and Early 1960s,” (master’s thesis, Pratt Institute, 2000), 45–8.

On 2 May 1971, the General Manager of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, Lee Mau Seng, was detained by Singapore’s Internal Security Department raising concerns over freedom of the press. It should be noted that the *Nanyang Siang Pau* had become more pro-government in its views after 1965 as seen in its cartoons making more social, economic and international commentaries than local political commentaries.

Cheong’s early woodcuts have been largely unremarked upon by scholars, and his role in the woodcut movement in Singapore overlooked. Some of Cheong’s woodcuts were socially engaged, employing the allegorical mode similarly found in the artworks of other Nanyang artists. Cheong’s *(Untitled) Mother and Child* (fig. 14.5) engages with the subject of the “mother and child” in the late 1940s, derived from imagery of the Madonna and Child recurrent in Christian iconography. This theme has been reproduced by artists in Singapore as it is a universally recognised symbol of selfless love. In *Mother and Child*, a forlorn mother holds her child in her disproportionately large and rough hands in a warm and maternal embrace. The unusually large hands could be inspired by Kathe Kollwitz’s woodcuts as artists in Singapore and Malaya had access to reproductions of her prints through magazines like *Wenman Jie*.

Georgette Chen’s *East Coast Vendor* (fig. 14.6) portrays a Malay mother and her two daughters, a different take of the mother and child subject as the three figures meet directly with the gaze of the viewer as equals. In Chen’s painting, these figures are not romanticised representations of other ethnic groups. Both Cheong and Chen are Nanyang artists who adopted the mother and child as a theme to socially engage with the realities of the world. As such, certain works by Cheong and Chen exhibit a desire for social engagement that share affinities to artworks by Tan Tee Chie and See Cheen Tee who could be categorised as either Nanyang or social realist artists.

*Giving Instructions* (fig. 15.2) and *Three Generations* by Tan and See respectively also adopt the allegorical strategy of the mother and child as a symbol to underline the importance of nurturing the young. Both artists were graduates of NAFA and were actively involved in making socially engaged woodcuts even though they were not members of the EAS. *Giving Instructions* portrays a mother and child looking towards a typical Malayan landscape dotted with coconut trees. The rays of sunlight radiating outwards signify a new beginning for the Chinese immigrants who have arrived in Singapore. Singapore was in the process of merging with Malaya, along with Sabah and Sarawak, to achieve independence from British colonial rule. Seen in...
this context, the theme of educating the young is used as a metaphor of a nation’s hope. This is also repeated in *Three Generations* which shows a child being breastfed while the mother has a Chinese newspaper known for publishing social and political criticism, the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, open in front of her. The mother’s gaze meets the grandmother’s and they appear to be having a conversation. Interpreted allegorically, the breastfeeding can be read as a metaphor for another form of nourishment: a thirst for knowledge about the world and the ability to think critically as well as the ability to engage in social and political criticism. The child as a metaphor for a young nation also suggests an underlying message of the need for guidance and direction through education that produces knowledge framed by nationalist ideologies. It is knowledge that serves social realism’s struggle to create a new nation whereby art becomes the vehicle in which critical thinking can be transferred to the next generation. The use of the mother and child imagery by the Nanyang artists (including See and Tan whose practices can be considered as a hybrid of Nanyang and social realist art) demonstrates that a socially engaged Nanyang art as espoused by Lim in his sixth precept (for art to embody social functions) existed.

**Who Art Should Serve**

The working class as a cornerstone of socially engaged art is clearly stated in a collective essay titled, “Who Art Should Serve” published in the SCHSGAA catalogue. Says the essay: “We should promote nationalistic culture, and at the same time, for art should serve the working class, art needs to be courageous in its criticisms to correct the mistakes of artistic directions taken by other artists, thus re-directing these artists towards art that serves the working class.” Workers such as coolies, street hawkers, miners, cobblers, rubber tappers, rickshaw pullers, construction workers and even child labourers were commonly depicted by social realist artists, appealing to the working classes who would be familiar with, and who would be able to empathise with, the hardship that all labourers share. Beyond the literal depiction of the everyday life of labourers is the glorification of labourers united as a working class regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Lim’s *Riot* (fig. 14.7) captures the tumultuous period of strikes by trade unions and students from 1954 to 1955, the most serious of which was the Hock Lee Bus strike in 1955. His use of a Cubistic angular fragmented mass of figures to depict the scene of a riot expresses his social awareness of these strikes by workers fighting for better pay and working conditions. His choice of style is unusual as Cubism was discredited by some social realist artists from the SCHSGAA as being anti-realist. Lee Tian Meng’s essay, “Three Reasons against the Ideas of Pablo Picasso” rejected Cubism as a style for it “denies the heritage of tradition, discards humanity and truth in art, and emphasises hypocrisy and anti-realism.” Lim’s use of the Cubist style in *Riot* to depict labourers and students on strike reveals his approach of synthesising Cubism (from the School of Paris) with the realities of local social and political conditions, an approach that he propagated. The Cubist figures depicted in geometric planes of different hues construct a unified structure of shapes united in their belief in social action for change. For Lim, the ideology of Cubism as being anti-realist did not matter as he was willing to experiment with different representational schemes, be it Surrealistic or Cubistic to convey his ideas. In *Resting*, Chen Wen Hsi similarly depicts labourers in the style of Cubism as seen in the angular geometric forms of their clothes. These labourers are probably rickshaw pullers as their hats are similar to the ones typically worn by rickshaw pullers to shade themselves from the scorching sun. The rickshaw pullers are depicted as huddled up, holding their knees close to their chests, and they fill the entire picture, forcing the viewer to engage with the reality of
The samsui women are known for forming tightly knit communities amongst themselves, their strong work ethic, taking vows not to marry and choosing to live in poverty than take on jobs that would involve vices, such as prostitution. It is estimated that 200,000 samsui women came to Singapore to work as construction or industrial labourers, as well as domestic servants. For a discussion of this body of works depicting rub-
the difficult working conditions that these rickshaw pullers face in post-war Singapore.

The heroic labourer is a recurrent figure in allegorical paintings by socially engaged artists. Choo Keng Kwang’s Miners is an example of how workers were “often endowed with a strong physique and monumental appearance” to create a heroic image of the working class. Beyond such literal depictions of labour is the social realist strategy of deploying the heroic worker as resilient, self-sacrificing and hard working to awaken the consciousness of the working class across ethnicities. Indian Workers by Lee Boon Wang, an Equator artist, depicts what appears to be a group of Indian workers constructing a road under difficult conditions in Singapore’s hot climate. This work shares a similar theme to Liu Kang’s painting, Samsui Women, of women who mostly came to Singapore from Guangdong, China, in search of jobs, even those that involved hard labour. A Nanyang artist, Liu Kang depicts the samsui women as heroic, working tirelessly, some even barefooted like the woman carrying building materials up the plank. These samsui women, who are the embodiment of labour and self-sacrifice, built Singapore with their own hands. These paintings send a powerful message of a multicultural Singapore built by the working class, regardless of ethnicity or gender.

The imagery of the heroic labourer, which recurs in the artworks of both the Nanyang and social realist artists, challenge the narrative of an aesthetic divide between the two. The emphasis of labour adheres to Lim’s ideas to depict the “reality of the South Seas” and for artists to make art that engages with society. Nanyang artists like Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang produced socially engaged depictions of labourers that raised social awareness of their plight. As such, the valorisation of the labourer can be conceived as a characteristic of socially engaged Nanyang art that bridges the false dichotomy between the Nanyang artists and social realist artists.

Related to the social realist strategy of labour as a metaphor is the motif of construction found in socially engaged Nanyang art. Once again, Lim points the way in Construction on a Site at the Shipyard at Tanjung Rhu which depicts the never-ending cycle of construction and destruction at construction sites in Singapore. The work questions the country’s obsessive pursuit of the new at the expense of its heritage. Socially engaged Nanyang artworks like Lee Kee Boon’s Nanyang University critique the state of Chinese education in Singapore. The scaffolding, a stable, interlocking grid, symbolises the building of a nation-state is an ongoing process; it also suggests the frag-
ile situation of Chinese education tainted by accusations of its affiliations to the left. This motif of a grid is repeated in Liu Kang’s *After the Fire I* (fig. 14.8) which portrays the devastation caused by a fire, a frequent occurrence in the 1950s and 1960s. In the aftermath, the remnant of a building stands in a grid-like structure. Similarly, Cheong’s drawing *Untitled*, which depicts workers building a house, features horizontal and vertical lines in grids that dominate the composition. These three pictures adopt the motif of the grid to suggest the dialectical relationship of construction and destruction, necessary processes of revolutionary sacrifice to bring about social and political change. The grid, as scaffold and structural beams, a symbol for construction and destruction, recurs in artworks by the Nanyang and social realist artists. These common expressions unite the socially engaged realists and Nanyang artists and indicate a “third way.”

Cheong’s body of drawings that depict backyard and dump sites exemplified by *(Untitled) A Rubbish Dump* (fig. 14.9) reveal a recurrent interest in marginalised urban sites, the by-products of urbanisation and construction in the city. These works by Nanyang artists reveal a preoccupation with rapid urbanisation in post-war Singapore and a persistent interest in social issues; they underline a need to reappraise the parameters of Nanyang art.

**Conclusion: Lim Hak Tai’s Third Way**

Both Sabapathy and Piyadasa correctly recognised Lim Hak Tai as the intellectual force giving the direction that the Nanyang artists would take. What has been overlooked are Lim’s ideas that “art is a reflection of social ideology” and the development of Nanyang art along a trajectory of social engagement as demonstrated by works discussed in this essay. This essay has traced the emergence and existence of a socially engaged Nanyang art to Lim’s ideas of an art movement that depicts the “reality of the South Seas” and “localness of the place”; his call for a hybridisation of artistic traditions from different cultures as exemplified by the eclectic adaptation of representational schemas from the School of Paris and Chinese ink painting; Lim’s belief in education and the social function of art; and his very own works that are examples of socially engaged Nanyang art. Socially engaged Nanyang art as a body of work produced by the Nanyang artists thereby forms a bridge between Nanyang art and social realism, unified by their shared concern for social issues in Singapore. Lim had shown us that the way to Nanyang art need not be restricted to only the two sources (or ways) identified by Sabapathy—the School of Paris (West) and Chinese ink painting (East). A third way exists: a socially engaged form of Nanyang art as an art historical category constructed discursively, pictorially and aesthetically by artists and art historians that draws from multiple artistic and cultural sources and contexts. Such art historical categories, like lexicons, are never stable as new ones emerge from alternative perspectives and interpretations, just as how Lim opened a third way of framing “Nanyang art.”

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### Two Types of Nanyang Art: Aesthetic and Socially Engaged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Sources in Nanyang Art</th>
<th>Aesthetic and Socially Engaged Nanyang Art</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 First Source</strong>&lt;br&gt;Chinese ink painting representational schemas and styles (e.g. hanging scroll or hand scroll compositional formats and ink brush techniques).</td>
<td><strong>1 Aesthetic Nanyang art</strong> is the main body of works produced by the Nanyang artists that conforms to Sabapathy’s formulation of aesthetic explorations in representational schemas from Chinese ink painting or the School of Paris, and local or Southeast Asian subject matter. Aesthetic Nanyang artworks tend to romanticise and idealise their subject matter, focusing on aesthetic explorations and experimentations without significant engagement with the public sphere.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Second Source</strong>&lt;br&gt;Representational schemas and styles (e.g. easel painting and styles such as Post-Impressionism).</td>
<td><strong>2 Socially engaged Nanyang art</strong> seeks to engage with the public sphere by raising awareness of social issues using narrative modes such as allegory, symbolism and metaphors to generate knowledge through didactic and artistic means. Socially engaged Nanyang art is distinct from Social Realism in that the former does not seek to incite social action in the viewer while latter uses art as a vehicle for social change.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3 Third Source</strong>&lt;br&gt;Socially engaged realism representational schemas and styles (e.g. realism, woodcut movement, Surrealism).</td>
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14.1 Cheong Soo Pieng
Hungry
1950
Oil on board
50 x 40 cm
Private collection

14.2 Two types of Nanyang art:
aesthetic and socially engaged

14.3 Lim Hak Tai
Lu Xun Shrine
1955
Acrylic on board
50 x 40 cm
Collection of Lim Yew Kuan

14.4 Lim Yew Kuan
Searching
1951
Oil on canvas
63 x 77.5 cm
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore
14.5 Cheong Soo Pieng  
_Untitled_ Mother and Child  
1949  
Woodcut on paper  
20.3 x 17 cm  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore  

14.6 Georgette Chen  
_East Coast Vendor_  
1965  
Oil on canvas  
92 x 73 cm  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore  

14.7 Lim Hak Tai  
_Riot_  
1955  
Oil on board  
49.5 x 89 cm  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
14.8  Liu Kang

*After the Fire I*

1951
Oil on canvas
98.5 x 131.5 cm
Gift of the family of Liu Kang
Collection of National Gallery
Singapore

14.9  Cheong Soo Pieng

*(Untitled) A Rubbish Dump*

Undated
Watercolour on paper
27.4 x 37.5 cm
Collection of National Gallery
Singapore