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NAVIGATING NEW REALMS WHILE ROOTED IN THE GRAND LINEAGE

CHUA EK KAY’S PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION OF INK PAINTING

Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Andre Gide | 安德烈·纪德

In his search for a personal artistic voice, Chua Ek Kay became a master in both Chinese and Western modes of art creation. Absorbing facets not only of their visual styles, but also of the philosophy underpinning each of them, he ultimately generated a fresh manner and approach that were satisfying to himself, while also expressing the spirit of Singapore.

Just as Chua’s life is a story of moving from China and settling in Singapore, so too is his art a journey with roots in China but which evolves far beyond those roots. Although Chua spent almost all of his life in Singapore, he was born in China’s Guangdong province. When he was a child, his family joined the throngs departing China due to political and/or social conditions and dangers, including fear of the repercussions of living under a communist state. His parents chose Singapore for their new home. The importance of this choice for Chua’s future development as an artist cannot be overstated. As Singapore was home to a large ethnically Chinese population and was then a British colony, both Chinese and British-style education were available, and art was offered as part of their curriculum. In Singapore, Chua received a traditional training in the intertwined arts of Chinese calligraphy, poetry and ink painting. The last was the tradition and medium in which he was most adept, and which he considered the core of his artistic practice throughout his life. In Singapore, Chua’s art could develop, shielded from the full force of political and cultural imperatives pressuring ink painting in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Chua’s career as an artist had spanned an exceptionally significant time for this mode of art, and yet he seemingly navigated this fraught era with equanimity.

During Chua’s lifetime, China experienced extreme political and cultural upheaval which inevitably impacted the arts. Ink painting received particular scrutiny because its long history endowed it with singular import in all cultural battles. Adding to the complexity of the situation for ink painting during the second half of the 20th century, the speed of communication across the globe increased dramatically, leading to the rapid exchange of ideas in the art world. Thus, at the same time as China’s internal concerns challenged ink painting, so too did the artistic revolution occurring in Europe and the United States.

**Historical Background**

Chua Ek Kay’s personal journey as an artist and an individual, as well as his forging of a fresh mode of art, can be best understood when viewed in the context of the development of modern and contemporary Chinese ink painting. On the one hand, Chua’s art represents a localised offshoot of one of the grand art historical narratives – that of Chinese ink painting. On the other, his art has acted as a bridging force, linking the aforementioned grand tradition together with that of the West. This dialogue between East and West is one of the most complex and fascinating stories of 20th-century art.

During the first few decades of the 20th century, many young Chinese artists travelled to Japan or Europe to learn new modes of art. They believed that in order to build a new China capable of meeting the world on equal terms, it was imperative to learn from the West. While the need to adopt Western science and technology seemed obvious, many considered an understanding of Western art to be an equally important component of successful modernisation. Those who studied in the art academies of Tokyo and Paris returned to become key figures in China’s art education system, establishing art academies and designing the curricula to include drawing from life as an essential component of study in the fields of sculpture and in both Chinese (ink) and Western (oil) painting. Furthermore, as one aspect of the “modernisation” of ink painting, they incorporated three-dimensional modelling and chiaroscuro effects into their ink works. A proponent of this mode of fusing the East and West, Xu Beihong (1895–1953) for example, had spent eight years in Germany and studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in France, among other places, before returning to China in 1927. He became one of the first presidents of the National Beijing Art College, the forerunner of today’s Central Academy of Fine Arts. Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) too studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and in Germany, before returning to China in 1925. In 1928, Lin helped to found the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou. There was an ideological drive behind the establishment of China’s art education system, and the students who had returned from their education abroad embedd that point of view within the structure of the new art academies.

Ideology shaped the arts in China in other ways. In 1942, communist leader Mao Zedong gave a series of lectures, now known as the “Talks at the Yan’an
Forum on Literature and Art," on the role literature and art should play in a communist society. These lectures established guidelines for art production, centred on the belief that art should serve the people and further the revolution. For art to achieve this goal, it should be relevant to the lives of "the people," it should be easily understood, and it should convey a clear and worthy message. Under such constraints, ink painting would consist mainly of figure painting and would make use of Western-style three-dimensional rendering and so on to produce easily read, didactic imagery. A painting of plum blossoms or of an uninhabited landscape, for example, would have been criticised as being meaningless unless one were familiar with the literary and artistic references, or had the education to read the brushwork. By contrast, a realistic image of happy workers labouring in a steel mill carries an obvious message supporting the goals of the state. The dictates of the party waxed and waned in power over the ensuing decades, but generally gained in power with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. The Red Guards who took action during the latter sought to destroy the "Four Olds" (old thought, old customs, old culture, and old morals). This entailed destroying not only books and art, but also people who stood for the bourgeois values of the past, especially, traditional ink painting practitioners. Under this rationale, they persecuted numerous teachers, intellectuals, artists, among others. Methods of persecution included demeaning and harsh forced labour; imprisonment; beating; humiliation. Some died, and others were driven to suicide—all in the name of the revolution. Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) for example, an artist admired by Chua (see the interview with Zhu Qi published in this volume), destroyed many of his own paintings out of fear of persecution, but was still sent to perform hard labour for years. Later on, though he produced many powerful and innovative works, years of work had already been irretrievably lost.

It was evident that in mainland China, the very act of painting had become highly politicised. While the harsh constraints on art gradually loosened up following Mao's death in 1976, a great deal of knowledge and talent was lost forever. To paint with ink and brush on paper had become highly fraught, and to learn to paint in the way of the masters, and to become a link in an ancient lineage, was a goal that was increasingly difficult to attain.

The 20th-Century Diaspora of Chinese Painters

Born in 1947, Chua Ek Kay belongs to the large cohort of 20th-century artists (among others) who started life in China but emigrated later. This diaspora catalysed a major influx of new ideas and techniques into the realm of Chinese ink painting. Coming as they did from disparate nations, these sources of new ideas were varied. A summary of the circumstances of a handful of the best-known artists will serve as a background against which to understand Chua Ek Kay's situation. Liu Guosong (b. 1932) for example, was born in Shanghai and moved to Taiwan in 1949, the year of the founding of the People's Republic of China. He studied both ink and oil painting at the Fine Arts Department of the National Taiwan Normal University and in 1957, co-founded the radical Fifth Moon Group. The group's members blended the arts of China and the West, most notably American Abstract Expressionism. The great connoisseur and
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IN THE GRAND LINEAGE

painter Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) was born in Sichuan province but left the
country in 1949, subsequently dwelling in Brazil, Argentina, and California
before settling in Taiwan in 1978. While he had completed his artistic training
prior to emigration, he nevertheless continued to evolve as an artist in response
to his changing natural surroundings and physical limitations. (His falling
eyesight may have been a catalyst for his splashed-colour style.) Lü Shoukun
(1919-1975) moved from Guangdong province to Hong Kong in 1948, and
is considered the founder of the New Ink Painting movement there. Wucius
Wong (b. 1936) was born in Guangdong province and moved to Hong Kong
two years later. His art education took many phases, beginning with a period
of autodidacticism, followed by tutelage under Lü Shoukun in 1958, and finally
a period of study in the United States from 1961 to 1965. Wong then settled
in Hong Kong. Zao Wou-ki (1920-2013) moved from Beijing to Paris, where
he became a celebrated abstract painter and a member of the Académie des
Beaux-Arts. Taiwan, Hong Kong, France, and the United States were among
the most favoured destinations of the immigrant artists, many of whom would
thrive in their new surroundings and respond vigorously to the challenge of
the Western avant garde. The influence of the latter arrived in Taiwan and
Hong Kong much sooner than in Singapore, where the conservative British
watercolour tradition flourished alongside the artistic styles of the local ethnic
and national communities.

Fan Chang Tien, Chua’s Ink Painting Teacher

Although he had emigrated as a child, the major 20th-century Chinese diaspora
made it possible for Chua Ek Kay to join one of the great ink painting lineages
of China, that of the Shanghai School. Dating back to early protagonists such as
Ren Xiong (1823-1857), the Shanghai School was not a formal institution but
is instead a designation for a group of painters with stylistic similarities in their
work; characteristically combining masterful brushwork with lush or dramatic
compositions and enticing subject matter, at times, their works show the
influence of the new print media. Chua’s ink painting teacher, Fan Chang Tien
(1908-1985), provided Chua’s link to the Shanghai School. Born in Guangdong,
Fan had moved to Shanghai for his education as an artist. Entering the Chinese
Painting Department at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art in 1929, his best-
known teachers were Wang Geyi (1897-1988), Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) and
Wang Zhen (1867-1938), all of whom were famous for their paintings of birds
and flowers using bright colours and strong brushwork. Through Wang Zhen,
Fan could trace his lineage back to the great master Wu Changshuo (1844-
1927) who had spearheaded dramatic innovations in brushwork, colour and
composition, resulting in a manner of painting that combined the centuries-old
literati standards of the elites with a populist sensibility. In other words, the
Shanghai School created innovative and technically superb art that was often
also decorative and could thus be appreciated by one and all. Images of bird
and flower paintings by Wu Changshuo, Fan Chang Tien, and Chua Ek Kay
exemplify the lineage, which continues to the present (figs. 1-3).

Following his graduation, Fan Chang Tien taught in various schools in South
China and Hong Kong until the Japanese bombings rendered it impossible to
continue. In 1948, he left China, travelling first to Bangkok and then, in 1956,
风相似的画家。他们的创作特点是结合纯熟的笔墨、华美（或者富有戏剧性）的构图，以及较具吸引力的题材，作品有时还显出新印刷媒体的影响。蔡逸溪与海派之间，乃是经其从多次画史长者范昌乾（1908—1985）而结缘。范昌乾出生于广东，早年为了学画而定居上海，1929年考入上海艺专国画系。他的老师当中最为知名的是王个簃《1897—1988》、潘天寿《1897—1971》和王震《1867—1938》等人，无一不是以色彩鲜艳、笔触强烈的花鸟画著称。通过王震，范昌乾的师承脉络可上溯至一代宗师吴昌硕《1844—1927》。吴昌硕的成就在于引领笔法、设色及构图方面非凡的创新和发展，所形成的画风将数百年来精英主义的文人画转为通俗的口味风格连结。换言之，海派的作品富有新意，技艺高超，而且往往具装饰性，因而可雅俗共赏。我们看吴昌硕、范昌乾和蔡逸溪三人的花鸟画，不难看出其中延续至今的一脉相承（图1至图3）。

范昌乾毕业后在中国南方及香港的学校任教，一直到被日军的轰炸行动遗憾无以为继为止。1948年，他离开中国前往曼谷，到了1956年又转而落户新加坡，任教于黄埔中学，直到1968年方才退休。从1975年开始，范昌乾便在潮安会馆定期教导蔡逸溪，前后持续一年。在此之后的一段岁月里，蔡逸溪仍继续向他学习（但改为不定期地上课），从而渐渐掌握了海派的水墨技法。中国传统水墨画的教学，一般即具有具体的物象研究特定的笔法，两者相辅相成。如竹笔、花竹叶，各式特殊的用笔方式；诸如兰花、花卉的花茎及岩石等等，各有各的笔法。描绘花鸟与人物，同样亦是下笔各有各的一套表现。海派的一大创新在于吴昌硕以书家笔法入画，开拓了表现空间。与此相关的是，蔡逸溪到了本身作品发展成熟之后，便认定长期以来所学习的笔法确实大有价值，但如果能突破使用范围，就更能扩展其价值。于是，他摆脱了早年所习得的、变化较为有限的图像形态，纵笔远游。蔡逸溪的创作信念似乎就是要力避教条主义，对一切无所拘泥。

由于蔡逸溪住在上海，因此不如居住在中国大陆那样有许多关于学习中华水墨画的机会。到1980年代中期为止，新加坡一直以来只有一所美术学校——南洋美专。该校于1938年南洋大学设立美术科，后由南洋大学并入。然而，身处新加坡的华族画家同道创办。(1) 然而，身处新加坡的华族画家同道创办。
中国画家的政治意识形态所阻碍。此外，关于水墨在20世纪及往后的可行性的问题，神州大地上一度展开了激烈的争论，甚至无休止的争论，而蔡逸溪似乎并未予于斯。1985年，学者李小山（出生于1957年）于《江苏画刊》上宣布水墨画是濒临消亡，引起了强烈的反响。1935年，约塔钠（1891—1977）其实便已提出了类似的想法，只不过他也同时相信水墨仍可能出现全面的转变；李小山则认定勉强的变化不会带来好的结果。4 在此数年后，著名画家吴冠中于1952年又在《朝报周刊》上直言“笔墨等于零”。对于传统水墨画是否还能跟上时代，显然有一些人抱持一种极端的悲观态度。蔡逸溪对有关的争论肯定有所知，但他并不沉浸其中。

游学国际

蔡逸溪不仅从未放弃水墨画，而且实际上一直选择以其作为自己主要的创作媒介。值得注意的是：尽管如此，唯有在他的导师范曾于1985年逝世以后，他才决定成为职业画家，并且正式学习其他艺术形式。他以快速的步伐先后取得新加坡拉萨尔学院—新航艺术学院的毕业证书（1990年）、澳洲塔斯马尼亚大学纯美术系学士学位（1994年）以及澳洲西雪梨大学的艺术硕士荣誉学位（1995年）。走这一步，其实并不容易。首先，由于蔡逸溪当时已是新加坡公认的、受人赏识的中华传统文化倡导者，有些人并不乐意他朝这样的新方向行进。5 再者，他已花费不计其数的工夫来研究传统水墨画；要脱离自己业已掌握并深度投入的事物，须有坚定的信念，敢于凭着信念做一次大冒险。蔡逸溪选择学习西洋美术，努力将其融合中华文化，为跟随徐悲鸿、林风眠等20世纪画家充满理想的脚步。通过纸面水墨营造抽象画面，并非蔡逸溪独创的尝试；20世纪中后期的欧洲和美国画家，包括赵无极、刘国松等人，都曾经从事于此。他们发现：抽象表现派早已吸纳了东亚思想，并在创作中体现了他们对此的理解。故此，对这些散发海外的画家而言，借用抽象表现派的画法而施之于中国水墨画其合理性，而且可获得令人满意的成就。

当年为了取得西雪梨大学的硕士学位，蔡逸溪写过一篇涉及新加坡20世纪艺术史之重大课题的荣誉学位论文，题目为“‘南洋画风的兴起以及其于东盟国家之区域主义所扮演的角色’”。6 论文审视在20世纪中后期兴起的新加坡

settling in Singapore. There, he taught at the Whampoa Secondary School until he retired in 1968. Beginning in 1975, and continuing for a year or two, Fan gave regular painting lessons to Chua at the Cha'nan Hall. Chua remained his student for many years thereafter (albeit with less regular lessons) mastering the techniques of the Shanghai School ink painting. Traditional Chinese ink painting education, such as the one Chua received under Fan, assigned particular brushstroke techniques to specific imagery. There was a special kind of stroke for bamboo stalks and another for bamboo leaves; one for orchid leaves, one for rounded blossom petals; and a variety for rocks. Birds, animals, and people were depicted using different vocabularies of strokes. As one of the major Shanghai School innovators, Wu Changshuo employed calligraphic brushwork in painting, expanding its expressive possibilities. In a similar vein, by the time Chua had realized his mature works, he concluded that the brushstrokes that he had learned throughout his career were valuable, but that their worth could be increased if one did not limit their use. Thus, Chua moved far beyond the somewhat predictable imagery which he had mastered early on. It seems that Chua's artistic credo was to avoid didacticism and be open to all.

Living in Singapore meant that Chua Ek Kay did not have the wealth of opportunities that mainland China offered for studying Chinese ink painting. Until the mid-1980s, Singapore had but one art school, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts – established in 1938 by Chinese painters educated in Shanghai, with the encouragement of Xu Beihong who visited Singapore that year.4 There were, however, advantages to being in Singapore rather than China, chief among them of course, being the fact that Chua was not hampered by the political ideologies adversely constraining artists there. Furthermore, Chua seems to have missed out on the unproductive but hot debate in China on the viability of ink painting in the 20th century and beyond. In 1985, for example, scholar Li Xiaoshan (b. 1957) declared in Jingshu Pictorial that ink painting was moribund, spurring contentious debate. He Tianjian (1891–1977) had expressed a similar notion as early as 1935, but while he believed that there was possibility for change, Li felt that continued change would not lead to good results.5 A few years later, in 1992, the established painter Wu Guanzhong stated in Mingbao Weekly that “brush and ink are nothing.” There was an extreme pessimism concerning the possibility of traditional ink painting remaining relevant. Chua was certainly aware of the debate, but he was not immersed in it.

An International Education

While Chua never abandoned ink painting – indeed, it remained his mode of choice – it is interesting that it was only after his painting master Fan had passed away in 1985 that Chua decided to become a full-time artist and pursue formal studies of other modes of art. In rapid succession, he earned a diploma from LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts (1990), a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting) conferred by the University of Tasmania (1994) and a Master of Fine Arts (Honours) from the University of Western Sydney (1995). To take such a step was not easy for Chua. Firstly, as he had become a recognised and admired proponent of traditional Chinese culture in Singapore, there were some who were not happy with his new direction.6 Secondly, he had
devoted decades to the study of traditional ink painting; breaking away from something one has mastered and in which one was deeply invested required determination and a major leap of faith. In studying Western art and striving to integrate it with Chinese ink painting, Chua followed in the idealistic footsteps of early 20th-century artists such as Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian. Chua’s experimental creations with abstract imagery using ink and brush on paper were reminiscent of those of mid-century diasporic painters including Zao Wou-ki and Liu Guosong. These painters found that the Abstract Expressionists had absorbed East Asian philosophy and manifested their understanding of it in their painting. Thus, for this group of diasporic artists to adapt Abstract Expressionist approaches to Chinese ink painting made sense and was a satisfying achievement.

For his Master of Arts (Honours) in Visual Arts degree from the University of Western Sydney, Chua wrote a thesis touching on the major issues in 20th-century Singaporean art history, titled “The Emergence of the Nanyang Style and its Role in the Regionalism of ASEAN Countries.” The thesis looked at the development of a Singapore-informed style of painting in the mid-20th century, and considered possibilities for a pan-Southeast Asian style. Written at the crossroads in Chua’s life when he was searching via education and travel for a viable new direction for his oeuvre, it presented one method he chose to examine his position as an artist. Chua quoted Chia Wai Hon, the Singaporean representative to the ASEAN Art Symposium of 1993: “To stay with the traditional would mean cutting themselves off from the mainstream of contemporary art ruled by Western aesthetics. If they are to go ‘modern,’ they would be distancing themselves from their ancestors and might end up in a blind alley trapped in an alien movement that takes them nowhere.” Chua may have reproduced this quote as a reflection of his own anxiety regarding this position.

Chua’s reinvention involved not only formal education in Western modes of art, but also travel to new places, reaching as far as the vast stretches of empty desert in Australia’s Northern Territory, the lush landscapes of Indonesia – including the lotus ponds of Bali – and the colourful sights of Nepal and India. He was very open to the influences of these disparate places, and was sensitive to colour, space, and form. This sensitivity led to his extended interest in painting lotus ponds and the old streets of Singapore.

**Synthesis of Life Experience**

As with all art, Chua Ek Kay’s mature works are the product of his personality, his circumstances, his particular journey through life, and the opportunities that came his way. Studying Western art, he imbibed new ideas while mastering new media and techniques. Not only did Chua embrace life wholeheartedly as an odyssey of discovery, he found journeys of the physical rather than metaphorical kind – his travels to unfamiliar places – to be a source of personal and artistic growth. Seeing unfamiliar sights or listening to music he loved, he was inspired to take his art in new directions, venturing far beyond the safe and familiar. Approaching life and art together with a clear and open mind, he devised a fresh manner of ink painting uniquely suited to his home of Singapore.

本土画风，探讨了发展一种泛东南亚画风的可能性。蔡逸逸撰写论文之时，正处于人生的十字路口。他当时正在通过教育和旅行自己的创作寻觅可行的新方向，而论文乃是他所选择的一种自我审视的方式，用以明晰自己作为一个画家的立场。蔡逸逸在文中引述了1993年东盟艺术研讨会在新加坡代表—谢惠汉的话：“留学传统，意味着自己与西方美学所主导的当代艺术主流断绝；如果选择走向‘现代’，即是远离自己的祖先，有可能从此走入死胡同，受困于全无出路的诡异风潮。”蔡逸逸抄录这段话，或许是藉此折射出他本人与这种观点相连的焦虑。

蔡逸逸的自我改造，涉及的不仅是正式学习西洋美术形式，而且还有游历前所未至之地。其足迹所及，远至澳洲澳北区偌大空旷的沙漠、印度尼西亚草木葱翠的自然环境（包括悬崖的山洞），以及尼泊尔和印度五彩缤纷的景观。他对这些不同地方所带来的影响采取非常开放的态度，并且对色彩、空间及形式保持敏锐的感觉。基于这种敏锐性，他的绘画题材后来才会延伸至乔森及新加坡的老街景。

**人生经历的合成**

跟所有的艺术创作一样，蔡逸逸比较成熟的作品乃是个性格、周遭境况、具体的生命轨迹以及所获之种种机遇交叉结合的产物。通过学习西洋美术，他不仅掌握了新媒介、新技法，也吸收了一些新的理念。他全心投入了人生的发展之旅，发现实体层面上（而不是隐喻层面上）一次次的游历一也就是前往陌生地点的实际旅行一可激发个人与艺术成长。无论是观览不熟悉的景物，还是享受他所喜爱的音乐，他都能从中获得启发，把创作推往新的方向，大步超越自认为“安全”的、已然熟悉的领域。总而言之，他以清楚而开放的头脑同时切入生活与艺术，成功开创了独适于家园之所在——新加坡——的崭新水墨形态。
REFERENCES

1. These were the Indian Fine Arts Society, Malay Art Society, and Society of Chinese Artists.


5. For example, see Yee Tshau Yi, "A Dreamer in Search of His Path: Reminiscences of Chua Ek Kay's Life," published in this volume.


8. 范昌贤相关资料取自：《范昌贤：诗书画》展览手册（新加坡：王惠辉及Editions Didier Millet，2014）。


11. 参见本文所收：杨少瑜〈一个追梦者的求索路——范昌贤油画生涯〉。


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