Migration, Transmission, Localisation
Yeo, Mang Thong

Published by National Gallery Singapore

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On a February day in 1995, I was casually browsing through the Chinese section of Popular bookstore in Bras Basah Complex. Suddenly, a book caught my attention; it was *Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji* (Essays on the History of Pre-War Chinese Painting in Singapore), written by Yeo Mang Thong. I had not heard of the author or the publication before, but the book seemed to be quietly waiting for me. It was exactly what I needed.

I was then a curator at Fukuoka Art Museum, and was preparing for an upcoming blockbuster show slated to open in 1997. *Modern Art History of Southeast Asia* was to be a comprehensive survey of modern art in Southeast Asia, and was the first of its kind in Japan. I spent three months visiting ten cities in Southeast Asia between 1994 and 1995 to conduct research, and Singapore was one of the destinations on my list.

During these research trips, I met with many artists, viewing artworks and conducting interviews. I also visited art museums, universities, libraries and other institutions to survey artworks and gather information. In Singapore, I visited the bookshops frequently. Back then, there was very little research being done in the area. Furthermore, available material on the subject was widely scattered, and would have required tremendous energy and time to put together. Even though I was able to come up with a framework for the exhibition, my progress was much slower than anticipated.

I read Yeo's book many times over on these research trips. Although I have never studied the Chinese language, I could grasp the gist of what was written as *kanji*, or Chinese characters, are also used in Japanese. Although Yeo's book looks plain and simple on the outside, it contains a wealth of information. In fact, I relied heavily on it for the 1997 exhibition. For example, most of my knowledge of the artist Tchang Ju Chi is from Yeo's book. The strength of the book lies in its use of primary sources—such as newspapers and journals published during the lifetime of the pre-war artists concerned—as the basis for its findings. While the book served as a rich source of first-hand information for my research, on hindsight, I think I gained even more by learning about the author's dedication and commitment towards research. Furthermore, Yeo never hoarded the material that took him so much time and effort to collect; instead, he shares it with the public and younger generation of researchers in this field: “noble” would be the best word to describe this selfless attitude.

Regrettably, I did not get the chance to meet Yeo on that visit to Singapore, and it never crossed my mind that I would ever do so. I finally had the privilege of meeting him last year—twenty years after I first encountered his book—through a curator from National Gallery Singapore. At the meeting, Yeo informed me that he has expanded on his research on pre-war art history in Singapore, filling the gaps with information he had uncovered in recent years. I had no doubt that such a publication would greatly contribute to the research of art history in the region.

The publication of this book is a testament to Yeo's remarkable achievements. Since the 1980s, he has been looking at old newspapers and magazines, and presenting...
his findings in meticulously and systematically written publications. It is admirable that Yeo recognises the advertisements and cartoons in these old publications as important research material; often regarded as “kitsch” and distinct from high art, they have often been overlooked as research sources. Yeo’s work is undoubtedly significant, and provides researchers looking at Singapore’s pre-war art history with fresh insights and new perspectives.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to offer my heartiest congratulations to Mr Yeo Mang Thong on the publication of this book, and to the field of Southeast Asian modern art history.

—Masahiro Ushiroshoji, 1st May 2016

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Masahiro Ushiroshoji is a professor at the Graduate School of Humanities in Kyushu University who specialises in the history of fine art. A graduate from the university’s School of Letters, he joined the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1987 as a curator, working on exhibitions on modern and contemporary art in Asia. These include the Asian Art Show (all four editions from 1980 to 1994), regarded as the first exhibition on Asian modern art in the world; New Art from Southeast Asia (1992); and The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia (1997). In 1999 he was appointed as Chief Curator, and was put in charge of setting up the new Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. He organised The 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale 1999, the commemorative exhibition that celebrated museum’s official inauguration. In 2002, he joined Kyushu University, continuing his research into Asian modern and contemporary art. While teaching at the university, he curated Modern Paintings of Mongolia: Its Origin up to Today (Tokyo Station Gallery, 2002), Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogue (National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2005) and 50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Art: 1925–75 (Tokyo Station Gallery, 2005). In recent years, Ushiroshoji has helped his students to organise annual exhibitions on modern Asian art. He is also published in journals, with his most recent articles being “The other as the lost innocent me: Gauguinism in Southeast Asian art” (Bijutsu Forum 21, 2010), “The diary of Luong Xuan Nhi: a Vietnamese painter’s journey to Japan in 1943” (Tetsugaku nenpo [Annual of Philosophy], Kyushu University, 2010), and “Art of Southeast Asia Under the Japanese Occupation, 1942-45” (Tetsugaku nenpo [Annual of Philosophy], Kyushu University, 2013).
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