Migration, Transmission, Localisation

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CHAPTER I

PRE-WAR (1886–1941) ART ACTIVITIES OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE THROUGH A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF DIASPORIC BONDS
**Visual Culture** encapsulates the politics, economy and culture of its time, and reflects the historical phenomena of different periods. In recent decades, art historians have come to include a wide variety of visual images as objects of study in their writings. Similarly, this essay is also diverse in its scope of inquiry, which ranges from traditional lyrical poetry exchanges among the literati, commercial advertisements, plaques of temples and Chinese guild halls, to seal carvings, allegorical illustrations in newspapers, as well as cartoons and woodcuts. However, the main sources of my research are the Chinese-language daily newspapers of pre-war Singapore, which are essential in this study. Through my use of diverse visual materials, I hope to broaden and deepen our exploration and understanding of the art activities of the Chinese community in pre-war Singapore.

The period under study herein begins in 1886, the year that the Chinese calligrapher Zhong Dexiang began selling his calligraphic pieces in Singapore, and ends in 1941. After that, Singapore fell under Japanese Occupation, from 15 February 1942 to 5 September 1945. During this time, all art activities were controlled behind the scenes by Japanese military and government officials, as well as Japanese cartoonists. Instead of serving traditional visual aesthetic functions, cartoons and art exhibitions were used as propaganda tools by the Japanese to broadcast decrees and keep the local populace ignorant.

This essay approaches its subject from the perspective of the Chinese migrants in pre-war Singapore. Living in a foreign land, these Chinese bore diasporic sentiments, longing for their homeland and maintaining frequent interactions with her. This underlies the unique character of pre-war art by the Chinese community.

The art activities of the Chinese community viewed in terms of the complex emotional diasporic experience can be explicated in two ways: Firstly, the Chinese diaspora never severed their cultural connections with their country of origin. Hoping to practise and promote the culture of their motherland overseas, they introduced, in newspapers, masterpieces of Chinese calligraphy and calligraphic models. They also bolstered the rich diversity of art forms that had been developed in the course of China’s long history by engaging in activities such as poetic exchanges, composing poems of specified subjects, inscribing plaques and exchanging paintings as gifts, and seal carving.

These Chinese migrants were emotionally attached to their motherland and were concerned with the political situation and economic developments in China. This can be seen in “allegorical pictures” that were critical of current affairs in China, such as commercial advertisements with slogans that emphasised the need to “reclaim China’s rights; promote Chinese goods;” even art schools were founded with the mission to “invigorate [China’s] industries.” By the Second Sino-Japanese War following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, cartoons had become a tool used by the Chinese in the resistance movement against the Japanese. Art exhibitions travelled south from China to raise funds for war-relief efforts, and art activities of the Singapore Chinese community were liveliest during this period in a show of spirited support.

**CONTINUING THE MANY-SPLENDOURED LEGACY OF THE CHINESE ARTS**

**Calligraphy Models And Masterpieces**

After the founding of Singapore in 1819, its local Chinese population grew steadily, and
numbered 164,300 by 1888. While most of the Chinese who migrated to Singapore were uneducated labourers, some were traditional literati; regardless, they were all culturally orientated towards China. An example of this can be seen in Chinese-language newspapers Sing Po and Thien Nam Shin Pao, which were founded in 1890 and 1898 respectively. Apart from reporting news from the motherland, these newspapers also occasionally published calligraphy and paintings by renowned artists, as well as announced the sale of calligraphy couplets (ready-mounted or otherwise), paper and brushes, and templates for calligraphic practice. In fact, the business of mounting paintings and calligraphy was competitive, demonstrating that the traditional literati in Singapore were indeed avid supporters of these arts.

Khoo Seok Wan (1874–1941), the founder of Thien Nam Shin Pao, was a key figure in the cultural activities of the Chinese community in Singapore from the late 19th century to the 1920s. Not only did he highly recommend the Kuaixuetang Fatie (Model for calligraphy practice from the Court of Quick Snow) in his newspapers, he also published a selection of calligraphic masterpieces (from his own collection) by renowned Qing dynasty master Lü Xicun (fig. 1.1), for the benefit of calligraphy enthusiasts who were eager to copy the works of the eminent virtuoso. In addition, Khoo introduced the works of Korean calligrapher Yin Xishi, Chinese calligrapher Xu Lunting, calligrapher Pan Feisheng (who was based in Hong Kong then), and the poet Lin Zhi Zeng (then living in Singapore) (fig. 1.2) to readers in Singapore, and even set the rates for their calligraphy commissions. These activities helped to enhance the knowledge of and appreciation for calligraphy and painting amongst the local literati; indirectly advance the development of the art of calligraphy in Singapore; and foster a connection between overseas Chinese and their cultural roots. Notably, at the beginning of the 20th century, local Chinese children were given the opportunity to study calligraphy in school. At the 1922 Malaya Borneo Exhibition, even calligraphy pieces by students received commendation, as published in an article: “Both the official and regular scripts are written with an archaic vigour and exquisiteness, presumably the result of the habitual copying of rubbings of stone inscriptions and other calligraphic models.”

In 1927, Li Jian from Shanghai held a fundraising exhibition at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Proceeds from the sale of poetry, prose, calligraphy, paintings and seal carvings were used to establish a Confucianist university. The event was highly recommended by the Chinese in Singapore who were eager to support the educational activities of their motherland. Another case in point is the Nanyang Society of Calligraphy and Painting, which was founded by a group of cultured individuals with the intention of sustaining Chinese culture in the “southern wildlands,” that is, to promote and cultivate the interest in Chinese arts among Chinese immigrants. Not only did members of the Society study Chinese calligraphy and painting, they also exhibited their works, all for the aim of popularising the traditional Chinese arts.

Literary Exchanges between Cultured Individuals

During this period, traditional literati residing in Singapore were known to have engaged in literary exchanges with their literati contemporaries in China. Fengyue qinzun tu (Painting of Zither Romance), an album in the collection of Khoo’s
descendants, is most representative of this. This work which was created by a painter in China was commissioned by Khoo after the failure of the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898. The work depicts a boat at rest in a grassy cove; the man in the boat, believed to be Khoo Seok Wan, plays a zither placed atop his bent knees. A light breeze brushes across the water’s surface, and in a flood of moonlight, the drinking vessels on the low table appear to wobble. The entire picture suggests Khoo’s dispiritedness; he presently yields to the pleasures of the breeze, the moon, poetry, wine and music (fig. 1.3). After the painting was completed, Khoo invited local and overseas literati to write poetic responses to it, and subsequently compiled these poems into an album. Many of these poems were also published in Thien Nam Shin Pao and Chin Nam Poh. Fengyue qinzun tu is a testament to the close interaction and exchange of ideas between the local Chinese and the cultured intelligentsia in their homeland. The painting also offers us a glimpse of the artistic sophistication in calligraphy made by celebrated men of letters from the Guangdong and Fujian region. Indeed, it allows us to appreciate remarkable calligraphy produced in Singapore over a hundred years ago by traditional Chinese literati, including Lin Qizeng, Huo Chaojun, Tan Biao, Kang Fengji and Li Jichen.12

As early as the end of the 19th century, literati societies, a continuation of the tradition of literati gatherings, were emerging in Singapore. A work to consider in light of this is Shoumei tu (Plum Blossoms of Longevity) in Khoo’s collection (fig. 1.4), which was a birthday present to him from Yan Yiyuan (also known as Yan Wenhao or Yan Diyuan), a fellow member of the Singapore Tan Poetry Society (Tan She).13 According to poems inscribed on various paintings by members of the Society, Sun Peigu (1892–1945), was a literatus, skilled in poetry, painting and seal carving, but who unfortunately has no extant works for us to admire.14 This underscores the great historical significance of Shoumei tu, for it speaks of the bonds of friendship between poets in Singapore in the 1920s: Here, the poet wishes a friend happy birthday in a traditional manner, by means of inscribing a painting with poetry. The receiver of the painting treasures the gift, and shows it to friends who had travelled from afar. Together they appreciate the work and he invites them to contribute additional calligraphic inscriptions.

Executed in the pomo (splashed ink) technique, the aged plum bough in Shoumei tu extends horizontally to the left, bearing a spray of cold, delicate blossoms. The leading seal, the impression of which reads “shijiu pi” (poetry-and-wine addict) was carved by Zhu Yugu, who came to Singapore in 1928 to sell his calligraphic works.15 The seal imprinted at the bottom corner which reads “leilei luoluo” (open and upright) was carved by Sun Peigu and gifted to Yan Diyuan in 1923. Being adept at both poetry and painting, Khoo knew very well that the placement of these two seals would be critical to the overall balance of the composition. With this in mind, he stamped the seal that reads “poetry-and-wine addict,” a gift from Zhu Yugu, on the painting. The poem on the lower left of the painting was inscribed by fellow Tan Poetry Society member Chen Yuxian, while the inscription on the far left was written by Li Jian in 1929, after a viewing of the painting.

These refined traditions, of celebrating birthdays with poetry and painting, and the sharing of masterpieces in one’s art collection with fellow enthusiasts, were brought to Singapore and Malaya by the Chinese literati. To the diasporic Chinese, such masterpieces
became something of an unusual medium that brought them together, and an effective balm that soothed their homesickness.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Plaque Inscriptions and Compilations of Seals}

The cultural phenomenon of inviting calligraphers or illustrious people to inscribe on plaques or signboards of temples, guild halls and shops was unique to the Chinese and quite common practice in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Early immigrants to Singapore who came from different parts of China actively built places of worship for their deities, and also formed community guilds based on their dialect groups or localities of origin.\textsuperscript{17} As the leaders of these immigrant communities would typically hope that their temples and associations could have their plaques inscribed by eminent individuals, there are plaques that have been inscribed by individuals such as the Guangxu Emperor, Tso Ping Lung the Qing government’s first Consul to Singapore (fig. 1.5), and Consul-General Huang Zunxian, some of which still survive.

Other examples include Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan’s plaque inscription by Li Jian, which bears the name of the clan association itself, as well as one by calligrapher Tan Hengfu that was inscribed on the completion of the Nanyang Khek Community Guild (fig. 1.6).\textsuperscript{18} In the latter example, the four large characters “\textit{li junzi zhen}” (advantageous for upholding the firm respectability of a gentleman) had been executed elegantly with strokes charged with breadth of spirit. The adjacent congratulatory message reads: “Given the wisdom and civility of our guild members, as they act with resolution, and get along harmoniously with every sector of society, our guild will surely flourish.” When we look back in history, these inscriptions are akin to ties that connect us to the past. They reflect folk religion, politics, the everyday life of the people and cultural philosophies of the time. Up to the 1930s, esteemed individuals such as the renowned writer Yu Dafu and painter Xu Beihong continued to leave inscriptions for plaques in Singapore.\textsuperscript{19} These traces of the past add to the heritage in urban Singapore, constituting quite a splendid sight.

From the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, there were calligraphy and painting studios in Singapore that would inscribe signboards for businesses. In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Chang Shu Nai, the chief writer of the \textit{Sin Kok Min Jit Pao}, often published advertisements for calligraphy (fig 1.7). This indicates a close relation between calligraphy and commerce. It should also be noted that signboards for shops were mostly written in Chinese.\textsuperscript{20}

Another set of artefacts to note are seals of personal names and shop names which were tokens of authentication for individuals and businesses. With the arrival of Chinese immigrants, the tradition of using seals as a practical object of authentication was introduced to Singapore. As early as the 1860s, there was a seal carving shop here by the name of \textit{Zuishi Xuan} (The Studio of Drunken Stones). Traditional seals were known to take on local elements to meet the needs of the immigrant communities. For instance, English, Indian or Malay scripts were sometimes engraved onto seals, as requested by customers.\textsuperscript{21}

At the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, collecting seals was also an activity of the traditional literati, who took pleasure in carving and gifting them to friends.\textsuperscript{22} Such practices enriched the art activities of the Chinese community during this period. \textit{Lat Pau’s} chief writer Yeap Jit Yun (1859–1921, also known as Yong Weng) was a skilled seal carver, as evidenced by his surviving work \textit{Shihanzhai yincun} (figs. 1.8 and 1.9) (a compilation of impressions of his seals, which he titled after
his residence, Shibanzhai). Considering that the album was completed in 1898 and that Yeap’s seal carvings are “characterised by an ancient quality of robustness and simplicity, and infuse a cultural energy into others,” I believe he deserves to be recognised as the leading seal carver in Singapore.

Four of Yeap’s seals are featured in Xinjiapo yinren zuopin ji (A collection of works by Singaporean seal carvers), published in 2004. In the accompanying foreword, Tan Kian Por notes that the significance of the publication lies in “saluting the contributions made by the early seal carvers, remembering them, and also finding the beginnings and tracing the development of seal carving in Singapore.” Explicitly articulated here is the transmission of the culture of seal carving.

Another case in point is Sun Peigu, who came south to teach at Tuan Mong School in 1915, and was an adept poet, painter and seal carver. During his sojourn in Singapore, he “painted occasionally, but was troubled by the lack [of seals] to use [in his paintings]; so [he] carved quite a number of seals on [his] own, and when [he] had some spare time, [he] playfully compiled the impressions of these seals into a book.” From this we know that Sun, too, compiled impressions of his seals.

INTERACTIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY CHINA’S POLITICAL SITUATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Advertisements to Promote Chinese Goods

The majority of advertisements at the end of the 19th century were purely textual; any images that were featured were mostly photographs of actual objects. Only from the early 20th century onwards did Chinese-language daily newspapers gradually begin to publish advertisements of commercial products that included a combination of both images and text. These mostly expressed their artistry through forms and lines, and the resultant visual effect possessed the qualities of both advertisement and illustration.

Due to specific historical circumstances at the time, the notion of “invigorating China’s industries and promoting Chinese goods” was incorporated into advertisements of various commercial products. The message of these texts and images in advertisements was very clear: in the course of everyday life, any activity, even smoking and drinking, could be considered an act of patriotism as long as one was consuming Chinese products. Inherent in the kind of emotional appeal here was a strong sense of national identity. When Chinese immigrants consumed merchandise that had been artfully packaged in this manner, the awareness of economic rights draining away and of the need to reclaim these rights seeped into their lives (fig. 1.10). Advertisements thus functioned as an effective medium, subliminally reexpressing the hopes of the people. “Not only did [they] not feel that anything was forcibly imposed upon them, but actually came to agree with the viewpoint presented in the advertisements. The advertisements were thus shaping people’s behaviour and thinking.”

The Chinese characters in figure 1.10 are basically saying: why spend money on foreign cigarettes when Great Wall is an excellent brand of cigarettes? The underlying message is that the consumption of Chinese products would lead to the recovery of China’s economic rights. This advertisement was created by Yi
Shi, the head of the Yi Shi Art School, for the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company Limited in Singapore. Its image is humorous and as far as its aesthetics, underlying thought and language are concerned, the advertisement would have attracted the interest and attention of consumers.

In 1911, the Chinese population in Singapore numbered 255,611, and grew to 350,355 by 1921. With this tremendous increase in population, art schools began to emerge. In 1906, Su Binting established a portrait-painting workshop in the belief that art could develop the minds of the people and help to strengthen the country. In October 1922, Sun Peigu co-founded Singapore’s first fine art academy—the Singapore Academy of Fine Arts for Overseas Chinese. In his speech at the inauguration of the institution, Sun noted: “Sales of the products of our country have been poor in recent years because they are poorly made and lacking in fine artistry. This is why we have fallen behind foreign goods and are at a huge disadvantage.” The establishment of art schools was thus also associated with the idea of invigorating the motherland, and increasing the wealth and strength of the nation and its people.

Discourses of this sort highlight, firstly, that art educators in Singapore worried about the gradual weakening and impoverishment of their motherland; secondly, that they hoped to catch up with foreign countries and power up the industries “back home” through the use of artistic design and packaging. Their motivation was markedly different from that behind Lim Hak Tai’s founding of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1938. Lim believed that Singapore, being geographically situated as a transport hub between Europe and Asia, was blessed in its arts with a tropical ethos and a complex ethnic consciousness.

### Allegorical Pictures that Critiqued Current Affairs, Cartoons that Called for Resistance against Japan and to Save China

Between 9 September 1927 and 21 March 1928, Fei Fei, the supplement to Chong Shing Yit Pao, published a total of 41 allegorical pictures, most of which were reprinted from foreign newspapers. Two of these bore the name of Ma Xingchi, a well-known first-generation cartoonist from China. Ma’s works published in Fei Fei are likely to be political cartoons drawn while he was in Singapore with Sun Yat-sen on revolutionary business. These allegorical pictures, which were critiques of current affairs presented visually, opposed the Manchu government and supported the revolution in China. For example, “Manqing guanli, guiguo huaqiao” (Qing bureaucrats, returning overseas Chinese, fig. 1.11) by an unknown illustrator, depicts how, after having worked very hard abroad for a living, overseas Chinese returned to their motherland only to be exploited by corrupt bureaucrats.

The satirical political cartoons that were published in Fei Fei to comment on current affairs and educate the public were the first of their kind in Singapore’s Chinese-language daily newspapers. Soon after, the shifting political situation in China brought about cartoons of a different nature. For example, shortly after its founding in 1914, Kok Min Jit Pao began to feature a series of cartoons that censured the aggressively ambitious Yuan Shikai. Between September and October 1918, there were also combinations of images and texts produced by the Singapore-based cartoonist Zhu Mingxin that exposed the fatuousness and incompetency of the warlords in China while consolidating support for the Kuomintang. The emergence of such political cartoons
evidenced the concern the overseas Chinese had for the political situation back in China.

Political cartoons appeared sporadically in the Chinese-language daily newspapers thereafter. The editors of the supplements to these newspapers focused on expressing sentiments and new ideas primarily through texts. By the 1930s, however, cartoons as a means to educate the people to resist the Japanese invasion gradually gained importance. In 1930, satirical cartoons by Tchang Ju Chi and Chen Kunquan were featured from time to time in Lat Pau’s pictorial supplement Yehui (Coconut splendour), the Union Times’ supplement and Xingguang (Starlight).36 Chen Kunquan’s “Zhe shi women weiyi de mudi” (This is our sole objective, fig. 1.12), for example, lays bare the Japanese military’s ambition to take over Manchuria. Such cartoons which expressed concern over current affairs and revealed ugly realities were a manner of art prevalent in pre-war Singapore.

In the 1930s, the Chinese diaspora fervently responded to the resounding cries to resist Japanese aggression and save the motherland. The art community at the time collectively relied on the use of cartoons as a publicity tool to educate the public and motivate the masses to take action. Dai Yinlang, the editor of Nanyang Siang Pau Wenman Jie (The world of literature and cartoons) as well as Nanyang Siang Pau (Sunday Edition) Jinri Yishu (Art today), believed that woodcuts and cartoons were effective weapons in the Chinese people’s war of resistance, comparable to airplanes and tanks, or at the very least a bullet or javelin.37 These two periodicals played an important role in promoting cartoons and woodcuts in pre-war Singapore for they not only provided a platform for people who enjoyed cartooning or making woodcuts to express themselves, they allowed Dai—due to his skill in drawing, talent in carving and rich creative experience—to come up with a set of art theories (fig. 1.13).38

Notably, in its manifesto publicised in 1937 at the First Malayan Chinese Cartoon Exhibition, the Nanyang Youth Lee Chee Association stated that political cartoons, when done correctly, often could be more powerfully and widely effective than an argumentative essay on politics.39

In 1939 and 1940, cartoons about the ongoing Sino-Japanese War were always prominently featured on the front page of Nanyang Siang Pau. Among these was 1939’s Dadi huichun (Spring returns to the earth), created by the newspaper’s graphic editor Tay Kong Han. The cartoon expresses conviction in China’s eventual victory over Japan and the successful establishment of the Chinese regime that was to come.

**Calligraphy and Painting Events to Raise Relief Funds**

The earliest fundraising calligraphy and painting event in Singapore took place in 1927, from 22 to 23 January. It was an exhibition organised for the sale of poetry, prose, calligraphy, paintings and seal carvings, held by Li Zhongqian (also known as Li Jian) at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, in support of the founding of a Confucianist university.40 Li was the first painter from China to hold an art exhibition at the venue. Another exhibition of a similar nature, this time of He Xiangning’s works, was held at the same premises on 7–9 November 1929, ostensibly to raise funds for the Chung Kai Agricultural and Industrial School.41

From the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident to 1941, a total of 19 exhibitions to raise relief funds were held. This fully demonstrates the
overseas Chinese’s intense interest in China’s war effort against the Japanese. Thanks to the Chinese immigrants’ fervent enthusiasm, a committee would typically be formed prior to such art shows to prepare for the event, taking charge of everything from publicity to installation and reception. Prices of the exhibited artworks ranged from tens to thousands of dollars. The organisers would form teams and travel far and wide to sell vouchers to be used for purchasing these artworks, to local Chinese businessmen. This was a distinctive aspect of the pre-war art exhibitions. The various Chinese-language daily newspapers not only reported these fundraising exhibitions in thorough detail, but also issued special publications to promote these events. Examples include Kunmingwen xiehui manhua zhanlan tekan (A special publication on the cartoon exhibition of the Kunming Branch of the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists) and Liu Haisu xiansheng huazhan tekan (A special publication on Mr Liu Haisu’s painting exhibition). A remarkable number of visitors attended these events. A Xu Beihong show, for instance, attracted 20,000 visitors and ran for a long duration, raising as much as 15,398 Straits dollars. Cultural societies, schools and radio stations frequently invited exhibiting artists to give talks, and their insightful understanding and profound discussions of art nourished art lovers in Singapore. Xu’s “Zhongxi hua de fen-ye” (The divide between Chinese and Western painting) and “Yishu de fangxiang” (The direction of art), as well as Liu’s “Zhongguo hua yu yanghua zhi yedian” (Differences between Chinese and Western painting) and “Xiandai yishu” (Modern art), for example, helped Westerners become better acquainted with Chinese art.

The painters who came south were warmly welcomed by the local Chinese community, with which they would frequently interact. Xu, for example, was invited to write on the title labels of books and leave inscriptions for plaques. He painted full-length portraits of the then Governor of Singapore Sir Shenton Thomas in military attire and Lim Loh (fig. 1.14); Hanjiang dudiao tu (Fishing Alone in Winter) for Tan Ean Kiam; a portrait for Lee Choon Seng, a full-length portrait of Miss Jenny, paramour of the Vice-Consul of Belgium in Singapore; as well as the famous tableau Fangxia ni de bianzi (Put Down Your Whip, fig. 1.15) which is based on a performance of the titular street play by actors Zhao Xun and Wang Ying. Incidentally, in relation to the last work, the painter Situ Qiao, who was sojourning in Singapore at the time, had at one point specially invited the two said actors to his studio. With the conditions of the stage performance replicated (in terms of lighting, as well as Zhao’s and Wang’s appearances), Situ completed another famous painting associated with the Second Sino-Japanese War, also titled Put Down Your Whip.

After Xu painted Hanjiang dudiao tu (Fishing Alone in Winter) for Tan Ean Kiam, Tan was known to have invited fellow poets—including Lee Choon Seng, Venerable Shi Chichan, Guan Zhenmin, Xu Yunzhi, Chen Tianxiao, Khoo Seok Wan, Huang Menggui and Wu Ruifu—to contribute inscriptions to the work. This was a continuation of the tradition of inscribing poems on famed paintings that was in practice at the end of the 19th century. Furthermore, not only did Xu create a good number of calligraphy works and paintings, he also left the Chinese literary circles in Malaya with many pieces of fine literature. Xu’s notes about his travels in India, his poetry exchanges with Huang Mengkui, along with poetic inscriptions for his paintings by Yu Dafu and other fellow poets enriched the art activities of the pre-war
Chinese community. (In addition, Yu Dafu also inscribed a good number of poems for Liu Haisu’s paintings.)

CONCLUSION

The unique character of pre-war Singaporean art was shaped and informed by the immigrant Chinese’s manifold emotional bonds to their homeland. Creating cartoons and advertisements was a way to connect with the social dynamics of their homeland. These were also mediums that inspired and deepened patriotism. The traditions of composing poetry for paintings, seal carving, calligraphy and inscribing plaques were brought south to Singapore. These cultural artefacts, which speak of delightful, ancient historical stories, allow a gradual understanding of the steady transmission of cultural heritage.

With the unfolding of the Second Sino-Japanese War (during which the fate of the Chinese nation hung in the balance), painters and calligraphers from China as well as those residing in Singapore held one fundraising art exhibition after another. Frequent art exhibitions, in the five pre-war years from 1937 to 1941 in particular, were unusual for this region. The artists’ insightful talks and the assistance given by students to such exhibitions contributed to an unprecedented artistic atmosphere in pre-war Singapore. The war destroyed everything, yet it also catalysed the development of art on this island. As calligraphers and painters arrived first in Singapore, and subsequently travelled north to different parts of Malaya to hold exhibitions—as in the case of He Xiangning, Gao Jianfu, Shen Yibin, Ong Schan Tchow, Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu—Singapore became a relay station for the propagation of art by Chinese at home and abroad.

The materials discussed in this essay have provided us with a wonderful perspective, allowing us to witness the visual artistic diversity that arose within a specific historical context.

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This essay, which was translated by Wang Yitong and edited by Ng Kum Hoon, was first published in Charting Thoughts, an anthology of newly commissioned essays by established and emerging scholars that was published by National Gallery Singapore in 2017.
As pointed out by Wu Hung, a renowned art historian and tenured professor at Harvard University, one of the most significant developments in art historical research over the last 20 to 30 years is that visual sources, such as folk murals in temples, pictures in newspapers and periodicals, illustrations for operas and novels, commercial advertisements in magazines and so on, are being covered in the newer general histories of Chinese art. See Wu Hung, *Meishushi shi yi* [Ten discussions on art history] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008), 56, 67.

My research mainly draws from newspapers: *Lat Pau*, *Sing Po*, *Thien Nam Shin Pao*, *Chang Shing Yit Pao*, *Chin Nam Poh*, *Union Times*, *Morning Post*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao*. When studying pre-war art, there is absolutely no way to clearly map the development of cartoons in Singapore without perusing *Chang Shing Yit Pao’s* supplement *Fei Fei*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh’s* pictorial supplement *Xingguang* [Starlight], *Lat Pau’s* pictorial supplement *Yehui* [Coconut splendour], *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao’s* supplement, the *Union Times*’ supplement, as well as Wenman Jie [The world of literature and cartoons] and Jinri Yishu [Art today], supplements of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and its Sunday edition respectively.

The calligrapher Zhong Dexiang arrived in Singapore in 1886—see Yeoh Meng Thong, “*Qiu Shuyuan yu zhanqian Xinjiapo huashe meishu*” [In the pre-war Chinese art community in Singapore] (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1992), 33–9. According to “Yibang jiexiao” [A published list of individuals who passed the entrance examinations to medical school] in *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, 31 Jul 1923*, Yan was ranked first among all the examinees from the Hokkien community who sat for the exams at the Institution in May 1923.

As seen in, for example, Venerable Shi Chichan’s “*Ti Sun Peigu Xingdi tu*” [For Sun Peigu’s painting titled *Begging*], “*Ti Sun Peigu jushi hua zeng molian*” [For the ink painting of lotuses painted and given by Sun Peigu the lay Buddhist], and He Guanren’s “*Ti Yan Yiyuan Sun Peigu zuo meihua tu*” [For the painting of plum blossoms created by the respected Yan Yiyuan and Sun Peigu]. Sun Peigu was an art educator. He taught at the Tuan Mong School in 1915, and made some contributions to art education during his stay in Singapore. After returning to China in 1924, Sun taught at various schools in Jieyang, Chaoyang and Shantou, cultivating students far and wide. See Sun Shuyan, “*Minguo huweisi baozheng gongwen yilue*” [An official governance report from the Chinese protectorate, translated in brief], *Lat Pau*, 6 Mar 1889, sheet no. 5.

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16 This may be illustrated by Lin Zexu mobao ceye [A leaf from an album of Lin Zexu’s calligraphy] from the collection of Khoo Seok Wan’s family. The friends who had viewed this page, along with their dates of viewing, are as follows: Jiang Kongyin (1910), Kang Youwei (9 Apr 1910), Hoo Wei Yin (1914; the Republic of China’s Consul-General to Singapore), Qin Ruqin (1924; Republican China’s Vice-Consul to Singapore), Yan Wenhao, Cai Mengxiang (1925), Li Jian (December 1926), Xu BeiHong (1927), Lin Zhuzhai (1927; one of the founders of Tao Nan Primary School and at one time Vice President of the Nanyang Confucian Association in Singapore), Yang Daoji (1928; also known by his sobriquet Xiangxue, Yang was from Bing Village, Mei County, Guangdong Province, China, and was once secretary to Chen Cheng, a senior general of the Kuomintang), He Xiangning (October 1929).


18 See Lat Pau, 24 Aug 1929.

19 Yu Dafu, who came to Singapore in 1938, wrote the name-bearing plaque inscription for Xingzhou Bookstore, as well as couplets to be hung on pillars for Haw Par Villa and the Jing Lu School. (See Yeo Meng Thong, Yu Dafu li Xin shenghuo yu zuopin yanjiu [A study of Yu Dafu’s life in Singapore and his works], volume 4 of Xinjiapo Xinshu xueshu congshu [The academic collection of Xinshu, Singapore] (September 1987), 242; and Yeo Meng Thong, “Yu Dafu, Huang Menggui yu Jinglu Xuexiu” [Yu Dafu, Huang Menggui and the Jing Lu School], in Asian Culture 4 (October 1984). The name-bearing plaque of Hai Inn Temple was inscribed by Xu BeiHong.


23 Shihanzhai yincun is currently in the collection of the renowned Singaporean painter Tan Kian Por. I am grateful to him for providing access to the material.

24 My thanks to Professor Wu Yongliang of works by Singaporean seal carvers] (Shanghai: Shanghai Kexue Jishu Wenxian Chubanshe, 1958). See Tan Kian Por’s foreword to Xinjiapo gongbuju xueshu congshu [The academic collection of the Nanyang Confucian Association in Singapore], volume 4, no. 1 (Jan 2006).

25 See Tan Kian Por’s foreword to Xinjiapo yishu manhua de lanshang” [Beginning with the cartoons in Old Shanghai’s Pictorial Record] (Shanghai: Shanghai Cartoons
dian, yiji 20 shiji chu Xinjiapo yishu shuju, 1958).

26 See the Yi Shi Art School’s enrolment survey, in Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, 12 Jan 1920.) Local newspapers called for the resident Chinese community to purchase Chinese products, so as to help reclaim the mother nation’s rights and profits. (See Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, 11–12 Mar 1921.)

27 After the founding of its Republican regime, China bustled with activities that invigorated its domestic industries and promoted Chinese goods. Gestures that reflected patriotism by the industrial and commercial sectors spread to the society in Singapore. Schools became influenced. For example, the Yeung Ching School established its own Students’ Society of Arts and Crafts in 1919, which held an exhibition in the following year with the purpose of “fulfilling the students’ moral obligation to promote Chinese merchandise.” (See Lat Pau, 5, 7 and 12 Jan 1920.) Local newspapers called for the resident Chinese community to purchase Chinese products, so as to help reclaim the mother nation’s rights and profits. (See Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, 11–12 Mar 1921.)


29 See the Yi Shi Art School’s enrolment advertisement in Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, 15 Mar 1921.

30 According to “Xinjiapo gongbuju hukou diaocha” [The Singapore Municipal Commission’s household survey], in Lat Pau, 30 Apr 1931, 4.


33 See Lao Shanghai manhua tuzhi [A Pictorial Record of Old Shanghai’s Cartoons] (Shanghai: Shanghai Kexue Jishu Wenxian Chubanshe, Jul 2010), 12–4.


35 Ibid., 169–79.
36 Chen graduated from the Tuan Mong School, and was at one time a clerk at Tuan Mong Branch School. See Duanmeng Xuexiao ershiwu zhinian jiniankan [Tuan Mong School’s 25th anniversary souvenir magazine] (Singapore, 1931). In addition, Zhang Bohe, Zheng Zhaowu and Wang Yunsheng wrote forewords for Chen Kunquan manhua ji [The collected cartoons of Chen Kunquan]. See Duanmeng yuekan [The Tuan Mong Monthly] 2, no. 2 (15 Dec 1932).

37 See “Dai Yinlang bian Nanyang Shangbao Xingqi Kan Jinri Yishu xilun” [Analyses of Art Today in the Sunday edition of Nanyang Siang Pau], in Yeo, Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji, 59–70.

38 As seen in Dai Yinlang’s “Yige tigong—Xian gei xinxing de muke zuozhe” [An option—For emerging woodcut artists], “Lun muke yishu” [On the art of woodcuts] and “Lun ticai” [On subject matter], which puts forth eight “isms” as guidelines for taking the woodcut-and-cartoon movement forward and as a set of standards for evaluating the works of the movement. See “Huajia Dai Yinlang” [Dai Yinlang the artist], in Yeo, Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji, 199–212.

39 See “Xinjiapo zhanqian wu nian (1937–1941) manhua yanjiu” [A study of Singapore’s cartoons in five pre-war years (1937–1941)], in Yeo, Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji, 174–85.

40 See Sin Kok Min Jit Poo, 17 Jan 1927.

41 Because He Xiangning’s political stance was at odds with Chiang Kai-shek’s, He’s exhibition was given a rather low-profile treatment by some of the local Chinese leaders and groups. Although the original plan was to invite the wife of the Governor of Singapore and that of the Chinese Consul-General to Singapore to co-host the opening of the event, both women ultimately did not show up, nor did Aw Boon-Haw, the Chairman of the exhibition’s organising committee. This goes to show that art exhibitions were affected by the political climate in China at that time. See “He Xiangning zai Xinjiapo” [He Xiangning in Singapore], in Yeo, Xinjiapo zhanqian huaren meishushi lunji, 13–21.


43 Lim Loh was a renowned architect who engaged in architectural work and the manufacturing of bricks and tiles. In 1901, he took on a commission to construct the Victoria Memorial Hall with the lowest bid, and caused a stir in Singapore when he completed the building in five years. Lim Bo Seng was his 11th child. Zhao Xun and Wang Ying founded the New China Theatre Troupe in Singapore on 6 April 1940, and went on to give performances at various locations in Singapore and Malaya. Fangxia ni de bianzi (Put down your whip) was a sensational street play at the time.


45 The original Hanjiang dudiao tu was lost or destroyed during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. In 1948, however, Tan Ean Kiam’s son wrote a letter to Xu Beihong, requesting him to re-create the work. Recognising that Tan was “not lacking in filial sentiments,” Xu thus painted Hanjiang chuidiao tu and gave it to him. See Hanjiang chuidiao tu [Angling in winter], published by the Tan Ean Kiam Foundation in 1988.

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