CHAPTER IX

“SLOW BUT SURE”:
LOCATING TCHANG JU CHI IN
THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL EXPERIENCE
The opening of National Gallery Singapore in 2015 was one of the most important events in the Singapore art scene that year. The two permanent galleries—the DBS Singapore Gallery and the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery—feature the modern art of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Together, they provide a spectacular visual feast for visitors, enabling them to explore the artistic legacies and the cultural exchanges between the east and the west.

I was deeply fascinated by what I saw in the DBS Singapore Gallery. Its inaugural exhibition, *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, presents key phases in Singapore’s art history through the following sections: Tropical Tapestry, Nanyang Reverie, Real Concerns, New Languages, Shifting Grounds, and a special section, Tradition Unfettered, that explores the local Chinese ink movement.

While at the Nanyang Reverie section, two works by the artist Tchang Ju Chi—*Self Portrait* and *Still Life* (figs. 9.1 and 9.2)—caught my attention. The latter is an ensemble of common tropical fruits like the mango, mangosteen, rambutan and cempedak. On the right side of the painting, behind the fruit bowl with high stem, hangs a piece of Sumatran batik—its dark brown surface, which is adorned with a motif made of lines and dots, enlivens the painting with its strong colours and a three-dimensional feel. I was riveted to the ground while admiring this masterpiece by Tchang. The artwork also led me to think about Tchang’s “Nanyang style” and the position that Tchang occupies in Nanyang art history; in the history and development of Singapore art, Tchang is an important artist noted for his role in promoting artistic activities among Singapore’s Chinese community from the late 1920s till the advent of World War II.

Born in Chaohzhou, Tchang grew up in a conducive family environment that nurtured his keen interest for art. In fact, his father Zhang Yinbo was an artist who painting Chinese ink works in the *gongbi* (fine brushstrokes) style. After graduating from the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Tchang enrolled into the Ecole Supérieure d’Art et de Design Marseille in France. Sadly, he was forced to quit school and return home less than a year later as he was not able to afford the school fees. He was passing through Singapore in 1927 when a friend successfully persuaded him to stay on in the country (fig 9.4).

Between April 1927 and December 1929, Tchang held a teaching position at the Tuan Mong School in Singapore. In April 1929, he took up another teaching job at Yeung Ching School, and was eventually appointed as the head of its art department. During this time, Tchang’s cartoon drawings were often featured in *Tsing Nien* (Youths), a bimonthly magazine launched on 15 March 1929 by the Nanyang Youth Lee Chee Association; Tchang also designed its masthead (fig 9.3). The masthead’s simple composition belies an allegorical message, calling for youths to face treacherous circumstances in life with courage and vigour.

In July 1929, Tchang became editor of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*’s pictorial supplement *Xingguang* (Starlight). He remained in the position till September 1930, when he resigned. While he was editor of *Starlight*, Tchang made his debut in the Singapore art scene in August 1929 with his painting *Oriental Cow* at the *Singapore Fine Art Exhibition* that was organised by the Nanyang Youth Lee Chee Association. It was the first exhibition jointly held by artists from Singapore and Malaya, and had the objective of inspiring the “dull and listless, lonely and boring” local immigrants through art, thereby introducing beauty into their lives; it was hailed
as “an unprecedented art exhibition in the Malayan Peninsula.” Tchang’s work was lauded by a critic for its “harmonious and rhythmic interplay of colours.”

In October 1930, Tchang was invited by his good friend Chen Lianqing to become the editor of Yehui (Coconut splendour), Lat Pau’s pictorial supplement. The role would also give him the opportunity to groom young, budding cartoon illustrators; one of his students, Zhou Jinhai, went on to become a famous woodblock printmaker under Tchang’s encouragement and mentorship. Unfortunately, Yehui was closed barely half a year later due to a lack of funds.

Tchang had also started a few art studios. One was Ju Chi Art Studio, which Tchang launched in February 1930 while he was an editor at Xingguang. In 1933, he co-founded another studio—Peng Te Art Studio—with Zhuang Youzhao to provide illustration services for commercial advertisements (fig. 9.5). Tchang and Zhuang worked hard, and they supported and encouraged each other. Having built a stable foundation for his career, Tchang then left for Paris again to continue his studies. During that time, Zhuang continued to run Peng Te Art Studio—it was Zhuang’s commitment to running the business that enabled Tchang to devote himself to the pursuit of art without trepidation.

In 1935, a common passion for art spurred a group of Chinese artists who were residing in Singapore to form an art club called the Salon Art Society. The society was formally established as the Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA) on 20 January 1936. From 10 July 1937, Nanyang Siang Pau started publishing political cartoons by Tchang Ju Chi on a daily basis.

SOCA’s fourth annual exhibition in 1939 displayed one of Tchang’s oil paintings, On a Rampage to Rape and Kill, which depicted the horrifying acts committed against Chinese women by Japanese invaders realistically. Sadly, Tchang himself was not spared by the Japanese either, and was killed during the Sook Ching massacre in Singapore in 1942.

Before Tchang’s death, he had made invaluable contributions to the art scene in Singapore. Tchang felt an affinity for his country of residence—living in Singapore exposed Tchang to its customs, the manners of its people, and allowed him to explore the local landscape and culture, and as a result, Tchang became concerned about the region’s artistic development. Tchang’s arrival in Singapore in 1927 had coincided with the time when other art practitioners in Singapore began to realise that the “the [art scene] is dead quiet to the north of the equator,” and that the task of promoting art “must immediately be embarked upon.” Tchang experienced the dormant and languid art scene firsthand, and after living in Singapore for some time, his sense of social responsibility inspired him to publish a statement in Yehui (fig. 9.6):

“The current state of the art scene is no different from a dessert: so barren and dry! Nevertheless, we desire the spring of life in this desolate terrain. The spring of life will dispel the loneliness of the heart, and quench the emptiness of the soul. Between life and death, light and darkness, day and night, the eternal flame ignites and strengthens our will to charge forward as if on horseback. But it is then that the camels appear. Their steps may be slow and their appearance dull and stupid. But they are the ones that carry an important mission, striding forward tirelessly, one step at a time, braving sand, dust, wind, thunder, rain and whatever suffering and pain they may encounter along the way. That is how we see it in Yehui. Go, camels go! Get on with your mission!”
In this statement, Tchang essentially made it his personal mission to cultivate the local art scene, knowing full well that such pioneering efforts would entail painstakingly slow steps. Confronted with the desolate state of Singapore’s art scene, Tchang’s challenge was in how to transform this barren landscape and spur artistic growth. Nevertheless, his concern for this land, and his unwavering focus and determination to contribute to local art spurred him on “tirelessly” at a “slow but sure” pace.

Although we know quite a lot about Tchang’s life, it is extremely difficult to put together an oeuvre of Tchang’s work. His daughter, Madam Chang Shifen (fig. 9.7), recalled that his art studio in Tank Road used to be filled with a roomful of his paintings. Unfortunately, many of these works are lost. Hence, this chapter will use primary sources, such as cartoon drawings, masthead designs, advertisements in Chinese newspapers, publications, as well as information provided by Madam Chang in order to build an understanding of Tchang’s art, style, and his participation in art-making activities in Singapore.

**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES**

*Establishing the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists*

In 1935, a common passion for art spurred Tchang Ju Chi and a group of Chinese artists residing in Singapore to form an art club. The Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA), the first full-fledged organisation made of Chinese artists, was thus formed in 20 January 1936. It was the first such organisation made up of Chinese artists. Tchang was its first president, and served a total of five terms in that capacity.

In 1940, the Society took up an editorial space in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* to publish a weekly magazine titled *Yishu* (Art). Together with *Jinri Yishu* (Art Today), which was edited by Dai Yinlang, these supplements enriched the content of Chinese daily newspapers. In 1940, SOCA initiated the idea of organising an art exhibition featuring works from Chinese school students in Singapore, but the plan was aborted when the director-general of education intervened. Nonetheless, this noble intention to raise the artistic standard of students from local Chinese schools reflected SOCA’s concern for the local milieu.

The annual exhibition of works by SOCA members was an important yearly event in the art scene in those days. In his essay *Remembering Mr Tchang Ju Chi*, written in 1966 by Singapore pioneer artist Chen Chong Swee, he remarked that “Without the effort and contribution of Mr Tchang, the Society of Chinese Artists would not have been able to organise an art exhibition year after year, a tradition that is upheld even till today.” The Society of Chinese Artists celebrated its 80th anniversary in December 2015—Chen’s insights still ring true today.

As president of SOCA, Tchang took on the tasks of meeting visiting artists from abroad and helping them organise exhibitions in Singapore. For instance, he took it upon himself to oversee the display and installation of works by Shen Yibin and Xu Beihong for exhibition. Tchang was also involved in external exhibitions, such as the *First Malayan Chinese Cartoon Drawings Exhibition* held between 1 and 5 July 1937. Tchang was part of the review committee and was involved in the selection of artworks for display. He also submitted his own illustrations for the exhibition, and contributed an article on the development of cartoon drawings in Singapore.
**Active Participation in Local and Overseas Art Exhibitions**

In April 1936, Tchang Ju Chi submitted two portraits for display at Yin-Yin Art Circle, an exhibition held in Penang. In July 1937, Tchang participated in the inaugural exhibition of the Penang Chinese Art Society, sending a sketch and two oil paintings for display. Back in Singapore, Tchang took part in a number of exhibitions, including SOCA's annual exhibitions, the Singapore Fine Art Exhibition in 1929, the First Malayan Chinese Cartoon Drawings Exhibition in 1936, and the cartoon art exhibition held in aid of the refugees in China put together by a group overseas Chinese in 1938. He was also invited to participate in the Xu Beihong Art Exhibition in 1939, which included a section on calligraphy and paintings by famous Chinese artists.

**FROM MASTHEAD DESIGNS, ADVERTISING DESIGNS, SATIRICAL CARTOONS TO PAINTINGS WITH A NANYANG FLAVOUR**

Tchang's masthead designs, advertising illustrations, satirical cartoons, and paintings all exude a distinctive Nanyang flavour. The idea of representing local elements in art was inextricably linked to the literary thinking of the time. Editors of Chinese newspaper supplements such as Huang Dao (Deserted island), a publication by Sin Kok Min Jit Pao, and Wenyi Zhoukan (Literature and art weekly), a supplement of Nanyang Siang Pau, strongly advocated the incorporation of Nanyang characteristics in literary writings. To a certain extent, this literary trend inspired the localisation of art in Singapore.

Among the many creations with Nanyang flavour that Tchang produced was the masthead for Yelin (Coconut grove) a supplement of Lat Pau, which Tchang designed in 1929 (figs. 9.8 and 9.9). The motif of coconut trees not only aligned with the name of the publication but also underscored the notion that “literature should capture local features.” Chen Lianqing, the famous Malayan Chinese writer, wrote about Yelin's masthead in his article entitled “Mr Tchang Ju Chi”: “The coconut tree may appear rather frail with its long, slender leaves and trunk, but Mr Tchang Ju Chi was able to infuse its delicate form with a certain vigour, resilience and strength, which truly resonates with us as an embodiment of our life in Nanyang.” By drawing parallels between the physical features of the coconut and the robust mindset and resilient character of overseas Chinese in Singapore, Chen acknowledged the coconut tree as a suitable symbol for the supplement's masthead design.

Chen was a writer who often championed the idea that “literature should capture local features.” This notion is clearly detailed in another of Chen's articles, titled “Local Characteristics and Literature and Arts”:

If you say that the landscape of Nanyang is too vulgar and uninspiring, and therefore not fit enough for the appreciation of writers like us, then perhaps it is our perception of things that begs questioning. Why, the local scenery is not as dull and boring as we think. Look at the lush coconut groves, verdant rubber trees, flourishing banana plants, towering old trees, and the tropical climate which often turns as cool as autumn with the abundant rainfall. It would certainly seem unfair to say that the local scenery is not as gorgeous as China's. However, our
writers have chosen to turn a blind eye to the beauty around them, focusing instead on copying and depicting—and not just contemplating—the scenery of China. This has left me bewildered and perplexed.  

While Chen did not make any reference to painting in the above passage, his analysis of Tchang’s masthead design for *Yelin* suggest that he would have thought the same for art as he did for literature—art, like literary writings, should capture local features. In fact, Chen was also an editor for *Yelin*, and was closely associated with Tchang, with the two exchanging views regularly. Hence, it is very likely that they shared similar views on localising themes in art and literature.

Like his masthead design for *Yelin*, Tchang’s advertisements and magazine covers injected a breath of fresh air in the local art scene with their originality and artistry. For instance, in the advertising illustration for the goldsmith Kwang Heng Limited (fig. 9.10), Tchang created a captivating feminine form, its graceful profile accentuated by the elongated lines delineating slender fingers. In another advertisement, this time for Asiatic Coffee Manufacturing Company (fig. 9.11), Tchang employed a rather novel, exaggerated style to drive home the effectiveness of the coffee brand at improving mental alertness and appetite.

In his cartoon drawings, TchangJu Chi either employed an exaggerated style to capture his subjects, or used symbolic elements to succinctly express his views of the events happening around him. For instance, the cartoon *Ordinary Folk Suffering Under the Weight of Monetary Woes* (fig. 9.14) is a vivid portrayal of the dire straits ordinary citizens found themselves in during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The cartoon shows a skinny man struggling helplessly to free himself from the hole of a huge Chinese bronze coin in which he is trapped, his predicament symbolic of the harsh reality confronting an ordinary citizen mired in constant monetary woes from which there is no escape. In another cartoon titled *The Boss and the Coolie* (fig. 9.15), Tchang captures the exact moment of anguish and despair when an employee was told by his boss that “the pay cut is necessary.” This is accomplished by contrast their appearances and behaviours: while the boss is fat, brash and haughty in demeanour, the worker appears thin, shabby and submissive as he receives the depressing news. Tchang’s various advertisements, cartoon illustrations and designs display his mastery of his lines. This mastery is also why his oil paintings are so outstanding.

Although Tchang’s time in Singapore was short, his artistic life here was a colourful one. His concern for the development of the local art scene, coupled with the influence from the literary thinking of the day, inspired him to paint and present the following oil paintings at SOCA’s annual exhibitions (1936–1937): *Malay Women, Malay Beauties, Still Life, Portrait of a Bengali, An Old Kling Man, Old Kling Lady, Malay Children at the Seaside, Attap House, Shadow of a Coconut Tree, and Coolies*, to name a few. Additionally, fellow artists Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee have also mentioned that Tchang probably made a trip to the Brastagi Highland in Sumatra to seek inspiration for his art. It is likely that the trip was made in 1939, given that Tchang started submitting many oil paintings with an Indonesian theme to SOCA’s 1940 annual exhibitions. These works included *Mila and Jena, Girl from Brastagi, Old Woman from Brastagi, Javanese Man, Brastagi Village, Balinese Puppets, Girl from Bundung*, and *Brastagi Woman*. Chen Chong Swee commented on the
prevalence of Nanyang-inspired subject matter in Tchang’s works:

“His compositions are brilliantly conceived, his figures wear lifelike expressions, his lines are immaculately executed, and his colours are applied accurately and concisely to create those magnificent layers of dark and light-coloured tones. Looking at the landscape painting that Tchang executed at Brastagi Highland, one can almost feel the breeze. The work is indeed a display of how Tchang has mastered artistic expression, and it is a showcase of his divine talent.\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Mila and Jena} (fig. 9.16)—which appeared in the souvenir magazine published to commemorate the 1939 annual exhibition organised by the Society of Chinese Artists—depicts two girls, one seated and one standing. Gazing into the distance, they seemed to be lost in thought. The forms exude a rustic simplicity while the rosy hues and composition convey a quintessentially tropical flavour.”

Regrettably, \textit{Mila and Jena}, like many of his works, cannot be found. Indeed, Tchang’s artworks are extremely rare and attempts at locating extant examples yield little result. As a result, we have to rely on old newspapers and magazines for information about Tchang and his practice.

Evidently, Tchang created many works that featured local and regional subject matter. Tchang was the first artist who made a conscious effort at incorporating subject matter that is distinctively Nanyang in his art, and these subjects are a sincere expression of his love for the local milieu. Indeed, the unique culture and exotic environment of Nanyang became the focus of his oeuvre. However, it is not just Tchang’s subjects that draw from Nanyang; his aesthetic sensibility is also characterised by the exotic charm of Nanyang and the mottled hues of the tropics, and can be said to have provided a strong foundation for the formation and development of art with a Nanyang flavour. Works with this sensibility and distinctive Nanyang flavour include \textit{Kahcheamputeh}, \textit{Banyan Tree and Flowers}. (figs. 9.17 to 20).

The Indian street vendor in \textit{Kahcheamputeh} wears a somewhat bemused expression, balancing a bamboo basket in which various types of kacang, or nuts and beans, are presumably kept. Placed on top of the basket is a little stool which he rests on while waiting for customers. The entire painting is skilfully rendered in a highly realistic manner, such that even the wrinkles on the shirt won by the kacang puteh seller can be clearly seen. The beautiful lines and the contrasting tones on the bamboo basket—whose height and depth is underscored by the clever use of light and colour—create a lovely visual effect. Every detail is captured and vividly expressed by the artist, from the left shoulder of the seller tilted under the weight of basket that is carefully supported by his right hand, to the little red dot on his forehead that he received after his visit to the temple. Hawking kacang puteh was a common sight on the streets of Singapore in the 1950s, and this portrait, which is infused with a rich Nanyang flavour, would certainly evoke childhood memories for anyone from my generation. I reckon that Tchang would have painted this enchanting scene with concern for the social environment that he himself was situated in.

As demonstrated in this essay through pre-war primary research sources, Tchang was an active promoter of art from the 1920s right up till the fall of Singapore. The use of local themes and subjects rich in Nanyang
flavour in his works, and the figure paintings inspired by his trip to Indonesia, are truthful expressions of the artist’s love of the local life. If we were to trace the origin of the so-called Nanyang style, then Tchang should be the focus of such a discourse.

Regrettably, people seemed to have forgotten about Tchang for many years. Although Tchang is such an important pioneer of Nanyang art, Tchang’s name has been practically left out of any discussion concerning Nanyang art after World War II ended. If so, how is one going to properly map out the development of Nanyang art? I believe the main reason that Tchang’s name had been overlooked lies is because the individuals participating in the discourse on Nanyang art, such as Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy, have never had the chance to access the precious pre-war material in Chinese. Another reason may be because there is an extremely limited number of extant works by the artist left.
1 Huang Shunsheng, Chen Jiashun, “Chaoshan huixua shilue zhi shi!” [A Brief History of Painting in the Chaoshan Region 14], http://www.dahuawang.com/localnews/showlocal.asp/no=76328 (accessed 23 Apr 2016).

2 “Jieshao Zhang Ruqi huashi” [An Introduction to Tchang Ju Chi’s Art Studio], Lat Pau, 11 Feb 1930.

3 Ed. Li Guseng, Lin Guozhang, Duan Meng Xueqiao sanshi zhounian jiniance [Commerative Publication for Tuan Mong School’s 30th Anniversary] (Singapore: Tuan Mong School, 1936).

4 Yeung Ching 5, 7 (15 Apr 1919), published by Yeung Ching School.

5 As stated in the editor’s notes from the 15 May issue, “Tchang Ru Chi provides us with his drawings for every issue; that has added colour to our publication.” Such drawings include the cartoon “Women kuaidian juewu ba!” [Let’s come to our senses quickly!] published on 15 Apr, “Xian dai Zhongguo de qingnian” [Youth in modern China] published on 1 May, as well as the masthead of the same issue.


9 “Before the Japanese troops invaded south, Tchang did a painting of the imperial army raping women. The painting was realistic and served to expose the Japanese’s crimes in order to spur the Chinese to actively donate towards the anti-war effort. Not long after the Japanese troops entered the city, Tchang and his brother-in-law, Zhuang Youzhao, were trucked off and killed in a mass massacre on Changi beach.” See Liu Kang, Liu Kang Wenji [Writings of Liu Kang] (Singapore: Educational Research Center, Nov 1981), 303. A/N: The painting Liu mentioned should be the oil painting Jianyin Jiesha [Rape and murder]. It was exhibited at The Society of Chinese Artists’ fourth annual art exhibition. See Huaren meishu yanjiuhui zhanlan jiniankan (disijie) [4th Society of Chinese Artists art exhibition catalogue] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Xingzhong ribao, 1939).

10 “Xinneng meishu chuansixuo zhaosheng” [Recruitment of Students by Xinjiapo Art Institute], Sin Kok Min Jit Poo, 21 Feb 1927.

11 See Tchang’s foreword to Lat Pau’s pictorial supplement Yehui [Coconut Splendour], in Lat Pau, 11 Oct 1930.


13 Ibid. 58–70.

14 Ibid. 44–46.

15 The Writings of Chen Chong Swee (Singapore: Chen Qisheng, Dec 2010), 24.

16 “Diijije mahua manhua zhanlan tekan” [1st Malayan Chinese Comics Exhibition Art Catalogue], Sin Chew Jit Poh, 1 Jul 1937.

17 Nanyang Siang Pau, 24 Dec 1946.

18 Yelin, 18 Jan 1929.

19 Yelin, 23 Sep 1929.

20 Chan Chung Sun, “Chen Lianqing er san shi” [A few things on Chen Lianqing], in Chen Lianqing, Chen Lianqing wenji [Writings of Chen Lianqing] (Singapore: Nanyang Wenyi Chubanshe), 73.

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