Liu Kang

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Cosmopolitanising the Modernised Chinese Painting: Liu Kang on Art

Yow Siew Kah

Liu Kang (1911–2004) is one of the most prominent figures in the history of Singapore art. Those of us who have some familiarity with Singaporean artists of the pre-independence period will likely know him as a pioneer artist or a first-generation artist, terms that suggest his canonical status as a founder of a type of modern art in Singapore. One of the reasons for Liu’s high stature is that his art has been given proto-national significance.1 However, in thinking of him as a national artist, we risk overlooking an important cosmopolitan dimension in his works — one that was connected to his deep involvement in the search for a modern Chinese art. This essay argues that Liu never wholly intended to create a national art, but was primarily preoccupied with modernising traditional Chinese ink painting.

Born in China, Liu Kang settled in Singapore permanently after the Second World War.2 His career became increasingly prominent in the 1950s, which was also the time when Malayan independence was a key concern among cultural elites in Singapore.3 It was partly for this reason that Liu’s art came to be identified with the emerging nation-state. However, his creative practice cannot be framed by Malayan nationalism alone. The time that he spent in Shanghai (1926–1928, and then 1933–1937), as well as his journey to Paris (1929–1933), was crucial in shaping his artistic development. Liu’s extended stay in these cities coincided with one of the most tumultuous epochs in modern Chinese history, during which it was widely felt that China was “weak” compared to the West and needed a modernising revamp on all levels.4 In particular, a new generation of artists believed that Chinese art had to be reformed so that it could become part of the modernist movements that had been sweeping across Europe from the late 19th century.

Over this period, Liu Kang developed life-long relationships with two key intellectuals: Liu Haisu (1896–1994) and Fu Lei (1908–1966). Liu Haisu was a Confucian scholar, an accomplished painter in both ink and oil, and an important figure in art education reform.5 Fu Lei was a writer, a translator, and a noteworthy individual in introducing European art philosophies to China.6 Partly from his association with these cultural elites, Liu developed a sustained desire to create a modern art that was still able to participate in Chinese culture, primarily by infusing the traditional Chinese painting with European modernist elements.

This cosmopolitan feature in Liu Kang’s practice remained with him for the rest of his career. Even as his peers praised him enthusiastically in the 1950s for contributing ceaselessly to the nascent Malayan art scene, his thoughts on art were hardly about the Malayan nation in a straightforward sense.7 Ahmad Mashadi has argued that despite its syncretic appearance, Chinese visual idioms dominate the art of the Nanyang artists, including Liu Kang’s: his art should therefore be considered Chinese modern, rather than Malayan national.8 As we will see in the following pages, Liu’s essays and speeches reveal his intention to create art that was firmly entrenched in a desire to express a Chinese modernity.

Liu Kang’s preoccupation with modern Chinese art began in his formative years when he was studying at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, which was founded by Liu Haisu. Under the latter’s guidance, Liu Kang began to make attempts at modernising the Chinese art of the past by borrowing from Western art.9 The traditional Chinese art form that came to occupy a privileged position in Liu Kang’s practice was that of literati painting.10 Also known as scholar-amateur painting, this ink-and-brush art is characterised by its use of empty spaces, stylised depiction, and lines of varying thickness to convey texture and movement. For Liu, it encapsulated the creativity of the Chinese people of the past. Influenced by the romanticised image of the literati painter as a scholar-gentleman that circulated in early 20th century China, Liu understood literati painting to be an expression of an artist’s interiority — including his knowledge and moral character — in ways that were unhindered by worldly concerns.11 He believed that in contrast to the commercially motivated professional painter, who was a “craftsman,” the scholar-amateur was a true artist.12

While Liu Kang admired the literati masters of the past, he did not condone imitating their works. Instead, he argued that a modern Chinese artist should attempt to create new art by creatively interpreting the art of the past.13 Thus, for him, the aesthetics of the ancients were not transcendental, but had to be reformulated for the present.

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painting, Liu Kang turned to Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, which some Chinese artists of the reform era considered symbols of the universal progress of modern European culture.²⁴ It is widely known that Liu Kang borrowed from these movements.²⁵ What is less considered is how he appropriated European artistic ideas for the sake of creating a modern Chinese art.

Liu Kang was particularly attracted to Post-Impressionist and Fauvist paintings for their emphasis on direct observation of the subject, but doing so without turning a blind eye to the agency of the artist. For him, European art-makers before Post-Impressionism mostly aimed to re-create the external appearance of their surroundings, leaving no room for personal interpretation. In contrast, paintings by the likes of van Gogh and Matisse, despite being derived from nature, were also concerned with expressing the artist’s “interiority.”¹⁶

For Liu Kang, the twin concerns of direct observation and individual expression were significant for reforming Chinese art. They served the specific purpose of changing what was considered an outdated modus operandi in China: copying prescribed forms from painting manuals. For centuries, instead of engaging visually with their subjects, Chinese painters had worked with a pictorial convention found in publications such as the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (芥子园画谱).¹⁷ A segment of reform-minded artists in the early 20th century were against this practice, arguing that it left no room for human agency.¹⁸ Liu believed that Post-Impressionism and Fauvism when accepted in Chinese art, would allow an artist to paint from direct observation while expressing a subjective visual engagement. His understanding of modernist European tendencies was thus shaped to a large extent by the idea of “individualism” — an important modern Chinese concern.¹⁹

Like a number of art-makers looking to reform Chinese art, Liu Kang was also drawn to Post-Impressionism and Fauvism for their perceived affinities with the literati painting.²⁰ For him, the key visual elements in the works of Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse that symbolise expressivity, including flat surfaces and expressive lines, were already essential features in the scholar-amateur painting centuries earlier in the Middle Kingdom: the “progress” of European modernism was embodied in the Chinese art of the past.²¹ Thus, Liu was not so much concerned with the theoretical underpinning of Western artistic ideas at their source as he was in translating them so that they took on new meanings in the context of the reform of Chinese art.²²

The strength of Liu Kang’s view of himself as a cosmopolitan Chinese artist did not diminish with the arrival of Malayan independence. Like a traditional man of letters aspiring to learn about a wide range of subjects, he celebrated syncretism. In addition to art, he also dabbled in writing about other aesthetic forms, demonstrating familiarity with poetry, music, sculpture, dance, and interior design.²³

Of particular note is Liu’s 1960 essay “Gravel of the River — Nurturing New Life” (江河沙砾·孕育新生), written in the year following Singapore’s attainment of self-government, in which he argued for a Malayan art with polycultural features. He contended that as multi-ethnicity was unique to the emerging nation, this art should aim for “merging the characteristics of all races.”²⁴ But he made his claim for the uniqueness of Malayan culture by comparing it to cultures in key metropolises of the world: “Paris, the arts capital of Western Europe; Beijing, the holy land of Oriental art; Rome, the indestructible city to which all roads lead; and Tokyo, the youthful and energetic cultural capital.”²⁵ While attempting to distinguish Malayan art from that of other cities, Liu was also linking it with artistic achievements that have occurred elsewhere.²⁶

Significantly, Liu Kang urged Malayan Chinese artists to create a new art with the same high level of aesthetic achievement as the traditional Chinese arts, which had “long occupied a leading position in the world of art.”²⁷ Liu was likely referring to his own project of reforming Chinese art of the past. After China came under Communist rule in 1949, it became extremely difficult for artists to carry out what was considered a bourgeois practice of appropriating Post-Impressionism and Fauvism.²⁸ At the same time, however, this modernised Chinese art blossomed in Singapore, primarily due to Liu’s growing stature, as well as that of his colleagues such as Cheong Soo Pieng (1917–1983) and Chen Wen Hsi (1906–1991), who expanded its iconography to include the peoples and landscapes of the tropical archipelago. Thus, in “Gravel,” Liu expressed a desire to see Malaya develop into an important centre for continuing the hitherto incomplete
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task of bringing Chinese art in line with European modernism. He also demonstrated a certain self-consciousness in being among the first to start a new tradition among the overseas Chinese artists — one that was centred on cosmopolitanising a “parent” art that originated in pre-war China.

This essay has attempted to offer some thoughts on looking at Liu Kang’s artistic career as being centrally focused on creating a modern Chinese art, a concern that developed early in his career in Shanghai, and relocated with him to Singapore before the start of the Pacific War. I have maintained that Liu’s writings show the primacy of his Chinese identity, and his keen participation in modernising literati painting. In doing so, I hope to raise some awareness of the inadequacy of our current assessment of his artistic accomplishment as merely proto-national, and to open up the possibility of evaluating his significance as a diasporic Chinese artist.

ENDNOTES

1 For example, according to the National Heritage Board and the National Arts Council, two of the most important cultural institutions in Singapore, “[For] more than 40 years, Mr Liu Kang has helped lay a firm foundation for the development of a distinctive art movement in Singapore. He did this as artist, educator, critic and mentor.” Exh. cat. Liu Kang at 87, ed. Teo Han Wue (Singapore: National Arts Council and National Heritage Board, 1997), 7


4 For an account of Chinese reform in the late 19th to early 20th century, see Spence, Jonathan D., The Search for Modern China (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).


6 For Liu Kang’s account of his relationship with Fu Lei, see Liu Kang, “Fu Lei, Fu Ts‘ong,” 121–134.


11 For a discussion of how the literati painting came to be seen as a quintessentially Chinese art in the 20th century, see Aida Yuan Wong, Pariting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 54–76.

12 Liu Kang, “In Memory of Huang Binhong,” 63–64.

13 Liu Kang, “Tan Tze Chor and his Collection of Rare Calligraphy and Paintings,” 45–47.


15 For example, see Chia, “Introduction,” 12–16.


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19 For a discussion of the concept of individualism in modern China, see Lydia H. Liu, Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity, China, 1900–1937 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 77–99.


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