Liu Kang

Siew, Sara, Liu, Kang

Published by National Gallery Singapore

Siew, Sara and Kang Liu.
ESSAYS FROM

1937 TO

1950
Cultivating Art in Singapore: 1937–1950
Yow Siew Kah

In the introductory essay to this volume, we saw that Liu Kang spent the early part of his artistic career in Shanghai and Paris in the company of Chinese intellectuals, such as Liu Haisu and Fu Lei, who were key figures in the cultural reform movements in the first half of the 20th century in China. These were Liu’s formative years as a painter, and also mark the beginning of his career as an art educator: at Liu Haisu’s invitation, he became a teacher at his alma mater, the Shanghai College of Fine Arts.

However, the artist’s extended stay in Shanghai came to an abrupt end in 1937. When he was in Malaya for a holiday in 1937, Japanese troops attacked and occupied Shanghai before moving south to Nanjing. As it was too dangerous to return to China, Liu opted to stay on in Malaya. During the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, he moved between Singapore and Muar, the town where he spent part of his childhood. When the war ended, he decided to settle in Singapore. This section contains essays that Liu wrote from the time he departed from Shanghai to the years immediately following the Second World War. Most of these articles were intended for the Chinese overseas community in Singapore, and they express a number of their intellectual concerns, including the idea that Malaya was a “cultural desert.” We will see that Liu attempted to fill this cultural void not by inventing a new art, but by introducing Malaya to the art of modern China, suggesting the significance of his formative years in Shanghai on his later artistic development.

Liu Kang’s unintended permanent relocation to Malaya coincided with an influx of artists and writers from China looking to get away from the worsening war condition in their homeland. These Chinese artistic and literary figures were key to the development of an intellectual community in Singapore, which became an important part of Liu’s professional and social lives. It was also a time when the region was seeing a surge in arts-related activities. A number of art societies had already been set up, and with the increased numbers of Chinese migrants to Singapore, their memberships grew. Art exhibitions were held more frequently, including those by resident and travelling Chinese artists who wanted to raise funds by selling art to support the Chinese war efforts against the Japanese. In general, the period from the late 1930s to the late 1940s saw Singapore growing as an important art and cultural centre for the Chinese overseas.

After moving to Singapore, Liu Kang not only continued to paint, but also demonstrated an interest in influencing how others created art. He assumed leadership positions in two key art societies, both of which were important institutions in regulating and disseminating artistic ideas: the Society of Chinese Artists, an association led by a small team of Chinese cultural elites, and the Singapore Art Society, a prominent arts group with a broad-based membership.

One of Liu Kang’s key reasons for taking leadership roles in these associations was that he believed Malaya lacked “high” culture — an issue that art societies could do more to address. The idea that Malaya was a “cultural desert” began circulating among intellectuals in the Chinese overseas community no later than the early 20th century. Writers, for example, often used the imagery of cultivation when describing their intellectual role, seeing themselves as gardeners looking to turn the infertile land into fecund plots. The contents of their works, as well as the names of the literary supplements in which their essays were published — such as Deserted Island (荒岛) and Wasteland (荒原) — delivered the sentiments that Malaya was culturally barren.

The artist as cultivator is a recurring metaphor in Liu Kang’s own writing. For instance, in his 1950 essay “Tan Tsze Chor and his Collection of Rare Calligraphy and Paintings” (读陈之初珍藏书画归来), he argued that while one may be disappointed by the arid Malayan cultural landscape, one can take hope that it may some day develop into a lush forest. In this regard, Liu believed that art societies were important: by holding regular exhibitions, they increased public access to good art. Moreover, these associations were platforms for art-makers to share ideas and organise channels to voice their collective concerns.

Thus, soon after Liu Kang arrived in Malaya, he committed himself to developing the width and depth of the arts community — expressing its desire for more financial resources to be channeled into the arts — until his death in 2004.
In the introductory essay to this volume, we saw that Liu Kang spent the early part of his artistic career in Shanghai and Paris in the company of Chinese intellectuals, such as Liu Haisu and Fu Lei, who were key figures in the cultural reform movements in the first half of the 20th century in China. These were Liu's formative years as a painter, and also mark the beginning of his career as an art educator: at Liu Haisu's invitation, he became a teacher at his alma mater, the Shanghai College of Fine Arts.

However, the artist's extended stay in Shanghai came to an abrupt end in 1937. When he was in Malaya for a holiday in 1937, Japanese troops attacked and occupied Shanghai before moving south to Nanjing. As it was too dangerous to return to China, Liu opted to stay on in Malaya. During the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, he moved between Singapore and Muar, the town where he spent part of his childhood. When the war ended, he decided to settle in Singapore. This section contains essays that Liu wrote from the time he departed from Shanghai to the years immediately following the Second World War. Most of these articles were intended for the Chinese overseas community in Singapore, and they express a number of their intellectual concerns, including the idea that Malaya was a "cultural desert." We will see that Liu attempted to fill this cultural void not by inventing a new art, but by introducing Malaya to the art of modern China, suggesting the significance of his formative years in Shanghai on his later artistic development.

Liu Kang's unintended permanent relocation to Malaya coincided with an influx of artists and writers from China looking to get away from the worsening war condition in their homeland. These Chinese artistic and literary figures were key to the development of an intellectual community in Singapore, which became an important part of Liu's professional and social lives. It was also a time when the region was seeing a surge in arts-related activities. A number of art societies had already been set up, and with the increased numbers of Chinese migrants to Singapore, their memberships grew. Art exhibitions were held more frequently, including those by resident and travelling Chinese artists who wanted to raise funds by selling art to support the Chinese war efforts against the Japanese. In general, the period from the late 1930s to the late 1940s saw Singapore growing as an important art and cultural centre for the Chinese overseas.

After moving to Singapore, Liu Kang not only continued to paint, but also demonstrated an interest in influencing how others created art. He assumed leadership positions in two key art societies, both of which were important institutions in regulating and disseminating artistic ideas: the Society of Chinese Artists, an association led by a small team of Chinese cultural elites, and the Singapore Art Society, a prominent arts group with a broad-based membership.

One of Liu Kang's key reasons for taking leadership roles in these associations was that he believed Malaya lacked "high" culture — an issue that art societies could do more to address. The idea that Malaya was a "cultural desert" began circulating among intellectuals in the Chinese overseas community no later than the early 20th century. Writers, for example, often used the imagery of cultivation when describing their intellectual role, seeing themselves as gardeners looking to turn the infertile land into fecund plots. The contents of their works, as well as the names of the literary supplements in which their essays were published — such as Deserted Island (荒岛) and Wasteland (荒原) — delivered the sentiments that Malaya was culturally barren.

The artist as cultivator is a recurring metaphor in Liu Kang's own writing. For instance, in his 1950 essay "Tan Tsze Chor and his Collection of Rare Calligraphy and Paintings" (读陈之初珍藏书画归来), he argued that while one may be disappointed by the arid Malayan cultural landscape, one can take hope that it may some day develop into a lush forest. In this regard, Liu believed that art societies were important: by holding regular exhibitions, they increased public access to good art. Moreover, these associations were platforms for art-makers to share ideas and organise channels to voice their collective concerns.

Thus, soon after Liu Kang arrived in Malaya, he committed himself to developing the width and depth of the arts community — expressing its desire for more financial resources to be channeled into the arts — until his death in 2004.
The Voice of the Motherland

Having lived in Nanyang for some time, I feel a sense of emptiness, as if adrift in a vast ocean, unable to see the familiar and kind faces of my brothers and sisters, and unable to enjoy my parents’ and my wife’s love. I also feel an unspeakable aridity, as though trudging thousands of miles in the desert, unable to find any dewdrops and greenery, or any villages. Unknowingly, my mind has become unconscious; my senses are numbed, and even my muscles and blood vessels are about to stiffen.

This, I believe, is caused by a lack of a local cultural atmosphere, especially in introducing the quintessence of the art of our motherland [China]. This can be considered the people’s misfortune, and also the fault of the people and organisations responsible for promoting culture.

In direct response to this shortcoming, the Photographic Exhibition of Artefacts and Landscapes from the Motherland (祖国文物摄影展览会) organised by Nanyang Siang Pau (南洋商报) has great significance and meaning.

For those who have returned to and come from the motherland, this photographic exhibition will elicit nostalgia. Fellow overseas Chinese will realise that the motherland is actually a magnificently beautiful country. The current armed conflict, corrupt government and ruined economy cannot conceal its beautiful landscape and elegant artefacts. The overseas Chinese whose palpable longing grows daily are led to deep contemplation, and find their love for the motherland grow.

Equally important is that this exhibition may allow our international friends to gain a better understanding of Chinese culture, thus increasing our standing in the international community.

Rome, the capital of Italy, enjoys the reputation of La Ville Éternelle (the Eternal City). The city earned this name because of the historically magnificent architecture, sculptures, and paintings of the West that are concentrated in it. Scholars are drawn to Rome to study the profound mysteries of Western cultural art while tourists go in search of Western ways.