Liu Kang

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Like a significant number of reform-minded Chinese artists in the early decades of the 20th century such as Liu Haisu, Liu Kang held the image of the Chinese scholar in high regard. This idealised figure continued to inform his art and writing years after he left China.


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


Where is the Centre for Southeast Asian Art?

Just as Europe has Paris and Japan has Tokyo as centres of fine art, Southeast Asia should also have an art centre.

Bali, an island with a strong artistic atmosphere, is home not only to beautiful mountains and waters, but also to people with very strong artistic talent and creativity. Its music, dance, architecture and sculpture can rival international Eastern and Western art; their pervasiveness is far beyond what other countries can match. Bali should be considered an arts centre. Unfortunately, it is remote, transportation is inconvenient, and it seldom comes into contact with the outside world. Without the injection of new culture, it is inevitable that it has become conservative and closed, considered to have fallen behind in terms of modern progress.

Yogjakarta and Bandung in Java each have a spectacular history. Currently, fine arts schools have been established. However, the works produced have never gained popularity. Owing to geographical seclusion, their art is parochial and lacks an international flair. The golden reputation of an arts centre does not belong to them.

Although Bangkok in Siam and Rangoon in Burma boast of gold and jade stupas and famous dance performances respectively, their religiosity is too strong and their artistic energy is not sufficiently vibrant. Besides, they represent only the consciousness of a single ethnic group. It is apparent why they cannot become regional centres.

As for Saigon in Vietnam, Tokyo in Japan, Manila in the Philippines, and Colombo in Sri Lanka, only a smattering of art and craft and musical entertainment exists for tourists. Little else worthy of mention exists.

Thus, after careful consideration, I still wish to give this honour to the preferred place of the times — Singapore.

It is possible for Singapore to become the art centre of Southeast Asia because of its outstanding advantages. First, it has a favourable geographical location. Not only is it

ENDNOTES


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


situated in a central position in Southeast Asia, it is also a well-established hub for travelling between Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and the United States. Its communication networks are strong; its land, sea and air transportation systems are already well developed, and it is able to absorb new or foreign cultures in a short time. Second, its population is multi-racial, allowing many races to live together harmoniously. This is an asset to a harmonious union within the arts. Third, the interaction of the world’s major cultures such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism are present here. They interact and interrelate, but do not lose their individuality. Fourth, while Singapore’s economy is not yet completely stable, it is vibrant.

The above are strongly in Singapore’s favour, but there are several weaknesses as well:

First, the foundation of Singapore culture is not yet stable; this has a great impact on artistic discussion and thought. Second, utilitarianism has pervaded the entire city and greatly diluted its artistic atmosphere. This has undeniably weakened artists’ creative desires and the public’s mood for appreciating art. These can be attributed to the country’s young history and flimsy cultural foundation. However, such weaknesses may be overcome with human effort. We just need a considerable period of time!

Since Singapore is favourably endowed and possesses many advantages, how then can it be realised as a true arts centre in Southeast Asia? The more important means are as follows: one, popularise art education, and pay particular attention to it in schools. For example, painting, drama and music should be listed as compulsory subjects. Extend the duration of the lessons and improve teaching standards. Two, set up more classes for fine arts, music and drama; employ professional instructors and hold open exhibitions or performances annually. Three, establish a fine arts museum; collect masterpieces from various countries and put them on public display for all to view. Four, build concert halls and other venues for well-known operas and musical performances. Five, establish art awards with generous monetary prizes to individuals who are gifted and highly skilled, so that they may focus on their art, unhindered by quotidian demands.

Six, encourage the public to appreciate the arts and to buy and collect artworks, so that artists can be rewarded spiritually and materially. Seven, organise exhibitions to exchange artworks, creating the opportunity for mutual study between foreign and local artists. Eight, establish a set of aesthetic conditions for the city’s architecture. Nine, place exquisite and magnificent sculptures in parks, cross junctions, public squares and plazas to nurture the city-dweller’s eye for aesthetics and create access to spectacular sights.

If we are able to achieve the above mentioned, the basic requirements of an arts city will have been roughly put in place. Whether it can garner responses from other countries and create new styles that will be followed by others will have to be left to the wisdom and effort of its artists. Honestly, Singapore’s culture is foundationally predicated upon that of China and England. However, as the Chinese have been the one more involved in artistic activities, the responsibility of turning Singapore into the arts centre of Southeast Asia falls on us — the overseas Chinese. We must approach this monumental responsibility with magnanimity and innovation in our creative activities. We will thus arrive at something that refrains from channelling the traditional Chinese model or making superficial imitations of Europe, and even less of Javanese simplicity or Siamese mannerisms. What we want to establish is a tropical archetype with an equatorial flavour. This tropical archetype needs to have strong heat and light, sufficient vitality, exciting emotion and sensitive insight. The robust theme is that of “The Life of Man” as a complement to the natural scenery.

In summary, this vast Southeast Asian region is still a barren wilderness with infrequent pockets of activity. The countries are governed independently and uncoordinated in their measures, impeding their ability to challenge the more developed nations. Since we do not wish to fall behind, we need to stand upright, hold our heads high, look ahead, and take big strides towards the brilliant future. Southeast Asia needs an arts centre to be the leader of the pack. Where, then, is this arts centre? I say it is Singapore!
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