Undoubtedly, the purpose of this exhibition of Chinese cultural artefacts organised by the Nanyang Confucian Association (南洋孔教会) is to display some of the motherland's art and historical artefacts so that all races will have an opportunity to view and study them, to promote the true meaning of our inherent culture, and to indicate what a future art movement should strive for.

Owing to the short time given in preparing for the exhibition, it is inevitable that the content has not been adequately put together. Based only on the sources of the exhibits, collectors who love art and scholars who are fond of antiques have been involved, all of whom contributed in their personal capacities. Even if the scale of this exhibition is not fastidious, it is still truly hard to come by and should not be compared with a national exhibition organised by the government and paid for with public funds. However, when has the government in Nanyang ever attempted anything like that?

Our countrymen have been heading south for more than 1,500 years since the Han Dynasty. Although most of their activities were commercial, political and military in nature, their presence led indirectly to the spread of Chinese culture. This contribution is not insignificant. Even today pottery continues to be excavated on isolated islands; the fact that our currency is still used in Bali proves that such a poor and remote place is also influenced by our culture. It is a pity that the indigenous people in the south lack cultural activity, which is why they have no apparent response to art. In fact, cultural interaction requires the parties involved to have attained a certain standard of cultural activity. There should be mutual encouragement that makes for gradual evolution, for if efforts are one-sided with the recipient unable to reciprocate, they will be futile.

Furthermore, the members who have been scattering the seeds of culture have done so without any concerted effort or organisation. Therefore, their endeavours have been weak and their effects, small. However, in today’s world, where there is organisation, not only is it difficult to compete with others, there is also no hope for survival. When will the cultural movement here develop a unique character? In light of this, it is not difficult at all for us to appreciate the significance of this exhibition.

Tan Tsze Chor and his Collection of Rare Calligraphy and Paintings

Before the war of resistance against the Japanese, our government [Nationalist China] had shipped to London some of the best collected artworks of the Palace Museum [Beijing]. A historic art exhibition on a magnificent scale was held and the valuable exhibits caused a stir. Many scholars and experts the world over congregated in London to view the exhibits meticulously and study them at length. After gaining an understanding, they returned to where they came from, satisfied. They spread their new knowledge to every stratum of European society, such that among their people arose a spirit that was more receptive and friendly towards Chinese culture. These people now understood that when their ancestors were still hunting in the wild, an Oriental tribe far away had already possessed a superior culture. They also came to understand that this culture was full of sincerity, generosity, compassion and kindness. They further learnt that Chinese culture not only held a commanding position in the East, but also influenced the entire world. Hence, arrogance was destroyed and discrimination was removed, replaced by sheer admiration as people lifted their heads and looked to the East, longing for a glimpse of incandescent brilliance.

Regrettably, since that exhibition, the government has not had the means to continue.

Nanyang has always been considered a cultural desert and a large part of this may be traced to faults caused by man. For example, the rulers’ exploitation of the economy and the local inhabitants’ gradual laziness were causes that impeded passionate aspirations towards more noble activities. So too for the culture that could have been reaped! As for the overseas Chinese, they left home and sailed across oceans for a livelihood. Many of them became labourers or undertook commercial activities. As long as there was income, they had peace of mind and nothing else mattered. At best, they established a few primary and secondary schools to educate their children. This was already the highest expression of their efforts in this area. As for culture, it could take a back seat!

With each race scattered about and coming into contact with one another within a progressive and diverse society, culture is used as the medium to communicate thoughts and emotions. Not only does this prevent unnecessary conflict, when there is culture as...
a means of interaction, consolation of the spirit and the moulding of the soul can be attained, and a realm higher than material life may be realised for humankind.

I do not deny that for many years, oases have gradually been discovered in this cultural desert. For example, different types of music performances and art exhibitions have shown signs of steady progress. The recent establishment of the University of Malaya is the most pleasing growth among the oases. In future, it could perhaps be the hotbed in which luxuriant forests sprout from sand. Nevertheless, we cannot but despair to see the wasteland that is now before our eyes.

Fortunately, during this July which alternates erratically between rain and shine, a grand event arrived, heralded by the radiance of the sun and the dew of the clouds. The Tan Tsze Chor Collection of Rare Calligraphy and Paintings, organised by the China Society (中国学会), is to be shown to the world at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (中华总商会) from the 22nd onwards.

This is joyful news indeed. We can say that this orderly, refined, and comprehensive lineup of Chinese calligraphy and ink paintings is perhaps unprecedented in the history of Nanyang. It is even more valuable that these treasures have been amassed through the efforts of one man, Tan Tsze Chor (陈之初). In fact, the search for a piece of artwork requires not only money but also lofty objectives and deep self-cultivation, qualities that Tan Tsze Chor possesses. Hence, my suggestion that we name him China’s art ambassador to Malaya will not be seen as inappropriate.

Our government never had any strategy for art matters overseas, neither was a proper organisation ever formed to promote it. Thus, such important tasks have fallen on the shoulders of fellow citizens overseas. The experienced and courageous among them are confident and happy to take on such tasks, and the country and its people have also benefited immensely. Such people, however, are hard to come by. It is far more common to find those who are capable but inexperienced, or who lack both ability and experience. There is also another group of countrymen who have lived overseas for too long and who, lacking the influence from the motherland, have embraced foreign cultures and as a result lead ignoble existences.

Hence, artists in Nanyang actually have two missions: one, to get an international audience to recognise the essence of our country’s culture; the other, to remind blood relations not to forget our ancestors’ good work. Although both working missions are different, they have a common objective, and that is to present the culture of our country so that it will forever stand tall.

Undoubtedly, this exhibition has attracted the special attention of people from all over the world. It aggregates the finest works of the famous artists of every period since the Song and Yuan dynasties. As each era has its own historical background and philosophy, we will be able to detect, from work to work, an evolution of content and style. This is an extremely interesting subject in art history, and is concretely presented before our eyes for practical validation. What an inspiration!

A detailed analysis concerning the master artists of the various periods of Chinese art cannot be easily given in a few words. I do not wish to waste ink and take up precious writing space. However, we need to recognise that although Chinese art shone brilliantly in the past and played an important role in culture, these are the achievements of predecessors — the revelations of traditional thought, an inheritance bequeathed by our ancestors. We might regard these as historical records for study but we should not think of them as living treasures because our generation has entered a brand new phase. Social standards are different; lifestyles, even more so. Ways of thinking and feeling have changed; thus, the arts naturally have to find new ways of expression. However, the creation of new forms of art cannot come about easily. We have to adopt our forebears’ bountiful achievements and put them to creative use before we have any hope of accomplishing the formidable mission. This is what it means to be critical when accepting the legacy of our forebears.

At this time and place, we face a wall filled with national treasures. Our minds are stirred, and we recall the exhibition of Chinese cultural artefacts in London. Our pulse quickens with excitement and we subconsciously feel the importance of our responsibility.
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ESSAYS FROM

1951

to

1960