THE EMERGENCE OF
THE NANYANG STYLE AND ITS ROLES
IN THE REGIONALISM OF
ASEAN COUNTRIES
THE EMERGENCE OF THE NANYANG STYLE AND ITS ROLE IN THE REGIONALISM OF ASEAN COUNTRIES

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UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY, NEPEAN.
To my wife, Tshau-yi.
with love
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an in-depth study in the art of Singapore.
ASEAN has been carrying out art activities since its formation in 1967. Some of the artists from the region have initiated discussions about their traditional cultures and aesthetic discourses in recent years. One of the main issues during the 93 Symposium at Manila was to call for an ASEAN aesthetic identity. It was due to the increasing awareness of the growing consciousness of culture and identity in the region. This paper begins with the history of the Nanyang Style which was established by a group of immigrant artists from China during the 30s and 40s. The Nanyang Style of art was an integration of traditional Chinese ink and wash painting, and was influenced by the School of Paris and local subject matter. By synthesising these three elements, the Nanyang artists were able to imbue a sense of local consciousness within their works. During the 1950s the Nanyang artists had extended their aesthetic explorations to Bali and since then Balinese indigenous art has become a major influence on the Nanyang Style. This was seen as an issue of regionalism in the early art history of Singapore. Nanyang Style became the mainstream in visual arts practice in Singapore until it was replaced by Abstract Expressionism and Pop art in the 1970s. Attempted in this paper however, is a re-examination of the Nanyang Style in order to demonstrate its significant contribution to the art world of Singapore. This paper also suggests that Nanyang Style might be reassessed as a metaphor for Singaporean cultural identity given its synthesised characteristics. This reassessment will further contribute to the broader debate concerning the shaping of an ASEAN aesthetic in the region.
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INTRODUCTION

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional organisation established in 1967. ASEAN was first formed as a political grouping and only recently has it started to explore concerns that go beyond matters relating to the economic cooperation of countries in this region. Due to the end of Cold War and the rapidly growing political and economic importance of the East Asian economic block, ASEAN countries have become strategically significant and play a vital role within the Asia Pacific region. ASEAN has also inaugurated programs of cultural development. A prime concern of these cultural initiatives has been to promote debate and discussion on the subjects relating to art and culture in the ASEAN region.

The ASEAN Symposium '93, held in Manila, initiated a call for regional identity. The papers delivered at the Symposium addressed three main topics.
The first topic concerned the traditional cultures of the region. The second discussed the contemporary expression of these traditional cultures. The third opened up discussion about strategies to develop a regional identity.

The subject of regional identity has become a subject of central importance among artists of the ASEAN region.1 With the exception of Thailand, all of these countries were colonised by Western powers and regained their independence in the period following the Second World War. As a result of colonisation, the traditional cultures of these countries became heavily overlayed with Western cultural values.2 The Symposium'93 called for a re-examination of the role of traditional cultures within a contemporary Asian context. It also called for an examination of how these traditional cultures have interacted with Western cultural paradigms.3

In Singapore, the concept of a local aesthetic was first discussed during the 1930s by a group

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of Chinese artists who had recently left China to settle in Singapore.\(^4\) These artists brought with them the knowledge and tradition of two distinct artistic traditions: traditional Chinese ink and wash painting and the technique of oil painting associated with the School of Paris which was taught in the art academies in China. In Singapore, these artists attempted to apply these two distinct approaches to local Singaporean subject matter.

Mr. Lim Hak Tai, the leader of these artists, established the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1938 and it became the centre of art activities for both Singapore and Malaysia. The academy and its lecturers had extensively contributed their efforts to shaping the modern art of Singapore. The terms Nanyang Style and Nanyang artists have since gained wide acceptance and usage.\(^5\)

In the 1950s a small group of Singapore artists travelled to Bali. The members of this expedition were all associated with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. As a consequence of this trip these artists began to incorporate Balinese motifs in their works. This represented the first occasion when subject

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matter of a regional nature began to play a role in the art of Singapore. An exhibition of their work was held in 1953 in Singapore. It was as a result of this exhibition that the idea of a regional consciousness in relation to the Nanyang Style was first discussed.

The word 'Nanyang' in the Chinese language, when literally translated, means 'South Sea' and is widely understood as referring to South East Asia. Nanyang style is associated with an art that synthesised Chinese traditional art styles and the influence of Parisian modern art, most notably, Impressionism. What is most significant about the Nanyang style is that it invokes a local and indigenous consciousness through the introduction of local subject matter. During the 1950s the Nanyang style begun to include imagery from indigenous Balinese and East Malaysian cultures.

When the ASEAN's Art Symposium 1993 called for an ASEAN aesthetic discourse, it initiated a cultural debate. The development of the Nanyang style is relevant to this debate because it first raised the issue of local and regional identities. It is for this reason that the Nanyang style deserves a more in-depth re-examination and exploration. This reassessment of the

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6 Xia-Shuoqi, 1994, "Art of the Nanyang", _Window on Singapore Art_ travelling exhibition publication, National Heritage Board, Singapore, p. 44.
Nanyang Style will further contribute to the broader debate concerning the formation of an ASEAN aesthetic. In particular, the importance of an re-examination of the Nanyang Style lies in the following:

(1) Modernity has caused the various traditional cultures in Singapore a general decline. People have turned their interests into the domain of Western influences and civilisation instead. The cultural debate on "Asian values" during the 70s reflected the economic interests of Western technology and its irrevocable overly Westernised social structure in contradiction to traditional values. It is important and therefore to examine the Nanyang Style to counteract this westernisation of Asian culture.

(2) Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art from the United States became the mainstream of the art scene in the 70s. The practice of traditional and indigenous arts appeared provincial and outmoded. It is possible than not a revival of the lost story of the Nanyang Style can constitute to a reemergence of a Singaporean cultural identity.
(3) Because exploration of the local geographical environment and the portrayal of ways of indigenous life and culture have been two of the most significant characteristics of the Nanyang Style, then these concepts of localisation are still relevant to present artistic explorations.

(4) There have been many articles written about the Nanyang Style, but mostly these have been related to individual artists and their aesthetic articulation. Issues of the Nanyang Style and its contribution towards the shaping of the Singapore cultural identity have not been critically discussed.

Therefore it is the intention of this paper to attempt an investigation of the Nanyang Style, its aesthetic values and the significance of its evolution over the last fifty years. Through such an investigation I will also attempt to facilitate the exploration of a Singapore cultural identity and the significance of such an identity in the broader ASEAN context.
CHAPTER ONE
Nanyang Academy, Nanyang Style and Nanyang Artists

"Nanyang" in Chinese literally means "Southern Seas", a term used by the Chinese to refer to any part or all of the island nations situated south of China. It covers the Malaya Peninsular, Singapore, the Indonesian archipelago, the Philippines, and the southern part of Thailand which is known in modern geographical terms as "South East Asia".

The South East Asian countries had a long relationship with China. Official documentations recording tributary relations with various states in Southeast Asia had been continuously provided since the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 211 A.D.). Besides writing
about the trade and diplomacy, they have also written about the workings of the tributary system of foreign relations. Ming (1368-1644) relations with Southeast Asia had concentrated on shipping technology, navigation skills and the rise of the great southern ports. The official relations and trade activities between Southeast Asia and China, have been continuously maintained. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries China began to face threats from foreign invasions, revolutions and internal upheavals. This has caused a large number of Chinese along the coastal cities to migrate to various parts of Southeast Asia. When most of the Southeast Asian countries had been colonised during the 19th century, demands for additional work forces for developments increased specifically in the Malaya Peninsula. The working of the tin-mines, the clearing of the jungle, the labour to the plantations and the enterprises in the ports were mainly dependent on immigrant population which had caused the Southward movement of the Chinese.

The term "Nanyang" was also used to associate with the Southeast Asian Overseas Chinese regional identity when Nationalist China tried to bind its overseas compatriots together in the service of the

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motherland. In fact, the Chinese in Southeast Asia before the Second World War have never had a concept of identity, they have only a simple idea of "Chineseness", of being Chinese and of becoming un-Chinese. Wang Gungwu interprets the meaning and relations between "Chineseness" and "Chinese identity":

"Chineseness" is no easier to define than "Chinese identity" and tends to be defined tautologically. But both at least consist of concrete images that can be pointed to, whereas "identity" is abstract and the Chinese have found no word for it before the last decade or so. The technical term is now translated as "rentong" meaning "to identify that which is the same", but this is yet to be used in ordinary speech.  

In this respect, Chinese were basically conscious of their family roots, their place of origin in China (which usually determined their language group or sub-ethnic group, as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka etc.) and their ties with other Chinese whether in China or in other parts of the region. Wang Gungwu further stated:

These factors had created a core of sentiment which could be strengthened and expanded by stories about the Chinese past and reasons for pride in a more or less abstract 'Great Tradition' of Chinese civilisation.

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However, because this historical consciousness in relation to the sustaining of Chineseness has been seldom authoritative, the Colonial government and indigenous elites of Southeast Asia had found it acceptable and allowed them to preserve it. Nevertheless, when Nationalists in China enforced their principle that all Chinese are part of China and that all Chinese should give their primary loyalty to her, the issue of Chinese identity became more complex. It evoked South East Asian Overseas Chinese patriotic feelings and resulted in the setting up of the clans and organisations.

The Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement was one such organisation that carried out its opposition to the Japanese invasion of China by setting up its head-quarter in Singapore with branches throughout the Southeast Asian region. For a short time Japanese aggression against China drew the Nanyang Chinese together in unprecedented unity.\footnote{The Cambridge history of South East Asia edited by Nicholas Tarling, Cambridge University Press 1992, p.p. 587.} It also made the Chinese identity stronger and more emotional.

Although there were Chinese immigrants to Nanyang some two hundred years earlier, and they have since made it their home, it was still the common practice among these immigrants to treat the place as a
temporary settlement. The mentality among immigrants was to simply endure the hardships of working in a foreign land in the hope that they could return to China if they became rich.

At the end of the 1930s, when the Sino-Japanese war began, a number of Chinese artists who had studied art from various academies in Shanghai settled in Singapore. During that time scarcely anyone had any interest in art because it was unpopular and in addition two thirds of the Chinese population were illiterate. The arrival of these artists would in many respects became important, particularly in the diffusing of art education and cultural activities.

One of their remarkable contributions was the setting up of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts which was the only art institution in Singapore until the mid-1980s. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was established by Lim Hak Tai (1904-1963), a Chinese immigrant from Amoy, the state capital of the province of Fujian. The subsequent development of "Nanyang style" by this group of artists marked the beginning of the modern art history in Singapore.

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In the investigation of the art of Singapore during the colonial period, it was written by Yeo Mang Thong that there were a limited amount of art activities in Singapore until a 1927 exhibition of the work of Yang Tze-ai (A graduate from the University of Shanghai and had studied art in Paris.) In 1939, when Xu Beihong, (1895-1953) a highly reputable innovator of the 20th century contemporary Chinese paintings, recalled his visits to Singapore in 1925 and 1927, he stated that Singapore was almost a cultural desert with no kind of art around at all.\textsuperscript{13} Brother Joseph McNally, President of the LaSalle College of the Arts, and member of the Advisory Committee on Visual Arts, Ministry of Culture also stated: "The monuments of the period are mainly architectural. They are a mute testimony to the styles of far away places. Some of them are decorated with sculptures in ceramics, marble, bronze or stucco- almost all of them imported."\textsuperscript{14} As for the Chinese, they imported craftsmen and calligraphers to decorate their houses and temples, and Indian immigrants used artists from India to decorate their temples.

Under these circumstances, with the coming of the first art institution, NAFA had initiated

\textsuperscript{13} Yeo Mang Thong, 1992, Xinjiapo zhangjian huaren meishushi lunji, 1st ed. Singapore, Asian Studies Society, pp. 1-5.
the practice of nurturing the local art of Singapore rather than importing arts and craftsmanship from elsewhere. One of the reasons stated by Lim Hak Tai in 1946, in his recollection of the establishment of NAFA was that no one had taken advantage of the central locality of Singapore in Nanyang as a trading port linking the East and the West in a rich tropical setting.15

Nanyang Style was first used as a generic term to characterise Chinese literature with subject matter based on local (Nanyang) themes. It was developed from a literary tendency during the 1920s towards vernacularisation which emphasised the placement of local Nanyang subject matter into writing. The newspapers such as "Le Bao", "Xin Kuo Ming Rei Bao", "Zhong Xin Rei Bao" and "Sin Chew Jit Poh" played a very important role in the promotion of the "Nanyang Style". Kwok Kian Chow saw:

In the late 1920s and 1930s, some proponents of the "Nanyang Style" associated writing with the articulation of a South Seas/Overseas Chinese identity and took the literary discourse even further to deal with the larger social issue of a "Nanyang Culture".16

The Nanyang Style in art, under these circumstances, is considered as one of the important aspects of Nanyang culture and is known as the "Nanyang Style".

Nanyang Style in art is an artistic innovation integrating Chinese traditional art forms, and strong influence from the School of Paris, which is then applied to local or Southeast Asian subject matter. There are various interpretations of "Nanyang Style" and each of them reflects the different perspective of viewing. T. K. Sabapathy regarded the artists Cheong Soo Pieng, (1917-1983) Chen Chong Swee, (1910-1986) Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991) and Georgette Chen (1907-1993) as notable pioneers who by the early 1950s had successfully adopted an experimental approach, using styles and techniques derived from two sources: Chinese pictorial traditions, and the School of Paris to create new pictorial means in visual representation.

Chen Chong Swee graduated from the Shanghai's Sin Hua Academy of Art in 1929. He was one of the earliest artists to migrate to Singapore in 1931. He began teaching art in secondary schools. In 1951, he was appointed to teach at the NAFA and stayed until retirement in 1972. Chen Chong Swee provides an intriguing insight into the style and content of art. He said: "Style is personal and individual. But the content
must reflect more than that. It is the content that suggests meaning and reality, and therefore allows for greater appreciation. *Still life* (Plate 1) in water colour was one of his early works, revealing his efforts in coming to grips with Western perspective of a subject matter of Western art tradition. *Thunderstorm* (Plate 2) rendered in Chinese Ink, the composition of the picture and the creation of the environmental tension shows a break from the traditional Chinese ink painting.

Cheong Soo Pieng arrived in Singapore in 1946. He was impressed by the New Art movements in China which had received the styles and techniques from the School of Paris into the tradition Chinese painting during the 1920s and 1930s. Cheong Soo Pieng taught in NAFA from 1947 to 1961. *Young girl* (Plate 3) and *Tend cows* (Plate 4) shows his skill and interest both in realism and the cubist idiom respectively.

*The Bali Boatman* (Plate 5) was painted by Chen Wen Hsi in the 1950s after his trip from Bali. He graduated from the Sin Hua Academy of Art. He was also on the staff of NAFA during 1951 to 1959. Chen Wen Hsi favoured the two-dimensional composition with deliberately innovative design and created his own pictorial language both of his Chinese art and Western
Singapore
38.5 x 34.5 cm
Chinese ink & colour
CHEN CHONG SWEE
THUNDERSTROM
Plate 2
Singapore  
66 x 65 cm  
Oil on Canvas  
1948  
CHEONG SOO PING  
YOUNG GIRL  
Plume 3
art. Chen Wen Hsi was one of the most influential artists in Singapore.

Georgette Chen who was born in France and studied painting in Paris. New York and Shanghai, revealed a direct and an intimate assimilation of the Parisian model. She had settled in Singapore and taught at the NAFA. *Vegetables and Claypot* (Plate 6) was painted in the 1940s, the treatment of the colour and texture emits a touch of Van Gogh's sentiment.

T. K. Sabapathy observed that the style made up of the School of Paris provided the Nanyang artists with a modern status, a sense of individuality and self-determination in ranging freely over the entire history of art in the search for the new.\(^{17}\) He considered that Nanyang Style is a form of modern art. In "Modern Art in Singapore, Pioneers and Premises" he noted:

> These artists attitudes regarding working methods, the response to the surroundings, the choice of subject matter, and the selection of particular radiations are some of the shaping factors which provide the Nanyang artists with a distinct identity, and in all these respects, they established the first modern art achievement in Singapore\(^ {18} \)

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T. K. Sabapathy also noted that converting the traditional scroll painting into easel painting and altering the figure-group relationship within the easel painting principles are the remarkable innovations attributable the Nanyang artists.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Under the Fragipani Tree} (Plate 7) by Chen Chong Swee explains the treatment of human figures with Western art proportions and perspective. This has transformed the painting to an easel painting principle although the other elements such as brush strokes and colour are the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. \textit{Going to Market} (Plate 8) by Cheong Soo Pieng sees the three dimensional figures of the painting constructed to provide an image of a concrete existence, however the ground (space) which it occupies is left underfined.

The other definition of Nanyang Style was given by Tan Tee Chie, Senior Lecturer of the NAFA and Chong Cheng San the Principal of the Malaysia Art Institute. They are more specific to the formal characteristic of the Nanyang Style. Chong Cheng San wrote in 1991:

\begin{quote}
The Nanyang Style in its Western art form was characterised by the representation of local subject matter in the manner of the School of Paris, with the infusion of the Balinese figurative form. The Nanyang Style in its ink painting form, on the other hand, was characterised by the representation of local subject
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Sabapathy T. K., "Modern art in Singapore pioneers and premises"Ibid.
Plate 7
UNDER THE FRANGIPANI TREE

CHEN CHONG SWEE
1972
Chinese Ink & Colour
68 x 100 cm
Singapore
GOING TO MARKET

CHEONG SOO PIENG

1975

Oil on Canvas

120 x 91.6 cm

Singapore
matter in the manner of the Shanghai School with *plein air* drawing and calligraphic elements, and sometimes incorporating Western compositional elements. 20

Tan Tee Chie also wrote in 1985 that "the aesthetic concern of the Nanyang Style was to represent the essence of the Nanyang spirit in both its ideological and physical manifestations. The art served as a bridge between tradition and ethnicity, as well as between local customs and the natural environment." 21

Under the above definition, the Nanyang Style does not necessarily only refer to synthesised formalism, but also to the Parisian art form or the Chinese ink painting itself with subject matter of local representation. Chong Cheng San and Tan Tee Chie suggested that the subject matter of the local reality has been the most deciding factor in identifying the Nanyang Style. This definition has also created access for both Western artists and Chinese ink artists to become Nanyang artists if they begin to paint local subject matters. However, ambiguity may arrive due to the artists' inconsistency in their practice so that a list of the artists' names might be required for identification.

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Tan Tee Chie saw Nanyang Style from a perspective with an ideology expressed in a communicative manner and concerned with man's relationship to his social environment within a particular historical period. Subject matter, in the eyes of Tan Tee Chie should be exalted from a visible physical configuration to a transcendental plane, or the "Nanyang spirit". The Nanyang spirit can be understood to be related to the modernist term of "Zeitgeist". However, in the narrower sense, "Nanyang spirit" may be seen as the ideology among the overseas Chinese intellectual under the influence of the modernisation movements in the early twentieth century in China. Such spirit stimulated patriotic emotion during the anti-Japanese invasion of China from the Nanyang territories. Tan Tee Chie's term of Nanyang spirit might be interpreted as the consciousness of reflecting the social reality of the local environment and change.

In regard to the Nanyang Style's definition by Tan Tee Chie and Chong Cheng San, Kwok Kian Chow commented: "The Nanyang Style used in the sense of times carries a normative weight suggesting that it is the most appropriate artistic expression for the Nanyang region." 22

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Many have seen the relationship between NAFA and Nanyang Style as inseparable. This assumption might be due to the fact that Lim Hak Tai and most of the Nanyang artists were lecturers at the academy, and were educated at the Shanghai academies. They may have been inspired by modernist attempts to set a new unified art direction, and the Nanyang Academy served as an ideal base for their exploration. Nevertheless, the close relationship between NAFA and the development of Nanyang Style does not signify them as one because many others who had practised the art were neither teaching in the Academy nor studied there. Liu Kang (b. 1911) is an example of an artist who was a formative factor towards in the constitution of the Nanyang Style. Liu Kang was born in 1911 and migrated to Malaya in 1916. He returned to China in 1926 and enrolled in the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art. He went to Paris in 1929 to study for five years and returned to Shanghai teaching in the Academy. He joined his family in 1937 in Malaya and came to Singapore after the War. Liu Kang was an active member of the Association of Chinese Artists of Singapore (found 1935). Most of the lecturers of the NAFA were also key members of the Association of Chinese Artists of Singapore. These two organisations had been the core of art activities in Singapore. *Divination* (Plate 9) was a painting by Liu
Kang depicting a street scene of Singapore.

If Nanyang Style was considered as an extension of the "New art" from China, the only similarity transmitted may only have been the innovation of style-integration. However, it was the rise of the Chinese intellectual movements during the early 20th century which intuited a new Chinese ideology that had been most influential to their overseas Chinese counterparts. These movements, which include the May Fourth Movement and Shanghai Modernist Movement, require a brief account of their lineage and genealogical references to the Nanyang Style.

Art in China had been undergoing several transformations in the early 20th century, these include a new perception of art as a communicative tool, and by the development of a realist tendency in pictorial representation. The May Fourth Movement which was established in 1917 was one of the most vigorous intellectual movements in modern Chinese history. The emphasis of this movement was largely based on literary innovation, however, major steps and measures had also been taken in compelling art as the means of communication with the multitude. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) head of Peking University, the ideological centre of the Movement, popularised art and art education and
with the aim of making them no longer an elite possession. Following Cai’s proposal, various art academies were established in Shanghai, Peking, Hangchow and other cities during the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the Singapore pioneering Nanyang artists, for instance Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng and Tan Chong Swee were graduates from these academies. The structure of NAFA was largely based on the model of these academies.

The influence of the May Fourth Movement within Chinese intellectual communities has been far-reaching in both mainland of China and overseas. As for art theory, the "Revolution in Art" published by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), then editor of the leading intellectual journal, 'Xin qinian (New youth) had evoked extensively the creativity and innovation of artists. He perceived that the short-coming of the monotonous repetition and irrelevancy of Chinese art could be rectified and cured by application of the realist spirit of Western art.

The creation of a 'new art' was the main concern of the "modern movement" in Shanghai during the 1930s. Liu Haisu (b.1896) of Shanghai Art School, Pang Xunqin and Ni Yide from the avant garde Storm

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Society were key persons involved in the act of providing shock therapy for the modernist assault on conservatism—both traditional Chinese and imported Western academicism (Xu Beihong). Theoretically they believed that painting was not a copy of nature or the reproduction of dead forms. It was proclaimed that "in the best tradition of modernists everywhere, they were suffocated by the stagnant old society and had to break free". In their Manifest, they stated: "we want to hit the rotten art of contemporary China with a powerful wave."24

Kwok Kian Chow in his article "Art History of Singapore, An Introduction" pointed out that "it is important to view the development of art education in Singapore in the larger context of the changes that took place within Chinese art (China) in the early 20th century".25 Certainly, it might also provide a better understanding a particular historical event in China that had also been affecting the aesthetic tradition of Singapore.

Cultural movements in China escalated during the period leading up to the Japanese invasion.

24 Croizier, Ralph, 1993 "Post-impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the fate of Modernism in Republican China" Modernity in Asian Art 1st ed. Sydney University of Sydney East Asian studies, p. 140.
Lim Hak Tai who was advised by a friend to remain behind in Singapore in 1937, saw the opportunity to inform and rally support from the Nanyang Chinese community against the Japanese through the setting up of an art institution. It is without a doubt that he was deeply influenced by the recent Chinese modernist wave of intellectual thought and sought to bring the new ideas of art education to the Chinese in Singapore. Although the setting up of the academy was based on the model of the Chinese Academy, its emphasis on geographical locality imbued the sense of belonging in terms of local identity. This was made even clearer from the disclosure by Chung Chen Sun, a graduate of the NAFA, (class of 1952-1955) and founder of the Malaysia Institute of Arts,

Lim Hak Tai was the man who gave the Academy its direction. He always suggested to the staff and students that the subject matter in their works should reflect the reality of the Southern Seas. He emphasised that our work should depict the localness of the place we all live in.²⁶

T. K. Sabapathy also ascertained the importance of Lim Hak Tai as an educationist and as a guiding voice for art activity in Singapore during the late forties and fifties. He notes:

"The reflection of the Southern Sea" and "the localness of the place" may not necessarily have assumed the stature of an ideological program for the Nanyang artists. Nevertheless these notions conveniently formulate positions and attitudes which are shared and manifested in their works.27

"To reflect the reality of the Southern Seas" and "depict the localness of the Place" were Lim Hak Tai's aims and were invocation based on a regional concept of a "tropical setting". However these aims might also be seen as a realist motivation against any social reality as invoked by the modernist movement in China. Nevertheless, it laid the ground work for the subsequent development of the Nanyang Style and its specific regional significance.

The search for a Nanyang style was an important aesthetic agenda in Singapore in the 1950s. The new focus was Southeast Asia due to a group journey taken to Bali in response to Lim Hak Tai's suggestion. Bali had long been known by the artists as an exotic island where indigenous culture was characterised by a ritualistic and decorative nature. Perhaps the exhibition by Jean Le Mayeur (a Dutch artist who sojourned in Bali 1880-1958) in Singapore in 1933 and 1941 impressed these Nanyang artists. Given his life-

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style and artistic approach, Singaporean artists associated him with Gauguin and took a measure of the Balinese perception from him. During the journey to Bali, they visited Le Mayeur and his wife, Nji Polok. Those who joined the trip included Cheong Soo Pieng, Tan Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang. On the next year (1953), an exhibition titled "Four Artists to Bali" revealed the new aesthetic exploration of pictorial motifs and new subject matters inspired by the trip made the year before. The exhibition had granted each of the artists an iconography which was distinct from that of the Nanyang artists. The synthesised technique which had harmoniously meshed with the Balinese theme became the landmark of these Nanyang artists and brought the Nanyang Style to its maturity in the 1960s.

Nanyang style was not only prominent in Singapore, the influence of the Nanyang artists has extended beyond the causeway to the state of West Malaysia. In an important exhibition "Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang" held in the 1979 at the Seni Negara Malaysia Museum, curator Piyadasa introduced the Nanyang Style and identified Lim Hak Tai, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Georgette Chen as "the first generation of
artists". In Ma Ge's "A concise History of Malayan Art", the author also identified Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Georgette Chen and Lim Cheng How and the Penang artist, Chuah Thean Teng as pioneer artists in the shaping of a Malayan consciousness in the visual arts.

"Vision and Idea, Relooking Modern Malaysian Art" was another exhibition organised by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in 1994. Exhibits included works by Lim Hak Tai, (Plate 10) Cheong Soo Pieng, Lai Fong Moi, Georgette Chen and Lee Boon Wan of Singapore. Surprisingly many works in this exhibition were characterised by a style and subject matter which were very similar to the Nanyang Style. Furthermore some of these artists belong to the Malay ethnic group. It was claimed that Singapore and Malaysia once shared the same history, as well as arts and culture. However, from the years since Singapore separated from Malaysia, each countries has taken a different path towards cultural policy. The exhibition implied that the aesthetic cultures on both sides of the causeway have been seemingly been mapping for a similar direction. The concept of ASEAN's regionalism had to a certain extent inspired

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Chinese Temple

Oil on Board
1952
Lim Hak Tai
some of the Malaysian artists to initiate a Neo-regionalist tendency which will be discussed in the following chapter.\textsuperscript{30}

During the 1980s, a series of retrospective exhibitions of the Nanyang artists were held, honouring Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang and Lim Cheng Hoe. The status of "pioneer artist" was presented by the National Museum Art Gallery of Singapore to each exhibitor. The confirmation of the Nanyang Style not only recognises its aesthetic achievements but also ascertains its future development, thus making it an important art event in the history of modern art in Singapore.

The achievement of the Nanyang Style certainly was not fulfilled wholly by these artists alone, there were many others working in similar directions. In his paper "Modern Art in Singapore: Pioneers and Premises" Sabapathy asked "Who are the artists who shaped the Nanyang Style?" and "What models and traditions did they select?" These questions are still being argued and discussed widely even today. However, the

most important concern regarding the Nanyang Style will be the question of its future.

The Nanyang Style has always been perceived as a form of cultural identity amongst the Chinese, perhaps requiring some re-examination and reconciliation in terms of its relation to social changes and the sensitivity of ethnic and cultural issues. The recognition attested to Nanyang Style was an event of the 1980s, almost half a century away from the day since the style began to be nurtured. There should be some communicative deviation due to the lapse of time. The art of Singapore during the last three decades of Singapore's independence has largely been dominated by media based on an internationalist discourse, it developed at a time when modernity was mainstream. It presents a great challenge for the Nanyang Style, and it seems that Nanyang Style might be revived only if ASEAN's regionalism strengthens and functions as part of the Post-modern condition.

Art usually plays an important role in nation building regardless of the political infra-structure. For example, when Indonesia had fought for its independence, art had given its support both secularly and spiritually towards the movement and the influence has since been fabricated within its tradition and cultures
today. Artists like Soedjojono (1914-1986), Affandi (1907 - 1990) and Hendra Gunawan (1918- 1983) were important artists and have contributed to the formation of the Indonesian national identity. However, art in Singapore had neither featured significantly in the shaping of a new state nor envisaged as means of constructing a fresh identity with the independence of 1965.\(^{31}\)

The government's first priority was to set goal for economic development. In 1967, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew saw that Singapore must strive for a international status otherwise it would face the danger of isolation. It was stressed that industrialisation and the building of an international market were the two essential objectives for development. Followed by a decade of economical progress in the 1970s, Singapore attained status of a newly industrialising country.

There were a few policies in Singapore after its independence which affected artistic space and direction. The founding of the People's Republic of China was a main issue of concern among the Southeast Asian countries. If anti-communism becomes a common

political stance, inwardly and outwardly the issue of Chinese ethnicity will become sensitive. Given that the population of Singapore is predominantly 75 percent Chinese and it is the only Chinese majority state outside the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. Singapore's leadership has not wanted their country's image to be projected as a Chinese state in the region (South East Asia) where the "overseas Chinese" are a main target of jealously, hatred, and hostility.\(^{32}\)

In order to establish economic links with the western world, and to prevent inter-racial sensitivity and avoid being misunderstood by the neighbouring countries, a new education and language system have been enforced. The Chinese community generally faced constraints but the Singaporean Chinese have grown used to the state's cosmopolitan character. This is acceptance is a consequence not so much of the state's cultural and educational policies but because of its dynamic economy. Therefore, on one hand, stronger ties with the rest of Southeast Asia has been established, and on the other hand, an internationally-oriented belief have been widely permeated and practised. Singapore therefore has submitted itself to the trajectory of a cosmopolitan order.

Internationalism was propounded by the Allied nations particularly the United States after World War II as a means of "increasing the worldwide penetration of Western rationality", expressed as "an all-embracing modernisation thesis", to all the non-communist countries during the Cold War. Since most of the Southeast Asian countries, and particularly members of ASEAN are basically anti-communist, their relationships with such International influences has been extensive. Singapore in particular just started its industrialisation in the 1960s using techniques and skills largely borrowed from the western world. As a result, the concept of Internationalism was not only confined to commerce and industry, but also intersected with many facets of social discourse. For instance, the formalist abstractions has been seen as a form of international art and as pertinent for Singapore. Particularly the abstract innate character of this international art form was expected to provide a common visual language for all the artists and audiences, regardless of their different cultural backgrounds and ethnicity. Kwok Kian Chow in his "History of Art in Singapore" commented:

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Formalist painting was perceived to have the potential of being a national art form. Painting was considered to be internationally-oriented, capable of cutting through intractable linguistic barriers, and genuinely multi-racial in practice and appearance.\textsuperscript{34}

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, students returning to Singapore from Europe and the USA turned towards a largely American dominated concept of art. Before travelling overseas, many of these students were Nanyang Academy graduates.

Long Thien-shih perceived that the Nanyang Style "was not bred out of a concerted effort or orchestrated movement" but "out of the individual sensitivity and reflection of the prevailing social condition."\textsuperscript{35} However, the establishment of an art has always been a long process. In the case of the Nanyang Style, there must be exchanges and discussions long before its emergence. Mr. Lim Hak Tai wrote an article which summarised the development of the School in the fifteen years and called for a new art in Singapore:

Undeniably, the art of Nanyang should possess its own special and unique characteristics. Her geographical location, prosperity and co-existences of many races and cultures contributed to the development of Nanyang's unique style and characterisation of art.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} Kwok Kian Chow, 1994 "History of art in Singapore", Ibid. p.13.
\textsuperscript{36} Lim Hak Tai, 1955, \textit{The 15th graduation magazine}, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore.
Given the close relationship forged by teaching at the same academy, the excursion to Bali and the setting up of exhibition together, I will argue that Nanyang Style of art was created by a combined effort and can be referred as a movement.

By and large, Nanyang Style having survived over a period of half a century and enriched and enlivened by two generations of artists, has been undergoing changes after the independence of Singapore. Firstly, the change of political environment from a British colonial system to a newly industrialised nation had not provided enough allowance for transitional adaptation for the art. Nanyang artists' identity changed from colonial overseas Chinese cognition to a multi-cultural but Westernised cosmological orientation and has to an extent restricted and interrupted the evolution of the Nanyang Style. Secondly, the emergence of American Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art overwhelmed the entire Singapore art scene abruptly. The indigenous and conventional pictorial imageries of the Nanyang Style seemed contradictory to the mode of modernity that had just begun in Singapore. Rapid urbanisation caused the traditional themes favoured by the Nanyang artists to diminish into irrelevancy and was considered as an indication of the lack of artistic inspiration. Furthermore,
the local audiences were equally unable to accept any real revolution from their own artists.

Given the circumstances, described above, the situation for the Nanyang Style has been considered as unfavourable. The high requirements of traditional Chinese ink painting and the technical conventions of the Parisian academy might have been one reason for limitations in the evolution of the Nanyang Style. There seems no other way in the acquirement of the skill and technique of Chinese ink painting but to expect a long period of practice. No innovations, or exploration could be justified if one did not acquire the basic foundations. Even with such foundations, the scrutiny of one's peers could not be avoided. The medium of the traditional Chinese painting itself and many artists who used that medium accepted the profound culture of the Chinese painting tradition as being unquestionable. They preferred to dwell within its realms and saw no necessity to explore elsewhere. As a major component of the Nanyang Style, the Nanyang artists had set themselves a compulsory background of vigorous self-training in acquiring the art of Chinese ink painting which was the only way to access this skill. A superficial appropriation of style-blending as kitsch should be absolutely refrained. These intricate processes and vigorous
demands discouraged young artists from taking up the art with confidence.

NAFA had a close relationship with the l'Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. This was due to the personal friendship between Georgette Chen and Chapelain Midy, who was then the Professor of the l'Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts. Between 1925-1970, there were quite a number of NAFA graduates advancing their studies in Paris, notably Lai Foong Moi (1931), Lu Chon Min (1933), Yeo Hoe Koon (1935) Ng Yat Chuan (1936) and Wee Beng Chong (1938) all of them are considered the second generation of Nanyang artists. In 1992, the Singapore Art Museum presented "Pont des Arts: Nanyang Artists in Paris, 1925-1970" which gave an account on stylistic relations between the Nanyang Style and the School of Paris. This exhibition consisted of works from nineteen artists, perhaps it was an evolution of an art style from a very realist approach, moving towards the exploration of other art styles in Paris which consequently lost the character of the Nanyang Style. It signified the later decline of the Nanyang Style.

During the Cold War, the United States had both exported the idea of a mainstream and encouraged the adoption of its institutional organisation
and practices, including models of professionalism and success. The avant-garde styles of Pop, Minimalism, Expressionism and Conceptualism soon became the most popular art styles and were combined and practised at the periphery.\textsuperscript{37} This situation exists in Singapore as well, and as a consequence Nanyang Style maintains a low profile and submits itself to a transitional period, a period of thirty years cross-fertilised by a contemporary mainstream. Re-examining Nanyang Style is essential, to re-define it is even more important, as art enters the age of Post-modernity. Jean François Lyotard refers to the constitution of sociocultural unity as a form of totality and claimed that society paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one.\textsuperscript{38} Art in the Post-modern epoch provides pluralistic space and diverse opportunities to re-write one's history, including the lost one.

\textsuperscript{37} Burn, Ian, 1988 "The re-appropriation of influence" \textit{Australian Biennale} 1988 Sydney, Art Gallery of NSW, pp. 41-48.

\textsuperscript{38} Lyotard, Jean-François, 1992, "What is Postmodernism" The Postmodern Condition, Manchester University Press, pp. 81.
CHAPTER TWO
ASEAN Aesthetic and
the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Region

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded in 1967. The member countries are comprise of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei was accepted as a member upon independence in 1984. With experiences learnt from other regions, ASEAN did not create a rigid institutional framework nor force an atmosphere of cooperation beyond the absorptive capacity of individual members. Rather, ASEAN operated "on the basis of consensus, equality, and mutual benefits."39

The forming of ASEAN was originally as a political grouping to facilitate problem solving between neighbours, and mainly to counter the pressures exerted from the North. Nevertheless, throughout these years, economic cooperation has proven to be the most dynamic means against any diverse political beliefs. Closer regional economic co-operation within ASEAN nations has been imperative. Mr. Mahathir bin Mohamad stated in 1989 the extent of emphasis in terms of economic imperative: "These developments... have undermined totally any faith in the permanency of ideologies and systems. Nothing is sacred any more. Economic atheists have now taken over everywhere." ASEAN's establishment of a clear and similar political stance coupled with strong economic progress and belief will thus go on to foster social and cultural co-operation within the region.

ASEAN geographically provides the "swing factor" between Japan and China on the one hand, the Indian subcontinent and Australasia on the other. ASEAN bestrides the sea routes between the Middle East and North Asia. Previously, the region was under European colonial rule. The British held sway

over Burma and Malaya, the Dutch over Indonesia, the French over Indochina, and the Americans over the Philippines, only Thailand escaped formal colonisation. During the colonial period, the feudal agriculture-based societies were transformed and whole structures of economic planning were shaped according to European models. This left Southeast Asia with certain similar features like a secular administration, modernised bureaucracy and groups of Western-educated elites that geared the countries towards an international world system after independence.

Since the postwar period, in the creation of a new regional order, nations have been trying to establish their own identities. It has not been an easy task considering the variety of ethnic, cultural and religious differences. The revival of certain traditional issues has made the situation even more complex and difficult. After 1945 Nationalist movements spread throughout the region, their interest was mainly political and fought for independence. This was the time where modernist reformers, anti-colonial activities and nationalists addressed the issues of nation building and identity. For example, some political leaders stressed cultural nationalism. This happened with the institutionalism of Buddhism as the national religion in Burma, and the Malay language as the national tongue in
the Federation of Malaya. For Indonesia and later in Singapore, nationalist leaders stressed unity in diversity, acknowledging ethnic religious and linguistic distinction but adopting a secular approach with such common goals of modernisation. These policies have been enforced by the two countries to the present.

With the forming of ASEAN, there was the initiation of an ASEAN art program into the agenda. The art program set about promotion of joint forums, exhibitions and facilitating interactions between artists, critics, writers and curators from around the region. The program reflects the cultural heritage of ASEAN member nations. Importantly, it also provides a context for an agenda in the search for regional identity.

Twenty five years since its initiation, several art critics like T. K. Sabapathy, Redza Piyadaza and Apinan Poshyananda have proposed that a critical re-examination of the program is necessary. At a 1989 symposium with the theme "Tradition: The source of Inspiration". Professor Alice Guillermo, viewed it as an assertion of the integrity of the culture, art and aesthetics of ASEAN countries, as part of a decolonising process that puts forward an alternative aesthetic discourse. She also saw this independent aesthetic discourse as the
primary reason for such a symposium. The theme of a 1993 symposium, "Towards the Shaping of ASEAN Visual Arts", brought about significant discussion of traditional aesthetics, contemporary expression, and strategies that contribute towards ASEAN aesthetic discourse.

The "ASEAN aesthetic" was interpreted by Brenda V. Fajardo as a call for cultural solidarity and part of the decolonisation process to elevate ASEAN art from being marginal. This has become one of the most significant current aesthetic issues that the 93 symposium covered. "ASEAN aesthetic" will not only be set as an aesthetic direction solely amongst the ASEAN art world but also will be a challenge against belief in internationalism. To a great extent, ASEAN Symposium of 1993, was influenced and stimulated by the First Asia-Pacific Triennial held at Queensland Art Gallery, Australia. The ASEAN artists and critics who took part in the Triennial had been tremendously inspired by the project. Particularly by its theme of tradition and change that has been reiterated by the individual participating countries. It presents a clear and prominent aesthetic consciousness of each artists' work in relation to his/her own cultural identity by engaging traditional values.

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The works of art from the First Asia Pacific Triennial and ASEAN symposium in 1993 both manifested a tendency among the artists in the region to veer away from Euro-American paradigms to the immediate environment and using indigenous forms, materials, and technology.43

It would not have been conceivable a decade ago that artists from the region who were heavily influenced by the onslaught of abstraction and pop art would even be slight interested, in their own indigenous traditions. In its twenty five year history, ASEAN had not been able to call for a regional art identity was criticised as directionless, extremely lethargic and tired. This was mainly due to the contradictions between internationalism and regionalism. Even now, some of the artists still perceive indigenous tradition as nostalgic, nativistic and backward. Some contemporary artists who have experienced the deviation of aesthetic perceptions between East and West however, had discouraged them from seeking further a single Western recognition. This eventually spawned the artists to re-examine their personal aesthetic positions.

According to Redza Piyadasa, there are neo-regionalist tendencies evident in Malaysian art from the early 1980s. Their main concern in this work was to

43. Fajardo, Brenda V. 1993, "Rethinking ASEAN Aesthetics", ibid.
reconsider the aspects of the total Malaysian reality and its ongoing history in the face of rapid modernisation, and a move towards a broader Southeast Asian identification. There are artists who raised social, economic and political concerns to reassess a more complex multiracial and multicultural matrix. However, Redza Piyadasa stated that "all these artists involved in a broader multiracial frame of reference are drawn from all the ethnic groups within the country and they act as a counterpoint to the strictly ethnocentric Malay/Islamic impulse."44

As mentioned by Caroline Turner, "the world has changed so dramatically in the last ten years with the decline of the superpowers and the growing strength of the economies of much of the region (Asia-Pacific), that "the centre" or "centres" are now obscured."45 This might also be one of the reasons that saw the emergence of regionalism.

CHAPTER THREE
Local Consciousness, Cultural Identities and Regionalism

Regionalism has been a provincial concept of development particularly in the early years of human history. It refers to the common interests of groups of people who live in the same part of the world whose lives and culture are characterised specifically by their restricted environments and vernacular values. American art during the 1930s initiated an international movement by retreating from the urbanised cities to the more rural village and country life when Paris ceased to be the Mecca of the American artists. The development of distinctive indigenous art expressing patriotism was also considered a form of Regionalism.46

The emergence of Regionalism in modern days has predominantly been as a reactionary force against totality and homogeneity. It has become an

intricate issue and no just a simple-minded attempt to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular. In relation to modernity, "Regionalism bears the hallmark of ambiguity, on the one hand, it has been associated with movements of reforms and liberation, on the other hand, it has proved a powerful tool of repression and chauvinism."\textsuperscript{47}.

Kenneth Frampton has suggested the discourse of "Critical Regionalism" to mediate the ambiguity of regionalism. He argues for the mediation of the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place." Critical Regionalism, however, "depends upon maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness".\textsuperscript{48} While Frampton's argument relates to architecture, I also believe it is relevant to the territory of fine arts because modern art and architecture both share certain basic aesthetic theories. Furthermore, art and architecture may, in order to maintain a highly universal civilisation, discard their indigenous or traditional values.

Critical Regionalism as a cultural strategy is as much a bearer of world culture as it is a vehicle of universal civilisation. The practice is contingent upon a process of double mediation: firstly the deconstruction of the overall spectrum of world culture which it inevitably inherits, this includes to the removal of oneself from that eclecticism which has appropriated alien, exotic forms in order to revitalise the expressivity of an enervated society; and secondly, through synthetic contradiction, a manifestation unique to universal civilisation such as the mediation of universal technique that involves imposing limits on the optimisation of industrial and post industrial technology.\(^{49}\)

Critical Regionalism might be seen as one of the solutions to Recoeur's questions "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old dormant civilisation and take part in universal civilisation."\(^{50}\)

Regionalism during the 1990s extends its significance to geographical means. This is due to certain parts of the world growing in global importance, whether seen from a strategic, political, social or cultural perspective. The European Community (EC) and the

\(^{49}\) Frampton, Kenneth, Ibid. pp.16-30.

\(^{50}\) Ricoeur, Paul, Quoted by Frampton Kenneth, Ibid. p.16.
North American Free Trade Agreement Community (NAFTA), two trading communities in the West, are emerging to fill the political power vacuum caused by the end of the Cold War. And in the east, besides the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) founded in 1967, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has also gained force and strength to ensure the continuance of free trade, providing a counterbalance to the West which is increasingly protectionist. After the Cold war, members of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) had begun to foster a climate of cooperation, not only within the economic region but also for cultural interregional intersection and exchange.

The First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1993 at the Queensland Art Gallery was one of the most influential art events in the Asia Pacific region. The symposium paper for the Asia Pacific Triennial mainly focused on issues of modernity and tradition. The cultural syncretism of the past, the engagement with and resistance of modernity, modernist ideas and changes within each country, gives an account of the struggles for the individual country's own modern art history during the 20th century. However, the Western paradigm and perception of contemporary
Asian art has been strongly criticised by the representatives for the ASEAN countries taking part in the exhibition. Dr. Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand argued that:

Exhibitions such as "Against Nature", "A primal Spirit" "Encountering the Others" and "China's New Art Post-1989" are either met with cold reservation or showered with compliments. Through some Western eyes, the artists in these shows are mostly derivative, utilising the worn-out ideas of Euroamerican artists. 51

Dr. Apinan Poshyananda further pointed out that:

Thailand holds true for the region as a whole. "Cultural syncretism" has been fundamental and contemporary art cannot be fully understood by looking through the "windows" of the "Euro-American paradigm." 52

These diverse perceptions can be understood as being derived from the different definitions of Modernity which form the basic framework of contemporary art. It seems that such diversity was also the main reason for the differentiation and separation of the world into East and West.

The concept and understanding of "Modernity" in Asia is unlike the West. Each of the Asian countries attributes its own definition according to their concept of history and extent of influence by Westernisation. Most of these Asian countries have a long history of civilisation and some would have articulated their own modernisation in the past. Thus if modernity is to be measured by a single Western perspective then confusion may result.

John Clark noted that Asian culture was autonomously marked by firstly the extent and frequency of their specific historical interaction, secondly the regional distribution of certain common religious, artistic culture, social forms, and thirdly the flow of segments of their populations. He commented:

The specific identities which united Asia in historical reality and in their systems of interpretation were non-Euramerican, that Euramerica was able to conceive "Asian" as one of its "others", and also to either seek for, or at times to exploit, those features of Asia's assumed cultural essence it thought laudable or ignoble by turns, Because many parts of Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were forced to redefine themselves via their reaction to forms of modernity its cultures adopted seemed to many Euramericans to be derivative, secondary, disingenuous and inauthentic. 53

Habermas explains that the term "modern" expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself

to the past of antiquity" and "the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients." Bergson explains the "new time consciousness" as the experience that expressed mobility in society, acceleration in history and discontinuity in everyday life. 54 Both the notions of Habermas and Bergson applicable to the development of Modern Asian art. But, when Habermas referred Modernity to the ideals of the French Enlightenment it was strictly European legitimation. The industrial Revolution (1789) had established a state of modern in Europe and introduced as a permanent change the continual progress of science into social life, and caused the destruction of customs and traditional cultures. Until the 19th century the expansion of European Colonialism also formed a modernising force penetrating the indigenous cultures in Afro-Asian countries, and it has been claimed since then, that modernisation has become universalised. 55

One of the Western approaches in the twentieth century was to create a "modernisation paradigm" to maintain and exercise Western mainstream

55 Baudrillard Jean, "Modernity" in Encyclopaedia Universalis France, translated by David James Miller, Purdue University.
ideology and evolutionary framework. Most economic, political or sociological issues were rooted in such a paradigm.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, a set of development theories was derived as a means of imposing the Western paradigm. The majority of Asian countries are labelled and classified as developed, developing or undeveloped countries; measured solely by a western model. As a result, autonomous cultural entry to 'world' art has been always a problem. Rasheed Araeen stated that:

The idea of nineteenth-century Europe are still with us today and they are being used to define and fix the position of non-European peoples in such a way that they are deprived of their active and critical functions in contemporary cultural practices.\textsuperscript{57}

"Primitivism in 20th Century Art" presented by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) at New York in 1984 was considered by many as controversial and imbued emotions due to its cultural discrimination. Hal Foster saw the exhibition as "no less than the formal abstraction of the tribal" and he questioned:

For what do we behold here: a universality of form or another rendered in our own image, an affinity with our own imaginary primitive? Though properly wary of the terms primitive and tribal, the first because of its Darwinist associations, the second because of its hypothetical nature, the curators used both as "conventional counters- but it is precisely this conventionality that is in question.58

Modern art in Japan, China and Southeast Asia began in the early 20th Century through the influence and adaptation of the school of Paris salon painting. John Clark saw this transmission across cultural boundaries becoming a naive exploration of imported style because of its absence in the local discourse.59 However, cultural interaction has been an universal phenomenon ever since human civilisation began, no absolute judgement should be imposed while each culture is in the course of evaluation. John Clark draw attention to problem of:

The inability of a Euramerican rhetoric to find a modern art in Asia intelligible is the very sign that its subversion will open up the discourse of modernity itself.60

He suggested creating more open codes for the interpretation of modernism both in Asia and beyond, so as to distinguish between common features


59 Clark, John, Ibid. p.4.
60 Clark John, Ibid. p.17.
and common inequality found generally across the modern art of different Asian cultures.

However, since the end of the 1980s, a range of Asian and Southeast Asian regional exhibitions have taken place in various countries, such as the first Symposium on Asian Aesthetics in Canberra in 1988, the Tresors International Fine Arts and Antiques Fair in Singapore on September 1988, the touring New Art from Southeast Asia Exhibition in Japan in 1992 and 1994, the Asian Watercolors in Bali, Indonesia in 1994 and the Asian Art Quadrennial in Fukuoka in 1994. These exhibitions show the increasing awareness of the regional consciousness in art development and its growing regional identity of the Southeast Asian artists.
CHAPTER FOUR
Nanyang Style - ASEAN Aesthetics

In contributing to the establishment of the Nanyang Style, Lim Hak Tai's invocation "to reflect the reality of Southern Seas" and "to depict the localness of the place" vigorously imposed a lateral significance. Firstly, it is a known fact that historically, Chinese paintings have rarely been exposed to a wider spectrum of subject matter other than traditional themes. Nanyang Style had in this respect constituted a breakthrough by relinquishing this traditional restriction. Secondly, the technique of mediating two different art styles with the revolutionary treatment of subject matters required highly intimate sensitivities and should not be perceived merely as a pure aesthetic process or accomplishment. Rather, it was a harmonious articulation between art and environmental sentiments in conceiving a sense of localness. Therefore, traditional themes such as the hermit communing with nature, the lonely fisherman in a
wintry landscape, or the scholar gazing at a waterfall did not appear in the Nanyang Style of art.

Lim Hak Tai's call for a "tropical setting" can be interpreted as a "regional consciousness" that corresponds to the immediate environment of the Southeast Asian region. When the Nanyang artists incorporated the indigenous pictorial cultures of Bali and East Malaysia into their work, the concept of regionalism implied by this was no less significant than the "ASEAN Aesthetic" invoked by the ASEAN Symposium '93.

Since the Nanyang Style was basically an integrated art form in nature, the originality of its primary property is often questioned. However, the artistic explorations under taken by the Nanyang artists in their attempts to redefine new pictorial techniques and discover a wider set of subject matters within the regional context cannot be overlooked. They had already mastered the academic rules and conventions governing the two stylistically different kinds of paintings. Despite the different painting mediums chosen, Nanyang art was born out of the merger of the artistic culture of the worlds and more importantly was centred upon the immediate surrounding of its artists. Furthermore, it is this narrowing down of subject matter, coupled with the underlying ideology spawned by Lim Hak Thai, which
binds these artists together. These ideologies were later included in the guiding principles of NAFA.

The guiding principles of NAFA was published in the School's 15th Graduation magazine by Lim Hak Tai. The characteristic of the guiding principles are:

1. Harmonious integration of all races and culture;
2. Exchange and interaction of the arts of the East and West;
3. A development of the spirit of science and the trends of thought of the 20th century;
4. Reflect the needs and desire of the local people;
5. Express the tropical sentiments;
6. Incorporate educational values and social functions.

The Nanyang Style in the 1960s attained a landmark in its stylistic achievement by deviating from its out-moded invocation of the Nanyang overseas Chinese identity during the colonial period. This change led the Nanyang artists to develop the art to a new direction relevant to the new social structure. Followed by the independence of Singapore, almost all the
overseas Chinese in Singapore had become Singaporean. With this identity, the Chinese culture in Singapore, similar to other ethnic group was treated equally as one of the components in the matrix of the multi-racial and multi-cultural society. This stylistic innovation appears largely in the works of Cheong Soo Pieng and has been regarded as a model of this articulation.

According to T. K. Sabapathy, the art of Cheong Soo Pieng is circumscribed by three principal pictorial traditions, "firstly the scroll painting tradition from China; secondly, easel picture practices which emerged in Paris in the first quarter of the twentieth century; and thirdly, the diverse artistic techniques in the countries of Southeast Asia."\(^6\) The two dimensional depth of the pictorial reality conceived within the works of Cheong Soo Pieng and its composition of iconography have been vitalised by the colouring and texturing techniques of Western art (Plate 11). The manipulation of negative space and one-dimensional pictorial values have been infused by the exotic and ornamental characteristic of the Balinese art and environment (Plate 12). His skill of merging Chinese paintings and Western art techniques provided the most harmonious and

MALAY GIRL

CHENG SOO PENG

1977

120 x 91 cm
Oil on Canvas

SINGAPORE
Plate 12
DRESSING UP

CHEONG SOO PIENG
1975
Oil on Canvas
120x 91.6 cm
Singapore
unified pictorial possibilities ever experienced in the modern art history of Singapore (Plate 13).

However, the most significant achievement of Cheong Soo Pieng's art was the incorporation of Balinese and other Southeast Asian values and techniques into his works. Cheong Soo Pieng's works with a Balinese theme are characterised not only the incorporation of human figures or sceneries to fulfil pictorial needs, but also by a close study of the indigenous culture which he modified. This incorporation modification is the third factor in correlation with the two other stylistic elements (Chinese art tradition and influence of school of Paris) which together form the Nanyang Style. In this respect, his works appear as an unobliterated Southeast Asian art identification. No longer seen as Chinese or Western, it has aesthetically become an art style specific to Singapore, to be shared among all the people who could identify their won cultural values within the art. The Malay choice of pigment scheme in Batik art, the decorative character of the picture plain of Indonesian crafts, and the human figure mould inspired by the art of Wayang Kulit (shadow play by flat leather puppets) from Bali, have been deliberately consolidated in the art style (Plate 14). This attributed not only to Cheong Soo Pieng alone, it is also the celebration of the Nanyang Style's
Singapore
105 x 89.5 cm
Oil on Canvas
1982
CHEONG SOO PIENG
MARKET SCENE
PLATE 13
Singapore
68 x 106 cm
Oil on Canvas
1980
CHEONG SOO PENG
WEAVER
Plate 4
achievement in Singaporean art history. The cultural differences and diversity in the work of Cheong Soo Pieng are considered as important inputs and transformations of the Nanyang Style. This transformation is not a problem of alienation, but a celebration of change.

The internal tensions and conflicts of tradition in Singapore had reactivated in various social aspects during the 1970s, and consequently certain government institutions and the general public initiated a debate about Asian values. The Singapore economy depends for survival, on its international network of attachments, and the inclination of international centric-dominance was irrevocable. Many had denied the existence of Asian value, including Mr. S. Rajaratnam, the then Foreign Minister of Singapore, Rajaratnam stated:

If it has any meaning at all it is merely a convenient way of describing the heterogeneous, conflicting and complex network of beliefs, prejudices and values developed in the countries which for geographical purposes have been grouped as being in Asia. 62

The government has taken certain measures to promote traditional cultural values, such as the teaching of ethnic arts at community centres (a public

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place set up by the government which provides facilities for leisure and cultural activities), encouraging festive celebration and the "Speaking Mandarin" campaign. However, the social structure and certain concepts and values are still largely formed through Western influences. Wang Gungwu commented in the Tradition and Change, a publication in conjunction of the Asia Pacific Triennial that when powerful cultures have expanded at the expense of others, the cultures which were not distinctive or strong enough tended to be absorbed, transformed or even made to disappear.63 Perhaps this notion would be seen as alarming for those countries in the region which were overly Westernised. On the contrary, however, Stuart Hall has argued that "the more profound the universalising tendencies are, the more particular peoples, ethnic groups or sections of society seek to reaffirm their difference and the more they become attached to their locality". 64

In reviewing the cultural history of Singapore, the Nanyang Style has been an integral part of the cultural tradition. Since the Nanyang Style has been able to encompass all differences and cultural interests, it could be entrenched as a model for the constitution of

Singaporean cultural identity on the basis of its absorbability and transcultural reality. If history can indicate future directions, then tradition will have an obligation to accept challenges. Nanyang Style in a new phase of history, should be able to revise, re-examine and continue its evolution. A re-definition of Nanyang Style is necessary at this point in history.

It has been suggested by Kwok Kian Chow in "A perspective of Chinese Ink Painting", that the definition of Nanyang Style by T. K. Sabapathy may by extension, be applied to all innovative art practices in Singapore which have demonstrated some synthesis of Chinese and Western aesthetic notions. Furthermore, according to Kwok Kian Chow, "this definition aims to capture the creative spirit of the pioneer Nanyang artists without having to restrict the definition to types, media or subject matter of art."65

Under the proposal to find a new definition of the Nanyang Style, one is free to synthesis any form of art style as long as they are appropriate or relevant to the theme or subject matter, be that representative or conceptual. Furthermore, with no limitation of mediums, this synthesis could even be

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extended to installation or performance art. Only the theme should be either local or regional, or related to any current issue in Singapore or the region.

The regional identity of ASEAN countries might be constituted by way of synthesis. In fact, certain synthesised values can be traced from their contemporary art works, particularly those with local themes or subject matter. In such a case, there will be no communicative difficulties between the Nanyang artists and artists from the ASEAN countries. They work as a group to establish a closer relationship which will enable communication and exchange.

Nanyang artists should uphold the motivation of invocating a regional identity by means of an approach of mutual understanding and shared experience. Although most of the ASEAN countries are multi-racial and multi-cultural, their cultures and religion are still very much indigenous constructions. A close study and understanding of the arts and cultures in between will be essential.

Nanyang artists now need to engage in wider exploration and gather further inspiration from their region. There are a wide range of indigenous craft and folk arts in the region ranging from weavers craft
from Brunei, Wayang (shadow play) performance from Java, various forms of architecture in East Malaysia and Indonesia, Balinese wood craft, religious sites and monuments, indigenous dance, religious rituals and mythical tales. All these cultures are so profound and richly contextualised as a treasure of inspirations for the artists of Singapore.

As a consequence of the growth in popularity of art education in Singapore, LaSalle College of the Arts was established in the 1980s. There has been an increasing number of graduates from these colleges who have pursued their higher education overseas. In this respect, the younger generation of artists in Singapore will be better informed and educated with the latest western art knowledge. This knowledge combined with the context of local or regional cultures and inspiration, suggests that the Nanyang Style will be able to meet a variety of challenges. This will allow the Nanyang Style to be embraced within the circumference of the Postmodern condition of Pluralism. As stated by Barry Smart "Postmodernity is a way of describing experiences of, relationships to, and struggles with the diverse and complex manifestations of a modernity that is still very much with us". 66

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Nanyang has become a historical term which now needs to be defined and interpreted, given that most of the first generation of Nanyang artists (pioneers) have passed on. Although their migration to Singapore was initially temporary, surprisingly none of them returned to their homelands. It would seem they had actually found their identities, their art and their home.

The continuation of the Nanyang Style will depend on the next generation. As Stuart Hall has suggested, it will be a constant challenge:

Cultural identity....is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past... But like everything which is historical, they undergo constraint transformation.67

CONCLUSION

The Nanyang Style grew out of a context of an unstable historical situation. It began with the Southward Movement of the Chinese to the British settlement of Singapore and developed during the anti-Japanese invasion and Post War period. When Singapore became independent, its industrialisation and economic development set a direction towards an international domain. These issues constituted social changes. They included the switch of public interest from ethnic tradition to Western modern cultures and influence. The Nanyang Style in this respect faced challenges from those art styles which were internationally orientated. There was no prominent activity in relation to the Nanyang Style for more than a decade after the decease of the pioneer Nanyang artists. This indicates clearly that the Nanyang Style is in its decline.
The evolution of the Nanyang Style reflects the changes of this particular period of history, predominantly the changing of the Chinese identity. The major causes of this were the political change in China in 1949 and growing independence of the Southeast Asian countries after the Second War. Although this change of identity for the Nanyang artists in Singapore was irrevocable, however, their change to a Singapore identity may be perceived as an actualisation of the "localisation" philosophy that was imbued by them. The Nanyang Style also can be seen as a form of patriotic consciousness because no other style of art during the same period had so deliberately incorporated local sentiments into its works.

The fact that Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art became the mainstream of the art scene in Singapore was partly due to the popularity of the art and its international influence. Such dominance also can be seen in many other Southeast Asian countries. Since the Nanyang Style itself is an art of integration that derived from different cultural sources and the significance of cultural exchange cannot be denied, especially during an epoch under the influence of high technology communication intersections.
The ASEAN Symposium of '93 signified the determination of the Asean's artists in exploring new aesthetic directions. The representatives from the region had proposed, questioned and exchanged ideas in relation to the issue of Asean aesthetics. The call for a regional identity had evoked generally an examination of the artists' individual stance on aesthetic practice within the region.

The motivation for redefining Nanyang Style is not simply to revive it, neither is it due to nostalgia. However, it is the soundness of the formalism and the significance of the content that are relevant and suggest a need for continuity. Chia Wai Hon, the Singapore representative of the ASEAN Symposium of '93, revealed that "Singapore artists opt for Western art because it provides new stimulus in terms of art theory, subject matter, freedom of expression, and a whole range of art and non-art materials to experiment with". He also pointed out the dilemma that faces Singapore artists:

To stay with the traditional would mean cutting themselves off from the mainstream of contemporary art ruled by Western aesthetics. If they are to go "modern", they would be distancing themselves from their ancestors, and might end up in a blind alley trapped in an alien movement that takes them nowhere.68

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A way out of this dilemma may be the liberty to choose a style for synthesising. A re-defined Nanyang Style might be able to provide a balance point between the two extremes of contemporary expression and traditional aesthetics.

Being the earliest modern art of Singapore and now as an integral part of the visual art tradition, the Nanyang Style needs to submit itself as one cultural model for identity. Its history and experience provide a significant contribution to share with the rest of the ASEAN members for shaping the regional identity called for by the ASEAN Symposium of '93.
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