ART IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE: GATEWAY TO CHINA AND MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

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Malaysia and Singapore; visual modernity; aesthetic; cultural exchange; ideology

Visual Modernity: its openness and complexity
Art in Malaysia and Singapore provides a good example of John Clark’s argument in “Open and closed discourses of Modernity in Asian Art”. He argued that “what autonomously and positively marks out culture as ‘Asian’ is the extent and frequency of their specific historical interactions; the regional distribution of certain common religious, artistic and social forms; the flow of segments of their populations.”1 In contrast, he argued the Euro-American position was closed because it defined forms of modernity in cultures such as Malaysia and Singapore as “derivative, secondary, disingenuous and inauthentic.”2 I argue that Singapore was a cultural gateway for China, especially to Shanghai, and that its unique geographic position in South East Asia, plus its development as a trading port under the British, established a marketplace of ideas from both Asia and Europe. In particular, it is important to recognize that “when techniques or forms cross cultural boundaries, they are articulated in a different discourse in the world, by those using them in ways which are neither apparent, nor relevant, to the discourses of interpretation of viewers from the originating culture.”3 The art of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore and Malaysia, was an example of transculture; interpreting and evaluating its forms requires a new more open discourse.

Except for the Communist Emergency in Malaysia in the 1950s, and “confratasi” by Indonesia in 1964, economic and cultural development in twentieth-century Malaysia and Singapore was more consistent than in China. Singapore’s collectors, in particular, acquired works that represented the major artists and movements in twentieth century Chinese art, often from the artists

2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
themselves. Chinese artists and collectors in Singapore were influenced by the current of realism, “guohua” that changed classical ink and brush landscape painting as a result of the influence of western science and modernism and the demands of nationalism. Most significantly, Singapore artists and collectors had close links with the art world in Shanghai in which artists such as Lin Fengmian and the “Storm Society” were influential through exhibitions, the publication of reproductions, art journals and the writing of critics and publicists in newspapers in stimulating a broad interest in modern art.

Two of the most innovative and influential Chinese artists were Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), the leader of the modernist avant-garde “Storm Society” and Xu Beihong (1895-1953), a staunch advocate of Realism. Both artist-teachers studied in France between 1919 and 1926. Lin Fengmian was influenced by the works of Matisse, Picasso, Roualt, and Modigliani. When he returned to China he was appointed the President of the National Academy of Art in Beijing and later founded the National Hangzhou Arts Academy from which Li Keran and other important artists graduated. Lin Fengmian’s Against the Wind (n.d.) is a painting using ink and colour on paper that was framed in the European style. It is an all over painting which occupies only the frontal plane demonstrating his understanding of modern abstraction. It also makes strong use of tonal colour to create atmosphere. In Against the Wind Lin Fengmian paints with the expressive brushstrokes that he learned from the Chinese painting tradition fusing both visual cultures in an outstanding work. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Lin was constantly criticized for his synthesis of modern European and Chinese painting, and as a result, he destroyed many of his own paintings. He was imprisoned for four years during the Cultural Revolution, leaving China in 1977. However, Lin Fengmian’s influence in China and among overseas Chinese persisted despite his persecution.

The other influential artist who studied in France in the same period was Xu Beihong.

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6. Ralph Crozier, “Post-Impressionists in pre-war Shanghai: the Jualenshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China,” in J. Clark Modernity in Asian Art, pp. 135-54, pp. 137-38.
7. Crozier, “Post-Impressionists in pre-war Shanghai: the Jualenshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China,” p. 136.