

Introduction to Singapore's early Chinese art scene

Singapore's art scene has been undergoing steady development since her first Biennale in 2006, and with the city's new National Art Gallery (which focuses on Singaporean and Southeast Asian visual arts) due to open in 2015, the future for our local art scene definitely looks promising.

It was not all rosy throughout the different stages of art development in Singapore, and in this article, we will be exploring the local early Chinese art scene and how it eventually leads us to where we are today.

Influx of Chinese migrants

In her early days, Singapore was an immigrant society and with an overwhelming influx of Chinese migrants travelling south in search of better opportunities. So much so that by 1827 Chinese had become the largest ethnic group in Singapore.

The majority of Chinese migrants then were generally poor and uneducated, and had come to Singapore to escape from the political and economic disasters in their homeland. Nevertheless, among the many hopefuls who had come to strive for a better future was a group of well-educated mainland Chinese. This group of people not only took on influential roles in the society, but also significantly influenced the country's art form.

It is interesting to note that due to a lack of support from the British government who was colonializing Singapore, many wealthy Chinese businessmen (i.e. Gan Eng Seng, Lee Kong Chian and Tan Kah Kee) took the initiative to donate money and set up Chinese schools in Singapore, hoping that they can give the next generation a better start in their lives. However, as early as in the 1910s, there had been a shortage of Chinese teachers. As a result, many well-educated overseas Chinese, such as Pan Shou (1911- 1999), Chan Shou She (1898 – 1969), Chen Jen Hao (1908-1976) , Goh Teck Sian (1893-1962) and Tsue Ta Tee (1903-1974) began to fill in the gap as educators.

Many of them were avid calligraphers or painters who practiced the art from a young age and were well-versed in literature and poetry. Hence, it was no surprise that a majority of them ended up on this path as educators. It then became apparent that the development of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy in our local art scene was closely linked to the setting up of the Chinese schools.

Chinese school aiding the development of Chinese art

Traditional Chinese ink painting and calligraphy are uniquely fascinating as each dot, line and maculation of ink is nothing short of the artist's creativity thinking and expression.

In fact, during the imperial era of China, calligraphy was an important criteria for selection of officials into the imperial court. Candidates who possessed great skill in calligraphy were assessed to be meticulous and confident, both important qualities required by the court.

In the early days, the learning and development of Chinese cultures were emphasized heavily in most schools built by overseas Chinese. Chinese calligraphy being the most sublime form of Chinese arts was naturally included as one of its co-curricular activities in most Chinese schools. One particular school stood up in its tremendous contribution to the development of Chinese calligraphy in Singapore. It was none other than Tuan Mong High School.

Located on Tank Road, Tuan Mong School was a primary school set up in 1906 by public-spirited Teochew clan leaders and became known as Tuan Mong High School when secondary levels were included two years later. As with schools built by clan associations in Singapore, Tuan Mong mostly served the education needs of Teochew children, and was staffed by Teochew teachers using Teochew as the medium of instruction in its early days.

Calligraphy was widely popular at Tuan Mong, especially in its early days where the school engaged teachers and principals who were accomplished calligraphers themselves and truly loved calligraphy and teaching the subject.

When one recalls the heyday of calligraphy at Tuan Mong, one will inevitably remember Tan Keng Cheow (1907-1972), an accomplished calligrapher. He was principal for 14 years and one could not underestimate his influence on cultivating the love of calligraphy that still remains at Tuan Mong. By the time he left Tuan Mong in 1964, the school had already established a positive environment for learning calligraphy.

Pan Shou is another classic example of someone who had deeply influenced the local art scene. Having worked as a newspaper editor for a year prior to teaching, His excellent language skills were evident in his calligraphy style where he often composed his own poems which were masterful in their own right. He has a total of 3 poetry collections published under his belt, and *An Anthology of Poems*, has been hailed as one of the world's most important publications in classical Chinese poetry, containing more than 1300 beautiful verses rich in Chinese literary allusions.

In 1934, he became principal of Tao Nan Primary School, nurturing it into a premier institution. It was also during that time where he met Tan Kah Kee, a businessman from his own province and a genuine friendship was forged. After World War II, he worked closely with Tan and his son-in-law Lee Kong Chian to rebuild the local Chinese community, particularly through the Hokkien Huay Kuan (Hokkien clan association). When the idea for a Chinese tertiary institution was discussed among Tan and other prominent Hokkien businessmen in 1955, they naturally appointed Pan as secretary-general. He remained as Nantah's Secretary-General until he retired in February 1960.

Till today, his calligraphic work can still be found at the main gate to Nanyang Technological University campus at Yunnan Garden. Besides that, it is interesting to note that the Chinese characters on the masthead of our local Chinese daily, *Lianhe Zaobao*, was also penned by him. After he retired, he devoted himself fully to calligraphy and poetry. In fact, a large portion of his highly acclaimed unique works was done after his retirement.

Born in Beijing, Tsue Da Tee (1903 – 1974) left China in 1937 to travel around the Southeast Asian countries and he eventually settled in Singapore in 1946. Since young, he had developed a strong passion for the Chinese calligraphy and studied extensively on the various calligraphic styles.

His constant search for knowledge led him to visit London in 1953 where he found the opportunity to do research in Chinese calligraphy, specifically on the oracle bone inscriptions at the British Museum. He also held several calligraphy exhibitions while in London and Paris. He left London in 1958 and headed for Penang where he spent several years focusing on refining his calligraphic skills. While he did not teach calligraphy in Penang, he definitely left a mark there. Today, you can still see inscribed sign-boards with calligraphy written by him at many places in Penang. In 1965, he finally returned to Singapore and devoted the rest of his time to teaching and promoting Chinese calligraphy. He was the volunteer calligraphy teacher of the Calligraphy Society of the Hua Yi Secondary School, and continued to hold many more exhibitions in Singapore and Malaysia.

He was one of the rare calligraphers in Singapore and Malaysia who were skilful in many calligraphic styles, such as kai (regular), li (clerical), cao (cursive), zhuan (official seal), bronze and oracle bone inscriptions. In addition, he was bold in experimenting and opening new grounds in the calligraphic art. His beautiful and controlled brushwork were skilfully executed with careful precision to express the underlying meaning and emotion of each character and form.

Besides being active in the education scene, many of those well-educated Chinese literati were also involved in politics.

Chen Xiao Hao (born 1888) was a classic example. A social-entrepreneur since his early days, he not only founded the daily newspaper, “*Voice of the People*” in China, he also set up schools there. In 1926, he was appointed Secretary of the National Revolutionary Army’s headquarters and served more than 2 months as Raoping’s magistrate. Subsequently, he arrived in Singapore to oversee the fund-raising for the Anbu Taihe Hospital, and was eventually appointed as Principal for Tuan Mong High School.

Though he did not shine as brightly as his other counterparts, his works were nonetheless executed with boldness and grace whose contribution to the local art scene could not be disregarded.

Closely-knitted elite community

Huang Man Shi (1890-1963) was also another interesting character worth mentioning. It was told that Xu Bei Hong (1895–1953) met Huang’s elder brother Meng Gui (1885-1965) in Paris in 1925. Meng Gui came to realize that Xu was having financial difficulties due to irregular government funding from China, and asked his younger brother Man Shi for help. Huang Man Shi being a generous man and an avid art collector (besides collecting art pieces, he also practiced calligraphy and one can still find some of his works in the market), invited Xu for a short stay in Singapore at his colonial-styled residence, the Hundred-Fan Studio, also known as Jiang Xia Tang.

Wanting to lend a helping hand to his fellow countryman, Huang converted a small living room on the second floor into a studio for Xu and introduced him to many of his friends. As a result, Xu began painting portraits for not just the rich and famous but also local senior officials, and was soon able to support his wife Zhang Manwei in Paris. One of the famous people in Singapore who commissioned him to paint their portraits was Christina Li Hui Wang, who later became the first wife of Asian movie mogul Dato Loke Wan Tho. Since then, Xu regarded the Huang brothers as bosom friends and stayed in Jiang Xia Tang whenever he visited the country.

History has it that Huang Man Shi was a lover of orchids and grown many precious and rare species of orchids in his garden at Jiang Xia Tang. Influenced by the passion of his friend and being physically surrounded by the colourful blooms, Xu became very interested in the orchids and they soon became his subject matter for painting. His creations during his stay in Singapore inevitably also helped to contributed to the local art scene.

The comrade spirit among the early pioneers was passionate and selfless as can be seen from Huang Man Shi’s generosity towards helping his fellow countryman. While they imparted their

knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation, they continued to develop their own brushworks and constantly met up with fellow Chinese artists to exchange artistic views.

Together as a closely-knit elite community, they explored art in a carefree and relaxed environment. This kind of community spirit and bonding proved to be essential to each individual artist, where the positive impact from such exchanges eventually led to their own breakthroughs in styles and forms.

This can be illustrated with the painting *Horse*, by Zhang Dang Nong (1903-1975), on which he painted the horse while fellow artists, Goh Teck Sian and Wang Jai Ling (1973) further enhanced his painting with their fluid calligraphy. Both Goh and Wang were prolific artists and their works were noted for their vitality, strength, grace and beauty. As a result, the masterpiece created was extraordinarily remarkable, having unmatched value, artistically and commercially.

Evidently, Singapore in her early days had many talented artists who possessed a strong passion for their crafts and who were not shy to impart and share with the younger generation. Though they came from China, many of them eventually came to view Singapore as their home and stayed here after their retirement, creating many more extraordinary works during that time.

In turn, Singapore provided them with a safe and peaceful environment to shine and showcase their talents. The tightly knit Chinese community forged during that period contributed significantly to their creative outputs while the establishing of Chinese schools further enhanced the development of such art forms among the many young and hopefuls.

The modern day Singaporean society should have a renewed sense of appreciation for these pioneers as without this group of elites pioneering the local art scene, Singapore will not be who she is today in terms of her art appreciation and development.

