

# Nostalgic Chronicles: Ten Men Art Group

24 June – 3 July 2016

“The Ten Men Art Group, the brainchild of Yeh Chi Wei, was an informal grouping of artists whose common interest was to participate in such field trips to the [Southeast Asian] region. The group, which membership increased to sixteen in its fifth outing, organized a total of six trips to the Malayan peninsula, Java, Bali, Thailand, Cambodia, Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei and Sumatra between 1961 and 1970.”<sup>1</sup>

Kwok Kian Chow, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*

“The organization and format for the trips were fairly similar. For each trip, interested artists would be invited by the more regular participants to take part. Yeh [Chi Wei] was keen to cultivate young artists and often encouraged them to participate. On the whole, the group welcomed a diverse group, including senior artists like Yeo Hwee Bin and Shui Tit Sing as well as foreign ones such as Medan-based Machzum. Occasionally, even non-artists such as writer Ma Ge [Marco Hsu] also joined the group. All shared an interest in outdoor sketching and painting, and enjoyed travelling with a group of like-minded individuals with whom they could discuss art.”<sup>2</sup>

Low Sze Wee, *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*

“What you will see today is a Malayan Consciousness expressed in form and colour. Here are 10 artists, all of them, Chinese, who have picked for their theme the life of Malay fisher folk and villagers in the East Coast. As Malayan artists, they are inspired by what they see in the east coast as readily as by what they see in Singapore’s Chinatown.”<sup>3</sup>

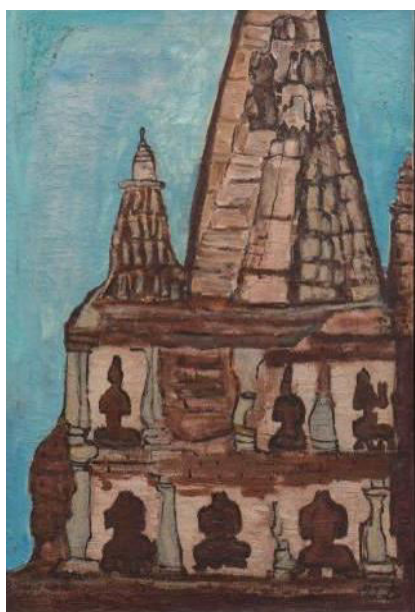
S. Rajaratnam, opening speech at the first Ten Men Art Exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 1961

## Introduction

It would not be possible to discuss today the context of Singapore modern art without an appreciative mention of the 1952 Bali painting trip undertaken by émigré pioneer artists Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang. Hailed for invigorating a post-war Singapore art scene with fresh subject matters and pictorial styles, overseas painting experiences as such reinforce the importance of interacting with foreign communities and environments for artistic stimulation.

In an era when means of travel remained limited for most artists in Singapore, the diverse, exuberant landscapes and cultures within Southeast Asia naturally afford an irresistible trove of visual inspirations; the multifarious modes and expressions through which Singapore artists articulate their exciting encounters with scenes and peoples of the region have proved imperative in the evolution of our early Singapore art scene (c. 1930s – 1980s).

***Nostalgic Chronicles: Ten Men Art Group*** is a commemorative exhibition that carries audience back in time to appreciate the Southeast Asian painting adventures boldly undertaken by a group of local artists during the period of 1961 to 1970. Informally led by pioneer artist Yeh Chi Wei, the Ten Men Art Group comprises a loose line-up of regular participants including Lim Tze Peng, Choo Keng Kwang, Seah Kim Joo and Chen Cheng Mei, along with others such as Yeo Hwee Bin, Shui Tit Sing, Cheah Phee Chye, Lai Foong Moi, Tan Choh Tee, Tan Teo Kwang and Lee Sik Khoon. Each road trip culminated to an exhibition (usually self-funded by the participating members) that showcased works produced by the members during and after the trip.<sup>4</sup>



This exhibition features 25 art pieces, ranging from oil, ink to batik paintings, by members of the Ten Men Art Group – Yeh Chi Wei, Lim Tze Peng, Seah Kim Joo, Chen Cheng Mei, Tan Choh Tee, Choo Keng Kwang, among others. Of particular note is a 1960s composition by Yeh Chi Wei, which must be considered a precious sighting outside of any institutional display.

1. *Indian Temple Ruins*, 1972  
Chen Cheng Mei, Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 50.5 cm

Despite being an informal art group, the success and cross-cultural interactions established by the Ten Men Art Group and its string of exhibitions eventually led to the formation of the Southeast Asian Art Association in 1970, with Yeh Chi Wei as its president.<sup>5</sup> This formal organization continues in the spirit of the Ten Men Art Group by regularly organising cross-border trips and exchanges between Singapore artists and those of the region.

### **Founders & Beginnings**

Most historical surveys on the landscape of early Singapore art observe little or no mention of the Ten Men Art Group and the footprints of their artistic contribution. This regret is compounded by the limited availability of archival materials from the period. Fortunately, the directive efforts by the National Art Gallery, Singapore in examining and presenting the legacy of pioneer artist Yeh Chi Wei in 2010, opened up new areas of information reflecting interviews and vital anecdotes from Yeh Chi Wei's family and surviving members of the Ten Men Art Group such as Chen Cheng Mei, Choo Keng Kwang, Tan Choo Kai, Tan Choh Tee and a few others. This development has enabled us a better grasp of how the Ten Men Art Group came into existence and the impact of their activities.

The Ten Men Art Group was apparently conceptualised based on an earlier road trip to Malaya made by four artists, Choo Keng Kwang, Lim Tze Peng, Chen Cheng Mei and her brother, Tan Teo Kwang, in 1960.<sup>6</sup> In the following year, these four artists, together with their respective invited friends, organised another overseas trip, leading informally to the gathering of the Ten Men Art Group in 1961.<sup>7</sup> The ten members – Chen Cheng Mei, Cheah Phee Chye, Choo Keng Kwang, Lai Foong Moi, Lim Tze Peng, Lee Sik Khoon, Tan Miow Kheng, Tan Teo Kwang, Yeh Chi Wei and Yeo Tiong Wah – travelled together in two cars to the east coast of peninsula Malaya.<sup>8</sup> Though almost no actual painting was done during the travelling, the artists collected photographs, sketches and artifacts, often incorporating them into their compositions upon returning to Singapore.

In December 1961, the first *Ten Men Art Exhibition* featuring paintings inspired by their travelling experiences, was opened at the Victoria Memorial Hall by the then Minister of Culture, Mr. S. Rajaratnam to favourable responses.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent trips to other parts of Southeast Asia were organised in 1962, 1963, 1965, 1968 and 1970; each trip was followed by an exhibition showcasing works derived from the group's travels. The innovative techniques developed and made stylised by some of these artists in their evolving oeuvres

would attest to the importance of pursuing these overseas adventures. (Some examples of artistic breakthroughs will be discussed in the later part of this reading material.)

Interestingly, the line-up for these group trips remained informal and inconsistent. As the activities of the Ten Men Art Group gained traction, the group also gradually expanded, eventually encompassing 16 artists in its 1968 trip. While Chen Cheng Mei, Yeh Chi Wei, Lim Tze Peng, Choo Keng Kwang and Seah Kim Joo remain its more regular participants, there were others like Liu Kang, Lim Yew Kuan and Marco Hsu who joined for a trip or two.

In addition to experiencing exotic landscapes and cultural monuments, these travels afforded the artist interactions with indigenous communities such as the Dayak tribes living in the longhouses of Sarawak and the Cambodians in their floating villages. At certain locations, they were received by welcoming local artists: for instance, in 1962, Lee Man Fong hosted and introduced the group to the deputy mayor and other local artists when they visited Indonesia; in 1970, Machzum in Medan hosted them and went around painting with them.<sup>10</sup>

There is something romantic and aspirational in the group's journeys to explore new, unfamiliar terrains; every trip embodies a collective quest for fresh experiences and visual materials. In an era where roads and travelling means were less developed and reliable accommodation less easily available, it was certainly no mean feat that the group persisted in making these journeys. As highlighted by Low Sze Wee in his discussion of the group's success in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*:

"Firstly, in the 1960s, it was unprecedented in Malaya for a large group of artists to organise themselves for overseas trips and then hold a thematic exhibition after each trip. It was even more remarkable that they did so over a sustained period, organising six international trips and five exhibitions over less than a decade. Even the more established groups like the Society of Chinese Artists had not achieved this."<sup>11</sup>

By the 1970, the Ten Men Art Group evolved into a formal entity, the Southeast Asian Art Association, with Yeh Chi Wei as its president. Embodying similar ideals and objectives to the Ten Men Art Group, this regional art group continued to facilitate cross-border trips and exchanges between Singapore artists and those of the region.<sup>12</sup>

### **New Aesthetics**

For some of its members, these travels served a new and sustained impetus to their artistic endeavours. This was especially the case for frequent participants like Yeh Chi Wei, Lim Tze Peng

and Chen Cheng Mei. These encounters abroad ostensibly shaped their practices, both in enriching their repertoires with new subject matters, and in transforming their modes of production.

Rising above mere observations of landscapes and cultures, many of these artists' works appear less concerned with mimetic fidelity than expressive, and at times, idiosyncratic interpretations; their paintings were brazenly marked by an ambition for new aesthetics, often with a noted partiality toward indigenous customs or primitivism. This shall be highlighted through a brief discussion on a few artists and their artworks below.

**Yeh Chi Wei** (b. 1913 – d. 1981) was among the leading figures in the early Singapore art scene during the period of 1960s - 1970s. Unfortunately, due to various reasons, he remains shrouded in relative obscurity today as compared to celebrated pioneers like Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang.

Yeh Chi Wei was born in Fuzhou, China. At age 5, he moved with his family to Singapore and later Sarawak, before returning to Fuzhou in 1925. Having been a keen artist since young, he enrolled, against his father's wishes, at the Xinhua Art Academy in Shanghai, specialising in Western painting till he graduated in 1936. Yeh subsequently relocated to Singapore to escape the Sino-Japanese war and settled in Sibu, Sarawak after his first marriage.

Yeh worked mainly as a teacher in Singapore and Malaysia between the 1940s and early 1960s. Among the students whose artistic interests he helped nurtured at Chung Cheng High School where he taught between 1952 – 1963 were the young Lim Tze Peng, Dr. Ho Kah Leong and Dr. Liu Thai Ker.<sup>13</sup> From 1961 to 1970, he informally led the Ten Men Art Group in the organisation of painting expeditions and exhibitions, and headed as president for the Southeast Asian Art Association from 1970 to 1977.

Yeh's contributions to the cultural landscape of Singapore have been widely acknowledged only in recent years, most notably in a retrospective exhibition by the National Gallery, Singapore in 2010, which helped uncover much of his legacy as an innovative artist and dedicated art teacher.

“In 1961, I went on a painting trip to the east coast of Malaya with ten fellow painters. It was then that I began to shake off whatever remained of my realistic tendencies.”<sup>14</sup>

The overseas trips with the Ten Men Art Group since the early 1960s did much to overthrow Yeh’s original resistance against Western abstract art. Being exposed to other exotic historical and cultural traditions, as well as refreshing discussions on artistic ideas and techniques with other artists shed new light on how he might approach his own painting. Yeh also picked up several ethnic sculptures and woodcarvings during his travels and often incorporated elements of primitive art in his compositions. These, combined with fervent readings on the subject of abstract art and his flourishing interest in Chinese antiquities like ink rubbings and stone carvings, enabled him to forge a new artistic frontier during this period.

Some of Yeh’s most successful paintings rely on his organic incorporation of these diverse influences, as seen in the work below (2), *Untitled (Mother with Children)*, composed sometime in the late 1960s. Spotting an entirely flat composition – as advocated in modern abstract painting – the work valorises the ‘mother and child’ theme in a Southeast Asian setting. The forms are reduced to simple shapes and lines, but the colours are evidently dense and striking. In particular, his unique palette knife sculpting evokes a mottled effect reminiscent of ancient stone rubbing, creating a new pictorial dimension for the oil medium.



2. *Untitled (Mother and Child)*, c.1969  
Yeh Chi Wei, Oil on board, 59 x 72 cm

Yeh was certainly not the only artist radically inspired by the sights and actions of the trips. One of the founders and regular members of the Ten Men Art Group, **Lim Tze Peng** – a former student of

Yeh at Chung Cheng High School and later became his friend – was also profoundly influenced by these experiences.

Well loved for his nostalgic ink landscapes depicting kampong life, bustling alleys and street scenes of Old Singapore, Lim Tze Peng (b.1921 - ) practiced painting and calligraphy since young though he was never formally trained in art. While Lim only turned to full-time painting after his retirement in 1981, he was already a well-associated figure within the local art circle during the decades when he was still working as a teacher, and later the principal of Chung Cheng High School. Between the 1960s and early 1970s, he travelled to various parts of Southeast Asia and participated in painting expeditions with first-generation artists like Yeh Chi Wei, Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng and Cheng Chong Swee.

Unbeknown to many today, Lim Tze Peng concentrated in oil painting before the 1970s, and his work during this early period thoughtfully reflect commonplace activities or decorative customs observed in places such as Bali and Sarawak. In addition, his oil painting techniques in this early period might have received considerable influence from Yeh's innovative style.



3. *Malacca Bullock Carts*, 1965  
Yeh Chi Wei, Oil on canvas, 62.5 x 80.3cm



4. *Bali Village*, 1960s  
Lim Tze Peng, Oil on canvas, 75 x 102cm

For instance, when we compare Yeh's *Malacca Bullock Carts* (3) with Lim's *Bali Village* (4), the similarities in their executions of the oil medium become apparent. Each painting comprises a flat composition with elements being reduced to simple outlines; the choice of colour scheme and deliberate interjections of lines and spaces in stark white give the composition its 'framed' and 'weathered' look. Furthermore, each work is signed off with a painted Chinese stamp that resembles a 'seal' on a painting.



Another founder of the Ten Men Art Group was **Chen Cheng Mei** (also known as Tan Seah Boey). Born in Singapore in 1927, Chen studied western painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 1949 to 1954 where she was taught by pioneer artists including Lim Hak Tai and Cheong Soo Pieng. In addition to six years of training in Chinese calligraphy under Chui Ta Tee, she picked up printmaking in the 1960s which further enriched her technical proficiency in painting.

In 1960, Chen was among the 4 artists who first initiated a road trip to Malaysia for painting – an idea that proved successful and snowballed to involve more artists, leading to the unofficial formation of the Ten Men Art Group for their 1961 painting trip and exhibition. As elaborated by Ms. Bridget Tracy Tan in *Joie de Vivire: Chen Cheng Mei*:

“Riding her husband’s Ford Zephyr, she [Chen Cheng Mei] was accompanied by her younger brother and aspiring artist, Tan Teo Kwang, classmate Choo Keng Kwang and teacher and artist Lim Tze Peng. Although the adventure was curtailed by monsoon floods, Chen marveled at her experiences and how much of the art produced was greatly inspired by those experiences. There was sadly, no exhibition that documented this trip.”<sup>15</sup>

Even as the Ten Men Art Group morphed into the formal Southeast Asian Art Association in 1970, and after the passing of Yeh Chi Wei in 1981, Chen has persisted throughout the rest of her practice, a relentless sojourner across the globe. Well documented in her dynamic repertoire between the 1960s and the 2000s, are her explorations of various scenes across the Malayan Peninsula, Philippines, China, India, Africa, Mexico and the USA.

More importantly, some works that Chen composed from her 1960s’ expeditions with the Ten Men Art Group suggest that she already developed the distinctive painting language that would later flourish into the effervescent naïve folk style that characterizes her oeuvre. Some salient features that surface in her early paintings of Southeast Asia include a rich, vivid palette, as well as a flat and deliberately naïve composition.

An example can be found in her 1965 painting, *Angkor Wat (5)*, which was inspired by the group’s visit to Cambodia. The composition is carried along by solid simplicity in brushwork. Rather than attempting to capture the vast magnificence of the ancient monument, Chen chooses to revel in the immediacy of its physical presence, focusing instead, on evoking the tactile nature of the architectural elements through angular structures, earthy tones and subtle highlights. Apart from its flatness in composition, the perspective almost comes across as a cropped frame from the viewfinder



of a camera. The resulting image is simplified yet expressive in form, and to a degree, reminiscent of a relief carving.



5. *Angkor Wat*, 1965,  
Chen Cheng Mei, Oil on canvas, 45 x 88 cm

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<sup>1</sup> Kwok, Kian Chow, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Low, Sze Wee, "Rediscovering Yeh Chi Wei," *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (Singapore: The National Art Gallery, Singapore, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Opening speech by Mr. S. Rajaratnam at the 1961 Ten Men Art Exhibition, 28 December 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Low, Sze Wee, "Rediscovering Yeh Chi Wei," *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (Singapore: The National Art Gallery, Singapore, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Yeh, Chi Wei, "Artist's Preface," *Ye Zhiwei huaji* (Yeh Chi Wei Art Catalogue) (Singapore, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Tan, Bridget Tracy, "That Without Which – Chen Cheng Mei," *Joie de Vivre: Chen Cheng Mei* (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).