

Resistance and Representation: The Making of Chinese Identity in the Art of the Yiyanhui and the Equator Art Society in 1950s Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social realist paintings of the art groups Yiyanhui and the Equator Art Society which emerged during the 1950s in Malaya and Singapore. Their works centred on the social functions of art and its subject matters featured the working class, the Japanese occupation and anti-British colonial sentiment. Their artworks are viewed here as cultural productions shaped by the negotiation between dominant-subordinate relationships within a postcolonial framework. It is argued that the artistic productions examined here may be viewed not only for its overarching “social realist” endeavours but, also as a struggle to rewrite the narrative of the Chinese in Malaya against of the prevailing static representations forwarded by the colonial campaign. The first part of the paper illustrates how colonial discourse in the local press propagated an image of the Chinese as inherently susceptible to communism, untrustworthy, and opportunistic. The second part of the paper shows how the artists resisted this essentialist image of Chinese identity and offered a more complex picture of a Chinese-Malayan identity. Through a combination of interviews, written artist’s statements, formal and contextual considerations of the artworks, as well as a cultural studies framework, the author demonstrate how a different narrative is being offered by these artists through two related processes in identity construction: qualifications for authenticity and belonging, the articulation of ambivalence. Resistance thus, is explored as encompassing a network of strategies employed by these artists as a way to reject colonialist representations of otherness and gain authorial agency against the intellectual and ideological dominance of colonial discourse.

Keywords: *Equator Art Society, social realist art, Chinese identity, Singaporean art, Malaysian art*

INTRODUCTION

The art of the Yiyanhui and the Equator Art Society (EAS) refer to social realist paintings and woodcuts which emerged during the independence period of Malaya and Singapore during the 1950s. This movement comprised of Chinese educated artists who either immigrated to Malaya during the 1930s–1940s, or were born in Malaya during the 1920s–1930s. The year 1953 marks the starting point of the Yiyanhui (Singapore High School Graduates of 1953 Art Association) who held a travelling exhibition which began in Singapore and journeyed to Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and some towns in between over a span of two years (circa 1954 and 1956). The Yiyanhui comprised of students from various Chinese high schools in Singapore who subsequently founded the EAS in 1956.¹ Collectively, their works has been categorised loosely by local art writers as social realist because of its artistic approach which centred on the social functions of art as well as its subject matters which featured the working class, the Japanese occupation, and anti-British colonial sentiment.

To a certain extent, their social realist preoccupations echo those of the other social realist movements which occurred in other parts of the world, in terms of the overt alignment with the working class and the critique of the bourgeoisie. But these comparisons with social realist works of the 20th century, as an art historical category, somewhat limits the works too neatly as reactions against idealism and a critique of capitalist ideologies. In other words, when categorically deemed as “social realist,” the art of the Yiyanhui

and the EAS loses much of its local specific resistive dimensions. Moreover, their supposed links with the Russian Peredvizhniki further concretise superficially, the former's main trajectory as primarily an expression of proletarian oppression that was happening in many parts of the world. As such, this paper proposes focusing on the making of Chinese identity as an underlying trope, in order to tease out the specificities of resistance in the works of these artists. By examining their works vis-à-vis representation, a more nuanced understanding of resistance within the Malayan context may be formulated.

I situate their struggle within the broader developments of resistance in cultural studies that has its roots in Edward Said's writings on cultural resistance and Stuart Hall's theorisation of identity within the spaces of representation and agency. Edward Said's key contribution to postcolonial resistance has been his 1978 text, *Orientalism* that argued that the production of discourse was the crucial component of Western imperialism. On the other hand, cultural studies as a mode of inquiry is employed here as heuristic device which emphasises subjectivity and examines culture in relation to individual lives (During 2005: 2). Secondly, the latter is also a form of analysis that considers of utmost importance, the unequal power structures in society and a partiality towards those within subordinate positions (During 2005: 2).

The significance of Hall's approach to resistance lay in his point that resistance is relational and conjunctural (Hall and Tony 2006). This means "it is not a singular universal act that defines itself for all time but is constituted by repertoires whose meanings are specific to particular times, places and social relationships" (Barker 2008: 432). By pointing to the relational and conjunctural quality of resistance, he pointed to the importance of contexts and specificity of resistance and avoided generalising notions of resistance.

The artworks in this case are viewed as cultural productions borne out of this specific postcolonial framework and shaped by the negotiation of dominant-subordinate relationships. It is argued that the artistic productions examined here may be viewed not only for its overarching "social realist" endeavours but, also as a struggle to rewrite the narrative of the Chinese in Malaya against the prevailing static representations forwarded by the colonial campaign.

Through a combination of interviews, written artist's statements, and formal and contextual considerations of the artworks, I demonstrate how a different narrative is being offered by these artists through three related processes in identity construction: qualifications for authenticity and belonging, the articulation of ambivalence, and the inevitability of self-ethnisation. Resistance thus, is explored as encompassing a network of strategies employed by these artists as a way to reject colonialist representations of otherness and gain authorial agency against the intellectual and ideological dominance of colonial discourse.

COLONIAL DISCOURSE IN BRITISH MALAYA

The 1950s–1960s was a period in Malayan history where there existed a stereotypical notion of Chinese identity as being inherently tied to Communism. The official historiography of nation-making in Singapore during the 1950s was characterised as a fight between the communist and the non-communist (Tan 2003: 756). The "communist" were ideologically represented in terms of Chinese education, culture and traditions, whilst the non-communist were represented by the English educated Chinese, less partisan to Chinese culture and tradition.

The notion of the susceptibility of the Chinese educated community to Communist ideologies were often weaved into the narrative of popular media and colonial propaganda such as in newspapers. The "criminalising" of Chineseness as communist was not a recent rhetoric but can be traced back to Western racial discourse on the colonised. Thus, concepts of Chinese identity in British Malaya during 1950s, should not be examined apart from this racial discourse that forms a historical basis, legitimising this narrative. I will briefly trace, through anecdotal accounts, representation of Chinese identity in popular media published in the early 20th century until the mid-1950s. These accounts give us a glimpse of the pervasiveness of this representation, not as one that emerged in 1950s British Malaya but rather as an extension of the larger Western racial discourse.

As French philosopher, Ernest Renan (quoted in Cesaire 2001: 313) wrote:

Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honour; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied.

Renan's words echo strongly in Malaya where Chineseness was conceptualised by colonial discourse to include an industrious nature and an opportunistic character. For instance, *The Straits Echo and Times of Malaya* (1951a) published an article titled, "The Chinese is a Colonist" which remarked:

The Chinese is well equipped to become a colonist. He is enterprising, ingenious, shrewd, economical, and not afraid of hard work. But he is no missionary; he is not interested in exploration for its own sake, or concerned with the progress or welfare of the people in the lands he travels to.

This essentialist identity was also popularly contrasted against an essentialist identity of the Malay as simple natives who benefited greatly from the intervention of colonial administration as British historian, Reginald Coupland (1926: 128) noted:

They [The Malays] are easy-going folk who will not work more than they need to keep themselves in simple comfort and, on such rich soil, that is not much. They gladly leave the large-scale development of its resources to the hordes of industrious Chinese coolies who have poured into the country in numbers almost equal to their own.

Resident General of the Federated Malay States (1896–1901), Frank Swettenham similarly, reminisced in one of his Malay sketches that “Work was plentiful, wages high, and the labourers few, so all classes became rich, as the resources of the country were exploited by the Chinese” (Swettenham 1967: 205). British Resident of Pahang (1896–1900), Hugh Clifford, for example, “was certain that the native Malays were incapable of good government” and the colonial rule was in his eyes a means of freeing the Malay masses and giving the Malays “self-government” (quoted in Savage and Kong 1994). The Governor of the Straits Settlement, Sir Frederick Weld also wrote, “Good rulers may arise in all countries, but judging from the past, good native government seems not to be a plant congenial to the soil”. He continues that the British government is welcomed by the people of Malaya for the former’s ability to maintain peace, “Both Malays and other races accept our rule in these states, and the majority, I doubt not, do so gratefully” (Lovat 1914: 316).

British colonial response to nationalistic sentiments which began to develop in Malaya during the 1950s were negative. Wong (1953: 10), related the comments of Carveth Wells, the author of *Six Years in the Malay Jungle*:

Mr. Wells has very strong views on Communism and rabid nationalism. He thinks neither will do Malaya any good. ... Mr. Wells thinks the rot set in with the occupation of Malaya by the Japanese and the ideas of “Asia for the Asiatics” which they promoted.

Malayan nationalism was inextricably tied to communism and casted as extremist ideologies that went against the civilising efforts of the colonials.

Within such contexts, whatever positions adopted by the Chinese community—whether anti-colonial, anti-Japanese, pro-British, anti-communist, nationalist, or otherwise—they could not, to a large extent, escape being categorised as opportunists who sided with whoever comes out on top at the end. For instance, *Malayan Mirror* (1953: 7) in “The Chinese as the others see them” stated:

The Chinese in Malaya total about two million and in Singapore almost 750,000. Few of the Chinese are actively and openly supporting the British Authorities. The majority continues to play the dispassionate onlooker, ready to surrender to the Communists if they happen to come out on top of the struggle; or to be his loyal subjects of His Majesty if the insurrection turns out a complete failure.

...The majority of the Chinese are fence sitters...²

Another writer says, “Most Chinese there want to keep in with the Communists because of their success in China, but they don’t want to side with them entirely because, for one thing, they feel they may get a better deal under our [British] regime.”³

In sum, these excerpts are stereotypical representations of Chinese political positions and attitudes in the local press that echo British colonial discourse, reinforcing the notion of the Chinese community as inherently opportunistic, susceptible to Communism and imbued with extremist ideological motivations. These notions limited the positionalities of the Chinese subject through a framework of identity that disallows firstly the invoking of authenticity through cultural and ethnic narratives, secondly it denies the ambivalence inherent in the identity making process, and thirdly it politicises representation which reinforces ethnisation. In the second part of the paper, I will demonstrate how these three processes are negotiated through artistic practice.

WHO CAN MAKE CLAIMS TO MALAYA?

The colonial discourse in Malaya reinforced the ideological divisions between the Chinese-educated Chinese and the English-educated Chinese by associating the former's recourse to Chinese tradition and culture as a reflection of their inability to "assimilate" into Malayan culture. On the other hand, the English-educated Chinese who could not read or write in Mandarin became valorised as the social elite, gaining not only more financial support in education but also validation as "qualified" citizens of Malaya. In other words, it seemed that the qualification of being Malayan was dependant on their disqualification as Chinese nationals and this disqualification is demonstrated through the castration of not only national ties but also cultural ties. In the 1950s, the gradual transitioning of the Chinese community away from China towards Malaya may be evidenced in various ways. This included the decrease in remittances to China (Thompson and Adloff 1955) and the decrease in Sino-centric subject matter in the media (Lim Cheng Tju 2003: 77). However, the cutting of cultural links from China was far more problematic and their negotiation of this discursive formation of a kind of peripheral diasporic culture could be felt particularly in the field of education.

Lim Yew Kuan, president of the EAS, noted that there was a disparity between English and Chinese-medium schools saying:

Unlike the English school we were not supported in any way... because Malaya was colonised by the British so naturally the English schools taught British history. Education was a way for them to control the Commonwealth countries...so after a while these students become more knowledgeable about British history and some of them even took pride in that fact (Lim Yew Kuan 2004).

For the Mandarin speaking/Chinese educated artistic community, the general feeling about the education plan developed by the British was that it mainly focused on the economic and political interests of the colony. Their treatment of Chinese-medium schools, in particular, was viewed as a form of regulation of Communist and leftist elements (Lim Yew Kuan 2004).

The notion of education for colonised subjects was introduced as a noble and civilising mission of the colony and this was strategically framed in two ways through colonial discourse in British Malaya. John Crawford, Resident of Singapore (1823–26), said, "The native inhabitants of Singapore have not yet attained that state of civilisation and knowledge which would qualify them to derive advantage from the enlarged system of education [...] without any early prospect of corresponding and adequate benefit" (quoted in Turnbull 2009: 45). This statement overtly demonstrates how colonial discourse operates. Firstly, it purports that the colonised remain at the bottom rung of society as a result of the inherent weaknesses and innate backward mentality. Secondly, the colony as bearer of education deserves the right to choose only qualified recipients that would reproduce colonial thinking and thereby benefit the colonial cause.

Within these contexts, Tay Kok Wee's *Lost and Found* takes on a particular significance (see Photo 1). In this marketplace scene, the Chinese High School student who is possibly on his back from school stops in aid of a fish seller. The position of the fishes thrown by the roadside connotes that an incident had taken place and the man in white with his thumb gesturing to the back indicates that the person responsible had taken off. He expresses indignation and the rest of crowd encircles him, sympathising to his misfortune but is hesitant, maintaining their distance.

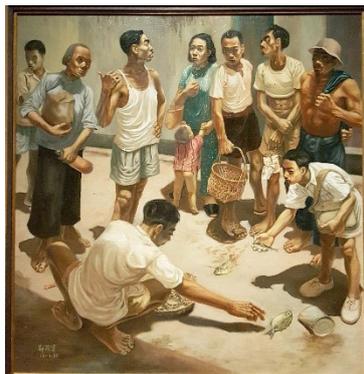


Photo 1 Tay Kok Wee, *Lost and Found* (1955). Oil on canvas, 100 cm × 94.5 cm
Source: Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore. Photographed by author.

This painting was published in the first catalog of the Yiyanhui exhibition with an accompanying caption:

Why are hawkers, who put their heart and soul in doing a small business, are always inseparable with bad fortune? The artist is telling us how a fish monger, who so treasures his fish which has dropped on the ground, picks it up with an unsteady hand; and how the passers-by react to this tragedy, what are their feelings, love or hate? The student of the Chinese school, forever acts with justice.

Tay Kok Wee questioning of our conflictive reactions, whether “love or hate?” may be read as a plea to change our perceptions of the lower classes of society. There is an implication here that the bad fortune was merely a consequence of the hawker’s own wretchedness (he was inseparable from bad fortune). The hawker is thus depicted as a representative of the labouring class who bears the brunt of politically motivated decisions of the government. He then introduces the Chinese school student as the arbiter of justice. His positioning of the Chinese school student as a symbol of action is contrasted with the crowd who comprise the elderly, other members of the labouring class, a mother and child—who all have their hands full. He presents the student, dressed still in uniform, schoolbag in hand—both identifiers of his Chinese education—who makes the effort to bend down and return the fish. He may be viewed not only as the active resistive voice of the labourer but also that of the colonised.

Many artworks within these thematic, began to project the field of education as that highly contested arena where authorial agency against the various levels of colonial representations needed to be expanded. In *United*, Tan Tee Chie illustrated how the Chinese community came together in support and defence of Chinese education which many felt were increasingly threatened by restrictive education bills (see Photo 2). The focus of the print is a small plant on the verge of being crushed by a rock. Towards the background, an outline of a Chinese school building offers us a way of reading the print. From this building, a long line of people gathers to take turns to save a plant from being rolled over by a large rock. They are fully dressed not as labourers, but perhaps as students or teachers. Keeping in mind the socio-political context during which such prints were produced, the visual cues and the title seem to indicate that the Chinese community stands united in supporting the cause of education. The plant therefore, may be read as a symbol of the vulnerability of Chinese education and culture. The people line up to lend support by using thin sticks. While their support is strong, their method apparently is feeble, signifying that they lack actual agency in the larger political scheme of things and the fate of the plant hangs in the balance.



Photo 2 Tan Tee Chie, *United* (1954). Woodblock print, 20.5 cm × 31cm.
Source: NUS Art Museum. Photographed by author.

In *Nanyang University*, Lim Yew Kuan depicts the university from an aerial perspective, his perspective which looks out into the horizon overlooking the tropical landscape allude to the future in Malaya rather than that of China (see Photo 3). The establishment of the university carried with it various political and cultural implications. For some quarters, it was viewed as a sign of Chinese political dominance and worked against their claims of loyalty to Malaya (*Straits Times* 1953: 9). Lim Yew Kuan pointed out:

Many people in particular the English-educated, did not really understand that the university was very important to the Chinese-educated community in many ways. The Chinese high schools gave birth to many artistic activities. [Their] contribution were often overlooked by the English press and they were not covered in the newspaper whereas other news which were more trivial were sometimes sensationalised (Lim Yew Kuan 2012).

His comment highlighted the politicisation of education that equated Chinese education to political loyalty to China and by contrasting this with the English educated who was presented as model citizens and whose ability to assimilate qualifies his claims for Malaya. Teerath Ram, expressed the views of the Chinese educated community when he said, “If we wish to speed up the building of a united Malayan nation then we cannot afford to ignore the existence of Nanyang University which is the symbol of faith of the Malayan Chinese in the future of this country” (*The Straits Echo and Times of Malaya* 1958: 6).



Photo 3 Lim Yew Kuan, *Nanyang University* (1956). 48 cm × 68 cm.
Source: Low Sze Wee (2011).

In the painting, a small but discernible lighthouse stands atop a hill. I suggest that Lim used the metaphor of the lighthouse to amplify the symbol of the university as the beacon of the Chinese community. The symbol of the lighthouse may be viewed as playing a double role—a beckoning towards home, as well as establishing a cultural space that one may recognise as home. Thus, the university symbolises their desire to establish and maintain cultural roots in Malaya. Correspondingly, negative reactions from the colonial government to the university was equated with a rejection of their claim to belong in Malaya. Being explicitly a Chinese medium facility, the university also reflected that their sense of belonging is strongly defined by their relationship to Chinese language and education.

Within this context, Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class* takes on a particular significance (see Photo 4). The notion of belonging is strongly expressed here by the acceptance of *bahasa Melayu* as the national language. Here, older Chinese students come together informally to learn the language from a Malay teacher.⁴ The painting depicts a comfortable, even cheerful atmosphere of the class which is infused with light and coloured with a warm palette. One of the students is smiling while another is standing up to speak in deference to the teacher. The overall atmosphere reflected their positive response towards the decision of the government to use *bahasa Melayu* as a national language in the context of national unity. If we view Chinese language as a symbolic carrier of Chinese culture and tradition, *National Language Class* may conversely be read as a demonstration of their identification as Malaysians.



Photo 4 Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class* (1959). Oil on canvas. 112 cm × 153 cm.
Source: Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore. Photographed by author.

In *Epic Poem of Malaya*, Chua Mia Tee portrayed feelings of nationalism in the reading of a fictional history book called *Malayan History*. The painting alludes to a future where, students gather to reminisce about Malaya's road to independence, implying that they see themselves (the Chinese community) playing a crucial role in the fight for independence from the British. The words "home country" and "compatriots" emphasise the allegiance of the Chinese community to Malaya (see Photo 5). During this period, depictions of Chinese identity was politicised in the press as one "susceptible to communism" spread the suspicion that the Chinese were just "waiting for the right time" to turn Malaya into another Communist China. In this context, the painting may be read as an attempt to quell the suspicion that the Chinese was still loyal to Communist China by expressing their loyalty and their patriotism towards Malaya. The accompanying caption in the Yiyanhui catalogue reads:

Who does not love his home country? Who does not love their kind-hearted compatriots? The fate of the people of any country is inseparable with the fate of their home country.

We, the people of Malaya, are surely moved by the recitation of the trying periods of our country...

I suggest that these examples serve as important narratives that deconstruct stereotypical representations of Chineseness in colonial discourse. They help us to understand how education and language are politicised as contested fields where authenticity can be constructed and claims of belonging can be justified.



Photo 5 Chua Mia Tee, *Epic Poem of Malaya* (1955). Oil on canvas, 107 cm × 125.5 cm.
Source: Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore. Photographed by author.

ARTICULATING AMBIVALENCE

In order to understand the nuances or the specificities of resistance offered by the social realist artists within the Malayan context, we need to go beyond the generalising notion that their art was merely an extension of the social realist movements taking place in the West, and that it opposed the capitalist or supported the proletariat in similar ways. As mentioned earlier, the idea that art should serve the common folk in general, do echo the Western social realist movements of the 20th century. However, by underscoring the Malayan context, we can appreciate the relational and conjunctural quality of resistance that responded to specific situations as they unfold. We can begin to understand this resistance as a rejection of a static representation of Chinese identity and one that reflects a changing ambivalent position.

The beginnings of social realism within the Chinese art circles in Singapore have been linked to the ideas of Lu Xun⁵ as well as the Russian revolutionary artists⁶ in Russia. The social realist artists looked towards those in Russia in terms of artistic approach and methods of composition (Lai Kui Fang 2012; Lee Boon Wang 2012).⁷ Lee Boon Wang explained that the idea of the travelling exhibition in 1954, was inspired by Russian realist artists who held similar travelling exhibitions in Russia. The word *Xing Hui* is a very meaningful word which was borrowed from the Russian artists who used it in the 19th century to refer to traveling exhibitions (Lee Boon Wang 2012). Lee explained that the 1954 travelling exhibition was the first of its kind which made stops in different parts of Malaya, bringing art to the common people. Tan Tee Chie also indicated that social realist artistic engagements in Malaya during that time had their connections with Lu Xun's woodcut movement (Tan Tee Chie 2004) Koeh Sia Yong (an active member and one-time president of the EAS) recalled that if you were Chinese-educated [in Malaya] you would inevitably be introduced to his works because his influence was wide and significant. Lim Hak Tai, the founder of Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, also produced a painting of Lu Xun, signalling his own personal alignment to this progressive writer and supporter of the arts (see Photo 6).

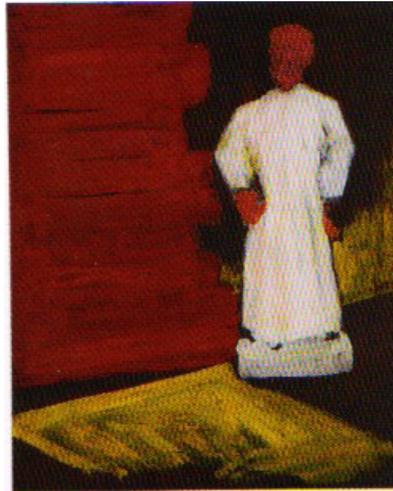


Photo 6 Lim Hak Tai, *Lu Xun Statue* (1955). Acrylic on board, 50 cm × 40 cm.
Source: Collection of Allison Liu. Published in Low Sze Wei (2011).

In the 1953 EAS exhibition catalogue, a writer exhorted, “We should produce workers and peasants oriented artworks just like what Gorky⁸ and Lu Xun did. ...motivating them to protest against an irrational social system” (Xiao Gang 1956: 6).

Their identification with Lu Xun here is interesting, for Lu Xun himself held an ambivalent political position. Lu Xun, a leftist writer, was heavily influenced by Russian anti-imperialist ideas and philosophies. He translated numerous works of Russian literature, edited, and wrote for many Chinese publications, taught at various universities.⁹ Lu Xun saw woodcut art as a way to communicate with the people and awaken them to the need for a revolution. He significantly encouraged the use of literature and art to modernise China and further stimulated the progress of modern revolutionary woodcut art, by mentoring the artists, being a patron and art collector, holding art exhibitions, and publishing writings on art (Andrews and Shen 1998: 213–225).¹⁰ However, Lu Xun was neither wholly a communist nor a nationalist. He did not officially join the Communist party though he worked closely with its members. He heavily criticised the nationalist party but at the same time he was also disillusioned with the Communist party in China (Pusey 1998: 81). He was only consistent in maintaining an anti-imperialist position, asserting that imperialists could come in any shade (race), and is a foreigner as well as his own people (Pusey 1998: 81).

Whilst many artists who were influenced by Lu Xun in China seemed outwardly members of the communist party, it is important to point out that the social realist artists in Singapore did not associate themselves with a specific political party. During interviews for instance, they indicated that they did not have any political involvement with either the reformists or the revolutionaries who came to British Malaya to seek financial support even though they might have been aware of them:

Actually there were three groups: one was the Communists who believes that you could no longer go back to China, they were known as the Mao bandits. Then there was the other group who always encouraged the people to support their home country and try to send money back to China whenever possible. Then there was Chiang Kaishek. He had to run to Taiwan. His revolution did not succeed (Lim Yew Kuan 2004).

Lee Boon Wang (2012) reiterated, “Art is art and politics is politics, we do not mix them.” The ambiguity of the positions taken up by various artists demonstrate the complex and dynamic nature of identity that cannot be confined within categories or labels such as “communist,” “leftist,” or “nationalist.”

Lim Yew Kuan who painted *Lingering Fear*¹¹ in 1954 (see Photo 7) reflecting on the night his brother was taken away, said, “We had no choice really... what else could we do but to speak about what was happening around us? We were all affected during the Japanese Occupation” (Lim Yew Kuan 2004).



Photo 7 Lim Yew Kuan, *Lingering Fear* (1954). Oil on canvas, 116.5 cm × 142 cm
Source: Collection of National Visual Art Gallery, Malaysia. Photographed by author.

“I drew a painting of my brother who was caught and later hung for taking part in underground activities. I was caught once and questioned by the CID. They came and took me from the boat on which I was working on, ...They asked me if I was a communist repeatedly,” indicating that it was a pointless question, not meant to know if one was indeed a member of the Communist party but meant to implicate those who were against the Japanese Army (Lim Yew Kuan 2004).

In the painting, the agent in dark blue tramples on the Chinese newspaper, a symbol of the voice of the Chinese community and the organ for spreading anti-Japanese or anti-Imperialist sentiment. This is a significant gesture which alludes to the closing down of Chinese newspaper presses during the Japanese Occupation (Tan Yew Soon and Soh Yew Peng 1994: 13). In its place, Japanese newspapers dominated the press with publications like *Malai Sinpo* and *Syonan Shimbun* (Kratoska 1997: 143). In effect, the press became the voice of Japanese imperialism which propagated the idea that Japanese power was “liberating” Malaya from Western colonisation. “Mopping-up activities” in China which was similar to mass killings in Malaya were published as victories of the Japanese army in these publications.

With reference to the painting, Lim Yew Kuan (2012) said, “My younger brother [Yew Ming] was caught by the Japanese... these were the betrayers... this happened about one year after they occupied Singapore.” Lim Yew Kuan’s mention of the “betrayers” is significant here because during the year 1943 the communist network in Singapore had been penetrated due to the high-profile betrayal of Malayan Communist Party leader Lai Tek who worked as a double agent for the Japanese. The latter’s disclosure of the identities of the Singapore Town committee members of the Malayan Communist Party led to Japanese raids on their homes or meeting places in May 1943 (Cheah Boon Kheng 2012: 87). The agents’ faces in Lim’s painting are shrouded in the shadows, leaving their identity ambiguous. This implied that the Chinese community were fighting not only against the Japanese, but the enemy also came from within—betrayers from their own community who were benefitting from Japanese imperialism. Lim Yew Kuan related that those who were suspected of having connections with the Chinese communists were arrested whether they were guilty or not, and he never saw his brother again after that.

During the Malayan Emergency (1948–60),¹² some of the artists were literally caught in crossfires between the Malayan Communist Party and the British army, as Lai Kui Fang (2012) recalled:

My friend and I were on a bicycle going to town. On the way there, we were on a road amongst some army trucks. Then out of nowhere I heard shooting. It was the communists! We

quickly came down and lay on the ground. The shooting became heavy and we crawled and hid in a drain. When I went back home, my father thought I was involved in a fist fight, my clothes were torn and I was a mess. It was a scary experience.

His expression, “It was the communists” demonstrated his distancing and otherisation of the communist. The social realists in Malaya thus frequently expressed ambivalent political positions that were not overtly aligned to the political ideologies of the communist and their actions against the British army. The artists remarked that there was no clear-cut political positions to be taken, citing as examples “the fact the British provided weapons for the Communists in the first place and then later had to hunt them down,” and that “not every Communist is a bad person, they are usually ordinary people trying to live and survive,” “some of them are just students who don’t agree with communist propaganda but also don’t agree with the colonial government.”¹³ One of the artists pointed out that many artists never ever got involved in an actual riot but they knew what was happening because everyone was talking about it and they sometimes got involved in the production of some of the supporting visuals since they were approached for help because of their expertise (Lee Boon Wang 2012).

These artists’ narratives demonstrate the ambivalent co-existence of conflicting attitudes towards the multiple political forces in Malaya during that period. These experiences and reflections of the artists is evidence that the artworks cannot be viewed within a singular or deterministic label or category. Their positions were situational—a response to events which unfolded and a negotiation of various factions which coerced them to take sides. As they began to see Malaya as their new home, they took on a form of resistance in social realist art which conflated the different oppressive forces within the context of British Malaya so that it took on anti-imperialist stand which parallels Lu Xun’s personal ambivalent political attitude.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the artworks and artists of both the Yiyanhui and the EAS offer us an interesting alternative narrative that we can read against the essentialist images of Chinese identity constructed by colonial discourse in Malaya. The politicisation of Chinese identity in popular media not only reinforced negative essentialist qualities but also widened the ideological divide between Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese. This colonial discourse enforced a framework of identity that linked Chinese education, language, and culture to extremist communist ideology. On the other hand, the narrative of these artists articulates an ambivalence that challenges the racialised and reductive representations of Chinese-Malayan identity and underscores identity as an inherently changing process of negotiation.

Today these paintings and narratives, have often been muted and subdued under the overarching theme of social realism. Its political trajectories have been somewhat re-ordered perhaps so that it may not disrupt the prevailing national narratives of both Malaysia and Singapore. However, they remain relevant and significant reminders that the making of Chinese identity during that time was a process of negotiation strongly marked and shaped by the unequal political structures from that era, rather than a process of locating an authentic or essential Chineseness.

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NOTES

1. The founding members of EAS included well-known Singaporean artists such as Lim Yew Kuan, Lee Boon Wang, Chua Mia Tee, and Zheng Guo Wei. Art writer Marco Hsu notes that many of its members consist of the members of the Yiyanhui. Between the years 1956 to 1974, the EAS organised six art exhibitions and reportedly had over 800 members in total from its fine arts, music, literature, and theatre department, out of which 300 members were from the fine arts (Seng Yu Jin 2007: 3).

2. An article entitled “Malayan Imbroglio” published in the April 1951 issue of *United Nations World* quoted in *Malayan Mirror* (1953).
3. This interview titled “The Chinese at Home and Abroad” was chaired by Vernon Bartlett. It is the fifth and last in a series of discussions which included 13 interviewees under the topic “Vernon Bartlett China Brains Trust—5” (*The Straits Echo and Times of Malaya* 1951b: 6).
4. Some of the artists said that they did not learn *bahasa Melayu* formally but spoke *pasar Melayu* which they had picked up along the way.
5. The connections between the social realist artists with Lu Xun and the woodcut movement in China has been explicated by a number of writers, such as Redza Piyadasa in the 1979 Nanyang Artists Retrospective Exhibition catalogue. More recent writings in Low Sze Wee (2011) reaffirmed Lim Hak Tai’s role in the EAS and his own admiration for Lu Xun.
6. This connection to Russian revolutionary artists has been recounted in Seng Yu Jin (2007). They consisted of realist artists, known as The Wanderers or Peredvizhniki who formed an Association of Travelling Art Exhibits in 1870 (Seng Yu Jin 2007: 52). Their subject matters range from social injustice to landscapes. It should be differentiated from socialist realism of the Soviet Union which branched out of realist art. The former is a type of art officially sanctioned by the government for the sole purpose of propaganda, emerging from 1932 onwards.
7. For example, Lai Kui Fang highlighted that he was personally looked to Ilya Repin as one of his role models when painting subject matters of this genre. Lee Boon Wang also cited Vasily Surikov as an exemplar of a historical painter and portraiture.
8. Maxim Gorky was a Russian writer and political activist. His writings which revealed the hardship faced by the proletariat was considered anti-imperialist and revolutionary. Lu Xun has often been compared to Gorky whom he greatly admired (Davies 2013: 2).
9. In 1918, Lu Xun published his first story “A Madman’s Diary” written in the vernacular. This appeared in the *New Youth*, a magazine which guided the cultural and democratic revolution, introduced the ideas of the [Russian] Revolution and of Marxism-Leninism to the people of China (Yang and Yang 1980: 14).
10. His taste in art was inclusive and cosmopolitan, with artworks collected from Russia, Germany, and Japan, ranging from illustrations to European paintings and woodcuts (Andrews and Shen 1998: 213–225).
11. Also known as *Hatred* in the Yiyanhui catalogue (1956) and *Night Arrest* on other publications.
12. A state of emergency was declared by the British government throughout Malaya after a spate of murders of European estate managers instigated by the Malayan Communist Party (1930). The Malayan Emergency as it is known, lasted from 1948–1960. During the Emergency, the British took steps to rid Malaya of Communist elements by spreading anti-Communist propaganda and setting up new villages to separate Chinese squatter settlements from supporting the Malayan Communist Party who were hiding in the jungles (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 258–259).
13. Personal interviews with several artists in July 2012.

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