



CHEN WEN HSI:  
MORE THAN CHINESE PAINTING

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SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA

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A dissertation submitted to the Nanyang Technological University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of  
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## Abstract

This thesis begins with an exploration on the roles or place of exhibitions and exhibitionary activities in a painter's artistic practice based in Singapore in the twentieth century, specifically Chen Wen Hsi, a master of Chinese ink painting and one of the most important pioneers of Singapore art. Chen is also representative of "Nanyang art" and overseas Chinese artists. The research aims to learn the scope of Chen's participation in exhibitions and exhibitionary activities, and if and how these might complement his artistic practice. It focuses on Chen's intentions and begins by chronologizing his involvements with exhibitions and exhibitionary activities documented in newspaper archives, and analysing three categories of his participations. First some observations across the exhibitions at which he exhibited paintings are presented. These are followed by findings on his other involvements in exhibitionary activities, such as being part of selection panels for exhibitions, with focus on a 1976 exhibition he "organised" and "hosted", and the two galleries he owned. Finally, his showcasing of acts of painting, such as at *huihao* sessions, painting demonstrations, and collaborative or joint paintings sessions, are discussed and related to their being featured in photographs and the newspapers. Besides the newspapers materials, the research is supplemented by extended literature, including the transcript of a 1983 interview of Chen, as well as an interview with Wee Beng Chong, co-participant of several of these activities. The findings illustrate that for Chen, exhibitions, exhibitionary activities, and its related structures are means of accessing financial support, navigating art infrastructure, and research. More importantly, they demonstrate that he also activated them as medium or form to transfer his artistic ideologies, such as on the combinations of the "East" and "West", traditionality and modernity, and the importance of individualism, innovation, and internationalisation. Thus, this thesis proposes that Chen's artistic practice comprise more than just painting.

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## 1. Introduction

“When I was in my thirties, I noticed that exhibitions held in Nanyang by Chinese artists were very successful. I thought, why not go and give it a try, given my accomplishments.”

Chen Wen Hsi, “Fifty years of artistic life” (1976)<sup>1</sup>

“Writing about Wen Hsi and not mentioning his galleries, would not be complete enough...”

Liu Kang, “Wen Hsi’s artistic breakthroughs” (1982)<sup>2</sup>

Chen Wen Hsi (1906–1991) is a “respected master within the broad narrative of the twentieth-century Chinese ink painting,” having been invited for large-scale solo exhibitions at the National Museum of History in Taipei in 1980 and National Art Museum of China in Beijing in 1987.<sup>3</sup> His Chinese ink paintings received accolades from eminent figures in the field, such as Xu Beihong<sup>4</sup> and Zhang Daqian,<sup>5</sup> and he has won numerous international awards.<sup>6</sup> He is also credited as one of Singapore’s most significant “pioneer artists”,<sup>7</sup> and associated with “Nanyang art”.

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<sup>1</sup> This extract is from Chen’s 1976 catalogue published by his Old and New Gallery, and reproduced in others that followed. Chen, Wen Hsi and Zhong Meiyin, “Fifty years of artistic life”, in *Chen Wen-Hsi Paintings*, Singapore: Old and New Gallery, 1976, (unpaginated). The following catalogue includes a translation and henceforth will be referred. Chen Wen Hsi and Zhong Meiyin, “Fifty Years of Artistic Life,” trans. Goh Ngee Hui, in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 59–78. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Kang 刘抗, “文希艺术的突破” (“Wen Hsi’s artistic breakthroughs”), *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, 2 November 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19821102-1.2.20.1>

<sup>3</sup> Cai Heng, “Tradition Unfettered: The Story of Singapore Ink,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, edited by Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 68–89. 77, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Chen and Zhong, op. cit., 63.

<sup>5</sup> 蔡建奕, “张大千诗赞陈文希画猿,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Aug. 25, 1983.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19830825-1.2.48.1>. Zhang Daqian’s comments on Chen were also reported and translated in Chua Kian Aik, “The Artistic Path of Mr. Chen Wen Hsi,” trans. Goh Ngee Hui, in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 107–118. 109.

<sup>6</sup> Such as the international ink painting award in China Beijing in 1988 “挥彩七十载笔下猴猿最传神 画坛老将陈文希,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Sep. 5, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Kwok Kian Chow, *Channel and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 8.; Kwok Kian Chow, “Foreword,” in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 12–13.

“Nanyang”, literally translating to the “Southern Ocean”, refers to the Southeast Asian region. It later became a term to refer to the artists and artworks from the region, particularly Singapore, in the twentieth century. “Nanyang art” has been described as art that draws on the School of Paris styles and Chinese ink tradition for artistic inspiration and the immediate surroundings in the region as a source for motifs. It has been discussed as the first critical period in Singapore’s art development that shows a conscious attempt by artists to create a local art discourse.<sup>8</sup>

Like most discussions on “Nanyang art” that revolve around the painting format, research on Chen have been focused on his paintings as well. (Henceforth, only Chen Wen Hsi will be addressed as “Chen”, others of the same surname will be referred to by their full names). Materials on Chen, however, contain suggestions on substantial involvements in exhibitions and other activities outside of painting and evidence of Chen’s agency. Chen’s impetus for coming from China to Singapore in 1949, as quoted above, shows he was drawn by how “exhibitions held in Nanyang by Chinese artists were very successful” and to “go and give it a try” for himself.<sup>9</sup> It was the exhibiting opportunities that drew him to the region, rather than a family member’s migration, for example. It illustrates the degree of his motivation, for it would have entailed leaving his young family, students, and artistic and teaching career behind in China. His purpose can also be seen from how, immediately upon reaching Singapore, he had looked up fellow artists, Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee, instead of people from his hometown<sup>10</sup> or for schools at which to teach. He had likely learnt about “successful exhibitions” from correspondences with these two artists and art academy schoolmates, who were the only people he knew.<sup>11</sup> The extent of Chen’s involvements in exhibitionary activities is indicated by his other activities around the region at the time, such as exhibiting his works in Saigon, Vietnam in 1948, prior to arriving in Singapore to hold another

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<sup>8</sup> Ong Zhen Min, “Nanyang Reverie,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 42–53.

<sup>9</sup> Chen professed this in 1976. Chen and Zhong (2006), 62. Chua Kian Aik also reported that Chen had indeed come to the Southeast Asia region. Chua also suggests that Chen was also motivated by wanting to seek East-West artistic exchange. Chua Kian Aik, op cit., 107–108.

<sup>10</sup> Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan 揭阳会馆, which was founded in 1941 for immigrants from Kityang, Guangzhou, China, and their descendants. Chen had been associated with it at least since 1981. “揭阳会馆举行第 38 届就职礼许登科出任正会长,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Jun. 9, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19810609-1.2.70.3>

<sup>11</sup> Chen said, “I knew only two people here – Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang.” Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 22.

exhibition. In 1950, he travelled to Thailand to hold exhibitions, including one in the Thai royal palace for viewing by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, where Chen also demonstrated finger painting to the Thai King,<sup>12</sup> suggesting his role was larger than just a traditional exhibiting painter and his involvement with the exhibition's auxiliary programming.

In Singapore, Chen was actively involved with the Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA) conceived in 1935 and registered in 1936 and the Singapore Art Society (SAS) formed in 1949. SOCA aimed to promote interest and standards in the arts in Chinese schools, and creating exhibitions, partly to raise funds for charitable courses.<sup>13</sup> Chen was ever part of the committee, holding the position of "Research".<sup>14</sup> The SAS gathered various ethnic-based art-group representatives and educational institutions to foster practice and appreciation of art, improve quality of art in Singapore, promote Singapore artistic exchange with other countries, and create learning and exhibition opportunities for artists.<sup>15</sup> Chen ever acted as their vice-chairman in 1976 and 1977.<sup>16</sup> Chen also owned two art galleries, the Old and New Gallery, which opened in 1972 at Tanglin Shopping Centre,<sup>17</sup> and Chen Wen-Hsi Gallery, which opened in 1976 at Singapore Handicraft Centre (SHC).<sup>18</sup> The former published Chen's 1976 and 1991 art catalogues.<sup>19</sup> Liu Kang, prominent artist and prolific writer, opines in the second quote above that these galleries constitute a significant aspect of Chen's artistic breakthrough, and goes on to suggest that they contributed "greatly to uplifting our country's artistic

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<sup>12</sup> "Biography of artist," in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 422–249. 426–427.

<sup>13</sup> 翁享祝, "抚今追昔话中华 About SOCA," The Society of Chinese Artists, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://soca.org.sg/about.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "中華美術研究會新執監委會選出," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Feb. 28, 1974. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19740228-1.2.26.7>; "中華美術研究會選出來屆新執委," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Mar. 19, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760319-1.2.50.4>.

<sup>15</sup> "History of Events," Singapore Art Society, accessed June 29, 2024, <http://singaporeartsociety.com/about-us/history-of-events-text/>.

<sup>16</sup> In May 1977, Chen was also part of the committee that SAS formed to managed the Tan Tsze Chor art prize. "名收藏家陈之初博士捐五万元设立陈之初艺术奖," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, May. 21, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770521-1.2.20.1>.

<sup>17</sup> Also referred to as "Old and New Art Gallery". Violet Oon, "Heading for Adelaide," *New Nation*, Feb. 26, 1972. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19720226-1.2.50.9>.

<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Quahe, "Goodbye Gifts," *The Straits Times*, Aug. 13, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19820813-1.2.122.4.2>.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Wen Hsi, *陈文希画集 Chen Wen Hsi Paintings* (Singapore: Old & New Gallery, 1976).

standards and international standing”.<sup>20</sup> These suggests a relevance for researching Chen’s involvements in exhibitions and exhibitionary activities.

This study will also relate to discussions in the expanding field of exhibition studies<sup>21</sup> on “the critical agency of operations and activities that are taken up by artists but which might not seem “artistic” in the most traditional sense”,<sup>22</sup> such as their expanded roles in exhibition making. In Singapore, recent studies relating exhibitions and artists’ involvement tend to concentrate on the late 1980s or early 1990s<sup>23</sup> on exhibitions of contemporary art, and not as much has been done for earlier exhibitions nor earlier artists. Given the fundamentality of the “Nanyang period” to the development of Singapore and regional art, this study helps address research gaps in the exhibitionary activities of “Nanyang art” and artists. Moreover, contemporary art is posited as being in tension with the academic or institutional systems representing prevailing modernist and nationalist ideals.<sup>24</sup> Happenings of earlier artists like Chen, who are commonly perceived as being representative of the academic or institutional, may contextualise the development of contemporary art and its systems.

The interest in artists’ agencies also refers to discussions on the “intentionality” of artists as causal inference to understand their work, as explained by Michael

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<sup>20</sup> Liu Kang, 1982, op cit.

The full quote is as follows: “写文谈文希而不提他主持的画廊，是不够完整的，在东陵购物中心的一间叫【古今画廊】，在手工工艺中心的一间叫【文希画廊】，都以出售他本身的作品为主，其他古董书画为副；在新加坡，很有一些艺术界朋友开设画廊，做美术品的买卖，但都此起彼落，难于维持长久，唯独文希是例外，究其原因，他本身的高超艺术造诣，吸引了大量顾客，包括本地人和外国旅客在内，这对提高我国艺术水平及国际声誉，有重大的贡献。但好多人都觉得，文希花了大把精神和时间去经营画廊，未免有点可惜。如果，他能专心一意地从事艺术创作，不是有更大的成就吗？这不只是他个人艺术生命的跃进，也将使国家的文化更见灿烂。”

<sup>21</sup> The use of exhibition histories as a subsidiary of art history, and its potential for meaning much more, has been suggested by writers the following: Stefano Collicelli Cagol, “Exhibition History and the Institution as a Medium,” *Rewriting or Reaffirming the Canon: Critical Readings of Exhibition History. Stedelijk Studies Issue #2 - Spring 2015.*, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/exhibition-history-and-the-institution-as-a-medium/>.

<sup>22</sup> Elena Filipovic, introduction to *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, ed. Elena Filipovic (London: Mousse Publishing, Koenig Books, 2017), 7–16. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Suggestion that the recent intense demand for histories of “Asian contemporary art” comes from the market, state and private collecting institutions, and academia. David Teh, “Artist-to-Artist: Chiang Mai social Installation in Historical Perspective,” in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98*, ed. David Morris and David Teh (London: Afterall Books, 2018), 12–47. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Teh, op. cit., 39. Patrick D. Flores, “A Changing World: Phases of the Installative in Southeast Asia,” in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98*, ed. David Morris and David Teh (London: Afterall Books, 2018), 164–279. 267.

Baxandall.<sup>25</sup> In *Patterns of Intentions*, Baxandall applies inferential criticism on artworks, such as through the establishment of the artist's goals, the culture from which he draws resources, and the use he makes of others' ideas, to better understand artists living in different cultures and historical interpretations of their works. This approach is especially relevant to Chen for his being a migrant, transcultural artist, and as a leading artist active during the high points of "modern art" in Singapore where different converging cultures were settling here after the war and British colonialism.<sup>26</sup> The intersection of cultures and modernity in Asian art is also discussed with John Clark's in "The Transfer", which is "the sending from one art culture and the reception and reproduction in another of artworks, their styles and techniques, and their artists; their secondary mediators such as critics and merchants; their elite; and variously broad, mass publics and so on".<sup>27</sup>

The transference of Chinese painting or Chinese ink painting in Singapore makes for an interesting focus. Instead of its indigenous people, Singapore's population comprise mainly immigrants and their descendants. Despite an ethnic Chinese majority, the population included significant non-Chinese, especially with the colonial British having arrived since 1819 and leaving in 1963. In the mid-twentieth century, many members of Singapore's traditional art audience were Westerners or Western educated. Dominant art systems and artform were brought to Singapore by immigrants. For instance, the most prominent art school, NAFA, was set up in 1938 and staffed by Chinese immigrants.<sup>28</sup> Unlike other dominant artforms, like oil and watercolour painting which originated from the West, Chinese ink painting uniquely presented an unfamiliar visual language system to the Western-educated art audience, and its successful promulgation is unusual. With exhibitions as a major platform interfacing art and its audience, an investigation into Chen's exhibitionary activities will reveal more about how the transfer happened.

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Baxandall, "Intentional Visual Interest: Picasso's Portrait of Kahnweiler," in *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 41–73.

<sup>26</sup> Kwok, 1996, op. cit., p 8.

<sup>27</sup> John Clark, "The Transfer [excerpt]," in *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 49–58. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Another art school, the Singapore Art Academy, was headed by a Chinese lady, Shen Yan.

That there is a need to clarify the terms “Chinese ink painting” and “Chinese painting” testifies to its aptness as focus for this study. The conception of “Chinese painting” arose when paintings from China had to be defined in terms of the other,<sup>29</sup> prior to which, they were simply “paintings” to an audience that had no conception of foreign paintings or medium. When the Chinese only painted predominantly with ink, so there was no need to specify “ink” either. It is the introduction of Western medium to Chinese artists, and the circulation of resultant works outside of China, that there is need to distinguish “Chinese ink painting” and “Chinese oil painting”. Given the audiences’ role in defining the artform, consideration of the presentations of Chinese ink painting at exhibitions and ancillary events is all the more relevant. As an eminent artist of the form in Singapore, Chen is the natural choice as the subject of focus for this discussion. Chen himself referred to “Chinese paintings” and “Western paintings”. The term “Chinese ink painting” may also mean painting made with ink that is Chinese. This discussion uses these two terms interchangeably depending on the context of discussion.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Past writings on Chen

Publications relating to Chen are predominantly in the form of exhibition catalogues that include writings and reproductions of his paintings. Earlier writings, including his own, focused on presenting his life and artistic style.<sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, writings elaborated on the significance of Chen’s painting practice in Singapore and modern ink paintings, especially on Chen’s combination of traditionality and

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<sup>29</sup> Clunas proposes for this to be in Persia in the 15th century. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Painting and Its Audiences* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Relevant discussions in Dora C. Y. Ching, Jull Guthrie, Joseph N. Newland (Ed), *Outside In: Chinese X American X Contemporary Art*. New Jersey: Princeton University Art Museum and P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, Princeton University, 2009 and Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching (Ed), *ARTiculations: Undefined Chinese contemporary art*. New Jersey: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, Princeton University, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Cao Shuming 曹树铭, “画家陈文希的风格,” in *陈文希画集 Chen Wen Hsi Paintings*, ed. Chen Wen Hsi (Singapore: Old & New Gallery, 1976). This essay was also attributed to have been written in 1964. Ma Ge (Macro Hsu) 玛戈, “陈文希的艺术生涯,” in *陈文希画集 Chen Wen Hsi Paintings*, ed. Chen Wen Hsi (Singapore: Old & New Gallery, 1976).

contemporaneity.<sup>32</sup> Writings on Chen in 2000s, especially in the 2006 catalogue for *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Exhibition* curated by Low Sze Wee of Singapore Art Museum, focused on Chen's innovation and incorporation of both Chinese and Western techniques and styles in his painting practice and process, with research on Chen's formative years to provide the context, such as Chen's diverse education in Chinese and Western styles and techniques and the exposure to a wide variety of artistic events.<sup>33</sup> Li Gongming<sup>34</sup> and Anita Chung<sup>35</sup> analyse Chen's incorporation of references to Chinese classical Chinese artists such as Xu Gu and Huang Shen of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, as well as Western and oil painting techniques and styles such as cubism and modernism. These studies are directed at contextualising Chen's paintings and creative process, especially in his innovative fusion of east-west techniques and styles. A transcript of a 1983 oral history interview with Chen was also published with the 2006 exhibition with an English translation.<sup>36</sup> This interview focused on Chen's painting process and techniques.

At the same time, the studies also contain details on Chen's exhibitions and some "other-than-painting activities", although these were not the main subject of analysis. They help to give a context on how Chen's relationship with exhibitions. For example, Chen was born in 1906 in Baigong village, Yuhu, Jieyang County, in Guangzhou Province, China and in his recounting of his childhood there, "an empty room in the old house where paintings and calligraphy adorned the walls" initiated his "curiosity and admiration" for paintings. This suggests how early his association with exhibitions

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<sup>32</sup> Such as Kwok Kian Chow, "A Dialogue with Tradition – Chen Wen Hsi's Art of the 80s," in *A Dialogue with Tradition – Chen Wen Hsi's Art of the 80s: in commemoration of pioneer artist Chen Wen Hsi's Investiture*, 6–12, (Singapore: National Arts Council and National Museum, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> The exhibition period was 1 Dec 2006 to 8 April 2007. This was the inaugural exhibition of the Singapore Art Museum. This publication compiles previous writings by and on Chen, as well as new research, together with translations into English, where appropriate. Low Sze Wee, ed., *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition*, (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Li Gongming, "A Brief Discussion on the Singaporean Chaozhou artist Chen Wen Hsi," trans. Goh Ngee Hui in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 136-167.

<sup>35</sup> Anita Chung, "Traditions and the Modernist Vision: Chinese Paintings of Chen Wen Hsi," in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 190–207.

<sup>36</sup> Volume II of publication to the exhibition 2006 catalogue. "Transcript Part 1–17: Chen Wen Hsi, interview by Pitt Kuan Wah, 24 Nov, 1983, interview 369/17, Oral History Interview, Oral History Centre, Nation Archives of Singapore, Singapore. (Accession No. 369/17: There are 17 reels of audio recordings.)", *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition Vol. 2.*, trans. Ng Kum Hoon. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006, 15. (Henceforth, referred to as "Chen's Interview".)

might have begun, and that his first experience with paintings was with several displayed in a room, rather than in books or other means.<sup>37</sup>

Past writings also contain details on Chen's art studies in Shanghai from 1926 to 1929. In the 1983 interview, Chen said "The path I take now is one of fusion of the East and West, thanks to influences from my experiences back then", testifies to how important this time in Shanghai is to his practice. Chen spent a year at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, founded by Liu Haisu in 1912, and then at Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>38</sup> Chen had chosen to study at Shanghai where he deemed had "the best teachers during that period", "because they studied in France" and "some studied in Japan". Chen was in the Department of Education, learning both Western and Chinese mediums which he believed had their own strengths, "intending to combine and continue in both traditions".<sup>39</sup> It was also a time when art institutional structures were evolving, with a high frequency of art exhibitions since exhibitions emerged in China at the turn of the century<sup>40</sup> and the formation of artist collaborations and societies. Chen also admired teachers with a diverse practice, such as Ni Yide, who was also accomplished in literature, and taught him Western painting.<sup>41</sup> Ni was also part of the Storm Society, and another teacher, Zhang Chenbo, set up the Tianmahui (Heavenly Horse Society) which gathered artists together and conducted juried exhibitions.<sup>42</sup> Chen also learnt Chinese brush and finger painting from teachers like Pan Tianshou,<sup>43</sup> who was to become another major Chinese artist, art educator, and advocate. Chen would later

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<sup>37</sup> "Highly unusual" for villages of that time, Chen was born in 1906 in Baigong village, Yuhu, Jieyang County, in Guangzhou Province, China. Chen and Zhong, *op. cit.*, 60. Sun Shuyan, "Highlights of Mr Chen Wen Hsi's Early Years in Chaozhou and Shantou," trans. Goh Ngee Hui, in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 97–106. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Chen accounted that the transfer was because of unhappiness with Liu Haisu and the system at the first school. The teachers at both schools were about the same people. Chen's Interview, *op. cit.*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Chen credits this experience for his artistic direction. Chen's Interview, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> See also Craig Clunas, *op. cit.*, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Chen suggested that Ni was both a teacher and student, but did not elaborate. [Chen's Interview, *op. cit.*, 19, 102]. Ni Yide (1901–1970) was not much of Chen's senior, himself went to Japan to further his studies in the autumn of 1926, but returned to teach at Shanghai in 1928 when Japan invaded China. Ni would eventually become a leading figure in Chinese art and art education, holding multiple positions in artist associations and being a chief editor of art magazine 《美术》. He authored multiple publications on art as well as works of fiction. Chen's Interview, *op. cit.*, 16, 19, 102.

<sup>42</sup> For an overview see Low Sze Wee, "Introduction to Exhibition," in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition*, (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 16–39. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Pan would later become a major artist and art educator in China, where he advocated that Chinese painting and Western painting has to be separated.



become acquainted with Xu Beihong, another important Chinese artist, educator, and art advocate. In 1937, Chen went to visit Xu, who was holding an exhibition in Hongkong.

Chen participated in exhibitions actively in the time around and after his graduation, upon which he returned to his hometown to teach art. For example in 1937, Chen's works were selected for the Second National Art Exhibition, which was a nationwide juried exhibition.<sup>44</sup> An early evidence of Chen's involvement in roles beyond painting and teaching is his founding of the Chunyang Art Society with other artists, with the aim of exploring art and holding exhibitions with fellow artists. Through art classes, pooling resources to purchase materials like plaster figures and easels, and printing brochures, this society contributed to promulgating and nurturing interest in Western paintings in the Chaozhou region.<sup>45</sup>

Of his activities in Singapore, there are also indications of Chen's other involvements, such as in the 1983 interview where he mentions that as a teacher in Chinese High school, he was the "main person" who organised about three public art exhibitions.<sup>46</sup> Chen taught art at the Chinese High School from 1949 to 1968 and at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) from 1950 to 1959. He also taught art in his home at Kingsmead Road from the late 1950s.<sup>47</sup> Li Gongming also mentions Chen owning two galleries, and its possible contribution to the Singapore art scene (attributed to a newspaper article on Chen by Liu Kang, as cited in the previous section). There was scant elaboration on the display and activities at the galleries.

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<sup>44</sup> Li, op. cit., 143.

<sup>45</sup> Sun, op. cit., 98–99, 104; Li, op. cit., 142.

Li, however, suggests doubts in Chen's role in setting up Chunyang Society, due to the time differences in account. But Xiao's account detailing that Chen rented the one-level space outside of Shantou and hung up the sign "Chunyang society", suggests his central role to this society. The details of Xiao's account as well as Xiao being a participant of the society, suggests its reliability. He also explained that other participants included those who pursuit literature, art, and history and were the talents of the area, and they gathered for discussion and conduct activities related to art and culture and painting. Xiao's account did not identify Chen Chong Swee's involvement which was suggested by Li.

(“记 1930 年左右, 文希兄在汕头外马路租凭一层楼, 挂牌招曰【春阳社】聚集同好少年, 从事文艺绘画, 甚至地方建设活动。”) 萧遥天, “陈文希博士回顾展画集序,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Nov. 3, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19821103-1.2.99.1>

春阳社. Also referred to as the Chunyang Painting Institute. In another account by Marco Hsu, this art society was known as “Chunyang painting society” 春阳画社 and was premised at teaching youths who were interested in painting and researching in art. Ma, op. cit., unpaginated.

<sup>46</sup> Being held at the Victoria Memorial hall. Chen's Interview, op. cit., 31–32.

<sup>47</sup> “Biography of artist,” op. cit., 426–428.

Most of the other writing on Chen's activities post coming to Singapore focus on his exhibitions, especially his major overseas solo exhibitions, predominantly positioning his role as being only an exhibiting painter. Chua Kian Aik ("The Artistic Path of Mr. Chen Wen Hsi", 2006)<sup>48</sup> provides a broadly chronological overview of Chen's major exhibitions, and suggests that a trip to his exhibition in China might have impacted Chen's new style of painting. While there are other anecdotal primary accounts on some exhibitions, especially those writings by Chen himself, his compatriots, and students, details are also interspersed across the writings.

Material on Chen's activities in Singapore also appeared disproportionate to Chen having spent his most creatively productive years here. For instance, in the comprehensive artist biography included to *Convergences* 2006, only seven of the forty-over listed exhibitions take place in Singapore. The other Singaporean listings were mainly about his teaching activities, besides two on the opening of his two galleries.

Prompted by the bibliography and the reproduction of newspaper articles in these publications,<sup>49</sup> a cursory review of Singapore newspaper archives revealed a lot of relevant information. For instance, an enquiry on Chen's galleries yielded photographs of Chen demonstrating finger painting to foreign dignitaries and their wives. The newspapers also reported on Chen's exhibiting in many local and joint exhibitions, involvements in artists societies, and judging exhibitions. These indicate a potential gap to be addressed by the present study.

## **2.2. On the Singaporean context**

In broad chronological accounts of Singaporean art histories,<sup>50</sup> Chen is introduced as being active since the 1950s, with his practice spanning the important time for modern

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<sup>48</sup> Chua Kian Aik (2006), op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Chen Wen Hsi, *Paintings by Chen Wen Hsi* (Taiwan: The Old & New Gallery, 1991).  
Low Sze Wee, op cit., 460–464.

<sup>50</sup> Kwok (1996) and Low Sze Wee, ed., *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015).

art in Singapore.<sup>51</sup> Chen is mainly portrayed as a painter, adept in both oil and ink, but who is representative of ink paintings. Also mentioned is Chen's association with Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng, in the "1952 Bali Field Trip", which is often credited for impacting the artists' search for a distinctively Southeast Asian visual and aesthetic tradition. Chen's affinity for modernist trends and its incorporation to Chinese ink paintings were discussed, and attributed as the first major artist to have deviated from tradition to achieve a stylistic breakthrough in ink by Ho Ho Ying, his student.<sup>52</sup>

Liu Kang, who has been mentioned repeatedly, was schoolmates with Chen in Shanghai. His introduction on Chen and his paintings (1938), and other writings have been compiled in his *Essays on Art and Culture*, which provides an introduction to Singapore art in the twentieth-century that is the context of Chen's practice.

Similarly, art historian T. K. Sabapathy's *Writing the Modern* (2018), contains writings on many artists, including Chen, that focused on their artworks. His arguments for the relevance of "Nanyang artists" to Singaporean and Southeast Asian art also supports the relevance of this study. There are some critiques on exhibitions in Singapore, including "The Space" (1992) by The Artist Village (TAV) initiated in 1988, in which the artists involvement in organising the event were discussed.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kwok offers three prevalent definitions of modern. 1. The sense of emergence of art as an independent and individualistic practice. Departure from the earlier monumental religious and public sculpture and architecture, as well as craft traditions. 2. Defined as an identifiable high point in the course of the entire 20th century development. This height comes at around 1950s. here modern art takes on the meaning of a point of maturity in the half century when the environment, stimulations and innovative efforts came into a right mix to bring forth a distinct flourishing of artistic innovation in Singapore. Earlier tension between Chinese nationalism and Nanyang regionalism. 3rd modern used by Modern Art Society as a departure from the mainstream Chinese migrant art which by then had developed into a convention known by the term, Nanyang school. A related meaning of modern became popular in the 1970s to indicate the formalistic aspects of art or abstract art which was then being discussed in relation to internationalism and multi culturalism. Kwok (1996), op. cit., 8.

<sup>52</sup> Kwok (1996), op. cit., 55 – 63, 79.

<sup>53</sup> T.K. Sabapathy, "O No! Not the Nanyang Again (2009)," in *Writing the Modern*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 398–403.; T.K. Sabapathy, "The Space: An Introduction," in *Writing the Modern*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 254–256.

### 2.3. Exhibitionary involvements of other artists and painters

David Teh (“Artist-to-Artist: Chiang Mai social Installation in Historical Perspective”, 2018) also discusses Singaporean artists’ involvement in exhibitions, referring to TAV and the Southeast Asian contemporary art context. He proposes some similar qualities of activities by artist groups across the region.<sup>54</sup> Patrick Flores’ (*Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*, 2008),<sup>55</sup> describes the roles and agenda, such as in advocating for the “renewal of tradition” and “search for the new”, of Southeast Asian curators who might also be artists. While Flores’s discussion premises on the role of a “curator” and Teh’s on the absence of a curator, both deconstructions of the involvements of artists in exhibitionary events provide parameters to investigate Chen’s involvements.

Similarly, wider exhibition studies provide helpful frames to approach Chen’s case, especially those examining artists as curators. Paul O’Neill (*The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 2012) provides an overview on the ongoing discussion on the convergences of art and curatorial practice. He brings up the discussion on how artists may take exhibition as medium or form. He also relates on the “educational turn” in exhibitionary activities which takes on pedagogical approaches, which can be relevant given Chen’s role as an art-educator. O’Neill also brings up suggestions of referring to artists or curators as “culture producer” instead, as a possible means of dissolving the boundaries between the genres.<sup>56</sup> That the boundaries between artists’ and curators’ roles can be fuzzy is proposed by Elena Filipovic (*The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, 2017) and illustrated by cases studies of artists’ curatorial involvements, from as early as 1957.<sup>57</sup> These suggests for this study to first focus on examining Chen’s involvements, than whether they fit into definitions of the roles of “artists” or “curators”.

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<sup>54</sup> Teh, op. cit., 12–47.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick D. Flores, “Tendencies of Gesture,” in *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 128–175.; Patrick D. Flores, “Cycles of Practice,” in *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 70–127.

<sup>56</sup> Paul O’Neill, “Curating as a medium of artistic practice: The Convergence of Art and Curatorial Practice since the 1990s,” in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 87–130, 167.

<sup>57</sup> Filipovic, op. cit.

This is reminiscent of the argument by Simon Soon (“Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism”, 2017)<sup>58</sup> against uncritical application of Euro-America forms in curatorial inquiry in Southeast Asia. Since exhibitions in its current form originated in the West, and with it, the curator’s role and definition, its applicability to Chen’s involvement might be limited. After all, his painting practice is so apparently different in form from the works of artists commonly associated to these studies.

This points us to look into writings about painters and their activities besides painting. Richard Sennett (*The Craftsman*, 2008) suggests extension of “craftsmanship”<sup>59</sup> beyond the traditional artisans, like from artists to computer engineers, and elaborates on their activities besides producing tangible works, such as reception and distribution. James Cahill’s *The Painter’s Practice* (1994)<sup>60</sup> discusses the interrelationships between ancient Chinese artists and painters, audiences, and the distribution of works, such as their management approach and how creative processes might be affected. While their focus are removed from art exhibitions in contemporary form, both suggest the fluidity of activities regardless of defined roles of the craftsmen, painters, artists.

Craig Clunas in *Chinese painting and its audiences* (2016) sets out the conception of Chinese painting to its audiences in broad chronological categories such as from the literati or imperial patronage in the early periods. Clunas does it through analysing images of paintings and painters, for example, introducing the inception of “exhibition” as a form in China with a painting of an exhibition in 1918. He discusses the image of painters as well and its development from paintings to photographs of painters, such as a 1935 painting demonstration in London by Liu Haisu and when Pan Tianshou visited children’s exhibition in 1961.<sup>61</sup> That Liu had founded Chen’s first art school, and Pan was Chen’s teacher, suggests another relevance for this study on Chen’s exhibitionary activities.

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<sup>58</sup> Simon Soon, “Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism,” in *Southeast Asia: Spaces of the Curatorial*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin-New York: Sternberg Press, 2017), 220–239.

<sup>59</sup> “As a way of life driven by the desire to do a job well for its own sake.” Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 9.

<sup>60</sup> James Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>61</sup> Clunas, op. cit., 176, 183, 217–220.

## **2.4. Research direction and question**

The literature review establishes the applicability of investigating Chen's exhibitions and exhibitionary activities spanning his time in Singapore (1949 to 1991), for it can address gaps in Singaporean and Southeast Asian art history and exhibition studies, with Chen being representative of "Nanyang art", precursor to contemporary art, and of Chinese paintings. Chen's case also relates with the issues in Chinese paintings studies, as a Chinese artist overseas.

As the preliminary evidence pointing to Chen's involvements and relevant discussions on other artists suggest, Chen's participation in exhibitions and exhibitionary activities has a role to play in his artistic practice. It is important not to pre-assume the nature of Chen's involvements, which may take place in a range of forms, especially given the confluences of systems in Singapore at the time. Therefore, at this juncture, a broad-based survey is more suitable for being less preclusive.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. A chronology**

Following from the above, the study aims to survey Chen's exhibitions and exhibitionary activities before analysing their significance in the context of his artistic practice. The approach adopted for this study is necessarily tiered and multimodal,<sup>62</sup> involving chronologizing, interviewing, extended literature reviews, and textual, visual, and contextual analysis.

The first task was to establish a more complete overview on his involvements, to mitigate confirmatory bias, and since Chen's existing biographies exclude many of his activities. Although materials, like Chen's interview transcripts and other written

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<sup>62</sup> Gunther Kress, "Multimodal Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. James Paul Gee, Michael Handford (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 35–50.

accounts contain some information, event details are interspersed with missing identifying particulars (such dates or venue).

A cursory review had suggested local newspaper archives as a promising, reliable repository of information, since they were intended to inform and report on these events as they are occurring, and have a distributed authorship spanning across newspapers and time. Although the information tends to be limited in depth, the records are structured, and the archives are systematic and dated. The digitalised archives enable methodical access to all the materials<sup>63</sup> until 1 Jan 1992 that was related to Chen, since he passed away on 17 Dec 1991. This was operationalised as materials which contained his names in English and Chinese which totalled 1211.<sup>64</sup> A search of “Old and New Gallery”,<sup>65</sup> showed up 13 entries. In total, 1,224 entries were reviewed.

A spreadsheet was used to record the information, with a new entry created for each event. The fields were expanded from those in Chen’s existing biographies, including event dates, country, city, venue, organisations and sponsors, curator or organiser, event name, and source location. For Chen’s exhibitions, notes were taken on whom opened the exhibition, the number of Chen’s works, and any identifying details of his works, whether it was annual or regular, solo or joint exhibition, and if joint, who else participated, and the total number of works. Events included non-exhibitions, like Chen’s painting demonstrations or feature in publications, and these were recorded with the notes on Chen’s designations, and other participants. Where multiple materials accompanied an event, only one entry will be captured, but alternate source locations were noted. Where any one material referred to multiple events, entries were created for each event. As the focus is on Chen’s direct involvement in the events, materials mentioning Chen in passing, with no indications of his direct participation were omitted, such as articles on his students’ exhibitions mentioning him as a teacher.<sup>66</sup> In avoiding presumptive exclusions on possible exhibitionary spaces, the entries include features on

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<sup>63</sup> The system organises the materials in non-mutually exclusive categorises of articles, illustrations, advertisements, letters, obituaries, and miscellaneous (such as tenders).

<sup>64</sup> 546 for the English search term, and its variant spellings “Chen Wen-Hsi”, “Chen Wenhsi”, “Chen Wen xi”, “Chen Wenxi”, and 665 for the Chinese name.

<sup>65</sup> And its variants “Old and New Art Gallery”, “Old and New Gallery”, “古今画廊”.

<sup>66</sup> Others include articles on his fellow artists, on the schools at which he taught, or whereby his name was included as a sender of condolence in obituary notices.

him or his galleries, in newspaper, publications, videos, and television and radio programmes.

Finally, the entries were sorted chronologically, and then by name. Repeated entries were identified, but they might not always be ascertainable since some present incomplete information. The total number of unique entries is 390, of which 345 were held in Singapore. While indicative, this is not entirely representative of all of Chen's events, either; for example, annual exhibitions were not featured in the news annually, or exhibitionart events did not always list participating artists, in which case only those directly documented were entered.

Thus, this database constitutes the main body of evidence for primary analysis.

### **3.2. Three categories**

The next step was to examine the database. Comparisons across events were performed with the "filter" function. Similarities across the events were also analysed, such as on its organisers, fundraising or charity purpose, or venues, like his galleries, and Chen's involvements. This yielded significant observations on tendencies and repetitions in the exhibitions and roles he played at exhibitionary events, such as being a judge or selection panellist for a juried exhibition, or if he conducted a painting demonstration. Three overlapping,<sup>67</sup> broad categories emerged:

- a) Events at which Chen exhibited paintings (225 entries including 43 overseas),
- b) Exhibitionary events at which Chen's involvements were more than exhibiting painting (142 entries including 10 overseas), additionally, there are also 34 entries relating to his galleries,
- c) Events at which Chen painted (as in demonstrations) (35 including 2 overseas).

The other entries are mainly on his being featured in documentaries, publications, or in the media, including his being featured as a model in an advertisement.

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<sup>67</sup> The numbers do not add up because he may be involved at single events in multiple capacities. For instance, by demonstrating painting at an exhibition.



### 3.3. Multimodal analysis

This was followed by closer examination of each category, which necessitated a closer reading of relevant literature either identified from before or extended. To alleviate the depth limitation of only relying on newspaper information, in some of these categories, significant patterns or case studies were identified for closer textual, visual, and contextual analysis. The first category was focused on identifiable trends across the exhibitions he exhibited in, the second focused on a 1976 exhibition which Chen “hosted” since it was potentially an event where his involvement was the most significant to the event and the activities of his gallery, and the third closely looked at various painting demonstrations and collaborations.

Besides consulting existing literature, another manner to derive contextual understanding was to interview fellow participants in Chen’s events. While more interviews would have further improved validity and reliability of the research,<sup>68</sup> resource limited the number of interviews. Based on a shortlist of candidates across key events, Wee Beng Chong (1938–) was identified. He studied at NAFA from 1955 to 1958 with Chen amongst his teachers. Both were in the SOCA management committee and each “hosted” an exhibition in the same series 1976. They partook many exhibitionary activities together, such as selection panels and a 1980 collaborative drawing activity. Wee is also a prolific multi-disciplinary artist, winner of multiple awards,<sup>69</sup> and co-founder of artist societies, like the Modern Art Society.

The interview elaborated on the identified events, such as on the role of “hosts”. Wee was also interviewed for his views on Chen’s practice. A copy of the interview transcript is in the appendix. As it was conducted in Mandarin, the transcript is in Chinese, as are most referred newspaper articles and many resource materials. For this research, where otherwise unlocated, translations or interpretation to English is provided

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<sup>68</sup> Especially since some event, like the 1976 exhibition, took place over 40 years ago.

<sup>69</sup> Including being the first recipient of the Cultural Medallion for art for his contributions to visual arts in Singapore in 1979.

for by this writer. The names referred to are sometimes in dialects or *hanyupinyin*, depending on which is better known.<sup>70</sup>

#### **4. Exhibiting in exhibitions**

Chen's most frequent mode of involvements in exhibitions, mostly joint or group exhibitions, was to exhibit his paintings. While seemingly obvious, Chen's agency should not be overlooked, for it indicates his responses to invitation or on a voluntary basis, after which he would self-select artworks for exhibition or for selection.<sup>71</sup> By exhibiting, Chen is also affirming his association with the event and its cause. Chen's agency in exhibitions has also been testified and established in earlier sections.

Chen's exhibitions in Singapore can be approached in several ways, for example by its different organisers, like his exhibiting in exhibitions organised by the schools at which he taught, or its different purpose, such as for fundraising or charitable causes. There are also some annual or regular exhibitions, while others are once-off. Past the formal categories, however, two distinct observations can be made across the exhibitions.

##### **4.1. Of ethnicity, nationality, or regionality**

The first observation derivable from examining Chen's exhibitions chronologically, is the shifts in Chen and his artworks being presented as Chinese, Malayan, Malaysian, Singaporean, Southeast Asian,<sup>72</sup> and then Asian and beyond.

In May 1949, Chen's Singapore first exhibition was sponsored by the China Society at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and presented as a "Chinese art" exhibition of over 200 works by "one of the leading younger artists of China". Through the connection of his former student, Lee Siow Mong, then secretary in the Colonial Secretariat of the British colonial government in Singapore and President of the China

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<sup>70</sup> The spelling used here are crossed checked against other writings.

<sup>71</sup> Wee, in the interview, explains the process on how artists would respond to exhibitions calling for entry. Upon knowledge of the exhibition, they would select amongst their works according to the requirements of the organising committee, and submit fill up a form and details like title and price.

<sup>72</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was set up in 1961.

Society,<sup>73</sup> the exhibition was opened by the Governor of Singapore, Franklin Gimson.<sup>74</sup> The proceeds from the sale by auction of six best pieces were donated to the Singapore Anti-tuberculosis Association and the Social Welfare Department, although Chen had not yet decided on staying in Singapore.<sup>75</sup> The China Society, which was “established at the University of Malaya to help arouse interest in the study of things Chinese and collaborate with the faculty”, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, “Chinese art”, and “Chinese”, “artists from China”, positions Chen’s representation of the Chinese. That the Governor of Singapore opened the exhibition, suggests however, that his target audience included, if not comprised, the “non-Chinese”, “non-Asian” colonials, the governing elite, or the people in Singapore instead of Chinese immigrants. A charity fund-raising event would have catered to the privileged class, who were more likely to identify with these causes, such as doctors, rather than others like schools or artist societies. To sell art by auction is also not a traditionally Chinese convention.<sup>76</sup> Chen’s presentation of the “Chinese” to Western audiences in Singapore aligns to his combining of the Chinese and Western in his paintings.

He would continue to present his works at these intersections of both Chinese and Western cultures. He regularly exhibited with the SAS, co-founded by Liu with others like Richard Walker, Art Master of Government English Schools, and C. A. Gibson-Hill (of the Raffles Library and Museum).<sup>77</sup> At the inaugural SAS annual exhibition in March 1950, Chen’s painting, *Coffee Boys* was lauded for being “not quite Western, not quite Eastern in conception”. This also indicates how early Chen had been combining Eastern and Western references in his paintings. There is also a congruence between Chen’s fusionist approach and what might be deemed “Singaporean”, for the article continues with that “the most pleasing impression left by the exhibition is the suggestion that there

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<sup>73</sup> “Chinese Art Exhibition,” *The Straits Times*, May. 13, 1949.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19490513-1.2.79>

<sup>74</sup> Chua Kian Aik, op. cit., 107.; “Chinese Art Exhibition,” *The Singapore Free Press*, May. 3, 1949.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19490504-1.2.96>;

(Sunday Times Staff Reporter), “Artist to Exhibit 200 Paintings,” *The Straits Times*, Apr. 24, 1949.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19490424-1.2.75>

<sup>75</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 24.

<sup>76</sup> Although unestablished if it was widely practised in Singapore at the time.

<sup>77</sup> Although the SAS also included representatives from other art societies, including other ethnic groups, the colonials had a significant representation. Kwok (1996), op. cit., 39.

is emerging what may someday be called the ‘Singapore School’.”<sup>78</sup> This subtly associates Chen with being representative of “Singapore”.

His representation of the Chinese and Singaporean appears to overlap for a period. In 1953 there was a joint exhibition organised by SAS, where participants Chen, Liu, Chen Chong Swee, and Cheong Soo Pieng presented works from a 1952 Bali trip 1952.<sup>79</sup> In an early report, participants were referred to as “Chinese artists”, but a year later, a related article referred to them as “Singapore Chinese artists”.<sup>80</sup> In Jul 1955, SAS presented an exhibition of “Singapore art” in London, UK, at the Imperial Institute for seven members of the SAS, including Chen Wen Hsi, who exhibited finger paintings.<sup>81</sup> Consolidating Chen’s representativeness for Singapore art. Following the colonial government dissolution in 1963, the regularity of these reports on SAS activities halted for a time, although its annual exhibitions were ongoing.<sup>82</sup> During this period, Chen exhibited overseas, including in Cologne, Germany in 1965,<sup>83</sup> implying a persistent presentation to Western audiences.

Meanwhile, as early as 1948, Chen was also exhibiting in Malaysia.<sup>84</sup> In Dec 1958, Chen exhibited in Kuala Lumpur’s “Fourth Malayan Artist Exhibition”, which aimed to “show how the artists of Malaya are helping to produce a national Malayan culture”,<sup>85</sup> followed by the May 1959 fifth rendition<sup>86</sup> and the Sep 1963 sixth at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>87</sup> He partook in “Commonwealth arts today” exhibitions in

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<sup>78</sup> (A Special Correspondent), “S’pore Art Show A Big Success,” *The Straits Times*, Mar. 13, 1950.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19500313-1.2.78>.

<sup>79</sup> “Bali—By 4 Chinese Artists,” *The Straits Times*, Nov. 10, 1953.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19531110-1.2.50>.

<sup>80</sup> “They’ll go to Borneo to paint,” *The Straits Times*, Jun. 4, 1954.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19540604-1.2.51>.

<sup>81</sup> “Singapore Spotlight,” *The Singapore Free Press*, Jul. 18, 1955.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19550718-1.2.39>.

<sup>82</sup> This might reflect the instability of the structures in the local art or newspapers.

<sup>83</sup> Margaret Burrows, “Invitation to An Artist,” *The Straits Times*, Oct. 2, 1965.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19651002-1.2.30>.

<sup>84</sup> Such as in Penang. “Fine Art and A Cool, Cool Drink,” *New Nation*, May. 27, 1972.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19720527-1.2.122>.

<sup>85</sup> “In Search of a National Art,” *The Straits Times*, Mar. 11, 1958.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19580311-1.2.84>.

<sup>86</sup> Together with 68 other artists (20 other artists from Singapore, 20 from Kuala Lumpur, 11 from Seremban, 11 from Penang, 2 from Malacca, 1 each from Klang, Morib, Kuantan, Bekok Johor).  
“An Art Show that is Alive with Vigour and Talent,” *The Straits Times*, May. 18, 1959.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19590518-1.2.95>.

<sup>87</sup> Chermin, “Brave New Face of Art in Malaya,” *The Straits Times*, Sep. 2, 1963.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19630902-1.2.59>.

1962 to 1963 held in London, and had eight paintings selected by the Malaysian Arts Council to represent Malaysia at the “1965 Commonwealth Festival of Arts”.<sup>88</sup> His participation and representation of “Malayan art”, “Malaysian art”, “Commonwealth art” reflect his ideological shifts in national and regional identity, that corresponds to the lead up to the political merger between Singapore and Malaysia in 1963 and after the separation of Singapore in 1965.<sup>89</sup> In Jun 1966, Chen was one of 43 artists in a showcase of “Malaysian art” at Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, but Chen and a few others had their Singaporean nationality specified.<sup>90</sup> In 1967, Samat Art Gallery held a joint exhibition of thirteen artists to raise funds for a national disaster relief fund; Chen donated works worth \$200.<sup>91</sup> These suggest the remainder of regional identity and connections post separation, and the regain of his “Singaporean” representativeness.

The Singapore Ministry of Culture began featuring in Chen’s exhibition history in Aug 1970 with their co-organising of the annual National Day art exhibition with other art societies;<sup>92</sup> Chen would continue to exhibit in this annual exhibition, which varied in scale and goes up to 179 works from 106 artists in 1979.<sup>93</sup> The Ministry of Culture also

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<sup>88</sup> “Art Has No Country It Comes from Heaven,” *The Straits Times*, Sep. 4, 1966.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19660904-1.2.135>.

<sup>89</sup> In Kevin Chua’s reading of Marco Hsu’s writing on Singapore art from this period, he reminds readers that the Hsu and his generation did not expect that the political merger would not last. Kevin Chua, “When was Modernism? A Historiography of Singapore Art,” in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 22–33. 27.

<sup>90</sup> “Showcase of Malaysian Art (Advertisement),” *The Straits Times*, Jun. 21, 1966.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19660621-1.2.48.3>.

<sup>91</sup> “Newspapers Collect Another \$21,000,” *The Straits Times*, Jan. 14, 1967.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19670114-1.2.91>.

<sup>92</sup> In 1970, the art organisations were: SAS, SOCA, Singapore Art School 新加坡艺术学院, Molan Art Association 墨澜社, Singapore Chinese Calligraphy and Art Research Society 中华书画研究会, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts 南洋美专, Modern art society 现代画会, Singapore Commercial Art Society 星洲美术广告协会, Singapore Watercolour Society (SWS) 新加坡水彩画会, Society of Malay Artists 马来艺术协会. “今年國慶美展下月中旬假紀念堂舉行籌委會主席鄺攝治次長易潤堂部長將被邀剪綵,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jul. 7, 1970.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19700707-1.2.42.16>.

In 1977, 18 art organisations were involved. “八月举行国庆美展工作委员名单公佈,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, May. 30, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770530-1.2.23.18>

<sup>93</sup> “国庆美展展出至本月 3 1 日,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Aug. 23, 1979.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19790823-1.2.70.13;>

“八〇年国庆美展评选工作顺利进行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jul. 25, 1980.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19800725-1.2.17.12;> “今年国庆美展增设最佳特别奖,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Apr. 13, 1983.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19830413-1.2.15.18;> “国庆美术展览会吸引数万人参观,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Aug. 3, 1986.

organised more exclusive exhibitions that included Chen. In Jul 1977, the Ministry of Culture sent eight paintings by Chen and three other artists to the ninth International Painting Festival, in France.<sup>94</sup> Similar instances include being amongst 32 works from 16 artists sent to Moscow, Soviet Union in May 1979,<sup>95</sup> and the “Contemporary Arts In Singapore: Where East Meets West” exhibition in Netherlands and Germany in 1989, organised by the Singapore National Museum.<sup>96</sup> These exhibitions confirm Chen’s representativeness for Singapore. The latter, which proposes the definition of Singapore’s art as one “where East Meets West”, is again in line with Chen’s artistic conception and reminiscent of the previous early suggestion of “Singapore style”. Local exhibitions were also held, such as in Aug 1984, “25 years of Singapore art” celebrated Singapore’s 25th year of independence, by exhibiting 120 artists and 209 artworks.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, Chen also began representing regional art through exhibiting in the 1974 ASEAN travelling exhibition, which travelled to the capital cities of ASEAN countries,<sup>98</sup> the May 1981 ASEAN Painting and Photo exhibition in Bangkok,<sup>99</sup> and the Jan 1985 fourth annual ASEAN Painting and Photography Exhibition in Singapore.<sup>100</sup>

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<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19860803-1.2.11.1>.

<sup>94</sup> “陈文希等四名画家作品代表新加坡参加法国国际绘画节,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Apr. 18, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770418-1.2.47.5>.

<sup>95</sup> Margaret Chan, “Moscow Debut,” *New Nation*, Jun. 30, 1978. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19780630-1.2.55.1>.

<sup>96</sup> It was curated by Constance Sheares, then curator of art in the National Museum. T. K. Sabapathy, “Modes of Change,” *The Straits times*, Mar. 28, 1991.

<sup>97</sup> “文化部主办 国庆美展与影展 17 日在博物院开幕,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Aug. 11, 1984. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19840811-1.2.22.1>.

<sup>98</sup> Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (15 Jan to 14 Feb) to Singapore (28 Feb to 30 Mar) to Jakarta, Indonesia (22 Apr to 1 May), Philippines Manila (19 Jun to 18 Jul), Bangkok Thailand, (16 Aug to 15 Sep). Liu Kang described that when compared to international standards, the exhibition would stand at the second and third class and gave a review of the exhibition. The exhibition included artists from ASEAN countries as listed, and representing Singapore were, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soon Pieng, Huang Pao Fang, Wee Beng Chong. 刘抗, “亞細安流動畫展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Mar. 8, 1974.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19740308-1.2.12.2.1>.

<sup>99</sup> 20 Singaporean artists presenting 40 artworks were selected. Travelling exhibition goes to 4 other places: Malaysia from 1 Jul to 15 Aug, Singapore from 16 Aug to 30 Sep, Indonesia from 1 Oct to 15 Nov, Philippines from 16 Nov to 31 Dec.

“我国艺术家与摄影家 40 件作品下月将参加亚细安绘画摄影展览,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Apr. 24, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19810424-1.2.10.11>.

<sup>100</sup> 20 paintings and 20 photographs from each of 6 ASEAN countries, showing current approaches to art. Organised by the Intra-ASEAN Cultural Programme, the exhibition was first held in the National Museum Art Gallery in Singapore, and tour all ASEAN Capitals: Kuala Lumpur in March, Manila in May, Bangkok in July, Jakarta in Sep and Bandar Seri Begawan in Nov. Each show would be held for a month. Accompanying the Singaporean exhibition was a Symposium “Current Approaches in the Art of the ASEAN Region” at Excelsior Hotel. Hoo Yew Gee, “Vibrant Splash of Changing Asean Art,” *The Straits Times*, Jan. 23, 1985. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19850123->

He begun to represent the “Asian” by being one of the 35 Singaporean artists sent to Hongkong for the “Fifth Asian arts festival”<sup>101</sup> in Oct 1980, and the Nov 1980 Fukuoka Art Museum Contemporary Asian Art Show, which was shown in Singapore in 1981.<sup>102</sup> Besides state-organised exhibitions, in Apr 1985, Chen was one of 11 artists represented by 35 works chosen by Arnaud d’Hauterives, president of the Association of French Artists, to show in the annual Salon of French Artists exhibition in Paris. The association had opened its salon to traditional and contemporary art of cultures less known in the West three years ago, and showed Singapore and South Korea that year.<sup>103</sup> This indicates Chen’s enlarging representativeness of the “non-West”. Although intended for overseas, these local newspaper reports attributed to the presentation of Chen’s identity and status in the local consciousness. Some exhibitions were accompanied by local preview presentations, such as the one for the annual Salon of French Artists exhibition.

Although it cannot be ascertained if the build-up of his reputation was deliberate on Chen’s part, his participations in exhibitions collectively manifest Chen’s shifting identity. His constant participation in these joint exhibitions also corresponds with his advocacy for the internationalisation of Singaporean art. At an SAS joint-discussion that he hosted in Feb 1977, Chen emphasised that local art has yet to reach international standing and arts practitioners need to continue to work hard, do more research, and learn from each other, to improve. The discussion concluded that for Singaporean art to improve, there has to be more international exhibitions and interaction with foreign artists so as to learn from them in terms of artistic techniques and creative process.<sup>104</sup> It

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1.2.89.5.1.; “ASEAN Photos and Paintings to Go on Show,” *The Straits Times*, Dec. 31, 1984. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19841231-1.2.24.17>.

<sup>101</sup> 梁曾瀛, “我国卅五位画家作品参加香港亚洲艺术节,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Aug. 30, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19800830-1.2.13.3>.

<sup>102</sup> “What and Where,” *Business Times*, Jun. 13, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/biztimes19810613-1.2.54.1>.

<sup>103</sup> This event was supported by the French language institute and the Singapore French Students Association. “11 Artists for French Show,” *The Straits Times*, Jan. 23, 1985.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19850123-1.2.24.28>.

<sup>104</sup> “Dr Chen Wen Hsi especially hosted a dinner to receive relevant (SAS exhibition) executive committee and selected members for a joint discussion, so as to exchange ideas...” (My translation.) “陈文希博士特设晚餐招待有关执委与部分会员作联席座谈，以资交换意见。。。 ” “新加坡艺术协会刻筹备常年画展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Feb. 7, 1977.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770207-1.2.16.12>.

submits that Chen's participations in joint exhibitions were also consistent with what he deemed procedural for producing better art. He once shared that he was first inspired to paint on crimson paper in response to an Australian commenting that on there being "too much white" in Chinese paintings at his exhibition,<sup>105</sup> which he incorporated after consideration, testifying to how exhibitions provided him research opportunities and insights. In the later period, Chen was already one of the most esteemed artists in Singapore, where his continual participation in major and small joint exhibitions alongside established and amateur artists reinforced what he advocated.

#### 4.2. Of medium and styles

Besides SAS, Chen also participated in SOCA's activities as early as May 1949,<sup>106</sup> but they became regularly reported from 1970 onwards. SOCA also organises regular and annual exhibitions. As SOCA represented "Chinese artists", Chen's participation in both SOCA and SAS is another translation of the "East" meeting "West" in his artistic practice.

This is repeated with his participation in medium-specific exhibitions organised by the Ministry of Culture, such as the Oct 1979 calligraphy, painting, and seal exhibition<sup>107</sup> and the Apr 1982, aimed at reversing declining numbers in oil painters.<sup>108</sup> The former would represent the Chinese medium and art forms, and the latter represented the Western. By 1982, Chen was an established Chinese ink painter and had two galleries displaying ink paintings. His participation in the exhibition promoting the oil paintings would send a poignant endorsement of the cause. It also suggests Chen's presentation of his practice as a multi-medium one.

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<sup>105</sup> Chen's Interview, op. cit., 37.

<sup>106</sup> "藝人多雅興古今同出一轍美術會同仁集體揮毫聚餐會中佳餚美酒權作寫真的好材料林居仁抱酒甕入睡鄉為是日最佳傑作," *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, May. 3, 1949.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19490503-1.2.20.30>.

<sup>107</sup> Showcasing 16 artists at the Singapore Conference Hall.

"文化部与新加坡大会堂画廊联办书画印美展 15 日举行开幕," *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, Oct. 12, 1979. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19791012-1.2.33.4>.

<sup>108</sup> Showcasing 50 over works from 30 over artists.

"文化部今年首次举办 油画展览今日开幕卅餘画家参加展出," *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, Apr. 21, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19820421-1.2.8.26>.



Comparing these two exhibitions, which convey traditionality, with the Ministry of Culture Dec 1980 “Modern art” exhibition,<sup>109</sup> and the Dec 1980 and Dec 1982 “contemporary art” exhibitions,<sup>110</sup> which convey contemporaneity, is parallel to another juxtaposition presented by his paintings. This demonstrates how Chen transfers his ideas about art not just through his paintings, but also in the exhibitions he exhibits in. The idea of “traditionality and contemporaneity” is also translated in the exhibitions that claim to represent the “senior”, “middle”, and “young” aged artists, such as at the Jun 1984 National Museum Art Gallery “Singapore Art: A Decade” which showcased “10 years of Singapore art” with 60 artists each showing one work from created between 1973 to 1984.<sup>111</sup>

Since the Bali exhibition in 1953, Chen’s association with “Nanyang art” could also have been reinforced by subsequent exhibitions that repeatedly associated him with the same other three artists. For instance, beginning in Dec 1981, the Ministry of Culture organised a series of retrospective exhibitions for them and Georgette Chen. An exhibition was conducted each year, and Chen’s was the second in Nov 1982. This series of exhibitions and the publicity accompanying every exhibition would reinforce their associations with each other. Although many other artists participated alongside them in larger joint exhibitions, that they were consistently present communicated a collective identity. Other feature articles also associated Chen with these artists and the “Nanyang art”.<sup>112</sup> This was also reinforced by efforts from NAFA, such as the Aug 1985 “Nanyang style” exhibition.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> It included one work each from 130 artists. Held in conjunction with the third Singapore Art Festival. “文化部联合博物院 主办“现代画展” 欧进福今日主持开幕,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Dec. 11, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19801211-1.2.19.9>.

<sup>110</sup> It included an ASEAN section with 60 local artists was put up in the National Museum Art Gallery, held as part of Singapore Arts Festival. Khng Eu Meng, “S’pore Artists’ Work On Show,” *New Nation*, Dec. 11, 1980. 刘抗, “艺术节当代美展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jan. 21, 1981.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19800830-1.2.13.4>.

It was held in conjunction with the Singapore Art Festival, it organised which showcased works from 52 artist, including Chen. This exhibition was included in conjunction with a photography exhibition and Zhao Wu Ji painting exhibition.

“为迎接今年度艺术节国家博物院呈献三个美展同时举行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Dec. 10, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19821210-1.2.26.1>.

<sup>111</sup> “丰收十年《新加坡艺术十年》展,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Jun. 12, 1984. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19840612-1.2.60.2.1>.

<sup>112</sup> For instance, in the following article on Nanyang art. T.K. Sabapathy, “Pictorial Vocabulary: The Nanyang Artists II,” *The Straits Times*, Oct. 6, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Page/straitstimes19801006-1.1.40>.

<sup>113</sup> “本国未来一周,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Aug. 11, 1985.

Chen's 1987 Beijing exhibition at the National Art Museum of China<sup>114</sup> and Jun 1990 solo exhibition at the Taipei Fine Art Museum in Taiwan, where he showed 93 works done in the style of Chinese finger painting, ink-and-brush, oil, sketches, abstract and semi-abstract.<sup>115</sup> In these exhibitions, Chen was representative of overseas Chinese and the audiences' relative "west", in presenting the "east-west" fusion back to a Chinese audience, he establishes himself as a "modernist Chinese ink painter". He also received the International Ink Painting Award in Beijing in 1988, which affirmed his accomplishment in ink painting, and his international standing.<sup>116</sup>

### 4.3. Extended readings

Chen's exhibitions correspond broadly to the descriptions in Liu Kang's "The State of Art in Singapore and Its Future Development", on the artistic organisations and exhibition structure in 1970 Singapore,<sup>117</sup> which is suggestive of the artists' agencies with their participation in these activities and thus supportive of the interpretation on Chen's agency in his participation.

It is clear that Chen transferred ideas about art through his participations in exhibitions; they consistently and coherently demonstrate his artistic conceptions of combining "Chinese" and "Western", innovation, internationalisation. One can also observe shifts in his representativeness in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or regionality. The developments are dynamic and in tandem; concurrency and interactions are evident between the two categories presented. It may be interpreted from Chen's perspective that these joint exhibitions allowed artists' interaction, research and mutual learning and

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<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19850811-1.2.7.4>.

<sup>114</sup> Organised by China's Culture Ministry and Beijing Association for cultural exchanges with foreign countries, and included about 100 paintings (80 Chinese ink and 20 Western painting). "从乡土和传统出发," *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Aug. 18, 1987.

K.F. Seetoh, "Artist Chen's Lifelong Works for Beijing Show," *The Straits Times*, Aug. 18, 1987.

<sup>115</sup> Goh Beng Choo, "Look Back and Wonder," *The Straits Times*, Jun. 19, 1990.

<sup>116</sup> "挥彩七十载笔下猴猿最传神 画坛老将陈文希," *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Sep. 5, 1989.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19890905-1.2.77.1.1>.

<sup>117</sup> Liu Kang, "The State of Art in Singapore and its Future Development," in *Liu Kang: Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Sara Siew (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2011), 164–178.

association, that he thought procedural in improving one's works.<sup>118</sup> Consideration with all of his other exhibitions, like those related to fundraising, education, or galleries, may present more dynamic connections.<sup>119</sup>

Martin J. Powers in "Artistic Status and Social Agency" suggests that the varying status of Chinese artisans and artists in relation to the social formations and scales of values of the different periods in Chinese history are structural. In other words, that artists exercise agency in navigating art infrastructure since ancient times.<sup>120</sup> This suggests that Chen's agency might be typical and traditional of Chinese artistic practices.

## 5. Other involvements in exhibitionary activities

### 5.1. Overview

Chen was involved with exhibitory events in a range of other capacities. Similar to his exhibitions, his very participation transfers his artistic ideologies. For instance, Chen was an active member of both SOCA and SAS. The artist societies had regularly hosted exhibitions besides those of their members, such as of works by artists visiting Singapore. In the SOCA committee, Chen held the position of "Research" in at least 1974 and 1976.<sup>121</sup> According to Wee, fellow committee member of SOCA in the 1970s,<sup>122</sup> the committee was responsible for organising the society's activities, such as

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<sup>118</sup> Joint exhibitions like the ASEAN exhibition were criticised for not proposing new curatorial readings, such as in T.K. Sabapathy, "The ASEAN Project: The Future or Bust (1993)," in *Writing the Modern*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 265–267.

<sup>119</sup> They are left undiscussed due to limitations of this paper and present room for future research.

<sup>120</sup> For example, since the Chinese medieval period (third through tenth centuries CE), artists acquired national reputations for their achievements, measured against the Xie He's "Six standards". Xie praised artists for creating new styles and having unique views, and Chinese medieval artists to achieve fame, he would have to distinguish themselves from others. Until today, artists have adopted Xie's standards and incorporate them to their works and process, as echoed in Chen's advocacy in 1977. J. Martin Powers, "Artistic Status and Social Agency," in *A Companion to Chinese Art*, ed. Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 351–370. 358.

<sup>121</sup> Chen became one of the honorary chairpersons (永久名誉会长) in as early as 1984. "Research" translated from "正研究" or "研究". "中華美術研究會新執監委會選出," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Feb. 28, 1974. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19740228-1.2.26.7>.

"中華美術研究會選出來屆新執委," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Mar. 19, 1976.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760319-1.2.50.4>.

"中华美研会选出新理事," *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Jan. 10, 1984.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19840110-1.2.20.10>.

<sup>122</sup> Wee was in charge of general affairs and publicity.

exhibitions, and promoting the events. Wee suggested that then-younger artists like himself saw to the operational aspects of the exhibitions, and senior members like Chen might correspond with senior counterparts, like officials and collectors. It is inferable that Chen and his compatriots might have had to perform similar tasks in their earlier years. Chen was the SAS vice-chairman in 1976 and 1977.<sup>123</sup> As previously mentioned, in 1977 he “hosted” a SAS joint-discussion which stressed the importance of learning from others, especially international artists; besides stressing on research, learning, and innovation, Chen also expressed his “hopes to see everyone’s excellent performance in SAS annual exhibition”.<sup>124</sup> That he would explain what he deemed desirable in art and artists, and then encouraged artists to create with this process, is indicative of how Chen activated his involvement in artists societies to transfer his ideas about art. His influence is compounded by his being part of the selection panel for the SAS annual exhibition at least in 1970, 1972, 1979.<sup>125</sup>

Chen regularly judged or selected works as a member of selection panels, for exhibitions like the annual National day exhibition, which was the nation-wide salon-style exhibition whereby artists submitted in response to open call. The selection panel were appointed by blind voting by organising committee members, who represented the art societies invited by the Ministry of Culture.<sup>126</sup> The “International Women’s year art exhibition” organised by SAS was also decided by voting.<sup>127</sup> Wee explains that judging was at the time also based on a blind voting system, whereby each selection panellist decided whether or not the art was “good” or “bad” and thus “in” or “out” of the exhibition accordingly. The process, together with the lack of articulated standards,

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<sup>123</sup> In May 1977, Chen was also part of the committee that SAS formed to managed the Tan Tsze Chor art prize. “名收藏家陈之初博士捐五万元设立陈之初艺术奖,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, May. 21, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770521-1.2.20.1>.

<sup>124</sup> Convened were selected SAS members and the exhibition organising committee.

“新加坡藝術协会刻筹备常年画展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Feb. 7, 1977.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770207-1.2.16.12>.

<sup>125</sup> “新加坡藝術協會主辦當地畫家作品展覽現改期十九在紀念堂舉行開幕,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, 11, 1970. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19700411-1.2.34.44>;

“Goals of Art Display,” *New Nation*, Jun. 3, 1972.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19720603-1.2.57.2>;

“新加坡艺术协会明年度理事选出刘抗蝉联会长,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Dec. 23, 1978.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19781223-1.2.30.3>

<sup>126</sup> According to Wee who was fellow jurist and exhibition organising committee member.

<sup>127</sup> “本報贊助藝術協會主辦国际妇女年美展將於本月杪举行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, May. 12, 1975. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19750512-1.2.16.12>.

implies each panellist had considerable influence on the artistic direction of Singapore's art development.

Moreover, Chen was involved as consultant, for instance for the Singapore Teachers' Art and Crafts Association, which comprised art teachers and would also hold regular exhibitions.<sup>128</sup> Chen also opened exhibitions, where he spoke about the exhibition, exhibiting art or artists, or art in general. In his opening speech for a Dec 1977 exhibition by seven young Malaysian artists, Chen stressed on the importance of internationalising to improve artistic standards. He commended them for not restricting subject choices to their locality and urged them to continuously improve their paintings by investigating the texture, surface qualities, visual elements, and composition of their works.<sup>129</sup> These are in accordance and could have stemmed from Chen's modernist concerns in his own paintings. Similarly, in his essay for Ho Ho Ying's Nov 1966 exhibition catalogue, Chen also wrote about modern art and its relation to self-expressionism.<sup>130</sup> These exemplifies Chen transferring his ideologies about art through existing exhibitionary structures of opening speeches and catalogues.

Ho learnt art under Chen at the Chinese High School, and both shared a close student-teacher relationship, that Ho has also written about in his essays on Chen.<sup>131</sup> Like Wee, Ho was one of the founders of the Modern Art Society (MAS) set up in 1963.

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<sup>128</sup> At least in the years 1975 to 1977, 1978, and 1980.新加坡教师美术与手工艺协会。  
“教師美術與手工藝協會將舉行十天美展五十餘位教師參加展出,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Oct. 31, 1975. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19751031-1.2.27.15.](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19751031-1.2.27.15;);  
“教師美術與手工藝協會擬主辦義展籌款建美術教育中心,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Apr. 12, 1976. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760412-1.2.46.7.](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760412-1.2.46.7;);  
“教师美术手工艺协会今年度执委会已选出,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, May. 18, 1977. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770518-1.2.38.10.](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770518-1.2.38.10;);  
“教师美工协会选出下届理事,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Apr. 19, 1978. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19780419-1.2.23.37.](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19780419-1.2.23.37;);  
“教师美术手工艺协会选出本年度新理事,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Mar. 12, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19800312-1.2.18.6>.  
<sup>129</sup> “大马七人画展由陈文希开幕,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Nov. 9, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19771109-1.2.44.4>.  
<sup>130</sup> Chen Wen Hsi, “艺术家的成见,” in *Painting Exhibition by Ho Ho Ying*, (Singapore), 1966.  
<sup>131</sup> Ho Ho Ying, “The Development of Chen Wen Hsi's Western Paintings,” trans. Goh Ngee Hui, in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 128–135.; 何和应, “画坛奇才陈文希,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Nov. 15, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19821115-1.2.14.19>.

Ho credited Chen as one of the first major artists to have deviated from tradition to achieve a stylistic breakthrough.<sup>132</sup>

Although not a member, Chen's involvement with MAS exemplifies how his role could be non-institutional, but still key. Chen exhibited in MAS exhibitions, such as the Oct 1979 Singapore-Malaysia-Taiwan Modern art exhibition<sup>133</sup> and the Jul 1982 Singapore-Taiwan modern art exhibition, which had an accompanying art prize for which he was a judge.<sup>134</sup> Chen was a selection panellist for the May 1979 MAS exhibition at the Taipei History Museum. Chen opened the Sep 1976 twelfth MAS painting exhibition with a speech on the merits of modern and abstract art.<sup>135</sup>

## 5.2. The 1976 Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition

One of the biggest roles Chen undertook in an exhibitory event was being the “host” or “organiser” for a Jul 1976 SOCA exhibition on the calligraphy and paintings of the Eight Eccentrics from Yangzhou. The Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics refers to a loose group of Eighteenth-century Qing Dynasty masters, deemed “eccentric” not for their personalities, but for their paintings that exhibited independence, individualism and self-expressionism unconventional for their time. The eight in this exhibition included Jin Nong, Zhen Xie, Huang Shen, Li Shan, Luo Pin, Wang Shizhen, Li Fangying.<sup>136</sup>

Held from 18 Jul to 21 Jul, the exhibition showcased about 100 pieces of art, including replicas and 42 authentic works, and was intended as the inaugural exhibition of the recently renovated SOCA gallery and premises at Outram Park.<sup>137</sup> See Hiang To

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<sup>132</sup> Kwok (1996), op. cit. 79.

<sup>133</sup> “现代画会订於廿四日举行新马台现代派画家第十五届作品联展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Oct. 20, 1979. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19791020-1.2.65.4>.

<sup>134</sup> At Singapore National Museum. Chen was one of the 31 Singaporeans exhibiting together with 38 Taiwanese artists. “现代画会下月举行新台现代画联展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jun. 28, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19810628-1.2.63.1>.

<sup>135</sup> “新加坡现代画會主辦现代画展经揭幕陳文希主持儀式強調現代畫面有活力表現,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Oct. 7, 1976.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19761007-1.2.28.13>.

<sup>136</sup> The inclusion of Eight Eccentrics sometimes differs, but this exhibition refers to the most common registry. 揚州八怪包括: 金农、郑燮、黄慎、李鱣、高翔、罗聘、汪士慎、李方膺。 “中華美術研究会將舉辦揚州八怪書畫展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jun. 11, 1976.

<sup>137</sup> “揚州八怪書畫展本月十八日舉行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jul. 21, 1976.

(1906–1990), then President of SOCA, opened the exhibition and explained its intention to promote the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics and their spirit of innovation and pursuit of excellence; they rose to prominence by being determined to paint in ways authentic to themselves, although deemed alternative to the mainstream. Chen said the exhibition promotes the artists’ creativity, individuality, and expressiveness, and is aimed at encouraging fellow art practitioners to persevere in their own paths in innovation and creation. He also hoped for the art centre to hold more exhibitions of Chinese masters’ works like Badashanren’s. Since the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics were a group of independent-minded artists but identified as a group, they may also be metaphorical for SOCA’s ambitions for their artistic development, given that this exhibition was the inaugural one for SOCA’s new premises.

The number eight could be significant for this exhibition was the first in a series of eight SOCA planned for that year.<sup>138</sup> The exhibition series (and their respective “hosts”) from the initial announcement comprise: “Exhibition of calligraphy and paintings from the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou “(Chen), “Appreciation session of famous calligraphy and paintings of Ancient and Present” (sometimes translated as “old and new”) (Huang Paofang 1912–1989), “Printmaking symposium” (Foo Chee San 1928– 2017), “Seal exhibition” (Wee), “Local Ceramics Exhibition” (Wong Kian Ping 1932–), “Local calligraphy exhibition” (Chen Jen Hao 1908–1976), “SOCA Annual exhibition” (See), “Watercolour painting exhibition” (Leng Joon Wong 1947–).<sup>139</sup>

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<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760721-1.2.32.9.1>

“中華美術研究會主辦揚州八家書畫展訂下月初旬舉行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jun. 24, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760624-1.2.39.26>.

“揚州八怪畫展今假歐南園美術中心揭幕附展出土史前陶器十二件,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jul. 18, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760718-1.2.18.16>

“會長施香沱致詞,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jul. 20, 1976.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760720-1.2.40.3>

<sup>138</sup> “中華美術研究會各項活動經編定,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, May. 13, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760513-1.2.36.19>

<sup>139</sup> While the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition and the seal exhibition manifested per proposed, the printmaking symposium and the local ceramics exhibitions were combined, and more research is required to establish confirm the others. The names of events and hosts are my translations from: “揚州八怪書畫展(陳文希), 古今名書畫欣賞會 (黃葆芳 sometimes also Huang Baofang) , 版畫座談會 (符致珊) , 當地陶瓷展(黃建斌), 篆刻展(黃明宗), 當地書家作品展(陳人浩), 本年年展(施香沱), 水彩畫展(凌運鳳).” “中華美術研究會舉辦陶藝版畫展廿日起在該美術中心舉行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Sep. 19, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760918-1.2.22.10>.

The different themes were each suggested by their respective “hosts” who were artists and members of SOCA. Wee, who hosted the seal exhibition of that series, explains the “host” for each exhibition as being entirely responsible and in-charge for the organisation, coordination, and execution of the exhibition, although each exhibition was also the team effort of the rest of the committee and other “hosts”. Responsibilities included locating and selecting artworks, contacting collectors, and collecting the artworks.

For the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition, part of the works came from Chen and his Old and New Gallery.<sup>140</sup> which sold mainly his own paintings but also dealt with ancient paintings and antiques.<sup>141</sup> Other paintings were loaned from collectors including Tan Tse Chor, Earl Lu, and Yeo Khee Lim,<sup>142</sup> whose association with artists like Chen has been widely established.<sup>143</sup> It may be that Chen’s gallery even sold some of the exhibited works. There was also a call put out on the newspaper for private collectors interested to exhibit their Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics works. Besides the telephone number for SOCA’s premises, Chen’s telephone number was also listed, identifying him as the contact person.<sup>144</sup>

The Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition was accompanied by a Thailand Manchang Prehistoric Pottery Exhibition<sup>145</sup> of twelve potteries from Chen’s private collection. Reportedly, the potteries were verified by experts from the Oxford University for being from around BCE 6000. The juxtaposition reportedly created an effect of antiquity.<sup>146</sup> See explained that the juxtaposition of the ancient paintings and potteries

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<sup>140</sup> “中華美術研究會主辦揚州八家書畫展訂下月初旬舉行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jun. 24, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760624-1.2.39.26>.

<sup>141</sup> Liu Kang, 1982, op. cit. also confirmed in Wee’s interview.

<sup>142</sup> 陈之初, 卢明得, 杨启霖. “中華美術研究會主辦揚州八家書畫展訂下月初旬舉行,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jun. 24, 1976.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760624-1.2.39.26>.

<sup>143</sup> Toh Lam Huat, “A Witness of the Times: The significance of Xiu Hai Lou’s Painting Collection in connection with the Nanyang Region,” in *Rediscovering Treasures: Ink Art from the Xiu Hai Lou Collection*, ed. Low Sze Wee, Cai Heng (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 13-31. 29.

<sup>144</sup> “中華美術研究会將舉辦揚州八怪書畫展,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jun. 11, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760611-1.2.49.6>

<sup>145</sup> “泰国曼谷史前陶器附展”

<sup>146</sup> “揚州八怪畫展今假歐南園美術中心揭幕附展出土史前陶器十二件,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jul. 18, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760718-1.2.18.16>



created an effect of exceptional rarity.<sup>147</sup> As the organiser of the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition and owner of the potteries, Chen was likely to have made the curatorial decision to put them together.

Wee recalled the inclusion of the potteries was also to fully utilise the space, as the paintings and calligraphy only took up the wall space. In setting-up such exhibitions, considerations include the overall visual effect, and the experience for the audience, with special attention to the initial effect that was pleasing and impressive to support the exhibition's intention. This premise was self-funded by the society, as were the exhibitions, such as transportation expenses.<sup>148</sup> These illuminate how the exhibitions were artist-initiated, artist-ran, and artist-funded, and the range of organiser's roles and responsibilities.

Chen is well known for referencing the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics in his own artistic practice. He ever said, "I paint according to how I feel about things and do not conform to the ways of others", which promotes the individualism that is central to what the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics represent.<sup>149</sup> Chen's paintings and calligraphy takes after those of Huang Shen, also a finger and brush painter.<sup>150</sup> In the 1983 interview, he related at length on Huang's artistic practice.<sup>151</sup>

Consistent with the common practice for artists to activate their own collection by studying the works for their own paintings, Chen might have been motivated to set up this exhibition to further his research in the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics. That he studied Badashanran's works and voiced his wishes for a Badashanran exhibition as well supports this interpretation. Wee confirms that a tenable process for Chen might be his learning from and selling the ancient paintings that passed through his galleries. This relates to Chen's possible commercial interests in organising this exhibition as well. In

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<sup>147</sup> "會長施香沱致詞," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Jul. 20, 1976.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760720-1.2.40.3>

<sup>148</sup> This is revealed by Wee. SOCA had held fund-raising exhibitions which sold works of their own members. Chen Chong Swee also discloses that SOCA get support from collectors and patrons. Chen Chong Swee, "Reflections on the 40th Anniversary of the Society of Chinese Artists (Trans. Chow Teck Seng, Goh Ngee Hui, Ng Kum Hoon)," in *Unfettered Ink: The Writings of Chen Chong Swee*, ed. Low Sze Wee, Grace Tng (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 117–118. 117.

<sup>149</sup> Ho (2006), op cit., 131.

<sup>150</sup> Chung, op cit., 191–192.

<sup>151</sup> Chen's Interview, op. cit., 26, 72.

promoting works that he referenced and emulated, Chen could also be helping the public access his own artworks.

If Chen was able to loan the works for a three-day public exhibition, however, he was likely able to access them under other circumstances, such as a more private loan, which would have allowed his closer scrutiny. Thus, the motivation for the exhibition likely extended beyond his own research pursuits.

Moreover, the operational risks for convening this public exhibition of the priceless works were great. Wee recalled the stress they faced since it would be impossible to compensate for any loss (or damage). This implies a real impetus to risk making this exhibition in its form.

Wee emphasised on another important motivation for the exhibition (and other exhibitionary involvements) was its educational intent, that is to encourage and improve the standard of art in Singapore through the exhibition. He stressed this as the “meaningful” purpose or intention, otherwise the efforts amounted to a “waste of time”. Wee explained that the target audience of these events were not specific, but opened to the general public.<sup>152</sup> In those days, art audiences included those curious but uncertain that admission was permissible, being unfamiliar with art exhibitions.<sup>153</sup> He recalls exhibition visitors commenting that they did not understand ink paintings.<sup>154</sup> He cited these to illustrate the differences from the present situation in Singapore, how far it has improved, although there is still room for progress. Wee’s submission may be attributable to his background as an art educator. While it cannot be confirmed if Chen and the other organisers were equally motivated, Chen,<sup>155</sup> See,<sup>156</sup> Foo Chee San,<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Although he said attendees of the seal exhibitions comprised mostly the traditional art audience.

<sup>153</sup> Wee described a scenario at the National Day exhibition where he had to assure those outside of the exhibition that they could come in to look around.

<sup>154</sup> Comments were that that ink paintings were blackish and that they did not understand what they were about. They also misunderstood that the “dry brush” effect of some works were due to the artist not using enough ink.

<sup>155</sup> As previously mentioned, Chen taught art at the Chinese High School from 1949 to 1968 and at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) from 1950 to 1959. He also taught art in his home at Kingsmead Road from the late 1950s.

<sup>156</sup> Lecturer at NAFA “Visual artist - Shi Xiang Tuo,” Tanoto Foundation Centre for Southeast Asian Arts at NAFA, accessed June 26, 2018, [https://tfcsea.nafa.edu.sg/artist\\_biography.aspx?id=9](https://tfcsea.nafa.edu.sg/artist_biography.aspx?id=9).

<sup>157</sup> “He served in various institutions including the Ministry of Education as Assistant Specialist Inspector of School (Arts and Crafts) (1968–1970), the Institute of Education’s Art Department as lecturer (1971–1988) and the National University of Singapore’s Extramural Studies Department as part-time lecturer in

Wong,<sup>158</sup> Chen Jen Hao<sup>159</sup> were also enthusiastic art educators. This points to an intimate relationship between art education, exhibitionary, and artistic practices.

SOCA and Chen's intentions could be manifold, as it is often the case for exhibition and art making. What can be minimally concluded is that Chen used others' artworks, and exhibitions and its related structure, as a medium or form to express, transfer, and promulgate ideas and views about art.

SOCA organised a similar exhibition in May 1977, with the "Qing Ming painting exhibition", exhibiting 26 calligraphy and 45 paintings, including works from Chen's and Wee's private collections. This exhibition was supplemented with the exhibition of nine sculptures from Chen's private collection to provide contrast. This exhibition was expressly aimed at responding to a statement from the then Minister of Education at the opening of the Outram art centre, that if Singapore was to have its own unique art and culture, then it must first place importance to the multicultural heritage of the people.<sup>160</sup> According to Wee, this exhibition was initiated by a local newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. This instance is another example of the discursive nature these exhibitions can take.

Besides the "artist as curator" discussions brought up in the literature review, Jessica Morgan also provides a direct treatment on "What is a curator?". She suggests that curation of the more contemporaneous arts is related to the "rethinking of issues of display and public presentation", "the notion of education", "establishing new publics" – qualities that Chen demonstrated with the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition. Even

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Chinese painting (1982) ... After retiring from full-time teaching at the Institute of Education in 1988, Foo took up another job, this time returning to his alma mater NAFA as Art Coordinator in 1989." The Esplanade Co Ltd, "Foo Chee San," TributeSG, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.esplanade.com/tributesg/visual-arts/foo-chee-san>.

<sup>158</sup> Art lecturer and Specialist Inspector of School in the Ministry of Education for 25 years. "Wong Kian Ping," Singapore Art, accessed June 26, 2020, [http://www.biotechnics.org/2wong\\_kian\\_ping.html](http://www.biotechnics.org/2wong_kian_ping.html).; "Visual artist - Wong Kian Ping," Tanoto Foundation Centre for Southeast Asian Arts at NAFA, accessed June 26, 2021, [https://tfcsea.nafa.edu.sg/artist\\_biography.aspx?id=16](https://tfcsea.nafa.edu.sg/artist_biography.aspx?id=16).

<sup>159</sup> In 1956, Chen Jen Hao moved to Singapore to take on the role of Principal of Kallang West Government Chinese Middle School, and from 1959 to 1969, he served as the Principal of Dunman Government Chinese Middle School (now called Dunman High School). He also taught Chinese painting at NAFA. Adlina Maulod, "Chen Jen Hao," Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, accessed June 26, 2022, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1474\\_2009-02-25.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1474_2009-02-25.html).

<sup>160</sup> "施香沱主持名家书画展览说要产生新加坡文化应先重视各种文化," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, May. 22, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19770522-1.2.21.19>

descriptors of the more conservatively defined curator as one in charge of “ownership and connoisseurship essentially embodying the continuation of a collecting/curating tradition...”<sup>161</sup> apply to Chen considering that the twelve potteries and some paintings had come from his private collection. Between all the articles and varied descriptions of Chen’s multitudinous involvements, however, neither referred to “curator” nor its derivative words, and the closest descriptors meaning “host” and “organiser”.<sup>162</sup> Filipovic’s research might offer a reconciliation with her suggestion that artists have been performing the role of curators for a long time.

### 5.3. Two galleries

One of the prompts to study Chen’s involvement with exhibitions and exhibitionary activities is his two galleries.<sup>163</sup> Both galleries predominantly displayed Chen’s own finger and brush paintings, although they also dealt with antiques paintings and ceramics from Chen’s personal collection.<sup>164</sup> The Chen Wen-Hsi gallery at the Singapore Handicraft Centre (SHC) also sold reproductions of his paintings at “reasonable prices”, such as framed prints of Chen’s works at \$31 and prints of his paintings on blank cards at 50 cents each. It also retailed souvenir items like painted snuff bottles and embroidered purses.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> “...That arguably brought about the first curatorial enterprise: the cabinet of curiosities”. Jessica Morgan, “What is a curator?,” in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (London: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 21–29. 22.

<sup>162</sup> Translation for curator are “策展人” or “馆长”, the articles describe Chen as “主办人” and “主持人” which translates to “organiser” or “host”. Although the interview, Wee confirms that the job of the “organiser” is to “curate”, it might have been applied in retrospect and prompted by the question, and since the interview did not elaborate on Wee’s conception of what is meant by “curate”, it might be more prudent to not apply the convenient label, in light of the other evidences.

<sup>163</sup> Chen’s “Old and New Gallery” opened in 1972 at Tanglin Shopping Centre. In 1976, Chen opened a second gallery, Chen Wen-Hsi Gallery, at Singapore Handicraft Centre (SHC).

<sup>164</sup> Liu Kang, 1982, op. cit. and Wee’s interview.

<sup>165</sup> Painted snuff bottles in different shapes, colours and sizes at prices beginning with \$35, paintings on silk priced from \$7 (unframed) to \$24 (framed), and antique embroidered purses at \$59 or “made-yesterday” ones for \$19. Yvonne Quahe, “Goodbye Gifts,” *The Straits Times*, Aug. 13, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19820813-1.2.122.4.2>.

The gallery partook in SHC<sup>166</sup> events, some organised by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB), such as the sponsoring of gifts for lucky draws.<sup>167</sup> Opened from 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. daily since Sep 1976, the 5.24-million-dollar SHC<sup>168</sup> set up by the STPB aimed to “attract a cross-section of Asian culture, to preserve and build up a unique heritage of the entire region around Singapore, and at the same time provide craftsmen with a means of livelihood through the practice of their crafts”.<sup>169</sup> The centre was conceived to complement the increasing number of tourist shoppers in search of souvenirs, given its location in the shopping district. In choosing the tenants, the STPB “made it a rule to select the top craftsman in a particular field of art, or at least one of the leading ones.”<sup>170</sup>

Articles introducing the galleries or SHC mentioned that visitors would also get to meet Chen in person.<sup>171</sup> At the opening of the first gallery, Chen had explained that people looking for him and his paintings would otherwise visit his home, which was not really good for display.<sup>172</sup> Chen set up small studios at the galleries, where he mainly created smaller paintings featuring grass and water birds.<sup>173</sup> Chen held many finger-painting demonstrations there, mainly for foreigners.<sup>174</sup> This was consistent with how all SHC shops presented live “demonstration of crafts”<sup>175</sup> for over six hours daily.

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<sup>166</sup> Part of the research on SHC presented here draws from an unpublished research on SHC I had done for “Introduction to Museum Studies” class in the Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices programme at NTU in 2019.

<sup>167</sup> “Can you name Singapore's exciting new food centre?,” *The Straits Times*, Mar. 1, 1978. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19780301-1.2.34.1>.

<sup>168</sup> Teo, Edmund. “\$5 mil handicraft centre opens today.” *The Straits Times*, 25 September 1976, p.32. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19760925-1.2.157.1>.

<sup>169</sup> By acting as a repository of Asia’s cultures, especially its intangible heritage, SHC presented Singapore as a nation positioned at the meeting point for these cultures. It was also aimed at becoming a place for tourism and for local cultural entertainment. Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, “Singapore Handicraft Centre”. (Singapore: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. Souvenir Brochure, 1976). 1.

<sup>170</sup> Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, op cit., 2.

<sup>171</sup> “Fine Art and A Cool, Cool Drink,” *New Nation*, May. 27, 1972. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19720527-1.2.122>.

<sup>172</sup> Violet Oon, “Heading for Adelaide,” *New Nation*, Feb. 26, 1972. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19720226-1.2.50.9>.

<sup>173</sup> Wee’s interview.

<sup>174</sup> Indeed, many of the newspaper materials relating Chen’s galleries were about the demonstrations that were conducted there for the foreign dignitaries and their wives. This will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>175</sup> To lend context, other demonstrations include Thai silk weaving, Malaysian silver crafting, batik painting and printing, Persian carpet weaving, and even the processing of reptile skin for leather products. Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, op cit., 2.

Chen announced the closure of the SHC gallery in 1985, saying that it was “just a pastime” for him, and was advised to close the gallery by his children due to his age, where at that time he was 79 years old.<sup>176</sup> He continued to paint at the Old and New Gallery for many hours daily, until his health deteriorated months before his passing in 1991.<sup>177</sup>

Wee recalls that the galleries were of “low-profile” in the local art scene. This corroborates with how the gallery did not feature regularly in the Chinese newspapers, and that his galleries were often not mentioned nor discussed in art writings. Apart from jointly organising an exhibition for his nephew, Chen Sheng, who was invited to visit Singapore by Chen, in 1989, with Singapore Kityang (Jieyang) Huay Kwan,<sup>178</sup> and Haiou (Seagull) art gallery, there were hardly announcements on exhibitions held there. In the English newspapers, Chen was interviewed on occasions regarding the gallery, sometimes as part of articles relating to the art gallery business<sup>179</sup>. Other reports were of the painting demonstrations he held there, to foreign dignitaries or their wives.

Chen’s galleries’ activities, products, location, seemed to be catered for the traditional art audience and collectors and tourists, rather than for the wider local public. Liu’s review of his galleries, previously cited, also mentions divided opinions about Chen’s galleries’ impact on his artistic development, but opines that the galleries advanced the international standing of Singapore art and constituted amongst Chen’s major artistic accomplishments. Liu writes that others in the art world have also opened art galleries, but are not as successful and hardly as long-lived as Chen’s, and this is attributable to Chen’s high artistic attainment attracting a large clientele.<sup>180</sup> Wee concedes that the gallery might be meaningful if viewed from an educational perspective, but the long and inflexible hours Chen spent at the gallery might have restrained Chen’s

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<sup>176</sup> “Handicraft Centre May Lose Novelty,” *The Straits Times*, Jun. 6, 1985.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19850605-1.2.36.28>.

<sup>177</sup> Goh Beng Choo, “S’pore Artist Chen Wen Hsi Dies at 87,” *The Straits Times*, Dec. 18, 1991.

<sup>178</sup> Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan 揭阳会馆, was founded in 1941 for immigrants from Kityang, Guangzhou, China, and their descendants. Chen had been connected with it at least since 1981. “揭阳会馆举行第 38 届就职礼许登科出任正会长,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Jun. 9, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19810609-1.2.70.3>

<sup>179</sup> For example: “Yes to foreign artists, but don’t neglect local ones,” *The Straits times*, Jul. 29, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19870729-1.2.62.11.1>.

<sup>180</sup> Liu Kang, 1982, op. cit.

artistic development. Wee recalls a conversation with Chen and how he implied that he could not easily be excused from the gallery and the required demonstrations. Considering how Chen exercises agency in everything else that he does, however, one should not diminish his loci of control over the manner, and his continual operation and attendance there well into his old age stand for his volition. Nevertheless, these discussions suggest the complicated ways Chen's culture producing involvements and the galleries may have affected his artistic practice. After all, one's time and resources are limited, and spending them on any one endeavour necessitates a compromise on others.

Sharon Loudon (*The Artist as Culture Producer*, 2017) broadens the idea of artist as culture producer to refer to someone who “reaches outside of the studio to extend creative energies and pursuits into his or her community”<sup>181</sup> and compiles cases of artists who were business owners, curators, educators. Most of them have economic reasons as a motivating factor, and many describe their family as part of the motivation. There are also synergies such as the development of contacts and networks to navigate the art infrastructure, and the dynamism of juggling artistic practices and a different business as part of the whole creative process.<sup>182</sup> Although these are contemporary artists, their articulated concerns illuminate Chen's practice. For instance, Chen attributed his sons for the publication of his 1976 catalogue for his seventieth birthday<sup>183</sup> and suggests Chen's familial involvement in the galleries and his exhibitionary activities, and an additional complexity to the interactions between just the gallery and his practice or paintings. Chen elaborated that his 1980 Taipei exhibition had come about from a person who saw his paintings and recommended him to the head of the National Museum of History in Taiwan, and also supported by other artists visited his home to view paintings and decided to help with the organisation.<sup>184</sup> This exemplifies how the gallery or studio, being a place for people to gather, could have been pivotal for his successful navigation of the infrastructure so integral to his career.

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<sup>181</sup> Sharon Loudon, ed., *The Artist as Culture producer* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 9.

<sup>182</sup> In cases of Duncan Mackenzie, Cara Ober, Euan Gray, Alec Soth. Loudon, op. cit., 128, 95, 153, 19.

<sup>183</sup> Chen and Zhong, op. cit., 70.

<sup>184</sup> Chen's Interview, op. cit., 77.

Chen's galleries also relate to the seldom-discussed financial and commercial aspects of artists' practices. Although not directly reported, sales at his gallery must have been a major source of revenue for Chen. Its other activities, such as the production of souvenirs and catalogues, were directed at promoting Chen's paintings. The juxtaposition of his paintings with antiques communicates a connection with traditionality and is suggestive of his lineage and mastery of the craft of painting. This is reinforced by the location of the SHC gallery alongside other shops representing master craftsmen from all over Asia. That both galleries were targeted at tourist shopping districts, however, suggests that the association might have also been for being popular with foreigners, and their different focus from Chen's stress on innovation might account for why these galleries were not activated for other artistic activities that were aimed at the local public. Nevertheless, both galleries must have played an important role in funding his artistic practice. The paintings Chen exhibited at annual exhibitions like the National Day exhibitions were for sale as well.

Related to this issue is the long history in Chinese art lauding the "amateurization" and "dematerialisation" of art to avoid association with commercialism, as discussed in Cahill.<sup>185</sup> Chinese artists in the twentieth century have to consider the contrasts between public exhibitions and the traditional *yaji* or private painting viewing sessions (more on this later). How they impact conceptions of cultivated and plebeian tastes differently is also discussed by art historian Shi Shouqian, in his discussion on Twentieth century Chinese artists and their audience.<sup>186</sup> Chen directly addressed this issue in his writing, and emphasises that "an artist should develop his own style to the best of his ability. He should not pander to the tastes of the masses. Doing so would lower the standard of his work."<sup>187</sup> This might explain his admiration for the tenacious individualism of the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics, as he explained at the exhibition. In his 1983 interview, Chen again related his admiration for Huang Shen of the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics with an illustration on how Huang did not compromise on persevering in his individualistic painting style even though he was living in poverty and debt.

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<sup>185</sup> Cahill, op cit., 9.

<sup>186</sup> Shi Shouqian 石守谦, "绘画、观众与国难 - 二十世纪前期中国画家的雅俗选择," in *从风格到画意: 反思中国美术史 (Cong feng ge dao hua yi: fan si Zhongguo mei shu shi) From style to huayi (Picture-Idea): Ruminating on Chinese art history* (Taipei: Rock Publishing International, 2010), 353–380.

<sup>187</sup> Chen and Zhong, op. cit. p. 64.



Nevertheless, the quandaries between art and money, appear to interplay within Chen as well. Also in the 1983 interview, Chen cited how well the paintings sold as one measure of success of his early exhibitions in Shanghai, Shantou, and Vietnam in 1948.<sup>188</sup> He also said:

“We have to consider the fact that paintings are done, in some sense, for others to look at. It’s not too good if what you paint is totally invisible to them.”<sup>189</sup>

“As a painter, you don’t necessarily have to let others understand, you only need to paint well. If what you do is not well-received here, it will be well-received somewhere else. One who has attained a high level in art will definitely not be constrained (lonely). Over time, someone will know him eventually.”<sup>190</sup>

“A painter cannot pander to the preferences of ordinary folks. He has to lead many people who do not understand to become those who do. He has to transform bad impression into good ones. This is the least a painter can do to help the arts.”<sup>191</sup>

The irony of the first quote to what he said of individualism is obvious. In the second quote, if there is no need for others to understand one’s painting, then well or poor-reception should not matter anywhere or anytime. In the third, how may a painter lead a following if people cannot understand? A possible reconciliation is if the painter is at least understood by some “extraordinary folks”. Limitations of this study prevents unpacking all relevant issues, and for the present purpose, it might suffice to note that Chen tried not to let reception affect his artistic considerations.

## **6. Showcasing acts of painting**

Another form of Chen’s exhibitionary activities is when he showcased the physical act of painting. This is relevant to other occasions when he would paint in front of a live audience or for documentation.

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<sup>188</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 26, 72.

<sup>189</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 37.

<sup>190</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 84.

<sup>191</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 84.

## 6.1. *Huihao*

The earliest report on Chen in local newspapers was on 1 May 1949, reporting an instance where over ten artists, including Chen, had gathered for a meal after a SOCA discussion. Inspired by the wine jar's form, they decided spontaneously to paint together. Various artists collaborated to produce ten over paintings. The painting deemed best was by Chen who captured the figure of attendee Lin Juren drunkenly hugging a wine jar, and then with embellishments and the colophon, alluded the painting to a portrait of Li Bai, the bibulous Tang dynasty poet.<sup>192</sup>

The event can be understood as a form of *yaji* (elegant gathering), an ancient Chinese practice whereby scholarly people private gathered to enjoy or engage in creating poetry, music, calligraphy, paintings and other cultural activities. *Yaji* can be considered occasions whereby *huihao* sessions may sometimes take place. The descriptor of the activity is however, "*jiti huihao*", which may translate to "collectively wield the brush". *Huihao* technically refers to simply the act of painting or writing calligraphy, regardless of audiences. (*Dangzhong huihao* refers to wielding the brush in public.) There is often an element of spontaneity implied with *huihao* sessions.<sup>193</sup>

A *huihao* session was held in conjunction with the national day exhibition in 1970, when 75 artworks were circulated for exhibition at seven high schools, of which Raffles Institution invited four artists, including Chen, for a *huihao* session at the school for students to observe.<sup>194</sup> This might be an early example of education and outreach programming for exhibitions in Singapore, and links to the previous discussion on the educational motivation of artists in exhibitionary activities.

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<sup>192</sup> “藝人多雅興古今同出一轍美術會同仁集體揮毫聚餐會中佳餚美酒權作寫真的好材料林居仁抱酒甕入睡鄉為是日最佳傑作,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, May. 3, 1949.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19490503-1.2.20.30>.

<sup>193</sup> 揮毫, 集體揮毫, 当众揮毫.

<sup>194</sup> “國慶美展圓滿閉幕後七區中學巡迴展覽七十五件美術作品四畫家明日在萊佛士英校當眾揮毫,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報*, Aug. 28, 1970.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19700828-1.2.50.1>.

Chen sometimes engaged in *huihao* sessions in conjunction with his exhibitions. One such case was a collaboration with Hongkong artist Liu Dabu on a “double flora painting” when the latter visited the “Hundred flowers blooming together” exhibition in Jan 1980 in which Chen exhibited.<sup>195</sup> Chen also hosted another session at his gallery in Feb 1982 for his former student, Wu Feng, a painter and renowned Teochew opera director. They collaborated on a painting, with Wu first painting fishes and then Chen painting bamboo.<sup>196</sup>

Chen’s galleries served as the main venue for his own painting demonstrations (*shifan*).<sup>197</sup> Technically they differ in that *huihao* emphasises on the artists’ creative discretion, and demonstrations have an emphasis on disseminating procedural information to the audience.

## 6.2. Demonstrations

Chen’s first finger-painting demonstration was for the Thai King at his palace in 1950.<sup>198</sup> Throughout his career, there were reports of over other 40 accounts of Chen demonstrating painting, especially finger painting, mainly to foreign audiences.

The first Singapore-based report of Chen doing a painting demonstration was on 29 Jun 1950 at a three-hour-long “China Night” programme organised by the China Society, at the British Council Hall. Chen “gave a superb lightning demonstration of finger and brush painting, producing a picture of four swallows in nine minutes with his fingers and another of three fishes in four minutes” to an audience of over 300.<sup>199</sup> Other parts of the programme included talks on Chinese boxing, Chinese poetry, Confucianism, and classical Chinese music. These suggests that the intention of the programming was

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<sup>195</sup> 《双清图》 This exhibition was organised by the Sin Chew Jit Poh and showcased works from a hundred artists. “香港画家刘大步参观百花齐放新春美展,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Jan. 4, 1980. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19800104-1.2.61.8.](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19800104-1.2.61.8;);

“本报迎新春特举办百名画家美展订明日举行开幕,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Dec. 27, 1979. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19791227-1.2.20.6>.

<sup>196</sup> 吴峰 “陈文希、吴峰师生阔卅余载重逢狮岛合作水墨画赠友好,” *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Mar. 10, 1982. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19820310-1.2.34.1.5>.

<sup>197</sup> 示范

<sup>198</sup> Chen’s Interview, op. cit., 23.

<sup>199</sup> Gtb, “China Night in Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, Jun. 30, 1950.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19500630-1.2.119>.

to educate and introduce Chinese culture to unfamiliar audiences, and relates to the earlier discussion on Chen's representation of Chinese identity to a Western-educated art audience at the British council. It could also be debated, however, given his speed, if Chen's intention was to disseminate procedural information about Chinese painting, or more as a performance with the intention to impress with its efficiency.

In Jan 1971, artist Seah Kim Joo's gallery at Tudor Court organised an exhibition showcasing 15 artists for the wife of Australian Prime Minister Mrs John Gordon.<sup>200</sup> On 22 Jan 1971, the artists, including Chen, met with and demonstrated painting for Gordon. Chen gave a demonstration of about 40 minutes, painting colourful paintings of branches, flowers, and birds, and explained that it was only a rough sketch that required more work.<sup>201</sup> This could have sparked the set up at Chen's own gallery later in 1972.

From 1977, painting demonstrations were held at Chen Wen-Hsi Gallery at SHC, a popular feature in the itinerary organised by government officials for foreign dignitaries, such as for the Norway Crown Prince Herald and Crown Princess Sonja in Feb 1978<sup>202</sup> and Datin Seri Siti Hasmah, wife of the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir in May 1980 and Dec 1981.<sup>203</sup> Photographs of Chen's demonstration of finger painting for the guests' viewership sometimes accompanied newspaper reports on their visits.<sup>204</sup> The images typically depict Chen featured in a side profile, poised over his table demonstrating a painting a small painting with his finger, in front of the seated guests flanked by officious looking personnel, presumably from the government or

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<sup>200</sup> Chen's light brushwork on birds was reportedly the best piece of Chinese art on display. Siva Choy, "Getting away from batik," *New Nation*, Jan. 23, 1971. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19710123-1.2.39.11>.

<sup>201</sup> "Mrs Gorton Attends Display of Finger Painting," *The Straits Times*, Jan. 22, 1971. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19710122-1.2.89>.

<sup>202</sup> "Prince Is Perfect Guest," *The Straits Times*, Feb. 22, 1978. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19780222-1.2.58>.

<sup>203</sup> "Looks Easy Once You 'Finger' It Out...," *The Straits Times*, May. 13, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19800513-1.2.48>; "Orchid Is Named After Datin Seri Siti Hasmah," *The Straits Times*, Dec. 18, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19811218-1.2.44>.

<sup>204</sup> "Initiative Must Come from Region Fukuda," *New Nation*, Aug. 16, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19770816-1.2.8>. "Princess Spends Morning at Gardens, Shops," *The Straits Times*, Oct. 11, 1977. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19771011-1.2.55>.

embassy. Chen also gifted the paintings he demonstrated to these visitors who might also purchase other paintings.<sup>205</sup>

These events suggest how Chen's navigated the art infrastructure through his gallery, participation in SHC, and collaboration with other Singapore government bodies, that allowed opportunities to connect with the elites and foreign networks. Besides dignitaries, Wee recalls Chen's painting demonstrations for busloads of tourists as well. The motivation for Chen's involvement here might again be manifold. His participation at SHC may be his endorsement of the showcasing of Singapore as where "a cross-section of Asian culture" would congregate. Consistent with Liu Kang's interpretation, it could also be another form of manifestation of Chen's ideas on the importance of internationalisation.

Clunas discussed the photographs of Shanghai Academy of Art founder Liu Haisu demonstrating brush painting in London in 1935 and Liu's student, Zhang Shuqi painting in Chicago in a room crammed full of onlookers comprising Caucasians, mostly women.<sup>206</sup> Zhang was in US as part of a diplomatic trip. Huge crowds in numerous cities attended his public demonstrations of Chinese painting, one of which was captured in a spread for *Life* magazine, while another was filmed. Chen was performing a role similar to how Liu and Zhang were "performing" the role of a "Chinese artist". That tourists would come to Singapore to access "Chinese paintings" might have also been due to the unique political conditions that prevented access to China as easily, and this presented a unique opportunity for Chen and other Chinese Singaporean artists, like finger-painting artist, Wu Tsai-yen, renown for having travelled widely giving demonstrations.<sup>207</sup> That Chen more frequently demonstrated finger painting than brush painting, might be due to

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<sup>205</sup> For instance, in Jul 1981, Mrs Chun Doo-Hwan, wife of then-President of South-Korean visited the SHC where "she sat fascinated as Dr Chen Wen Hsi demonstrated the art of finger painting". She offered to buy the demonstration painting of bamboo and sparrows, but Chen presented it to her instead as a "souvenir" of her visit. She saw another painting of squirrels and wanted to buy it but Chen offered it to her as a gift as well, which she accepted after some persuasion. She, finally, bought a third painting, of ink herons, for \$1,200.

"Mrs Chun Goes Shopping." *The Straits Times*, Jul. 2, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810702-1.2.63>; "全斗煥夫人选购象牙首饰送给掌上明珠," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Jul. 2, 1981. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19810702-1.2.9.3>.

<sup>206</sup> Clunas, op. cit., 183.

<sup>207</sup> Wu Tsai-yen, *吴在炎指画回顾展 = Wu Tsai-yen retrospective exhibition of finger painting* (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991).

how it contrasts more strongly with Western brush painting, and yet was more relatable to audiences by gesturing with his hands and fingers rather than the unfamiliar Chinese brush.

### 6.3. Photographs and the newspapers

Chen's practice coincides with the advent of media, photographs, and videography. Chen, his paintings, his image, and practice, were the subject of magazine features like *Australian Vogue*, television programmes, documentaries, and even as part of Singapore's educational curriculum. As early as May 1976, he was featured as a renowned local artist and art educator on Channel 8, a Singaporean television channel typically for non-English programmes.<sup>208</sup> "The painter-Chen Wen Hsi" was a programme that was used as a university pre-requisite for comprehension and composition; it was produced by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore and broadcasted on the "Education channel", in 1979, 1981, 1982.<sup>209</sup> He was on an Aug 1979 panel on "Singapore culture forum", recorded and aired on Singapore's National Day on Channel 8, discussing ways to encourage awareness on local cultural activities and the integration of the best of Singapore's different cultures.<sup>210</sup> Besides the opportunities to transfer his artistic ideas, these must have contributed to the consolidation of his status as an important artist.

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<sup>208</sup> "陈文希先生施本国一位知名画家及美术教育工作者" "生活之窗 第三十二集," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, 16, 1976. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19760516-1.2.32.20>.

<sup>209</sup> "教育葡稠," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Feb. 20, 1979.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19790220-1.2.58.2;>

"Tv And Radio," *The Straits Times*, Feb. 17, 1981.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810217-1.2.104.8.3;> "Tv And Radio," *The Straits Times*, Feb. 24, 1981.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810224-1.2.117.6.3;> "教育电视节目," *Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商报*, Feb. 23, 1982.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/nysp19820223-1.2.36.1>.

<sup>210</sup> The forum was chaired by Professor Koh Lip Lin, Member of Parliament for Nee Soon and Dean of Nanyang University Science Faculty. Other of the speakers were Lee Khoo Choy, Senior Minister of State, Dr Wong Men Won, President of Singapore Writers' Association, Choo Hoey, Conductor of Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Wang Chiu Tien, drama director, and Chen Wen Hsi was present as an artist, and presumably represented the visual arts sector.

"新加坡文化电视座谈会下月 7 日举行," *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Jul. 30, 1979. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19790730-1.2.22.3>.

The local newspapers were especially active in the arts, besides promoting events and artists, the newspapers sponsored, hosted, and initiating exhibitions as well as art activities. An example was a collaborative *huihao yaji* session that was organised by *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in Feb 1980. Six artists, including Chen and Wee, collectively worked on one Chinese ink painting, titled “Hundred flowers blooming to welcome spring” that adorned cover of a Lunar New Year supplement. The artists did not previously discuss the composition and other specifics but simply took their turns spontaneously. Che Chenglin painted rhododendron, Chen Yuexiu narcissus, Huang Paofong camellias, Chen Wen Hsi, peach blossoms and Wee painted a rock. Pan Shou wrote on calligraphy describing who painted what, the occasion, and a poem analogizing the diversity of flora to the diversity of artistic talents.<sup>211</sup> The title alludes to a phrase describing diversity and vibrancy, which was also referred to in China’s Hundred Flowers campaign in 1956–1957, aimed at promoting the flourishing of arts and sciences.<sup>212</sup>

According to Wee, the event was held at a *Xinhua* bookshop which regularly hosted *yaji* sessions on Saturdays, but this session was especially initiated by *Sin Chew Jit Poh* which invited participants a week beforehand. Everybody present were free to take part in the collaborative drawing, although not all did. He recalled being unaware that the painting would later be published in that way, nor of the reporters or photographers present to document the event. He suggested that Chen was likely unaware as well, however, the photograph featuring the six artists poised over the painting,<sup>213</sup> suggests otherwise, for Chen (and only Chen) looked directly at the camera, suggesting his awareness and engagement with the intended audience for the photograph.

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<sup>211</sup> 杜鹃 车澄霖, 水仙 陈月秀, 山茶 黄葆芳, 石 黄明宗, 桃花 陈文希, 诗 潘受

Wee describes his process in detail in the interview, and how he crumpled the paper to achieve the rock’s texture and the considerations as he was painting.

“六名书画家集体创作百花迎春图作为封面本报农曆新年专号明日将呈,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Feb. 14, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19800214-1.2.13.2>.

<sup>212</sup> “百花齐放” coming from the phrase, 百花齐放, 百家争鸣, “Let a hundred flowers bloom together, let the hundred schools of thought contend”. “Hundred Flowers Campaign”, also termed the “Hundred Flowers Movement”, was a period in 1956–1957 in the People’s Republic of China during which the Communist Party of China encouraged its citizens to express openly their opinions of the communist regime. For more information, please see John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A new History* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 364.

<sup>213</sup> “六名书画家集体创作百花迎春图作为封面本报农曆新年专号明日将呈,” *Sin Chew Jit Poh 星洲日报*, Feb. 14, 1980. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/scjp19800214-1.2.13.2>.

In Jul 1987, an article described Chen in another collective drawing session, although of a different nature and the artists produced different artworks. On the afternoon of 27 Jun 1987, Chen, Liu Kang, and Liu Haisu, gathered in the studio of accomplished art and commercial photographer, Chua Soo Bin, for a life drawing session of a nude female model. They had initially engaged a Chinese lady, but she backed out and was replaced by a Caucasian. Images of three paintings from the session accompanied the article, with photography credited to Chua. The article described that Liu Haisu, eminent Chinese painter, was in Singapore for his exhibition, and was the teacher to both Chen and Liu Kang from the Shanghai Art Academy. Liu Haisu is famous for having introduced nude drawing sessions to the art academies in China and causing a controversy then. Earlier in 1987, he held an exhibition in Hongkong, where the organisers had arranged for a nude life drawing session as well, but it was unphotographed. Photographs depicting both Liu Kang and Liu Haisu were published in another newspaper report, wherein Chen was only mentioned by name.<sup>214</sup>

The unusual context was indicated by a preceding article in Apr 1987 where Chen declared his support for life drawing of female nude models, along with other artists. Earlier that year, the then-Chairman of Chinese Chamber of Commerce raised that female nudity in paintings ran “contrary to Oriental moral concepts” and “humiliated women”. The matter was attracted debate, with artists such as Liu Kang and Chen speaking for the fundamentality of life drawings of nude to an artist’s training. Chen pointed out that paintings of nude was not unique to Western society but that it was practised in China as well.<sup>215</sup>

Chua was preparing for his Feb 1989 exhibition on photographic portraits of great contemporary Chinese artists, including both Liu Haisu and Chen. A photo from this session, that featured both Liu Kang and Liu Haisu sketching the model from her right

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<sup>214</sup> 李永乐、许瑞霞, “海粟大师画兴大起师徒齐动笔裸女跃画上,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Jul. 1, 1987. “裸女当前·师徒共画,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Jul. 7, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19870707-1.2.51.1.1>.

<sup>215</sup> 陈建发, “表现人体曲线美,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Apr. 10, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19870410-1.2.19.3.1>; Augustine Low, “Artists defend nudity in art,” *The Straits Times*, Apr. 15, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19870415-1.2.22.31>.



was included in his exhibition and catalogue.<sup>216</sup> The photo featuring Chen separately, sketching the model from her left, would surface later, being donated to the Singapore national collection, and appearing in later publications on Chen's works. These writings did not elaborate on the controversy on nudity in Singapore art and media at the time the photo was taken.<sup>217</sup>

By that time, Chen would have had been invited by the Beijing Association of Cultural Exchange with Foreign Countries, Chinese Ministry of Culture to hold his solo exhibition in Aug 1987 at the National Art Museum of China.<sup>218</sup> Being a Chinese artist about to present in China's national art museum, his expertise on the matter of Chinese art and values would appear to outweigh those of the head of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Also, in Aug 1987, he would be receiving the inaugural ASEAN Cultural and Communications award for visual arts in Bangkok, as the only Singaporean artist nominated by the Singapore Ministry of Culture.<sup>219</sup>

It is tenable, thus, that the artists' roles and intentions here are more aligned with those of performance artists. Chen would have been aware of the significance of his and their joint participation in the session that day, as endorsing the painting of female nudes. Chen would also have known the meaning and implications of the photographs, and that they would constitute his response to the controversy. It was the act of painting and painting together, that was intended for presentation to audiences, more than just the resultant paintings. That the details of the otherwise private event were released to the

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<sup>216</sup> Chua Soo Bin, *蔡斯民留真影展 = 当代中国画名家的生活与创作 Portraits of Fourteen Great Contemporary Chinese Artists* (Singapore: [unattributed], 1989), Unpaginated.; Chua Soo Bin, *Legends: Soo Bin's Portraits of Chinese Ink Masters*, ed. Teo Han Wue (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989), Unpaginated.

<sup>217</sup> In Low (2006), op. cit. 29., the image was described as "Artist (Chen) painting a female nude model. Mr Chua Soo Bin had arranged the life-drawing session for Chen, Liu Kang and Liu Haisu when the latter visited Singapore in 1987." The controversy surrounding nudity in art in the media was not described. It also features on pages 11-12, with the caption "Photograph of the artist taken by Mr Chua Soo Bin between 1985 and 1988." The image is also featured here: The Esplanade Co Ltd, "Chen Wen-Hsi," TributeSG, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.esplanade.com/tributesg/visual-arts/chen-wen-hsi>.

<sup>218</sup> K.F. Seetoh, "Artist Chen's Lifelong Works for Beijing Show," *The Straits Times*, Aug. 18, 1987.

<sup>219</sup> Chen was reported saying that he would like to see the Government spend more money to purchase works by young Singaporeans in order to promote art. An instance of him advocating for art and artists in Singapore. The awards are non-competitive, each ASEAN country nominated four people and their nomination were endorsed by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information. Other Singaporean winners were journalist Ismail Kassim for communications composer Zubir Said for performing arts and author-poet Edwin Thumboo for literature.

"Journalist Ismail among four getting ASEAN award," *The Straits Times*, Aug. 12, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19870812-1.2.5>.

press suggests an expanded awareness and active engagement of the discursive space the media offered. The very act of releasing the event details and images of the three resultant nude paintings to the press for reproduction is also significant as protestation against the censure of female nudity in paintings.

In the photographs, Liu Kang and Liu Haisu painted on canvas propped on easels, but Chen painted with the canvas laid flat on the table as typical of Chinese paintings. He wielded a western broad brush, and the combination could convey how the Chinese and Western coincided in his practice. His representativeness as a Chinese ink painter is juxtaposed with the immediate context of drawing a foreign nude model that is more typical of Western academic art, is another instance of converging the “Chinese” and “Western”. His participation in this collaborative session also connects it with the *huihao* tradition and demonstration sessions with which he would be associated.

Chen’s response is consistent with the internationalisation of Singaporean art he often advocated, since the drawing and painting of nudes are deemed foundational to Western art, and its acceptance is important to Singaporean art. He could also be responding as a resistance to the censure.

Another possible primer, evidenced by strong parallels, is an April 1987 collaborative sketching session organised by the Ministry of Culture for Chen and Liu Kang at a duck farm. It was a session for them to draw or paint the ducks from observation, but accompanied by a video crew to capture the artists painting for the production of a documentary series about six Singaporean artists.<sup>220</sup> The press reports on the event was accompanied by images taken of Liu and Chen drawing together.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> “For sale at art fair 87: video tapes on 6 pioneer artists,” *The Straits Times*, Jun. 25, 1987.  
“陈文希、张荔英、李曼峰、黄葆芳 四艺术家记录片 87 美展中将放映,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Jul. 20, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19870720-1.2.13.23.>;  
“社会发展部联合早晚报联办 88 年美术展,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Aug. 2, 1988. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19880802-1.2.7.3.>  
The Ministry produced another video documentary about Chen in 1989.

“ 招 标 通 知 (Advertisement),” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Jan. 13, 1989. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19890113-1.2.43.2.>

<sup>221</sup> Artist and public servant, Ho Kah Leong, also showed up at the event. “倚栏画鸭,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Apr. 14, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhwb19870414-1.2.19.1.>

Liu Kang had an oil painting, *Artist and Model* (1954) depicting Chen drawing a half-nude female model on their Bali trip. In Oct 1987, Liu submitted it for an exhibition that was part of the Centennial Celebrations at the National Museum, which then procured the painting for \$20,000.<sup>222</sup>

Another instance where Chen used his image as an established painter was in an advertisement of a luxury watch featuring a photograph of Chen, captioned: “Behind Dr Chen Wen Hsi, who is himself one of South East Asia's most renowned artists, are three paintings from his collection. The delicate brushwork are fine examples of the skills shown by artists of the Ching dynasty. Connoisseurs will also appreciate the art of the watchmaker in a Patek Phillippe watch.” This advertisement appeared four times from Apr 1981 to Nov 1982 in an English newspaper.<sup>223</sup> It is part of a series of an advertising campaign that featured other prized collectibles like antique ceramics. While presumably initiated by the advertiser, Chen’s consent in the juxtaposition with the international brand aligns with his ideas on the internationalisation of art, and transfers the standing of Chinese paintings to less familiar audiences. This is also indicative of Chen’s status as a painter, master-craftsman, first-class artist, and close association with Chinese ink painting.

Images of Chen’s painting continued to feature regularly until the last year of his life, when Deng Lin, Chinese painter and the eldest daughter of former China premiere, Deng Xiaoping, visited Singapore for her joint exhibition with three other artists in Apr 1991. A photograph depicting Deng Lin and Chen working collaboratively on a single large painting propped against a wall accompanied a report on their “painting together”.<sup>224</sup> Besides communicating the artistic connections between China and

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<sup>222</sup> With the support of Shell Group of Companies.

吴新慧, “刘抗 33 年前一幅画国家博物院将购存,” *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*, Oct. 16, 1987. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/lhzb19871016-1.2.14.5>.

<sup>223</sup> “(Patek Philippe Advertisement),” *The Straits Times*, Apr. 18, 1981.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810418-1.2.123.2>.

“(Patek Philippe Advertisement),” *Business Times*, Jun. 5, 1981.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/biztimes19810605-1.2.14.1>.

“(Patek Philippe Advertisement),” *Business Times*, Nov. 12, 1982.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/biztimes19821112-1.2.13.1>.

“(Patek Philippe Advertisement),” *Business Times*, May. 14, 1982.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/biztimes19820514-1.2.13.1>.

<sup>224</sup> “邓小平长女邓林来新开画展,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Apr. 21, 1991.; 郑玉梅, “女儿邓林证实邓小平戒烟成功,” *Lianhe Wanbao 联合晚报*, Apr. 25, 1991.

Chinese Singaporeans, this image has Chen coming full circle in representing Singapore to China, “performing” the role of a Singaporean, or at least the Chinese Singaporean. The photograph, mass media, and identities of the participations take the instance beyond the traditional *huihao* or *yaji* sessions that it so formally resembles, and allows its performative function.

#### 6.4. Extended readings

Chen’s *huihao*, demonstrations, and performative drawing sessions connect with his exhibitionary activities in manners such as constituting education and outreach, extended programming, or using the mass media as an exhibitionary space. Despite the myriad of relevance these events may potentially imply, the most relevant to the present research focus is that Chen consistently activated them to transfer conceptions about Chinese and Western modernist art to different audience segments.

Performance art in Singapore is typically associated with the emergence of conceptual art in Singapore in the 70s, but is also connected with Chinese ink painting, through installation and performance artist, Tang Da Wu, who while “working in the 1980s at a distance from local developments in Chinese painting” was also known to have learnt Chinese ink painting when he was young,<sup>225</sup> and had associated closely with the MAS. In Jan 1989, in one of Singapore’s early performance art pieces in the first TAV exhibition, Tang used “Chinese ink and paper in a sort of drawing and shadow puppetry piece” to comment about a social issue (the deaths of domestic workers from accidental falling from buildings), and the local art scene and its focus on awards and competitions. He performed drawing in the nude.<sup>226</sup> Parallels can be drawn between this performance art piece and the photography and drawing session in Chua’s studio, where in its inclusion of nudity, commentary on the arts and Singapore’s system could be set up by and perpetuated by artists like Chen. Tang had only moved back to Singapore in 1988, however, and it is unknown if he was aware of the nudity issues in 1987.

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<sup>225</sup> Cai, op. cit., 83–89.

<sup>226</sup> Tang was nude “for some seconds in dim light” but was later warned by the organiser that one audience member complained that it was “visual rape to see him nude”. Koh Nguang How, “The Artists Village and the Birth of Contemporary Art in Singapore (Koh Nguang How in conversation with Iola Lenzi),” in *Concept, Context, Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*, ed. Iola Lenzi (Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre Foundation, 2014), 190–217. 190.

The connections between Chinese painting, the performativity of the act of painting, and performance art is suggested in Clunas book, beginning with prior mentioned images of Liu Haisu and Zhang, to Pan Tianshou painting in the Huaqiao Hotel in 1964 (that is juxtaposed with one of Jackson Pollock painting in 1949), and culminating to the images of performance and conceptual artist Ai Weiwei dropping a urn in 1995.<sup>227</sup>

On the connections between performance art and *yaji* and *huihao*, Wee opines that *yaji* and *dangzhong huihao* are a kind of performance art, but it is just that “Chinese do not share Westerners’ proclivities for coming up with new labels or separate categories of expression or art”. He supports the suggestion that paintings may be understood as the cumulation and record of gesture.

On the possible significance of Chen using a broad brush, Wee opines that Chen did not perceive strict boundaries or definitions between drawing mediums, and rather, placed emphasis on the resultant visual effect and quality.

Art historian Shi Shouqian offers a congruous explanation, in that Chinese artists at the intersections of culture and times of change, such as the meeting of Chinese and Western artforms, usually do not purely conceive of art as “new” or “old” or in terms of traditionality and contemporaneity. Instead, their emphasis is on how art can interact with members of society at the time, and to participate and engage with the formation of culture, because only then can they achieve recognition and become legitimised (institutionalised)... If they were unable to transfer their ideologies on art to the masses, then all art creation and reformation will only be transient, no matter how spectacular.<sup>228</sup> Shi was describing Chinese artists from the 1900s onwards, which coincides with Chen’s

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<sup>227</sup> Clunas, op. cit., 217–227. Issues relating to performativity in Chinese painting is also discussed here Maxwell K. Hearn. *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: The Metropolitan museum of Art, 2013).

<sup>228</sup> Shi, op. cit., 354. Interpreted by me, from: “这个内在脉络的变化，也必然牵涉一定程度的社会性，也就是说，艺术家在变化之脉络中所思考的经常不只是其艺术之新旧与否的单纯问题而已，更重要是其艺术如何与当下社会中其他成员互动，而参预至社会文化中之某个价值形塑过程之中，因为只有如此，其他位才能得到认同，而其艺术方能得到具吸引力的合法意义。...如何将改革的理念推及广大的基层群众，让中国文化产生一个全盘的改造？如果不能克服这个实践的难题，所有的文化革新运动，不论如何高瞻高瞻远瞩，光彩夺目，皆不过是漂浮的泡沫罢了。”

formative years. The idea is relevant to Rosalind Krauss's discussion on the "postmedium condition" in contemporary art,<sup>229</sup> where she suggests the limitations of medium-specificity approaches to understanding contemporary art. Her point relating the heterogeneity of television and media complicating medium-specificity, can help to explain Chen's situation.

## **7. Discussion and implications**

### **7.1. More than Chinese painting**

This study uncovers several overlapping interconnections between Chen's exhibitionary activities and his artistic practice. Exhibitions and exhibitionary activities sometimes form part of his research process for his paintings and practice. They also helped to financially support Chen's practice and allowed him to better navigate Singapore's artistic infrastructure. While the issue of money was hardly directly mentioned in most of the research material, on hindsight, it seems an apparent connection. Generally, the findings are consistent with relevant discussions, such as Cahill, Sennet, Shi, and Loudon on artists, artworks distribution, and their commercial and financial structures seem loose, undefined, and under-wraps. Chen, like the artists of antiquity, appears to find the matter quite difficult to discuss. He also tries not to let issues of reception affect his artistic creation, mindful of Huang Shen's example. Chen's case might suggest one sustainable model is for artists to engage in efforts that fund their artistic practice, while extending it at the same time. To understand the extent to which these activities funded Chen's artistic practice would require investigation on his pricing strategies, relationship with STPB, and involvement with other galleries, amongst others. It might also be interesting to compare these with his involvements in fundraising and charity events.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 31–32.

<sup>230</sup> The research gap on artists and money is not unique to Singapore, although still surprising since we are known for our pragmatism. Apart from the issues public funding and performance art, and that Tang Da Wu had worn a jacket emblazoned with "Don't Give Money to the Arts", approaching then President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, while handing a note to the President that read "I am an artist. I am important", issues about art and money have receive little attention in Singapore.

Chen's exhibitions collectively reveal that his identity is more fluid and complicated than just being a Chinese painter. Chen's paintings' subjects do not vary drastically, as it is often the case in Chinese ink and modernist practices. Kevin Chua relates that writings on "Nanyang art" tend to suggest its freedom from ideology and understanding of "Nanyang" and modernist art need to be "wrested from their formalist (pastoral) seclusion".<sup>231</sup> The examination of Chen's exhibitions reveals connections between the political and national conditions and his artistic conception and development.

Most evidently, Chen consistently utilised exhibitionary activities to transfer artistic ideologies, such as combining "Chinese" with "Western", traditionality and modernity, and the importance of individualism, innovation, and internationalisation, through various manifestations, by exhibiting his artworks at different exhibitions, supporting or organising others' artworks being exhibited, and displaying acts of paintings through *huihao*, collaboration and demonstrations, and performance art.

That his artistic practice and outputs should comprise more than just painting and span several different mediums and forms, is consistent with how Chen's paintings already spanned across ink and oil mediums and Chinese and Western techniques. It is also consistent with how Chen had chosen to pursue both Western painting and Chinese painting by enrolling in the Art Education department in cosmopolitan Shanghai. He had also admired his teachers for having a diverse practice, and might have been informed by how their practices as painters constituted more than painting. After all, he attributed his experiences in Shanghai for the "path" he took that was the "fusion of East and West".<sup>232</sup> This is supported by Wee's comment that Chen did not perceive strict boundaries or definitions between drawing mediums, and rather, placed emphasis on the resultant visual effect and quality. It is inferable to that he might not have perceived boundaries between all mediums and rather, placed emphasis on its effectiveness to transfer his artistic ideologies.

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<sup>231</sup> Kevin Chua, op. cit., 29–30.

<sup>232</sup> Chen's Interview, op cit. 15-16.

This interpretation is directly supported by the extended literature on medium-specificity, especially Shi's explanation on artists' motivations to promulgate their ideas about art and become "institutionalised" so as to make a permanent contribution to shaping art and culture.

It is also relevant to Krauss's argument on the limitation of medium-specificity. Unlike her case study on Marcel Broodthaers and in Western contemporary art, however, Chen's modernism did not seem to have been as impacted by the formalists and the conceptual art group. Chen's case is further complicated by the traditional structures of Chinese art practices he had inherited, and by being at the intersection of cultures in Singapore at that time. Instead of a development to a "post-medium condition", it might be better interpreted as a retention of a "pre-medium condition" or that he had always maintained a "no-medium-specificity condition".

Discussing Chen's practice as being "multi-disciplinary" is paradoxical in a similar way Krauss had reservations on retaining the word "medium" to discuss "post-medium".<sup>233</sup> The activity, responsibilities, and "job description" of Chen's undertaking with the exhibition of the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics coincides with many descriptions of curators, like Morgan's and also those of Southeast Asian artists-curators, as discussed by Teh and Flores. The definition of "curator", however, is repeatedly called into question in contemporary times, as elaborated by Morgan and O'Neill amongst others. Whether or not Chen qualifies as a "curator" is a complication worth side-stepping, since it is unconfirmable if he or others thought of himself in that way at that time, and thus unimportant to understanding his intentions. More importantly is that Chen used his own and others' artworks, exhibitions, and exhibitionary structures to transfer ideas about art and culture and how. Chen's roles go past binary notions of artist-curator, for he was also playing the role of art collector, and gallerist in the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics exhibition. Furthermore, the multitudinous combinations of his involvements across all his events trivialise any attempts to distinguish Chen as "painter", "curator", "demonstrator", "performance artist", "judge", "award-winning artist", "art-educator", "gallerist", and so on.

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<sup>233</sup> Krauss, *op. cit.*, 7.



The diversity of his involvements illustrates the pervasive heterogeneity of combinations and forms that developed in tandem. This testifies to Chen's constant, thorough, and tenacious authenticity to his core artistic ideologies, which might have developed since his formative years.

This brings to mind the designation of "culture producer", which either enlarges artists' roles or encompasses artists' and curators' roles, as brought up by Loudon and O'Neill. Yet, it should not be overlooked that, despite his varied roles, Chen most consistently presented and referred to himself as a painter or artist, and sometimes educator. This is evident from his writings and interviews. It is inferable that, given his "no-medium-specificity condition", he might have conceived of all these pursuits and involvements as part of his artistic practice, as they were of his teachers' in Shanghai, and even his compatriots' in Singapore. In other words, that it is the limiting pre-conceptions of "artists" or "painters" and their roles that need shifting, rather than the designations applied to him.

In the same vein as returning to Chen's agency and intentions, his inclination towards Chinese ink paintings may be interpreted as a manifestation of his repeatedly choosing it over other mediums for its qualities or other reasons. This is relevant to his choice allocation of resources, such as on his galleries and other pursuits. The perceived "specialisation" in ink painting may be resultant of having invested more resources on developing and presenting this aspect of his practice.

The findings elaborate on prior research that primarily regards Chen's painting practice, by showing that his artistic output in other varied forms is substantive. Although likely not outweighing his paintings quantitatively, their significance cannot be overlooked, as they enrich readings of Chen's and other artists' artworks, practices, and exhibitions.

## **7.2. Implications**

First, there are Chen's compatriots and other artists who have been involved in various artistic roles besides producing tangible artworks, such as organising exhibitions

or being artist societies. This study has revealed comparable involvements of many other artists, like Liu Kang, those of the 1976 SOCA exhibitions, and Wee.<sup>234</sup> Investigation into these activities can help understand the artists' connection with their times, especially for the "Nanyang artists" and modernists, whose ideas may not be immediately apparent from their tangible artworks, alleviating issues pointed out by Kevin Chua. Chen's activities are suggestive of how other artists could have also activated exhibitionary structures to transfer their artistic ideologies, in similar or different ways. Another implication could be on the understanding of art societies like SAS, SOCA, and MAS which remain active to this day. There are also other artists organising exhibitions and performing cultural producing roles outside of these structures. Meaningful comparisons can be made.

SOCA's organising an exhibition on Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics that was part of a series of eight exhibitions could be compared to the exhibitionary activities of contemporary art collectives, such as Philippines' Baguio Arts Guild's international festival that begun in 1989, and Singapore's TAV initiated in 1988 and their international activities in the early 1980s, discussed by Teh as being "artist-initiated and artist-run, wrought collectively by artists practising as artists" and not "mediated by curators". The conceptual artists have been discussed as being motivated by a departure from the constraints of modernist academic institutional art,<sup>235</sup> which could be represented by artists like Chen and his compatriots. But consideration of the similar conditions under which they set up their ideas as "academic institutional art", including how Chen introduced the Chinese artform to colonial and local audiences, suggests more complicated connections than departure from "constraints".

Moreover, the "Chen-Liu-Liu-Chua-model" collaboration in 1987 already indicated some institutional acceptance of performance and conceptual art. Chen, Liu Kang, Chua Soo Bin represent some of leading institutionally-endorsed Singaporean artists at the time, and they had collaborated to present what is an early example of performance art in Singapore. Additionally, the National Museum bought Liu Kang's

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<sup>234</sup> The interview contain much information about his own artistic practice and involvements as well, and though beyond the scope of this research, bears potential for further investigation.

<sup>235</sup> Teh, *op cit.*, 265.; Kevin Chua, *op. cit.* 31–33.

*Artist and Model* shortly after in Oct 1987, and Chua's 1989 National Museum Art Gallery exhibition had included the image of Liu Kang and Liu Haisu drawing the nude model.

The "Chen-Liu-Liu-Chua-model" collaboration<sup>236</sup> also suggests an elaboration on the development of performance art in Singapore, that strengthens connections between ink painting and performance art made with Tang's 1989 ink-painting performance art. Likewise, it presents similarities with Josef Ng's 1994 *Brother Cane* performance art piece, such as involving nudity, artistic freedom, authority, censorship, and a key role of the media, and a comparison can help better understand the part of each one.

This relates to the literature on "Chinese painting" genre, like Clunas' and Shi's which traces the development of Chinese painting from antiquity to contemporaneous questions about how Chinese paintings might progress with Western influence and globalisation. The collaboration and its images could add on to understanding the development of Chinese painters, especially the connections between the images of Pan Tianshou and Ai Weiwei, as discussed by Clunas.

Chen's activation of exhibitionary structures to transfer his ideas as well as finance and manage his painting practice could be used to elaborate on Senett and Cahill's discussions on artists' activities beyond producing tangible artworks. Chen's galleries and connection with SHC connecting art and craft would also be interesting for further exploring Sennett's discussion. Chen's activities may also help to elaborate on Cahill's discussion by exemplifying overseas Chinese artists in the twentieth century. Chen's case suggests that overseas Chinese artists may present more fodder for consideration on identity studies and the dynamics between and beyond two hegemonies – Chinese and Western – and the ensuing combinations and development.

The development of art in Singapore does not unfold exactly along the same patterns as anywhere else, for the composition of Singapore's cultures differ. Another

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<sup>236</sup> The event is also interesting for consideration for feminism studies, given the context and that these three senior male artists had gathered to draw a female for a photographed session by another senior male. It is also relevant to studies on censorship. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce had been one of the popular venues for artistic events like exhibitions when the then head of Chinese Chamber of Commerce had voiced out against female nudity in paintings at an exhibition opening.

example is how the linearity in O'Neill's suggestions on the convergence of art and the curatorial practices occurring since the 1990s, and increasing connections between exhibitions and pedagogy occurring in 2000s<sup>237</sup> do not seem exactly congruent with the findings. While exhibitions are relatively new to China, the existing infrastructures of art and education are ancient and very different from the West. Chen and his compatriots had received their first experience of exhibitions in China and had observed their teachers' initiating and activating the structures. They then transferred their ideas when they came to Singapore. Moreover, Singapore is more than just the interactions between Chinese and Western hegemonies, because it is also Southeast Asian, a composite of many other cultures and, above all, Singaporean, with its own unique set of dynamics. This uniqueness is similar to that of other cosmopolitan and increasingly globalised cities. Singapore's combination of cultures is increasingly relevant with China's growing international influence. Chen's case exemplifies how artists managed these interactions. For example, further investigations on how he, and others like him, manage artistic, exhibitionary, and pedagogical roles could help to elaborate existing models, like that proposed by O'Neill.

## **8. Conclusion**

This thesis begun by exploring the roles or place of exhibitions and exhibitionary activities in the artistic practice of Chen Wen Hsi, a master of twentieth century Chinese ink painting and one of the most important pioneers of Singapore art. For Chen, exhibitions and its structures are a means of accessing financial support and navigating art infrastructures, and participation in exhibitionary events, either by exhibiting, organising or any other capacity, and showing acts of paintings, served as opportunities to transfer, promulgate, ideas about art, in the sense that they may be the medium or form itself. Chen consistently activated them to transfer his ideas about art.

The study submits that exhibition studies provide new understandings on Chen, his artistic practices, exhibitions, and artworks and suggest possibilities for other artists. It also demonstrates how the chronologizing of an artist's involvements from newspaper

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<sup>237</sup> Paul O'Neill, *op. cit.* 88, 167, 190.

archives may be useful to art and exhibition studies. Resource limitations constrained post-implementation reviews and further refinement of the method implemented, such as the fields and details captured in the database and more in-depth analysis. An investigation on newspaper or media studies, in other disciplines, might suggest other approaches or methods of analysis, such as on the differences of reports between Singapore's Chinese and English newspapers. Given the findings relating the performativity and his activation of his image and media, closer analysis of the photographs in newspaper could enrich our understanding. This should include a review of his features in documentaries and other mass media that was uncovered by this research. More interviews could also improve the reliability and validity of the findings.

Since this study points to Chen's integrated practice, it suggests the need for a more thorough investigation on all of Chen's activities, including as an art-educator, so as to understand the whole of Chen's practice comprehensively. The findings also put forth the relevance of modernity and medium-multiplicity issues for future studies, especially investigations on the activities of Chen's compatriots, other Singaporean or Southeast Asian artists, or other overseas Chinese artists, for comparison on transferability.

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## Appendix: Transcript of Interview with Wee Beng Chong

Wee Beng Chong was born in Singapore in 1938, and from 1955 to 1958, he studied at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, studying under Chen Wen Hsi, and other artists like Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, See Hiang To, and Lim Hak Tai. In 1964, he went to Paris, France to study at L'Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts and returned to Singapore in 1969. He was a member of the Society of Chinese Artists, and like Chen, was one of the organisers of the 1976 series of exhibitions. He was on the organising committee of the National Day exhibition in the 1970s and 1980s, that was jointly organised by the Ministry of culture and various art organisations, and was part of the judging or selection panel together with Chen. He was also a fellow participant with Chen at a collaborative drawing activity in 1980. Besides being the co-founder of artist societies, such as the Modern Art Society Singapore, Wee is a prolific multi-disciplinary artist, and winner of multiple awards, including being the first recipient of the Cultural Medallion for art for his contributions to visual arts in Singapore in 1979. This interview was conducted on June 2, 2019 and refers to relevant newspaper articles cited in the thesis.

Lee Ju-Lyn 李裕鈴 (裕)： 黄明宗老师， 谢谢你接受访问。我的研究是关于新加坡第一代水墨画家的艺术活动。现在，一般大众对那个时代的画家或艺术家的普遍认知仅停留在作画之人。我们也能想象艺术家想透过作品传达理念并非易事。因此，我想研究陈文希在绘画及举办展览以外的文化艺术工作。选择您做访谈的原因是陈文希是您的老师，您也在同一时间活跃于新加坡艺坛。

### 中华美术研究会

裕：我特别关注的是你们几乎同一时间参与了中华美术研究会并当上了执委，那时陈文希在会里的职位是“正研究”。请您讲述陈文希当时在委员会里的活动及工作范围等。

Wee Beng Chong 黄明宗 (黄)：我在中华美术研究会最活跃的时候是大概当施香沱当会长的时候。我曾当过总务、宣传。工作非常繁重，主要做宣传、办展览、联络报馆、发新闻等。这些事多由我们年轻一辈的人跑腿。陈文希通常主要负责幕后工作，如与官方或上一辈的有关人士接洽之类的。有一年我们一连办了8个展览。

裕：您是指1976年办的一系列展览吗？当时陈文希办了扬州八怪书画展，而您则办了篆刻展览？办这些展览的目的是什么？主题是谁提出的？

黄：当时是这样。篆刻非常冷门，没有什么人去注意，所以我想把它“炒热”起来，希望多一点人来刻图章。当时还出了一本篆刻集。那场篆刻展大概展出了一个礼拜的时间，反应不错，来看的都是内行人的多。办篆刻展的主题是我提出的。陈文希主持的扬州八怪也是他提出的，然后由我们协助。

裕：报章上写着你们是展览的“主持”。“主持”的意思是策展人吗？

黄：就是策展。也就是展览的事情由这个人全权负责。不过，关于展览的事务很多，他一个人办不了，我们就会一起协助。那年我们各自提出一个主题，大家互相帮忙，一起办这些展览。

裕：在选画和布置方面，你们有什么考虑呢？

黄：是这样的，我们是看一个大整体，不是个人的问题。不是说我把我的画摆在中间就是好。我常常举一个例：莫娜丽莎那张画摆的位置是不好的，但还是有很多人挤去看。东西好摆在哪里都是好的。摆画就是这样，我们先初步摆好，再作调整，调整好了才挂上去。之后，我们会请那些主持会长或重要的人先来看一下，看是否要移动或更换什么的。因此，我们会考虑到视觉上的效果，比如作品与作品之间很常因摆在一起不协调而造成冲突，就不好看了。比方说如果将一幅油画或水彩画与4、5副中国画摆一起，看上去就会不协调，这是要换的。（我们也会考虑）色彩问题、布局及场面。我们注重的是观众的感受和体验。比方说当观众进去之后那一刻的感受很重要。我们注重的是整体与展出用意的传达，不是个体。

裕：你们那时的用意是为了推广展览主题（中的艺术形式）吗？（我的意思是）你办篆刻展是为了让大家更认识篆刻，而陈文希办扬州八怪书画展是为了让更多人懂得他们的画？

黄：是一样的，道理是一样的。

裕：展出的地点是中华美术研究会在欧南园的会所吗？

黄：是的。当时在三楼。现在拆掉了。

裕：场地是政府提供的吗？

黄：不！要还租金的呀。我们办这些展览也是自己掏腰包。车马费都是自己掏腰包的。

裕：你们是怎么选择作品参展的呢？

黄：比方说，那场篆刻展，我是主持。我知道哪一家刻得好，我就向好的那一家发出邀请。当然也有好的篆刻家不想参加。但我们都会邀请。过世的篆刻家，我们也会联系家属，请他们拿作品来参加。无可避免的，会有一两位联系不到，比如吴得先就联系不到，而张丹农、黄载灵就联系上了。当然联系不到的篆刻家，我们就不会展出其作品或篆刻集。这不能勉强。

陈文希就和收藏家联系，向他们借来展。收藏家包括了报章提到的那几位（陈之初，杨启霖、张永贞、卢明德、陈文希、郑农、源则俭、施香沓）。当时会很紧张，因为不能弄丢他们的展品。扬州八怪！弄丢任何一幅都是赔不起的！

裕：当时他怎么会知道谁有什么画呢？

黄：由陈文希老师和我们的前辈去联系。他们会知道。

裕：陈文希在办扬州八怪书画展览时，也同时举办了陈文希的泰国曼昌史前陶器附展。您了解为什么他会有一同展出这些陶器的想法吗？

黄：记得不清楚。好像都是小小的古董。

裕：为什么会拿这些出来展呢？是因为扬州八怪作品不够吗？

黄：他当时的感觉是，八怪只是挂在墙壁上，那里的空间还很大。如果不充分利用就浪费掉了，不如放一点雕塑或其他东西。所以他就拿出自己的收藏品一同展出。制造那个整体上的效果。

裕：您也曾提到之后中华美术研究会也办过一个明清名家书画展？可以聊聊这一项吗？

黄：当时那个画展是由星洲日报发起主办，中华美术研究会协办的。我拿了康有为的字出来。当时造成了非常大的轰动，因为是真迹。场面不错，展出地点在大坡，就是旧的星洲日报报馆，Robinson Road 附近。

裕：这个画展的受众是谁？

黄：我们展出当然不能抓人家来看的嘛，他们有自由不看。我那时也有听过观众说：“黑漆漆的不知道是什么东西。”这些人是因为看不懂，才会说出这句话。可能这个“黑漆漆的”刻有一方图章，一些人也看不懂。我们中国画的笔法苍老，有些飞白的地方他们说是不够墨。你看观众水平相差那么远。要把这些人的水平提高，就得花上几十年的时间。到现在为止还有很多人不了解这些艺术，不过情况已经好转了。我们办这些展览的目的本来就是为了促进国民文化水平的提升。那个时候在维多利亚纪念堂有一个展览厅是国庆美展经常展出的地方。那里有一扇玻璃门。我遇见人们走到那里以为禁止进入就止步不前，我告诉他，欢迎参观。很多人排在会场外面不敢进入。你看从那个时候到现在，观众发生了什么样的变化。

### 画廊

裕：当时陈文希也办了两个画廊，一个在东陵购物中心，一个在新加坡手工艺品中心，您提起过您常到那里拜访他。请您说说画廊里的布置是怎么样的？他在那里有自己的画室吧？

黄：他的画室也在那边，画廊也在那边。他就是有空间就会把他的画和一些古董、花瓶、陶器之类的存放在一起。他每天都要到那边去现场表演。。。

裕：表演还是示范？

黄：示范，示范。示范给那些旅客看。因为旅游局跟他签了合约，大概是这样的情形。有没有真的签，我不知道。但那个旅游车一来到，他就要示范给他们看。陈文希是用指画示范给他们看的。他的指画真的很不错。

裕：这是在哪一间？东陵还是手工艺品中心？

黄：都有都有。因为我记得他在东陵那间，请了我刻一方图章。“文希指画”，小小的，大概3分大(1 cm)。我刻了之后交给他。当时我胆量特别大，我向他讨了一副画。他说，“好呀，你自己选”。然后我就跟他讨了一幅“猿猴”。现在这幅画还在我这边。

裕：他在他的画廊是否展过别人的画或学生的画？

黄：不多。我记得不多。几乎是没有。主要是推销他自己的画，还有卖一些古董。他也有卖一些古画，如扬州八怪之类的。可能就是这样，他才知道谁有他们的画。陈文希也学习了八怪的书法，如八怪中黄慎的草书。大概就是这样的概念。

裕：那他是收画来做临摹、观察，过后再卖掉吗？

黄：都有，都有。大概是这样的关系。

裕：刘抗写道：“在新加坡，有一些艺术界朋友开设画廊，做美术品的买卖，但都此起彼落，难以维持长久，唯独文希是例外，究其原因，他本身的高超艺术造诣，吸引了大量顾客，包括本地人和外国旅客在内，这对提高我国艺术水平及国际声誉，有重大的贡献。但好多人觉得，文希花了大把精神和时间去经营画廊，未免有点可惜。如果，他能专心一意地从事艺术创作，不是有更大的成就吗？这不只是他个人艺术生命的跃进，也将使国家的文化更见灿烂。”您认同吗？

黄：我同意他把时间浪费在画廊上是不值得的。人生短短几十年，你是不能浪费一分钟的。即使画好或画不好也不要紧，你要好好珍惜。当然你生病，就不能勉强。所以陈文希在画廊那样做就太可惜了。

裕：那你不认同他办画廊对我国的文化有贡献吗？

黄：那不见得。因为它隔离在大众的视线，很少人知道他的画廊。到后来人家才知道他在那里开了画廊。我是听说了之后去那里走走，才知道它的存在。是那么一回事。而不是说他请了总理、文化部长等等来开幕或大肆宣传。完全没有。是很低调的。

裕：可是我们在报章看到有很多外地来的贵宾都会到他的画廊去看看？

黄：因为旅游局帮他宣传。旅游局每个月会发行一本宣传单。

裕：那您是说他没有在那里创作吗？虽然他的画室也在那里。

黄：有的，他在后期画的 De Kooning 式的比较多。因为那些小小一张就可以了，用手指一沾就完成了嘛。De Kooning 是最容易处理得像的。手指一沾。我也有试过，很像。就是枯草，水草那些。通常是小品，那里可以作画的位子不多。



## 评选委员会会员

裕：我接下来的问题是，报章里也记载你们同时当过评选委员会会员，如在国庆美展中，他是评中国画，而您是评西画或雕塑。请问当时你们在筹备展览时，陈文希的角色或工作是什么？

黄：一样，一样，中画西画我都有评。所以他们说黄明宗是最公平的，因为他每一样都行，每一样都有水准，都不会错过，不会走眼。很多画家也讲过这个话，包括刘抗。所以每一个画展我都有份。所以我是个劳碌命，赚钱的份儿没有，可是苦差事我就有。

裕：是谁委任你们做这个评选委员会会员的？

黄：文化部。文化部指定和邀请 10 多 20 个艺术机构及团体派出代表。然后这些人就通过把名字写在纸条上来投票，得票最高者就是评选委员。

裕：那你们当时是用怎么样的审美标准来评选作品？是否有一定的标准呢？

黄：很难有一定的标准，开始是这样。画拿来如果是好的就是“in”不好了就是“out”。开始是这样的，不过后来有很多人不满，有人会认为自己的画一定是好的。这个是错觉来的。他就提出抗议，搞到整个国庆美展非常乱。后来就是通过投那个码子的方式。有绿的、有红的。每张作品前面都有一个小小的桶，评选走过来就把码子丢在里面。然后把码子倒出来，如果评选委员有七个人，码子有四个红的就“out”，即不通过的意思；如果有四个绿的就“in”，即通过。谁投“in”或“out”都没人知道。因为走过去把码子投进桶里只听到声音。这样的速度虽然很慢，不过我认为却是最公平的。那时陈文希就是七位评选委员之一。

裕：但每一次都大概刚好有 100 多幅作品吗？

黄：大概是这个数量，如果觉得不够还可以从那些已被淘汰的作品中抽一两张比较好的出来，给他们机会。但通常不会不够的，因为维多利亚其实不大。我个人在那里办展都无法展出全部，会剩下很多。

裕：那挂画的时候，布置之类的事物都是你们做的吗？有什么考虑？

黄： 是的。那个就非常麻烦了。有很多人会提出为什么把他们的画放在角落头，而不是放在中间。我们追求的是整个场面的谐调，不是个人的问题。是要看大体而不是看局部的。

裕： 那时 陈文希也有参与这些事务吗？

黄： 他个子比较大，走两步他就感到有些喘了。他们会来过目，通常也没有什么意见。因为我们的态度是“好，既然你提出意见，你有意见的话，就请你来排喽。”是这样的。“怎么样摆才美？你来咯。你提，那你就来排。”当时我们年轻，才30多岁。其实也是我们那些年轻的在做比较多。我很多精彩的雕塑就在这个时候展出。一年一件。当时是一人拿一件或两件出来展出。

裕： 当时你们要参选的作品是自己选的吗？你们参加不同画会的展览是怎样选画的？

黄： 我们会自己做些调整。比方说，我参加现代画会，就会拿比较抽象一点的作品；参加艺术协会，就可能拿有形一点的作品，也可能是没有形的。中华美术研究会也是可以拿出有形或没有形的。决定在于我自己如何分配。比方狮城书法，不能拿画，就一定要用书法作品。就是根据画会的性质决定拿怎么样的画。其他的艺术家也是这样的，包括陈文希在内。当时在国庆美展时，文化部会把表格发给艺术团体，艺术团体再把表格分给会员。想参加展览的就会把自己的作品、资料、价格填写好提交上去。还蛮直接的，不像现在，比较麻烦，还要交照片、CD什么的。太麻烦了。以前这些是主办当局在做的，不能都推给画家做。画家拿画出来展览是给予支持。他要吃饭的，类似这些杂务不应让画家负责。你们主办当局请人来就是要做这些的。

裕： 您是现代画会的发起人之一，陈文希不是会员吧？

黄： 不是。

裕： 但陈文希也参与你们的活动，对吗？比如你们1982年的新台现代画联展，办了个创作奖，评选委任有五位刘抗，陈文希，钟四滨，何和应，和您。请问当时你们评作品时的用意与标准是什么？这与国庆美展有什么分别？

黄： 讲起来是一样，国庆美展拿出来的作品水平有高低之分。不可以拿现代画会的标准去衡量国庆美展。现代画会的水准不同。评国庆美展的时候要以那个场合的用意来评，大家高高兴兴，为了庆祝国家独立，是这种用意。比如每年

的国兴美展会有很多人以南洋景物作为作画题材。顺便声明，那时不只是常提到的那四位前辈【刘抗，陈文希，钟四滨，陈中瑞】在画这些而已。他们画的也不是所谓的南洋风，而是南洋景物。现代画会展的时候就要求有现代画法，要求很高。那时现代画会限定只有 20 个会员。而且当时情况是这样的，我们会先去注意某位画家，参观他的画展好几次、好几年，觉得可以了再邀请他参加。不是想入会就入。我们同时也规定会员要每年参加展出，如果有一年不展出就要自动退会。到后来，换了会长就变了啦。

裕：你们当初组织这个现代画会或参与中华美术研究会与各项活动的用意是什么呢？是要推动某种艺术观念吗？

黄：就是这样。要把艺术水平提高。不管你画什么画，都要把艺术水准提高。

### 集体创作活动

裕：你们在 1980 年二月一同参与星洲日报所办的“百花齐放迎春图集体创作”。那时的情况是怎么样的？是以参加雅集的心情对待，还是示范的心情？

黄：当时，在一个星期之前中华书局就已通知大家来参加雅集。那里其实每一个星期六都会办一个雅集，平时我们去到那边都会有人，比如说潘受等都会在那边挥毫。

裕：所以这张报章上的这张照片就是在那边现场拍的吗。平常都会有人在那边围观吗？

黄：对。我画那个石头的时候，围观的人眼睛都亮了起来。你知道我怎么样画吗？我把这张纸这样（做了把纸捏成一团的动作）弄皱，他们惊讶了一下，不懂发生了什么事情。然后我把纸铺平，一两笔就完成作画了。这么做就是为了增加那个效果，增加那个石头纹。

裕：你当时要做这个动作，有没有想到观众会有很惊讶的反应？

黄：有想到的。

裕：所以你那时是故意要让他们有个反应的吗？

黄：有想到的。然后我画这一块石头时，我也想到了不要占太多空间，因为要礼让给别人。

裕：你们那个时候有好几个人一起画，有没有事先商量谁要画什么？

黄：没有，没有商量。

裕：是按照报章上报道的次序吗？

黄：不，没有按照次序。谁都可以上去画的。

裕：我以为他们是特别邀请你们六位。

黄：没有。就在那个圈子里面的那几个人了，也就是那天来参加雅集的那几个人而不是接到邀请函的。可能他们有邀请更多的人，但没有出席。

裕：过后他们就拿这个去登在。。。？

黄：就是报章整版满满，星期天头版，把这张画登出来了。

裕：你之前知道他们会这样登出来吗？

黄：不知道，我只是当作是参加雅集，其他的事我都不理。

裕：你们当时在创作时有没有意识到摄影师和报馆有人在那边记录这件事情？

黄：哦，我不知道，我看都不看他们。

裕：可是你看这张照片里面陈文希有对着镜头笑，你们其他人都没有。你觉得他有没有意识到这件事是要做给别人看的？

黄：没有吧，应该是当作是个雅集来对待。

裕：示范和雅集有什么分别？

黄：示范好比上课，老师做示范，把画法传给他，就是示范。如果几个画家约定在什么时间地点见面，就是雅集。两者用意不同。

裕：你觉得雅集这种表现方式和行为艺术能相提并论吗？

黄：这个本来就是了嘛。因为这种雅集跟集体创作本来就是一种艺术了嘛。

裕：你指的是那个集合起来的行为而不是那幅共同创作的画吗？

黄：对。大家可以不事先约好就一起创作。反正纸张拿来就可以了。

裕：也就是说您同意中国画创作的根本就是在记录一个肢体动作表达的说法？

黄：对。对。虽然这张没有，不过传统的中国画，确实有一些是集体创作的。。。比如说是我画这个部分我会在旁边盖一个图章，然后这个是别人画的部分他们就会在旁边盖他们的图章。以前的方法是这样，可是这张没有。

裕：这张是一起落款的吧？

黄：落款是潘受写的。就是他把那边的事情记录下来。这一幅画现在应该很有价值啊。

裕：1987年，艺坛上发起了画裸体画的争论。刘抗、陈文希，与刘海粟在蔡斯民的摄影室办了一场画裸女的活动并拍摄下来，您对这个事件有印象吗？

黄：其实裸体雕塑在西欧的大街小巷到处都会看到，不只是一个人或许是三四个人抱在一起。五六个或七八个都有。这并不稀奇。这是每一个艺术家都必须经过的练习。它的重点在比例、光线明暗问题、角度问题、线条问题等等，对画家有非常大的帮助。

裕：所以那时他们一起画裸体，你觉得。。。

黄：就是并不稀奇。NAFA那时候要画裸体是我争取的，以前是不准的。因为我当时是系主任，我强调说我们一定要有这一环。我们的上级及身后有很多人要阻止，可是我跟他们讲一定要做，这件事我不谈啊。因为你跟那些不会的人要谈什么呢？你画裸体画的关键在哪里？不是画光光秃秃就可以了。比如我问你裸体画里面有没有直线？没有，答案是没有直线，所以每一条线都是非常美的。画裸体画来练线条、比例、光暗、神韵，都是非常重要的。构图也非常重要，没有一项是没有帮助到的。

裕：你之前在南艺学习是没有学过裸体画的，对吗？

黄：对。可是我们私下有办。就是设在某某地方，就是私下请一个 model 来，然后你拿速写簿去，就是在几号街，什么房间。这是在 1960 到 1963 年的事情，我从南艺毕业了之后，还没有去法国之前就参与了。

裕：这是谁带动的？是不是刘抗他们？

黄：不是不是，我忘记是谁了。不过(刘抗)他们没有在。当时就是一个人收五块钱，而且也不是每个礼拜都有。因为那些 model 很不容易请得到。

裕：这些通常都是用木炭画的吗？

黄：是的。也有用 indian ink 和 pelican 笔。画速写的那个画法。

裕：可能那个时候他们三位聚起来画是因为那年年头发生了裸体画的争论。于是就是有人提出反对裸体画。

黄：其实这是很普遍的。你要知道争论的人，是会不会、懂不懂的。

裕：你觉得他们那三位站出来画这个是不是有一点好像行为艺术那样？因为他们是当时比较资深的画家…？

黄：西方世界很喜欢用一些很奇怪的名堂，比如“行为艺术”这个名称，闹出来就强调这个。他们很喜欢这样。我们中国画就没有。比如我们中国画主张谢赫六法可是六法也都不够用的。比如创作新意他没有。所以我的意思是中国艺术本来就已经有类似行为艺术的传统，只是没有独立拿出来讲。

中国画自明朝开始就已经在画春宫画。文征明他们都有画。我有看过，新加坡有人收藏，不过那位收藏家已经过世了。他有拿过给我看。是真迹来的。所以那个时候他们已经画了。所以画裸体也不是一个西方的事情。可是中国社会和西方社会不同。中国比较保守。如果你穿暴露一点出去就不行了，而在西方是没问题的，在东方就会给人家骂。在夏威夷人家穿比基尼在街上跑，在新加坡可以吗？现在有人这么做了，但当时是不可以的。所以这个是西方不了解东方艺术的那个根底。

裕：当时陈文希好像不是用水墨画来画这个裸体，你觉得他对于所使用媒介的差别是有意识的吗？

黄： 没有。什么媒介都可以用来作画。这主要看你要求的效果。所以他对媒介之间没分得那么清楚。就是很简单，什么都可以用。这是他的创作理念。我也一样，好像我写过大字给人当招牌，就是用报纸捏成一团当笔用。这大概是在我 18、19 岁时做的事情。

裕： 以前唐大雾有和你们一起活动吗？

黄： 有。他画一些盒子，线条，有在现代画会展览过。在 70 年代初，一、二年左右。

裕： 他是会员吗？

黄： 这个就要去查了。不过过后他就拿一支大的毛笔。。。搞行为艺术。其实如果坐着，好好地写，也是行为嘛。

裕： 你觉得他当时做这个会不会是从中国艺术那里得到灵感的？

黄： 有，这是一定的。历来中国画家都有当众挥毫的传统。不好也就在这里，破坏了整个价值。因为外国或外行人看了，会觉得你一两下子就要卖几千块什么的。。。他们就用这个方法衡量。

裕： 可是陈文希也做了很多现场示范的动作。

黄： 这就是画廊害的。他也不能跑掉。旅游车一来，他就得示范给游客们看。如果是要固定地示范给旅客们看，久而久之，难免就是停留在那边。

裕： 所以他不可以不画吗？

黄： 我曾和他开玩笑，问他，“陈老师，如果你心情不好怎么办？”他笑笑。意思就是不可以啦。

裕： 刘抗说他的画廊对新加坡艺术有贡献？

黄： 当然以他那个身份得那样说，不过那个画廊就没有存在的价值。他很吃力。时间很吃亏。他也要交租金，固定时间要出现在那里。

裕：那您也办过画室，当时您有什么感受？您有没有把艺术理念表现出来？

黄：我就是不理生意，想做什么就做什么，然后关门大吉。因为那个店是我的叔公的，最后我欠他很多钱，是我的父亲帮我还债的。现代画会就是在那里发起的。

裕：你们办展览、当评委等的那些工作呢？

黄：也都是浪费时间。不过若是站在提高国家艺术水准的角度，也是值得了，因为这些事情都带有教育用意。如果陈文希办画廊来提高旅客的文化艺术水平，那还说得过去。不过他得固定的时间待在那里，还是太耗时间了。

裕：谢谢黄老师拨出的时间。我将把我们的谈话转录整理，再请您过目并确认。谢谢您接受访问。

黄：好的。