FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE TO LANDSCAPES: THE POLITICS BEHIND THE WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF SEE CHEEN TEE

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FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE TO LANDSCAPES: THE POLITICS BEHIND THE WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF SEE CHEEN TEE

ABSTRACT

See Cheen Tee produced over 50 pieces of woodblock prints in the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. This research seeks to investigate the politics behind these woodblock prints by studying social and political climate of the time it was produced. Politics in this research must be understood in the context of power relations that includes both formal and informal, organizations or individuals, and is not limited to the generalized notion of the activities of governmental bodies.

His work is compared and contrasted against other artworks such as woodblock prints produced during the Chinese Modern Woodcut Movement, paintings by first generation Nanyang-style artists and even some of his contemporaries. The research approaches his woodblock prints according to themes that are observed to be prevalent in the subject matter of the prints, namely Social Justice, visualizing nationhood, the exotic native Other, and feminine figures. This wide range of subject matter required several methodologies and theoretical frameworks to be consulted. This included social-political historical data, Post-Colonial theory, the concepts of the Other, and also gender politics.

The analyses of his works revealed that his early works were closely related to Social Justice themes, and engaged with formal politics and perceivable formal structures of power. But as his subject matters veered towards more genre scenes and landscapes, the workings of politics also delved into more personalized areas of informal politics, that deals with personal visions of nation-building, negotiating with native ethnicities as the other, and the gaze of the artist based on gender. See's work demonstrates a sort of

sensitivity to these subject matters that reveals an ambivalent quality. This research further dismantles the notion that woodblock prints are necessarily related to the workings of formal politics and that it is an equally pliable medium that allows for very unique representations capable of even creating fine nuances that convey more complex narratives.

Keywords: woodblock prints, Social Justice, post-war prints, Nanyang artists, genre art

ABSTRAK

See Cheen Tee telah menghasilkan lebih 50 keping cetakan woodblock pada pertengahan 1950-an hingga pertengahan 1960-an. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat politik di sebalik cetakan woodblock dengan mengkaji keadaan sosial dan politik pada masa cetakan beliau dihasilkan. Politik dalam kajian ini perlu difahami dalam konteks yang merangkumi hubungan kuasa formal dan tidak formal, organisasi atau individu, dan tidak terhad kepada tanggapan umum yang mengaitkannya dengan aktiviti badan-badan kerajaan.

Cetakan woodblock See dianalisa dan dibanding dengan karya seni lain seperti cetakan woodblock yang dihasilkan semasa Pergerakan Cetakan Kayu Moden China, lukisan oleh artis gaya-Nanyang generasi pertama dan juga beberapa orang yang sezaman dengan beliau. Penyelidikan ini akan dikaji mengikut tema yang diperhatikan lazim dalam perkara subjek cetakan beliau iaitu Keadilan Sosial, penggambaran kenegaraan, kaum bumiputera sebagai golongan 'Other', dan figuratif feminin. Kepelbagaian subjek yang diperhatikan dalam karya seni woodblock See memerlukan beberapa metodologi dan kerangka teori untuk dirunding dan dikaji. Ini termasuk data sosial-politik sejarah, teori Post-Colonial, konsep mengenai Other, dan juga politik gender.

Analisis karya beliau mendedahkan bahawa kerja-kerja awal beliau berkait rapat dengan tema Keadilan Sosial, dan secara langsung dikaitkan dengan politik formal dan kuasa yang mempunyai struktur yang formal. Apabila perkara subjek cetakannya mula bertukar ke arah yang melebihkan penggambaran genre dan landskap, hubungan kuasa politik turut berubah dan lebih menyentuh aspek-aspek yang lebih peribadi dan struktur politik tidak formal; membentangkan visi peribadi kenegaraan, perundingan dengan

kaum bumiputera sebagai ‘Other’, dan pandangan artis berdasarkan jantinanya. Karya cetakan See membuktikan bahawa beliau mempunyai kepekaan terhadap perkara subjek yang mempunyai ciri-ciri yang berbelah dalam hasil karya beliau. Hasil kajian ini menyangkal tanggapan umum bahawa cetakan woodblock semestinya berkaitan dengan politik formal. Ia sebenarnya adalah satu medium yang juga berupaya mewujudkan nuansa halus yang menyampaikan naratif yang lebih kompleks.

Keywords: cetakan kayu, Keadilan Sosial, cetakan post-perang, pelukis Nanyang, seni genre

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To my dearest family (especially wife and sister), for your continual support an encouragement. This accomplishment would not be possible without you. Last but not least, I'd like to dedicate this project to my dearest late-mum…I made it.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS & ABBREVIATIONS

EAS : Equator Art Society

CHSGAA : The Chinese High School Graduates of 1953 Art Association

CCP : Chinese Communist Party

KMT : The Kuomintang (China)

KPD : German Communist Party

NAFA : Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

NYSP : Nanyang Siang Pau

PAP : People's Action Party (Singapore)

SPD : Socialist Democratic Party of Germany

YWCA : Young Women's Christian Association

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Objective

See Cheen Tee (1928-1996) was an artist who delved into a variety of mediums such as woodblock prints, watercolours and oil paints. Whilst websites and media articles would refer to him as a Singaporean artist, a closer look at his biography would reveal otherwise. It is true that he may have spent much of his adulthood in Singapore and settled down with his family there, but he was actually born in a small fishing village called in Kemaman, Terengganu on the east coast of the Malaysian Peninsular. Therefore, it comes as no surprise when one skims through his portfolio of works that many of his landscape artwork does make fishing villages and coastal communities as his subject matter.

See subsequently completed high school in Singapore in 1948, and then studied art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) where he graduated in 1953.[1] It was here that he came under the tutalage of the first generation Nanyang artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Lim Hak Tai.[2] See spent most of his career as an art teacher in high schools as well as in NAFA, but he never abandoned his art practice and continued producing his own artworks even as he was teaching.

[1] Chia Wai Hon and See Cheen Tee. *See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and n Cartoonist*. (Singapore: Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001) p.210
[2] Ibid p.21

Figure 1.1. *Cheen Tee demonstrating the application of colours to his students at NAFA. As a teacher, Cheen Tee frequently brought his students on outdoor painting trips*. 1971, in See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 26.

It was only in the early 1970s did he retire from being a teacher and became a full-time artist. He passed away in 1996 from cancer and all of his artwork came into the care of his eldest daughter See Yee Wah who keeps them with her in her residence in Singapore.

Though he produced artworks of a variety of mediums as mentioned earlier, but it shall be the collection of woodblock print works that he is most well-known for that will be the focus of this research paper.

The research's primary objective will be to investigate the politics behind the emergence of his woodblock prints. This will also shed light on how an artist like See negotiates and adapts through the shifts in the social-political climate during a critical era in Singapore's history (between the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s) through visual analysis of his works that were created in this environment of turbulent change. It is a crucial period in Singapore's history from its emergence out of colonial rule as an independent state and subsequently to its severance from the Federation of Malaya. To facilitate this primary research question, the following questions are formulated to also assist in garnering data to guide this investigation.

(a) What are the social and political conditions that could have been instrumental in the surfacing of See's woodblock prints based on the respective years they were produced?

(b) What are the subject matters and how they were portrayed in his woodblock prints to reflect these social-political shifts? How the subject matter changes would also be a factor to consider if indeed there are to be any observable and distinguishable patterns.

(c) How his works could assist in our understanding of the politics behind woodblock prints that feature genre-themed scenes, landscapes and still life, and our definition of social realism?

The condition that had set this research into motion was when it was observed that there was a change of the subject matter in the woodblock prints that See produced. Between the mid-1950s until the late 1960s See made well over 40 woodblock prints. He began with about a dozen in the mid-50s and then there was a hiatus of almost a decade with only a couple of pieces in 1959. Then there was a surge of woodblock productions by Cheen Tee in the late 1960s. When his works within this period are mapped chronologically, we notice a change in the subject matter he chose to depict in his prints. The earliest works were akin to his contemporaries of the time such as Lim Yew Kuan, Choo Keng Kwang and Lee Boon Wang who drew much influence from the Modern Woodcut Movement spearheaded by Lu Xun in China during the 1930s who used the medium of woodblock prints as an essential tool in an array of arsenal responsible to drive China's reformation. These early Malayan woodcut artists saw the potential of woodblock prints as an art form with a political agency through the portfolio of China's woodblock practitioners, and so used the woodblock print medium to surface the social injustice suffered by the people under colonial rule in Malaya.

After the initial few pieces that were themed to Social Justice, we observed See adopting subject matters that were not as forward in addressing the plight of the people. The pieces that came after seem to fall well within a genre art theme, depicting figures in rural or domestic settings, either at work or leisure. In 1964 we see a stark contrast not just in subject matter, but quantity. The formats began to take on larger dimensions and included landscapes and still life. This stark shift in subject matter and its representation is the condition that created the need for this research to be done.

1.2 Scope of Research

The primary data that will come under scrutiny for this study will be the woodblock print works of See Cheen Tee. He produced these work as mentioned, within the mid-1950s till the late 1960s. However, it will be only a select few works and not the entire collection that will be studied. Samples will be selected and divided into four different groups distinguished by themes which are Social Justice (of which definition will be outlined in the first chapter), nationhood, the Other and gender.

Contemporaneous works of other Nanyang artists, woodblock prints produced in China during the Cultural Revolution and also some European prints would also be studied. This is done to provide a contrast that could surface fine nuances that differ him from the other artists in the way they respond and negotiate with the social-political circumstances through their work.

It would also be imperative before proceeding further that the term "politics" for this particular study be delimited to help us understand the scope of which this term encompasses and hence also determining the approach we are taking for this study on See's artwork. "Politics" is most commonly related to the notion of governmental institutions and its operations over a particular society, be it within say a sovereign nation-state or perhaps even its interactions beyond the borders supranationally. The idea that politics are often related to authoritative bodies such as governmental institutions could be attributed to the habitual practices of social scientists performing their studies and research on these bodies because the power wielded by such institutions were more visible and its rule of law more tangible and is therefore stable. So in the context of analysing See's woodblock prints, we can deduce quickly that the

works which were involved almost directly in its interaction with the government would be those that had obvious political associations.

We must be reminded that "politics" has essentially the element of power-play, and with this, we might gain insight from Michel Foucault's idea that power really can exist anywhere. His idea dismantles the notion that power only emanates hegemonically from a primary source, and power is not so much a property, but rather a strategy that could be exercised by those with the knowledge to do so. This gave rise to many other authors who rode on the pivotal concept that power can be everywhere, and therefore politics too can exist anywhere. This subsequently then led to an understanding that there could be such a distinction as formal politics and also informal politics. Informal politics according to Douglas Pike operates "outside the frameworks of formal institutions". Barbara Misztal defines informal politics as an interaction between individuals or social groups that have the autonomy to dictate their roles in the relationship. The rules in informal politics, unlike the rule of law for formal politics are often not written and is socially shared cognitively. This then would mean that an artist in the likes of See would be thoroughly entangled in all forms of politics in his relations with other artists, or their groupings and allegiances, even the schools or academy in where he worked, his cultural codes and familial upbringing.

Through this delineation of what "politics" is defined in this study, we have to then step out of our strictures that conventionally binds our notion of politics to only relate to formal institutions with a fixed and tangible set of codes and laws. We will need to begin considering other aspects of social relations or activities that may be contributing factors that result in the materialization of the woodblock prints of See Cheen Tee. This

research, however, will not be investigating the efficacy of the visuals and their effects on the public sphere or those who are privy to set eyes upon them.

After his passing, the majority of See Cheen Tee's artwork, woodblock prints, oils, watercolours, and sketches are all placed in the care of his daughter Ms. See Yee Wah (Yvonne) in Singapore in of which there is access, though not freely because it is her private residence. Nonetheless she seems to not pose much difficulty for visitors who shows interest in her father's work. This collection will be the primary source of data collection and observation. An initial visit and introductory meeting had been done before the commencement of this research project.

Archival documents, newspapers, exhibition catalogues and journals from legitimate resources such as Singapore's library, museums and universities will be crucial for this research. Private and public art galleries both in Malaysia and Singapore which houses selected artworks by the early Nanyang artists would also be a resource that would be included in this research. Art historian and researchers in Singapore such as Koh Nguang How who is familiar with this area of study will also be consulted.

There might, however, be some limitations that may serve as a slight restriction in the course of this research. The first would be the absence of primary data which is the artist himself. He has passed away in 1997 and hence getting a primary source of data through the artist is no longer possible.

The next obstacle would be the matter of language in some of these archival documents or catalogues that are available only in Mandarin. However, some assistance in translation which is already accessible would be acquired in the case these documents are crucial for the research.

1.3 Methodology & Framework

The woodblock prints produced by See Cheen Tee will be grouped into four distinct categories according to the themes presented through the subject matter in the artwork. Each of these groups will then discussed respectively in each chapter and they are as follows:

1) Social Justice (overtly political prints that highlight the plight of the poor)
2) Nationhood (artworks that attempts to present a nationalistic identity, be it through the depiction of its people, society or environment)
3) The Other ('Other' here refers to the more ethnic aspect where we look into artworks that depicts the native or more specifically Malay culture)
4) The feminine body (prints that depict the female form in any way)

When visually analyzing all of the works in the groups above, it will be taken into consideration any possible use of allegory that the artist may attach with his use of subject matters depicted in his prints. His stylistic interpretations of the subject matters would be assessed and the results of the analyses will be contrasted against the findings through the analyses of artworks from earlier Nanyang artists, his contemporaries and the antecedents of the Modern Woodcut Movement in China.

In the chapters where Social Justice prints and those that try to capture the idea of nationhood are investigated (Chapters 3 & 4), they will be viewed through a social-political lens by taking into account the social climate and political circumstances that created the environment in which these works were produced. To synthesize the link between the artwork and the social-political setting, literary works that document the

accounts of Singapore's historical events, exhibition catalogues and articles that pertain to other Nanyang artists will be consulted and reviewed. This portion research will also have to establish links of the subject matter with the social-political setting in Singapore or Malaya's history. Post-colonial concepts and literary works that help in understanding the process of decolonization will be consulted for these chapters.

In Chapter 5, literature with regards to the establishment of the self through the reproduction of the other will be examined to understand the power relations between him, a Chinese artist born to an immigrant family and his subject matter, the native Malay of the Malayan Peninsular and Singapore. Then finally in Chapter 6, gender theories such as Mulvey's theory of the male gaze will be used to uncover the power dynamics that occur between him a male artist and his subject of the female form.

An additional aspect to the analyses of his work would be to consider the biographical aspect of the artist though this may be limited because he, being a primary source of data, is no longer available. Every artist is an individual with specific experiences that shapes their perceptions and therefore reactions differently. This ultimately does effects the politics, in terms of power-play between him as an author with the subject matter for which he is reproducing in his prints. Though Nanyang artists have certain common themes in their artworks, but their varied paths and motivations which created the diversity of hybrid productions is one aspect we cannot overlook.[3]

[3] Ong Ian Li, and Izmer Ahmad. "Hybridity as Expressions of a Diasporic Community: Selected Nanyang Artists." *Malaysian Journal of Performing and Visual Arts,*1 (2015), file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/2043-817-6925-1-10-20170509.pdf. (Accessed January 2, 2018), 62 ; Seng, YuJin, "Lim Hak Tai Points a Third Way", p.67.

1.4 Significance Of Research

In the literature review for this study, it was noted that post-war woodblock prints are an area that still lacks extensive research. Though Lim Cheng Tju has offered several essays on political prints, the choice of woodblock prints that he discussed were quite often those that are overtly political, charged with motivations to make a forceful statement about the local society. There are also discourses such as Foo's dissertation which offers us an insight into pre-war prints, but none that explores specifically post-war prints. In other essays, woodblock prints are discussed superficially as part of a larger discourse on such topics as the EAS for instance whose artists are also proficient in other mediums. Most of all, there is an absence of any writing that discusses large format woodblock prints that depict genre scenes, landscapes or still life such as those picked for this research from the portfolio of See Cheen Tee.

The next crucial factor for this research to be done is the availability of the collection under one roof at this present time. Almost the entirety of See's collection has been kept intact personally by his daughter See Yee Wah after he passed away. The artist barely sold any of his large-format prints whilst he was alive, and what was sold after his demise by his daughter was a very small handful of prints that she had duplicates of. The convenience of having been able to study his entire collection right now is possible only because of his daughter's efforts, but we do not know of the fate of this collection in the future.

Finally, an almost complete absence of academic literature about See makes this research even more necessary. Singaporean artists such as Lim Hak Tai and Chua Mia Tee has been discussed in numerous literary works, some essays and articles even solely

dedicated to the discourse of their work. However, we have yet seen little of such an attempt for See whose portfolio is in no means less substantial. If ever mentioned in any literature, his works are discussed very briefly amongst others. It is only in very recent years that See began to gain any traction in the discourse of Singapore's art history when a commemorative book featuring almost all of his work was published by his daughter in 2001.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Perceived Polarities: The Pioneer Nanyang Artists and the Equator Art Society

Early literature with regards to Nanyang pioneer artists, or whom we may refer to as first-generation Nanyang artists placed focus on the study of their uniqueness that sets them apart from art practice in their home in China.[4] It is not uncommon to find essays that discuss these artists as a Chinese diaspora negotiating with their new physical environment and social conditions, and their struggles in juggling new subject matter, experiences and artistic traditions. Then in 1956, the Equator Art Society (EAS) was established, and essays about their work represented them in such a way that seems to situate them in direct contradiction to the pioneer Nanyang artists - presenting quotes from EAS catalogues that slight the efforts of the pioneer Nanyang. These essays tend to draw a demarcation between two opposing artistic bodies that are exclusive in the characteristics of artworks they produced.

This false dichotomy has been brought into question in recent years. Kevin Chua's essay gives us an alternative view in the assessment of Nanyang paintings that renders them to be political as well. He used Cheong Soo Pieng's 1959 *Tropical Life* to illustrate this point.[5] He believes that there had been what he refers to as "misrecognition" of the

[4] First generation Nanyang artists is a term to refer to artists who are often born in China and migrated to South East Asia, specifically to the Malayan Peninsular and Singapore. Second generation Nanyang artists on the other hand are often artists born in Malaya whose parents migrated from China, such as See Cheen Tee.

[5] Kevin Chua, "Painting the Nanyang's Public: Notes Toward a Reassessment", in *Eye of The Beholder: Reception, Audience and Practice of Modern Asian Art,* edited by John Clark, Maurizzio Peleggi and T.K. Sabapathy, (Sydney: Wild Peony, 2006), 82.

works of the first generation Nanyang artist by the EAS that comprise mainly of second-generation Nanyang artists. Seng Yu Jin attempts to also dissolve this rigid division and classification of works produced by the first generation Nanyang artists and the social realist artists of the EAS. He used the work of Lim Hak Tai to assert that there is a category he referred to as "socially-engaged Nanyang art" that created a sort of bridge between the two supposed opposing ends.[6]

The Chinese High School Graduates of 1953 Art Association (CHSGAA) is often documented as the forerunner of the EAS. The exhibition catalogue by CHSGAA before the formation of EAS also held pertinent essays about the early conception and ideals that set the foundation for the EAS mantra. An essay written from a collective discussion with artists established that the main objective of art ought to be for the people - referring to the masses which consisted of the lower working-class citizens who suffered the most under colonial rule.[7] Art, to them, should play an imperative role in rallying people for the cause of liberation from capitalism through bringing awareness to the masses about the plight of the people. The artists shouldered the responsibility to reveal the truth or rather, "reality" of their disparate social conditions. The artworks featured in this catalogue does seem to stay true to the resolution they have declared, which is art for the people. Yet, if we take a look at the first few exhibitions by the EAS, one will not be able to find the same fervour and tenacity in championing for the people as one could find the 1956 CHSGAA catalogue. In fact, the foreword for EAS' 2nd

[6] Seng YuJin, "Lim Hak Tai Points a Third Way: Towards a Socially Engaged Art by the Nanyang Artists, 1950s-1960s, in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia, edited by Patrick D. Flores and Low Sze Wee.* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 191.
[7] *Singapore Chinese High School 1953 Graduates Art Association Exhibition Booklet*, (Singapore: Nan Yang Publishing, 1956) Exhibition catalogue.

exhibition was interestingly written by Basoeki Abdullah, an Indonesian artist who is known for his romanticizing of Java, primarily the women.

It might seem that there may be a contradiction when we compare the discourses on the EAS about their origins and motivations, and their actual exhibition catalogues. However, Stefanie Tham's in-depth study for her Masters' thesis on the EAS which she delivers following a chronological framework from the association's early influence, inception and dissolution further asserts that the works produced by the EAS were not as exclusively social realist in nature as compared to what they have expressed in words or texts.[8] The search for painting the "truth" and art that "serves the people" was not an aspect that was present in all their artworks. Based on Tham's study not even the majority of their works depicted the sufferings and difficulties of the lower class, and in fact, there were more still lifes, landscapes, and portraiture. It was only in the final few EAS exhibition did the artists regain the tenacity of social critique so much so that they were stopped dead in their tracks when preparing for their 7th exhibition which never came into being. In an essay by Seng Yujin for the *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency* exhibition catalogue, he also adds that this lack of social realist works was due to stringent censorship imposed by the authorities. The members who organized the 1960 EAS exhibition was criticized by journalist Lee Hua Mok for succumbing to the pressures of the authorities.[9] Seng then also explains how an artist like Lai Kui Fang, who reproduced a ruined painting entitled *Bedok Flood*, revealed a much stronger social critique compared to his first one because the social restrictions no longer exist for him

[8] Stefanie Tham Xiu Jie. "The Equator Art Society in Singapore, 1956-74." B.A. Hons diss., (National University of Singapore, 2012), 22.
[9] Seng YuJin, "Social Realism During the Malayan Emergency". *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency 24 Aug -31 October 2007*. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum. 2007) p 51.

decades later during the reproduction of th same artwork. This meant that Seng had proposed the possibility for social realist artist to obscure their true intentions. He believes allegorical messages of social realist artist could even be found in still life such as Lai Kui Fang's *War and Peace*.[10]

The in-depth study by Tham following a chronological order and Seng's additional illumination on the subject matter issue yielded insights that helped us understand that a single artistic body can and will need to go through different circumstances that will ultimately bear varying outcomes, even compelling artists to employ alternative solutions that dismantles any notion of exclusivity in their work. This insight with regards to the EAS is crucial for this study because the same principle could be potentially applied to understand how subject matters could have shifted in such a short period for a single artist.

Now, on the study of specific subject matters, we turn once again to an EAS catalogue, specifically the one published in 1960 for its second exhibition. Prominent social realist, Chua Mia Tee offers his view about the subject matter of landscapes.[11] His view is crucial to this research because his work has been mostly social realist in nature, yet we find here that he supports the painting of landscapes which is not a subject matter that can have immediate or direct relations to social realist critique if compared to scenes of the impoverished citizens suffering. However, in this essay, he reveals the capability of a landscape painting to foster nationalism and patriotism. A skilled artist as

[10] Seng YuJin, "Social Realism During the Malayan Emergency". *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency 24 Aug -31 October 2007*. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum. 2007) p 49.
[11] Chua, Mia Tee. "On the Significance of Landscape Paintings". *The Second Art Exhibition of the Equator Art Society*. 1960. Translated by Ng Kum Hoon in From Words to Pictures Art During The Emergency 24 Aug -31 October 2007. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum. 2007), 46.

he claims would be able to render a landscape painting and imbue it with the experiential qualities of the environment - often of beauty and splendour insomuch that it ignites one's pride for the homeland. Through his essay, we find that the political agency lies not overtly within the subject matter of the artwork, but rather in the intention of the artist to produce the artwork.

This approach of looking beyond the subject matter within a painting to understand its political agency could also be found in an essay by Susie Protschky. Though it is about Dutch still life in the Netherland Indies, her methodology is particularly useful in the analysis of paintings that may seem overtly apolitical. In her investigation, she finds a constant and recurring subject matter in these Dutch still life paintings, which is the depiction of tropical fruits. She associates them with the notion of the colonial vision on the natural abundance of the West Indies. Later on, she suggested that these picturesque paintings of succulent fruits are really to elude from the reality of the exploitation of the Dutch on the colonized people in the West Indies to cultivate commercial crop which was never depicted in these still life.[12]

2.2 Politics and Woodblock Prints in Singapore

In 2006, an exhibition was held in remembrance of the 1966 woodcut exhibition which featured 6 prominent woodcut artists including See Cheen Tee himself. In the catalogue for the exhibition, Lim Cheng Tju expressed through his essay that woodblock prints are often associated with leftist sentiments with reason that it was prominently

[12] Protschky, Susie. "Dutch Still Lifes and Colonial Visual Culture in the Netherlands Indies, 1800-1949." *Art History 34*, no. 3 (2011): 510-35. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.2010.00800.x.

used to surface the inadequacies of the colonial government in the pre-independence years and had retained this stance as an opposition voice against the ruling government even in the years after Singapore's independence.[13] He proposes that artists did try to disengage the medium of woodblock prints from being politically driven by depicting different subject matters such as still life and landscapes. Furthermore, he reveals that he learned from the organizers the reason the 6 artists were chosen for the 1966 exhibition was that their work was deemed apolitical. Through this, it can be observed that according to Lim, woodblock prints seem to be divided between those that were directly and overtly political, and those that were not, and hence were deemed safe.

In another more recent essay according to Lim, the reason woodblock prints in Singapore is an art form which has not received as much prominence compared to other artworks in Singaporean art history was due to the ephemeral nature of the prints, and also the political sensitivity of the subject matters of the prints itself. Once again he stresses that woodblock prints, Social Realism, and politics are always closely related to this artform.[14] The examples he presents in his essay to assert his arguments are woodblock prints that all seem to fit comfortably within the Social Realist category. They were thematically similar, often renditions of the plight and hardships of the lower class, or unfortunate events that befell them.

Lim once again asserts the relationship of woodblock prints with politics when discussing about a significant book that was published in the 1950s, *Selection of*

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[13] *Imprints of the Past: Remembering the 1966 Woodcut Exhibition*, 木刻展：四十年的回憶, Edited by Lai Chee Kien et al., (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2006), Exhibition catalogue.
[14] Lim Cheng Tju. "“Fragments of the Past”: Political Prints of Post-war Singapore." *The Heritage Journal*2 (2005): 22-47. http://epress.nus.edu.sg/ojs/index.php/heritage/article/view/9/4. (Accessed March 1, 2018)

Woodcuts and Cartoons by Singapore and Malaysian Artists, edited by Ho Kah leong and Ong Shih Cheng. It had a crucial role in the proliferation of cartoons and woodblock prints. He owes it to the two editors of the book whom like Lu Xun, deemed these two art forms as "sister arts", both which carries this spirit of resistance that is useful to rally the masses, even the illiterate, through a visual language enabling them to challenge those in power at that time.[15] See himself was a practitioner of both these cartoons and woodblock prints, and it would be interesting for us to also in a separate study analyze his work and dissect how both these mediums carry this notion of "sister arts". What is the relationship between them? Are these sisters identical or complementary, in a sense they fill different spaces required of them to do their Social Realist duties?

This study may reveal that it would not be as straightforward for us to try and apply the same framework of the analysis presented by Lim when trying to understand See Cheen Tee's woodblock prints which are rarely sitting comfortably within what we can overtly perceive as Social Realist. In reviewing Lim's essays, it raises the question of what should be deemed a political print and what is not a political print. How are these lines drawn for the case of one such as See Cheen Tee's woodblock prints? They consist of a wider range of subject matter and themes that requires more investigation.

Foo Kwee Horng mentions in his dissertation about pre-war cartoons and woodcuts in Singapore that indeed, post-war prints still lacked sufficient extensive research. The reason he even embarked on his research was with the intent to lay the groundwork to fill a gap that would allow for research to be done for artworks produced in the years

[15] John A. Lent and Lim Cheng Tju, "Chinese Cartoonists in Singapore Chauvinism, Confrontation and Compromise (1950–1980)," in *Southeast Asian Cartoon Art History, Trends and Problems* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014). p.155

after the war. Foo mentions the contributions of Tai In Long - a key figure responsible for the proliferation of the Modern Woodcut Movement into Singapore. Tai held firmly to a doctrine that woodblock prints had a responsibility to depict "reality". The negotiations between black ink on a white surface is just like text, and a well-executed woodcut can be more powerful than text. This term "reality" now in Tai's sense encompasses a much broader scope which is different to the "reality" implicated by the artists of the EAS as mentioned earlier which has much to do with depicting the reality of the suffering of the people brought on by social injustices of those in power whether colonials or local government. Foo notes that Tai's pre-war prints could have been divided into 3 main broad themes, which consisted of the daily lives of the people (herein which includes genre scenes), depictions of helplessness (often scenes of social injustices suffered by the lower class), and the frontliners in the war.[16]

Through this, we can see Tai's sense of "reality" also includes depicting the "everyday" - even the mundane, and not necessarily the tragic. This may shed light for us then to understand that when a social artist sets out to depict their so-called "reality", this "reality" could well be shaped by his motivations. This then would be a crucial factor to consider in this research when analyzing the artworks of See Cheen Tee, so as not to fall into stereotyping him based on his affiliations or contemporaries. On this note, it is also worth mentioning that even Foo observes that social commentaries exist in all of these pre-war woodblock prints, but on varying degrees - some forceful and direct, whilst some are milder. He makes no mention if the prints were political or apolitical.

[16] Foo Kwee Horng. "Cartoon and Woodcut Movement of Pre-War Singapore (1900 - 1941)." (Master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2004), ch. 4.3.

2.3 See Cheen Tee and his Woodblock Prints

See Cheen Tee is not a name that would regularly appear in texts on Malayan artists, in fact not until very recently was he mentioned very briefly by Ong and Seng in their respective essays, both of which briefly discusses the same artwork, which is a woodblock print titled *Three Generations*.[17] None of the essays also delve in-depth into the visual analysis of his paintings, but mostly extracts one or two aspects of the subject matter from his woodblock print and discussed rather broadly.

In these essays, it also seems that his affiliation with the EAS remains uncertain because contradictions have occurred claiming that he was a member, whilst others said that he was not. Knowledge about his associations could be crucial to understanding his leanings and perhaps influences, though as mentioned earlier that this should be treated with care as not to accept his affiliations as absolute defining characteristics of his artworks because artists can be fueled by very different motivations on varying degrees.

In 2001 a commemorative book was published by See's daughter, See Yee Wah. In the foreword, Ho Kah Leong and Kwok Kian Chow both attributed See's woodblock prints to have drawn influence from Lu Xun's effort as a tool for China's reformation.[18] Not enough was discussed on how Lu Xun had any influence over See's work - if it were the aesthetic potential of the medium? the subject matter? or the use of it to affect or catalyze social change and awareness? Most of what is written in this book not

[17] Ong Ian Li and Izmer Ahmad. "Hybridity as Expressions of a Diasporic Community", p.198.
[18] Chia Wai Hon., and Cheen Tee See. *See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist*. (Singapore: Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001), 6.

surprisingly take on a celebratory manner with the reason that it is, after all, a commemorative book produced by a family member. Nonetheless, this book will remain a crucial source of data to mine for See's influences because it does document his biography clearly and this helps with the research in understanding his social surroundings at the point of time his works were produced.

CHAPTER 3: A CALL FOR JUSTICE

3.1 Defining Social Justice

Figure 3.2. See Cheen Tee, *Begging*. 1954, Woodblock Print, 20 x 14 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 70.

See's earliest documented woodblock prints were produced in 1954, and one of them was titled *Begging* (Figure 3.2). It is worth specifying here that the works by See which we are analyzing are the ones which have been *documented* because woodblock prints

are considerably ephemeral and there is the possibility he may have produced more, but those would not be covered in this study. The other works if any, may have been lost probably because the editorials failed to be archived, or he may have even repurposed the woodblock for yet another artwork which woodblock artists often did to economize the woodblocks. Another reason would be that artists could have signed off under pseudonyms due to the political sensitivity of the subject matter in the prints, hence making it rather difficult to assign authorship to some of these works.

Begging and *Hunger* are two social commentary works by See that vividly highlight the deplorable state of the lower classes of society. How he depicted the subject matter of the poor in these two woodblock prints was a visual approach that had a visceral forwardness that never recurred throughout the rest of his life as an artist. He did produce works that had social commentaries later on but were more subtle such as *Young Gamblers* which was produced in the 1960s which we will discuss in the next chapter. At a glance, it would be almost immediate for one to consider these works as Social Realist, or even Social Justice art. However, for the sake of this study, the term Social Justice shall be used to describe them though it would not be inaccurate to also call this a Social Realist work. To distinguish the differences, we would have to first compare and contrast some of these artworks to tease out the nuances between these works.

See's *Begging* has a singular figure in the center of the composition - it is not remarkably clear if it may be a man or a woman, but the slightly tapered jaw may suggest it to be a gaunt old woman with short-cropped disheveled hair. She is dressed in a shirt that is extremely worn out. She raises out the right hand with a hat toward the

viewer, beckoning to you to throw in some spare change. Her entire posture is crooked, emphasizing her weakened state as she tries to lean her frail built onto the equally feeble walking stick she has on the other hand. See placed close attention to her facial expression - giving an exceptional amount of detail to the wrinkles on her skin. The varying fine and thick lines upon her face describe the amount of hardship and torment she must have endured. But it is also interesting to note the dark background or vignette used to frame the figure, one which is organic in shape. The shape is not well-defined, or solid, but looks rather wobbly as if enclosing in upon the figure. This could be read in two possible ways - either as a sort of aura emanating from her gloom and misery, or a representation of the beggar's world crumbling and closing in on itself trapping her within. Either way, it is a device used to further emphasize the plight in which the figure is in. All of these visual elements culminate in a portrait that calls out to the audience, appealing to our empathy through tragedy and pathos. Her hand reaching out to beckon for spare change really could now be recognized also as her beckoning for justice.

Figure 3.3. Tan Tee Chie, *Beggar*. 1953, Woodblock Print, 20.5 x 15.1 cm. DBS Singapore Gallery. From the Collection of National Gallery Singapore. https://www.nationalgallery.sg/artworks/artwork-detail/2010-03429/beggar

Tan Tee Chie is a contemporary of See, and he produced a similar piece of woodblock print - though same in terms of theme, it vastly differs in compositional technique. In Tan's *Beggar*, you are not put face to face to engage with the beggar herself, instead, you are confronted with the situation she is faced with (Figure 3.3). The beggar with her extremely contorted hunched back posture steps out onto the street to

approach a younger woman for spare change. The younger woman casts an obvious disdain for the beggar with her downcast countenance and a slight turn of her arm into her body and away from the beggar as if to avoid the old beggar. Her whole erect posture reads like an imposing boulder, unmoved by the plight of the beggar to even empathize with her. Tan's print has less focus on intricate details compared to See's work. Stylistically the lines and shapes in Tan's work are in a way more geometric and brief in contrast to See's fine organic lines and detailed shapes. This choice of style which almost caricatures the figures suggests a sort of satirical approach revealing the artist's derisive commentary on the social situation. Though both Tan and See depicts an exact moment of a beggar reaching out to ask for change but both have very different approaches to help appeal for justice from the audience for the plight of the old beggar. See chooses to use empathy, to draw the viewer into the pathos of her tragic life, but Tan uses satire to mock the capitalist culture that created her tragic life. Both works are politically charged and show no qualms in obscuring the inadequacy of the government to provide for the people.

The two works discussed are what this study would term as "Social Justice" works - quite evidently because they outrightly and overtly have a political agency that challenges a formal institution in this case, the government. Social Realism however, is a broader term that refers to a wide spectrum of artworks that seeks to reveal the difficulties and struggles faced by the lower classes of society, and highlights the tensions occurring between them and the political structures that serve as their oppressors. As previously mentioned, it would not be wrong for us to also consider these two artworks by See and Tan as Social Realist. Nonetheless, not all of Social

Realism art depicts the plight and troubles of the poor or working class in its visceral forms like the woodblock prints of See and Tan.

Malayan pioneer woodblock artist and editor, Tai In Long's idea of social realism for instance also includes the depiction of the mundane, everyday activities performed by the working class that does not necessarily highlight suffering and anguish clearly in full view. If any hint would be given with regards to their plight, it would have been subtle like in Tai's woodcut print *Mending Clothes* which shows a woman preoccupied with some needlework (Figure 3.4). Any clue that sheds light on her hardship is only revealed when we analyze the harsh angular and diagonal strokes that Tai used to create the form of the subject matter and her environment. Though she sits as a still solitary figure in the center of the picture plane, yet this stillness is betrayed by the chaotic disarray of lines used to evoke a sense of hard work or struggle. See himself has produced such works as well taking his woodcut print titled *The Creator* which he produced in 1966 (Figure 3.5) as an example. This artwork fits Tai's description of what Social Realism would constitute - a depiction of the everyday, the mundane. The work features a primary figure, an old man creating traditional Chinese dough figurines for children. It is unlike the Social Justice work *Begging* we discussed earlier that confronts social issues head-on. Additionally, the idea of traditional toys and children in this artwork immerses the viewer in a sort of light-hearted nostalgia. The idea of poverty or hardship is only very subtly conveyed to us through the simple clothes of the old toymaker, and the rugged environment in the background.

Figure 3.4. Tai In Long, *Mending Clothes* 1936, Woodblock Print, Wenman Jie, Nanyang Siang Pau. 12 July, 1936

Figure 3.5. See Cheen Tee, *The Creator* (colour) 1966, Woodblock Print, 61 x 46 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 85.

Through comparing and contrasting these woodblock prints, we can understand how Social Justice can be perceived as a sect perhaps or a specialized niche, under the Social Realism umbrella. Social Justice works tends to have a stronger and clearer voice when calling out to the masses in its effort to demand justice.

Social Realism should not be confused with Socialist Realism which goes on a tangent that romanticizes the toils and efforts of the working class. In the case of Russian Socialist Realism, it was mandated as the official art to glorify the communist

state, and *Fighting for Peace* by Jules Perahim is a fitting example (Figure 3.6). This politicized aesthetics was later on adopted by China as well and can be observed from their Cultural Revolution posters that were aimed to encourage patriotism when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took to power after World War 2, displacing the Nationalist Government (Figure 3.7). In both examples, the favoured medium is oil paint, which is quite common in Socialist Realism art. In Perahim's painting, a whole entourage of people from varying occupational roles within the working social class is marching forward in unison. The movement is so synchronized that they all simultaneously stride forward with their left leg, and have their right leg extended back which creates a sort of diagonal implied line in all the figures giving them a sense of forwarding motion. The diagonal flag poles and fabric folds within the flags itself further supports this movement. The repetition of these visual elements throughout the painting as the figures ascend some stairs towards the right of the picture plane reveals a sort of hive mind which is characteristic of the Soviet communist party. Their collective consciousness readily supports the ideologies brought forth by the dictatorial leader Joseph Stalin, whose rectangular portrait is raised above the figures in the painting contrasting against all other elements.

Figure 3.6. Perahim, Jules. *Fignting for Peace* 1950, Oil on canvas. Accessed January 23, 2019. https://www.wikiart.org/en/jules-perahim/fighting-for-peace-1950.

In the Chinese propaganda poster, though not as many figures are represented compared to Perahim's, yet the forward motion of the figures is still felt, supported by the diagonal stalks of golden wheat on the lower portion of the picture plane. Take note also of their facial features, which seem like it has been replicated across all four of them - once again revealing a sort of hive mind consciousness. The entire scene is being romanticized when we analyze the visual appearance of the figures and the setting. All four of them are dressed in working social class attire - even peasant-like. Yet, their smiling faces, glistening skin and warm colours all suggest remarkable health and vitality. The wheat beneath them seems to glisten with gold and lights up the facial features of the figures from beneath. This illuminates them in such a way it glorifies them - the working class. All these visual elements work together to convey exactly what the tagline of the poster reads underneath in bold red, "*Grow Stong Under The Broad Sky and Earth*". These visual characteristics of idealization and optimism we

have observed in both Socialist r\Realist paintings would not be found in Social Justice woodblock prints.

Figure 3.7. Pollack, David. *Grow Strongly Under the Broad Sky and Earth, Chinese Cultural Revolution Poster* 2007, Photograph 29.8 x 42.3cm. From Corbis Historical. Accessed January 24, 2019. https://mashable.com/2016/07/01/cultural-revolution-posters/#UStzdm7Caaqk

Now, that the constitution of Social Justice artworks have been briefly delineated, we can delve into studying the workings of politics behind these two early Social Justice woodblock prints by See. To do so, we shall be looking at the history of the Chinese Modern Woodcut movement in China, which is a crucial part in the genealogy of the woodblock prints produced by Nanyang artists. We shall attempt to study and analyze the works, organizations, key individuals and social events through the lens of politics and power-play. Though of course, we can trace it even further back historically, but for the sake of limiting our scope in this research, it would suffice for us to demarcate our

study at China's Modern Woodcut Movement which has its roots in the New Cultural Movement.

3.2 Old Artform, New Culture

The woodblock print as a technique and artform originates from China, but the visual form it took on during the Modern Woodcut Movement is something that was perceived as new and highly Western in influence when it was first introduced by Chinese artists to their viewers and audience. The woodcuts of the late Qing Dynasty, which was the last Chinese dynastic rule before the New Cultural Movement, had an entirely different purpose compared to any Social Justice prints. The woodcuts prints such as the very popular *nian hua* were associated with the cosmology and beliefs of the Chinese people. *Zaojun The Kitchen God* is a woodblock print with bright colours, predominantly red which is considered very auspicious for the Chinese people (Figure 3.8). Comparing this with the Social Justice print by See, the starkest difference would be the amount of black present on the artworks. In the traditional and religious image of the Kitchen God, black is almost negligible save for the fine outlines that delineate the forms of the subject matter, environment, and lettering. This is not so for See's work where black plays the pivotal role of not only outlining, but creating forms.

Figure 3.8. Unknown artist from Yangliuqing, *Zaojun The Kitchen God* 1873, Woodblock print; ink and color on paper with additional hand coloring, 55.3 x 40cm. From the Met Museum on loan from the British Museum Collection. Accessed June 10, 2019. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60051881?exhibitionId=%7BD341C7DA-C89F-43E7-9CED-FCDCA982F4CD%7D&oid=60051881&pg=7&rpp=

This religious image of the deity is usually placed over the stoves of homes whereby the household believes that he would observe all activities in the home. Then, on the Lunar New Year, this image would be burned in the belief that the Kitchen God would then return to the celestial realms and report the good deeds that the household had done to the Jade Emperor, ruler of the heavenly realms in the hopes they would then be blessed by him. In this woodblock print, the remarkably larger figures seated behind the altar facing forward are the Kitchen God and his wife. They are the only ones whose eyes look forward, hence giving the sense of surveillance into the realm of the viewer. The artist of the woodblock print was purposeful in using the gaze of the subject matter as a crucial element to giving the artwork a utilitarian purpose albeit a religious one. This endows the artwork with a sort of political agency, though not formal like the imposition of governing institutions. It does wield a sort of informal, normalizing power that has the ability to shape the conduct and behaviour of the people within the household that bears this image. As mentioned earlier, even though this print differs from See's Social Justice woodcut print in terms of purpose as well as its visual form, but they both wield a sort of power. In See's *Begging* and *Hunger*, he uses pathos and the suffering of the lower social class to create a social awareness to challenge a formal governing institution, but in this case of the image of the Kitchen God, the idea of a celestial surveillance is a normalizing power that coerces the people to live according to a set of unwritten norms and social courtesies.

Another aspect we can observe about this woodblock print is its relation to traditions. The religious image of the Kitchen God is heavily associated with tradition, one that the

Chinese people had been practicing for centuries. But when we observe woodblock prints that flourished during the New Cultural Movement, the absence of this tradition is clear. In Hu YiChuan's woodblock print he produced in 1937, at the brink of the Sino-Japanese War, he depicts a grim scene of casualties amongst ruins in Zhabei (Figure 3.9). This artwork is Social Justice in nature too, as it highlights the tragedy of the people without any reservations - to this extent of featuring corpses strewn over the lower portion of the picture plane. Furthermore, Hu's work is two-pronged, one of which directly attacks the atrocities of the Japanese Imperial Army in China, and the other would be the failure of the then Nationalist Government to protect its people from foreign invasion. The three vertical pillars with its cracks and crumbling state, exposing its interior to the outside is perhaps suggestive of this idea of the government's failure.

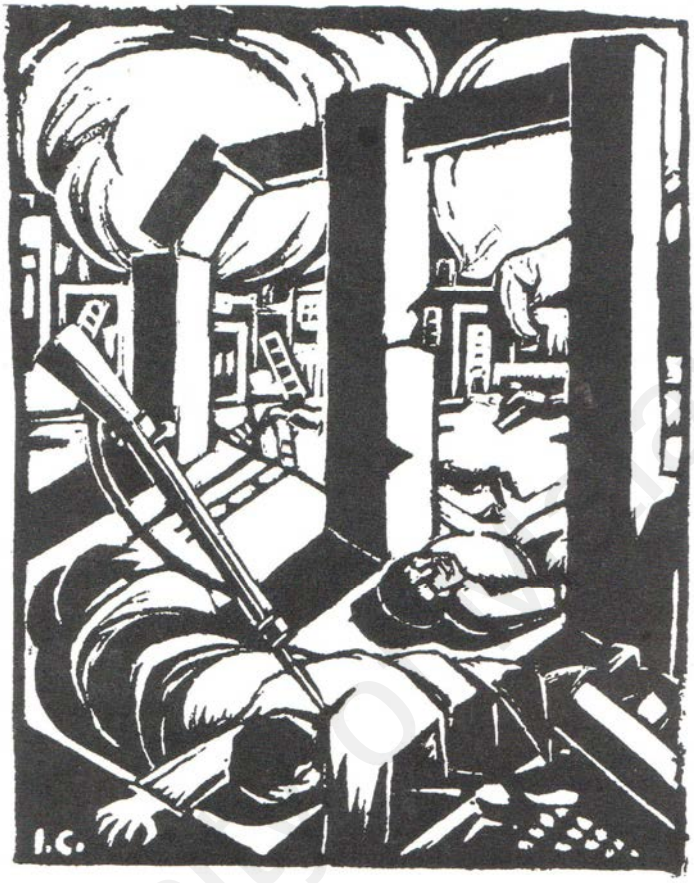

Figure 3.9. Hu YiChuan, *A Scene in Zhabei,* 1932, Woodblock Print, From Origins of the Chinese Avant Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement. University of California Press, 2008. Pg 119.

The Kitchen God religious image and Hu's Social Justice war scene were produced 40 years apart, but when we observe the transformation of the form and content, we are also able to draw a parallel to China's political state. China, up until the late 19th century practiced and observed a feudal system of governance that was founded on Confucianism. Though more of an ethical philosophy rather than a religion,

Confucianism is still built upon the structures of religion.[19] This system of governance was upheld then by the Qing Dynasty. The thinkers and revolutionaries of the New Cultural Movement saw this as an archaic system which was the main root of the social-political decline suffered by China at that time. The dynastic rule of China which has withstood for centuries began to crumble.

One of the key events that led to the New Cultural Movement was the fall of the Qing Dynasty into the hands of the Nationalist government, The Kuomintang of China (KMT) in 1911. The newly formed KMT government was formed first under Dr Sun Yat Sen whom the Chinese celebrate as the founding father of the Republic of China, but subsequently, he was replaced by Yuan Shikai. The people recognized that Yuan had wanted to re-establish a monarchy, one of his own. This resulted in the people revolting, leading to another power struggle and this culminated in the New Cultural Movement, otherwise also known as the 4th May Movement.[20]

This movement is pivotal in the shift of the use of woodblock prints that we have earlier observed from a feudalistic religious print like the Kitchen God to an emotional and dramatic print like *A Scene in Zhabei* which depicts the tragedy of war. The heart of this movement was Peking University, led by Cai Yuenpei as the President. He is a renowned figure often attributed to the reshaping of China's education system, which had a great impact on art education. Cai received formal education from both local and foreign formal institutions. He sat through the traditional Chinese civil service

[19] Confucius, otherwise known as Master Kong-Qui, the founder of Confucianism developed the philosophy as a means to revive and give new light to an already existing official religion of the Shang-Zhou Dynasty.

[20] It was named the 4th May Movement as it took place on the 4th of May 1919, and was the capstone event bulit upon student protests that changed the course of China's history.

examination - a system of education that favours the literati, built upon the feudal system of governance. He also obtained education from the west, in Germany at the Leipzig University. Cai's exposure to both formal institutions caused him to realize there is a need to introduce and synthesize Western philosophies and concepts to drive the modernization of China's education system and through this, reshape the minds of the people to effect change.

Cai developed a conceptual framework that outlines the new approach for China's education system in 1912, and this was when Aesthetic Education was introduced. According to Cai, the new education system is to be made up of 5 crucial components - divided into 2 groups that complement each other, one to serve politics, the other to nourish the soul. Aesthetic Education is one of the 5 components, and lies in the former group and plays a crucial role in the proliferation of art – woodblock prints would fall within this domain. In this situation, we see Cai being vested with positional authority, a form of legitimized power to carry out his plans to reshape the education system. This is of course coupled with his authority of expertise, of which unlike positional authority is a power that is not endowed extrinsically but was intrinsic, an inherent part of him because of his personal knowledge and expertise.

Cai upon taking his role as President of Peking University delivered a speech in April of 1917 titled *"Aesthetic Education as a Substitute for Religion"*. His intentions and plans are underscored clearly, and this was a crucial landmark that would lead to the emergence of the Modern Woodcut Movement in China. The displacement of religion and its substitution with the more humanistic concept of knowledge and education is something we can see reflected in the two woodblock prints discussed earlier - the

Kitchen God, and Hu's Social Justice war scene. The religious image that bears the normalizing power and determines the ethics and conducts of the people, had to give way now to knowledge. Therefore, knowledge became the new source of power and educational institutions became formal bodies that emerged as a locus that allows its member, be it students or teachers to draw from its power and subsequently mobilize themselves. One of such individuals would be Lu Xun, who was central to the proliferation of the Modern Woodcut Movement.

3.3 Lu Xun: Carving out the Modern Woodcut Movement

Before the New Cultural Movement, woodcut prints were predominantly an artform that reserved its figural representations only for deities, fairies, and spiritual beings or creatures. This changed when Aesthetic Education was proposed to substitute religious indoctrination. The term Aesthetic Education was not coined by Cai himself but has its origins from the essays by J.C. Friedrich von Schiller in 1795, titled *Lectures Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller asserts that the teaching of art is essential for the development of an aesthetical state of mind that is free from political trappings. This very western, humanistic concept that extols the facility of the human mind is very well reflected in Cao Bai's, *Portrait of Lu Xun* which he produced in 1935 (Figure 3.10). No longer do we have an orderly symmetrical composition featuring a deity and his wife, but rather we have here a mortal man who was highly esteemed for his knowledge and ideas of which he expressed through his writing.

Figure 3.10. Cao Bai, *Portrait of Lu Xun,* 1935, Woodblock Print, From Origins of the Chinese Avant Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement. University of California Press, 2008. Pg 175.

Lu Xun's face takes center stage in Cao's woodblock print, located roughly in the center of the picture plane - his face is the most contrasted subject matter with the most white compared to anything else in the composition. His body is turned slightly to the left whilst his gaze goes in the opposite direction of what we can perceive from the shadow on his face as the source of light. This evokes a sort of tension in his pose. His facial expression further asserts his restless state of mind with the furrowing of his brow, building up to a frown. A Chinese brush pen strikes through the picture plane diagonally

in the foreground below Lu Xun's face, almost dividing the entire picture plane into two parts. At the tip of the pen, we see a smaller figure toppling over, with his hands thrusting upwards as if he had been smitten by the brush itself. Dogs are racing forward at the lower periphery of the picture plane, barking towards the tip of the pen. According to Tillman in her analyses of two woodblock prints with Lu Xun's portraiture, she expresses that there's a sort of animosity between Lu Xun and these dogs in this particular woodblock print and another one by Li Qun.[21] The dogs are suggested to be an allegory for the loyal followers or officials that execute the directives of the government or institutions that become the subject of attack in Lu Xun's writing. The figure at the tip of the pen, though relatively small and crude, but the sash belts are clear enough to reveal that he is a sort of militant official. Another declining figure can be seen on the left of Lu Xun's cheek. Sharp flare-like motifs emerge from the falling silhouetted figures, separating them from the black background. All of these elements and the disarray of lines moving in all directions - both angular and diagonal gives this artwork a sense of anarchy. The artist illustrates to us the tumultuous social and political setting that Lu Xun must have been embroiled in. However, Lu Xun's determination is captured here by the artist in a calm pose with a forceful gaze. Lu Xun's weapon of choice in this civil war is his knowledge wielded through his writing. The stark straight lines of the brush that threaten the smaller figures and dogs in the artwork are emblematic of that.

Lu Xun is no doubt very much like Cai Yuenpei when we come to assess both their authorities in affecting political change in China at their present time. Both of them

[21] Margaret Tillman. "The Knife, the Pen, and the Scapel: Lu Xun in Woodblock Prints". *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* Number 32. (2003) 87-134.

hailed from the civil service examination, but Lu Xun was exposed to Western education during his studies in Japan. He was equipped with positional authority when Cai appointed him as the Head of Social Education office in 1912 during Cai's tenure as Education Minister. Lu Xun was tasked with the development of museums, galleries, exhibitions, for both literature and drama. Additionally, the welfare of historical landmarks and monuments fell under his purview. It would come as no surprise then that Lu Xun would become a supporter of Cai's proposal for Aesthetic Education and its role to replace religious indoctrinations.

Whilst Lu Xun did hold positional authority, and to some extent is a factor that allowed him to exert a sort of political influence, but when observing and analyzing literature and writings about Lu Xun, what frequently comes to the fore is his authority in expertise. People are drawn to him, and his influence because of the tenacity he demonstrated through his initiatives for the proliferation of modern arts and literature in China. He has been attributed as a pivotal figure that impacted the Chinese language who broke the barrier that kept the masses of the illiterate in their social class.[22] He also translated several Japanese and European literature, including materials by Marxist theorists Anatoly Lunancharsky and George Plekhanov.

He was known to be an ardent supporter of woodblock prints. He supported the efforts of several art societies that emerged and bloomed in politically adverse times. The members from these societies had leftist tendencies, and some were indeed pro-communist, such as art student Hu YiChuan from the Eighteen Art Society. Therefore,

[22] Lu Xun's seminal work, *A Madman's Diary* is an example of how he "modernized" Chinese literature by refusing to conform to the traditional writing styles of serious writers and mingled his work with colloquial language that made it more familiar to the native ear.

Lu Xun at times was associated as having leftist tendencies though it must be made clear he has never declared allegiance to the Communist faction. Most of the content of the artworks the society members produced were either anti-government or anti-Japanese in nature - making Hu's work, *A Scene In Zhabei* a fine example of such works. Naturally, woodcut artists became the target of the government. These groups and societies kept blossoming even with the incessant crackdowns of the Nationalist government; some might say it could have been because of the adverse pressures from the government that has catalyzed their continual survival.

In August of 1939, Lu Xun organized a small workshop which many attributes to being the so-called birth of the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement. Members of the Eighteen Art Society, White Goose Painting Society, the Shanghai Meizhuan and students from the Shanghai Art College took part in this workshop which lasted from the 17th to 22nd of August 1939. He worked together with Uchiyama Kakichi, the brother of a close friend who taught the students woodcut techniques.[23] Lu Xun facilitated as a translator, and also shared works from his collection for their learning. Most of these works were predominantly Western or Japanese. It would not be the first time he would contribute from his rich collection of material culture for the learning and benefit of the students in woodblock prints. Another account of his contribution would be during an exhibition held by The Eighteen Art Society, of which he also wrote an introduction for the catalogue of the event. So, it is indeed somewhat meritocratic fashion that Lu Xun

[23] Tang, Xiaobing. *Origins of the Chinese Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) p. 108

was vested with the power of influence over many students who came under his mentorship.

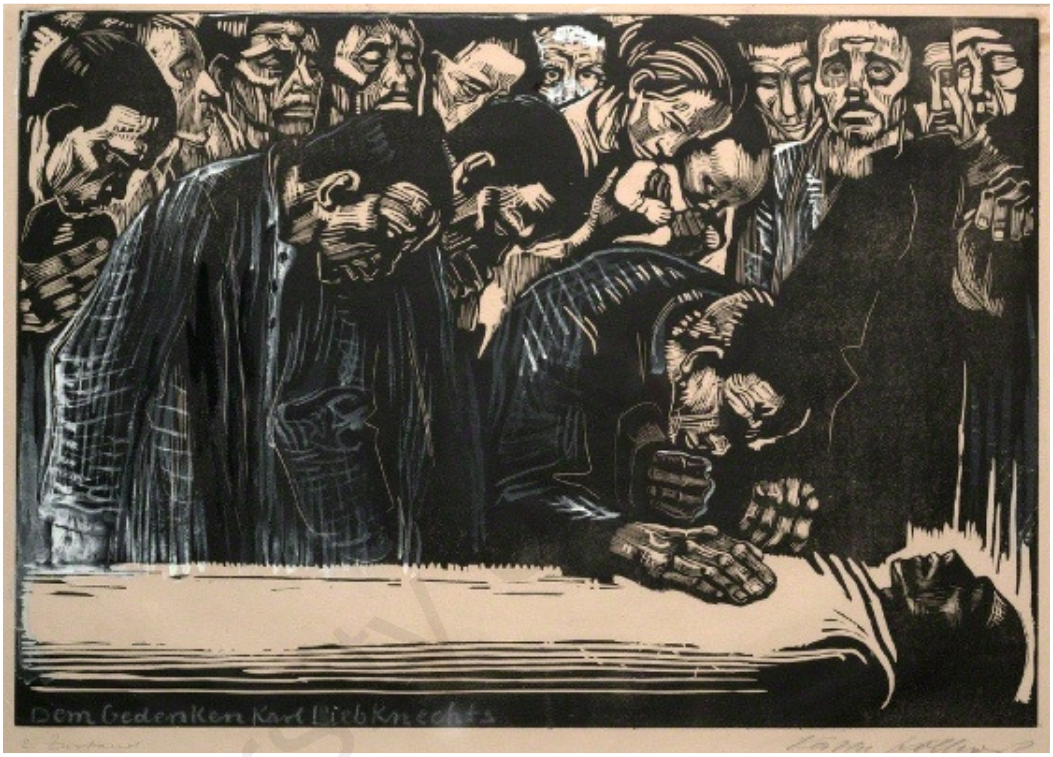

Figure 3.11. Kollwitz, Käthe. *Memorial Sheet of Karl Liebknecht (Gedenkblatt für Karl Liebknecht)*, 1919-1920, Woodcut heightened with white and black ink, 37.1 × 51.9 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. Accessed June 14, 2019. https://smarthistory.org/kathe-kollwitz-in-memoriam-karl-liebknecht/

Lu Xun amassed artworks by many European woodblock artists including those by Kathe Kollwitz, Vladimir Favorsky and Frans Masareel. These European woodblock artists produced artworks that often had a melancholic theme to reflect their social-political state of turmoil. German artist Kathe Kollwitz for instance, produced *In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht* in 1920 as a commissioned work by the family members of Karl Liebknecht, a leader of the German Communist Party(KPD) who was assassinated

by opposing Socialist Democratic Party of Germany(SPD) in 1919 (Figure 3.11). In Kollwitz's woodcut, the entire composition could be divided roughly into 3 horizontal portions. The topmost portion of the picture plane we see a mass of solemn faces, grouped and huddled together to pay their respects to the deceased. Our view is led down to the middle portion of the picture plane by the implied curved lines of the figures in the front of the crowd who are bowing - drawing focus especially to the man whose palm rests on Liebknecht, the deceased. The detail on the faces of the mourners and their clothes consisting of repeated gestural lines going in all directions funnels down to the palm of that one man which is suddenly met with a sharp contrast of Liebknecht's lifeless figure which is a horizontal mass of white. The stillness of the martyr's figure is further elaborated with streaks of broken horizontal lines at the lowest periphery of the artwork. The narrative behind Kollwitz's print, based on these visual elements suggests that the distress and agony of the mourners that have come to pay their last respects are soothed by the memory of the work of Liebknecht, a martyr who championed for them. The palm of the man gently resting on the martyr's body is a crucial point of focus, becoming almost like a conduit for the transference of Liebknecht's legacy onto the people. This notion of passing on a legacy and the possibility of hope even in his demise is hinted by the presence of a woman holding an infant immediately behind the man whose hand is placed on Liebknecht.

Through analyzing Kollwitz's print, and comparing it with the folk woodblock print of the Kitchen God, besides the obvious formal differences, we can see that she was able to use the woodblock medium to capture pathos. The almost schematic, symmetrical elements in the Kitchen God print that strive to reflect order and conformity relating to

the imperial rule vastly differs from Kollwitz's highly emotional piece that seeks to draw the viewer into the somber atmosphere of the mourners as they experience the pain of loss, and perhaps even the birth of hope.

The ability for the woodblock medium to capture the pathos and create such poignant narratives that can be replicated and then disseminated to the masses must have resonated very strongly with Lu Xun and the Chinese artists who were experiencing very similar fates in their social-political circumstances as did Kollwitz. The exposure and publicity of these Western woodblock prints permeated the artistic community in China, and one such pioneer artist that seized the capability of the medium, adopting it to depict the oppression of the Chinese people was Li Hua. He produced *Roar, China* in 1935 - a powerful image dense with a political agency that was circulated through the newspapers at its present time (Figure 3.12). The lines in Li Hua's print compared to Kollwitz's memorial piece may lack such fine details, but it remains a highly emotional piece capturing the agony and suffering through bold and angular lines. The blindfolded solitary nude male figure is bound by ropes to a short wooden post. He shows no sign of defeat with his taut body writhing to break free from the constraints of the much darker and heavier ropes. Though his limbs are restricted and his eyes covered, his mouth remains wide open as if to shout, or as the title suggests - to roar. This woodblock print aptly describes the predicament of the people of China then - physically handicapped to challenge the more powerful governing powers holding positional authority. The blindfold is emblematic of the people shrouded in oblivion to what the corrupt governing bodies do in secrecy. All that remains for the citizens is their voice, the ability to speak out and call for Social Justice.

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Figure 3.12. Li Hua, *Roar, China!,* 1935, Woodcut. 20 x 15cm, National Art Museum of China, Beijing. Accessed June 15, 2019. http://en.cafa.com.cn/roar-china-li-huas-works-of-the-1930s-and-1940s-debuts-in-wuhan.html.

Through the analyses and study of both Li Hua and Hu YiChuan's woodcut print and contrasting it against the Kitchen God folk print, we observed that artists had gained the insight to capture pathos and embody emotion into an artwork to endow it with political agency to demand for justice on behalf of the lowest social classes. This was made possible because an individual, namely Lu Xun took on the initiative to build a

rich library of material culture, amongst other contributions he had made for the development of modern art and literature in China. This may explain why thus far, Lu Xun has garnered such favourable recognition earning him such titles as the “Father of the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement”. According to Bacharach and Lawler, Lu Xun therefore politically held two forms of power - that which he wields as an authority with specialized expertise in his field of knowledge; and also the informal power of influence. Influence is not bound by hierarchy or social orders and hence can move in all directions, even supranationally. His influence did not take long before it began making waves to the south seas – the Nanyang.

3.4 The Movement’s Wave to the South Seas

Figure 3.13. Unknown artist, *China is Roaring 中国怒吼了*. 1937 Nanyang Siang Pau, July 13, 1937.

Movement of Chinese immigrants into Southeast Asia in the early 20th century had already become very rampant with many coming down south in the hopes of better opportunities, escaping the political and social turmoils that had a direct effect on the socioeconomic situations and livelihoods of the Chinese people. Many of them hoped to work in Southeast Asia and earn enough or more before returning home, but those plans changed for some and made the "Nanyang" their permanent home. Naturally, with a growing population of Chinese immigrants, the demand for a local press with content for readers to keep in touch with the homeland seemed necessary and in 1923 Nanyang Siang Pau, a Chinese daily began its press run in Singapore. Immigrant artists and writers began to fill up roles as teachers in local Chinese schools and also as editors in Chinese dailies such as *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*.[24]

The local Chinese press was one of the first ways the modern woodblock art form began to permeate into the consciousness of the people in Southeast Asia. The subject matter in these woodblock prints was mostly anti-Japanese aimed to rally Chinese immigrants to support the Sino-Japanese war. Alternatively, they also had strong anti-imperialist sentiments, to oppose the increasing foreign influence in China. The dailies did publish issues that were pertinent to the localized Chinese community in Malaya and Singapore, but content to rally nationalistic sentiments for homeland China was still a staple in the publications. Woodblock prints that appeared in the press needed to echo these sentiments, such as the one by an unknown artist titled *China is Roaring* which was published in the 13th July 1923 edition of *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Figure 3.13).

[24] Foo Kwee Horng. "Cartoon and Woodcut Movement of Pre-War Singapore (1900 - 1941)." (Master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2004), ch. 4.

The print features a group of Chinese soldiers in uniform bearing rifle guns dashing forward (in this case towards the right of the picture plane) in much haste. Though it has a sense of forwarding motion, it differs from the march of the Soviets in Jules Perahim's Socialist Realism piece we have discussed earlier in this chapter. There is no hive mind mentality suggested here with the absence of repetitive implied lines moving in a synchronized fashion. Here, though there is a sense of forwarding motion, each individual seems to be his own. The soldiers are depicted at varying angles, some as their profile, and others at a quarter angle with different facial expressions even though the forms are crude. Their feet are at varying strides, and some are them are bent lower as if to accelerate forward faster. In the background, we even notice a fist being raised not too far from the mass of black which is the flag above all of the figures rushing forward. This print though has nationalistic objectives to unite the Chinese people in their cause to evict foreign influence and defend the national borders, but it does so not by demanding the audience to form a homogenous mass as did Perahim's work. Instead, in the flurry of varying diagonal implied lines, it calls out to each individual as his own to voluntarily answer the call of valour.

A print like this, though lacking in figural representation that is up close and personal still manages to convey an emotional depiction of war. This is done through the restlessness of the figures as they run forward, the same varying diagonal implied lines of these figures that suggest their individuality also, as a collective, denotes the psychological state of the Chinese people. The dread and agony of war are captured through its dramatic lighting of the scene, with most of the figures predominantly in black, and using white just to delineate out each figure. Their shadows cast upon the

ground are made of long diagonal streaks, creating an ominous mood as if to convey that these men are running into an unknown fate, possibly their deaths. Through the analysis of this woodcut that appeared in *Nanyang Siang Pau* and the piece by Li Hua, we get a sense of how woodblock prints once again manage to capture emotion and pathos - the distress of a people who are "roaring" for justice.

Woodblock prints such as *China is Roaring* would have been commonplace in Chinese dailies in Malaya and Singapore before World War II. According to Foo Kwee Horng's thesis, the first appearance of the type of woodcut that draws from the Modern Woodcut Movement in China first appeared in *Nanyang Siang Pau's* art supplement, *Wenman Jie* in 1936.[25] This meant that it was not too long after the Modern Woodcut Movement took off in China in the early 1930s did it have an effect in Malaya and Singapore. It could be said that the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was well-informed about Lu Xun and his efforts in the advocacy of the Modern Woodcut Movement. A figurehead that is attributed to the proliferation of the woodblock print was Tai In Long, who not only contributed articles but woodblock prints himself. He was the editor for *Nanyang Siang Pau's Wenman Jie*, an art supplement that featured a lot of Lu Xun's efforts in the development of woodblock prints. Subsequently, *Wenman Jie* was replaced by *Jinri Yishu* as a smaller section, but Tai In Long was placed in charge of the daily supplements of other areas as well, and so woodblock prints was being exposed to readers every day, instead of only the art supplement. However, Tai was banished by the British colonial government due to his pro-communist activities. In Tai's situation, we observe that the individual vested with the positional authority to

[25] Foo Kwee Horng. "Cartoon and Woodcut Movement of Pre-War Singapore (1900 - 1941)." (Master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2004), ch. 4.

dictate the press can have a strong influence on its readers and audience. Yet this power is not absolute and is also subjected to the power of the governing institution.

As we trace how the Modern Woodcut Movement made its way to Southeast Asia, we see that the power struggle between nations resulting in political turmoil and socio-economic difficulties in one country is a factor that contributed to the dissemination of the artistic culture of that country to another. This is made possible through its citizens who are fleeing to seek refuge or sanctuary in neighbouring countries. The printing press technology was a crucial part of this dissemination and was endowed with a political agency, becoming a tool in the dynamics of power-play between citizens and their formal governing bodies. The woodblock prints in the press became a beacon to rally support through the visualization of injustice to appeal to the emotions and empathy of its viewers namely the citizens, the laypeople. It had during the Modern Woodcut Movement in China been developed into an ingenious tool capable to speak even to the illiterate and this tool very quickly found its way into Malaya and Singapore.

In Foo's thesis about pre-war Singaporean woodblock prints, he explicated in the final chapter about how the whole woodcut movement in Singapore began to decline after 1939 due to the ordinances imposed by the colonial government. They used repressive power to impose restrictions to curb woodblock print production for the press. Even though such drastic measures were taken by the colonial powers to control the political agency that was manifested through politically-charged woodblock prints, but it was evident that the legacy did not die out. An imminent study as to how the art form was kept alive by its practitioners through the period of colonial repression and World War II needs to be conducted with the dwindling practitioners still alive today.

Artist's such as See Cheen Tee and Tan Tee Chie are proof that the aesthetics of the woodblock print survived and re-emerged after the World War though this time addressing political issues in a slightly different context which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Figure 3.14. See Cheen Tee, *Hunger*. 1954, Woodblock Print, 25 x 19 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 71.

In 1954, See not only produced *Begging* which we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter, but he also produced *Hunger* - another overtly Social Justice piece (Figure

3.14). This woodblock print by See has five figures; the central figure is a man seated on the ground in front of four others behind him. The man in the front is most prominent not just because he is in front, unobstructed by anyone, but he is also the only one with eyes held up looking into the distance whilst the rest have their gaze toward the ground. He looks up as if hoping for help to come, or perhaps in deep thought, pondering on when their next meal will be. This is unlike the woman *in Begging* whose direct gaze toward the viewer draws us into her realm, instead, their gaze and poses suggest a sense of withdrawal perhaps even a feeling of shame and humiliation as they huddle together. Yet, how it is similar to *Begging* is that both the woodcut prints have an intense mass of black behind the figures that force the viewers to contemplate the gaunt and sorrowful faces of its figures to appeal to the audience to empathize with their pathos. In both artworks, the artist used a mix of curved and diagonal lines to create a heavy texture within the forms of the subject matter, so much so skin and garment are hard to distinguish to evoke the idea of agony and torment. Even though their poses and postures are composed and still, they lack any vigour or active movement. The heavy texture within them only exposes the psychological or internal anguish that they are experiencing.

If we were to juxtapose both *Begging* and *Hunger* by See, with the memorial piece by Kathe Kollwitz, it is clear that they both employed the same methods of capturing pathos. In both pieces, agitated lines fill the countenance of the figures to express agony and sorrow experienced by the figures. Through this comparison, we could at this point reflect on the pivotal role the New Cultural Movement in China had played in the transformation of the Chinese woodblock art form that was previously a depiction of

political power wielded by formal institutions (in the case of China, it's feudal governance), to one that captured the humanistic aspects of emotion, particularly that of pathos to challenge formal institutions. This transformation of the artform was made possible because individuals such as Cai Yuenpei and Lu Xun who were vested with forms of power that enabled them to create a milieu that was optimal for the development of the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement. Nonetheless, it was power struggles from a higher-order between nations that created social conditions that catalyzed the dissemination of that new art form to other regions. The printing press technology was seized as a vehicle to drive the political agendas carried in these woodblock prints, and we have someone like Tai In Long who held a form of power to maneuver this vehicle for its proliferation here in Southeast Asia.

We understand that Chinese immigrants in Malaya and Singapore were exposed to woodblock prints primarily through periodicals or dailies during the pre-war era with the political agenda of drawing their support for China's war against Japan and the condemnation of expanding foreign intrusion in the homeland. In the case of See's first two woodblock prints he produced in the post-war years of the mid-1950s, we find that they instead addressed a more localized issue about the plight of the people in Singapore. The call for Social Justice in these woodblock prints be it before or after the war reflects the desire of the artists to use the political agency imbued in these artworks to affect change over the governing formal institutions for the betterment of their living and social conditions. Whilst Social Justice became a prevalent theme in these early woodblock prints, we cannot negate another aspect that can be observed is the idea of nationhood. The need to demand for Social Justice is, after all, a result of nationalistic

sentiments to defend and protect oneself - the collective consciousness of belonging to a community we call nations.

CHAPTER 4: VISUALIZING NATIONHOOD

4.1 Decolonization And The Road To Nationhood

In the years after World War II, the woodblock prints that were found in Singapore differed from those before the war. The post-war prints addressed more localized issues instead of rallying for the support of immigrant Chinese in Malaya and Singapore to defend the "homeland", China. At that point in time, many of the immigrants have settled down and had children, taking root in Malaya and Singapore so, the idea of the homeland had certainly changed for some of them. Naturally, artists such as See who was born here in Terengganu would view Malaya as his home and therefore created art for a society and environment that resonated with him more clearly than a distant land of his forebears.

The first two woodblock prints See produced in 1954, *Begging & Hunger* which we have discussed in the context of Social Justice best exemplifies his effort in addressing localized social issues. In the early 1950s, Singapore (of which was still part of Malaya) was still recovering from the war and also the Malayan Emergency[26]. Both the woodblock prints by See highlighted clearly without reservation, the plight and anguish that the lower classes endeavoured, hence they were overtly Social Justice in nature

[26] The Malayan Emergency is a termed coined by the British colonial government for the conflict that occurred between them and the military force of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which is known as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). This guerrilla warfare took place in the post-war years of 1948 to 1960. The MNLA's term for this conflict is the Anti-British National Liberation War.

because they were a direct criticism on the failings of colonial government; whom at the time was viewed by the people of Singapore as incapable of protecting the nation when the Japanese imperial army occupied the Malayan Peninsula with such ease.[27] However, comparing See with his contemporaries, he did not seem too keen on continuing with this subject matter. He did still comment on the social situation of Singapore though not as overtly as the initial two works he produced in 1954.

Figure 15.1. See Cheen Tee, *Young Gamblers* 1959, Woodblock Print, 15 x 20 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 74.

Young Gamblers, produced in 1959 has five figures in the artwork, all young boys judging from their anatomical proportions - possibly teenagers (Figure 15.1). In contrast

[27] Jeff Hayes. "SINGAPORE AND ITS ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE AFTER WORLD WAR II." *Facts and Details* 2008. http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Singapore/sub5_7a/entry-3713.html. (accessed May 1, 2019)

to his earlier works which relied on heavy textures to imbue the works with pathos, the only heavy texture on the figures here are used to submerge two of the young gamblers in the background into shadow. The figure that seems to be in the limelight of this scene is the boy in the center that lacks any texture because he is lacking in clothing. He is clad with only a pair of dark shorts without any shirt, exposing his bare skin and skeletal frame. He is seated on his sandals, providing him with little comfort instead of suffering the hard ground. The rest of the boys who are all clothed with either shirts or singlets and pants seem to have their gaze directed towards the smaller shirtless boy. This entire setting gives us an impression almost as if the bald and shirtless boy has become an object of ridicule and shame. This is further emphasized by his caricatured and extremely contorted posture with his head turned back to an impossible tilt that creates a sense of sheer discomfort, suggesting the difficulty of his whole situation. The contrast between his pose and those of the other relatively older boys gives us a sense that he is being victimized by the more crafty boys at the game they are playing. Half of the pictorial plane and the two figures that recede into the shadows behind convey to us a sort of negativity or depravity in their activity, whereas the shirtless boy exposed out in the light could reflect his naiveness.

This work was produced by See when the Anti-Yellow Movement had become a full-fledged initiative put into motion by the ruling political party, PAP (People's Action Party) in Singapore. This movement first originated with the Chinese High School Student Movement in 1953, which was born out of anti-colonial sentiments. These students who were much influenced by the Chinese Cultural Movement in China's revolution took it upon themselves to inform the masses about the dangers of "yellow

culture", which are social ills and vices that are believed to plague society causing it to become sickly and unhealthy.[28] They framed the understanding of yellow culture like it was a sort of pathogen capable of spreading through the body of their society through exposure to pornography and nudity in media, contemporary western music such as jazz and rock and roll, opium smoking and gambling. Not so incidentally, most, if not all of these were somehow related to western cultures because much of the materials and influences did originate from the west, though some did also come from Japan and Hong Kong. In Lau's essay, she explains that yellow culture as defined by the students, seem to lack clear delineations, and in fact, her observation of what they wrote in their periodicals reveals that any culture that did not conform to their ideals in creating a 'healthy nation' was refuted and defined as "yellow" - creating a rather ambiguous and unclear scope. [29]

The colonial government, however, saw the whole Anti-Yellow Movement initiated by the students as Communist propaganda and made special efforts in monitoring the development of this movement. We must also be reminded that at that point in time, decolonization was becoming a global trend in many parts of the world and the British lost many of their colonies in India, Pakistan, and Burma through rather violent means. Singapore became of much interest, being the only remaining outpost for the British Empire in the far east, which explains why a movement like this that could disrupt their mission in keeping control over Singapore was of much concern to them.[30] The colonial

[28] Lau Yu Ching. 2016. "The Anti-Yellow Culture Movement , 1953 – 1961 : Morality And The Language Of Decolonising Singapore." National University of Singapore. Pg 40.

[29] Lau, "The Anti-Yellow Culture Movement" p.46.
[30] Ibid. p.26.

government then clamped down on the movement by imposing ordinances and proscription of sorts to contain the “anti-yellow movement”. This only exacerbated the situation causing more Chinese, who were the majority in Singapore to pledge their allegiance to the radical left. It was here that the PAP who took to power in 1959 seized the opportunity to use the language of the anti-yellow movement to exert its formal authority and systematically sift out anything deemed to be of yellow culture. This whole exercise was spearheaded by Ong Bang Poon, the party’s Minister of Home Affairs.

Having now an overview of the political and social climate of the time, we can now delve further into analyzing See’s woodblock print. Firstly, we could now see why this gambling scene would be a subject matter he chose to produce based on our understanding of the anti-yellow movement. The game of cards they are playing also holds certain anti-colonial criticisms, observing that the cards bear the images of Pikes and Tiles coming from French-suited decks. Though playing cards originated from China, this particular design was exclusively identifiable with occidental culture. The dizzying textured prints on the shirts of the boys with diamonds and crosses allude to a culture that is carefree and ostentatious which was what the government had wanted to portray with regards to yellow culture. The overall scene now can be analyzed in this sense that the craftier older boys whom have “mastered”(or rather are masters of) the yellow culture victimizing the bald and shirtless boy in the center, stripping him bare; an allegory of what could happen to the local society who adopts or allows themselves to fall victim to yellow culture.

Figure 16. Koeh Sia Yong, *Visiting the Injured*, 1958, woodcut, 200 x 157 mm (Singapore History Museum).

When we shift our attention to See's contemporaries who also produced woodblock prints, we can observe that instead of only highlighting the depravity of society, there are works that have a more positive overtone. Koeh Siah Yong, a prolific woodblock artist in Singapore at that time produced *Visiting the Injured* in 1958 (Figure 16). The print depicts an injured man resting on a simple wooden bed as a family comes by to visit him. In the foreground at the bottom right of the print, there is a newspaper with the words "Worker" as part of its headline, hinting to us that this scene before us pertains to them. Observing his living conditions, it would not be inaccurate at all to assume that he is a blue-collar worker based on the simplicity of his wooden bed and tight living quarters evident through the wooden walls in the background. The figures in Koeh's

woodblock print in comparison to See's are not submerged in shadow, but instead, the treatment of having only distinct outlines and minimal texturing to create form makes the figures stand out quite starkly from the surrounding environment. This clarity, and openness in the way Koeh treats his figures is perhaps his way of emphasizing the virtues exhibited by the figures in the scene such as compassion, care, empathy, and camaraderie. Woodblock prints during this period of Singapore's history tend to champion the working class with PAP giving support to such prints because of its socialist mechanics that was more appealing to the masses. The working class is often cast in a positive light and depicted as selfless builders of the nation.

Koeh's woodcut print would be a fine example of what Benedict Anderson posits in his seminal work, Imagined Communities. Anderson attributes the origination of nationalistic concepts to the rise of print-technology which was crucial in the dissemination of new thoughts. Print was instrumental in the relegation of concepts that bound the majority of European society to unconditional subservience unto religious institutions and their ideologies, as well as the monarchs who rule with absolute authority which was hereditary by divine dispensation. He also mentions much about the role and use of language and vernaculars in the transmission of these new thoughts.[31] In the case of woodblock prints like Koeh's work, new thought needed little or no translation - the ideas and emotions transmitted through the visual vocabulary in woodblock prints demonstrate far less viscosity than it would through literary text. The argument that Anderson proposes helps us understand how an image like the one

[31] Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016) p. 53.

depicted by Koeh is instrumental in fostering the idea of nationhood, having an agency that aids in the imagining of what he would call a "deep, horizontal comradeship".[32]

Another example of this camaraderie we speak of can be observed in the work of Lim Mue Hue's *Love* produced in 1962 (Figure 17). In this print, we have a scene of several people aiding some who are weaker or injured. The figures are heavily textured to simulate the texture of the fabric they are wearing, but the lines are softer, wavier if compared to See's Social Justice prints. These lines add a sense of movement and activity in the figures. This is further accentuated by the gestures and poses of the figures especially with their hands holding, grasping to assist, and reaching out. The able-bodied, such as the relatively robust male figure on the top right corner at the door, whose pose is echoed by the female figure near the center of the picture plane next to the seated man, are all seen helping those who are weaker, older and more feeble. The whole scene is summed up with a text near the entrance door which reads "Unity Is Strength". To monumentalize this whole charitable deed, the scene is dramatized by the use of shadows evident on the left of the figures created by the source of light that originates from the door on the right. Analyzing both Koeh and Lim's works, we cannot deny there is a strong sense of activism - this is done through the depiction of figures, often at full length with gestures and poses of aiding, and assisting each other that evokes a sense of togetherness.

[32] Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016) p. 50.

Figure 17. Lim Mu Hue, *Love* 1962, Woodcut, 154 x 206mm, From Works by Lim Mu Hue, edited by Ong Yih and Tan Fucheng, Singapore, Siqiang Publishers, 1990.

This sense of activism and togetherness is not something we were able to observe in See's work. In 1959, during a time when See's contemporaries such as Koeh and Lim were producing Social Realist works depicting urban blue-collared workers bearing the burden of nation-building together, See instead took to scenes that were by far more politically benign. In fact, he produced scenes that were a stark contrast of the hustle and bustle of urban life and produced *Fishermen* (Figure 18). The print has three figures, all of which are fishermen who have just returned from a catch which is clear from the large fishes slung over the back of the fisherman who is standing on the right of the picture plain. Another fisherman on his left is seen picking up another fish, whilst some

smaller fishes are seen placed on the ground between the two of them. In the background on the top left corner, a third fisherman is carrying some oars over his shoulder. It also seems that the fishermen would very likely be of Malay ethnicity, based on the batik sarong they are wearing. The treatment of the figures here is quite different from what we have been analyzing before because the skin of all these fishermen is left completely in flat black with minimal lines to hint at their muscular forms. The flat black further adds weight to their form giving all three of them a sense of endurance and fortitude. There are no extended arms or holding of hands, but each fisherman are quietly fulfilling their duties.

Figure 18. See Cheen Tee, *Fishermen* 1959, Woodblock Print, 23 x 15 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 65.

In choosing to depict a scene like this, did it mean that See was not participative of championing a progressive vision for the nation seeing as it differed from the communal activism of other woodblock print artists? Instead, these able-bodied and robust fishermen create a different narrative that also supports the idea of an independent nation. All three of them are able to stand on their own, executing their respective tasks

for a common goal - to bring home a good catch. Their physicality becomes an attestation to the capacity of the local populace who are fully capable of sustaining themselves. Additionally, their attire consisting of simple sarongs and bamboo hats conveys to us a sense of tradition and thus asserts that they have always been independent and self-sustaining even before any foreign "intervention". The flat black on their skin that unifies the three fishermen is See's strategy of imbuing them with a sense of togetherness.

Then in 1966 See produced *The Creator*, which features a craftsman of Chinese dough figurines as the central focus of this artwork, even though his face might be obscured partially by his wooden workbench (Figure 19). He is, as the title of this woodblock print suggests the "Creator" in the act of creating a dough figurine which we can observe from the small head between his palms. He has completed three other figurines and propped them up on display on the wooden frame in front of him. The human infant with some flame-like extensions appearing on both sides is likely to be the mythological character *Nezha* (哪吒), then the anthropomorphized monkey to the right is *Sun Wukong* (孫悟空), and finally *Zhu Bajie* (猪 八戒), the anthropomorphized pig with a rake over its shoulders. These are all characters from popular Chinese folk tales mostly known to Chinese children. From his choice of figurines he has crafted, it seems he is still very much accustomed to Chinese traditions and cosmology. This is apparent even as we move further down the artwork to where his wooden box is situated. The cover of the open box has four bat motifs engraved on each corner. Bats, in the Chinese language, is a homophone of the word luck, which is "*fu*", so it is quite common to find

bat motifs in Chinese arts and materials. Then further down the cover of the box, we find a partially cropped yin yang symbol on the front of the box. All of these elements together give us an idea about how closely this Chinese man still associates with the culture and cosmology originating from mainland China, in spite of now being in a foreign country which he might have made his home now.

Figure 19. See Cheen Tee, *The Creator* 1966, Woodblock Print, 61 x 46 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 84.

There are three children around him admiring his craft, but the one of much interest to us at this point is the Malay boy on the left of the picture plane partially obscured by the wooden display frame. We know that he is Malay from his *songkok*, and the grid lines at the bottom left corner would be his *kain pelikat*, traditionally worn by Malay men. The very presence of this Malay boy in this setting and at such proximity with the dough craftsman informs us of See's intention to create a sense of togetherness through racial harmony. It is a scene where two cultures come together, to enjoy the companionship of one another and the boundaries of ethnicity are of no concern - the boy admiring the skillful hands of the craftsman, and the craftsman gratifying from the boy's enthusiastic spectatorship. The purposeful introduction of the Malay boy by See into this print is his effort to contribute to the narrative of togetherness through diversity in the extensive initiative of nation-building at that time of Singapore's history.

Through this study of See's work and his contemporaries, we noticed that the social-political climate of Singapore as it was going through the process of decolonization, and then subsequently birth as an independent nation had direct effects on the choice of subject matters chosen by the artists. The Nanyang artists saw how the New Woodcut Movement in China was used as part of an arsenal to create social consciousness to oust foreign influence, and therefore wanted to replicate the same model here to oppose the formal institutions of which power was predominantly colonial.

The artists had two approaches in the woodblock prints they produced. They could choose to have a negative overtone to highlight the incompetence of the colonial government or the depravity of western influences such as what was propagated by the Anti-Yellow Movement. Alternatively, they had the option to also depict subjects with

positive overtones with communal activism and camaraderie. Either way, the works were politically-charged and aimed at uniting the local community against the colonial government in their struggle for independence. See, however, had only briefly attempted these two approaches before turning to another alternative to convey his idea of togetherness. We understand that artists did have their collectives and based on studies by Seng and Lim on Singaporean woodblock prints it is observed that they often created works that echoed each other by means of influence possibly by the most prolific of them. Yet, as we understand influence through Bacharach and Lawler, it is unlike authoritative power and has no aspect of involuntary submission. Therefore someone like See was able to freely choose his approaches and build his reality, and hence the idea of reality has recently become a more contested concept in the realm of early Malayan Social Realist works.

4.2 Paradox of Realities: Nanyang vs Equator Art Society

The Chinese Student Movement of the 1950s that played a key role in engendering anti-colonial sentiments and igniting a nationalistic fervor in Singapore developed much of their materials for arts and literature during the post-war years when materials directly from China became scarce following the Malayan Emergency[33]. On the 17th of June 1954, The Chinese High School Graduates of 1953 Art Association (CHSGAA) was formally registered and served as an auxiliary body attached to the Singapore

[33] Materials from China were deemed to be a threat by the colonial government with reason that they fear it would further spread pro-Communist propaganda amongst the Chinese community residing in Malaya. The Communist insurgency, otherwise known as the Malayan Emergency occurred in Malaya from the late 40s up until 1953.

Chinese Middle Schools Student Union. Its focus was none other than to express cultural liberation through the production of art which they exerted should be Social Realist in nature because art and its role in formal politics should be inseparable. In the subsequent year, they had a traveling exhibition and in their catalogue, an article was put together by Xiao Gang explicating that the working class was the target audience of the art that was produced by the members of this association. The article was a result of a collective discussion and was laden with anti-colonial sentiments, and continually beckoned for artists to develop works that would serve the people and build the nation. The art they produced predominantly had subject matters that featured the working class because the artists were fully aware that the largest block of the population in Singapore consisted of this class, which according to them were the most persecuted yet silenced group under the political governance of the colonials. Through this article, the artists seem to have taken it upon themselves to use their artistic vision to become the voice for the masses[34]. Their objective was to help the working class become enlightened that their dire state is a result of colonial rule in order to rouse them into action. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that in October 1956, the association was charged for unlawful activities by the colonial government.[35]

There were about 7 pieces of woodblock prints amongst works of other mediums that were featured in the published catalogue of their 1955 traveling exhibition, and Chua Mia Tee's, *On The Bus* was one of them (Figure 20). In line with the artistic creed of the association, the main subject here would, of course, be a worker - a blue-collared

[34] *Singapore Chinese High School 1953 Graduates Art Association Exhibition Booklet* (Singapore: Nan Yang Publishing, 1956). Exhibition catalogue.
[35] Stefanie Tham Xiu Jie. "*The Equator Art Society in Singapore, 1956-74*." B.A. Hons diss., National University of Singapore, 2012. p.14.

labourer which is made quite evident from the woven basket placed between his feet filled with construction tools like the paver, trowel, and crowbars. Taking note of these tools and his simple hat, he seems like a construction labourer who has spent hours toiling under the sun. This print captures his ride home after a hard day's work judging from his slumped posture and the napping passenger beside him who is leaning onto him for support. His uncomfortable situation is also accentuated through the dense texture of the background with its vertical and horizontal lines in the seats and windows on the bus, surrounding both their figures in an attempt to drown them into the cramp shallow space. The use of textures within the worker's figure bears many similarities to the Social Justice works See produced in the sense that the organic lines that make up the wrinkles on his face and the creases on the fabric of his clothes were meant to convey the pathos of this labourer to the viewer.

Figure 20. Chua Mia Tee, *On The Bus* 1950s, Woodblock Print, From the Singapore Chinese High School Graduates of 1953 Art Association Exhibition Booklet.

This woodblock print by Chua was but one of many other works in the 1955 exhibition that had strong socialist sentiments, bringing the working class to the fore. Another noteworthy artwork, an oil painting also by Chua titled, *Epic Poem for Malaya* was part of this exhibition - a seminal piece by the artist that is often epitomized as a truly Social Realist painting aimed at fostering nationalistic sentiments. Many of the

members of The CHSGAA subsequently formed another art group, The Equator Art Society (EAS), in 1956 and their objectives in the production of art remained the same as the former association, which is to serve the people. Amongst the core founding members are Lim Yew Kuan, Lee Boon Wang, Chua Mia Tee and Lai Kui Fang. They continued to express anti-colonial sentiments and even continued to champion for the anti-yellow movement when they published the article "The Equator Art Society Anti-Yellow Issue" which was accompanied by cartoons that the members had produced. The EAS and ruling political party, the PAP at that juncture had political objectives that ran parallel in leading Singapore into independence. The EAS in their 2nd exhibition catalogue reiterated the importance of the portrayal of "real life" in their work, and then in the foreword of the 5th exhibition catalogue, expressed the need to depict the "Truth, Virtue, and Beauty" of this world.[36]

Their persistent demand to create works that depicted the "truth" or the "real" living circumstances of the oppressed working class brought them in sharp contrast with the first generation of Nanyang artists, many of whom were their teachers at NAFA(Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts) such as Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang. The members of the EAS viewed the works of the first generation Nanyang artists as being too colonially influenced because their post-impressionistic paintings were often idyllic depictions of local, and often rural life that supposedly fails to reveal the "truth". In the 4th EAS exhibition catalogue, Lee Boon Wang states that the works of their predecessors were not "realistic", and instead

[36] Equator Art Society, *Pertonjokan Hasil Kesenian Yang Ke-2 Perkumpulan Seni Hatulistiwa* (Singapore: Xing Zhuo Hong Fa Publishing, 1960) Exhibition catalogue; Equator Art Society, *The fifth art exhibition of the Equator Art Society*, (Singapore, 1966). Exhibition catalogue.

reflected a decadent lifestyle fashioned after colonials. Kevin Chua observes, that the members of the EAS saw these early Nanyang paintings as a reminder of the nation's colonial past and did not benefit their aims in the progression of nationhood.[37] Others, however, would argue that the efforts of these early Nanyang artists that brought about the confluences of styles from the East and West were emblematic of Malaya's multiculturalism.[38]

As much as the EAS members were belligerent in resounding their political stance and social realist tendencies through writing, their initial exhibitions featured works that lacked the political agency when compared to the 1955 traveling art exhibition by CHSGAA. The EAS first exhibition featured works of portraits, landscapes and still life, with subtle hints in the choice of objects chosen that links them back to their artistic creed. Lee Hua Mok, reported in the *Singapore Free Press* that the works in the second exhibition failed to meet the artistic creed the members so valiantly championed for and that political suppression was the cause of this.[39] It is only in the 5th EAS Exhibition that we saw the emergence of the overtly political works that bears resemblance to the 1955 CHSGAA traveling exhibition. The seventh exhibition of the EAS never took place because it was banned and shut down altogether. This was because by then, their leftist political stance was not seen favourable or instrumental anymore in the objectives of their once ally, the PAP who was then the ruling political party. Singapore by then had become independent and needed to maneuver its cultural practices to support its

[37] Kevin Chua, "Painting the Nanyang's Public: Notes Toward a Reassessment", in *Eye of The Beholder: Reception, Audience and Practice of Modern Asian Art*, edited by John Clark, Maurizzio Peleggi and T.K. Sabapathy, (Sydney: Wild Peony, 2006), p.74
[38] Kwok Kian Chow. *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art.* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1996)
[39] Tham, "*The Equator Art Society"* p.23.

new economic goals to draw in foreign investments. The PAP government did not feel the melancholy in the works of EAS was beneficial to their economic strategies, and instead favoured the more apolitical abstract art.

It is unclear if See was a member of the EAS because there have been contradictions in current literature with regards to his affiliations to the organization. What we do know was that See would not have been oblivious about the political leanings and motto of the EAS because he was a staff at NAFA at the point of the EAS' inception, and he had a relatively close rapport with Lim Yew Kuan based on the fact they had worked together along with 4 other artists for the 6 Men Woodcut Exhibition. The only reason why one would be concerned about See's association with the EAS would be to try and perhaps understand his political stance and creative motivations. See was, after all, quite a prolific woodblock artist from the mid-1950s onwards, and taken that woodblock prints is an art form that has an affinity with formal politics, would we so readily also assume that See shared the leftist stance as did the core founding members of the EAS whom were his contemporaries? An analysis of his woodcut prints could perhaps give us an insight into his political stance or motivations and help identify his strategy in constructing a national identity.

Figure 21. See Cheen Tee, Pounding Rice 1964, Woodblock Print, 82 x 58 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 66.

As mentioned earlier, Sees documented works that dealt with overtly political themes were relatively few in numbers. Besides the Social Justice works of *Hunger* and *Begging* produced in 1954, he produced only a handful of works that very subtly dealt

with political and social criticism such as *Young Gamblers* and *The Creator*. The majority of his works in the years after saw more renditions of rural or village life. In 1964, See produced *Pounding Rice* which depicts a scene with four young girls in the process of separating rice from their hulls. Three of them are pounding rice in a large traditional wooden mortar with large pestle-like tools, whilst another one is carrying away rice that has been dehulled evident from the white grains spilling from the rattan sieve she is carrying (Figure 21). All of them are going about their tasks quite contentedly. The smile on their faces, their active postures, the rigidity of their limbs and firm grip of the pestles all suggest that they were toiling with full of energy. They are all dressed differently, but in traditional garments that inform us that they were of Malay ethnicity. This entire scene takes place in what seems to be a semi-enclosed area surrounded by a sort of woven divider behind the three women. A wood and bamboo structure is erected on the left-hand side, and a small opening, an exit perhaps is seen between these two barriers. Beyond that, we find some buildings, and observing its design and architecture it does not seem at all rural. The towers with its domed roof and pilasters are quite typical of British colonial-style buildings. Just peering over the woven mat we see a small portion of the roofs that may belong to shophouses. This creates a bit of a conundrum for us to speculate about the locality of this scene and the possibility of such a setting where rural and township are brought so close it's merely a stone's throw away.

Young farmhands pounding away at rice cheerfully with vigour is quite antithetical from what the EAS would have deemed as art that should depict reality, and by their terms, "reality" often has an overtone of pessimism and melancholy. Yet, neither could

we truly say that See was taking after his predecessors, the first generation Nanyang artist who was accused by the EAS members as colonially-influenced and presented an unrealistic, romanticized pastoral life in the tropics. To see this distinction, it would be helpful for a comparative to be made to see the contrasts between See's work and a Nanyang artist's.

Figure 22. Chen Chong Swee, *Pounding Rice* 1971, Chinese ink and colour on paper, 117 x 242 cm, National Heritage Board, Singapore Collection. Accessed June 15, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/pounding-rice/bwHmi82_CXhPIQ

Chen Chong Swee had painted a piece by the same name as See's in 1971, also *Pounding Rice* and quite aptly so because once again the main activity here is the same - the separation of the rice from the hull (Figure 22). The first notable difference here would be the artwork's format and backdrop. See's woodcut print is more vertical, like a portrait format whereas Chen's is much wider like that of a landscape. See's background directly behind the girls is a shallow closed-off space that obscures the distant background. The verticality of his woodcut print and shallow space creates a sense of

restriction and confinement as opposed to Chen's Chinese ink painting which emphasizes a vastness of space. The background in Chen's scene includes a hill in the distance on the right of the picture plane and beyond that, it is all white with no demarcation of what is land or sky. The figures in Chen's painting are much more liberated against this boundless background compared to the girls in See's woodcut print which are framed within the bamboo and rattan dividers. The lines that delineate Chen's figures are smooth and delicate, their postures are all relatively straight and vertical. This contrasts with the girls in See's woodcut that seem to be a bustle of activity with their angular arms, varying arched postures, and diagonal pestles. The calmness and serenity we perceive from Chen's idyllic genre painting are what the EAS would have considered a romanticized imagination influenced by colonial masters of Southeast Asian inhabitants.

See, though depicted the same subject matter conveys something quite contrary to Chen's painting. It is supposedly a scene of rural life, but then again one can also perceive a sense of urgency and chaos. The girls seemed hurried in their tasks with their active gestures and poses. The peculiar background of the bamboo and rattan divider and colonial architecture in the distant background could perhaps be the artist's endeavour to also address that indeed these two seemingly opposing environments are being forced closer together with the impending development of cities brought on by colonials, assisted by the Chinese community. The barriers that separate the Malay girls from the growing city behind seem to leave them with very little space which could suggest a diminishing way of life. The curved lines and spiral in the sky also suggests a sort of dizzying atmosphere created by this clash.

Here, we can conclude that See has managed to present to us a "reality" of a colonized nation that is neither romanticized Nanyang nor EAS social realist. Though the subject matter of the woodblock print was about rural life, something that the Nanyang artists embraced, See manages to allude certain social-economic critique within the print, a habit which comes more naturally to social realists like the EAS artists. This observation is akin to Seng Yu Jin's essay on the works of Lim Hak Tai where he notes that the dichotomy created by existing literature between the EAS and pioneer Nanyang artists can be argued and needs further inspection. His study reveals that Lim had artworks he coined as "socially-engaged Nanyang art" - paradoxical artworks that dissolve the categorical distinctions of Social Realist art and romanticism and strives to form a sort of bridge between the extremities. See's print seems to exhibit such qualities that situate his work within this once illusive divide that exists between EAS works and first generation Nanyang style artists. Now, having a clearer perception of See's prints with regards to its affiliations between romanticism and social realism, it becomes possible for us to study See's woodblock print with subject matters that previously would have no affinities whatsoever with woodcut - namely landscapes and petit genre of rural life.

4.3 Contestations of Landscapes

Figure 23. See Cheen Tee, *Sentosa Island* 1965, Woodblock Print, 46 x 110 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 56.

The mid-1960s marks a crucial time for both Singapore and See. Singapore had just become an independent nation-state on the 9th of August 1965 when efforts for the Malaya-Singapore merger fell through attributed to continual racial conflicts that had failed to be resolved. 1964 to 1966 were See's most industrious years producing woodblock prints, with almost 30 pieces - some of which were reprinted in varying colours. *Sentosa Island* was one such artwork that was produced in that period in 1965 (Figure 23). It remains one of his most iconic pieces which he also revisited and produced in colour in the subsequent year. He had produced woodblock prints featuring life in fishing villages before, but none received a specific identification of place as did with *Sentosa Island.* Interviewing Singaporean art collector and researcher Koh Nguang How, he mentioned that fishing villages were a common subject matter for See because of his relationship with this particular setting as a child when he grew up in the coastal village of Kemasik in Terengganu. However, Koh had also proposed that the scene

depicted in the woodblock print is not Sentosa Island but rather a smaller island located in the northeast, called Brani Island. Sentosa Island was better known for being a military base for the British colony before its subsequent commercialization efforts making it a tourist destination today. The less popular Brani Island, on the other hand, did indeed have fishing villages, for example, Telok Saga and Kampong Selat Sengkir located along its coastline. Furthermore, this print was made in 1965, but Sentosa Island only received its current name in 1972 to replace its rather morbid former name, Pulau Blakang Mati, translated as "Island of Death Behind". These findings suggest that the title might not have been given by See himself. The naming of this artwork as *Sentosa Island* seems like a purposeful move in the delineation of space to set apart the south islands which makes up the nation of Singapore from the mainland Malayan peninsula. This reveals how a landscape artwork and its name which situates it specifically within the boundaries of a nation could be politicized to invoke a nationalistic sentiment.

In this woodblock print, all of the houses in this fishing village are built above the seawaters, suspended above it by scrawny wooden stilts. A larger cluster of houses lies to the right of the picture plane in front of some hills in the distant background. In front of this cluster of village houses, a rickety wooden walkway emerges and sweeps to the central foreground where we see a lone figure holding an umbrella sitting at the edge of the wooden walkway plank. It is possible for her to perhaps be the wife of a fisherman whom we see rowing his boat toward her. Then to her left, the wooden platform continues to connect to a smaller cluster of village houses that are closer to the foreground.

The wide format of the print does give the scene a sort of panoramic serenity with its subject matter strewn horizontally across the picture plane. The straight horizontal line of the sea level dividing it from the distant mountains in the background, the clouds that loom over them, and the delicate curves of stretched ellipses that make up the gentle ripples in the seawater all give us a sense of calmness and composure. Yet, we cannot find complete repose because there is an ambivalence in the way he depicts this fishing village. The irregular-sized wooden planks that make up the rickety walkway that connects the two village house clusters consist of varying diagonal lines that does little to keep us at rest. The houses are made of varying rectangular blocks that give them a sense of considerable mass, and yet these structures sit on such flimsy and delicate stilts. This conveys a sense of vulnerability the villagers have subjected themselves to living in this environment. The ripples of the seawater on the bottom right corner of the picture plane seem more turbulent than they are in the center of the picture plane.

There is peace, and yet chaos as this woman sits waiting with her umbrella for her fisherman husband to approach in a small boat isolated in the center of the picture plane in a relatively higher value background left in white. There is calmness in the natural environment, yet the disarray of the wooden construction hints to us a life of struggle and turmoil. This reality that See carefully orchestrates strikes a more complex emotional chord than the Social Justice prints produced by his contemporaries, who probably have a more definitive objective and target audience in the works they produced. There is a sense of melancholy and pathos imbued in Sees fishing village, created once again through rich textures and generally lower values. Yet, the narrative

also delivers a sense of hope and love between the two central figures though relatively small.

This ambivalence in Sees work can be appreciated more if we can juxtapose it against a first generation Nanyang style artwork like Liu Kang's oil painting *Life by the River* which he painted in 1970 (Figure 24). Quite immediately we can observe a striking difference in the overall mood in Liu Kang's painting, having a more optimistic overtone in comparison to See's *Sentosa Island*. This is done through the use of vibrant local colours, regulated and repetitive lines and shapes evident in the village houses' structure and stilts, and the simplistic forms of the figures. It is very idyllic to say the least, perhaps pushing to a point that seems naive. The narrative of joy and familial ties conveyed in Liu Kang's painting is clear, definite and non-conflicting, much unlike See's ambivalent serenity mingled in turmoil.

Figure 24. Liu Kang, *Life by the River,* 1975, Oil on canvas, 126 x 203cm. National Heritage Board, Singapore Collection. Accessed June 15, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/life-by-the-river/cwFRYfjRcs5sWA

The practice of landscape painting in Malaya however, did not begin with Nanyang style artists, but rather with the British colonials. One of the earliest and more well-known painters whose works are now housed in the Penang State Museum is Captain Robert Smith. By studying the landscape painting of a colonial, and contrasting it against the work of Liu Kang - a Chinese immigrant into Malaya; and also with See's - one who was born and raised in Malaya, we can observe how the depiction of a landscape would have changed and note the differing strategies employed to construct the identity of a place. It is worth to also note here that such differing strategies do occur when we understand place and space as Yi-Fu Tuan explains it. A space is something non-subjective, which differs from the subjective place because the idea of place is tied with the individualized experience of a space, creating a sort of value built upon memories of it, or even power relations between a person and the space.[40]

Captain Robert Smith was a superintendent engineer serving the East India Company and from 1814 to 1815 he was posted to Penang. It was then that he painted *View of Glugor House*, a painting of the house and estate owned by a rich Scotsman, David Brown who settled in the area with hopes of developing the area for agriculture namely cultivating coconuts, nutmeg and cloves (Figure 25). The colonial-style house stands right in the center of the picture plane, and in spite of its rather small scale compared to the environment around it, it is still visually central with roads, trees and the horizon of the hill it sits on leading our eyes to it, the only piece of architecture in the painting. Immediately around the structure, we notice that it is surrounded by perfectly curated

[40] Tuan Yi-Fu. 2001. *Space & Place: The Perspective of Experience*. 8th ed. Vol. 6. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

gardens and lawns and then followed by some smaller trees planted in organized rows, perhaps a type of crop in the middle ground. Then, in the darker-valued foreground, we have slightly wilder shrubbery and foliage. There is change in the way the foliage and trees are rendered in this painting, with simpler and softer round shapes near the colonial building, and turning slightly more organic and erratic as we move away from the building. The gradual shift of design in the trees in relation to their proximity to the house seem to convey an idea of taming and domestication of the wild - a notion that elevates colonial sovereignty present in the picture represented by the house, seizing control over the native force alluded by the more rugged and gnarly appearance of tropical plants at the periphery.

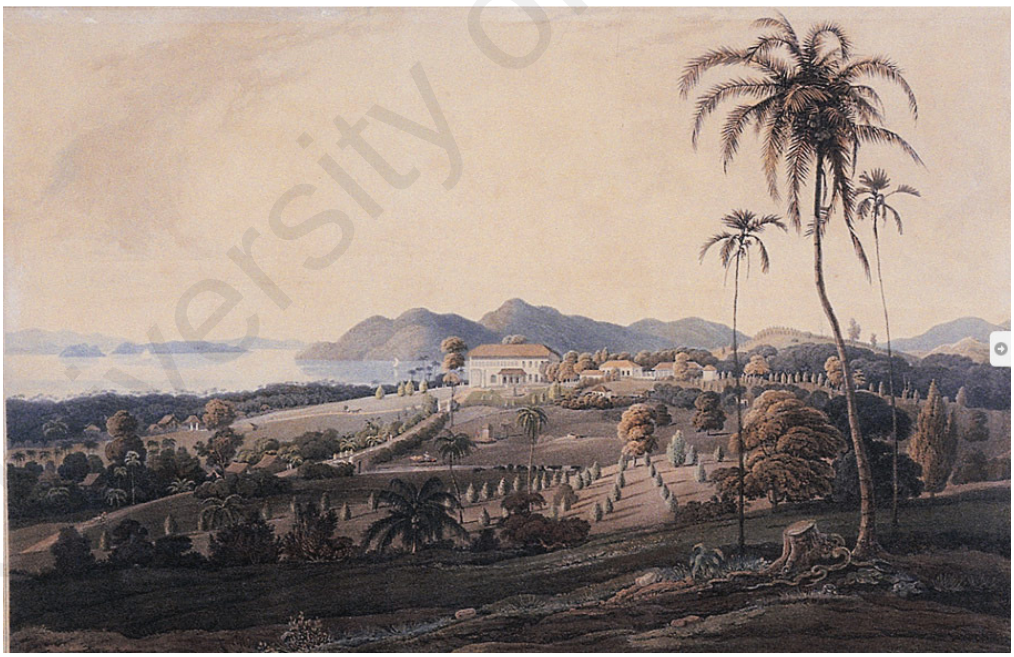

Figure 25. Robert Smith, View Glugor House and Spice Plantations, Prince of Wales's Island, 1818, Aquatint, 46 x 71cm. From the Penang State Museum and Art Gallery Collection. Accessed June 15, 2019. http://www.penangmuseum.gov.my/museum/museum/historical-paintings.

The first thing one should take note of when comparing Smith's painting to that of Liu Kang and See, is the disparity between the spatial distribution of the landmass and bodies of water with the expanse of the sky. In Smith's landscape, the land and waters are evenly divided with the sky, both taking up almost equal portions of the picture plane. Liu Kang and See however does not include much of the sky, and instead the village setting, its people and the community are made primary. There is also a lack of division between civilization and nature for Liu Kang and See compared to what was discussed about Smith's painting in the change of the foliage from the central house to the periphery. In Liu Kang's idyllic painting the river winds through the scenery and figures are seen interacting within it. The foliage design is consistent and scattered throughout the village setting, behind the village houses, along the riverbanks, and even amongst the figures. In See's fishing village, the sea is dominant, so much so that the houses that are built above it so precariously almost seem to be at its mercy. In both the artworks of the Malayan artists, we find that there is a strong sense of civilization intermingling with nature.

Understanding the artist's social-political background is crucial for us to comprehend the change in the way they depicted the tropical coastal landscape, albeit in different locations in Malaya. If we view this comparative exercise through the lens of Yi-Fu Tuan, then the tropical coastal space should be experienced differently, shaped by the social-political backgrounds giving all three artists differing views in their practice of producing an artwork of this place. Captain Robert Smith a colonial, serves the imperial capitalist motivations of the British Crown Colony to search for new resources in other parts of the world. His perception of a new found land would be that of a newly

discovered commodity for the colony, because the colonial practice of landscape painting as means of documentation also draws upon the studying of it as a subject in order to lay claim over it.[41] This is reflected in his painting, where the central house becomes emblematic of the Crown Colony, and the gradually shifting foliage gives us the sense of the imperial colony casting its sovereign influence over the wild exotic land, enabling it through colonization and modernization to provide back to the Crown Colony.

In the case of Liu Kang and See, because they identify with the space differently as a place which they call home, it therefore naturally comes with a sense of belonging which gives them both different emphasis when visualizing the landscape. Their concern is not so much the possession of the land and of nature as with imperial capitalism, but rather of negotiating and communing with it in the efforts to coexist. Liu Kang an immigrant from China was perhaps enchanted by the exotic atmosphere of this new found home when he arrived here. He fled his homeland China for possible socio-political or economic reasons in hopes of finding better prospects elsewhere, so his view of his new home in the Nanyang might have had a sort of bias to something better, hence a more idyllic viewpoint. However, for See the enchantment of the exotic tropics is probably not as prevalent as with Liu Kang seeing as See did grow up in this setting and does not have preceding experiences of other places to contrast it with. This may account for how See's visual strategy is more concerned with the unraveling of the more complex emotional experience which we have discussed as being ambivalent; whilst he admired the beauty of his homeland, he also experiences the struggle and turmoil of

[41] Edward Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," in *Landscape and Power,* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.247.

living here. Though Liu Kang and See are both seeking to construct a national identity, their individual experiences of a common space give them each differing views of a place which is made manifest through their landscapes.

The idea that politics, in the sense of power relations between the viewer (in our case, an artist like See), and his subject matter exists is a crucial point for us to keep in mind as we move forward in our study of See's work. Besides rural landscapes, See seem to show a keen interest in Malay culture evident in some of his prints in the mid-1960s. This opens new queries as to how politics and power relations exists in the othering of a culture or ethnicity for an artist like See.

CHAPTER 5: THE EXOTIC OTHER

5.1 Frolic & Dance

Figure 26. See Cheen Tee, *Malay Dancers*. 1964, Woodblock Print, 81 x 45 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 78.

In 1964, after a 4 year hiatus from producing woodblock prints, See once again to delved into this art form. When we scrutinize his portfolio of woodblock prints up until

that point, one should notice two significant changes in his woodblock prints that emerged in the 60s. The first would be the dimensions of the artworks which increased three or four times of those he produced before the 60s. The other change is the subject matter of which focused more on the Malay community in contrast to the previous woodblock prints he produced which centered more on social justice topics or genre scenes of the Chinese community.

According to independent researcher, Koh during an interview, he explained that the change in the dimensions of the woodblock prints produced by See and his contemporaries could be attributed to the visit of Praphan Srisouta. A Thai woodblock artist who introduced the masonite board as an alternative to the previous woodblock that was imported from China. Koh also provided an article by Lim Mue Hue who expressed in the article that Nanyang artists should learn from Srisouta, for having such an ingenious approach in terms of technique. The masonite board, the more economic alternative allowed for them to work on artworks of much larger dimensions. However, we are uncertain if the upscaled dimensions of these artworks had any relation to the change in the subject matter, and could be an area that should be researched further. Nonetheless, for this study we would be focussing primarily on the way the subject matters are visualized and the politics behind See, a Southeast Asian artist of Chinese descent and his subject matter.

Malay Dancers was one of the woodblock prints that were produced in 1964 and it has a male and female figure, both relatively slender in their forms dancing together (Figure 26). Now, as the title suggests quite plainly, the couple we see in this print are identified as Malay. We also know this because of their outfits which are traditionally

worn by the Malay ethnics in Malaysia and Singapore. The man is wearing a baju Melayu, complete with a checkered *samping* bound around his waist that goes down to about his knee. He also dons a *songkok*, a cap worn mostly by Malay men, and is often associated with Islam with its introduction by Arab traders, some of whom were also Islamic missionaries in the Southeast Asian region during the 13th century. The female figure is wearing a *baju kebaya* with delicate lace motifs and a *sarong batik* with intricate floral motifs for her skirt. She also has a sort of headscarf that is loosely draped over her hair.

They are both dancing together and it is clear that the dance is a highly spirited one, involving vigourous motion with implied diagonal lines moving in all directions through their limbs and posture. There are gestural lines at the base of their feet to suggest a sort of upbeat and dizzying motion. The swirls and rhythmic creases on their outfit and fabric also give us this impression of vigorous motion. Though they are dancing together, there seems to be a sort of cat and mouse game between the two dancers. The female dancer turns her body away from the male counterpart yet turns her face back to look at him. The male dancer offers a hand, but the female dancer reciprocates it rather unenthusiastically, her hand is limp as if to tease him and encourage his pursuit. In fact, her hand is positioned as such it gently touches his chin, subtly drawing him into her allure - an artful seduction.

This artwork is quite a contrast when compared to the woodblocks prints that was being studied earlier in this research, specifically those with Social Justice themes. The contrast of black and white was formerly used in the Social Justice pieces to create a dramatic atmosphere, to accentuate the melancholy and anguish of the impoverished.

Yet now, See has used these binary contrasts instead to define intricate details and patterns on the traditional clothing of these dancers. The lines are smooth, graceful and sinuous in the artwork with this dancing couple, but the poor and afflicted in the social justice pieces are fraught with erratic and chaotic lines. In place of elements that are composed together to capture pathos, we find a visual composition that exudes excitement, joviality, even sensuality. The visual treatment of the subject matter is evidently different, and this may perhaps be that the artist does feel that the subject matter now, the Malay people here are indeed different - different from his own, the Chinese.

Figure 27. Liu Kang. *Malay Couple* 1953, Oil on Canvas. From the private collection of Liu Thai Ker (son of Liu Kang). Accessed July 17, 2019. https://www.esplanade.com/tributesg/visual-arts/liu-kang

The depiction of the Malay community by Chinese artists in Malaya and Singapore was not something new at all in the 60s. In Liu Kang's *Malay Couple* painted in 1953, we see yet another couple but they are interacting differently compared to the ones in See's woodblock print (Figure 27). Void of dynamic movements, this artwork is more composed, with the couple seated on a bench in a serene park setting hinted by the

heavy foliage in the background. The vertical stone columns of which we could speculate are the pillars of a gazebo with overhanging plants above the couple encloses them both, giving them a sense of privacy. Their surroundings set the tone of a rather intimate moment between the two of them. The female figure here is rather coy, more reserved in comparison to the female figure in See's woodblock print. Here, her legs are tucked close together, arms folded in with hands over her thighs and her head and gaze are lowered. Her body language suggests a sense of modesty, yet subservience as she offers herself to the male figure to left. The man on the other hand, in contrast to the female figure, seems almost imperious, with his legs spread apart and one of which is propped up on the bench. His right arm extends out over to her back as if to draw her into his domain. Additionally, his clothing is rather casual, wearing a shirt with shorts altogether adds to his whole nonchalant demeanour.

Though there are obvious differences in the way both couples are interacting with each other, both artists have chosen to capture a moment of courtship. In both cases, the couples are spending their time leisurely, engaging with the affairs of love and romance. This "carefree" and idyllic way of life seems to be a dominant theme when Nanyang artists depicted the Malay community in their artwork. This distinction is more pronounced when we begin to observe how the artists would, in turn, depict the Chinese community. See's woodblock prints, for instance, would mostly depict the Chinese community involving in some sort of productive activity or familial relations. Examples of artworks that convey the idea of productivity are *The Creator* which we have discussed before, depicting a street peddler working his craft of making dough figurines, and *Moment of Joy* which features a farmer releasing young chicks from their captivity

to have a drink (Figure 28). *The Next Generation* and *Three Generations* are artworks that deal with family and descendants (Figure 40). The breastfeeding mother in *Three Generations* also holds a newspaper that is emblematic of literacy and knowledge - a pursuit of keeping with the times suggesting mental productivity. Even if the figure was idling away such as in *Resting* which See produced in 1954, it depicts a rickshaw puller which still reminds us of the notion of work and toil (Figure 29). Couples dancing in merriment and romantic conversations are not settings you would find Chinese woodblock artists depicting the Chinese ethnic group.

Figure 28. See Cheen Tee, *Moment of Joy*. 1966, Woodblock Print, 61 x 44 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 66.

Figure 29. See Cheen Tee, *Resting*. 1954, Woodblock Print, 29 x 20 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 58.

The practice of Nanyang artists having Malay people as the subject matter of their artwork was made popular by the first generation Nanyang artists and we must study them, being antecedents to See - it would lend us some insights as to how they might have influenced his work. The practice of painting the Malay as a subject matter had its most pivotal moment in a trip that four of them made to Bali in 1952. This trip involved Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Cheong Swee, and they traveled there to endeavour a search for visual inspiration that could allow them to create works of art that can truthfully reflect a Southeast Asian flavour. According to Chen Wen Hsi, he expressed that Bali was a place that was so filled with inspiration for his work and he was enthralled by the abundance of culture that was present in that place. Liu Kang on several accounts noted the beauty of the Malay Balinese womenfolk and their half-nakedness allowed for him to do studies of nudes quite easily during this trip. However before we proceed, it would be imperative to note that the term 'Malay' even in the Southeast Asian context itself has a plurality of definitions. Milner explicates this plurality of who can be considered Malay, and explains that most scholarly practice might initially define them as those who speak the Malayo-Polynesian language.[42] Though this can be complicated even further by politics and other ethnographic differences, but for the sake of this study we are only focussing on the 'Malays' whom are depicted in the artworks of these Nanyang artists - the Malay who are from Bali (whom may not be referred to as Malay but more commonly as Balinese), and the Malay in See's and Liu's work which are the dominant ethnic group in the Malay Peninsular made identifiable by their attire.

[42] Anthony Milner, *The Malays: The Peoples of South-East Asia and The Pacific* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell,2008) p.1-5

The similarities between the Malays from these two different geographical locations are that they both speak a language that falls within the same family of Malayo-Polynesian languages, and that they are also both inhabitants of these locales before the immigration of the Chinese ethnic groups. Therefore, to Chinese immigrants such as the early Nanyang artists, Malays are native to this region. It should be clarified that the term 'native' used in this study explicitly refers to the dominant Malay ethnic group that has built a civilization in these locations before the arrival of Chinese immigrants who finally settled there as well. Notwithstanding, indigenous groups with developed communities that have resided in these locales for even longer too are considered 'native' and have also been a subject matter of the early Nanyang artist such as Cheong Soo Pieng.

The gaze of the native body by these Nanyang artists during the Bali field trip is, in fact, an act of othering the native. There is an order of distinction made between the artist and the subject matter, and this is briefly explained in an essay by curator Rawanchaikul Toshiko for an exhibition, "Nanyang 1950-65: Passage to Singaporean Art":

"In short, it reveals a paradox where the "self" was achieved by reproducing the "other".[43]

This was with reference to the Nanyang artists painting the Balinese women. Toshiko further expressed that artists such as See too demonstrated such a gaze in his work of the native. The "self" in her essay referred to Singapore (the artists themselves being Singaporean), and hence it was also an attempt of the artists to develop a national

[43] Rawanchaikul Toshiko. *Nanyang 1950-65: Passage to Singaporean Art*. (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2002)

identity as part of the making of the 'self'. Bali and its womenfolk becoming an ideal subject matter come from the fact that these artists sought a less modernized place. This was because they as Singaporean artists were themselves an 'other'. Toshiko explains that being Singaporean artists, they were in fact doubly marginalized, by both the Western world and China. The Nanyang artists then applied the same structural framework onto the Southeast Asian society and as a result turned to seeing the native womenfolk as the other.

Now that we understand the power relations behind the Nanyang artist and the subject matter of the native body, we should be reminded that another concept attached to natives is the idea of the 'noble savage'. This myth of the noble savage was believed to have emerged from the writings of Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The idea of the noble savage is an ambivalent one which glorifies the native and their closeness with nature and equates their primitivism and ignorance with innocence; yet quite simultaneously valorizes Eurocentric progression and the capabilities of the human intellect. Ong in her thesis essay expounds on this relationship between the noble savage and the art of the Nanyang artists.[44] We find on several accounts their perceptions of Bali were also been influenced by the West and their romantic exoticization of the island. An exhibition by Belgian painter, Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merpres in Singapore in 1933 at Raffles Quay, YWCA became quite a decisive factor to make Bali as the location for their field trip. Liu Kang, in one of his essays even quotes Charlie Chaplin who highly recommended Bali when one visits

[44] Ong Ian Li. "Tradition and Change: The Eclectic Artworks of The Nanyang Artists." MA diss. (University of Malaya, 2007). p.74

Southeast Asia. Gauguin and his paintings in Tahiti too played a role to inspire the artists to make the trip to Bali, and in fact Tahiti was an option before their decision to settle with Bali.

Ong argues that whilst most writers would draw parallels between Gauguin and his Tahitian paintings with the Nanyang artists and their Balinese paintings, the intent of these two sets of artists is quite the contrary. Gauguin was drawn to the primitivism of Tahiti and was there to escape civilization, drawing upon the whole notion of the noble savage, whereas the Nanyang artists were less sentimentalized and were drawn there for the visual inspirations that can redefine the formal aspects of their work.[45] We could perhaps see what Ong had presented in her thesis when we analyze Chen's painting of *Dancing Lesson* which he probably painted during the trip in 1952 (Figure 30). The low value and desaturated background of the temple forces the viewer to look at the dancers in the foreground, fully clothed in colourful fabric which he meticulously painted with patterns. The same sort of meticulousness we find See demonstrating in his detailing of the fabric of the Malay couple dancing. Their clothing and graceful poses become the main interest in the paintings. We would not find the same technical precision when looking at one of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings - his broad expressive stroked that fills delineated shapes like a cloisonné (Figure 31). The meticulous details of traditional material culture and observation of ritualistic activities (dances, bearing of offerings) of the 'natives' is absent in Gauguin's paintings but made very apparent in the artworks produced during and after the Bali trip by the Nanyang artists.

[45] Ong, "Tradition and Change". p.77-80

Figure 30. Chen Chong Swee, *Dancing Lesson,* 1952, Watercolour on paper, 47 x 62cm. From the Singapore National Museum Permanent Collection. Accessed August 25, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/dancing-lesson/ZQFq5X8dsSh0LQ

Figure 31. Paul Gauguin, *Sacred Springs Sweet Dreams,* 1894, Oil on canvas, 74 x 100 cm. Currently at the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Accessed August 20, 2019. https://theculturetrip.com/pacific/tahiti-french-polynesia/articles/art-galleries-and-museums-to-visit-in-tahiti/

Nonetheless, a query that would also be worth pondering upon is if this othering by the Nanyang artists something that could be attributed only to the West. Would the Nanyang artists have the tendency to establish the 'self' by reproducing the 'other' solely from their contact from their Western education and influences?

We must also understand that the Bali trip artists were notably first-generation Nanyang artists who were born in China, and up until their graduation from academies of fine arts in China, they were thoroughly exposed to the literati class, their practices, and philosophies. A prime example would be Liu Kang's very acquaintances that include his mentor Liu Haisu (founder of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art and well-known for his efforts in synthesizing philosophies from Japan and Europe to reshape art education in China), and Fu Lei (prominent art theorist and translator in China). The literati class is closely related to imperial power in China. Otherwise known as the scholarly-gentlemen, this class of men was groomed to take on the much-desired positions in service of the imperial government. An imperialistic civilization, according to its theoretical structure is one that views itself as the center, and those at its periphery as the lesser.[46] This is also discussed in Toshiko's essay where she explains that even the term Nanyang (南洋) used by the Han Chinese to refer the region of Southeast Asia meant South Seas - in this case, south of the center, the center being China (or more specifically the capital). She illustrates this Sinocentric system to help us understand this concept:

[46] Johan Galtung, "'A Structural Theory of Imperialism'- Ten Years Later," *Journal of Peace Research 8*, no. 2 (1971): pp. 81-117, https://doi.org/10.1177/030582988000900302O1) p.82

center=self=civilized

periphery=other=primitive[47]

So, whilst we can easily observe othering in Western paintings and attribute othering to Western ideas, the gaze of the native as the other is not necessarily something inherent only in Occidental art practice, it is, in fact, inherent in imperialistic cultures. This is evident in the discovery of such terms as "*fan ren"* and "*nan man"* in official Chinese imperial documents. Both of those terms carry a derogatory tone that defines the Southeast Asians as "barbarians".[48] Cheng Wen-Huei's research also has similar findings in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*.[49] This is also evident when we observe the writings of Liu Kang who was deeply interested in modernizing Chinese art at the time and in one of his essays, Liu expressed that the development of arts in Malaya was a responsibility that the Chinese community must undertake.

As we now gain insight into the power relations or rather politics that exist between Chinese immigrant artists (the early Nanyang artists), this helps shed light on the production of some See's woodblock prints that portrays the Malay as a "carefree" people, a community that in contrast lacks the productivity and industry of the Chinese he depicted. However, this notion of the merry and jovial native frolicking in paradise is not necessarily a consistent trope is See's work, just like his woodblock prints that feature the local landscape - it has an ambivalent quality.

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[47] Toshiko Rawanchaikul, "Considering the Reproduction of Other and Obtainment of Self in Nanyang Art Movement." (*De Arte, Journal of the Kyushu Art Society*, vol. 17, Kyushu University, Mar. 2002)
[48] Jing Sun, *Japan and China as Charm Rivals: Soft Power in Regional Diplomacy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013)) pg. 59.
[49] Cheng Wen-Huei. ' Visual Spectacle and A Geography of Power: Representations of Southeast Asia (Nanyang) in Dianshizhai Pictorial.' In *Qing/Emotion, Mobility and East Asian Modernity International Conference*, National Tsing Hua University, December 22, 2016.

5.2 The Malay Dilemma: Economic Displacement

See produced a woodblock print in 1964, entitled *Family in Boat* which depicts a family of three huddled into the confines of a small boat (Figure 32). The family consists of a man to the right, and to his left, a woman is looking at him which we may presume to be his wife who is holding their infant child on her lap. The man seems to be either taking a brief shut-eye or is deep in thought, perhaps a little of both, but whatever it is the visual elements point to the fact that he is carrying some sort of mental burden. His face is shrouded in shadow and the intertwining of fingers over his face suggests to us an attempt at hiding or obscuring problems he might be facing. His troubled state of mind is also reflected in his posture, with his arms and hands forming an implied square that encloses him in; and his legs are folded inward further restricting his whole figure into a confined space. His wife looks toward him emphatically with a composed demeanour, retaining an upright posture as she cares for the infant in her arms. Her facial expression and posture together lend to an idea of her continual support for her husband in spite of the troubles that burden his mind. The subject of his worry could be two things suggested in this artwork. Firstly, he is worried about the infant's upbringing and survival whose circular head stands out between him and his wife. The other cause of worry could their living conditions which we can only assume might be the boat itself. The arching canopy over the boat and the hull of the boat itself forms a frame that encloses the family into an almost claustrophobic space. We could deduce that the man is concerned about caring for his family, and the difficulties of raising a child in this less than ideal setting of a small boat. Even if the boat might not be their dwelling, it visually sets up an environment that reflects the restrictions or conundrum faced by the man.

Figure 32. See Cheen Tee, Family in Boat. 1964, Woodblock Print, 77 x 49 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 68.

It can be deduced from this woodblock print that the family is ethnically Malay based on the attire and fabric. Firstly, the female figure is half nude and only wears a sarong with floral batik prints, and she also wears hooped earrings and pins a tropical flower on her hair. All of these are stereotypical of a Malay woman though it might not be

absolutely clear if she was Balinese Malay or from the Malay Peninsular. However, being bare-breasted and observing her accessories, she may likely be Balinese as this was quite conventionally what they wore and can also be observed in the studies and sketches of the early Nanyang artists during their trip in 1952. The headgear which the man wears over his head tied into a sort of turban which has checkered patterns also alludes to something worn by Balinese men called the *udeng*. This artwork by See does not romanticize the native's way of life, but it is a demonstration of his sensitivity to the plight they were facing. This work could very well be deemed as a Social Realist piece that depicts the social condition faced by the natives.

Figure 33. Paul Gauguin, *The Canoe: A Tahitian Family,* 1896, Oil on canvas, 96 x 130.5 cm. Currently at the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Accessed August 20, 2019. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gauguin_-_Der_Einbaum_-_1996.jpg

Gauguin's painting, *The Canoe: A Tahitian Family* which he painted in 1896 is quite a contrast in terms of the narrative when compared to See's Balinese *Family in Boat* (Figure 33). It offers a typical colonial view of the native body in their environment, in fact much more than that it is quite specifically Gauguin's imagination of an idyllic primitive life that is free from the artificiality of European civilization. Art historians Nancy Mowll Mathews and Stephen F Eisenman have both researched and written extensively on how Gauguin's Tahitian paintings are fictionalized depictions of an exotic life that he had longed for but never lived in Tahiti, which by then was quite heavily modernized by French colonials. In this painting, the male nude figure in the foreground is painted in profile, kneeling on the ground as he gazes into the coconut husk. His body is not confined or restricted like the man in See's woodblock print, and in contrast this Tahitian man is very relaxed, with slightly hunched shoulders and his right arm is just simply hanging down. His eyes peer into the coconut husk, and his countenance does not reflect someone in deep contemplation. The woman behind the canoe is laid down on the beach sand basking in the final rays of the sun as it sets on the horizon marked by a distinct horizontal line which further calms the entire painting. Another smaller nude figure of an infant on the bottom right corner is left to stumble around inspecting the canoe by himself. The canoe itself is dragged relatively far from the water's edge which we can see in the upper portion of the painting, signifying cessation of work, perhaps travel. Its earthbound state gives this immobile sea vessel a sense of inactivity. There is a great impression of slumber and passivity that is created by all these elements. The poses of the figures, the compositional arrangements, and even the colours. Though there are some warm reds, it is juxtaposed with earthy tones

and deep blues, colours that are reminiscent of colours during sunset; a time of unwinding and rest. There is a vast difference between Gauguin's colonial fiction of an idyllic life in the exotic tropics that enforces the myth of the lazy native when compared to See's depiction of the native's dilemma.

In order to understand what this dilemma might be, a painting by Mohamed Salehuddin in 1959 titled *At the Kampung Shop* may shed some light on our investigation (Figure 34). The main activity we see in this painting is the buying and selling between the Chinese shopkeeper and the Malay woman in the foreground. Another Malay man is standing not too far from the Malay woman, of which could be her husband suggested by the basket he is holding which could be meant for the groceries she is about to buy. At the right periphery, an Indian man is walking into the picture plane. The environment is also divided into two areas which are the urbanized commercial area in the foreground and middle ground (demarcated by the car at the center of the painting and the shophouses on the far right behind the Indian man), and the rural village in the background where the kampung house and coconut trees are situated.

This painting was discussed by Piyadasa and his reading was that this painting by Salehuddin was, in fact, a social critique of the socio-economic situation at the time. Piyadasa proposes that this painting makes a statement about the economic upper hand that the Chinese have over the Malays which is conveyed in this painting by the robust and healthy built of the shirtless shopkeeper in comparison to the frailer, and delicate build of the Malay woman. He further posits that the Malay man wearing a songkok is contemplating the disparity between urban and village life as he looks on at the

kampung house. The Indian man was assumed to be a *chettiah* because of his South-Indian attire who were infamous as moneylenders for the Malay community.[50] Tan on the other hand, vehemently refutes Piyadasa's reading of this painting in his book *Social Responsibility In Art Criticism (Or Why Yong Mun Sen Is The Father of Malaysian Painting)*. Tan instead insists that it was a painting about racial harmony and that he did not see "a well-dressed Chinese towkay, with an evil glint in his eye, manipulating the *dacing* to cheat a poorly dressed Malay lady with her malnourished child…". [51]

[50] Redza Piyadasa, "The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art, 1930-1981". *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysia Art Vol 1*: 26-51. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: RogueArt, 2012) p.33-34

[51] Tan Chee Khuan. *Social Responsibility In Art Criticism (Or why Yong Mun Sen is The Father of Malaysian Painting).* (Pulau Pinang, The Art Gallery, 1998) p.125

Figure 34. Mohammed Salehuddin. *Membeli-belah di kampung*. Oil on canvas. 89.5 x 76.5cm 1959. National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. In *Cobo Social.* https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Screen-Shot-2016-08-03-at-4.43.12-pm.png.

Nonetheless, if we scrutinize this painting, one will notice that it would be rather uncharacteristic for Salehuddin to paint such a caricatured representation of the Chinese shopkeeper, because as Tan himself said, this painting was merely a depiction of a common scene in a kampung. This meant, Salehuddin was trying to depict a scene true to Social Realist values, hence this painting would present itself as a piece of evidence to the actual situation. Therefore, Piyadasa's reading of the painting is not necessarily wrong as Tan pointed out, and holds much more weight because he was interpreting it just as it was. We cannot deny that indeed the shopkeeper is remarkably more robust than the woman, and when he holds the *dacing*, it does visually suggest that he is in fact control of the trading activity. The irony here is also that the very rice that was planted predominantly by Malay farmers, has gone into the hands of Chinese commercial traders only to be purchased back by the Malays. This irony is a major dilemma faced by the Malay ethnics in post-colonial Malaya - an economic displacement of their community. Another piece of evidence as to how this painting could so easily be read as carrying political undertones is the little newspaper article used to pack the rice that the shopkeeper is weighing. A close scrutiny reveals the headlines *"The King is indeed proud of all of you…",* which could be an assertive stance to remind the Malay community that in spite of their economic displacement, the rule over the land and

governance over the newly established nation-state of Malaya was still in the hands of the Malays.

The economic displacement is an issue that was very prevalent at that time - so much so that the New Economic Policy had to be introduced by the newly independent government in Malaya to keep the balance of wealth and economy in the country in check between the races. The disparity of wealth and commercial strength became most apparent during Malaya's colonial rule. The notion of race was used by the colonials who governed the land to categorically discriminate and stereotype the different ethnicities for the sake of their economic benefit.[52] The Chinese immigrants who were brought into Malaya by the colonials were favoured by the colonials for their tenacity and willingness to work under the colonials in the rubber plantations in spite of the decrepit living conditions they had to endure. The Malays however, who did not see the need to subject themselves to such dire conditions, turned to rice farming on their own were instead labelled indolent by the colonials. In the book *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas explains that such essentialist categorization by the colonials was practiced by them in shifting around local labour to maximize their economic gains which ultimately altered socio-economic hierarchies in the land. According to records a British government officer, Wanford Lock wrote about labour division and stated that the Malays are lazy and indolent (from their refusal to work with the colonial on their capitalist interests primarily in rubber plantations), The Chinese are thieves (the stereotypical association of shrewd businessmen in commerce and trade)

[52] Sharmani P Gabriel, "The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-Colonial and Possible New Conjunctures," Ethnicities 15, no. 6 (2015): pp. 782-809, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796815570347) p .787

and the Indians were stereotyped as drunkards.[53] Alatas also explains that the displacement of the Malay trading class was a gradual process that occurred over three centuries starting with the colonization of Malacca by the Portuguese.[54]

This situation of native economic displacement was not exclusive only to Malaya, but according to Kuhn in his book *The Chinese Amongst Others*, he discusses this scenario occurring also in two other nations besides Malaysia, namely Indonesia and the Philippines. He noted that in the early 20th century, the economic displacement of the natives in Southeast Asia was apparent and Anti-Sinitism had been simmering even before the World War. In the post-war years, as these Southeast Asian countries began its decolonization process, nationalism emerged among the natives together with a distaste for the Chinese immigrants whose loyalty and belonging was in question. He quoted from an excerpt by Assat, a prominent Indonesian man who targeted the Indonesians of Chinese descent and exclaimed that they were monopolistic, and were biased in their commercial practices. In Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammed had written a highly controversial book in the 1970s, *The Malay Dilemma* and expressed how the Chinese were naturally adapted over generations to survive harsh circumstances and living conditions which worked to their advantage economically against the Malays:

[53] Charles Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology," Sociological Forum 1, no. 2 (1986): pp. 330-361, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01115742) p. 357
[54] Hussein Alatas, The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism. (London: F. Cass, 1977) p.185

> "The Malays, whose own hereditary and environmental influence had been so debilitating, could do nothing but retreat before theonslaught of the Chinese immigrants"[55]

Once again returning to Piyadasa's reading of Salehuddin's painting, it would not be unfounded for him to make such a visual analysis about the Chinese upper hand in trade compared to the Malays, because the reality was such that colonialism had forever altered the socio-economic landscape of Southeast Asia, and the void of their governance, which allowed for nationalism to rise and became a hotbed for racial conflicts to fully erupt. When See's woodblock print was contrasted against Gauguin's painting we can understand how a colonial view is vastly different from the reality a 2nd generation Chinese migrant, such as See was trying to depict. Yet, it was through consulting with a painting by a native, in our case Salehuddin, did we find an avenue that sheds light on the predicament that could have troubled the mind of the man on the boat in See's woodblock print.

The fascination of the native body and their lives by Chinese artists be it the 4 popular Nanyang style pioneers or by a 2nd generation immigrant like See is quite apparent when we view their portfolio collectively. As mentioned earlier this othering of the native comes not only from Occidental practices and culture but is inherent in imperialistic civilizations which includes China. The native, however, is not the only subject matter othered by the artists, because observing See's portfolio once again, the feminine figure makes a persistent recurrence throughout.

[55] Mahathir bin Mohamad. *The Malay Dilemma.* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1970) p.3

CHAPTER 6: FEMININE FIGURES

6.1 Beauty & Burden In Paradise

Figure 35. See Cheen Tee, *Village Girls (Sienna-Violet)*. 1966, Woodblock Print, 77 x 49 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 77.

The year 1966 marks See Cheen Tee's most prolific year in woodblock print production with 12 different prints, and some of these were also reprinted with colours. One of these was a vertically-oriented print titled *Village Girls* which came as a series printed in 6 varying colour schemes (Figure 35). The main difference between these 6 prints was the background colours which remained within a palette of earthy warm tones. There are two Malay women in the woodblock print and their figures are slightly overlapping. See created a sense of space between them through the use of light and value. The woman facing us, whose reddish sarong that is bound around her chest is well illuminated, hence her skin is left white in contrast to the woman whose back faces the viewer who is rendered predominantly in black. This stark difference in value not only helps us distinguish the two figures but also gives us a sense of space, thrusting the woman rendered in black nearer to the foreground, a shadowed area nearer toward the viewer. This then suggests to us as the viewer that we too are standing in the shadows as we cast our gaze upon the two of them.

The arrangement of their figures, one who is partially blocked and the other whose back faces us creates a sort of enigmatic quality about the figures through obscuration. We fail to get a full view of neither of them, evoking our curiosity about these women. It immerses us into an elusive mystery surrounding these women and at the same time captures a sort of voyeuristic moment as we the viewer gazes at these girls who may not even be aware of our presence. This manner of viewing is explained to us in Mulvey's seminal writing on the male gaze, in which it objectifies women as a subject matter of sensual beauty. The female figure in the front who is predominantly in black is wearing only a bra with much of her back exposed. The curvilinear outlines that delineate her

figure heighten the sensuality of her form. Her obliviousness that she is being viewed in this scopophilic experience gives her viewers, or more importantly through the lens of her author, a male artist the agency of power to look - to view, whilst she serves as stimuli, the object of desire.

The native female body is often a subject matter for most early artists in the history of Malaysian or Singaporean art-making if any figuration is depicted in the artwork. Observing the range of works produced by the first generation Nanyang artists, right up until the years where the Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung flourished, the feminine figure remains a predominant choice in figurative artworks - the native woman in her rural setting specifically becomes allegorical to the beauty and natural abundance of the land. According to Izmer Ahmad, the Nanyang artist, in fact, chose the feminine figure in their artworks, as a means to discover their new identity as Chinese immigrants who are trying to set roots in a new land, a new region.[56] Yee, who analyzes the works of batik artist Chuah Thean Teng from Malaysia, postulates that the consistent use of voluptuous women in his work bears a metaphor for the bounty of the land.[57] Woman and her body have long been metaphorized as the earth or as nature, for which man views as the other, with the desire to lay claim and become an object of conquest. The understanding of the male gaze and the metaphor of the feminine figure as the land could then help us understand See's woodblock print as an artwork that reflects his negotiation with the land and its native people - seeing them beautiful, exotic, enigmatic and yet desirable.

[56] Izmer Ahmad. "The Body In Modern Malaysian Art". *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysia Art Vol 1*: 252-261. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: RogueArt, 2012) p.253
[57] Yee I-Lann. "Love Me In My Batik". *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysia Art Vol 1*: 262-278. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: RogueArt, 2012) p.263

It is worth noting too that the verticality of the artwork's format accentuates the uprightness of the two figures. They also both seem busy with their hands full; possibly carrying out certain chores evident from them bearing many things with their hands and even on their heads - baskets, fruits, and what seems to resemble a crude urn possibly filled with water. The uprightness and verticality of their figures along with the bearing of multiple objects representing the variety of chores they've taken upon themselves is an indication that these dainty and delicate girls have a certain strength and social importance to their society. We have not full certainty about where he may have gained the inspiration to visualize such feminine figures from, but based on the commemorative book his daughter put together, it seems that he drew inspiration from the rural parts of the East Coast of Malaysia, more specifically from where he grew up as a child in the coastal regions of Terengganu.[58] The depiction of women as strong and independent is not exclusive to Malaysia alone. It is a common perception of native rural Southeast Asian women to be extremely industrious because not only are they required to care for the home, but some go to the extent of delving into rural industries and commerce. In Indonesia, hard labour such as construction work and bricklaying are also taken on by women. It is not uncommon to see women bearing not only water urns on their heads like See's village girls here, they also bear piles of cement in baskets.[59] The visual representation of women bearing items on their heads also suggests not just strength but an idea of subservience to their community, of which we need to note is often a

[58] Chia Wai Hon and See Cheen Tee. *See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and n Cartoonist*. (Singapore: Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001) p. 19
[59] "Family & Gender," Ubud Now & Then, accessed November 18, 2019, http://ubudnowandthen.com/ubud-bali-culture/community-life/family-gender/)

patriarchal one. A sort of expectation is created through the reinforcement of these artworks that it is the role of the women to carry this burden.

Figure 36. Liu Kang, *Offerings* 1957, Oil on canvas, 122 x 154 cm. Liu Kang Family Collection at Singapore Art Museum. Accessed July 20, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/offerings/TwEuDt6s7gynFQ

We see this also in Liu Kang's oil painting entitled *Offerings* in 1957, possibly reproduced from his sketches and studies he made in the 1952 Bali trip (Figure 36).

There are three Balinese women in this painting, and unlike the village girls in See's woodblock prints, these figures in Liu's painting are facing forward, they are not obscured and they are fully aware of the viewer. There is a sense of openness here, with all three of them standing in a row, upright and facing the viewer giving the impression that there is nothing to hide - not them, nor the viewer. It is devoid of the voyeuristic elements that catches the subject matter off guard, oblivious of her viewer. This could be perhaps due to the nature of their activity at present which is religious and therefore demands a different approach in their representation - one that reflects order, devotion, innocence and simplicity as opposed to sensuality and seduction. Order is reflected in this artwork with a balanced composition using approximate symmetry, having the tallest woman in the center, flanked by the two shorter, possibly younger women by her side.

Here instead of carrying out domestic chores, the women's role in religion and devotion is highlighted because they bear offerings (*banten tegeh*) on top of their heads. These offerings are always handmade by women and carried on the heads by women in a large procession on the days of the founding of most temples in Bali. The offerings do become the highlight of this painting with its stark geometric forms and bright colours compared to the more organic forms of the female figures. The background is also a crucial component to observe, with the hill and sky separated behind where the faces of the women are. It is as if to say, that man (or in this case womankind) with the hill and forest behind is of the earth and the ground which relates to humankind's mortality and limitation. Yet, as our view ascends to the offerings, the background is then the infinite

space of the blue sky and clouds which relates to the ethereal nature of the deities. Once again we find that the feminine figure becomes a metaphor for earth.

Another similarity that can be noted between this painting and See's woodblock print is their upright stance. In both paintings, the female figure becomes a literal pillar of strength, playing a crucial social role in upholding the home and their beliefs. We find that these Nanyang artists shared such a common perception of the native rural woman, and so for the sake of contrast, it would be needful to also consult with a painting that looks at the native feminine figure through a colonial lens.

Figure 37. Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur De Merpes, *Women Around the Lotus Pond* 1950-51, Oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Anonymous sale; Christie's Hong Kong, 27 May 2007. Accessed July 20, 2019. https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/adrien-jean-le-mayeur-de-merpres-belgian-1880-1958-6000032-details.aspx

Le Mayeur is known for his romantic depictions of Bali and their womenfolk. Much of his art along with several other Western artists who were captivated by the allure of Bali is responsible for presenting and reinforcing an idealized trope of Asia's landscape and its women in particular, as aesthetically beautiful and exotic. This tendency also finds its roots from the notion of the noble savage of which we have mentioned in the previous chapter. This form of the idealized depiction of the East in the art of Western painters in Indonesia which subsequently also influenced a handful of local artists was known as the "Mooi Indies" movement. One of such painting we will be analyzing is *Women Around the Lotus Pond* which was painted by Le Mayeur in the early 50s (Figure 37).

Observing the figures in his painting, and juxtaposing them with the figures in See's and Liu's work, one can quickly perceive that Le Mayeur's women lack the verticality depicted in the works of the Nanyang artists. Here, they all are in motion, and none seem to be standing still. In each one there is a diagonality and imbalance in their poses giving them a sense of movement - an arm reaching out, a foot gingerly stepping forth, or slowly kneeling down. There is a delicate rhythm that resonates in this painting, making the movement of the figures almost seem like a dance. Whilst we can perceive quite easily that there are figures in the painting, yet they do not stand out in stark contrast against the environment. See and Liu's work both employ crisp delineation of the female form, making sure of a clear distinction between them and the background. Le Mayeur, however, attempts to almost diffuse the figures into the environment they are in. He takes no effort to outline the figures purposefully like the two Nanyang artists. Additionally, the complementary colours of red and green are used throughout the

painting which is on the fabric of the women's sarong, and then on the hibiscus and surrounding foliage, an attempt that blurs the line between the women and their environment. The female figures, statues, and branches of the trees in the setting also share a consistent organic form. Le Mayeur took efforts to set up his abode as such it provided a setting that suited his vision and ideals when painting the feminine figure, who was primarily his wife, the dancer Ni Pollok and her friends. It came complete with Balinese-influenced style architecture, a garden, a courtyard that had Balinese statues, palm trees, and frangipani.

The lengths in which Le Mayeur took to artfully orchestrate an ideal setting in his vision and his artistic strategies employed in his paintings through colour and form to unify the female figures with the environment suggests Le Mayeur's view that these women and their environment are one. Objectifying both people, and the environment as equals - both things of beauty. Through this, we can see a distinction in terms of the visual approach of the feminine figure between a Western colonial master, and Chinese settlers in Nanyang. The former, unifying the feminine figure with the environment, setting them as equals, but the latter often delineating the feminine figure as a separate entity, imbuing her with qualities of independence, strength and yet burdened with certain crucial roles expected of them by their society.

6.2 The Mother, The Wife

Apart from the depiction of women as objects of beauty and strength, pillars that uphold the home and religious devotion, the feminine figure is also depicted as vessels for which a man sustains his continuum. Through her body, his lineage is sustained and

this subject of women as both wife and mother is also found in several of See's work. The title of this woodblock print by See, *Three Generations* suggests to us that the figures are related and the scene we are presented in this woodblock print is one that deals with familial ties (Figure 38). However, we may not readily conclude that the familial ties here were a literal one from a single family unit through the same genealogy. If we observe the difference in the attire of the women, it seems that they do come from different Chinese communities. This meant that the women may not have been related through blood ties. The older woman on the left of the picture plane is dressed in Peranakan attire, evident from her floral blouse and batik sarong skirt with bamboo shoot (*pucuk rebung*) motifs. Her hair is tied up into a bun, which is quite common for Peranakan women. The younger woman on the right of the picture plane wears a simple blue traditional Mandarin-collared blouse, but she has her blouse partially lifted revealing her left breast to feed her infant child whom she is supporting with her left hand. There is a possibility of course that the breastfeeding mother could have been the daughter-in-law of the older Peranakan woman, making them from a single family unit as there are instances where Chinese brides were imported by Peranakan families, though it was more common for them to marry within the Peranakan community.

Nonetheless, it seems that the artist's concern here was to depict different Chinese communities coming together. Here in this woodblock print, they are unified by having them sit together on a *mengkuang* mat; which is a traditional mat made by weaving screwpine leaves together, a popular rural industry product in Malaysia. This traditional Malaysian mat could perhaps serve as an allegory for the idea of the Nanyang, whom

the Chinese community (the figures sitting on top of it) find themselves in at that point in time. It is not definite if the mat might further defined itself as Singapore, but observing the year this woodblock was produced, 1965 was after all the year Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent nation-state. However, the newspaper that the young mother is holding is a *Nanyang Siang Pau* daily, which was not exclusively Singaporean. Additionally, the headquarters of NYSP moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1962. Therefore, it may be not possible at this point for us to conclude that this print has any deliberate nationalistic motivations that might define it as a piece for either Singapore or Malaysia, but only that is could represent the idea of the Nanyang (both the Malay Peninsular and Singapore).

Figure 38. See Cheen Tee, *Three Generations*. 1965, Woodblock Print, 62 x 49 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 63.

The Peranakan woman comes from a class of Chinese community that has been in the region for far longer than the mass migration of Chinese during the early 20th century. They are a class of Chinese known for their mixed ancestry with the existing native populous when Chinese traders who came into the region intermarried with local

women as early as the 15th century. Their community is also known for its rich cultural traditions and practices, and this is well depicted here in See's print through the elaborate texture of her attire with chrysanthemum blooms on her blouse and the very distinct *pucuk rebung* motif on her sarong skirt. To the Chinese, chrysanthemums are a symbol of longevity, and the *pucuk rebung* finds its origins from Malay cultures which relates it to the *Gunung Sari* (the universe depicted as a triangular motif). But the young breastfeeding mother, on the other hand, represents a different generation altogether. Her simple Mandarin-collared attire is void of any decorative motifs. The design of the Mandarin-collar also has its origins from Qing Dynasty outfits worn by male bureaucrats, often a sign of literacy and scholarship. The simplicity of her attire forces our attention to the newspaper she is holding, an indication of her drive for intellectual pursuit, and has the notion of someone who is keeping up with the times. This contrasts with the older Peranakan woman whose gaze is directed towards the infant child. Her concerns seem to be more for the affairs of the family, the raising of children.

The Peranakans are matriarchal, in this sense that men marry into a woman's household. Yet, whilst it seem that women are in control of the household, with the oldest woman exerting her authority within the home, you will notice that the power of women operates only within the home. So, whilst there is a matriarchal system in the home it does, however, serve a larger patriarchal system in their society that favours the male. The men are seen as breadwinners, the ones who will go forth and have the freedom of movement as opposed to the women whose sphere is confined within the walls of the home. If viewed from a phallocentric perspective, the man's role in the family is perceived with this outward thrust - to go "out" into the world, whereas the

woman's role is characterized by its inwardness, to keep within. Now, when we assess See's print once again, we find that the Peranakan woman enforces the idea of a nurturing matriarch that cares for the home, and whose concern remains within her domain. In fact, observe the potted orchid and house cat behind the Peranakan woman, both enforcing the idea of being homebound and domesticated. The younger mother, however, reveals a rather ambivalent quality - her breastfeeding does enforce the ideology of woman as mother, and yet the newspaper she holds gives her an agency of power, knowledge, and insight to hence thrust forth. We see here See's sensitivity to the social change of his time, coinciding with the second wave of feminism in the 60s which originated in the USA and quickly permeated the globe for the next decade. The social status of women in countries such as China rose quickly, also catalyzed by the Communist revolution. This print reflects the state of women who are torn between their expected traditional roles within the home and their ability to break through that sphere into a realm previously dominated by men.

Figure 39. See Cheen Tee, *Matchmaker with Cat*. 1954, Woodblock Print, 77 x 49 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 61.

A similar narrative could be found in an earlier woodblock print by See, *Matchmaker with Cat* which he produced in 1954 (Figure 39). The matchmaker is the woman on the left, dressed in a long-sleeved *huafu* attire predominantly in black with triangular motifs trimmings. She is whispering into the ear of the younger girl to her left as she holds up a thumb with a right hand in an effort to convince the girl perhaps over matters about a partner she has picked out for the girl. The young girl, however, shows a certain disdain

for the advice she is receiving, evident firstly from the very expression on her face that shows her obvious suspicions and doubts about what she is hearing from the matchmaker. Her body is also turned away from the older woman with her back against the older woman. The way in which See has chosen to render the matchmaker also creates a negative perception about her. Her head and face is relatively contorted, almost caricatured to look gaunt and even frightening with deliberate creases to show wrinkles and sharp points in her hair. If you compared this elderly matchmaker with the Peranakan grandmother in *Three Generations*, the difference is very noticeable with the distinctions in the use of line and shape alone. The Peranakan grandmother's face is delineated by softer curvilinear lines, and even her wrinkles are contoured more gently and orderly around her face. This contrasts with the erratic lines that fill the countenance of the matchmaker.

The task of a traditional matchmaker in Chinese culture or mei po 媒婆 is to find suitable brides for young men. The practice of traditional matchmaking dates back almost 2000 years in ancient China to the late Zhou Dynasty. Up until a century ago, traditional matchmaking did not really account for the personal feelings or preferences of the individuals that are to be 'matched' together and thus resulting in what was known as 'blind' marriages - 'blind' because neither parties of the match would know each other, on some occasions up until the day of the event.[60] One of the first considerations of a traditional matchmaker, when she attempts a match, was to ensure the suitability of the social class of both the bride and groom and then possibly even family politics in the hope the union of the 'matched' couple would bring economic

[60] Jeffrey Hays, "MATCHMAKERS, PARENTS AND MARRIAGE IN CHINA," *Facts and Details*, accessed October 20, 2019, http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat4/sub20/entry-4330.html)

benefit to both families. It is almost an impossibility to narrow down the exact motivations of a matchmaker, but based on Jordan's research on Tianjin matchmakers, being a traditional matchmaker was a relatively lucrative business.[61] It would also not be uncommon to have heard of negative perceptions about matchmakers being 'busybodies' who serve as a mediator between two people, and often manipulating either sides in order to fulfill their goals to matchmake a couple. The intrusive disposition held by a matchmaker, coupled by an assumption of her motivation tainted by lucre might be reasons of which See's matchmaker takes on such a grim appearance.

As mentioned earlier, the young girl does not show favour to what the matchmaker is whispering into her ear. This situation can be read allegorically, as the new generation's resistance to tradition. She is imbued with the ability to think for herself, and this is very artfully done by See - her body is calm as she remains seated in her chair, but the shift in her body's direction and the slight furrowing of her brow all visually conveys her stance. In a way, this print offers us a contemporaneous glimpse into the consciousness of women at the time, to resist against archaic feudalistic traditions which usually served patriarchal ambitions.

[61] David K. Jordan, 'Chinese Matchmakers of Tiānjīn & Táoyuán.'(*Conference on Anthropological Studies*, Taiwan Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, March 21-23, 1997). https://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/meiren/meiren.html#sec2

Figure 40. See Cheen Tee, *Next Generation*. 1955, Woodblock Print, 20 x 15 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 74.

Figure 41. See Cheen Tee, *Bride-to-be (orange-sienna)*. 1966, Woodblock Print, 107 x 46 cm. Private collection of See Yee Wah. From See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire: Master Draughtsman, Printmaker, Painter, and Cartoonist. Raffles Avenue Editions, 2001. Pg 83.

Now that this study has scrutinized the artworks produced predominantly by men, it would be imperative for us to also assess a woman's view of the feminine figure. In the early years of the development of the Nanyang art style, we cannot deny that most of the pioneers were made up of male artists. This meant an artist like Georgette Chen was quite the exception being perhaps the only well-known female painter to join the ranks of influential artists that played a vital role in shaping the face of the Nanyang art style.

It should, therefore, be worth our time in this study to consult also with her work to offer contrasts in a field that is relatively dominated by the male gaze. Previously, we analyzed the artworks produced by men and found that the works in some ways or another revealed the idea of the objectified female form. Through the male gaze, the feminine figures often served as stimuli or a spectacle for a voyeuristic lens. It is not so much that the male gaze is solely about objectifying the female figures, but rather a reflection on the limited view that the male gaze has to create a male-centric narrative. A female gaze is therefore different from the male gaze, for it does not exist to objectify men the same way the male gaze objectifies women. The female gaze offers an alternate view to the female form - so, instead of her being merely an object, her form takes on a personality, an identifiable human being with complexities and narratives of her own.

Figure 42. Georgette Chen, *Family Portrait* 1954. Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. From the collection of the National Heritage Board Singapore. Accessed 25 July, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/family-portrait-georgette-chen/2gETWOpPGhAKYw

In 1954, Chen produced an oil painting entitled *Family Portrait* which depicts a literal family, and not a possibly allegorical one like See's *Three Generation* (Figure 42). This family depicted here in this portraiture is Chen Fah Shin's family. Fah Shin has been a close friend to Georgette Chen for a long time. Fah Shin, the female figure in the center is no doubt the main focus in this artwork. We are drawn to her immediately first and foremost by the centrality of where she is located in the picture plane. She's also the only one whose full length of her body is stretched out over the sofa which also gives her a sense of being comfortable, relaxed and yet open and confident, obvious from her unwavering gaze directed back at us, the viewer. This is crucial to note because these establish to us that this visual narrative is about her as a person. The narrative here is about her as an individual, and not about what she serves to a male audience or viewer.

She is dressed in a grey traditional cheongsam with windowpane patterns which suggests a sort of seriousness or staidness. She is also wearing a pair of glasses and holding a newspaper with the words 'Nanyang' on the front page, all of which adds to the idea of an intellectual individual. This also quickly situates her and her family in a locality, that they have settled in Southeast Asia. These visual elements in itself dismantle the typical conventions that we previously observed in the artworks produced by male artists that would depict the feminine form paired with some sort of flora, be it flowers in the background and environment or even floral prints on her clothes. Flowers or floral motifs often serves to enforce the male gaze because it sees it as an allegory of the female form, as an object of beauty, having the qualities of delicateness and fragility.

The simple horizontal and vertical lines of the windowpane motif on Fah Sin's grey cheongsam give no opportunity for that.

Another thing that we should note is the manner in which Fah Sin is depicted with her family. In previous cases, the trope of the mother figure is visualized through women carefully tending to her children; reaching out to them, coddling them to their bosom. Here, though we are aware that she is a mother to three children around her, we do not see her purposefully tending to them. Nonetheless, Chen fails not in portraying Fah Sin as an able parent to raise children by depicting them as cheerful and healthy. The girl on the right is the tallest of the three children, probably the eldest is doing some knitting. The second daughter lying down on the sofa on Fah Sin's left is reading a book. Finally, her son is playfully dressed in some native American costume and is holding some arrows in his hands. All of these activities help us understand that they are children raised in a steady home environment - having the time and luxury of hobbies, education, and play.

Through this analysis of Chen's painting, we have now an alternative view in assessing the feminine figures in the works of artists and the gender politics involved in the creation of these artworks. Yet, we are not to say that the male gaze is wielded only by male artists and that he is only capable of this view and that the female gaze is exclusive only to female artists. Returning to See's woodblock prints, we cannot deny that there is a predominantly male gaze in a majority of his work that stereotypes the feminine figure to fulfill certain male-centric narratives, but he does demonstrate certain sensitivities to foreground women in his artworks - giving them an agency of power and of consciousness such as the literate mother keeping with the times in *Three*

Generations, or the resistant young woman in *The Matchmaker* who forms her own opinions instead of unquestioning subservience to a larger patriarchal system.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This study delved into the politics that were at work in the creation of woodblock prints produced by See Cheen Tee, and by "politics", we do not merely refer to the conventional sense of power relations that occurs between formal organizations namely the government, but rather the Foucauldian concept of power dynamics that can occur at any level between formal and informal social structures. A primary reason that called for this study to be made was that we observed a significant change in the subject matter when we mapped See's woodblock prints chronologically. His earlier woodblock prints began with Social Justice themes that we find similar and typical of the prints produced during the Modern Woodcut Movement in China. Then, over several years he seemed to move onto genre scenes depicting the life of rural folks, landscapes and even still life. This wide range of subject matter, therefore, required this study to employ several methodologies and consult with varying theories to shed light on the politics at work behind these prints. We examined social-political events, historical data and biographical information on the artist, but also supported the visual analysis with concepts involving Post-colonialism, the phenomenology of The Other as well as Gender to comprehend the workings of politics that are involved in the manifestation of his works.

In the first chapter, we began by unpacking the terminology of Social Justice works by reviewing several artworks that had social themes. Social Justice could be understood as a niche, or perhaps a subcategory within the realm of Social Realism. Social Justice possesses a certain political agency because they are more overt in the demand for justice and the artists of such works do so to evoke the attention of the masses through

its distribution via the print media. These works often attempt to oppose formal institutions and highlight their failure to help the people - primarily the weakest and lowest class. Though we could qualify Social Justice works as Social Realist works, but yet not all Social Realism artworks would have the boldness of social critique as with Social Justice works. In fact, some Social Realism works include the depiction of everyday life and the mundane. It is only through very close scrutiny do we find that these works would very subtly hint at the plight of the people. The pessimism and melancholy of Social Justice artworks contrast inversely with Socialist Realism that presents an idealized image and optimism to politicize aesthetics.

Apprehending these different terms allows us to situate Social Justice works in the larger realm of Social Realism works of which woodcut prints are often associated with. This enables us to examine See's earlier Social Justice works by tracing its origins back to the Modern Woodcut Movement in China. To truly see the significance of the Modern Woodcut Movement, we compared *nian hua* religious prints with woodblock prints produced during the Modern Woodcut Movement. Stark differences were observed which reflected the respective purpose of both types of prints. Woodblock *nian hua* prints served a religious purpose and reflected subservience and the rule of imperial governance. The artwork had a sort of normalizing power, imbued with a political agency that dictates the behaviour of people - making them subject to certain rules and codes of social conduct. The modern woodblock prints from China which influenced See's early works, on contrary were bold enough to challenge formal authorities - government bodies.

In this study, it was also essential for us to take note of individuals who held certain power, in the form of authority, making them instrumental in the development of this art form. The first individual we discussed was Cai Yuenpei, a crucial figure who held positional authority and authority of expertise that played a major role in sparking the New Cultural Movement, which subsequently catalyzed the emergence of the Modern Woodcut Movement. A pivotal move by Cai in this process was well expressed in the speech he delivered in 1917, "*Aesthetic Education as Substitute for Religion*". We can see his intent come into fruition when we observed how religious prints like the traditional *nian hua* were displaced by the emotional and dramatic modern woodblock prints which were born out of the synthesis of Western and Eastern knowledge and accentuates humanistic concepts. Lu Xun was the next figurehead we highlighted because like Cai, he too held positional authority and authority of expertise but he had more direct involvement in the development of the Modern Woodcut Movement. The workshops he organized and his sharing of Western material culture greatly assisted in the proliferation of the movement. It was through the introduction of works by Western artists such as Kathe Kolwitz did the Chinese woodblock artist began to adopt the skill to imbue their prints with pathos, capturing the emotional turmoil of the people in their artworks. It was political and social unrest within China that was responsible for the modern woodblock print to subsequently find its way into Southeast Asia as immigrants from China began to set foot in other neighbouring countries. Then, Tai In Long rose as the figurehead that was instrumental in the propagation of woodblock prints here in Malaya and Singapore using the printing press as a vehicle to further drive this

movement and eventually influencing artists such as See to embrace this art form and develop his own visual vocabulary.

Then, in Chapter 4 we explored how See's work sought to use the woodblock print medium to visualize nationhood. After gaining insight into how the shifts of formal politics in China in the pre-war years gave rise to the Modern Woodcut Movement which subsequently made its way into Southeast Asia in Chapter 3, we can comprehend the workings of politics behind See's earlier works that dealt with Social Justice. In an artwork like *Young Gamblers* we observe a subtle provocation against formal political power, of which were the colonial government at the time. It was a piece of work that expressed sentiments that ran parallel to the Anti-Yellow Movement. When we contrast See's work with his contemporaries such as Lim Mue Hue and Koeh Sia Yong, it seems that their work exudes a positive overtone charged with activism and camaraderie, but this was not so with See's work. Nonetheless, this did not mean See was not participative of creating a positive image of nationhood. He did it through more subtle means in rural genre scenes depicting the locals as a society that is able, independent and living harmoniously together. In this chapter, we also observe how See's keen eye for detail, artful compositions and choice of subject matter allowed him to create works that sat on neither extremities of conventionally perceived romanticized Nanyang style nor EAS Social Realism. Genre art of rural settings or landscape scenes were not subject matters that the modern woodblock prints were usually associated with, but See dared tread into such waters and managed to harness the gritty qualities of a woodblock print and paired it with elegant compositions to create a visual experience that was ambivalent - evoking a complex emotional response that empathizes the suffering or

hardship of the people at the same time, the beauty of the environment they live in. We were able to note, that his social-political background as a 2nd generation Nanyang artist played a crucial role here. His artworks offered us a view through the eyes of someone whose family had set foot and began to get rooted in a land that supposedly offered more promise than their homeland in China. However, growing up in this land, he was sensitive to the struggles and difficulties one goes through living in this land of supposed "hope". Through the analysis of landscape artworks in this chapter, we were also made aware of the power relations that occur between the subject matter as well as the artist.

This brings us then to Chapter 5 where we began analyzing See's woodblock prints that revolved around the Malay community. Here, we tried to explore the politics behind him as an artist born to an immigrant family from China, and his subject matter of the natives in the Southeast Asian region. Through analyses of his work, we notice certain commonalities with early Nanyang artists in their othering of the native body. The myth of the noble savage is a trope that we do indeed observe in his artwork, and though the term 'noble savage' is occidental in origins, the conception of the idea was not necessarily so. The Chinese too was an imperialistic civilization and the Sinocentric system that places itself in the center and Southeast Asia as its periphery is the ideology that situates the native people of Southeast Asia as people who are still pure and untainted by the progress of civilization - living a carefree life closer to nature. Yet, further scrutiny of See's work shows that this notion of the 'noble savage' was not a consistent trope in all of his works depicting the natives. His work reveals his sensitivity towards the plight and predicament faced by the native communities. He recognizes that

there is a sort of economic displacement that has put them in a disadvantageous situation and this contrasts against the ideals of the carefree and romanticized life of a native.

The body of the native is not the only subject matter othered by the artist, but when we glance through See's woodblock print portfolio, the feminine figure is also a constant recurring subject matter. Therefore in Chapter 6, we delved into the study of gender politics to understand the power relations between him and the figuration of women in his artworks. We observed from his work that there is the element of the male gaze, where the feminine figures serve as an object of beauty of which is also subservient to serving a patriarchal system. The body of a woman also often becomes a metaphor for nature, the earth and drawing from this parallel, both woman and land become objects of conquest for man. Then again, closer analyses also help us see his sensitivities to foreground the feminine figures instead of being mere objects of beauty subjected to supplement male-centric goals, he imbues them with the agency of power - depicting them as individuals with equal capabilities to wield intellect, knowledge, and self-awareness.

This study has revealed to us that formal politics involving interactions between perceivable and public social structures such as governments, nations and even universities were an integral part of the birth and proliferation of the Modern Woodcut Movement that influenced See's early Social Justice works. Key individuals vested with specific forms of authority were also essential in this process. However, the woodblock prints that See produced later on began to address more informal politics and delved into more private areas of social constructs involving nationalism, race, and gender. It is here when See began to delve into such subject matters that we find a unique visual

vocabulary dissolving the dichotomous categorization in the works of art primarily between the Social Realism propagated by the EAS and the romanticism of the Nanyang style artists. He used woodblock prints, a medium better known for its association with Social Realism (more specifically Social Justice), a theme favoured by the EAS and synthesized it with subject matters that the Nanyang artist was more prone to depict in their artworks. The unique synthesis of a medium that had overtly political origins, and a certain visual grittiness with subject matters that were often beautiful, elegant and serene resulted in an ambivalent visual vocabulary and experience when analyzing his works. See has the ability to depict landscapes that highlights the serenity of the natural environment and yet does not fail to addresses the plight of the people living within it. His work presents to us the beauty of a native community and yet illustrates an awareness of their struggles. The feminine figures he carves out are not merely objectified sensual bodies but are also individuals with an agency of power, and intellect. We could observe nuances when we juxtaposed his work with his artistic antecedents, from the mainland Chinese woodblock print artists and colonial painters to the first generation Nanyang style artists. These nuances in the way See portrays the subject matters prove that there is indeed a difference in the politics between him, his social-political setting and the subject matters compared to artists before him. This allowed him to demonstrate a much more keen sensitivity about the subject matters from which is drawn from the environment around him in Southeast Asia, or more specifically in Malaya and Singapore.

This study becomes a stepping stone to helping us understand more about woodblock print works created here in Malaya and Singapore in the post-war years, especially

artworks with subjects matters that veer away from the conventional Social Justice themes which had closer relations to the overtly political Modern Woodcut Movement in China. This is crucial because a majority of existing literature on woodblock prints in this region still addresses the politics behind these works and its role in challenging formal institutions. Through this research, we find that the wide range of subject matter demands that we look at woodblock prints as works that are not inherently linked to politics in terms of power dynamics and interactions with formal institutions. It began as a medium that was used for religious purposes, but through the synthesis of western knowledge, it was transformed to have a political agency with the ability to capture the pathos of the those who are suffering, and subsequently, it was used by an artist like See to depict the complexities and nuances of the social life of people capturing both serenity and struggle, beauty and strength.

Limited by the time and scope, the range of works selected as primary data for this study was a select amount of See's woodblock prints, and so, it would be deemed necessary that for this study to expand and deepen, an inclusion of woodblock prints from his contemporaries such as those from the 5 men woodcut show to be included as part of the primary data for the research. See had left behind several pieces on incomplete woodcut works which remained in the form of a sketch and coloured study, and these were not dated. But one of the last dated woodcuts by See was a peculiar abstract bull which seemed to allude to his efforts in trying to adapt the woodblock print medium to abstract visuals. This piece definitely calls for further studies to be made if any of his contemporaries attempted this feat, and why? This study could also serve to form essential links in the study and understanding of woodblock prints' transformation

from the pre-war years to contemporary works that are being produced by artists within Malaysia and Singapore today.

Thereafter, See also continued to produce artworks well into the 90s until his death, focussing more on chinese ink and watercolour techniques which bears much similarities to the works of Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi. These works which have barely been discussed or studied thoroughly could reveal other facets of Nanyang art history just as we have observed through a study of his woodblock prints. Based on interview accounts with his daughter, and even from articles, See was known to be rather reserved about publicizing his work in spite of having demonstrated such a wide repertoire of mediums in his portfolio. The reason there is a lack of study until the recent two decades since the publishing of his art book by his daughter might well be attributed to this. It is about time that See's work be brought out to the limelight in terms of study, research and appreciation.

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