

# The Asian Traditional in the Works of Liu Kang and Tan Kai Syng

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This paper discusses the idea of Asia in the works of two Singaporean artists whose practices are some sixty years apart: painter Liu Kang (1911-2004) and digital video artist Tan Kai Syng (b. 1975). Focussing on a piece of art work by each artist, I suggest that while the two artists appear to have different understandings of the meaning of Asia, both use Southeast Asian art forms to signify the Asian “traditional” — complicated by the possibility that such “traditional” aesthetics were at least partly first affirmed in the West.

Modern art in Asia is often tied to ideas of tradition and cultural authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Art historian John Clark has argued that much of Asian art in the 20th-century came about as a result of contact with Western Europe. The perceived reliance on “foreign” ideas frequently led the artists to attempt to create art forms that were based on their own “traditions”.<sup>2</sup> Underlying this mode of art making was the belief that while it was important to look to the West for ideas on the modern, the use of these concepts might threaten the “cultural core” of Asian artists. The “traditional” — ideologically constructed by leaving out historical complexities and often thought of as antithetical to the West — became a source for artistic ideas that could protect Asia against the possible “undesirable” influences of the north Atlantic countries.<sup>3</sup>

The connection between cultural authenticity and modern art can occur at both a national and a regional level.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Singapore — a country which lacks a shared originary past, the question of a common culture is a complex one. For some artists, the concept of Asianism — the belief that different communities in Asia share fundamental commonalities — appear to be significant in the understanding of tradition.<sup>5</sup> The two works discussed here — Liu’s painting *Artist and Model* (1954) and Tan’s video *Southern Tales* (2002-2005), use Indonesian artistic elements the Asian traditional, with the implicit understanding that the artists themselves — despite being residents of urban Singapore — have claims over such traditions.

Liu’s and Tan’s art works suggest that the artists understand the term Asia differently. For Liu, Asia is a cultural sphere that is centred in China; with the “rise” of the West, the influence of China in Asia has weakened, and rejuvenating Asia by emphasising the traditional was a key concern in the artist’s works. Tan’s works challenges Liu’s idea of Asia — defined as antithetical to the West and understood to have a clear centre-periphery structure. The Asia that she knows is one that has neither a clearly defined boundary nor a firmly entrenched hierarchy; it is an open system whose power centres are constantly shifting.

Liu’s *Artist and Model* is a painting inspired by batik textile — understood by the artist to be an art form that embodies the “essence” of Southeast Asia. The image shows Liu’s colleague Chen Wen-hsi creating an image of a woman. The formal system is syncretic. In addition to batik patterns, the artist also used aesthetic elements from European modernist and Chinese literati paintings. All the objects are rendered as flat surfaces filled in with pure colour, and are outlined in unpainted strips meant to imitate the dye-resisted areas on a batik fabric.<sup>6</sup>

Liu Kang began his artistic career in Shanghai during the May Fourth period, when intellectuals and cultural elites were finding ways to reform China on all levels.<sup>7</sup> Despite having moved to Singapore when he was still in his twenties, the desire to “save” China continued to inform his works years after he left the Middle Kingdom. Much of his artistic production in the post-Shanghai period was concerned with the cultural linkages between Singapore and China, and he devoted a good part of his career in creating art works that were meaningful to both places. *Artist and Model* is closely related to the discourse of Malayan art in the 1950s — one in which the British expatriate community appeared to have played a significant part. Artists and other cultural elites were interested in creating art works that would be suitable for the soon-to-be-independent Malaya. Batik — considered to be an “essential” Southeast Asian art form — became a source of inspiration for the making

of “Malayan art”.<sup>8</sup> For Liu, such appropriation was significant on an additional level: batik signified a return to a pre-modern Asian past unadulterated by Western materialist influences; the use of such aesthetics could help strengthen Asia — understood to be a cultural realm centred in China — by beefing up “thinning” cultural authenticity.<sup>9</sup>

Tan Kai Syng’s *Southern Tales* shows a different understanding of Asia. For Tan, Asia has a “landscape of plurality”, that is, a region without a clear centre, and whose histories cannot be conflated into a single narrative. The audiovisual essay is part of a series of works, titled *Island Hopping*, that the artist created by combining footages taken on her trips to different islands in Asia.<sup>10</sup> Inspired primarily by French filmmaker Chris Marker’s filmed essays, Tan had wanted to show her personal experience of the complexity of Asia by juxtaposing images from varying locations conventionally understood to be parts of an organic whole.<sup>11</sup> The work includes the following fragments: a car trip with an Okinawan man, a visit to the U.S. military base in Okinawa, a trip to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, and scenes of Bali and

Singapore. The footages appear in no particular order, but are edited so that they constantly interrupt each other — gently occasionally but violently at other times. What emerges is a work of overlapping images which appear simultaneously distinctive and inextricably entwined.

The disparate visual images *Southern Tale* are given a sense of a whole by the audio component of the work. Tan had chosen a gamelan-inspired piece written by Singapore composer Philip Tan, possibly motivated by how such sounds signify traditional Asia. Like the batik patterns in Liu’s *Artist and Model*, the status of gamelan music as an “essential” Southeast Asian art form appeared to be at least partly a Western construct.<sup>12</sup> Thus, although Liu’s and Tan’s works are different in a number of ways, both turned to partially orientalist aesthetic forms as a representation of traditional Asia.

*Note: I would like to thank Tan Kai Syng for our extended conversations, as well as granting me access to her art works and publicity material from past exhibitions.*

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- 1 Weisenfeld, Gennifer. 2008. “Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World.” In *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Vishakha N. Desai. Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, pp. 182-183.
  - 2 Clark, John. 1998. *Asian Modern Art*. Sydney: Craftsman House, pp. 51,71.
  - 3 Clark, pp. 71-73; Weisenfeld, p. 181. For a discussion on idea of cultural authenticity in the formation of the modern Asian identity, with specific references to China, see Duara, Prasenjit. 2003. *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 9-20.
  - 4 Clark, pp. 239-259; Supangkat, Jim. 1993. “A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art.” In *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Caroline Turner. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 47-57; Piyadasa, Redza. 1993. “Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Overview.” In *Tradition and Change*, pp. 58-71; Mashadi, Ahmad. 1996. “Some Aspects of Nationalism and Internationalism in Philippine Art.” In *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, edited by T. K. Sabapathy. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, pp. 45-60; Mashadi, Ahmad. 1996. “Brief Notes on Traditionalism in Modern Thai Art.” In *Modernity and Beyond*, pp. 61-68.
  - 5 For a discussion on the discourse of Asianism in Japan, see Sun Ge. 2007. “How Does Asia Mean?” In *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat. Translated by Hui Shiu-Lun and Lau Kinchi. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 9-65. For a discussion of the idea of Asia in China, see Wang Hui. 2007. “The Politics of Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis”. In *The Inter-Asia Cultural studies Reader*. Translated by Matthew A. Hale, pp. 66-102. For a discussion of the development of Singapore as a nation-state under the conditions of there not being a shared originary past, see C. J. W-L Wee. 2007. *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, pp. 33-51.

- 6 Art researchers have pointed out several power issues in *Artist and Model*. For example, see Sabapathy, T.K. 2002. "Liu Kang's *Artist and Model*: Thoughts on Art about Art." In *Postmodern Singapore*. Edited by William Sullivan. Singapore: Select Publishing, p. 137; Lee Weng Choy. 1999. "That Bit Between Modernism and Tourism." In *Eyeline* 40. Spring 1999, pp. 19-21.
- 7 There is a large body of literature on cultural reform and art making in China in the first half of the 20th-century. See, for example, Andrews, Julia F. and Kuiyi Shen, eds. 1998. *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition and Art of Twentieth-Century China*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
- 8 For a discussion of Malayan nationalism and the "invention" of Batik paintings, see Seng Yu Jin. 2006. "The Primacy of Painting: The Institutional Structure of the Singapore Art World from 1935 to 1972". Unpublished MA thesis. Singapore: National University of Singapore.
- 9 The relationship between a Chinese centre and a Southeast Asian periphery is alluded to in several of Liu Kang's essays. For example, see Liu Kang. 1981. "Du Chen Zhichu zenchang shuhua guilai" (After Retuning from an Exhibition of Paintings and Calligraphy from the Collection of Chen Zhichu). In Liu Kang. 1981. *Liu Kang wenji*. Singapore: Education Publications Bureau, pp. 169-171; Liu Kang. 1981. "Zhongguo de wenhualì" (The Cultural Strength of China). In *Liu Kang wenji*, pp. 211-214; Liu Kang, Bali xing (A Trip to Bali). In *Liu Kang wenji*, pp. 215-220.
- 10 Publicity material for Tan's lecture performance at the Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand as part of the Wellington Arts Festival in 2006. In this respect, Tan's "Asia" is similar to historian Wang Hui's understanding of historian Takeshi Hamashita's tribute-trade system operating in Asia since the 7th-century. See Takeshi Hamashita. 2003. "Tribute and Treaties: Maritime Asia and Treaty Port Networks in the Area of Negotiation, 1800-1900." In *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives*, edited by Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita and Mark Seldon. London: Routledge, pp. 17-50; Wang Hui. 2004. "Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis." In *LSE Public Lectures and Events*, <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicLecturesAndEvents/pdf/20040512Hui.pdf>> (27 April 2007), pp. 21-30. For a critique of Hamashita's arguments, see Sun Ge, pp. 38-56.
- 11 The idea of "islands" is significant to Tan because she sees herself as native to an island – Singapore – who has lived in two other groups of islands: the United Kingdom and Japan. Wee, C.J. W-I. 2006. "After Theory – and Into the 'Zones of Contact'?" In *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney – a Critical Reader*, edited by Natasha Bullock and Reuben Keehan. Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre Ltd, p. 43.
- 12 For a discussion on Marker's works, see Alter, Nora, M. 2006. Chris Marker. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. See pp. 15-20 for her discussion of the filmic essay. Tan herself acknowledges Marker's works as important references in her own practice.
- 13 For a discussion on the popularity of gamelan music in Europe and North America in the 20th-century, see Sorrell, Neil. 1992. "Gamelan: Occident or Accident." In *The Musical Times* 133 (1788). London: The Musical Times Publication Ltd, pp. 66-68.