

「dalam
singapore」

Tchang Ju Chi: Tireless Camel

“为此，骆驼出来了。虽则，脚步恁般迂缓，样子笨滞；但是它，纵使前途有沙、尘、有风、雷雨，与一切困苦，还是负着重大的使命，一步一步地前进，永远没有倦意。”

“For this, the camel emerges. Though its gait may be slow and its appearance clumsy, it presses on. Despite the sand, dust, wind, thunder, rain and all hardships that lie ahead, it bears a great mission, step by step moving forward, ever tireless.”

Tchang Ju Chi (张汝器) (b. 1904, China; d. 1942, Singapore) was a prominent and pioneering artist, active in Singapore from 1927 to 1942 which was a period of tumultuous socio-political upheavals. Trained in Western painting at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts and later spending time in France, a friend persuaded him to stay in Singapore—a move that ultimately made the city his home and transformed its nascent arts scene.

Tchang once likened artists to camels: unyielding and trudging tirelessly with slow but sure steps, driven by a sense of mission. This metaphor speaks to his conviction and courage to forge new paths forward. He stood at the vanguard of a blossoming visual arts scene in Singapore, where exhibitions were held regularly and art discourse began to take root.

As one of the earliest artists to integrate local subject matter into his work, Tchang played a pivotal role in the emergence and development of “Nanyang Art.” His work influenced many of his peers and was critically acclaimed by his illustrious contemporaries, including Xu Beihong, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang. Yet, despite his contributions, his name and work have not fully percolated into public consciousness. This exhibition brings together—for the first time in over 50 years—a rare collection of more than 15 artworks, reproduced cartoons and archival materials, providing a revelation of the artist’s contributions and legacy.

National Gallery Singapore warmly thanks Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist, and Chong Chee Beng, daughter of Chuang U-Chow, for their gift of Tchang Ju Chi's and Chuang U-Chow's artworks respectively to the National Collection.

Slow but sure

Yeh Hui 《椰暉》, *Lat Pau* 《叻報》, December 11, 1930

Self-Portrait

1937

Oil on canvas

Gift of Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2022-00940

Wearing a beret and suspenders, Tchang presents himself as an artist in tune with French fashion. After graduating from the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, where he received foundational art training from teachers like Liu Haisu, Tchang studied briefly at the École des Beaux-Arts de Marseille. However, financial difficulties forced him to return to China. A friend later persuaded him to consider opportunities in Singapore, where he eventually settled in 1927.

After a successful career in design and advertising, Tchang returned to Europe in 1934 to survey the art scene and visit iconic landmarks such as the Louvre in Paris.

莲山双林禅寺

(Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery)

1927

Oil on canvas

Collection of Dr. Claire Ang

This work depicts a peaceful corner of the Skanda Buddha altar at the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery, illuminated by soft light falling across the floor. The Skanda Buddha's face is obscured in reverence to the deity. It is likely one of the first pieces Tchang created upon arriving in Singapore.

Completed in 1909 in Toa Payoh through contributions from the local and overseas Chinese community, the monastery is a significant centre of Buddhism in Singapore. Tchang's depiction reflects his connection to local culture and his inclination to capture Singapore's life and scenery.

Temple

c. 1930s

Oil on canvas

Collection of Dr. Claire Ang

Yeo Mang Thong

(b. 1947, China)

流动迁移在地经历：新加坡视觉艺术现象（1886–1945）

Migration, Transmission, and Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886–1945)

Originally published in Chinese in 2017; English edition released in 2019.

In the 1980s, Yeo Mang Thong began his research into Singapore's pre-war history and, in the process, uncovered the overlooked legacy of many artists, including Tchang Ju Chi's. The book cover features Tchang's *Kacang Puteh Man*—a poignant painting of a street vendor selling snacks. At the time of the book's publication, the painting was in a state of disrepair, its flaking paint reflecting how the artist's legacy had faded from public memory.

Kacang Puteh Man is now part of the National Collection and is currently undergoing conservation in preparation for display in this exhibition in 2026. Conservation is especially challenging—and crucial—for artworks in a tropical climate. As with many works presented here, conservation treatments include cleaning and consolidation of the painting layers; infilling and retouching of the paint losses.

“而況中原板蕩。夷狄交侵略。故國荒涼。野灶無菸。此正我輩以藝術警醒群倫時也。爰集同調。共組畫社。”

“China is in turmoil, beset by foreign invaders, the homeland in ruin—with barren fields and cold hearths. Now is precisely the moment of our generation to awaken the masses through art. Thus, I gathered like-minded souls to form an art society.”

Leading the Charge

Appointed founding president of the Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA) (est. 1936) at just 32, Tchang Ju Chi was a respected force in Singapore’s art scene. Set up to promote art and foster artistic exchange within the region and beyond, SOCA hosted visiting artists, organised group sketching and painting sessions, and annual exhibitions. The arts scene blossomed into a vibrant oasis of cultural and artistic activities. From 1936 to 1941, its annual exhibitions drew over 60 artists to contribute more than 900 works. Tchang led by example, exhibiting more than 70 works.

Tchang’s three-storey shophouse, located at 181 Tank Road, was SOCA’s headquarters until 1939. The first floor housed The United Painters (朋特畫社), an advertising and design studio he ran with his brother-in-law, Chuang U-Chow, who was a founding member of SOCA. On the second level, artists gathered for meals cooked by Tchang, bonding over art and food. The third level was a studio for painting sessions where artists produced works including anti-Japanese war propaganda banners and paintings. It was also where fundraising exhibitions for victims of the war in China were organised, such as *Xu Beihong’s Art Exhibition* in 1939.

Self-Portrait

1939

Oil on canvas

Gift of Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2022-00938

画家的夫人像

(Portrait of the artist's wife)

1939

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2021-00083

Do you notice a canvas on the left side of this portrait of Tchang's wife, Chen Mengyu (陈孟俞)? Chen frequently sat for her husband's paintings in their home studio, appearing in works that ranged from personal portraits to anti-Japanese war propaganda paintings, many of which have since been lost.

Chen was a modern woman and met Tchang on a ship headed to Singapore while fleeing an arranged marriage. The two married soon after. Known for her sewing skills, Chen often crafted large banners and cloth backdrops for the movie advertisements that Tchang made.

Attributed to Tchang Ju Chi

Bust of the artist's wife—Chen Mengyu

c. 1930s

Plaster of Paris

Collection of Selina Ang

Portrait of Ho Kwong Yew

c. 1939–1940

Oil on canvas

Collection of Ho Kah Keh

Ho Kwong Yew (1903–1942) is portrayed here with a calm, confident expression, dressed in a light-coloured suit, collared shirt and striped tie—attire reflecting his status as the first locally born Asian registered architect in Singapore. Known for often carrying a pipe, Ho designed numerous buildings, including the iconic Haw Par Villa. He was also a patron of the arts and served as vice president of the Society of Chinese Artists in 1941.

Portrait of Lim Hak Tai

c. 1930s
Oil on canvas

Collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Here, Tchang delicately captures the sunken cheeks and well-worn expression of Lim Hak Tai, the founding principal of one of Singapore's earliest fine arts academies—the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Known for his tireless dedication to the Academy, Lim nurtured many future generations of artists in Singapore.

Lim settled in Singapore in 1937, following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, and soon joined the Society of Chinese Artists. There, Yong Mun Sen, then-vice president of the Society, proposed establishing a fine arts academy. This vision was realised in 1938 with the founding of NAFA.

Chuang U-Chow (庄有钊)
(b. 1907, China; d. 1942, Singapore)
Self-Portrait

1939
Pastel on paper

Gift of Chong Chee Beng, daughter of the artist
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2025-00044

A self-taught artist, this work demonstrates Chuang U-Chow's conscious engagement with post-impressionism through the breaking of linear perspective and accentuating flatness at selected parts of the composition, for instance, the round table on the right. The portrait of the woman in the background references Chuang's work *Malay Girls*, exhibited at the 4th annual exhibition of the Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA) in 1939.

Chuang married Tchang's first cousin and the two families lived together at 181 Tank Road. A founding member and secretary of SOCA, he managed the society's correspondence with the government, aided by his fluency in English and German. Chuang was also active in the anti-war relief efforts and was known for his political cartoons, many of which appeared in local newspapers.

Chuang U-Chow (庄有钊)
(b. 1907, China; d. 1942, Singapore)
Boy

1936
Watercolour on paper

Private collection

“椰林皓月。尽是写青佳作。暮霭朝霞。岂非大块文章。”

“Beneath the luminous moon, the coconut groves stand as perfect subjects for painting; and are not the evening mist and the morning glow also great for literary works?”

Painting Local Colours

Tchang Ju Chi arrived in Singapore in 1927, just as a new literary movement was gaining ground. Young Chinese intellectuals, displaced by China's political upheaval, came to Singapore and continued to express longing for their homeland through writings of China's landscapes. Between 1927 and 1930, editors and writers Zhang Jinyan (张金燕) and Chen Lianqing (陈炼青) of newspaper supplements *Huang Dao* (荒岛) and *Yeh Lin* (椰林) respectively, exhorted these intellectuals to draw inspiration from their immediate surroundings and to depict local colours such as rubber plantations, tropical weather, labourers and local cuisine. Referred to as "Nanyang" (South Seas) colours too, this concept emerged from a conscious attempt to forge a diasporic Chinese identity distinct from that of mainland Chinese culture.

Tchang, a close associate of Zhang and Chen, translated this ethos into his work. Of the over 70 artworks he exhibited at the Society of Chinese Artists' (SOCA) annual exhibitions, many depicted scenes of local life—coconut groves, attap houses and diverse communities across the region. His approach influenced many artists in SOCA, inspiring them to depict local realities in their paintings—as seen in the adjacent archival materials.

<p>印妇 (Indian Woman)</p> <p>1939 Oil on canvas</p> <p>Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2021-00082</p>
<p><i>Jaga Man (Watchman)</i></p> <p>1936 Oil on canvas</p> <p>Gift of Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2022-00943</p>
<p><i>Portrait of a Sikh Man</i></p> <p>c. 1930s Oil on canvas</p> <p>Collection of Selina Ang</p>
<p><i>Untitled (Seated Malay Man)</i></p> <p>c. 1930s Oil on canvas</p> <p>Collection of Ho Kah Keh</p>
<p>[Not titled] (<i>Still Life</i>)</p> <p>c. 1930s Oil on canvas</p> <p>Gift of Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2022-00941</p>
<p>汝人像 (Portrait of You)</p> <p>c. 1939–1942 Oil on canvas</p> <p>Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2021-00080</p>

In this painting, Tchang depicts two Malay boys at a beach; they are bare-chested and wear white sarongs. One has his arm draped languidly across the shorter boy, and both are shown with their heads turned from the viewer, looking instead into the distance.

Tchang often paired his figurative subjects as a pictorial device he returned to in several works. His pairing created a visual echo, allowing him to explore subtle differences and dynamic tension between the two figures within the frame.

Old Man

c. 1930s
Oil on canvas

Collection of Dr. Brenda Ang

Nude

1939
Oil on canvas

Gift of Chang Si Fun (Shewin), daughter of the artist
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2022-00944

马达老妇
(Old Woman of Batak)

1937
Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2024-00333

Tchang's portrait of this elderly *Batak* woman (likely from the Lake Toba region in Sumatra, Indonesia) is unflinching—capturing her weathered skin and bony frame. Bare-breasted, she holds our gaze with a discernible equanimity. Tchang's detailing of her headdress, attire, the local textile of the cushion on which she sits and the wild boar (an animal associated with the *Bataks*) fleshes out the scene and evokes the highlands environment.

In the late 1930s, Tchang made a trip to Sumatra, and, to date, this is the only known work to survive from his trip to Sumatra.

“仅凭悠悠遐想，已或许捉住了一刹那现实的人生味，苦闷与厌倦，亦从而消逝。”

“By mere imagination, one may have captured life’s experiences in a moment, thus wiping out bitterness and weariness.”

Cartooning Life

Widely circulated in print media, *manhua* (cartoons) used biting wit and bold imagery to engage the public with social and political issues of the day. As a prolific cartoonist and editor of Singapore’s first pictorial supplement, *Sin Kwang* 《星光》 and later, *Yeh Hui* 《椰晖》, Tchang Ju Chi offered sharp socio-political critique through his cartoons. His works, recovered from digital copies of historical newspapers and reproduced here for the exhibition, explored themes ranging from mass hunger to the challenges faced by young people and the political apathy of immigrants. He also brought in leading Chinese artists, such as Ye Qianyu (叶浅予), to contribute to this growing visual medium.

With the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), cartoons and woodcut prints became tools of social mobilisation. In Tchang’s works like “看吧！暴日下的同胞” [Look! The Violence of the Japanese against Our Compatriots], wartime atrocities are exposed. He also took a leading role in organising exhibitions, including the *National Salvation Cartoon Exhibition* (救亡漫画展览会) (1937), to raise funds for war victims.

<p>苦闷 (<i>Confusion</i>)</p> <p><i>Yeh Hui</i> 《椰暉》, <i>Lat Pau</i> 《叻報》, November 1, 1930</p>
<p>青黄不接的过渡时期。 年轻的朋友呀！ 我们正是冲波逆流的孤舟， 汝不努力地撑起竿儿么！ 匪特不会前进！ 顷刻便至下游！</p> <p>[Navigating a transitional chasm. Young friends! We are but a lone boat against the tide, Will you not row with all your might? Otherwise, not only will you fail to advance, you'll be swept downstream in an instant!]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, September 9, 1929</p>
<p>中国青年的能力就有限。推上这么多东西。更不能翻身了。</p> <p><i>(The capabilities of China's youths are limited. Shouldering so many burdens makes it even harder for them to turn their fortunes around.)</i></p> <p>Words within the cartoon, clockwise from top: “礼教; 政治; 经济; 家庭; 恋爱”</p> <p>[Confucian code of ethics]; [Politics]; [Economy]; [Family]; [Love]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, October 28, 1929</p>
<p>Words within the cartoon: “革命大道”</p> <p>[The path of revolution]</p> <p>非清洗一下不行</p> <p><i>(must be cleaned)</i></p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, December 9, 1929</p>
<p>Words within the cartoon: “中国青年的文明”</p> <p>[The civilisation of China's youths]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, November 11, 1929</p>

<p>南洋革命家 (<i>Nanyang's revolutionaries</i>)</p> <p>Words within the cartoon: “革命” [Revolution]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, January 13, 1930</p>
<p>南洋侨胞都要各配一个 (<i>Every overseas Chinese in Nanyang needs to be prescribed one</i>)</p> <p>Words within the cartoon: “三千度的近视。” [Short-sightedness of 3000 degrees]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, December 16, 1929</p>
<p>捉迷藏 (<i>Hide-and-Seek</i>)</p> <p>Words within the cartoon, clockwise from the top: “政治; 华侨” [Politics; Chinese immigrants]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, October 28, 1929</p>
<p>Words within cartoon: “这是真的” [This is true]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, November 18, 1929</p>
<p>金钱紧迫下的市民 (<i>The commoners under the oppression of money</i>)</p> <p><i>Yeh Hui</i> 《椰晖》, <i>Lat Pau</i> 《叻報》, December 20, 1930</p>
<p>腰裏有几块臭铜板便作威作福起来。 (<i>With a few stinky copper coins, he became arrogant and domineering</i>)</p> <p>Words within cartoon: “峇味快! 快! 快些! ” [Ba Wei, quick! Quick! Quicker!]</p> <p><i>Fan Xing</i> 《繁星》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, April 21, 1930</p>
<p>安得不瘦藏 [How could one not be thin]</p> <p><i>Sin Kwang</i> 《星光》, <i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i> 《星洲日报》, November 25, 1929</p>
<p>Words within cartoon, clockwise from left: “卢沟桥”; “正义”; “公理”</p> <p>[Marco Polo Bridge]; [Justice]; [Axiom]</p> <p><i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> 《南洋商報》, July 10, 1937</p>

Words within cartoon: “倡言和平的人拼命把地球装满炸药”

[Advocates for peace are eagerly trying to fill the earth with explosives]

Sin Kwang 《星光》, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 《星洲日报》, November 18, 1929

Caption below the cartoon: “看吧！暴日下的同胞”

[Look! The violence of the Japanese against our compatriots]

Nanyang Siang Pau 《南洋商報》, January 1, 1938