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Penang Palette

Bridging Distance and Ideology through Art

by Ooi Kok Chuen



Recent years have seen a strengthening of Malaysia-China ties through art.

It was a dog day afternoon with the mercury level crunching at 36°C, despite the “cooling” lake surrounds of Liaoning’s Celebrity Island. In the courtyard promenade



fronting the newly christened Li Chi Mao Art Gallery, another auspicious rite of forging Malaysia-China cultural relations was being enacted.

There, the “Belt and Road” art link exhibition virtually blasted off with a six-cannon salute, officiated by Deputy Malaysian Ambassador John Samuel, on July 12, with the eponymous 91-year-old grandmaster Li Chi Mao flown in from Taiwan as special guest.

Although artists from both sides of the ideological divide have started cultural links since the normalizing of relations between Malaysia and China in 1974, China’s transformative Belt and Road initiative has given it new gloss, traction and significance.

Works of 17 Malaysian artists, including 11 travelling in the cultural programme and 27 China artists from Shandong – plus those of Li Chi Mao – were part of the exhibition. The Malaysian artists, including some spouses, were given a whirlwind acculturation of places and events over a week in Shandong province, with a view to an exhibition based on the trip back home much later at a date yet unspecified.



Cheah Yew Saik.

Their activities centred in Liaocheng (including the historical quarters of Dongchang, which has a fortification used by the Qing Emperor Qianlong as a retreat), and in the capital city Jinan comprising visits to three art institutions, besides Qufu, home temple and tomb of the Chinese sage Confucius (551BC-479BC). However, a planned visit to the Museum of Chariots and Horse Pits (of Eastern Zhou Dynasty) in Linzi, Zibo City, was scuttled because of bad weather.

The artists on the Shandong bandwagon were Cheah Yew Saik (b. 1939), Heng Eow Lin (b. 1946), Calvin Chua Cheng Koon (b. 1961), Maamor Jantan (b. 1961), Rasid Yusof (b. 1957), Sukri Deraman (b. 1975), Datuk Mohd Yusof Ahmad (b. 1951), a former ambassador and former director-general of the National Art Gallery (2010-2012), and four relative young newcomers – Sabihis Pandi (b. 1988), Azizi Latif (b. 1988), Amierul Iskandar Hamdzan (1993) and Safuan Nasiar (1993).

The participating artists not present were the Britain-based Sim Wenchi Lucas (b. 1960), Awang Damit Ahmad (b. 1956), Suzlee Ibrahim (b. 1967), Ng Foo Cheong (b. 1965), Puah Kim Hai (b. 1950) and Suhaidi Razi (b. 1977).



Calvin Chua Cheng Koon.

Apart from the exhibition venue, where the Malaysian artists combined to do a mural painting based on the theme “Lovely Liaocheng”, the artists were also taken to three major art institutions:

1. The US\$96.66mil Shandong Art Museum (SAM) shaped in a mock mountain topography, which was officially opened on October 12, 2013. At the time of visit, the main exhibition was of three artists interpreting “shan” (“mountains”). SAM boasts a combined floor area of 20,700 square metres (overall 52,000 square metres) with 12 hall spaces over five levels, and with a unique roof that can have variable height adjustments;

2. The Li Kuchan Memorial Museum, housing the works of Liaocheng’s prodigal son Li Kuchan (1899-1983), who is noted for his depictions of eagles and water fowls. Both museums are in the Lixia district in Jinan, and;



Datuk Mohd Yusof Ahmad.

3. The Li Chi Mao Art Museum, shaped like Admiral Zheng He’s treasure ship and housing the works of Taiwan’s great grandmaster Li Chi Mao. “Mr Art Expo Malaysia (AEM)” Datuk Vincent Sim was instrumental in negotiating the setting up of the museum. He was also the chief coordinator from the two co-organisers of this exhibition, the Malaysia-China Friendship Association and the Malaysia- China Culture and Arts Association. The other organisers were the AEM and the Malaysian Li Chi Mao Museum, also headed by Vincent.

Among the itinerary was a visit to the main campus of the Golden Childhood Kindergarten, which has a total of 1,000 pupils apart from 4,000 others in other campuses in Liaocheng. The artists interacted with a group of pupils having an art class, and were entertained to a talent performance by them. The kindergarten was one of the ground sponsors of the exhibition and leaseholders of the Celebrity Island.

A visit to the Kong Miao (Confucius Temple) and Kong Lin (Confucius Cemetery) complex, a Unesco-listed World Heritage Site, offered the sight of fascinating centuriesold trees alongside the interlocking dougong wooden brackets of the ancient architecture – some dating back to 478BC – and structures erected mostly during the period of Ming and Qing imperial patronage.



Abdul Rasid Yusof.

The artists also got to experience the bullet train from Jinan back to Beijing, which

The Malaysian artistic potpourri was a smorgasbord of Malaysian life, culture and landscapes, with the water element being a dominant theme: in Cheah's sampan with the day's catch arrayed like shield trophies and padi fields; Chua's splashing river

vivacity; Rasid's seashore susurrus and jungle alcove; and Wenchi's obstreperous waves of England's Dancing Ledge.

Cheah was the founder-principal of the now defunct Kuala Lumpur College of Art (KLCA); Chua was the president of the Malaysian Watercolour Society; and Wenchi is slated for a group exhibition at the prestigious Tate in London. Chua was a KLCA graduate in 1979.



Heng Eow Lin.

Heng, also a sculptor, presents an abstract double entendre of a semi-nude woman and a cow being milked to comment obliquely on tube-train molest, while Puah is noted for his combining batik imagery with Chinese ink brush tapestry of kampung life. Yusof, who already has three solos, has a knack for evoking spiritual solace through his subdued colour mesh of Quranic khat.

Cheah and Heng, both Kedah-borns, were early graduates of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art in Singapore, in 1961 and 1968 respectively.

Awang and Suzlee are two of the most significant artists working in abstract – Awang on his highly individual symbolisms based on his early struggles in his Kuala Penyu (Sabah) hometown abode, and Suzlee on expressive brushstrokes and colours evoking inner spirit and the physical environs. Awang boasts several prestigious awards including the Major and Consolation Award in the Salon Malaysia 1991-1992 and the Minor Award in the Young Contemporary Artists 1985, while Suzlee, the dean in Aswara (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage), holds the Malaysia Book of Records for the longest painting for his 60-foot work, *The Poem*.



Sukri Deraman giving a painting demonstration to some pupils of the kindergarten.

Maamor, who plays a mean double bass in a *keroncong* orchestra and is noted for his rural villages with his dragonfly alter ego motifs, opts for the image of musicians and rhythm, while part-time farmer cum art-lecturer Suhaidi, who also sculpts large equestrian works including a Cinderella-like “carriage”, plays on irony and surrealism.

Ng is known for his complex symbolic cultural matrix harkening to Oriental philosophy, while Sukri Deraman, the anointed heir of the late Ismail Mat Husin (1938-2015) presents batik renditions of the wayang kulit and the Pasar Siti Khadijah of Kota Baru.



Sabihis Md Pandi.



Amierul Iskandar Hamdzan.

Of the four millennials, Sabihis is more entrenched in his work referencing humans as skeletal relics and an image of the precious pearl, while southpaw Azizi pays homage to icons in a mixed media paper-quilling of acrylic and collage. Sabihis had clinched the Malaysian Emerging Artists Award (2013), bronze in the UOB Painting of the Year (2014) and the Young Guns Award (2017), while Azizi took the silver for the UOB Painting of the Year (2015, Established Artist). Safuan won the silver in the UOB Painting of the Year (2015, Emerging Artist) while Amierul was apprenticed to Awang at his Pantau Iraga Art Space.



The finished mural painting by Malaysian artists, based on the theme, "Lovely Liaoning".

The Shandong artists and calligraphers were led by Zhang Wang, the president of the Shandong Artists Association who is also the SAM director, while the only sculptor among the lot was Tian Yuemin.

Four artists (Cheah, Heng, Chua and Rasid) were in the entourage when AEM had a similar tour of Beijing during the presentation of the painted 888 foot-long banner to the China Olympic Games Council just before the Games in 2008. The touring artists contributed their thoughts to an exhibition entitled "Ni Hao" on their return later, at the City Art Gallery, KL.

Vincent had organised several major expeditions of Malaysian artists to China since then, with two exhibitions in 2016. One was called "Melaka: Where Friendship Begins, The Strengthening of Maritime Silk Road Connectivity" Perfect Art Exhibition at the

Joy Art Gallery in the 798 art zone in May, and the other in October, the “Guangdong 21st Century Maritime Silk Road International Expo”, a batik art exhibition featuring four artists namely Puah, Sukri, Ahmad Fauzi Arshad and Adly Zil Ikram Razali. The batik quartet will reprise the batik exhibition in China from September 21-24 this year.



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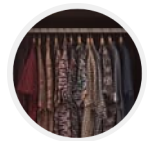
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