

# BALI, ALMOST RE-VISITED

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**From left: Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng. From right: Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Jean Le Mayeur and his wife.**

This exhibition marks the second occasion when works by Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang are being shown in a single exposition: the first was in 1953. Of the four, Liu Kang is alive and continues to paint. All four have been declared *pioneer* artists; to signal and signify this status, each has been accorded a 'retrospective' show by the National Museum Art Gallery in the 1980s. (These presentations were retrospective in an extremely provisional sense as they were not grounded in clearly defined, and rigorously explicated curatorial methods or procedures.)

This exhibition seeks to intimate historical dimensions, and in this sense has its roots in an extremely important and formative event in the art history of Singapore, namely: the journey to Bali undertaken by these four in 1952, and the exposition of pictures they produced as a consequence of that journey in 1953. The journey to Bali was also catalytic in the development of their respective artistic ideologies and artistic practices. Titled *Pictures From Bali*, the exhibition in 1953 was, according to Liu Kang, "quite an event at that time".<sup>1</sup> One might add that it has proven to be more than quite an event since that time.

In spirit, the current show points to a sense of Bali re-visited. Bali was a nucleus, the site of shared experience; and the confluence of historical sources. A fond hope was to re-construct or reconstitute the Bali encounter as an historical entity, and unravel some of its ramifications. Liu Kang explains the thinking underpinning the development of this exhibition, and the intentions mooted by the Singapore Mint.

They thought about our trip to Bali. It would evoke memories of the past art history, if we were to exhibit the Bali paintings again. There are a lot of young people who had not experienced that art exhibition, for it was quite an event at that time. Originally the selection criteria was only the paintings in Bali.<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding to consider the exhibition as it is constituted, it will be useful to dwell on the Bali project as it proved to be formative in shaping their artistic identities. Why Bali? How did these artists conceive of and approach the project? What are some of the consequences of the journey? What productions ensued from it?

In a very general sense the question why Bali? will appear superfluous. If not Bali, where else? It is not as if Bal



its uniqueness in world cultures, its allure, are all matters embalmed in a privileged past or consigned to mythical memory. Of course, Bali is also of the past, and of course it is webbed in mythical splendour. Even so, Bali also has a presentness, and a continuing presentness. As a cultural construct, as a dynamic contemporary society, Bali continues to assert a magnetism that is unmatched or unparalleled in Southeast Asia and, for that matter, in the world. It attracts peoples with diverse interests, dispositions and expectations to make their pilgrimage to its shores in order to behold and be immersed in conditions in which life, nature, art and spirituality appear as integrated and to constitute a seamless matrix.

Notwithstanding changes brought about by developmental plans and policies, and notwithstanding the demands of the tourist industry, Bali continues to pulse, radiate and attract like an undiminished nebula. If it has been claimed as a paradise then, it continues to beckon similarly today.

These were among forces which pulled these four artists as well, and they acknowledged them variously. Writing in the catalogue of the 1953 exhibition, Liu Kang gives a moving account of these powerful appeals. Recalling a statement by Charlie Chaplin (who toured Indonesia in the early thirties). "Whoever hasn't been to Bali can't say that he has been to Southeast Asia," Liu Kang adds, "It is the last paradise."<sup>3</sup>

It is indeed tempting to read this within the frame of an Orientalist mode, or as subscribing to the impulses of exoticism; in this same vein, these four artists can be viewed as embarking on a quest for the *Other*. Yet, the matter is neither simple nor straightly aligned. Their awareness of Southeast Asia as a region and their absorption or immersion in that awareness, their arduous and complex construction of identities entailing diverse traditions and ideologies, and their consciousness in being artistically and socially contemporary and pertinent, all of these point to

circumstances that are subtle, layered and at times rife with tensions. In these situations, applying static binary constructs in order to explain connections between a sense of one and another, be this Self/Other or Coloniser/Colonised or Male/Female or whatever else may be the paired nominations, is not necessarily satisfactory or relevant.

There was little doubt that Bali was for these artists enthralling and exotic, the writings of Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang attest to this, as do recorded disclosures by Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng. But it is not only this. There is also little doubt that they regarded Bali as integral to their respective *Selves*. And this is because they, as with Bali, are of this region. There is no more ringing endorsement of this sense of affinity and rootedness than that made by Liu

Kang when he claims that "Working in Bali is as good as working in Paris."<sup>4</sup> The claim advances a context or points to an environment which is exemplary in all particulars, and unsettles the status/power of the hegemonic *Centre*. In a more recent account, Liu Kang, while describing his early life in Malaysia (he resided with his parents in Muar in the state of Johore from the age of 6), recounts his total absorption into his environment. All these experiences and memories endured throughout his life and permeated his practice. In a moving statement he reveals the depth and intensity of his regionalist consciousness.

All these Nanyang anecdotes and experiences are deeply ingrained and course through my blood. They are primed into my system. When I had formal art training in Shanghai and Paris, these images kept reappearing.<sup>5</sup>

This is an extremely valuable disclosure; it is evident that in his case it is not a matter of slipping and fitting into a given construct, but that Southeast Asia was a formative, enduring and constructive force in his life and development,



**Pioneer artists with Rudolf Bonnet in Bali, 1953.**



even while living outside the region. The period of gestation for the growth of a regionalist consciousness was long and continuous.

Chen Wen Hsi, on the other hand, reveals his approach and position in less charged tones; even so, the strength and clarity of purpose are by no means diminished or diluted. He says

We went there (Bali) because of the richness of the cultural life. There was an abundance of subject matter, all so suitable to painting. In one lane, in one small vicinity, you could do so many sketches. The environment was invigorating and it induced one to work.<sup>6</sup>

Wen Hsi's testimony can be read in tandem with Liu Kang's claim that Bali is an exemplary place to practice art.

Each of these artists regarded and approached Bali in distinct ways. Yet, there were shared expectations; there was admiration and respect for its artistic cultures and the life styles of its people. The grounds for cultivating and advancing these interests are also to be found in their education in China (especially in the Xinhua Academy of Art in Shanghai where they enrolled); the educational and cultural milieus there fermented interests in and the development of cross-cultural foundations for artistic thinking and practices.

The ambition to journey to Bali was spurred by exhibitions (of pictures) in Singapore by European artists who were residing and practicing there. At present, it is not certain how many such expositions were held here and when exactly they occurred; nevertheless, among these which proved to be influential were shows by Jean Le Mayeur in 1933 and again in 1941. Their impact was dramatic and enduring; Chen Chong Swee records their effects on him vividly.

Figures dominated his (Le Mayeur's) Bali paintings. His works, be they sketches done in light colours or bright-coloured oil-paintings, showed that they were inspired by the bright and clear tropical light. His brightly-clad energetic and graceful dancers, dancing to the beat of the drum and bells, or his weaving women, kneeling beside the loom weaving sarong cloth, fully demonstrated the tranquil and fine life of the Balinese.<sup>8</sup>

These readings were to be confirmed by the visit in 1952; all four artists were greatly impressed by the prominence/dominance of women in the realms of work, family life, the performance of rites and the making of culture. Chong Swee encapsulates their perceptions by remarking that "Bali is indeed women's empire".<sup>9</sup>

It was not only Le Mayeur's pictures that left indelible imprints on the Singapore public; his companion caused an equal, if not greater stir. Here is Chong Swee's account:

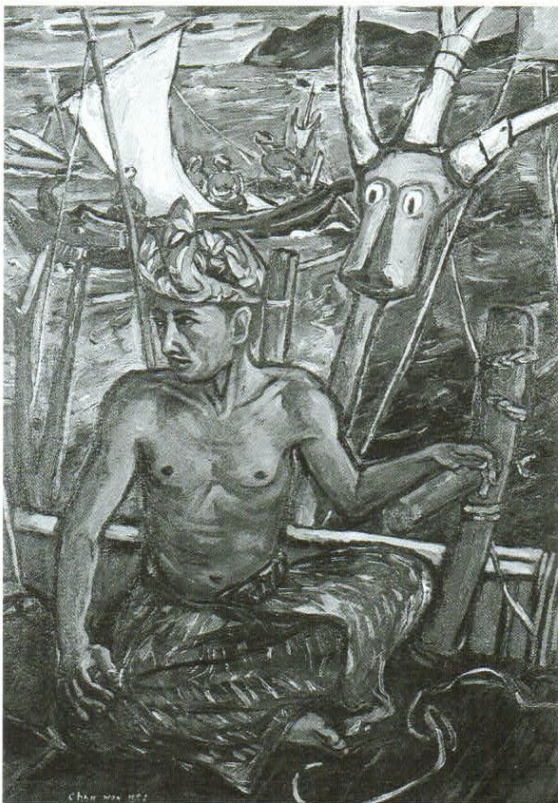
The painting partner (who later became his wife) he brought along, attired in traditional Balinese costume, was on hand to receive guests. She offered herself for photographs bare-breasted. This caused quite a stir in Singapore.<sup>10</sup>

Exhibitions such as these were compelling; they threw into prominence works which were read or construed as paradigms (among other paradigms), thereby provoking fresh conceptualisations of pictorial content and form. These were not realised easily or immediately, but through arduous effort and over a long period of time; above all, they emerged from and were concretised by living, thinking and working in Southeast Asia.

Liu Kang confirms the impact of these shows on him; they strengthened the resolve to visit Bali, and reinforced the sense of embarking on a mission.

Artists like the Belgian Le Mayeur exhibited their paintings of Bali in Singapore and this strengthened our urge to go. In '52, we decided that we had to go to Bali. We searched for (painting) themes in Bali with diligence and purpose, and painted a great deal.<sup>11</sup>

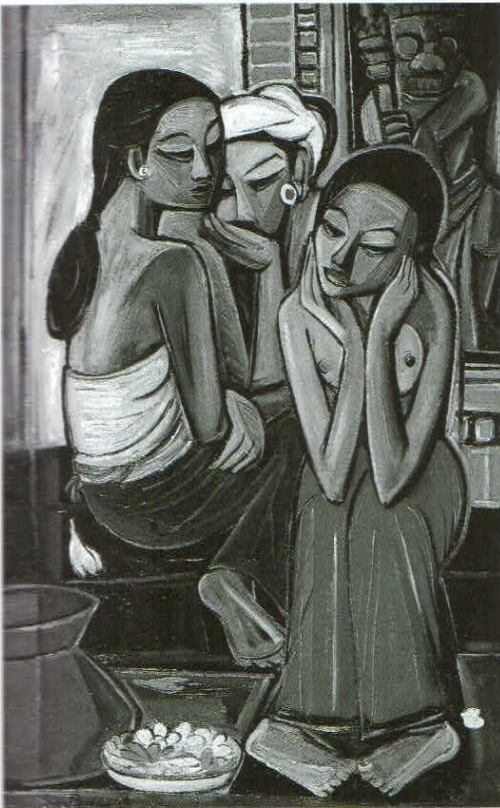
The intervening, disruptive Second World War years neither diffused the ambition nor did these deflect the artists from working towards achieving this goal; indeed, with



Chen Wen Hsi

Bali Boatman





**Cheong Soo Pieng**

**Meeting**

the arrival of Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng in the latter half of the 40s, the momentum to embark upon the project expanded and took deeper root.

Although the initial aim of this exhibition was to revitalise the Bali experience, and as far as possible reconvene the works that ensued from that experience, the effort has posed insuperable problems. Chief of these has to do with the difficulty of tracking those works which are now dispersed and lodged in private and public collections in a number of locations. While this may ordinarily be a nightmare, it can also be curatorially challenging and a worthy and important undertaking. Gathering and studying the Bali pictures, documenting the visit of 1952 in detail, reconstituting the exposition of 1953 and ascertaining its reception at that time, and analysing the influence of the Bali works on the subsequent development of these four artists as well as on other artists, all these can yield valuable insights into historical processes. Such investigations can also move the writing of art history into new, fresh frontiers.

Be that as it may, the presence of Bali, although limited, is discernible in a number of pictures in the current show. After forty years they appear vibrant and are absorbing at a number of levels. They crystallise ways by which these artists thematised their perceptions; they also exemplify processes by which traditions (especially ink painting traditions and easel picture practices) are adapted, altered, syncretised and at times used extemporaneously.

The figure is paramount in these pictures, and the female is dominant; in composing the figure(s), attention and care are given to place, appearance, gesture, relationships and expressivity. These attributes are not necessarily developed by each of the four artists with equitable interest or forcefulness in every picture.

In *Balinese Dancers* (1960s), Chen Wen Hsi heightens the expressive dimensions of the medium; five female figures shimmer into view. The entire picture surface emits light in varying shades of intensity; the diaphanous drapery of the figures is rendered generally in cool tones, while their torsos are dusky. The chromatic orchestration reaches a crescendo in the headdresses which appear to be aflame and engulfed in searing white light.

In *Bali Boatman* (1960s), Wen Hsi develops altogether different interests; a muscular edginess or ruggedness characterises the brushwork and courses through the forms. The figure of the boatman is gaunt, sinewy; he appears to have been shaped by the forces of weathering and unrelenting labour. In the middle distance, the sea is flecked and opaque; the sky is leaden and an island appears all gnarled and brooding on the horizon. The pace and vigour of realism press the subject and its execution into close and sustained scrutiny. Iconicity and expressiveness intersect with equal force; they do so again in two other pictures, namely, *Bar Girl* (1950s) and *The Museum* (1960s).

*Meeting* (1956) by Cheong Soo Pieng bodies forth a theme greatly favoured by him and also by Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, namely: comradeship and companionship among women; the theme is treated circumspectfully. In this regard, these four artists sustained great discretion in their observation and thematisation of the female in Bali. They did not, like many European painters resident and practicing in Bali, conceptualise and present the female as spectacle.

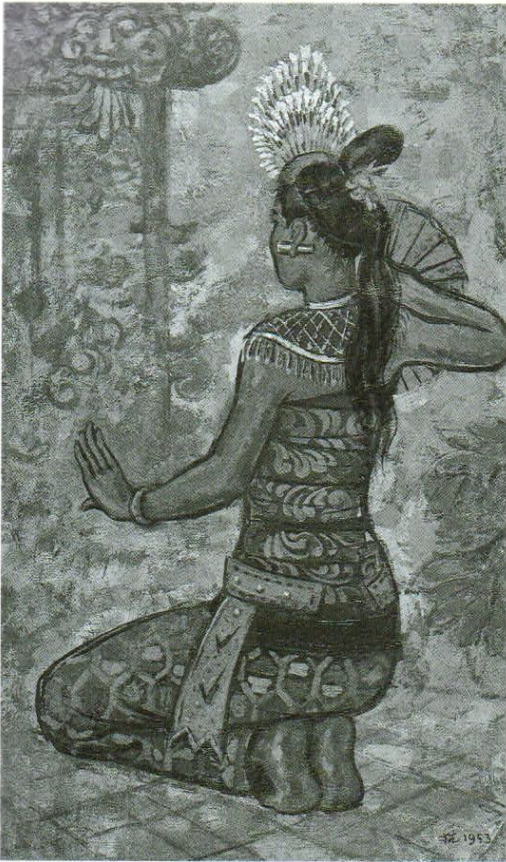
In *Meeting*, three female figures are seated in pensive attitudes on the steps of a temple doorway; just above them is visible a *dvarapala* (door guardian). Soo Pieng utilises the cubist idiom selectively (to accentuate formal structures and relationships) and braids it with his dominant interest in primitivisation. The outcome is appealing and proved to be enormously influential, art historically; younger artists read such works as constituting paradigms, and rooted their development of figuration in the study of them. *Going to Market* (1952), can be viewed as a companion work to *Meeting*; executed four years earlier than the latter picture;



**Chen Chong Swee**

**Decorating the Offering**





**Liu Kang**

**Souri**

it demonstrates that Soo Pieng's interest in the dynamics of syncretism predates his visit to Bali; it endured throughout his practice.

When compared to the pictures by Wen Hsi and Soo Pieng discussed above, Chong Swee's *Decorating the Offering* (1952) appears spartan, if not even bland. Two female figures are engaged in assembling a temple offering; they are absorbed in their tasks, yet companionable. Closer inspection reveals variety of brushwork and interest in detail, which enliven both the symbolic and formal fields of the picture. Symbolically, the focus is on the utensils, containers and condiments that constitute the ritualistic offering; not surprisingly, these are chromatically highlighted and patterned in detail. The figures, while instrumental for the gestures, are treated and positioned discreetly; flowing lines, in places overlapping and in other places discontinuous, articulate their physiognomy. The head-scarves frame the faces and also act as foils for their hair, which appears and coil in space forcefully. A quiet, lyrical mode pervades the composition.

This is in contrast to a picture titled *Coffee Shop* (1953), which conveys a heightened, sustained degree of realism, both in subject and its formal execution.

*Souri* (1953) and *Balinese Girl in Sarong* (1953) by Liu Kang are paeans to painterly ideals; this is one possible reading of them, and satisfaction is gained from it. Especially in *Souri*, details are grasped with great acuity, but not every detail is featured; yet, such comprehensive knowledge permits selection to be made convincingly, as exemplified in this composition. The figure kneels, facing the temple and therefore is absorbed in her activity; her entire body is engaged in the performance of her gesture. Liu Kang asks us to maintain a discrete distance, and watch in hushed tones.

All around her are textured and redolent surfaces suffused with, yet radiating multi-hued light. The figure is resplendent in minutely observed, inter-looking details which have been painted with relish in the sensual properties of the medium, and also with control and sensitivity. The environment around her, on the other hand, is amorphous yet palpable. The contrast between the particular and the general or the specified and the suggested, is maintained throughout the picture, and maintained with rigour and sensitivity. This is a deeply satisfying work, both as a painted image and as a symbolic evocation.

The thrust of my account has been to foreground the Bali encounter because it was a fecund site for these artists to consolidate their artistic ideology and practice in a Southeast Asian matrix. The decision to visit Bali was deliberate; considerations and preparations for the visit were firmly rooted in art historical reckonings. The works produced catapulted art in Singapore onto an unprecedented plateau; for the artists, the experience marked a watershed, collectively and individually. Iconographically (in the narrow sense of denoting subject matter) and formally, new dimensions were inaugurated; images embodying regionalist perceptions or visions were realised. All of these coalesced to mark a significant moment in the art history of Singapore.

While Bali endured in their memories (there were subsequent visits on an individual basis) and periodically surfaced in their practices, each developed distinctly after the experience; there also

were interests other than Bali which led to the creation of important and formidable works. The selection of pictures in this exhibition aims to provide glimpses into some of these advances and interests; while they have been chosen carefully (especially regarding aesthetic quality), the purpose is not to project comprehensive or rigorous surveys of their respective art histories; the aim is to draw attention to specific works. Generally, the majority of the pictures selected cluster around the 1960s; in some cases there are productions from the 1930s and 1940s. Although the choice for each artist is confined to 20 works, there are surprises; there also are paintings which although familiar, more than sustain prolonged and repeated viewing.

Chen Wen Hsi's *Gibbons* (1960s) executed in oil, and *Games On the Floor* (1970s) are unusual in the sense that their imagery and composition are the outcome of improvisational processes, pressed to degrees not customarily encountered in his works. The composition is liquified and flows over the picture surface with energy and freedom; the eye flicks over



**Chen Wen Hsi**

**Games On the Floor**



and along the brushmarks, marvelling at the textures and sinewy lines.

Cheong Soo Pieng's *Village* (1961) and *Imagination* (1974) are works which emerge from important formal innovations. In the former, Soo Pieng transforms and condenses the hanging scroll picture, and produces an architectonically designed picture surface; vertical movements are staggered and proceed upwards in distinct units. *Imagination* is a late development, arising from his travel to Europe in the 1960s, and his encounters with works by Turner and Venetian painters.

In *Pier in the Night* (1961) and *Still Life* (1971), Chen Chong Swee presses the medium, and the subject as a tangible entity, into assuming forceful material presences. The sense of realism in these pictures is reinforced in part by close observation and detailed (painterly) rendering, and in part by concretising space and time.

Liu Kang's *Orchids* (1952) consummately crystallises the expressive dimensions of the medium even as the content is made vivid. Lines are used as expressive in themselves, and also in their functional mode to represent seen reality. In *Fruit Sellers* (1956), Liu Kang sets out to simulate batik as a medium; details are eliminated and forms are abbreviated and generalised. The picture is composed to have the look of batik fabric.

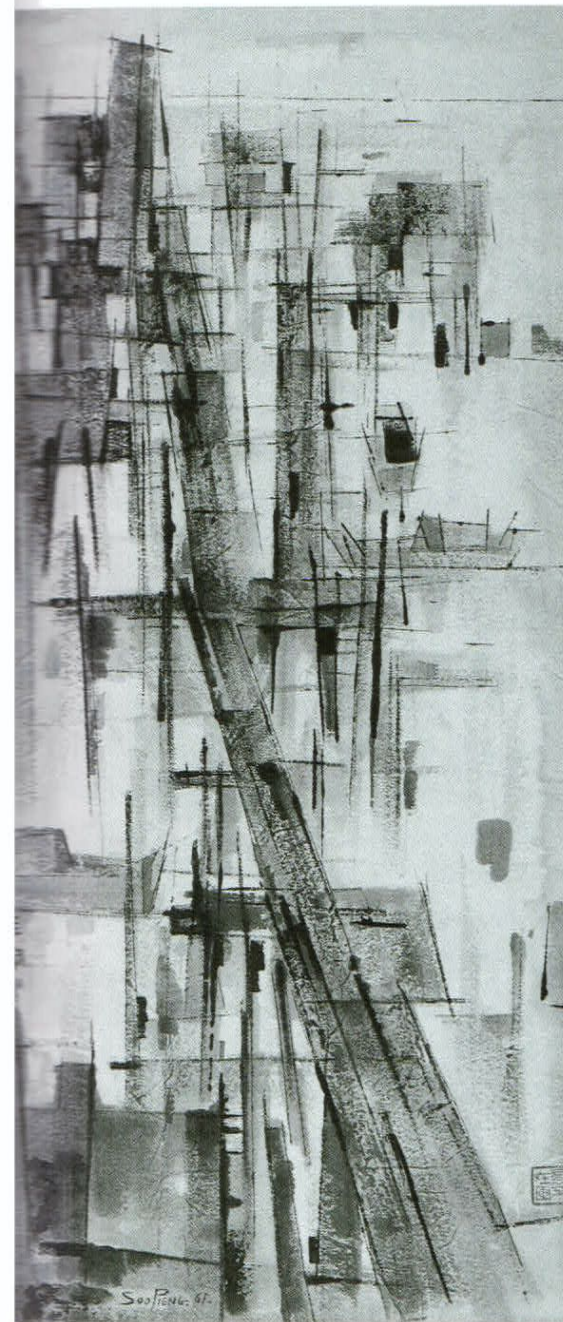
I have highlighted these pictures not out of interest in quirkiness but to point to artistic concepts and critical issues which have yet to be discussed in the works of these four artists. That they have been claimed as pioneers only serves to underline the urgent need to embark upon serious research and sustained studies of their artistic practices. There is much still to be done in constructing the art history of Singapore.

#### Notes

- 1 **Interview with Liu Kang on 15 December 1993**, Singapore, (unpublished), translated by Lai Chee Kien. (Hereafter **Interview**)
- 2 **Interview**. In another recollection, Liu Kang remarks that "the reception was like champagne corks popping." **Singapore Artists Speak**, edited by Richard Lim, (C.H. Yeo), Singapore, 1990, p. 68.
- 3 **Pictures From Bali**, Singapore, 1953 (exhibition catalogue), translated by R. Marleni.
- 4 Sabapathy, T.K. 'Romance of Art', in **The Straits Times**, April 14, 1981.
- 5 **Interview**.
- 6 Sabapathy, T.K. 'Harmonics of Painting', in **The Straits Times**, December 2, 1981.
- 7 The following lived and practised in Bali in the first half of this century: Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, Arie Smit, Willem Gerard Hofker, Miguel Covarrubias and Theo Meier.

*The impact of their presence on the art communities in Bali has not been examined in detail; Claire Holt provides some insights into the outcome of cross-cultural contacts in 'Bali's Plastic Arts: Traditions in Flux' in her **Art in Indonesia, Continuities and Change**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1967, pp. 168-188.*

- 8 Kwok Kian Chow, 'Chen Chong Swee. His Thoughts' in **Chen Chong Swee. His Art. His Thoughts**, National Museum, Singapore, 1993, p. 14.
- 9 Kwok Kian Chow, **ibid.** p. 15.
- 10 Kwok Kian Chow, **ibid.** p. 14.
- 11 **Interview**.



**Cheong Soo Pieng**

**Village**