

The art of interpretation

Soo Pieng's *Visions of Southeast Asia* was published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Cheong Soo Pieng: Bridging Worlds' at The National Art Gallery of Singapore (15 Sept-26 Dec 2010). As may be expected of a retrospect of the work of a visual artist, the volume contains a rich repertory of plates and illustrations, an overview of the artist's biography (Xiamen 1917 - Singapore 1983), and, under the title 'Bridging Worlds', art-historian and art-critical reflections on Soo Pieng's impressive body of work. In the 130-page section 'Plates', these reflections are still rounded off with substantive notes on the artist's preoccupation with Southeast Asian subject matter, his use of colour and composition, and his bridging forms and traditions.

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Right: Cheong Soo Pieng, *Weavers*, 1981. Oil on canvas laid on paper board, 82 x 106cm. Collection of National Heritage Board.

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WITH A FEW FELLOW ARTISTS of Chinese extraction, Soo Pieng originated what has become known as the Nanyang School, in which the term Nanyang refers to the southern seas or the South China region, of which Singapore and Malaysia are a part. School or Movement stands for the synthesis of Chinese ink-painting traditions, and of styles that centred on Paris, such as Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism. The artists concerned, mostly émigrés from China, were overwhelmed by the light, nature, and styles of life along the equator, which inspired a direct way of working, rendering their subjects in their own right or, as Soo Pieng observed, "This is how things are".

language, despite recognized success in the organization of academic conferences, the achievements by students, and a recognized need for the preservation of minority identity. They are Burmese migrants in Thailand who have moved to work as cleaners or to work on rubber plantations. They are the Naxi, a highland minority in China who are "reduced to displaying traditional costumes and performing Dongba music to dance for tourists" (122). They are Thai garlic growers, and individuals like Dr. Yu, who sought to educate about the social impact of development in Zomia and the GMS, and the founders of the Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN). All of whom have been silenced at one point or another because of their attempts to educate others about the impact of unequal development in Southeast and East Asia.

Conclusion

Although they do not take the need for class-based analysis at the center of their discourse, Michaud and Forsyth present work that substantially adds to the Glassman perspective. Furthermore, their greater attention to the dynamics of Zomia more greatly rounds out Glassman's geographical understandings of the GMS as well, as, although Glassman is critical of Thai-centered concepts, research restrictions have made Glassman's work a relatively Thailand centered narrative. Meanwhile, Michaud and Forsyth provide narratives that engage directly with the Thái, Tày, Drung (Chinese: Quizi), the Tarieng, the Khmu, the Lamet, the Hani, the Tai speaking peoples of Chợ Đồn (Chi Bốn District,

Bounding the Mekong is a rich combination of raw data interwoven with excellent narration and backed by a firm theoretical analysis.



Soo Pieng's work clearly demonstrates his affiliation with the commonplace that he depicted in a personal way of perceiving and doing things. This is obvious in the prominence of everyday life scenes in his work. Whether it concerns a fishermen's settlement along the coast, a rubbish dump somewhere in Singapore, scenes from Malay life, stark portraits, common utensils, and what have you, they are reproduced in a direct manner through the mediation of the inner life of the artist.

Together with his fellow Nanyang Style artists, Soo Pieng emphasised that their work should "reflect the reality of the South Seas" and "the localness of the place we live in", in contrast with the well-known imagined Chinese landscapes of the distant homeland. In their drive to depict 'localness' and 'everyday reality', the adherents of the Nanyang Movement became ethnographers, so to say, participant observers of the Other, which entails the risk of over-interpretation and distorted representations. To watch against this tendency, such artists as well as any experienced field-working anthropologist should submit to conscientious self-reflexivity.

All the same, and within the means of their craft, visual artists or cultural analysts' interpretations remain hostage to their personalities and experiences; it remains 'reality as they see it'. Because of his unusual versatility and permanent self-renewal, the vision of Soo Pieng is consistently captivating. In the words of art-critic Sabapathy – often quoted throughout the volume – "Soo Pieng transformed norms, extended limits, created new ways of making art and pointed to directions that still remain to be explored."

For a simple anthropological observer as is the present reviewer, the best part of *Visions* is in the abundant illustrations and reproductions. Even though, during Soo Pieng's stay in Europe (1961-63), he successfully exhibited in London and Munich, his oeuvre – despite it being world-class – regrettably remains virtually unknown to most of us. If you ever have the opportunity to see his work in person, make sure you grab it.

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Bác Kạn Province) and Bán Lượ (Than Uyên District, Lai Châu Province), the lower classes of Shilin, Dali, and Sipsongpanna (Chinese: Xishuangbanna). Thus, Michaud and Forsyth fill in the geographical regions of the GMS that Glassman's analysis is not particularly strong in drawing examples from, such as territories controlled by the Vietnamese government and also on the borderlands of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Nevertheless, even in these examples there appears to be a greater drawing from the Thai-Kadai language family than others. In the end, it is clear that only through a combination of these works and others will individuals be able to come to a decisive answer of what future development will look like for Southeast and East Asia.

The aim of this study is not to take a moralistic stance on the nature of the winners of global development, as no doubt, even amongst the 'winners' mentioned in this essay there is a distinct favoritism that will prevail amongst the business oriented elite classes. The future of analysis will be to more accurately provide the historical narratives of these 'losers' in the process of Glassman's "actual globalization", and to strive to provide an analysis of what has been termed "Political Ecology" in the context of both inter and intra-regional development. While this will be the trend in historical analysis, the same trend can be seen (in a few, but notable circumstances) in contemporary states. In Vietnam, petitions for preservations have been increasingly well received and in Thailand, "by the 1980s the Thai state was more amendable to arguments for regulating

logging than it had been in the past" (69). Thus, even though development studies, at their best, have predicted a long string of crises that Southeast Asia will face as a region, the potential future for the analysis of political ecology as a field remains an open, provocative, and relevant horizon.

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Notes

- 1 All page numbers refer to Glassman, 2010 – unless otherwise specified.