

# News from Southeast Asia

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

## Research. Scholarship. Policy.

These selected articles are from the workshop 'National Imaginations in Southeast Asian Art', organised by the Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Together with RSCS's regular Arts in Southeast Asia seminar series, this workshop aims to explore the intersecting forces of nationalism, nation-building and art-making in the region.

## New Titles from ISEAS Publishing

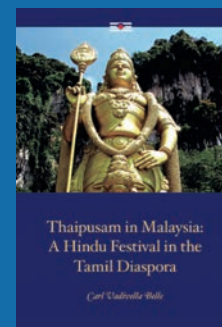
ISEAS Publishing is a dynamic press with more than forty years' experience. It is the largest publisher of academic books that focuses on Southeast Asian politics, economics and social issues. As a Unit of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, its role is enshrined in Parliamentary Act 9 of 1968, to assist ISEAS in the promotion of research on Southeast Asia worldwide.



*Spirits and Ships:  
Cultural Transfers in  
Early Monsoon Asia*

Edited by Andrea Acri,  
Roger Blench and  
Alexandra Landmann  
2017, 577 pages  
ISBN 978-981-47-6275-5,  
soft cover

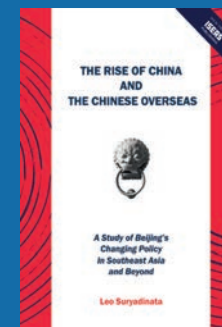
US\$54.90



*Thaipusam in Malaysia:  
A Hindu Festival in the  
Tamil Diaspora*

Carl Vadivella Belle  
2017, 401 pages  
ISBN 978-981-4695-75-6  
soft cover

US\$35.90



*The Rise of China and the  
Chinese Overseas: A Study  
of Beijing's Changing  
Policy in Southeast Asia  
and Beyond*

Leo Suryadinata  
2017, 278 pages  
ISBN 978-981-47-6264-9  
soft cover

US\$29.90

Please visit the ISEAS Publishing website at <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg> for the full range of titles and for ordering. Books are also available as PDF downloads, either as full books or as individual chapters.

## National imaginations in Southeast Asian art

Helene Njoto

THE REGIONAL Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute convened the workshop 'National Imaginations in Southeast Asian Art', on 20 January 2017. This workshop welcomed both senior art historians and younger specialists from the region including Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, as well as Australia, the Netherlands, the USA. Designed as an open forum, the one-day workshop gathered a large crowd of over 140 people from cultural institutions such as galleries, museums and universities. Clearly, there was great public interest in the region's art history, a discipline still in its infancy in Southeast Asia.

The workshop, organised by Helene Njoto and Terence Chong, addressed the theme of national consciousness in Southeast Asia and the role of the arts in the formation of nationhood. It asked how the art world, its agents and the

images produced, can shape this region and how much this region's 'national imaginations' are shaped by the arts. The workshop examined the role of arts not only from the point of view of artists and their artworks or through other dialectical frameworks such as modernism or globalisation. It also sought to address a broad range of local socio-economic factors from which art is manufactured as well as the cultural intermediaries like curators, critics and gallerists who promote or exclude artworks. It questioned 'nation-building' as a heuristic/relevant framework about 60 years after the creation of the first sovereign nations in Southeast Asia. This question seems ever more relevant today as artists tend to abandon local cultural signifiers and adopt more global idioms.

The workshop was divided into three country panels to highlight singularities among Southeast Asian nations.

## The ambivalent political identities of Chinese Indonesian artists in the 1950s-1960s

Brigitta Isabella

THE IDENTITY OF CHINESE INDONESIANS is closely linked to the way they perceive themselves, as well as how they are treated by society and the state. Chinese Indonesians have had to negotiate issues of nationalism, citizenship and loyalty in articulating their identities. This was certainly so amongst Chinese Indonesian artists of the 1950s. The case of *Yin Hua Mei Shu Hsieh Hui* (印華美術協會) or *Lembaga Seniman Yin Hua* (Yin Hua Artist Organization, YHAO), formed in Jakarta in April 1955, is a prime illustration of how national forces have pulled the identities of Chinese Indonesians in ambivalent directions.

There are two lenses with which to view YHAO. One is through the issue of national citizenship and the other through

national identity. Both issues placed YHAO in a tug of war between Indonesian and Chinese political and cultural identities. These issues were shaped by a variety of forces such as decolonization, nationalism, the bilateral policy between Indonesia and China, and the overseas Chinese community in Indonesia.

YHAO had approximately 92 members from Jakarta, Surabaya, Semarang, Solo, Cirebon, Pekalongan, Malang, Bandung and Tanjung Pinang, probably making it the biggest art organization in Indonesia at that time. YHAO enjoyed the patronage of none other than President Sukarno. The Chinese government also supported YHAO's first exhibition in January 1956, and later invited ten YHAO members to visit China for five months in the same year. YHAO was soon drawn into the politics of diplomacy between Indonesia and China. YHAO's first exhibition from 7-14 January 1956, at the Hotel Des Indes, Jakarta, was a case in point. President Sukarno and the Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia, Huang Zhen (in office from November 1954 to June 1961), attended the opening and praised YHAO's first exhibition. The show turned into a diplomatic gesture, which immediately transformed YHAO into a symbolic bridge for Sino-Indonesian relationships, providing China leverage through Sukarno's well-known passion for art.

The morning was dedicated to Indonesia and the afternoon saw two consecutive panels on the Philippines and Thailand on the one hand, and Singapore and Malaysia on the other. The speakers covered a wide timespan from the 19th century to the present with an emphasis on the pre- and post-independence era (1940s to 1970s) when most artworks and writings on nation-building were produced. Dr Daphne Ang showed how artistic genres such as portraiture served the purpose of establishing colonial authority in Malaya.

Most speakers observed that the role of arts in forming national imaginations is an on-going process. In the Philippines and Indonesia, artists from the colonial past (19th century) are lauded for being pioneers of modern art and national heroes "avant l'heure", though not without triggering some reaction as shown by Dr Sinnardet, Dr Baluyut and Dr Scalliet in their respective presentations. In the Indonesian panel, Ms Katherine Bruhn and Ms Brigitta Isabella spoke of how certain ethnic or provincial groups in Indonesia were excluded from the national narrative, while Mr Matt Cox challenged the territorial boundaries of 'national art' by looking at diaspora artists. The very limitations and relevance of the 'national' framework were also touched upon by Mr Brian Curtin who spoke of contemporary Thai art. In the late afternoon Dr Sarena Abdullah looked at the effects of the promotion of religious and ethnic values in national Malaysian arts. Last, Dr Yvonne Low and Ms Grace Hong addressed the challenges faced by Singapore to construct a national curatorial line while coveting a more global position in the region. Find below short summaries of three presentations given at the workshop.

Helene Njoto is Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute ([helene\\_njoto@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:helene_njoto@iseas.edu.sg)).

However, Indonesia-China relations were full of contradictions. The official Chinese endorsement of YHAO's first exhibition sent, on the one hand, a clear message of transnational unity with overseas Chinese in Indonesia; on the other, this endorsement contradicted Chinese state policy, which encouraged Chinese Indonesians to distance themselves from Chinese transnational patriotism, and to choose Indonesian citizenship, but withdraw from Indonesian domestic politics in order to play down the negative association of ethnic Chinese with communism. It was never clear if the overseas Chinese would neglect their cultural identity if they opted for Indonesian nationality. For YHAO, however, the political aesthetic imposed on it was Maoist-Chinese in orientation. As such, when expressing identities and culture in its art works, YHAO had to oscillate between Chinese transnational political aesthetic and Indonesian nationalism.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian government also desired close ties with China. However, due to its own deteriorating economic situation, Indonesian domestic policy was un-sympathetic to the rights of Chinese in Indonesia. On paper, after 1955, the Chinese in Indonesia could freely choose either Indonesian or Chinese nationality. But throughout the 1950s-1960s the government established many discriminative policies that made most of them feel alienated and unwanted. Under such circumstances, YHAO formed a dual attachment to Indonesia and China. Although the sense of overseas Chinese patriotism is present in YHAO's organizational practice, there are artworks in the 1956 exhibition that praise Indonesian nationalism, as represented by the works of Ling Nan-Lung and Tjio Tek Djin that depict the figure of Sukarno respectively in sculpture and painting, both entitled 'P.J.M. Presiden Dr. Ir. Soekarno'.