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Becoming Mun Sen: Shaping of a Penang modern art scene

Simon Soon

The story of Yong Mun Sen, who is widely hailed as the 'Father of Malaysian Art' is a well rehearsed one. It is a story that is nevertheless filled with inconsistencies, gaps and contradictions. Exhibition and auction catalogues have over the past 67 years sketched out the brief contours of an autodidact from Kuching, who eventually settled down in Penang and found his metier as a watercolourist of great originality.¹

For modern artist and playwright Lee Joo For, the appellation of 'Father' assigned to Mun Sen was deservedly for his singularity. Mun Sen, in Joo For's reckoning, "activates and energises artists to experiment and find new techniques bouncing off from the study of conventional ones, to effect a synthesis between Eastern and Western methods, and above all to see life, nature and art with a new vision, unborrowed, but daringly one's own. Because Mun Sen dared, Malaysian artists old and new dared."²

Yet, for all of Mun Sen's art historical prominence, our understanding of Mun Sen's artistic career appears uneven. For one, while we have some ideas of Mun Sen's artistic activities before the Second World War, they primarily list his accomplishments with little elaboration and discussion of the context in which Mun Sen worked as an artist.

Then, there's also the case where artworks produced by Mun Sen in the 1920s and 1930s tended to be smaller in volume compared to the post-war period. A large part of Mun Sen's oeuvre that are currently in circulation in the secondary market tends to be works produced after the Second World War and almost

exclusively in the watercolour medium. This has resulted in a tendency to elevate Mun Sen's stature solely as that of a great watercolourist. Moreover, the story of Mun Sen is often pieced together through recollections, either from the artist or family members after the second World War. These are recollections of the pre-war era made long after the period which they describe. While they sketch a general contour of Mun Sen's activities, the recollections often lack accuracy in details.

In order to paint a more accurate picture of a Penang art and cultural scene of the 1930s, characterised by Yong Mun Sen as a 'Golden Age', we are required to turn to a different range of historical sources. It is through newspaper reports and other documents that we are able to reconstruct with some level of detail Mun Sen's artistic activities before the Second World War, as well as fill in some gaps and reconcile a number of inconsistencies to clarify Mun Sen at the peak of his creative form.

Owing to the word-limitation, this essay will focus on three areas of Mun Sen's pre-war activities — his studio, his photography practice and the exhibitions he organised and participated in. It is hoped that by providing a fuller account of Mun Sen's pre-war activities, we gain a fuller and much more versatile profile of a modern artist — as photographer, sculptor, oil painter, photo-journalist, businessman and community organiser. This historical research contributes to future analysis of Mun Sen's pre-war oeuvre, giving historical and contextual understanding of the cultural life that Mun Sen led and the cultural world of Penang.

In Sulin Lewis' *Cities in Motion*, she characterises the Chinese community in Penang along a culturally divided line. The Anglophone Chinese stood on one end. This circle was forged through the alumni networks of the Penang Free School, known for "being fun-loving, frivolous, and sportive" especially when compared to their more 'bookish' Chinese contemporaries.³ Mun Sen however cannot be easily situated within this dichotomy. In a sense he is an outlier to the binary and warns us of the reductive lens it provides us to understand the cultural milieu of 1930s George Town. In turn, a close examination of Mun Sen's activities during this period provides us with new insights into what it means to be a cosmopolitan modern artist in a modern cosmopolitan city called Penang.

I. PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST AND HIS STUDIOS IN PENANG

Our story of Mun Sen must necessarily take us back to his arrival in Singapore sometime in 1918. Having married in Kuching, Mun Sen found employment as a cashier at a Chinese school's bookshop. He was paid around fourteen dollars a month, of which 6 dollars went to his rental.⁴ The income wasn't enough to support his growing family who joined him shortly after. Through an extended family connection, he also started working part-time at a relative's bookstore known as Rui Ting (瑞廷書局) in Chinese.⁵ In addition to that, Mun Sen also painted during his free time and supplemented his income by selling pictures he painted at a relative's bookstore in Singapore.

Within two years, an opportunity to relocate to the Penang branch of Rui Ting (瑞廷書局) came calling. There was a shortage of staff up north and Mun Sen was asked to head up to help out. We do not know the exact reason why he accepted the transfer. However, it is possible to surmise that the more laid-back environment, lower cost of living and a stable job at the fledgling bookshop could all be enticing reasons.⁶ Penang was where Mun Sen would settle down for the rest of his life.

A 1953 interview records that the Penang branch of the bookstore was called Tong Wen (同文書局), which was located on Beach Street.⁷ He continued painting when he had free time and consigned his paintings for sale on commission at a frame-making shop. In a short time, he became close acquaintance to an artist of Hokkien-descent who went by the name Ooi Hwa (黃花). Ooi Hwa was the artist name of Ong Seng Rong (王森榮) who hailed from the tin mining town of Ipoh, in the state of Perak. Mun Sen would enter into a business partnership with Ooi Hwa providing financial support for the setting up of an art gallery (美術館).⁸

Some years later, Mun Sen decided to establish his own art studio. Joseph McNally's account records that Mun Sen reputedly pawned his watch to make a down payment on the rental of the studio. He developed an interest in photography, explored the tonal value of painting and also tried his hands at sculpting with plaster-of-Paris. He also purchased studio cameras as well as a Leica and a Rolleiflex. In the 1955 Poay Cheng Building School Fund catalogue, it is recorded that the art studio is called Wei Kuan Painting Studio (蔚觀畫室).⁹

The studio is often described in English language sources as Tai Koon. Later, Wei Kuan and Tai Koon were both attributed to Mun Sen with Wei Kuan serving as his art studio and Tai Koon his photo studio business. However, there

are no known Chinese sources with the Chinese characters for Taikoon. Taikoon is likely 大觀, a shortened form of the four-character saying 蔚为大觀, used to describe a colourful and magnificent scene/vista/landscape. 蔚觀 Wei Kuan is also shortened from the four-character saying and adopted as the name for Mun Sen's studio in 1922-1930. It is therefore likely that Taikoon and Wei Kuan are one and the same name for his studio.¹⁰

The studio was located on a street called 牛干冬, which translates as cattle pen, the word being a transliteration of the Malay word for an animal pen, *kandang*. In Chinese street names by Lo Man Yuk, we learnt that in a multilingual port city like Penang, each language community living side by side with each other, might have their own conceptual orientation of geographical site and space.¹¹ More importantly, they hint at the ease in which words in one language are adopted as evidenced in the transliteration. More importantly, they might not always correspond neatly to the colonial ordering and understanding of space. Here, the street called 牛干冬 in Chinese sits within a longer stretch of road called Chulia Street, a major commercial thoroughfare running across George Town. However, 牛干冬 only refers to the section of Chulia Street between two intersecting streets, Love Lane and Penang Road.

Mun Sen reputedly pawned his watch to make a down payment on the rental of the studio. It was during this phase of his life, he decided to change his name to Mun Sen 曼生. Coining an 'art name' or 號 for oneself was part of a long Chinese tradition beginning in the Six Dynasties period and became vogue from the Tang dynasty onwards. The name translates roughly to gradual or prolonged creation. Though Mun Sen continue to sign his work under the name Yen Lang (印冷), which is a homophone for his original birth name 延朗, it was the name Mun Sen that he would be best remembered as in art history.

¹ Jing Ge 金戈. 1955. 'Biography of Yong Mun Sen (楊曼生傳)', *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*, 4.

² 1953. 'Mister Yong Mun Sen 40 Years of Art-making (楊曼生先生從藝四十年)' *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 3 August, 10.

³ 1972. *Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/ Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April*.

⁴ Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery; Jing Ge 金戈. 1955. 'Biography of Yong Mun Sen (楊曼生傳)' *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*, 4.

⁵ Jing Ge 金戈. 1955. 'Biography of Yong Mun Sen (楊曼生傳)' *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*, 4.

⁶ 1972. *Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/ Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April*.

⁷ Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery; Joseph McNally. 1994. 'Yong Mun Sen' *Pioneers of Malaysian Art*, Penang Art Gallery, 70-76.

⁸ Lo Man Yuk. 1900. 'Chinese Names of Streets in Penang', *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 33 (JANUARY 1900), 205.

⁹ See 1999. *Yong Mun Sen Retrospective 1999*, Penang State Art Gallery.

¹ The first catalogue being the 1955 *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*.

² Lee Joo For. 1999. 'The Joy and Phenomenon that is Mun Sen', *Yong Mun Sen Retrospective 1999*, Penang State Art Gallery, 24-25.

³ Su-lin Lewis. 2016. *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 206.

⁴ Jing Ge 金戈. 1955. 'Biography of Yong Mun Sen (楊曼生傳)', *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*, 4;

⁵ 1972. *Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/ Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April*. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery.

⁶ The bookstore was however named in Joseph McNally's 1994 account as Kee Huar Bookstore in English. See Joseph McNally. 1994.

'Yong Mun Sen' *Pioneers of Malaysian Art*, Penang Art Gallery, 70-76.

Not much is known about this early studio, but no evidence suggests that Mun Sen has entered the photo studio business at this point. The earliest evidence of Mun Sen studio comes from an advertisement dated 1927, not 1930 as commonly stated in subsequent literature and auction catalogues. Based on the advertisement, the studio already occupied two adjacent shoplots in its early years but there are no indications that the studio offered photo studio services.¹³ In fact a 1930 travelogue that profiled the studio also did not record the existence of a photo studio.



Fig. 1 Advertisement for Mun Sen Studio in Kwong Wah Jit Poh, 4 November 1927.

At that point, Mun Sen studio sold art supplies, offered frame-making services and ran art classes. It is from the 1930 travelogue, that we gain a peak into what an artist studio looked like in early 20th-century Penang. Given that the travelogue was published in 1930, it is reasonable to assume that the author visited Penang 1-2 years before. In turn, the record would have captured the Penang Road studio in its early days.

The page-long description of Mun Sen studio in the travelogue paints a vivid picture of what lies inside it. The studio had oil paintings for

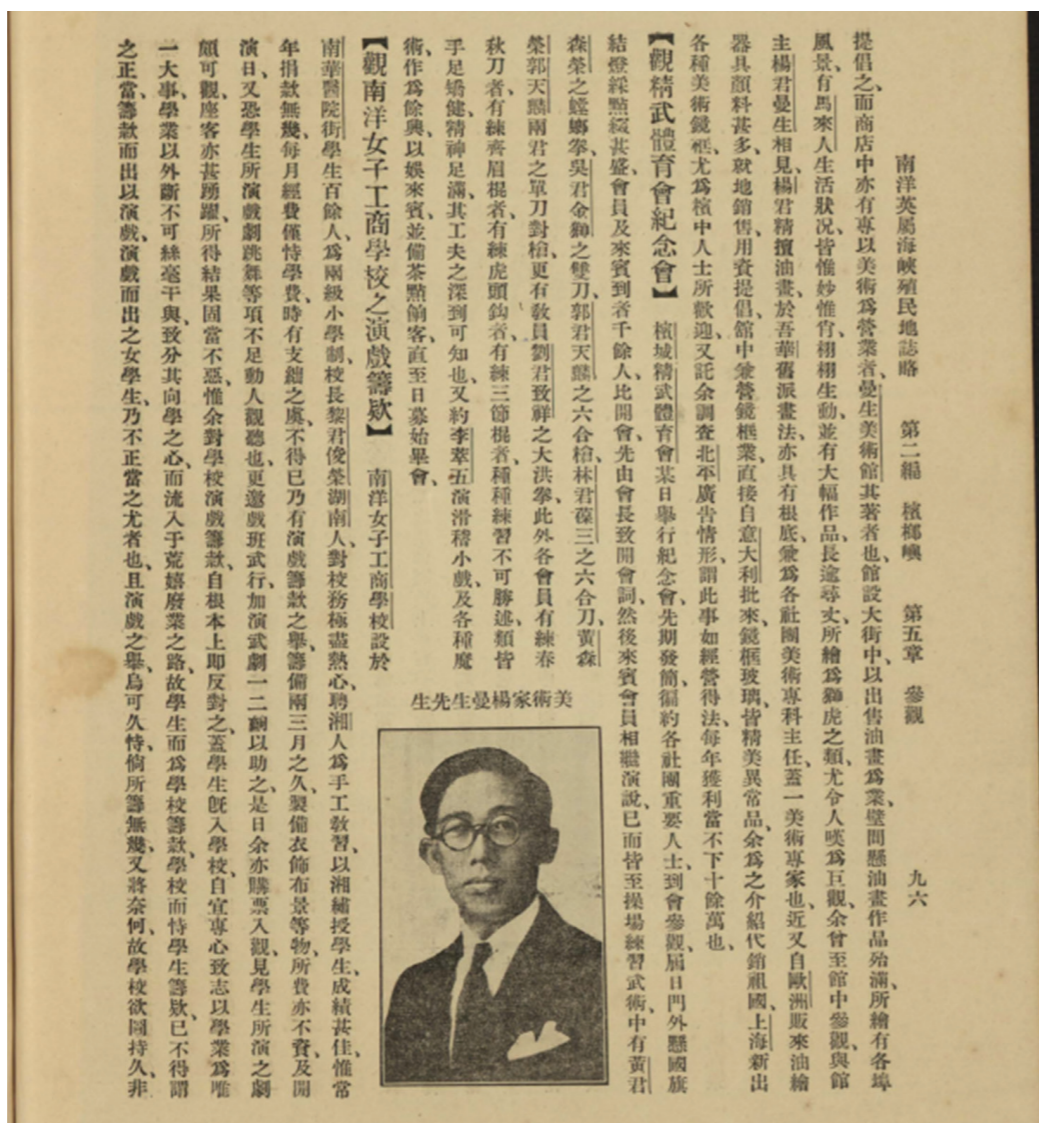


Fig. 2 A profile of Yong Mun Sen and Mun Sen studio published in a 1930 travelogue in Description of British Straits Settlements of Nanyang 南洋英屬海峽殖民地志略 (In *Yun Business Firm*, 1930, 95-96.)

sale, every inch of studio wall space was filled with his paintings. These paintings include all manners of local landscapes, including what is described as "lively depictions of Malay kampung life". Amongst the smaller paintings hung on the display wall is a large painting of the lion/tiger genre. In addition, there were Chinese style paintings for sale, and also art supplies. The travelogue further records that Mun Sen began importing European art supplies to fulfil a local market. The art studio was also a frame-

making workshop with imported mirror frames from Italy and Shanghai.¹⁴ The studio became a favourite meeting place for fellow artist-friends, namely Tay Hooi Keat, Kuo Ju Ping, Khaw Sia, Lee Cheng Yong, Abdullah Ariff, Chuah Thean Teng, Zhong Bai Mu. Mun Sen also became acquainted with the works of European artists through books, particularly those of Van Gogh and Gauguin. In turn, it was Gauguin that had the greatest impact on the development of his style.¹⁵

Finally, based on family interviews conducted by Michael Yong (楊焜善/觀山) and Saniza Othman, we have also learnt that Mun Sen's wife, Lam Sek Foong, is remembered as an abled business woman. She was in charge of sales and daily operations of the studio.¹⁶ It was a business that reportedly brought in a handsome profit of \$10,000 in 1930. Unlike many others whose fortunes took a drastic turn during the Great Depression, Mun Sen and his family seemed to have made a small fortune. It was during this period that the family bought a piece of farmland in Air Itam, which explained the recurrence of the Kek Lok Si Temple as one of Mun Sen's favourite subjects to paint. It was also during this period that Mun Sen came to own a car.

McNally noted that it was during the 1930s that Mun Sen opened an additional studio in a sea-facing old mansion at 58, Northam Road. The mansion was previously owned by the last Kapitan of Penang, Chung Thye Phin, who lived here until he passed away on this very premises in 1935. This means that Mun Sen would only have occupied the mansion after the passing of the late Kapitan Chung. At some time, we know that the house was bought over by Ng Sui Cam (伍瑞琴).¹⁷ It is unclear what McNally meant by suggesting Mun Sen opened a studio in this location. Children from Mun Sen's first wife, Lam Sek Foong, recalled living in the mansion at some point. It is unclear if they rented or purchased the property. In any case, from the available information, it seems like the Yong family moved into the mansion sometime after the mid-1930s until the mansion's ownership was transferred to Ng Sui Cam sometime after the war.¹⁸

2. MUN SEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Perhaps less known to the general public is the significance of photography in the story of Mun Sen. From his 1999 posthumous retrospective, Mun Sen's foray into photography was significantly downplayed. Explained largely as a means to an end, photography was largely understood as a business that supported Mun Sen's livelihood and his growing family while his true passion lies elsewhere, in painting.¹⁹

It is from a recollection published in a 1955 catalogue that Mun Sen acknowledged the encouragement given by Tan Chiu Cheng (陳樹青), owner of an electrotype company, to Mun Sen. Mr Tan also provided financial support to Mun Sen in setting up the photo studio business sometime around 1931. Presumably this was when the second lot of Mun Sen Studio was converted into a photo studio.

The 1955 catalogue also states that Mun Sen opened a second photo studio known as Shanghai Photo Studio sometime in 1932. It remains relatively unknown that Mun Sen had a second photo studio called Shanghai Photo Studio at the tail-end of Leith Street (which was diagonally across from Mun Sen Studio). In fact, the studio was where the Ying Ying Art Exhibition organising committee members met and later served as the venue for the Penang Chinese Art Society's meetings. The studio was renamed Chungking after the war, contributing to occasional confusion that the original name of the second studio was Chungking.²⁰



Fig. 3 Advertisement for Shanghai Photo Studio, in *Chunam Morning Post*, 4 September 1930.

However, a survey of newspaper advertisements on the photo studio points to the existence of Shanghai Photo Studio as early as 1930.²¹ We know from 1927 advertisements of Mun Sen studio that photography-related services were not yet offered then. Therefore, we can reasonably assume that if Shanghai Photo Studio was already open for business in 1930, then Mun Sen studio's photographic venture might have started with the conversion of half of his two-shop lot Mun Sen Studio sometime in 1929.²²

¹³ See 1927. *Kwong Wah*. 4 Nov. 16.

¹⁴ Song Yunpu 宋蕴璞. 1930. 'Visiting Yong Mun Sen's Art Studio (參觀楊曼生美術館)', *Description of British Straits Settlements of Nanyang* (南洋英屬海峽殖民地志略), *Yun Business Firm* 齋與商行, 95-96.

¹⁵ Joseph McNally. 1994. 'Yong Mun Sen', *Pioneers of Malaysian Art*, Penang Art Gallery, 70-76.

¹⁶ 1972. *Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April*. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery; 2022. Conversation between descendants of the first family of Yong Mun Sen / Lam Sek Foong and Michael Yong (楊焜善/觀山) and Saniza Othman, first half of 2022.

¹⁷ Ng was trained as a mechanical engineer but was roped back to run the family business, Sun Wo Loong Oil Mill Co. Ltd (新和隆油廠), manufacturer of rice bran oil and coconut oil, located at 51, Madras Lane, Penang. He became a successful businessman and was actively involved in political and community services, even serving as a member of the Federal Legislative Council of Malaya and was one of the 16 executive councillors who formed Malaysian Chinese Association.

¹⁸ Joseph McNally. 1994. 'Yong Mun Sen', *Pioneers of Malaysian Art*, Penang Art Gallery, 70-76; Also see, <http://teochiewkia2010.blogspot.com/2011/04/ng-swee-cam.html>

¹⁹ Dr Tan Chong Guan. 1999. 'The Life of Yong Mun Sen', *Yong Mun Sen Retrospective 1999*, Penang State Art Gallery, 9.

²⁰ After the Second World War, the name Shanghai Photo Studio was used for a branch of Mun Sen's photographic studio business located in New World Amusement Park. See Simon Soon, 2020-2021. *Photographic Studios and photography in Malaysia and Singapore, 1840s - 1980s*. Site: bit.ly/myphotostudios

²¹ 1930. *Chunam Morning Post* 中南晨報, 4 September.

²² 1972. *Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April*. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery; Jing Ge 金戈. 1955. 'Biography of Yong Mun Sen (楊曼生傳)', *Poay Cheng Building School Fund Exhibition Catalogue*, 4.

Beyond venturing into the business of running two photo studios, Mun Sen had for a brief period also worked as a photo-journalist. In fact, he was given the opportunity to edit a pictorial supplement in *Chunam Morning Daily* (中南晨報). The pictorial supplement was however a one-off attempt, no further editions ensued as the newspaper was relatively short-lived. Nevertheless, the pictorial supplement offers a clue to the growing cultural ties between Mun Sen and the relatively young modern art scene that was emerging in Singapore, spearheaded by the likes of Tchang Ju-Chi, a graduate of the Shanghai Art Academy who moved to Singapore. It is unknown if by 1930 Mun Sen already knew Tchang Ju-Chi personally. However, it is obvious from the editorial experimentation that Mun Sen was exploring in his pictorial supplement, that the influence of Tchang Ju-Chi is undeniable. Tchang was then the editor of the pictorial supplement *Ye Hui* (椰輝), or *Coconut Splendour*, a weekly insert of *Lat Pau* (叻報), the oldest Chinese language newspaper in the Straits Settlements of Singapore.

Both *Ye Hui* and Mun Sen's pictorial supplement shared a similar layout, occupying four full-pages in the spreadsheet newspaper format. It included short captions, with photographs cut out and laid out in a scrapbook format, interspersed with editorial cartoons. While *Ye Hui's* content had a more political focus with photographs taken from various sources, Mun Sen's sole edition tended to publish photographs taken by himself, often featuring sporting events organised by the Chinese language schools of Penang. In turn, *Ye Hui* had a diverse pool of cartoonists to draw on, while Mun Sen pretty much drew the cartoons himself. It is from the pictorial supplement a new aspect of Mun Sen's artistic exploration in editorial cartoons.

Mun Sen's foray into photojournalism and taking on the challenge of editing a short-lived editorial supplement suggest that his undertaking and interest in photography was not merely commercial. Moreover, his interest in photography was not solely as a tool to capture



Fig. 4 The Pictorial Supplement of *Chunam Morning Post* edited by Yong Mun Sen, (4 September 1930).

and document scenic encounters for the sole purpose of committing them into his paintings. Rather, we might begin to think of how painting and photography worked to complement each other as mediums of expressions for Mun Sen.

There is further evidence of the importance Mun Sen placed in photography. While more research needs to be undertaken to uncover the extent of Mun Sen's photographic oeuvre, newspaper accounts seem to be suggesting that Mun Sen has also actively sought to carve out a name for himself in the field of art photography.

In 1936, Mun Sen Studio won 2nd place in the Photography-Professional category in the M.A.H.A. exhibition held in Kuala Lumpur around August. The studio was beaten by Ebata Studio (Penang). The Singapore Free Press reports: "Enthusiasm of Chinese for watercolours and oils is evident after a glance at the exhibits ranged on two walls of the art and photography hall. The photography section has

not been so well supported, but it is clear that the professionals in Malaya are beginning to search for subjects and settings in keeping with the advancing technique of their profession."²³

Shortly after, Mun Sen also participated in the Mahua Art of Photography Exhibition (馬華攝影藝術展覽會) organised by *Nanyang Siang Pau* that was held in October at the Great World Amusement Park. With 張汝器, 周福隆, 柯子平, described as three artist photographers (三位攝影美術家), named as jury for the competition. Penang Shanghai Studio won 1st Prize for the Professional Group for the work '黃金時代' (*Golden Age*) and 2nd Prize for the Professional Group for '媚' (*Charm*); Yong Mun Sen won 1st Prize for the Amateur Group for his work '極目地' (*Vista*) and also three of the ten Special Mentions for his work '得之' (*obtaining*), '井然' (*In good order*) and '白雲在望' (*White clouds in sight*).²⁴

Mun Sen continued to participate in photography competitions following his 1936 successes. In the following year, at the 1937 M.A.H.A. exhibition, Yong Mun Sen won 1st place for Portraiture and 2nd place for Miscellaneous under the Professional Category.²⁵ Later, in 1939 M.A.H.A. exhibition of art and photography, Mun Sen won 1st prize in all three of the watercolour categories: 1) Land and Sea, 2) Still Life, and 3) Portraits. He also won 1st prize for the Land and Sea category for oil painting, even though his name was spelled 'Mun Seng'. In photography, under the Amateur category, Mun Sen Studio achieved 2nd place for Composition. In the Professionals category, Mun Sen Art Studio won 1st place for Miscellaneous category, 2nd place for Child Study, and Landscape and Seascape. Meanwhile Shanghai Studio won 1st place for Composition and a "very highly commended" for Child Study.²⁶

3. MUN SEN AND PENANG'S ART COMMUNITY

Having gained some measure of financial stability through his art and photo studio business, the 1930s also saw a gradual increase of Mun Sen's public profile in Penang. By 1936, he was able to bring together artists in Penang to organise an art exhibition on a scale that Penang had never seen before.

The Ying Ying Art Exhibition (嚶嚶藝術展覽會) was held at Li Teik School 5th Branch (蓮花河麗澤第五分校) from 2-4 April 1936. The exhibition was open from 10AM-6PM throughout its three day long run. Planning for the exhibition began earlier in January that year. The exhibition banner, written with red ink on white cloth, reads, '棧一層嚶嚶藝展大會', was hung at the entrance. Artworks exhibited include paintings, photography, sculpture and calligraphy, carved

reliefs, and stamps, with a total of approximately 300 pieces. More than 40 artists participated in the exhibition, including artists from across Malaya, as well as China and Japan. Mun Sen contributed 20 oil paintings, 15 watercolours, 12 photographic artworks and 3 sculptures. Installed in the front room were sculptural works by Yong Mun Sen and Lee Cheng Yong. Exhibited works were selected by Yong Mun Sen and Lee Cheng Yong with Mun Sen taking the lead in installing the artworks. The closing meeting was held at Shanghai Photo Studio.

Penang Ying Ying Art Exhibition opened on April 2 at 10AM, with Consulate General of China Huang Yan Kai and his wife officiating the opening ceremony. On two opposing walls, relief carvings, craft pieces and oil paintings, were hung on display. In addition, oil and watercolour

were displayed in the middle and end room, with works in small brush calligraphy displayed on tables. The classrooms upstairs were used to display photographs. In addition, Ying Ying Art Exhibition also featured the calligraphic works of many modern calligraphy masters including Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Liang Shuming, Hui Zhongwu, Huang Jie, Chen Xun (康有为, 梁啟超, 會仲鳴, 黃節, 陳洵), which were loaned by Huang Yan Kai for the exhibition.²⁷

It is from this exhibition that have spurred local correspondent of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, who wrote under the pen name of Nan Guo, to recall exhibitions that were held by the Chinese artists community of Penang over the past ten years in Penang's history. A table of the exhibitions has been listed below:²⁸

YEAR	EXHIBITION	VENUE	DATE	TYPE	GENRE
1925 (15)	黃森榮個人美術展覽會, 火車頭路精武體育會 (沒有籌款)	Chin Woo Sports Centre, China Street Ghaut	Unknown	Solo	Fine Art
1926 (16)	李仲乾, 書畫展覽會, 平章會館 (是籌款建設什麼學院)	Chinese Town Hall	Unknown	Solo	Ink Painting and Calligraphy
1931 (20)	二月間, 楊曼生, 陳威安, 鍾百木, 葉應靖, 黃花陳蘭, 聯合檳怡兩坡, 平章會館 (籌款賑濟魯難 (經費由彼等自備))	Chinese Town Hall	Mid February	Group	Modern Art
1932 (21)	十二月間, 李清庸個人美術展覽會, 打石街檳城閱書報社內 (無籌款)	Philomatic Union	Mid December	Solo	Modern Art
1933 (23)	六月廿二日, 陳天嘯, 書畫展覽會, 平章會館 (籌款做什麼用, 記者忘記了)	Chinese Town Hall	26 June	Solo	Ink Painting and Calligraphy
1936 (26)	第一層嚶嚶藝術展覽會	Li Teik School 5 th Branch (蓮花河麗澤第五分校)	2-4 April	Group	Multiple

²⁵ 1937. 'The Results', *Sunday Tribune* (Singapore), 1 August, 2.

²⁶ 1939. 'Photography And Art', *The Straits Times*, 7 August, 14.

²⁷ Wu Zhong Xiang (吳中相) contributed the most photographic pieces to the exhibition, with scenes from both China and Malaya. Lee Cheng Yong and Yong Mun Sen contributed the most number of paintings to the exhibition. For further information, see 1936. 'Penang's Ying Ying Art Exhibition (檳城嚶嚶藝展會二日展舉行開幕內外各埠參加者計有四十餘人作品數百件琳瑯滿目美不勝收請黃領事夫婦蒞場主持開幕禮)', *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 6 April, 10; 1936. 'Penang's Ying Ying Art Exhibition held a third meeting and issued an open invitation via the press to invite participating artists from other areas (檳城嚶嚶藝展會第三次籌委會議決在報上登臨時啓事請外埠 藝術界盡量加入)', *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 27 March, 8; 1936. 'Penang Ying Ying Art Exhibition received thousand of visitors during its four day run (檳城嚶嚶藝展 四日中觀者千人)', *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日報, 8 April, 12; 1936. 'Penang Artists held a meeting to discuss organising an exhibition (檳城藝術界同人開會討論籌備藝展展覽日期已定四月一日舉行展覽科目詩詞畫攝影彫刻等推舉籌備委員負責辦理)', *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 14 January, 8.

²⁸ 1936. 'Penang's Ying Ying Art Exhibition (檳城嚶嚶藝展會二日展舉行開幕內外各埠參加者計有四十餘人作品數百件琳瑯滿目美不勝收請黃領事夫婦蒞場主持開幕禮)', *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 6 April, 10.

²³ 1936. 'Highlands' Produce Outstanding Feature Of M.A.H.A. Exhibition' *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 4 August, 6; See also, 1936. 'Prize Winners at the Malayan Show' *The Straits Times*, 3 August, 13.

²⁴ 1936. 'Malayan Chinese Photography Exhibition organised by *Nanyang Siang Pau* (本報主辦之馬華影展昨經評定優勝者名次職業組冠軍檳城上海照相公司業餘組冠軍檳城楊曼生君另有優等獎十名定十二日分發各獎品)' *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, 9 October, 5.

From the table, we learnt that Mun Sen had participated in a group exhibition in 1931, which showcased artists from both Penang and Ipoh. The group exhibition suggests that the cultural milieu Mun Sen was part of an extended network that stretched beyond the shores of Penang across to Singapore and Malaya. Therefore, it is no surprise that in 1936, when The Society of Chinese Artists, Singapore was formally established on 20 January, Mun Sen was elected as the Vice-President of the Society. It was a position he held until 1939.²⁹

At the inaugural meeting, Mun Sen's lasting contribution was that he planted the idea of establishing a regional art school. This eventually came into fruition as the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Upon registrations, Society members travelled to Penang under Yong Mun Sen's invitation and participated in the Ying Ying Art Exhibition. On 25 June, the Society also organised its first large-scale annual exhibition in Singapore and included the participation of Penang artists.³⁰

1936 was also the year when the Chinese artists of Penang made their debut at the annual Impressionists Art Society Exhibition held at Malay Volunteers Headquarters from 21-23 October. The exhibition featured more than 200 works.³¹ Reviewing the exhibition, Nan Guo notes that "[Mun Sen's] recent oil and watercolour paintings seemed more liberal in style, *The Bride* vividly depicted Nanyang

Chinese wedding customs; *Fulfilling Life* was a representation of mundane life of local people. Yong and Quah Kuan Sim's works received favourable reviews from *Strait Echo* and *Pinang Gazette*, particularly Yong's *After Rain* and *Mountain Spring*, were praised for their delicate tone and composition."³²

The exhibition was ground-breaking for it was the first time that the Penang Impressionist Society made an open invitation to the Chinese artist community to participate in their annual exhibition. 7 Chinese artists made their exhibition debut this year, including Yong Mun Sen, Tan Seng Aun, Quah Kuan Sim, Tay Hooi Keat, Lee Cheng Yong, Wu Zhong He and Kuoh Ju Ping. Together, they showcased 74 pieces of artworks.

Reporting the event, Nan Guo again notes, "We went upstairs and saw an English woman sitting behind a table, she was entertaining the visitors while selling a stack of exhibition catalogues, each sold at 10 cents. We could choose to buy it or not. The exhibition featured 200 works from artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Artworks were hung on wooden screens and arranged in an orderly pattern, some were not for sale, whereas those attached with a fixed price were available for sale. It was exciting seeing Chinese artists being featured in the exhibition as local Chinese Arts were making their presence felt in the art scene."³³

In the following year, efforts to organise Penang's Chinese artist community led to the formation of Penang Chinese Art Research Society (檳城華人藝術研究會). Members held a meeting on 25 June 1937 at 8pm at Mun Sen's Shanghai Photo Studio on Leith Street. Attendees included lawyer Lim Cheng Ean, Yong Mun Sen, Lee Cheng Yong, Tan Seng On (陳成安) and others.³⁴ Owing to Mun Sen's connection to the Chinese Art Research Society of Singapore, some members of the Singapore Society further participated in the Penang Chinese Artists Art Exhibition held around early July of 1937.³⁵

A second edition of Ying Ying Art Exhibition (嚶嚶藝術展覽會) was staged from 15-17 September 1939 at the old office of Sing Pin Jih Poh, then located at 8, Leith Street. Response to the second exhibition did not compare favourably to the first but it continues to serve as a platform of exchange and friendship for both artists in Penang and Singapore.³⁶ This further cemented Mun Sen's prominence as a public figure in Penang. So influential was Mun Sen that by 1941 on the occasion of the celebrated Chinese artist Xu Bei Hong's visit to Penang, Mun Sen and other leading artists hosted a welcome dinner for Xu.

Over the course of the 1930s, the port city of Penang underwent rapid expansion. A writer describes "the suburbs of George Town ... are growing so rapidly in importance today that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discover

where the city ends and where suburbia subsides into rustication"³⁷ It is within this context that Mun Sen's artistic career took off and his art and photography business flourished. The Yong family lived a comfortable life up to the eve of the Second World War.

From this brief survey of Mun Sen's contribution to the cultural life of Penang, we see an artist whose personal and business success translated into community-building endeavours. If the oft-repeated and seemingly cliché description of Yong Mun Sen as a 'father figure' for modern art in Malaysia is to have any measure of relevance today, we must look at least to the 1930s where one could sense the beginning of a cross-cultural Penang art community in formation. Yong Mun Sen played a role in giving shape to this community.

4. END OF A GOLDEN ERA

In 1941, Lam Sek Foong, the first wife of Yong Mun Sen passed away due to ill health. By then, children from the first marriage had already grown up.³⁸ Mun Sen subsequently married Yao Chew Mooi (daughter of Yao Swee Lum of Ipoh, a descendant of Kapitan China, Yap Ah Loy), through engaging the services of a matchmaker.³⁹

With the Japanese occupation of Malaya, Mun Sen and his new family members retreated to his Air Itam farm, and they turned to farming for survival.⁴⁰ His retreat marks the end of a Golden Era, a period where the Penang art community flourished. When the Second World War finally came to an end, it signalled new opportunities. Mun Sen worked diligently and twice as hard to rebuild his career by painting prolifically and exhibited widely in Singapore and across Malaya. Mun Sen fame grew through his exhibitions not only in Malaya and Singapore but also through foreign contacts in Britain, U.S.A. and Australia.⁴¹ He also sought to rebuild his businesses and community organisations that gave some semblance of an art scene to Penang during the pre-war period. These efforts would mark another significant chapter in the story of Yong Mun Sen. ■

^[1] Yeo Mang Thong. 2019. Migration, Transmission, Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886-1945), Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore, 80.

^[2] Yeo Mang Thong. 2019. Migration, Transmission, Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886-1945), Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore, 80; 1936. 'Singapore Chinese Art Research Society's Exhibition (星洲華人美術研究會美展會昨由刁作謙夫人揭幕主席張汝器希望參觀人士嚴格批評付展作品計一百六十五幅張汝器之油畫楊印冷之水彩戴陳賴三君之木刻均極優異)', Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報, 26 June, 6; See also Singapore Society of Chinese Artist's website: https://soca.org.sg/about/history.htm

^[3] 20 works of Yong Mun Sen was shown including 7 of his oil paintings, Small Talk, Working Together, Fulfilling Life, The Bride, Mountains, Gambling, and Village; 7 watercolours, including After Rain, Working in the Field, Contemplating, White Rock Mountain, Tanjung Landscape, Penang Hill, and Mountain Spring; as well as 6 photographic works. See 1936. 'Penang Chinese Artists Debut at Impressionist Exhibition In Collaboration With Foreign Artists. Featuring 200 Artworks From More Than 40 Artists (檳城中外藝術家舉行印象派藝展會檳華人破天荒被邀請參加作者四十餘位作品二百件楊曼生作品獲兩西報美評)', Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報, 26 October, 1 (Translated by Lim Jit Jean). Yong Mun Sen's artworks is recorded to have received acclaim from 2 Local English Press.

^[4] 1936. 'Penang Chinese Artists Debut at Impressionist Exhibition In Collaboration With Foreign Artists. Featuring 200 Artworks From More Than 40 Artists (檳城中外藝術家舉行印象派藝展會檳華人破天荒被邀請參加作者四十餘位作品二百件楊曼生作品獲兩西報美評檳城中外藝術家舉行印象派藝展會檳華人破天荒被邀請參加作者四十餘位作品二百件楊曼生作品獲兩西報美評)', Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報, 26 October, 11 (Translated by Lim Jit Jean)

^[5] 1936. 'Penang Chinese Artists Debut at Impressionist Exhibition In Collaboration With Foreign Artists. Featuring 200 Artworks From More Than 40 Artists (檳城中外藝術家舉行印象派藝展會檳華人破天荒被邀請參加作者四十餘位作品二百件楊曼生作品獲兩西報美評)', Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報, 26 October, 11 (Translated by Lim Jit Jean). Artists were required to submit their works directly to the Society. All entries including artist name, title and type of artworks, must be submitted in English.

^[6] 1937. 'Penang Chinese Art Research Society welcomes the participation of artists abroad (檳城華人藝研會議決開會 歡迎外埠藝界同志)', Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報, 28 June, 10.

^[7] See also Singapore Society of Chinese Artists's timeline: https://soca.org.sg/about/history.html

^[8] The exhibition did receive the support of artists including Yong Mun Sen, Lee Cheng Yong, Qiu Shang, Guan Zhen Min, Tan Seng Aun, Tay Hooi Keat, Quah Kuan Sim, Kuo Ju Ping, Zhang Ru Qi, Zhuang YouZhao, Lu Heng, Xu Jun Lian and Dai Yin Lang.

^[9] 1930. Eastern Courier, 15 March, 16.

^[10] 1941. 'The wife of Yong Mun Sen passes away from illness (楊曼生夫人 病逝檳城)', Sinchew Jit Poh 星洲日報, 25 January, 13; 2022: Conversation between descendants of the first family of Yong Mun Sen / Lam Sek Foong with Michael Yong and Saniza Othman, first half of 2022.

^[11] Together they would have four sons and two daughters. Mun Sen started a second family with Yao Chew Mooi, having four sons and two daughters.

^[12] 1972. Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/ Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery, Joseph McNally. 1994. 'Yong Mun Sen', Pioneers of Malaysian Art, Penang Art Gallery, 70-76.

^[13] 1972. Pameran Peringatan Yong Mun Sen/ Yong Mun Sen Memorial Exhibition. Exhibition catalogue 17 March - 4 April. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara/National Art Gallery.