

Cheong Soo Pieng



LARASATI

Friday, 22 August 2025

Chinese Girl

The titular subject of a Chinese figure in Cheong Soo Pieng's work is rare. While traditional Chinese figuration can be found more regularly in the less well-known paintings produced during Soo Pieng's last few years, as a rule the paintings with the almond-eyed, slender-limbed human forms of his mature figurative style – which were a significant part of his output from the late 1960s onwards (and were executed in both oils and Chinese ink) – almost always represented people, mainly women, from Bali and insular Malaysia. *Chinese Girl* is an exception to this rule. Indeed, the only other example to have come to auction is *Untitled (Chinese Woman)*, 1965-69, which sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2018.¹

By 1976, the year *Chinese Girl* was executed, Soo Pieng had spent a couple of years re-studying the discipline of Chinese ink painting that had been part of his training in the Xiamen and Xin Hua academies. This eventually led to a visit to Guilin, China, in 1979, which in itself prompted in him a renaissance of traditional ink painting based on works by Song Dynasty masters.² However, the origins of the anonymous Chinese girl portrayed here are communicated not through the use of materials or approach to painting, but through the compositional motifs. The series of ink sketches and calligraphy across the lower border, which translate broadly to the notion of “auspicious blessings”, are interspersed with male figures in Tang, Song and Ming Dynasty headwear that allude to the Chinese ink painting tradition and the calligraphic traditions of the Chinese artistic culture.

The young girl seems to be daydreaming, perhaps yearning for the romance that the red rose in the vase symbolises, or mourning the loss that the wilting white rose could signify. Her Chinese origins are quite consistent with the ethnically Chinese majority in Singapore and she dresses in a simple mandarin-collared top and plain skirt or trousers – exactly the same combination of separates worn by the figure in *Untitled (Chinese Woman)*, 1965-69 referred to above. But she is firmly placed within the Southeast Asian context with the inclusion of the sepia-coloured frangipani trees in the background that are a regular feature of Soo Pieng's mature paintings. Everyday details are boldly stated within the composition; flattened against the picture plane are two tables, the nearest covered in cloth and the one upon which she leans possibly being made of a laminate typical of 1970s domestic spaces. The eternal and the contingencies of the modern co-exist.

The spirit of Soo Pieng's mature style are welded in spirit to the concrete forms of his much earlier output. In the exhibition catalogue for the 2016 National Gallery of Singapore show *Reframing Modernism: Paintings from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, organised and co-curated with the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, the authors argue that the selection of Cheong Soo Pieng's works from the 1950s belong in the category of:

¹ Sotheby's Hong Kong, 31 March 2018, Lot 1024. *Untitled (Chinese Girl)* was one of two works sold in the same lot, but the other was in mixed media. Sold for a premium-inclusive HK\$2,735,000 (US\$302,650) against an estimate of HK\$1million – 1.8 million (\$ 127,432 - \$ 229,377). Data from Artpace.

² Esplanade Archives, Offstage, Cheong Soo Pieng, 16 Oct 2016. <https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/cheong-soo-pieng>



CHEONG SOO PIENG

(1917-1983, Singaporean)

Chinese Girl

Painted in 1976; oil on canvas; 130 x 94 cm

Signed in Chinese characters on lower right, signed again in English and dated on the reverse

S\$ 250,000 - 350,000

US\$ 194,100 - 271,740

Literature:

- Reminiscence of Singapore's Pioneer Art Masters, Published by The Singapore Mint
- Soo Pieng, Published by Summer Times Publishing

Pick up point: Singapore

[...] artists who are associated through their concerns for creating visual harmony, through their interest in the decorative, their sense of intimacy and through the persistence of a picturesque aesthetic in their modernism.³

The works chosen by the NGS curators for this seminal show – the first to assign a distinct place to Southeast Asian modernist art alongside European modernist works chosen by the French curators in response (thus inverting the usual narrative of Modernism travelling from West to East) – were more chunky, striated, colourful and thickly layered than *Chinese Girl* and Soo Pieng's mature style. Yet these 1950s works, say the authors, had the representation of place and space at their core, rendered with "cubistic tendencies"⁴ that "existed only in spirit."⁵ The intellectual coolness of Cubism was absent, and instead we find "his own exhilaration of own exciting and fresh responses to the exuberance of the tropical Singapore habitat".⁶

Chinese Girl, painted a full twenty years later than the paintings in *Reframing Modernism*, might bear the same adjectives: visual harmony; decorative; intimacy; picturesque. In short, the underlying spirit is there consistently throughout the decades of Soo Pieng's practice.

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References:

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- Choy Weng Yang (1983). Soo Pieng. Singapore: Summer Times Publishing. Unpaginated
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- Lee, Sarah and Siew, Sara (Eds) (2016). *Reframing Modernism: Paintings from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*. Exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Singapore, 31 March to 17 July 2016.

³ Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Eds) (2016). *Reframing Modernism: Paintings from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*. Exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Singapore, 31 March to 17 July 2016. Horikawa Lisa and Phoebe Scott 'Introduction', p.13. Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore

⁴ Phoebe Scott, 'Cheong Soo Pieng' in *Reframing Modernism*, p.71

⁵ Choy Weng Yang, *Soo Pieng* unpaginated, in citation in *Reframing Modernism*, ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

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