Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. 34 (5): 2359 - 2383 (2026)

PERTANIKA JOURNALS

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Journal homepage: http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/

The Transformation of Xu Beihong's Portrait Paintings During His Singapore Years

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ABSTRACT

Xu Beihong visited or resided in Singapore at least six times in his lifetime. During his time in Singapore, he created a large number of portrait works, including oil paintings, sketches, and Chinese paintings, among which oil painting portraits are the most well-known. However, existing academic research on Xu Beihong's portrait creation mostly focuses on his works during his time in China or when he was studying abroad in Europe. For his works created in Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore, research is still relatively limited. This study aims to use a combination of archival research and case studies to systematically review and comprehensively analyse the portrait works created by Xu Beihong in Singapore. Drawing on the concept of Patronage Economy, the paper examines how Xu's portrait practice shifted from French Academic Salon conventions toward a diasporic hybridity shaped by local commissioning culture and wartime contexts. The analysis focuses on three dimensions of transformation: the dual-mode background treatment (functional vs. symbolic), the intermedia translation from street performance to high-art canvas (as seen in *Put Down Your Whip*), and the negotiation between client expectations and artistic choices. This paper argues that these changes in style are not just the result of artistic development; they are the result of negotiation and compromise between Xu's academic training and the cultural and political expectations inherent in Singapore's commissioned portrait economy.

Keywords: Patronage economy, portrait paintings, Singapore, transformation, Xu Beihong

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 06 February 2026
Accepted: 20 July 2026
Published: 05 October 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.34.5.01

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INTRODUCTION

Xu Beihong was one of the most influential painters and art educators in 20th-century China, known as the "father of modern Chinese painting" (Xu, 2020). His artistic career spans across Europe and Asia, and his trip to Singapore played a crucial significance in his artistic development.

e-ISSN: 2231-8534

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The connection between Xu Beihong and Singapore began in 1925. At that time, he did not have enough living expenses in Paris, so he went to Singapore on the advice of a friend to create portraits of local overseas Chinese leaders and wealthy businessmen in order to make a living. Afterwards, especially between 1939 and 1941, Xu Beihong returned to Singapore to raise funds for the Anti-Japanese War and created a large number of portraits during this period. The creation during this period was an important part of his artistic career and manifested his artistic exchange within the context of Southeast Asia. Therefore, Singapore was not only a key node in his early artistic exploration but also witnessed the unfolding of his artistic achievements thereafter. However, the existing scholarships tend to portray Xu Beihong as a fearless genius who acted upon the passive overseas Chinese market. This paper reexamines this relationship and believes that Singapore's commissioned portraits are an active place for socio-economic exchanges and artistic taste negotiations. Chinese scholar Hua (2023) believes that the Singapore period was the pinnacle of his artistic creation. Xu Beihong's student Yang (2018) also holds a similar view, stating that "in his three peak years, hundreds of works were created in Singapore, the Malay Peninsula, and India". Therefore, this paper will focus on Xu Beihong's portrait painting that he produced in Singapore, exploring the unique style and artistic value of his works during this period.

This paper will examine how Xu Beihong's Singapore production should not be read merely as the activity of a solitary artist responding to a passive diaspora market, but he commissioned portraiture also functioned as an active socio-economic transaction in which taste and representational acceptability were negotiated. To conceptualise this dynamic, the study reframes the Singapore period through the lens of a "patronage economy", emphasising how British-colonial conditions and the precarious socio-political identity of Nanyang Chinese merchant elites (*towkays*) shaped what kinds of images they sought and how they validated them through commissioning art. The concept of patronage economy in art historical analysis draws on the sociological framework of art as a field of negotiated production, in which aesthetic decisions are shaped by patron-client relations and the circulation of symbolic capital (Baxandall, 1988; Bourdieu, 1993).

Academic research on Xu Beihong has mainly focused on his works from his time abroad and in China and Europe, with less attention paid to his artistic creations in Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore. For instance, scholar Au Yeung Hing Yee (2008) emphasises how "Xu Beihong's research in Singapore can also be seen as an extension of Chinese art history" that can serve as part of the narrative on the overseas exchanges and influences of local painters in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art.

In the context of portraiture studies, the intertwining of social resources and wartime conditions led Xu Beihong to accept a considerable number of portrait commissions from local wealthy merchants

and political figures, a pattern that warrants further research. The Chinese community in Singapore at that time focused more on culture, art, and identity recognition, and used custom portrait paintings to show their status and emotional identity. Rather than treating these patrons as passive recipients, this study positions these commissioners as active agents whose capital and cultural-political concerns actively dictated aesthetic terms and the desired moral-symbolic content of portrait images in Singapore at that time. Although there have been several studies on his work, there is still no systematic review of his artistic practices in Singapore (Cao, 2020; Hua, 2023; Liu, 2021; Liu & Liu, 2018; Shang, 2021; Shao, 2018). In comparison with his works in China and during his stay in France (1919-1927), the portrait paintings that he produced during this period are unique, as they not only focused on the realistic depiction of people's temperament, but these portraits also reflected how he integrated the aesthetic needs of local society, which resulted in the contributive evolution of his own style.

To examine the context of his portrait paintings, this study will not only trace the relations between Xu Beihong and Singapore and the reasons for his stay; it will also discuss changes in the form, techniques, and themes of his portrait paintings in Singapore, as well as the evolution of his artistic style. As such, this paper will demonstrate how these portraitures can also be examined as a site of artistic interaction between the Nanyang Chinese community and the situation of the times, through Xu Beihong's artistic process.

As such, this study raises a core analytical question: to what extent does internal artistic evolution drive Xu Beihong's stylistic innovation, and to what extent is it affected by customer-driven aesthetic compliance and negotiated taste in the sponsorship economy? This issue guides how to link the style change and artistic development with the socio-economic logic of commissioned portraits in colonial Singapore. This paper will discuss the question: how do Singapore's unique social structure and geographical environment affect the theme and style of portraiture? Is there any change in the style of the portraits created by Xu Beihong in Singapore and his works in other periods? To what extent can this change be explained by customer expectations and sponsorship negotiations rather than by art development itself? What are the typical characteristics and contemporary values of his portraits in Singapore?

This study fills the gap in academic research on Xu Beihong's artistic creation during his Singapore period and deepens our overall understanding of his artistic career. By systematically studying Xu Beihong's creations during this time, we can, on the one hand, gain insight into how he absorbed, adapted, and innovated in different geographical and cultural contexts, and on the other hand, provide a new perspective for exploring the activities and influence of modern Chinese artists in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Xu Beihong's Trip to Singapore and His Fundraising Art Exhibition

There are differing views within the academic community on how many times Xu Beihong has passed through Singapore or temporarily resided there. Local Singaporean newspapers and media believed that Xu Beihong visited Singapore at least five times (Li, 1990). However, scholar Shao Xiaofeng (2018) believed that Xu Beihong visited Singapore more than ten times in his lifetime and established an inseparable connection with Nanyang[1]. In early 1939, Xu Beihong painted a sketch portrait for Huang Manshi's fiftieth birthday, in which it was inscribed with "Beihong visited Singapore six times"; indicating that Xu Beihong's encounters with Singapore were at least six times (Au Yeung, 1985a). However, the academic community generally agrees that Xu Beihong made only two significant trips to Singapore. First, in 1925, due to his financial difficulties, he travelled from Paris to Singapore upon the recommendation of Huang Menggui, intending to create portraits for local overseas Chinese leaders and affluent merchants, thereby securing adequate financial backing for himself. Second, in 1939, with the full outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in China, he went from China to Singapore to hold a fundraising art exhibition to support China's Anti-Japanese War. This 1939 trip to Singapore was the longest and significantly influenced the Chinese community there, particularly among young artists (Au Yeung, 1985b).

In early 1939, in a letter to his son and daughter before his departure, Xu Beihong explained the reason for his trip to Singapore, "Because I want to fulfill my personal obligation to the country, so I want to go to Nanyang to sell paintings and donate them to the country..." (Wang, 2006). He arrived on January 9, 1939, and garnered significant attention from both local Chinese and foreign media. Prominent Chinese and foreign newspapers successively reported on the announcement of his upcoming art exhibition in Singapore (Renowned painter Xu Beihong arrived in Singapore yesterday, 1939).

The Xu Beihong's Singapore fund-raising art exhibition was initially held at the Victoria Memorial Hall on March 15 and 16, 1939, and then moved to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry from March 18 to 26, lasting a total of 10 days. The exhibited works included those produced during his studies in France, his works produced at Central University after returning to China, and his recent works, totaling 172 pieces. The types of works included oil paintings, traditional Chinese paintings, and sketches. Among these works, the proportion of portrait paintings was very high, as many as twenty-four portrait sketches (a total of twenty-six sketches were exhibited, except for two creative sketches; the rest were all portrait painting

[1] "Nanyang" is a historical and geographical concept referring to the maritime and land regions south of traditional China, including Southeast Asia and the surrounding seas. It specifically encompasses the present-day ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and others.

sketches), ten oil portrait paintings, and five pastel portrait paintings (The Governor and military and political officials today visited Xu Beihong Art Exhibition, 1939). The fundraising art exhibition was quite successful, and it had a wide influence on the Singapore Chinese community at that time.

> *Out of every 20 Singaporeans, one has visited the art exhibition. The scale of a painter's art exhibition, its wide scope, the large amount of fundraising, and its far-reaching artistic influence are unprecedented in the art history of Singapore and Malaya. In the subsequent decades, Xu Beihong still held several personal records for art exhibitions in Singapore.* (Singapore Art Museum, 2008).

The success of the exhibition elevated Xu Beihong's reputation in Singapore to a new level. Not only were local Chinese wealthy merchants and overseas Chinese leaders attracted to Xu Beihong's art, but even the British government administrators in Singapore, including the Governor of the Straits Settlements, also highly praised his works (Au Yeung, 1985c). Consequently, following the exhibition's conclusion, an increasing number of individuals requested that Xu Beihong create their portraits, with those making such requests representing a diverse array of professions in Singapore.

Xu Beihong's Portrait Paintings Before His Arrival in Singapore

Xu Beihong's portrait paintings reflect his exploration and practice of integrating Western academic realism techniques with Chinese painting traditions. Some scholars contend that while Xu Beihong's Chinese portrait paintings are fewer in number compared to his oil portrait paintings and sketch portraits, his Chinese portraits nonetheless reflect his practical exploration of realism and the integration of Chinese and Western art in "On the Improvement of Chinese Painting"[2].

Xu Beihong's portrait paintings can be summarised into four stages, namely the adolescence period (the initiation of traditional methods); the Shanghai period (the tentative exploration of the combination of Chinese and Western art); the 1930s (the preliminary integration of Western realist painting methods and traditional portraits); and the late period (the specific presentation of realism style) (Liu & Liu, 2018). The stylistic evolution of Xu Beihong's portrait works in Chinese painting in the different periods is clearly discernible. During his youth and the period in Shanghai, Xu Beihong's Chinese portrait paintings were influenced by his family tradition (Xu Da Zhang, 1869-1913: Xu Beihong's father, who was a well-known local painter) and

[2] The ideas “On the Improvement of Chinese Painting” was first proposed by Xu Beihong in a 1918 lecture at the Peking University Painting Research Association, the speech was published in the Peking University Daily from May 23 to 25 of the same year. At its core, Xu advocated preserving the finest elements of traditional Chinese painting, reviving techniques that were on the verge of disappearing, reforming practices he considered inadequate, supplementing existing deficiencies, and integrating selected principles and techniques from Western painting.

painters of the Shanghai School such as Ren Bonian (1840-1896).

His portrayal of people's faces tended to be realistic, and their clothes were often rendered using the traditional Chinese technique of outlining and filling in color. His overall style also bore obvious traces of traditional Chinese painting techniques. *Scattering Flowers* (1918) (Figure 1) is a portrait of the renowned Peking opera performer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) in costume, painted by Xu Beihong in Beijing the year before he went to study in France. While the facial features and hands are rendered realistically in a Western style, and the background is executed in a wet-on-wet technique similar to watercolour, the costume is depicted using the traditional Chinese method of outlined forms filled with colour.

During Xu Beihong's stay in France, his focus of study was mainly on training in realistic sketching and oil painting techniques, and he paid attention to the accurate expression of human body structure, light-and-shade relationships, and a sense of volume. During this period, his portrait works were mainly sketching and oil painting. For example, during his time in Paris, he created oil portraits such as *Portrait of a Fan Bearer* (1920), *Portrait of an Old Woman* (1922), *Portrait of an Old Man* (1924), *Portrait of a Cat Caresser* (1924), and *Self-Portrait* (1924). Among these, *Portrait of an Old Woman* (Figure 2) was selected for the 1923 French National Fine Arts Exhibition (i.e., the Salon) and "received high praise" (Wang, 2006). The



Figure 1. Xu Beihong, *Scattering Flowers (Portrait of Mei Lanfang)*, 1918; 95 cm × 53 cm. Color on silk. (Source: Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum)

model in the painting is an elderly French woman, whose face is depicted with a serene yet weathered expression. This painting demonstrates a Rembrandt-esque use of light, with illumination from above, creating strong contrasts between light and shadow on the face and subtly and richly rendered dark areas.

Upon his return from China, particularly during his time in Nanjing, Xu Beihong entered his mature period of portrait

painting. Representative works from this period include the oil paintings *Portrait of Poet Chen Sanyuan* (1927-1930), *Portrait of Mr. Xu Dazhang* (1928), *Portrait* (1928), *Portrait of Fu Zengxiang* (1935), and *Portrait of Sun Duozi* (1936). Among these, *Portrait of Poet Chen Sanyuan* (Figure 3) is Xu Beihong's most acclaimed portrait (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.). In terms of characterisation, the face is based on the precise anatomical structure, maintaining the rigorous control of "shape" unique to French academic painting. The whole work shows Xu Beihong's conscious exploration after returning to the country, combining the Western realistic modelling language with the spiritual expression of the Oriental literati portraiture.

Additionally, Xu Beihong's traditional Chinese figure paintings created in China before his 1939 trip to Nanyang, such as *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* (1930) (Figure 4), *Poor Woman* (1937), and *Flower Seller* (1938), further integrated Western perspective and anatomy into traditional Chinese figure painting techniques. *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* is a significant representative work from the second phase of Xu Beihong's reform efforts in Chinese painting (approximately 1925 to 1931). The primary characteristic of this painting is a return to tradition, marking a transitional stage towards his mature period (Hua, 2007). "The painting entirely employs traditional *gou-ran* (outline and wash) techniques, with no light and shadow on the face, the structure being completely rendered with brush lines. The drapery style shows the influence of Ren Bonian, and the painting methods for the pine, rock, bamboo, and chrysanthemum are all derived from tradition" (Hua, 2007). Although *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* has "no light and shadow on the face," unlike the significant chiaroscuro



Figure 2. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of an Old Woman*, 1922, 47 cm × 33cm. Oil on canvas, Source: (Xu Beihong Memorial Hall)



Figure 3. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Poet Chen Sanyuan*, 1927-1930, 60 cm × 73 cm. Oil on canvas, Source: (Xu Beihong Memorial Hall)



Figure 4. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* , 1930, 132 cm × 66 cm. Ink and color on paper. Source: (Xu Beihong Memorial Hall)

variations and more three-dimensional, realistic effects seen in the facial features of *Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore* (1940) and *Portrait of Li Yinquan* (1943), a detail of *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* (Figure 4) still shows that the rendering of the facial features accurately highlights the bones and muscles, achieve initial integration of Chinese and Western styles. As Xu Beihong said, "I went to Europe to study Western painting techniques in order to find methods to reform Chinese painting" (Yang, 2018).

Therefore, the portraits that he produced when he was in Singaporean can be examined by three formal characteristics: (a) His oil portraits often followed the chiaroscuro and volumetric modelling techniques of the French Academy, while his Chinese portraits maintained a Western/ Chinese technical dichotomy; (b) The

background of his paintings primarily served as documentary or atmospheric purposes, with little independent symbolic or narrative significance; and (c) The portrait painting was dominated by the personal relationship between the artist and the sitter, rather than by the commercial commission dynamics of the diaspora economy.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research method, mainly combining archival analysis and Xu Beihong as the case study. This is useful for studying artworks created within a specific socio-economic context in art and art history studies. According to John W. Creswell (2018), archival research is a process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesising existing evidence to clarify facts and draw conclusions about historical events. In this study, the researcher conducted an extensive review of archival materials related to Xu Beihong's stay in Singapore from 1939 to 1942. The primary sources were historical newspapers housed in the National Library of Singapore, such as the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, which directly documented Xu Beihong's exhibitions, social engagements, and public reactions to his works in Singapore. Additionally, the researcher consulted exhibition catalogs, personal letters, and academic writings from his time in Singapore. By adhering to the principles of historical research, this method facilitates a systematic reconstruction of Xu Beihong's artistic practice in Singapore and the socio-cultural context surrounding his figure painting creations, providing a robust empirical foundation for subsequent analysis.

This study adopts a case study approach to conduct targeted, in-depth investigations. Yin (2018) defined case studies as empirical studies that explore contemporary phenomena in real-world settings, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and its background is unclear. Although this study is a historical study, this definition also applies to the investigation of Xu Beihong's paintings, which can be seen as a "case" embedded in the specific background of Singapore before the war. Based on this, the paper selects representative figure paintings of this period for detailed analysis, including *Fishing in Winter* (1939), the *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (1939), *Put Down Your Whip* (1939), and so on. This tripartite analytical approach: visual, contextual, and comparative, enables the study to move beyond isolated formal appreciation toward an integrated understanding of how the patronage economy of Singapore shaped Xu's pictorial choices. By juxtaposing historical data ("what happened" and "when") with carefully read works ("how to present" and "why"), the dual approach of this study helps comprehensively explain how Xu Beihong's unique experience in Singapore catalysed the transformation of his portraiture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Xu Beihong's Portrait Paintings in Singapore

As mentioned earlier, Xu Beihong's portrait paintings in Singapore were mainly created

during his study in Europe and the period of China's full-scale Anti-Japanese War. During the early period, his creations paid more attention to meeting the commissioners' requirements, such as *Portrait of Tan Kah Kee* (1925) and *Portrait of Lim Loh* (1927). However, during World War II, he revisited Singapore out of his sense of mission to support the Anti-Japanese War and save the country.

In this period, Xu Beihong created portrait paintings in Singapore for various reasons, which can be divided into several situations: first, the portrait paintings of Xu Beihong's friends or wealthy overseas Chinese merchants were created for social needs, such as the oil paintings *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Ho Kwong Yew and Ho Kok Horng* (1939), *Portrait of Lim Hak Tai* (1939), *Portrait of Mother and Daughter* (1939) and *Portrait of Young Lady* (1940), and others; the sketches *Portrait of Huang Manshi* (1939), *Portrait of Huang Mengui* (1941), and others; and the Chinese paintings *Fishing in Winter* (1939), *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* (1939). Second, Xu Beihong's commissioned portraits, such as *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (1939) and *Portrait of Miss Jenny* (1939). Third, there were portrait paintings that reflected the theme of the Anti-Japanese War, for example, *Put Down Your Whip* (1939).

From the beginning of 1939 to the beginning of 1942, China was in a critical period — the full-scale Anti-Japanese War, and it was also the most energetic period of Xu Beihong's creation (Singapore Art Museum, 2008). As scholar Au Yeung Hing Yee (1985b) pointed out, "Xu Beihong chose Singapore as a fundraising destination because he understood the economic development of Singapore. Here, the Chinese people are the most concentrated, and also the richest". During this period, Xu Beihong's activities in Singapore and his wide range of acquaintances had a deep and growing influence. Au Yeung Hing Yee (1999) emphasised the importance of Southeast Asia, in particular Singapore, to Xu Beihong: "Singapore is an important turning point in Xu Beihong's artistic life. Whenever he is in a situation of family and national difficulties, as soon as he comes to this small island in Southeast Asia, he will break through another world."

The Creative Shift in Xu Beihong's Portrait Paintings during His Singapore Years

In comparison with his early works, such as *Scattering Flowers (Portrait of Mei Lanfang)* (1918), *Portrait of an Old Woman* (1922), *Portrait of the Poet Chen Sanyuan* (1927-1930), and *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* (1930) as mentioned earlier, Xu Beihong's portrait paintings during his time in Singapore showed a significant change in his creative style, which is manifested in the following characteristics: a deepening of the integration of Chinese and Western artistic approaches, changes in background treatment, and strengthening of realism and transformation in Xu Beihong's signature.

Deepening of the Integration of Chinese and Western Art Artistic Approaches

Xu Beihong had devoted his whole life to the integration of Chinese and Western

techniques this could be seen as early as 1918, while serving as an instructor at the Painting Method Research Society at Peking University (established 1918), Xu Beihong's Modernization Movement of Chinese Painting (1918-1953)[3] when he advocated the incorporation of realistic techniques from Western painting into Chinese painting, with an emphasis to "integrate compatible Western approaches" (Zhu, 1986), as seen in Xu Beihong's Chinese painting, *Scattering Flowers* (Figure 1), the depiction of the figures' facial features and hands clearly demonstrates the influence of Western painting techniques.

This is reflected in the works of Xu Beihong during his time in Singapore, such as *Fishing in Winter* (Figure 9), which was painted for Singapore banker Tan Ean Kiam (1881-1943) in 1939, demonstrating his ability to combine Western realistic techniques with the elegance of Chinese ink painting. However, this stylistic choice cannot be attributed solely to Xu's internal artistic evolution; it must also be understood through the lens of the patronage economy in which the work was produced. Tan Ean Kiam was a conservative overseas Chinese banker, the "premier of the largest overseas Chinese financial institution of his time," and a "successful poet who achieved artistry effortlessly, without intentional striving" (Au Yeung, 1985d). In 1938, Tan Ean Kiam also published his own poetry collection, "Zhiyuan Poetry Collection." On March 21, 1939, Tan Ean Kiam visited the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce to see Xu Beihong's fundraising art exhibition. He personally, and on behalf of the Wu Lu Club (of which Tan Ean Kiam was then chairman), donated funds to purchase Xu Beihong's works. Xu Beihong painted two colorful ink portraits for him. *Fishing in Winter* (Figure 9) is one of them. The theme of this painting highlights a lone fisherman in a snowy landscape, evoking the "hermit fisherman" tradition in literati painting. This imagery is imbued with connotations of moral purity and detachment from worldly corruption. According to Au Yeung, this painting was created by Xu Beihong at Tan Ean Kiam's request. Tan had asked Xu Beihong to paint a "Solitary fisherman on a cold river" depicting himself wearing a coir raincoat and a bamboo hat amidst heavy frost and snow. "A straw cape and hat are my family's style, life as bland as water. A lone boat in frost and snow, fishing alone in the cold river." — this poem by Tan Ean Kiam, inscribed on a painting, expresses his creative intent (Au Yeung, 1985d). Xu Beihong also explicitly stated in his inscription in the upper right corner of the painting that it was a commissioned work: "In the spring of April 1939, I was preparing for a fundraising exhibition in Singapore, and Mr. Tan Ean Kiam asked me to paint this picture." For a Nanyang *towkay* navigating the tumultuous socio-political environment of British Singapore, commissioning such a

[3] Xu Beihong's Chinese painting reform movement, first proposed in a 1918 lecture at Peking University's Painting Method Research Society. The core of his reform movement was to improve Chinese painting through Western realist techniques, addressing what he saw as a historical weakness in Chinese painting as it lacks the emphasis on anatomical accuracy.

painting was not merely an aesthetic choice; it was an affirmation of identity, a public assertion of Confucian moral standing through the symbolic capital of high culture.

In this painting, Xu Beihong used traditional Chinese painting materials to accurately depict the portrait features and personal interests of the protagonist, Tan Ean Kiam. Only the character's face and hands were rendered using Western realistic techniques, while the rest of the background was rendered using purely Chinese freehand *(xie yi)* landscape painting techniques. The environment of *Fishing in Winter* was created by depicting snow and branches beneath it, and the painting lacked the strategic void or *Liu Bai*, common in Chinese ink paintings. Instead, it resembled the style of Western oil paintings or watercolor portraits, unlike Xu Beihong's *Poor Woman* (1937) and *The Flower Seller* (1938) (Figure 5), which featured only the character without any background.

The characters are portrayed differently — while *Flower Seller* is a sketch of an anonymous street vendor created by Xu Beihong for teaching or exploratory purposes, *Winter Fishing* is a portrait commissioned for a specific client, requiring the fulfillment of their particular expectations. These two works belong to fundamentally different creative paradigms: one is a private study, the other a commercial commission. Their formal differences, therefore, not only reflect the "evolution" of Xu Beihong's spatial thinking but also embody the unique pressures and advantages inherent in different patronage contexts.



Figure 5. Xu Beihong, *The Flower Seller,* 1938; 101.5 cm × 62 cm. Ink and colour on paper. (Source: Artron. Net, https://m-news.artron.net/20201222/n885487.html)

In addition, although the faces of the characters in *The Flower Seller* are depicted using Western realistic techniques to show changes in light and shade through the use of thick and thin ink, the difference from the faces of the characters in *Fishing in Winter* remains evident. The facial modelling of the characters in *Fishing in Winter* is more exquisite and three-dimensional because "Xu Beihong, referring to real people and photos, first drafted with a pencil (Figure 6), then sketched with a brush, dried with light ink, drew a small portrait from life, and then enlarged to a large rice paper" (Au Yeung, 1985d). This painting may reflect the



Figure 6. Xu Beihong, Portrait of Lee Choon Seng and Tan Ean Kiam (Creative Sketch), 1939; Sketch. (Source: BEIHONG ZAI XINGZHOU, 2020)

elite sponsors' higher requirements for the completion of commissioned works, which contrasts with the more casual and sketchy approach in street scenes.

Changes in Background Treatment

Wu Zuoren (1908-1997) emphasised the "dual nature" of these backgrounds in Xu Beihong's work—functional and symbolic. Wu Zuoren discussed how the functional background mainly serves the purposes of space and narration and constructs physical space and supports the continuity of the picture through common techniques in Western realistic painting, such as perspective logic and light-and-shadow organisation. In contrast, symbolic backgrounds are understood as conveying emotional or spiritual realms, externalising inner states through ink brushwork and the expressive potential of Chinese painting.

Wu Zuoren also compared and analysed Eastern and Western perspectives on backgrounds, Western painting backgrounds create space, while Chinese painting backgrounds depict the state of mind (Wu, 1979). Western painting backgrounds create space, refers to the background treatment of Western painting that is not strictly based on reality, but is added, subtracted, or even "created" according to the theme of the picture. The *Portrait of Lim Loh* (1927) *and Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (1939) belongs to the first category, where Xu Beihong "created" according to the needs of the picture.

Xu Beihong's *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (Figure 7) was initiated at the end of June 1939. The oil painting *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas,* completed and unveiled in mid-September, garnered far more attention than the portraits of previous governors on display at Singapore's Victoria Memorial Hall. Representing Chinese-language newspapers, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Daily* published six news articles on the painting. In contrast, English-language newspapers, such as *The Straits Times*, also featured six reports. After the portrait was completed, Sir Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements, wrote to Xu Beihong on September 14, praising the portrait as "an exquisitely crafted masterpiece." (Lawyer Chen Siren, on behalf of the



Figure 7. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas*, 1939; 244.5 cm × 134cm. Oil on canvas. (Source: National Museum of Singapore)

overseas Chinese community, presented the Governor's portrait to the Mayor, 1939).

This commission by the British High Commissioner and the artist represents a complex field in the dynamics of postcolonial power. The portrait's background is meticulously constructed to reflect Governor Thomas's official status and unique colonial context. The backdrop to the right of the *portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* features a large British classical stone pillar. Conversely, on the left side, the governor rests against a Chinese rosewood tea table adorned with inlaid mother-of-pearl. Surrounding the base of the stone pillar are lush tropical green plants. In the background behind the governor, the outlines of banana and coconut trees are subtly visible. Clearly, the background of this scene was not the actual view from Xu Beihong's studio in Jiangxia Tang. Still, it was deliberately arranged by Xu Beihong to reflect the governor's special status. On this point, scholar Au Yeung (1985c) also expressed the same view,

> *Many people criticise that these two types of Chinese and Western props (i.e., English stone pillar and Chinese rosewood tea table) should not be placed together in the same painting. But it is precisely the choice of these two incompatible environmental props that places the Governor of the Straits Settlements in a typical mixed environment of Chinese and Western cultures, thereby expressing his identity.*

The public reception of this painting also revealed this dual scrutiny. Governor Thomas, from a colonial perspective, acknowledged and praised the painting as a "masterful masterpiece" (Lawyer Chen Siren, on behalf of the overseas Chinese community, presented the Governor's portrait to the Mayor, 1939). On the other hand, local Chinese media, such as the September 15th report in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, focused on the prestige the painting's artistic achievement brought to the Chinese community. As

Governor Thomas emphasised in his thank-you letter to Dr. Lim Han Ho, the Chinese community representative and initiator of the governor's portrait commission, "The joy of this friendly connection with the Chinese community in Singapore is boundless. The work of this portrait is indeed excellent, and I believe the people of your country will undoubtedly agree." (Lawyer Chen Siren, on behalf of the overseas Chinese community, presented the Governor's portrait to the Mayor, 1939).

Furthermore, this portrait was sold for 4,000 national currency units, which was a huge sum at the time (converted at an exchange rate of 8:1, 4,000 national currency units equaled 500 Straits dollars in Singapore)[4]. It must be noted that Singapore painter Chen Chong Swee's salary as an art teacher at Tuan Mong High School[5], was 60 Straits dollars at the time. Therefore, Xu Beihong's painting, sold for 500 Straits dollars, was almost equivalent to Chen Chong Swee's salary for nearly a year as an art teacher. This comparison not only highlights its artistic value but also underscores its worth as a cultural and political commodity within the prevailing socio-economic context of Singapore in 1939.



Figure 8. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Lim Loh,* 1927; 116 cm × 77 cm. Oil on canvas. (Source: National Gallery of Singapore)

The *Portrait of Lim Loh* (Figure 8) reflects Xu Beihong's portrayal of the characters' inner spirit, combining Western realistic techniques with Eastern aesthetic concepts. In the painting, the main character stands almost entirely in the foreground, wearing exquisite Chinese attire and holding a hand fan that symbolises Chinese intellectuals. The fan depicts chrysanthemums, a traditional Chinese painting theme. Xu Beihong used this method to honor Lim Loh as one of Singapore's pioneers, while also praising

[4] The exchange rate was from Li Chao and Liu Kanglin's "Research on Artistic Documents from Liu Haisu's 'Nanyang Period'" published in *Meishu*, Issue 1, 2022, page 83. It should be noted that this exchange rate is based on the 1941 rate; however, given the short interval between the two periods, it is unlikely that the exchange rate differed significantly.

[5] Letter of appointment from Tuan Mong High School, Singapore, to Chen Chong Swee in 1939, held by the National Gallery Singapore, Collection ID (Reference Code): RC-SG04-CCS.03-0006.

his noble character. The chrysanthemum symbolises noble character and purity, so it has become a commonly used subject in ink painting.

In these two portrait paintings, Xu Beihong meticulously depicts the environment behind the characters to reflect their identities. This feature can be classified as a "functional" background, thereby aligning with the public function of portraiture and the readability of identity. In *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas*, the use of English marble columns, a redwood table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and tropical plants highlights the unique cultural and geographical environment of the governor's office in Southeast Asia. In contrast, the background of *Portrait of Lim Loh* features high mountains, lakes, and pine trees, with orchids in the mountains, symbolising the figure's noble character.

> *Representing the official identity of the subject is an inherent requirement of Xu Beihong's realist portraiture. This is evident in several portraits he completed for distinguished friends in Nanyang, where he would, depending on the circumstances, supplement the depiction with props, complement it with the environment, imply relationships, and convey meaning through perspective, using various appropriate methods to present the social aspect of the subject* (Cao, 2020).

The second characteristic — expressing inner state through the background of Chinese painting (Wu, 1979) — can be seen in how he creates a background that enhances and reflects the inner emotions or mental state of the characters in the painting. This transcends the limitations of physical space, achieving an aesthetic isomorphism between the "scenery" and the "inner state". Xu (2009), in his lectures at Central University, has emphasised that the background is not a realistic portrayal of the scene, but rather an externalisation of the inner landscape. As mentioned earlier, *Fishing in Winter* (Figure 9) and *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* (Figure 10) use the background to reflect the characters' inner states, as evidenced by the symbolic background.

Xu Beihong's *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* and *Fishing in Winter* are among the few Chinese portrait paintings he has created in Singapore. The figures are not only realistic portraits with accurate forms and harmonious proportions, but, more importantly, Xu Beihong uses the *xieyi* (freehand) style of ink painting to create atmosphere in the background, highlighting the subjects' lofty aspirations through a fusion of Chinese and Western artistic techniques, for example, in *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng*. In the painting, Lee Choon Seng (1888-1966), the chairman of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge, is depicted wearing a *kasaya*, set against a background of pine trees, rocks, and flowing water, expressing his religious beliefs. The *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* was commissioned by Lee Choon Seng himself, and Xu Beihong created it in accordance with his wishes (Au Yeung, 1985d).



Figure 9. Xu Beihong, *Fishing in Winter,* 1939; 75.8 cm × 119.5 cm. Ink and colour on paper. (Source: *Bei Hong Zai Xing Zhou*, 2020)

As previously mentioned, the *Portraits Fishing in Winter* (1939) and *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* (1939) were created to meet the patrons' wishes, resulting in a slightly different visual effect from the earlier *Portrait of Huang Zhenzhi* (1930). The background treatment in *Fishing in Winter* (1939) and *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng* (1939) integrates traditional Chinese painting techniques with Western realist expressive skills. The backgrounds of these two portraits are not actual scenes from Nanyang, Singapore, but rather fictional settings designed to highlight the subjects' spiritual character, demonstrating the successful negotiation between the artist and the patrons.



Figure 10. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Lee Choon Seng,* 1939. Ink and colour on paper. (Source: Hua Tianxue: Study on Several Newly Discovered Figure Illustrations by Xu Beihong, *Fine Ar*t, 2023)

The Intensification of Realism

Among Xu Beihong's portrait works in Singapore, *Put Down Your Whip* (Figure 11), created in 1939 reflects his concern for social reality and his support for

the Anti-Japanese War. This spirit of realism was already reflected in several of his early works, but it was further strengthened in the Singapore period. Scholar Shang Hui (2021) believes that during the critical period of the formation of Xu Beihong's unique style in oil painting, he was undergoing a profound transformation from representational realism (as an artistic technique) to critical realism (as a creative methodology). After Xu Beihong returned from his studies in France in 1927, he immediately began to prepare for the creation of large-scale historical paintings, namely *Tianheng Five Hundred Soldiers* and *Xi Wo Hou (Awaiting Deliverance)*. However, as time progressed, his French Academic art style gradually waned, with grand historical paintings yielding to mythological and legendary themes that offered more potent allegorical references to social realities. This transition is evidenced by unfinished historical compositions such as *Farewell My Concubine* and *Qin Qiong Selling His Horse*, which survive solely as partial sketch studies. Sullivan (1996) wrote,

> *After 1933, Hsu Pei-hung (Xu Beihong) abandoned the grand historical narrative and favored the legendary theme with social implications, which is particularly obvious in his unfinished sketches, in which symbolic deformation exceeded the accuracy of the academic school.*

Xu Beihong's *The Foolish Old Man Moves Mountains,* completed in India in 1940, has a more explicitly realistic orientation than *Xi Wo Hou (Awaiting Deliverance)* and *Tianheng Five Hundred Soldiers*. That is, through the visual presentation of the fable of Yu Gong moving mountains to show the determination and firm belief of the Chinese people in the Anti-Japanese War (Shang, 2021). Zhang and Tang (2024) argue that "As the circumstances of the War of Resistance changed, Xu Beihong's artistic focus shifted from an individual perspective to a national one, his attention moved from 'heroes' to 'the people', and his pictorial narratives also transformed". After 1935, Xu Beihong began to depict reality and gradually



Figure 11. Xu Beihong, *Put Down Your Whip,* 1939; 144 cm × 90 cm, Oil on Canvas. (Source: *Xu Beihong in Nanyang*, 2008, Cover)

recognised the significant power of the masses, reflecting a realistic consideration aimed at national salvation in his artistic creations (Zhang & Tang, 2024).

Xu Beihong's painting *Put Down Your Whip* (1939)[6] vividly embodies the growing trend towards realism, which is not merely a technique but a means of cross-media translation and social engagement. However, Xu Beihong himself did not watch the troupe performance of Put Down Your Whip; instead, he created the work based on performance stills and a live sketch of actress Wang Ying (Yeo, 2019). This creative process may be conceived as a cross-media translation, in which meanings and visual forms were continuously transformed across different media and social contexts – from itinerant street performance, to studio photography, to high-art bourgeois painting, and finally to the generation of wartime relief capital. By separating the performance from its street context and relying on studio-based characterisation, Xu Beihong effectively deepens a vivid proletarian street performance, turning it into a long-standing bourgeois salon painting. His focus was on portraying Wang Ying as a "universally admired heroine," making the entire work lean more towards poster-style mass communication, in hopes of resonating with wealthy patrons and mobilising their financial support.

Xu Beihong deliberately extracted the "street" elements from street theater to make his paintings visually acceptable to wealthy bourgeois donors and to contribute to the war effort when purchased at the chamber of commerce. He retained the dramatic postures but consciously altered elements, for example, changing Wang Ying's costume pattern to a "phoenix-and-peony design", symbolising her noble status and identity, thereby elevating her image beyond a specific role to that of a national heroine. This transformation reflects a consistent romantic characteristic in Xu Beihong's creative approach, which re-envisioned the direct, heartfelt impact of street theater as an inspiring, aesthetically refined high-art image. Consequently, the creative essence of this painting evolved from a common portrait of a film star to an outstanding depiction of a national heroine saving the country in that era (Cao, 2020).

This bourgeois aestheticisation stands in stark contrast to Situ Qiao's (1902-1958) 1940 oil painting on canvas of the same theme (Figure 12). Situ Qiao watched the performance of "Put Down Your Whip" multiple times. Shen Shan, the art director of the New China Theater Troupe at the time, later recalled that when the troupe performed "Put Down Your Whip" in Singapore, Situ Qiao was always seen nervously waving his paintbrush in the

[6] In a letter dated mid-November 1939 to a friend (written on a postcard bearing this portrait), Xu Beihong stated: "'Miss Wang Ying in Put Down Your Whip,' this painting is life-sized." Based on written evidence, professor Cao Qinghui at the Central Academy of Fine Arts uses "*Miss Wang Ying in Put Down Your Whip*" as the title for this work in his research (Cao, 2020). Other scholars also uses the title *"Put Down Your Whip -- Portrait of Wang Ying"* as the painting's title, emphasizing on Xu Beihong's portrait approach in painting *Put Down Your Whip* (1939) (Au Yeung, 2020).



Figure 12. Si Tuqiao, *Put Down Your Whip,* 1940; 124 cm ×177 cm, Oil on Canvas. (Source: National Art Museum of China, https://www.namoc.cn/xwzx/zt/stqstj/)

dark audience, trying to capture the most exciting scenes on stage. At the same time, his wife held a small lamp beside him to provide light (Shen, 1945). To paint the story of "Put Down Your Whip," Situ Qiao even specially invited Wang Ying and Zhao Xun to his studio, where their costumes, makeup, and lighting were identical to those on stage (Yeo, 2019). Starting from the original plot and characters of the street play, Situ Qiao created a narrative mode closer to a stage photograph, meticulously preserving the spatial claustrophobia of the street theater crowd and the raw proletarian suffering. Shen Shan believed that Situ Qiao understood and grasped reality; his portrayal of Xiangjie (Wang Ying) was that of a pitiful, vulnerable woman who had wandered for many years, unlike those "self-admiring literati" who tried to paint her as a celestial being (Shen, 1945). Yeo Mang Thong believes that the "self-admiring literati" refers to Xu Beihong (Yeo, 2019). This kind of "same theme, different structure" not only highlights the differences in the painters' creative motives and techniques, but also reflects the social environment in which they were based at the time and their attitudes towards saving the nation in response to the times.

Transformation in Xu Beihong's Artistic Signatures

Xu Beihong's evolving signatures on oil paintings (Figure 13) created during his time in Singapore (1925-1941) vividly reflected the transformation of his artistic identity and cultural stance. *Portrait of Lim Loh* (1927), signed horizontally in French as "PÉON 1927", demonstrated his adherence to European artistic norms during his studies in Paris. At this stage, Xu had not yet completed his education, and his many artworks were exhibited at the French



Figure 13. From left to right, *the portrait paintings of Lim Loh* (1927)*, Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (1939), *Portrait of Mrs. Tchang Ju Chi and daughter* (1939), *Put Down Your Whip* (1939), and *Portrait of a Young Lady* (1940) are signed and dated by Xu Beihong

Spring Salon and received unanimous praise, which reinforced his inclination to present himself as an international artist. By contrast, *Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* (1939) marked a radical shift: Xu Beihong challenged the longstanding tradition of employing European artists to create portraits of colonial governors during Singapore's over-century-long colonial era (Au Yeung, 1985c). The work sold for 4,000 Chinese yuan, a record price for a living Chinese artist at the time (Zhang, 2016). Xu Beihong used the signature "悲鸿 乙卯六月" (Beihong, June of *Yi Mao*), combining Chinese characters with the traditional celestial-terrestrial calendar, signaling Xu's transition from a European-trained painter to a national artist.

In terms of how he signed his paintings, the *Portrait of Mrs. Tchang Ju Chi and daughter*, signed "悲鸿，廿八年八月" (Beihong, August 1939), introduced a horizontal Chinese signature paired with the Republican calendar. *Put Down Your Whip* further advanced this evolution with a vertical right-to-left inscription: "人人敬慕之女杰王莹，廿八年十月悲鸿写，星洲" (Wang Ying, a heroine admired by all, October 1939, Painted by Beihong in Singapore). By 1940, *Portrait of a Young Lady* had fully integrated Chinese artistic conventions: a vertical right-to-left inscription concluded with a vermilion "Xu" seal, while black oil paint simulated ink-wash texturing techniques (Shang, 2021). This confirms Xu Beihong's artistic proposition of integrating Chinese and Western painting styles.

This transformation was deeply tied to wartime cultural dynamics. In a June 30, 1939, letter to Shu Xincheng (1893-1960), Xu Beihong emphasised that the governor's portrait "marked the first time a Chinese artist broke colonial conventions" (Zhang, 2016). The shift from French to Chinese signatures, Gregorian to traditional or Republican dating systems, and horizontal to vertical layouts collectively embodied a cultural reorientation from "Eurocentrism" to "national subjectivity."

CONCLUSION

This study examines the stylistic changes in Xu Beihong's portrait paintings during a critical period in Singapore (1939-1942). Through archival research and case studies of key works, it is evident that this period marked a significant change in his artistic practice. During his stay in Singapore, he created many portraits of celebrities and wealthy businesspeople. His works are lifelike in both form and spirit (Xie, 1998). Xu Beihong's portrait art centers on realism, while taking into account the Oriental aesthetic tradition of both form and spirit. His creation has had a profound impact on the development of portraiture, both in depicting the characters' real appearance and in conveying the theme's profound significance.

Back to the core question of this study: is Xu Beihong's stylistic innovation derived from internal artistic evolution, or from patron-driven aesthetic obedience in the sponsorship economy? The evidence shows a dual mechanism with different weights across different types of entrustments. For the portraits of businesspeople such as Tan Ean Kiam and Lee Choon Seng, commissioners' expectations play a leading role in media selection (such as Chinese painting), and the theme (fisherman hermit, Buddhist monk) and the symbolic background are based on the commissioners' negotiations and requests. In contrast, in the portraits *of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas* and *Put Down Your Whip*, Xu Beihong's artistic evolution and strategic negotiation with commissioners are more evenly integrated, aiming to reflect colonial prestige and attract the conscious visual choice of Chinese donors. The transformation from a French signature to a Chinese signature with a cinnabar seal further promotes the dual-driven model that responds to Xu Beihong's cultural self-assertion and meets Nanyang's customers' expectations for visible "Chineseness". Therefore, Singapore's patronage economy is not seen as a restriction but as a catalyst that contributed to the stylistic achievements that Xu Beihong's independent creation may not have achieved.

Through the in-depth study of Xu Beihong's portraits in Singapore, we can draw the following conclusions: first, Xu Beihong's artistic styles have changed significantly – the portraits that he produced in Singapore demonstrated his innovative techniques and styles, reflecting the characteristics of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures and diversified development. Secondly, Xu Beihong's artistic creation is influenced by many factors, such as the social environment, geographical conditions, and personal experience. Through the visual analysis above, it can be observed how Xu Beihong's portraits in Singapore are relatively mature and diverse. He successfully integrated Chinese and Western art, reaching new heights in the fusion of emotional expression and realism.

The significance of this study is reflected in two aspects. First of all, the focus on Xu Beihong's Singapore period is a key episode and a catalyst for his artistic development, challenging the traditional idea of holistic creation by

emphasising the interaction between his unique "Nanyang" characteristics and Singapore's local environment. Secondly, this study reveals how the life experiences of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia provide fertile ground for Xu Beihong's artistic innovation. This study emphasises the complex interactions among patriotism, cultural identity, and artistic adjustment, and offers a subtler perspective on the modernisation of Chinese art in the 20th century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers express their gratitude to National Museum of Singapore (NMS), National Gallery of Singapore (NGS), National Art Museum of China, and Xu Beihong Memorial Hall (Beijing) for granting permission to republish the images featured in this paper.

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