

Jiak Kim (see p. 110), which was painted in 1917 and unveiled in a ceremony at Victoria Memorial Hall two years later.⁵⁵ Tan Jiak Kim died in 1917 and so the portrait was almost certainly based on a photograph of Tan. An earlier portrait of Tan Jiak Kim, inscribed “C. A. Pun Ting” (probably “S. Punting”, for Soo Pun Ting), appears to have been a prototype for Low Kway Soo’s painting.⁵⁶

A century later, the tradition of commissioning artists to paint posterity portraits has been revived by Singaporean artist, Alvin Ong, who has received numerous commissions from the Peranakan community. While most of his commissions were painted from sittings with clients, Ong has also painted posthumous portraits, including of Tan Keong Saik and Tan Cheng Kee, the former based on the illustration in Song Ong Siang’s 1923 book.⁵⁷

Picturing Straits Chinese society: Portraits at the Victoria Memorial Hall

The Straits Chinese community initiated commissions for the portraits of governors to be displayed at Victoria Memorial Hall, including portraits of Sir John Adamson in 1901, Sir Arthur Young in 1911, and Sir Shenton Thomas in 1939 (fig. 19).⁵⁸ Members of the Arab community presented a portrait of Sir Hugh Clifford in 1928.⁵⁹

Victoria Memorial Hall accumulated portraits, busts, and mementos of individuals who contributed to the building of the British Empire in Singapore.⁶⁰ In 1919, Tan Jiak Kim became the first Singaporean Chinese to have his portrait displayed at the hall, in the company of former governors. The portraits were hung on the upper floor, which was refurbished in 1909 (fig. 21).

Two weeks after the unveiling of Tan Jiak Kim’s portrait, an advertisement in the *Straits Times* of 23 August 1919 announced that portraits of Lim Boon Keng and Sir Arthur Young, commander of the Straits Settlements, both painted by Low Kway Soo, would be publicly exhibited for a few days in the department store John Little.⁶¹ They were then installed in a new portrait gallery in the Raffles Museum; the portrait of Sir Arthur Young later made it to the walls of Victoria Memorial Hall.

In 1936, Song Ong Siang was painted by the German artist Julius Wentscher (fig. 20). The sitter wears evening dress, with his knighthood badge around his neck, and the silver star of the order and the Colonial Auxiliary Forces medal on his chest. A copy of Song’s book, *One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore*, is displayed on the table, together with a Bible and several other bound volumes. However, when Song’s portrait was completed, the

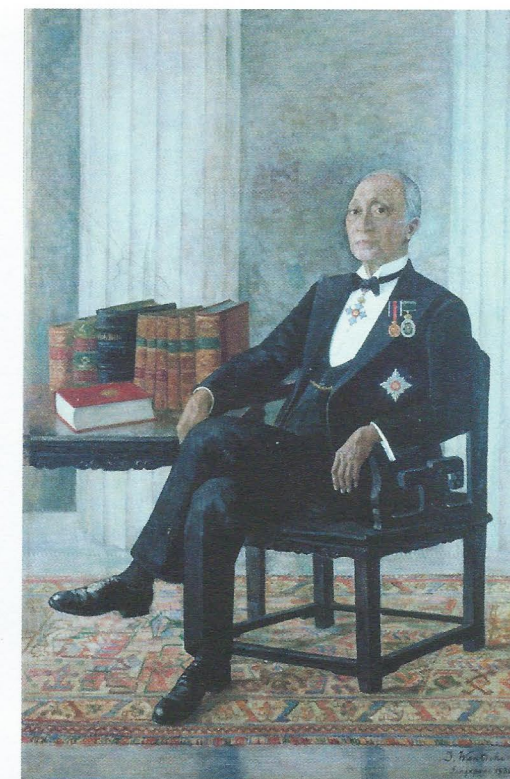


19. Governor Sir Shenton Thomas

Xu Beihong. Singapore, 1939. Oil on canvas, 244.5 x 134 cm. National Museum of Singapore, HP-0014

portrait gallery seems to have been full. The *Straits Times* on 15 March 1936 exclaimed, “No space for a knight!”

Who should make room for Sir Ong Siang? There are twenty panels around the hall, each with its portrait of a personage who made a niche for himself in local history. Not only are there no vacant panels, but the gallery is overcrowded. The portrait



20. Song Ong Siang

Julius Wentscher. Singapore, 1936. Oil on canvas, 214 x 142 cm. National Museum of Singapore, HP-0017

of Sir Laurence Guillemard is so badly placed, in a corner by the organ, that few people have ever seen it. However, as one looks around this gallery one is forced to admit that Sir Ong Siang Song has a much stronger claim to be there than some of these bygone notabilities.⁶²

The portrait of Song was eventually given its place in the gallery. The paintings

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Figures opposite:

upper left: Tan Kim Ching. Oil on canvas. Thiravudh Khoman and family, Bangkok

upper right: Plate belonging to Cheang Hong Lim (see p. 93)

below: Tan Kim Seng Fountain on Battery Road, 1880s (see p. 80)

Figure on p. 8: Epergne given to Tan Kim Seng (see p. 78)

NOTE TO THE READER

Names are rendered in the dialect or the preferred romanization of the individual. Pinyin is used for general Chinese terms and titles. The terms "Peranakan" and "Straits Chinese" have overlapping meanings, the latter being commonly used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dollars cited are Straits dollars, which in 1906 were worth 2 shillings and 4 pence sterling (11.7% of a pound). The Straits dollar became the Malayan and the Singapore dollar.

<i>baba</i>	A Peranakan man
<i>nyonya</i>	A Peranakan woman (also spelled <i>nonya</i>)
PAP	People's Action Party, founded 1954
Peranakan	Community of creolized Chinese in the Malay Archipelago
SCBA	Straits Chinese British Association, founded 1900
Straits	Straits Settlements: the British colony of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore (1867–1946)
Straits Chinese	A Peranakan, or more generally, a Chinese born in the Straits Settlements; a term used in the 19th and early 20th centuries

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