A candid account of the background to the collection based on an

INTERVIEW WITH LEO HAKS BY WILLEM VELEMA

Before I started buying ceremonial objects in Chinese paper shops in Singapore, I collected oriental ceramics. I was quite involved and even became treasurer of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Society. One day, however, there was an incident:

I had bought an Annamese pipette in the shape of a duck, one of those objects which is used to drip water onto an ink-stone to make ink – very old and very beautiful, but perhaps not so special to the initiated. I took it to a 'pot clinic', a sort of workshop where collectors of ceramics show their acquisitions to each other and discuss their merit. When I proudly showed my duck to another collector he was very enthusiastic. 'Lovely', he exclaimed. 'What did you pay for it?' I mentioned a fairly modest sum. He turned away and didn't give it another look. That did it. It was a message I had been getting too often. If it is expensive, it's good; if it's cheap it can't be. This incident prompted me to sell most of my pieces and withdraw.

The first time I went into a Chinese paper shop was in North Bridge Road in Singapore in 1975. These shops sell things like statues of gods for home altars, but they also carry an extensive assortment of ceremonial objects, particularly ones made of paper, traditionally burnt as offerings to gods and ancestors during religious festivals and on other ceremonial occasions, including funerals. Some painted objects caught my eye; they were simple, but appealing – what is generally, but erroneously, called folk art. I purchased three items. At home, I gave them a closer look and could see that they were really rather special, and must have been painted quite some time ago. I was intrigued and went back to see if they had more. After some persuasion, a box was produced from under the counter; in it there were three old papier-mâché figurines. I bought them, and kept going back. The owner, Daniel B.K.Lee of Joo Moh Chiap Kee Trading (Pte) Ltd, must have found it odd: a Dutchman with a strange interest in old sacrificial paper objects! He confirmed that some of them had been lying in the shop for at least twenty or thirty years.

The items I collected had mostly been made between 1930 and 1960. In 1948 the Communists came to power in China and religious objects like these were banned for domestic use, although they were still produced for export. After the 'Great Leap Forward' in the mid-fifties, their quality deteriorated sharply. During this period all sorts of goods were in short supply in China, even paper. I have an example of what is called a 'bed sheet' – a large piece of painted paper that is burned as an offering. (In the other world it will indeed be a bedsheet for the spirit of an ancestor to rest on.) Superficially, it doesn't seem out of the ordinary, though beautifully painted with flowers and lions. But if you turn it over, you see that it is made from about thirty pieces of paper stuck together. In some respects, it is one of the highlights of the collection.

Paper became so scarce that Singapore paper shops exported sheets to China, to be painted there and then returned to Singapore for use. Two pieces from that period may appear identical; only the backs disclose that one is made from a single sheet of imported paper and the other from many pieces.

At the time I was collecting, the Cultural Revolution in China was drawing to a close. Traditional religious beliefs and practices had, of course, been banned in China for years, but during the Cultural Revolution were repressed even more severely, and associated artifacts were systematically destroyed. As a result, very little of this art form remained in China, in public at least. I realized that the old objects in the shop in Singapore had all originated in China. It gradually dawned on me that I had come upon fragments of an important part of traditional Chinese culture, dating back two or three thousand years, perhaps even longer, and that what I was collecting may well be the vestiges of an ancient craft, in apparently terminal decline for political and cultural reasons. I came to feel strongly that I had a responsibility to rescue what I could. The collecting, per se, of these beautiful things became of lesser importance than their preservation. I hoped and expected too that the academic and museum worlds would come to realise their significance.

Quite by chance, the collection suddenly grew. The paper shop in North Bridge Road was located in an old building, a so-called shop-house in which the business was conducted on the ground floor and the upper floor or floors were the owners' residence. This shop, like many other old, often fine and historic buildings in Singapore, was assigned for demolition to make room for a shopping complex. It was to be relocated to the first floor of a new multistorey concrete building in Victoria Street. The impending move turned the shop upside down, and I was given an extraordinary opportunity to buy a lot of items. It seemed that the shop actually had very little use for much of their old stock; customers doing their 'ceremonial shopping' had simply not bought any of it for years. Some of the pieces were quite exceptional and included hand-painted paper costumes. These costumes, together with many others, form the strongest part of the collection in my opinion, a view shared by specialists.

Paper costumes are burnt at temple festivals as offerings to gods or ancestors. According to Chinese tradition, the surviving relatives have to provide their

A very large dragon robe.

ancestors with everything they might need in the other world. All these requisites – clothes, shoes, money, even cars, motor scooters, irons and video cassette recorders – are made from paper or are depicted on paper, and, at the close of the ceremony, are sent to the ancestors or the gods by way of fire.

There are a couple of hundred specimens of old paper costumes in the collection, ranging from quite simple to extremely elaborate. These were all made in China and are hand-painted. When I bought them it had been years since the latest models had been imported. New models were made in Bangkok and were not hand-painted but printed in large quantities on offset machines. If a devotee wanted to buy a new paper costume for a favoured deity, and the shopkeeper brought out one of these hand-painted models, the client would not accept it; people would not want to appear before the deity with something so hopelessly outmoded. These beautiful hand-painted costumes lay around the shop and gathered dust. The shopkeepers were well aware of their hand-crafted quality but were unable to sell them.

I became a familiar figure in the shops. When I came, on a Saturday or Sunday, they would say, 'Go ahead and look around'. Eventually I was allowed to look everywhere, not only in the public part of the shop, but also behind the counter and in closed cupboards.

In many Chinese shops in the Far East it is the custom to hang merchandise in boxes from the ceiling as protection against mice and rats. Lots of boxes of all sizes hang on strings and can be got down with a stick or pulley. I also searched in that swaying forest of boxes. If a box looked old enough I asked if they would get it down for me, and if there was something interesting in it, I bought it. As a result, the collection gives a good general impression of what was sold in this sort of shop twenty and more years ago. These days the stock is completely different.

At first, my response to the paper objects was purely aesthetic. They were beautiful, they fascinated me, they should be preserved – but I knew little about their ceremonial significance. The burning of paper costumes as offerings is an aspect of Chinese custom that, even today, scholars have hardly touched; in fact, I have been unable to locate any English language literature on the subject. By asking questions in the paper shops, I gradually learned. They explained the significance of objects, for instance, and let me know about religious festivals at which sacrificial paper would be burned. I was able to attend several from beginning to end, sometimes lasting three or four days.

In 1981, a friend, R.Ian Lloyd and I made an audiovisual slide-show entitled *Art to Burn*, based on slides taken at such festivals, interspersed with pieces

from the collection. We also showed how the paper objects were prepared in the shops, their transport to the temple and their use there. We then showed how, at the end of the festival, the objects are taken down from the temple walls, folded neatly, offered to the gods and finally burnt.

This custom has always fascinated me. Many of the people who bought the paper offerings were poor. What they paid must have been a lot of money to them. And at the end of the festival the offerings are simply burnt up, to please a god or to ensure that an ancestor

Yeo Swee Huat Paper shop in Singapore.

has good clothes for the coming year. I was always touched by these people's willingness to spend so much of their money on offerings, and by the idea of transport to the other world by means of fire.

I must admit too, that one reason I was so attracted to collecting these particular objects is that they seemed to demonstrate the absurdity of the accepted distinction between 'fine art', ie. worth collecting, and 'folk art', which is almost invariably regarded as inferior by collectors. As a result of this distinction, and despite their beauty and sophistication, the items I gathered had been ignored by museums and collectors alike.

My job in Singapore had nothing to do with art. I worked for the major food importing and distribution company, and visited the paper shops in my spare time. It could be called a hobby perhaps, but it was more than that for me. Being in such a shop was wonderfully relaxing. In the years when I was collecting, I was often extremely pressured at work; sometimes, even if it was two in the afternoon, I would rise from my office chair, get into the car and go to a paper shop. I would just sit there – an hour, sometimes two hours. I watched people coming and going, watched what they bought and didn't buy and asked why. It was wonderful, almost like a meditation.

Mr Yeo Swee Piew and Mr Yeo Hung Teo selling offerings at a Singapore temple in 1982.

In this way I got to know the families who ran the shops. Daniel Lee married and had his first child – who is now studying accountancy. I remember with fondness one afternoon in 1976 when Mrs Lee proudly came to me and placed her daughter, a few days old, in my arms to introduce her to me.

When I went to the shop I would be given a soft drink or a cup of tea, and then we talked. I asked about the customs and festivals, and how the things in the shop were used. This was all carefully explained to me. But the contact between us never became intrusive. The people in the shop never asked me, for example, what I did for a living. It was not important either; we knew we were on common ground as far as the material was concerned.

By accident, I came across a second shop. I had to be in Chinatown for some reason, but couldn't find a parking place. I finally found one on Upper Circular Road. Backing into it I saw, like a mirage in the rear-view mirror, the bedecked interior of a paper shop. This was to become my most important source: a fantastic shop, with beautiful people, called Yeo Swee Huat Paper Agency which, like Joo Moh Chiap Kee, was run by people of the Teochew community. It was owned by Mr Yeo Swee Piew, a very fine man. He sadly passed away in 1987 and the business was carried on by his son, Mr Yeo

Hung Teo. After I had visited their shop regularly, I was again given the freedom to look around wherever I liked – not only because I went there so often but, I believe, because Mr and Mrs Yeo were aware of my motivation: that my overriding concern was not commercial but an appreciation of the pieces and a desire to preserve them. Even though I have not lived in Singapore for the last twelve years, Mr and Mrs Yeo still send cards and sometimes flowers at the Lunar New Year.

Highly perishable material like paper is difficult to keep, particularly in the humid, tropical climate of Singapore. In addition, the items were made to be used only once, not to be resistant or lasting. It was actually some time, however, before I began to conserve the paper material properly, and it took an accident for that to happen.

I had bought a box of paper masks; I put it on a shelf at home and went on a business trip. When I returned six weeks later, white ants had got into the box and eaten the masks. They all had to be thrown out. This was a clear message that I needed to look after the objects more professionally. It prompted me to empty one room in my house, make it as lightproof and airtight as possible and instal a dehumidifier to keep the humidity within recommended limits. I then packed the paper objects in sealed plastic bags together with some peppercorns – an ancient Chinese method of conservation that is very effective. I stacked the plastic bags in aluminium trunks. Fragile objects which could not be stacked were also packed in plastic bags with peppercorns and stored individually in boxes.

I also decided I should make a record of the collection in case real disaster were to strike. I hired a photographer, Thomas Schüllhammer and placed another room of my house at his disposal. With yet another part of the house converted to a studio, Thomas worked every day for three months, photographing five hundred of the best specimens, all on large format Ektachrome slides. I stored these elsewhere so that if my house should ever burn down, we would at least have some record!

Another shop opened next to the shop in Victoria Street. Sing Young Loong was my third shop even though I purchased little there. That's how it went, the collection just grew and grew. It was a strange situation for me, leading two lives: during the week I was at the office, and at weekends in the paper shops.

I didn't always buy something and wasn't expected to; I often just sat there. Occasionally, I was put to work – like when a big order was received from a temple for a festival at which lots of lanterns were needed. These lanterns were still made by hand, from bamboo and rice paper and had to be painted. On such an afternoon I would be told, 'We don't have time now, we have to deliver three hundred of these lanterns. Here's a brush and a pot of paint. Start painting.' For the whole afternoon, I did nothing but paint lanterns. There would be a wonderful atmosphere of common purpose and community, almost familial. It was an exceptional experience.

Daniel Lee's shop was involved in a variety of commercial activities centred around religious festivals. One of these was making displays, such as large paper images of gods. They also made imitation houses for funerals. When a person died, a copy of his house was made from paper. These paper houses might be three or four metres wide and three metres high. Sometimes a copy of the deceased's car was made too. Anything that a person might need in the next life could be constructed for burning at the ceremony.

Another of their activities was hiring out ceremonial articles that were not for burning. Many of the temples are not well off and cannot afford to buy expensive articles for use only once or twice a year – things like paintings and tapestries that are hung from temple walls as adornment during a festival. Musical instruments were also often required at festivals. Daniel Lee had all these things in stock, for hire.

One day he rang up and asked if I would like to come because there was something important for me. There were two large cases there that day, containing temple attributes – various painted objects, textiles and so forth. I was told, 'You've been collecting for so long. Your collection is getting bigger and more important. We hardly ever use these things any more, are you interested?' I examined what was on offer and was more than interested. It was something very special. I was then told, 'If you buy this, it will be an important step for both of us, because you will not only be buying these things from us, but by selling them we are no longer able to call ourselves a hire firm'. It was an emotional moment for both of us. I was buying, of course, but we were clear that it was not just a matter of money; it was a gesture of great trust on his part and an acknowledgement of a shared will to conserve the material. Although the price was fairly high, I did not bargain – something I would normally definitely have done, bargaining is an accepted part of Chinese business. 'It's a lot of money,' I said, 'but with your loss of business included, it's a fair price.' We were both satisfied with the transaction and still are.

With the purchase of the temple cloths I had deviated from my original intentions which was to collect paper articles, as these were by far the most fragile and in need of protection. Textiles will survive, I had thought. But suddenly, here I was with a whole new element. I asked if I could see more textiles. They did have more, I was told, but did not think I would be interested in them; they were burial garments. I asked to see them

anyway. What was brought out to me was absolutely marvellous, and I needed no persuasion to purchase.

Chinese people often begin preparations for their death long in advance. They have burial garments ready sometimes years before they die. These may consist of as many as thirteen layers of textile (including the linings), and may include several layers of undergarments, a layer of morning dress, one of work clothes, another of evening wear and so forth. On top of this there would be a ceremonial gown. All the clothing, in fact, that might be required in the next life.

Not long after this, in another of the shops, I came across some samples of embroidered opera costumes from China, intended to show what various individual studios in China could produce. They were made to be exhibited flat, as examples of embroidery techniques. The owner no longer took orders for opera costumes and I was able to buy these too.

In a similar way, I later added real opera costumes to the collection. At first I thought they didn't fit in, as I was focusing on art associated with offerings, but actually they do. At a temple festivity, an opera is not performed as entertainment for people, it is almost always performed as an offering to the gods. That's why it regularly happens that these operas are performed with virtually no audience. This is by no means disappointing to the actors: it's not people who are their audience, but the gods. The costumes, in their splendour, are an integral part of the offering.

In the early eighties, a friend introduced me to Mr Liew Seng Wah and his wife, who had run an opera company for many years – the well known Kwong Wah Dramatic Troupe. Mr Liew had begun his career in the late 1920's, and became one of Singapore's most prominent opera performers. He and Mrs Liew had now retired, and all their costumes, hats, backdrops etc. were stored in their small apartment. There wasn't an inch of space left. Moreover, they had always been self-employed and no longer had an income; their main asset was the opera material. For both reasons, they were willing to sell part of it. I decided it would be a valuable addition to the collection. I was privileged to visit Mr Liew several times and was able to purchase some real treasures: costumes of outstanding quality and beauty. Most of them, including some made to measure for the Liews, had been made in Canton in the 1930's, and are of a style peculiar to that period. With this acquisition, opera articles in general began to assume a more central place in the collection.

Mr. and Mrs. Liew Seng Wah show how an opera costume is worn, 1984.

Specialists claim that the collection is unique. If that is so, I am amazed that no one else has been so drawn to this material. Surely other people have responded to its beauty and realised that it is something out of the ordinary.

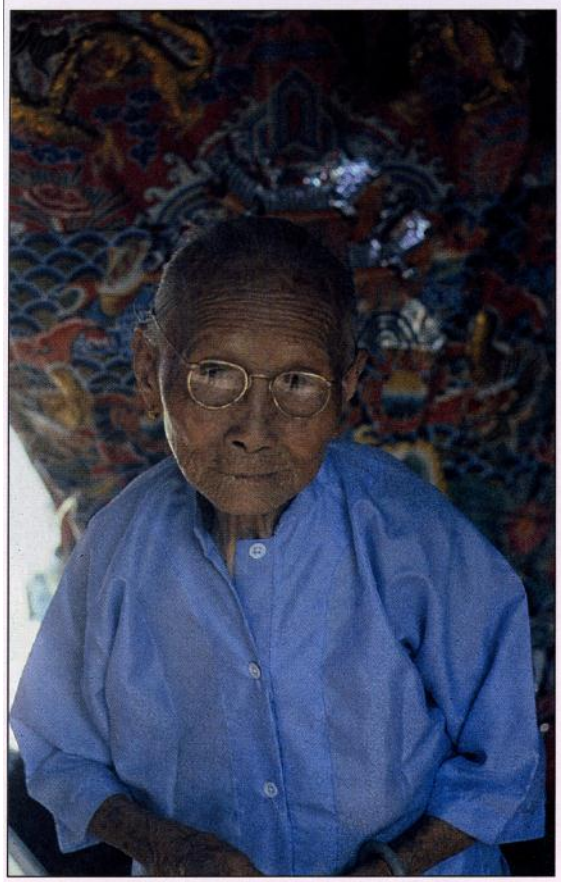
Perhaps, again, it is that dichotomy between 'art' and 'folk art' – a denigration of 'art for use' that has stifled appreciation and funding. I was apparently the only one in Singapore to collect them, encouraged by an old friend there, Ronni Pinsler. He realized their worth and may have collected them himself if had he not been so busy photographing Chinese opera performances and temple festivals.

It must be said however that for many Chinese people there is a something of a taboo on collecting this type of ceremonial object. They are not made for such a purpose. I can appreciate their attitude, and reflect it to an extent: I never have any ritual objects hanging on the walls of my home, nor have I ever worn any of the clothes or displayed any item of the collection as 'ornamentation'.

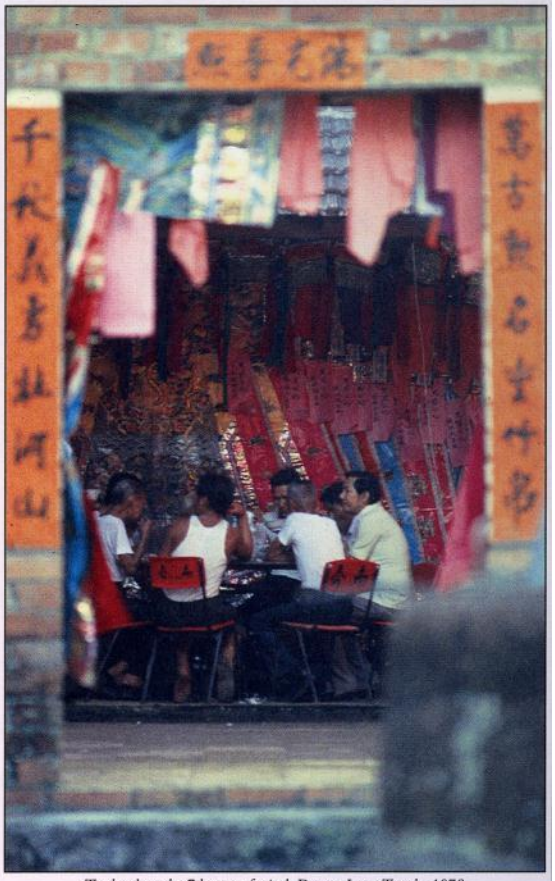
I continued collecting until the shops were empty. All the boxes hanging from the ceilings had been got down and looked into. Under the counter, behind the counter, in the cupboards — I had looked everywhere. There was nothing left.

I never went searching for other shops. If it is meant to be, I thought, then the shops will come to me. It is quite possible that there were other shops with items of interest and quality, but I never gave it a second thought. I did not want to go searching the whole city. I already had enough. When the three shops had been exhausted, I was, in a way, relieved.

But I could actually have gone further, for example by collecting altar tablets inscribed with memorial texts for ancestors. I never did – it seemed somehow disrespectful to buy them. Nor did I buy the stoppers used to close orifices in corpses; it was a bit too intimate, I felt. However, I did buy coffin palls and also the cloths that were placed in coffins. The coffins themselves I never bought.



A Devotee at the Dragon Lotus Temple in Singapore, 1978.



Tea-break at the 7th moon festival, Dragon Lotus Temple, 1978.

Collecting these objects is now a thing of the past for me. Apart from this book and the related exhibition, I am no longer actively involved. Now that I can sit back and review that period with some detachment, I realise that chance played a large role. I never set out to be a collector, the possessor of a collection; I never went searching for it. I stumbled upon it and could not ignore it. Then it took me in tow and I was carried away. I have even wondered if perhaps I gave it too much of my time, energy and money, if it assumed too demanding a place in my life. In the final analysis, the deepest pleasures from that period came from attending festivals and being in the shops, relating to the owners and their families, seeing the old men make wonderful objects, watching the devotees at the temple and in the shops come and go, and listening to their stories even though I did not speak their language. The objects in the collection are, and I now realise always were, a bonus.