

The Study of Liu Kang's Comic Art: Centered on the *Chop Suey*

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Abstract

The publication of *Chop Suey* (1946) marked Liu Kang's only comic book collection, set against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion during World War II's southward advance. It exposes the grim realities that followed the Japanese occupation of Malaya, often referred to as the "Chronicles of Suffering for the Malay Residents during the Japanese Occupation." This comic collection was a significant work of its time, characterized by a strong accusatory tone and a prominent focus on realism. Liu Kang skillfully blends history with imagination, depicting various atrocities committed by the Japanese military, creating emotionally charged scenes and conveying complex emotions. This resulted in a unique and distinctive style. Liu Kang's comic works serve as valuable visual records, offering not only educational and cautionary insights but also therapeutic significance in healing trauma. They positively impact shaping collective social memory and contributing to the future of humanity.

Keywords: Liu Kang, *Chop Suey*, comics, style, significance

1. Introduction

Liu Kang (1911-2004), also known as Liu Yan and Liu Hang, was a pioneering figure in Singaporean art and a significant artist in modern Chinese art history. Born in China, educated in France, and settled in Singapore, Liu's diverse geographical experiences made him a prominent figure with connections to "three worlds". He gained international acclaim for his pioneering Nanyang style. Liu Kang dedicated his life to painting, achieving remarkable success over nearly 80 years of artistic endeavor, with his works becoming prized pieces in art museums worldwide. In addition to his artistic creations, he made outstanding contributions in art education, art theory, criticism, and public cultural development, earning honors such as the Public Service Star and the Meritorious Service Medal from the Republic of Singapore. In recent years, research on Liu Kang has made significant progress, with publications such as *Correspondence between Liu Haisu and Liu Kang* and *Vibrant Art: Photos from Liu Haisu and Liu Kang*. Scholars including Li Zhi, Wang Xin, and He Yikai have explored various aspects of Liu Kang's artistic activities, correspondence, and critical writings from different perspectives. However, his comic works have received scant attention. Therefore, this paper focuses on *Chop Suey* to study Liu Kang's comic art, aiming to enhance understanding of the artist and his works.

2. A Brief Introduction to the Life and Art of Liu Kang

Liu Kang was born in 1911 in Jin Feng Village, Huyang Town, Yongchun County, Fujian Province. At the age of six, he moved with his family to Muar, Malaysia, where his father operated a rubber plantation business. Showing a keen interest in art from a young age, Liu impressed family and friends with his talent in drawing and imaginative painting. His middle school education was interrupted by student strikes, which coincided with Jinan University's overseas recruitment. In 1926, Liu went to Shanghai to study. After a semester at Jinan, he attended a short-term course at the Shanghai Art Academy during the summer, where his interest and skills in art grew rapidly. Subsequently, he formally enrolled in the Shanghai Art Academy, joining the second-year Western painting department for formal training. Student strikes disrupted the Shanghai Art Academy in 1927, prompting Liu to transfer to Xinhua Art University. Graduating in 1928, influenced by the French-educated teacher Chen

Hong, Liu furthered his studies in France. During his five years there, he not only studied painting at the research institute but also visited museums, galleries, participated in the Salon d'Automne, and traveled extensively in Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. He befriended notable figures such as Liu Haisu, Wang Jiyuan, Fu Lei, and Chen Renhao. Returning to China in 1933, Liu was invited by Liu Haisu to become a professor in the Western painting department of the Shanghai Art Academy. Besides teaching, he actively participated in various art societies such as the Baichuan Art Society, the Chinese Art Association, and the Changfeng Art Association. He also served as a judge for the Second National Art Exhibition and the National Children's Art Exhibition, and traveled to places like Putuo, Huangshan, and Laoshan for sketching trips. In May 1937, Liu married Chen Renbin, the sister of his friend Chen Renhao. A few months later, the Battle of Shanghai broke out, prompting his return to Muar. Considering his livelihood, he engaged in art education, teaching at Muar Chinese High School and later at Nanyang Teachers' College in Singapore. In 1942, with the Japanese advancing southward and Muar falling, all Chinese schools were closed, forcing Liu to flee to Singapore. After the Japanese surrender, he resumed teaching and continued his artistic endeavors, ultimately founding the Nanyang Art Style and becoming a prominent figure in the art world.

Reflecting on Liu Kang's life, his artistic journey can be divided into four significant periods. The first period, his studies in Shanghai (1926-1928), saw him progress from still life and plaster model studies to professional courses in watercolor and human anatomy, beginning his realistic approach to capturing the essence of his subjects. The second period, his studies in Paris (1928-1933), was influenced by Post-Impressionism, with Liu admiring artists like Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse. He honed his realism while experimenting with new techniques, creating works that exuded a Western modernist essence. The third period, his teaching tenure in Shanghai (1933-1937), expanded his perspective through unique Chinese themes. Combining Western painting foundations with traditional Chinese art, he emphasized strength, brushwork, and vitality, progressing towards an Oriental style that blended East and West. The fourth period, his residence in Southeast Asia (1937-2004), marked a milestone with his 1952 sketching trip to Bali. The local landscapes, costumes, dances, music, and architecture profoundly stimulated his creativity, leading him to develop a distinctive artistic language and pioneer the "Nanyang Style." From 1952 to 1970, Liu's artistic career reached its peak, establishing him as an internationally acclaimed leading painter in Singapore (Chia Wai Hon, 1997). After 1970, he revisited old themes and became passionate about nude studies, amassing numerous sketches and pastels, with an unrelenting creative spirit that permeated his artistic journey.

Liu Kang's art was nourished by Eastern, Western, and Nanyang cultural influences, allowing him to explore various styles with great freedom and versatility (Lin Xiangxiong, 2000). Whether in oil painting, ink wash, pastel, or cartoons, he exhibited a unique artistic flair. His cartoons, in particular, stood out for their concise, direct, and socially reflective nature. His comic works are distinctive, scattered across various periodicals, but the most concentrated and expressive can be found in *Chop Suey*.

3. Overview of Chop Suey

Chop Suey is the sole collection of comic works by Liu Kang, created between 1945 and 1946. Through these artworks, Liu Kang condemned the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in Southeast Asia. After relocating from Shanghai to Muar in 1937, Liu initially believed the war would soon end and he could return to Shanghai quickly. However, the conflict in China continued to escalate, and Malaya also faced increasing turmoil. On December 8, 1941, the Pacific War erupted, with Japan adopting a strategy of southward expansion, launching large-scale invasions across Southeast Asia. The occupation of Malaya was pivotal to Japan's southward plan, aiming to control the strategic Malacca Strait, disrupt the British military base in Singapore, and secure vital resources (Zhang Lianhong, 2004). At the time, Malaya was a British colony, and fierce battles ensued between British and Japanese forces for control. On January 11, 1942, the Japanese army captured Kuala Lumpur, forcing the British to retreat to Singapore. By February 15, the British troops stationed in Singapore surrendered to the Japanese. Following the occupation of Malaya, Japan initiated a dark period of three years and eight months of oppressive rule, characterized by massacres of civilians, mistreatment of prisoners of war, and widespread atrocities, leaving an indelible mark on human history (Liu Kang, 1946). During these turbulent times, Liu Kang's worldview and creative approach underwent transformation. Constrained by circumstances, he temporarily set aside oil painting and experimented with new mediums such as ink, pastels, and charcoal. In 1945, upon learning of Japan's unconditional surrender, Liu Kang was inspired to use his art to expose the brutal nature of the Japanese soldiers, aiming to serve as a cautionary tale for future generations.

The Birth of *Chop Suey* was not solely driven by Liu Kang's personal intentions but also by the encouragement of his friend, Zheng Zhen'en. Zheng Zhen'en, a manager at American International Assurance, oversaw the publication, distribution, and English translation of the collection, while Liu Kang was responsible for the illustrations and the Chinese text. The content of *Chop Suey* was drawn from their observations and experiences. Currently, *Chop Suey* is available in Chinese, English, and Japanese versions. The English version was divided

into three volumes, published between January and March of 1946. The first volume of the Chinese version was published in April of the same year, corresponding to the three volumes of the English version. Although there were initial plans for a fourth English volume and a second Chinese volume, these plans never materialized. The Japanese version was published in December 1990 by Mekong Publishing, with the translation handled by Michiko Nakahara, an honorary professor at Waseda University. The publication of *Chop Suey* received significant attention in Japan. The *Asahi Shimbun* ran an article titled *Comic Collection Confirms Atrocities*, featuring Liu Kang's work and introducing him to the Japanese audience. In Singapore, *United Evening Paper* had already interviewed Liu Kang in 1987 and ran a series of full-page reports in its special feature section, providing young readers with an opportunity to learn about this "blood-stained history." In 1991, Global Arts & Crafts Pte Ltd. published a combined Chinese-English edition. In 2014, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Liu Kang's passing, Global Publishing released a commemorative edition, which included additional prefaces, annotations, and biographical content. Liu Kang believed that the purpose of reprinting the collection was not to revive old grievances but to help young people in Japan and around the world understand historical facts. He hoped that by showing the "brutal nature of war," people would be inspired to pursue and cherish peace.

The title *Chop Suey* carries three layers of meaning. Firstly, it implies a jumble of things — referring to the unclassified nature of the artworks, which were created spontaneously. Secondly, it echoes a specific derogatory term — reflecting some of the content and accompanying text within the collection. Thirdly, it denotes a dish made from cooked and chopped animal offal — mirroring the metaphorical meaning of the cover illustration (Figure 1). On the cover, the plate does not contain a delicacy but rather depicts men and women subjected to torture. This suggests that each "ingredient" in the art collection represents various gruesome tortures. The *Chop Suey* is richly illustrated, featuring 36 comic artworks. Based on their main themes, these artworks can be divided into five sections. The first section, "Cruel Punishments," graphically portrays the extreme and brutal methods of the Japanese army, showcasing a wide variety of savage executions. The second section, "Perverse Slaughter," illustrates the bloody scenes of ruthless killings by the Japanese army. The third section highlights the vile behaviors and actions of the Japanese army, revealing their hypocritical, debauched nature and tyrannical conduct. The fourth section, "Iron-Fist Governance," depicts the shameless actions of the Japanese under the guise of the "coexistence and co-prosperity" slogan, establishing a new order through violence and coercion. The fifth section presents a microcosm of society, vividly portraying the various aspects of life during these dark times.

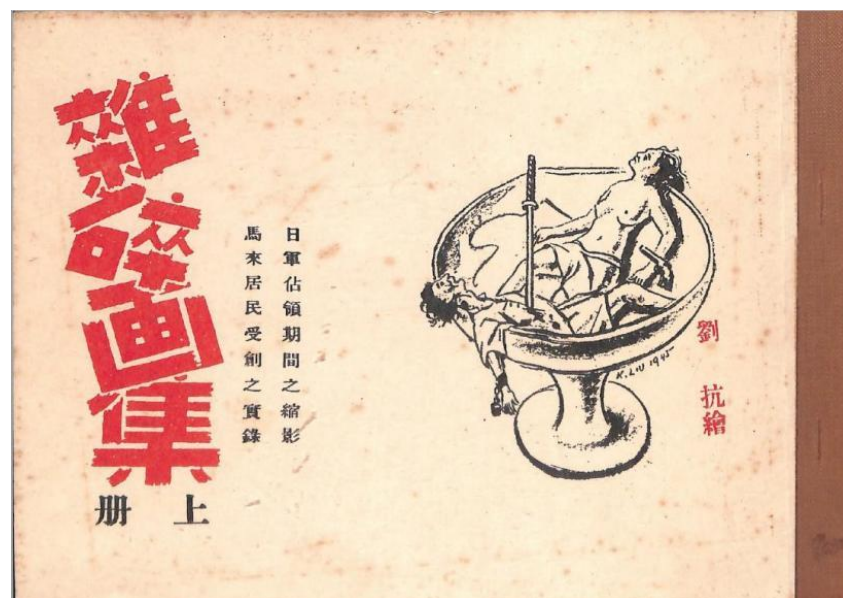


Figure 1. Chop Suey Cover, 1946 Edition

4. The Artistic Style of Liu Kang's Cartoons

Liu Kang articulated that while his works adhere to a central stylistic principle, they often exhibit significant variations in technique and appearance due to sudden emotional fluctuations or profound impacts (Liu Kang, 1997). The *Chop Suey* stands as a potent testament forged in the crucible of its time. Liu Kang employs a strikingly realistic style, adeptly blending historical narrative with imaginative elements to depict the atrocities

committed by the Japanese army. His works resonate with emotionally charged scenes that convey a spectrum of complex emotions, thereby establishing a distinctive style unique to Liu Kang's cartoons.

4.1 The Harmonious Fusion of History and Imagination

Liu Kang's cartoons exemplify a harmonious fusion of history and imagination. Utilizing real events as the cornerstone of his creations, he imbues them with his vivid imagination. His dynamic brushwork revitalizes each event and scene, enabling viewers to appreciate the creative visuals while experiencing the gravity and authenticity of history.

Documenting history through cartoons is a hallmark of this collection. Works such as *Japanese Kumiai*, *A Glorious Tomb*, *Concentration Camp Massacres*, *Lamentation and great mourning*, and *Tragedy of the Siam-Burma Railroad* are based on notable historical events. *Concentration Camp Massacres* (Figure 2) portrays the ruthless massacre of overseas Chinese by the Japanese army. Japanese soldiers are depicted in an organized manner, squatting and aiming rifles at blindfolded and bound prisoners. Another group of soldiers meticulously inspects to ensure complete eradication. Layers of ink envelop the scene, creating a somber and weighty atmosphere that evokes profound sorrow. The lines, simple yet precise, and the balanced brushwork accurately convey the theme. The author's structured composition is evident in the clear hierarchy, contrast between light and dark, and the arrangement of foreground and background elements. The scene illustrates an adversarial dynamic through uniform actions and parallel compositions, contrasting the indifferent posture of the executioners with the vulnerable, apprehensive figures of the victims. The painter captures the tense moment just before the bullets are fired. This work is based on the "Sook Ching" also known as the Massacre, during which the Japanese army used "identity verification" as a pretext to arrest and execute a large number of overseas Chinese. Initially, overseas Chinese supported the war effort in China through fundraising and relief efforts, significantly impacting the Japanese army. Following the occupation of Malaya, the Japanese viewed overseas Chinese as potential threats and established examination centers to identify anti-Japanese elements. Those who passed were marked with a "verified" stamp on their faces, hands, clothes, or documents; those who did not were transported to remote areas for mass execution. The "Sook Ching" persisted for over ten days under arbitrary criteria, resulting in the wrongful labeling and massacre of many innocent individuals. It is estimated that more than 75,000 Chinese in Singapore (Liu Kang, 1946) and over 150,000 in Malaya were victims, excluding casualties among Chinese volunteer soldiers (Li Enhan, 1994). The Sook Ching ranks alongside the Nanjing Massacre and the Manila Massacre as one of the three major atrocities committed by the Japanese army in Asia. Returning to this poignant image, numerous individuals are bound in groups, either shot or stabbed, vividly recreating the historical scene. The stark contrast between the deceased in the foreground and the living in the midground intensifies the emotional impact on the viewer, evoking a profound sense of mourning. This vividly encapsulates the sentiment expressed in the poem: "Thousands of men examined, few survive the ordeal; skeletons and bones buried in desolate graves, the vast yellow sands weep over the sorrowful city" (Liang Rongji, 1995), linking to the collective anguish of the occupied period.



Figure 2. *Concentration Camp Massacres*, Liu Kang, 1946

In his creative process, Liu Kang relied solely on his own observations, without consulting additional sources. Once he decided on a theme, he depicted it based on his understanding and imagination. As a result, many works in the collection, such as *Singapore Zoo*, *The Battle Simians versus Sun Gods*, and *Human Turkey*, are infused with imagination. *Singapore Zoo* (Figure 3) depicts an interesting and captivating scene. In the cage is none other than Tomoyuki Yamashita, the notorious Japanese commander responsible for the occupation of Malaya and the orders to purge anti-Japanese Chinese. Prior to this, he had fought in Central and Northern China, and the 25th Army units in Malaya had also been transferred from those who had fought in China, known for their brutality towards Chinese civilians. Due to his rapid and “remarkable” conquest of the Malay Peninsula, Yamashita was hailed as a national hero by the Japanese and earned the nickname “The Tiger of Malaya”. In Liu Kang’s portrayal, however, the once imposing and revered general is depicted as a pathetic and comical figure, desperate and dressed in prison garb, trapped in a small cage like an animal. This adds an element of humor and attraction to the image, while also expressing the artist’s disdain for war criminals. In 1944, Yamashita was appointed to command operations in the Philippines. After Japan’s defeat, he was imprisoned in Manila, tried by a military tribunal, and executed. Liu Kang, therefore, imagined that “The Tiger of Malaya” would be exhibited in the Singapore Zoo before his death. The metaphor of Yamashita as a beast is clear, and Liu Kang reinforces this through his visual language. The perspective lines center around the caged figure, extending upwards to a monkey and downwards to a small tiger, creating a stable relationship and a unique viewpoint in the composition.



Figure 3. *Singapore Zoo*, Liu Kang, 1946

The monkey, representing humanity, stands high in the composition, looking down at the imprisoned Yamashita, suggesting his doomed fate. The lion, a symbol of Britain, glares angrily at its “fellow inmate” Yamashita. The small tiger in front of the cage looks up at the caged king of the forest. The contrast between the enormous, caged beast and the small animals outside highlights the absurdity of the situation. This composition not only reveals Liu Kang’s unique historical insight but also showcases his rich imagination and creative expression, filled with artistic charm and individuality.

4.2 The Bold and Rugged Realism

Liu Kang disliked delicate and intricate details, preferring a style that emphasized vigor, skill, and grandeur. His use of bold, dynamic lines and colors aimed for a majestic effect, a creative philosophy also reflected in the *Chop Suey*. Liu’s preference for using short, thick charcoal sticks to draw cartoons created a distinctive style.

The inherent texture of charcoal, with its strong granularity, allowed for quick sketching and coloring, establishing a certain atmosphere. Softer charcoal could quickly outline and shade, while harder charcoal added layered details with a more abrasive feel. Liu's emphasis on fundamental skills made him adept at using charcoal, and his concise, rugged strokes rendered each event in the cartoons with vivid realism.

Upon viewing works such as *Concentration Camp Massacres*, *Tragedy of the Siam-Burma Railroad*, *Headache*, *Another form of Torture*, Liu Kang's distinctive style becomes immediately apparent. His use of bold, powerful lines and direct execution creates a compelling visual impact. The seventh piece, *Another form of Torture* (Figure 4), depicts a scene of harsh interrogation by the Japanese military police in Northern Malaya. The composition is direct and unembellished, delivering a strong visual shock. Using charcoal to represent realistic scenes demonstrates Liu's solid modeling skills and confidence in handling the material. In his depiction of characters, Liu's lines are brisk and powerful, capturing vivid and lifelike images. A military policeman is shown kneeling on one knee, leaning forward to throw in kindling, with the dynamic posture accurately portrayed. The MP armband clearly identifies his role. The tortured prisoner, with disheveled hair and a drooping face, embodies the agony and despair of being tortured. The significant proportion difference between the scene and the characters highlights the dramatic tension, and due to the coarse nature of charcoal, drawing smaller figures requires high accuracy and control. However, Liu masterfully uses precise lines to vividly portray the prisoner's suffering and the cruelty of the military police, endowing the characters with clear and distinct identities. Beyond character depiction, Liu also pays attention to the details of the scene. The tattered fan on the ground, the long tongs, the piled-up firewood, and the chimney pipe connecting outside add richness and realism to the scene. Liu skillfully utilizes the characteristics of charcoal, drawing the stove structure with heavy lines, using side strokes to create a rough texture on the stove wall, and employing large smudges for the soot effect on the background wall. This creates a dynamic and confident touch. The sense of "torture" and the rising heat and thick carbon dust permeate the scene, fully showcasing Liu's exceptional drawing skills and artistic expression.

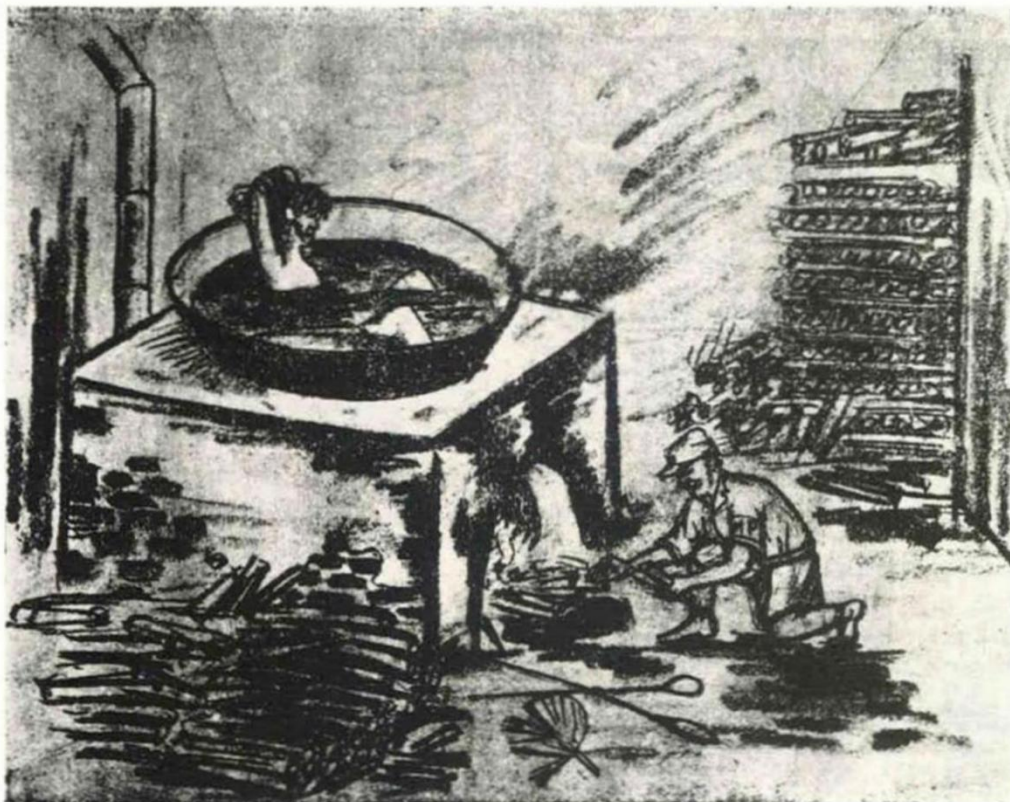


Figure 4. *Another form of Torture*, Liu Kang, 1946

Liu Kang rejected superficiality, preferring a deliberate and fluid brushwork to depict scenes realistically. This approach is evident in works such as *Off with their heads*, *Lamentation and great mourning*, *Houses of pleasure*, and *Digging your own dugout*. The twentieth piece, *Lamentation and great mourning* (Figure 5), portrays a harrowing scene of Japanese soldiers slaughtering infants, evoking profound horror in viewers. The focus is on faithfully recreating the event, emphasizing the main subjects and their body language while minimizing finer

details to underscore the central theme. Liu exaggerates the characteristics of the depicted subjects, employing varied lines to convey the short, contorted, and aggressive forms of the Japanese soldiers. Their dynamic postures — lifting, receiving, stabbing — are rendered with precision. He deliberately simplifies the facial expressions of the soldiers, depicting them as indifferent or even smiling, conveying their desensitization to violence. The infants' faces remain blank, symbolizing countless innocent lives lost and reflecting the artist's empathy. The ground is littered with the bodies of two women who were also victims of stabbing, intensifying the scene's shock value. The stark contrast between the vivid, bloody foreground and the indistinct forest background creates a palpable tension and rhythm. The brutality of the scene is deeply unsettling. Initially, Liu Kang's son, Liu Thai Ker, suspected the depiction might be exaggerated for dramatic effect. However, upon seeing similar photographs at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, he suddenly realized that this was not imagination but a stark reality.

Despite its silent, monochromatic nature, the image evokes heart-wrenching cries and a pervading atmosphere of bloodshed. Liu's exceptional artistic skills convey a profound humanitarian concern, eliciting a visceral response both visually and emotionally.

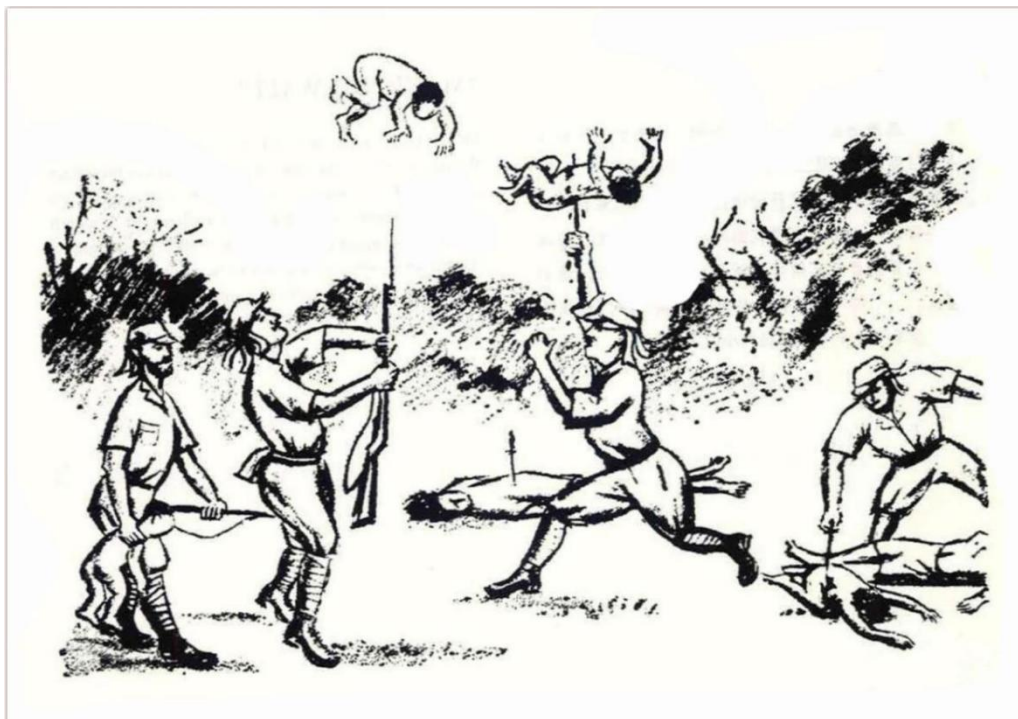


Figure 5. *Lamentation and great mourning*, Liu Kang, 1946

4.3 Complex Emotional Undercurrents

Liu Kang's comic works and writings are infused with intense emotions, whether directly expressed or subtly implied. Upon close examination of his depictions of brutal punishments, grotesque acts, and social vignettes, it becomes evident that these emotions are deeply layered. His works reveal a profound blend of anger towards Japanese atrocities and sympathy for the plight of the underprivileged under oppressive conditions. This emotional interplay adds depth and richness to his art.

Many pieces in Liu's collection reveal Japanese soldiers' brutal acts and grotesque behaviors, often conveying a sense of righteous indignation through vivid depictions. The 19th piece, *Sheer spite* (Figure 6), is a prime example of an outlet for anger. Singaporean vendors, aiming to profit from the Japanese, simultaneously feared their unpredictable nature. Some Japanese soldiers, dissatisfied with high prices, would curse and dismiss the vendors, while others, in a fit of rage, would beat them. The drawing shows a Japanese soldier, unable to communicate and enraged by the price, grabbing chickens from their cages and violently twisting off their heads to vent his frustration. The vendor is vividly portrayed with a straw hat, bare feet, rolled-up pants, and a hunched posture. His open mouth, suggesting a helpless sigh, captures his terror and frustration. This layered depiction of anger — direct and fierce in the soldier's actions and suppressed and pitiful in the vendor's demeanor — adds dramatic tension to the scene. Liu's own anger is palpable in his written description of the Japanese soldiers'

brutality, enhancing the scene's emotional impact. Some of Liu's works also exhibit humor, such as the first piece, *Before and Now*, which uses contrast to depict the Japanese army's imposing demeanor during the occupation of Singapore and their dejected, defeated state upon surrender. The stark transformation in their appearance and attitude serves as a satirical commentary on the transient nature of power and glory, subtly critiquing the absurdity of war.



Figure 6. *Sheer spite*, Liu Kang, 1946

Liu Kang's artistic and life views are closely intertwined. His curiosity and desire for exploration enriched his artistic creations, making them more diverse, comprehensive, and human. With extensive knowledge and a keen sensitivity to life, he produced numerous outstanding works depicting life under the Japanese occupation. Pieces like *The search for Nutrition*, *Those crumbs (from the rich man's table)*, and *Potshards* illustrate the daily struggles of prisoners in detention camps. They were forced to scavenge for frogs, snails, and plant buds due to hunger, eating leftovers from guards' tables, and even using ceramic shards as eating utensils due to the lack of proper tools, portraying a heart-wrenching reality. The 34th piece, *Tragedy of the Siam-Burma Railroad* (Figure 7), stands out as a rare example of expressionism, using rough, thick strokes to depict a desolate night scene. A lone owl perches on a tree, its cold gaze reflecting the scattered bones on the ground. A train speeds by, emitting thick smoke, with the distant mountains and gloomy sky in the background. The Thailand-Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway, was constructed by the Japanese during their invasion of Southeast Asia to transport military supplies. Approximately 200,000 laborers and 50,000 prisoners of war were forced to build the 415-kilometer railway, originally planned for six years but completed in 16 months at the cost of a high death toll. About 16,000 POWs and 100,000 laborers perished due to starvation, disease, hard labor, and Japanese cruelty, their bodies abandoned in the wilderness. Understanding this historical context deepens the tragedy depicted in Liu's work. The contrast between the dark, speeding train and the white bones emphasizes the horror of the period. The moon, shrouded in clouds, reflects sorrow, highlighting the suffering of that time. In Chinese culture, owls are considered ominous "birds of ill-omen," associated with death, whereas in Japanese culture, they symbolize wisdom and good fortune. This cultural dichotomy is harmoniously integrated into the artwork, adding depth. The white bones suggest that almost every railway sleeper is a grave marker, while the speeding train symbolizes Japanese success achieved at great human cost, aptly illustrating the theme that the Thailand-Burma Railway was a tragedy built upon a sea of bones.

Liu Kang's comic works embody a unique creative philosophy, daring to challenge the boundaries of history and imagination. By skillfully utilizing the characteristics of charcoal and incorporating diverse artistic techniques and forms of expression, he creates vivid scenes with a rugged yet refined artistic style. His works possess a powerful visual and emotional appeal, touching the viewers' hearts and provoking deep reflection.



Figure 7. Tragedy of the Siam-Burma Railroad, Liu Kang, 1946

5. Value and Significance of Liu Kang's Comic Art

As a member of the Chinese nation, Liu Kang consistently emphasized the importance of China in shaping his artistic vision. After the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, he returned to Muar to teach and engage in anti-Japanese activities. He supported patriotic fervor among overseas Chinese by helping art groups perform, creating propaganda posters, and raising funds through auctions, achieving significant results. During the Japanese occupation, Liu and his family were forced to seek refuge, even facing interrogation and pressure from the Kempeitai. These experiences heightened his awareness of the crucial role of art in uplifting national spirit. His comic collection demonstrates the artist's sense of responsibility and mission, serving as valuable visual documentation of Japanese atrocities. As the cover of *Chop Suey* states, it is a "snapshot of the Japanese occupation and a record of the suffering of the Malay residents." During Japan's occupation of Singapore, pro-Japanese propaganda spread, falsely portraying the brutal actions of the invaders as liberating the local people (Yao Mengtong, 2019). In the early post-war period, Liu Kang, as a cultural warrior, used his art to depict the painful and dark times, countering propaganda with truthful representations. His comic works stand out with their strong accusatory tone and realistic style, offering an immersive and shocking experience that deeply impacts viewers. These works are extensively referenced in related studies, helping to reconstruct the true face of that period. They have also been featured by institutions and media such as Singapore Television, libraries, and the Oral History Centre, bringing the works to a broader audience and ensuring the historical memory is preserved.

Liu Kang's comics are not only precious visual records but also convey historical lessons and reflections, thus holding significant educational value. The back cover of the first volume of the Chinese edition of *Chop Suey* (1946) suggests it can serve as both a war memorial and a school textbook. After its publication in Japan, students at Sophia University advocated using it as supplementary material. Professor Michiko Nakahara, explaining the translation, noted that post-war Japanese education deliberately ignored Japan's criminal modern history, leaving students with a void (Lu Peichun, 1991). As an educator, Nakahara hoped this series would help new generations understand Japanese military crimes. Japanese history textbooks often downplay guilt and distort history. For instance, the *Asahi Shimbun* reported in May 1983 that government-approved textbooks reduced the massacre in Singapore to "over 6,000 Chinese lives taken," downplaying the tens of thousands of victims and rebranding unarmed civilians as "resisters." This clearly constitutes historical distortion and whitewashing of atrocities. Amidst Japan's trend of denying wartime atrocities, the publication of this comic collection serves a profound contemporary mission. It not only provides materials for Japanese people to reflect on aggressive wars but also strongly counters those Japanese reactionary elements shamelessly denying war

responsibility. This contributes to urging Japan to educate the next generation with a correct historical perspective (Lu Peichun, 1991). In addition, these comics also play a part in Singapore's national education program, which aims to cultivate national identity by educating the younger generation about Singapore's history and nation-building (Lim Cheng Tju, 2004). The series has been used by government bodies such as the Ministry of Education and the National Heritage Board to meet political and educational needs. The subjects depicted in the comics are not unique to Malaya but reflect the broader suffering in many Asia-Pacific countries during the war. Similar images of brutalities can be found throughout the collection, serving as a mirror to remind us of the value of peace and the need to avoid repeating such tragedies.

Liu Kang's comic works bear witness to traumatic history and hold collective national memory. They serve not only as a warning but also as a means of healing. The initial print run of 2,000 copies of the first volume of *Chop Suey* quickly sold out, and it became a rare book, fetching up to \$1,000 in Dutch second-hand bookstores, showing the public's need and value for the collection. Survivor Roymon Huang, in an interview, mentioned how many scenes reflected his experiences, triggering deep emotions and painful memories. Even Liu Kang himself, recalling the Japanese atrocities in Muar, couldn't hold back his tears. His comics are a form of memory art, revealing the truth and connecting traumatic memories. Trauma memory is stored vividly in the subconscious and is hard to verbalize, often experienced through intense emotions and psychological images. However, memory can heal as well as hurt (Thomas Butler, 1989). Judith Herman, a renowned trauma therapist, suggests that re-experiencing trauma through mourning, recalling, and interpreting it can help in accepting and reconciling with the memory, thereby restoring dignity and confidence (Judith Herman, 1992). Liu Kang's dedication of the reprint "to the innocent victims and the spirits of the humiliated" signifies an intention to heal psychological wounds. The multiple reprints of the comic collection have helped survivors connect with others and the external world, with societal reactions and actions playing a crucial role in resolving trauma. For those who did not directly experience the trauma, appreciating the comics allows them to mourn the victims and condemn the atrocities, providing emotional support to survivors and helping rebuild their faith in truth, justice, and order. This process aids in shaping collective memory and constructing a future, as French thinker Ernest Renan suggested that disasters and suffering, more than enjoyment or glory, can unite people and foster a solid community (Zhang Yuteng, 2003).

6. Conclusion

Liu Kang's comics in *Chop Suey* blend historical foundations with bold and creative strokes, exuding a powerful and vigorous spirit while retaining warmth and fluidity, embodying the strength of righteousness. The comics vividly depict the Japanese massacres in Southeast Asia during World War II, exposing their savage nature and deceitful facades, offering powerful testimony for understanding historical truth. Beyond darkness, Liu's works also reveal unique humor and warmth, comforting those burdened by the heavy spiritual legacy of that era, and prompting reflections on peace, war, and trauma. Throughout Liu Kang's artistic journey, *Chop Suey* holds a unique place. Despite differing in content, medium, technique, and emotional expression from his signature Nanyang style works, it adheres to the same artistic principles, exploring themes of nationality, era, region, and individuality. This collection is an indispensable treasure for understanding Liu Kang's artistic evolution.

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