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Differences in Painting Styles of Malaysian Chinese Artists in Different Periods

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Abstract

Chuah Thean Teng, through continuous experimentation and improvement, has upgraded Batik from a traditional craft to an artwork with cultural significance and national characteristics. His son and grandson are also trying to develop batik painting. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the batik works of artists from different periods. The results show that from the first to the third generation of Chinese artists, their creations have gradually pursued stylistic diversity from their original focus on cultural significance. This study contributes to the dissemination of batik art.

Keywords: Batik Painting; Malaysian Chinese Artist; Chuah Thean Teng; Art Analysis.

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1.0 Introduction

The word batik originates from the Javanese word "tik", which can be translated as dot. As an ancient Malaysian craft, it usually involves designing a pattern on the fabric's surface and repeating waxing and dyeing to produce handmade batik printed fabrics. This method contributes a new decorative technique to fabric printing, while the batik process has attracted artists' interest due to its excellent resistance to etching.

Chuah Thean Teng is recognised as a pioneer of batik painting as a Malaysian Chinese painter who improved the traditional batik process into a work of art through continuous experimentation. His sons, Chuah Siew Teng, Chuah Seow Keng, Choy Siew Kek, and his grandson, Chuah Seong Leng, have all been nurtured to varying degrees. Due to the influence of life experience, educational background and social environment, the batik paintings of the three generations of the Chuah family show different ways of expression. In the process of inheriting, innovating and reinventing batik paintings, they have formed their painting language. This is one of the fewer family-based transmission relationships in early batik painting. Thus, the development of batik painting over time can be discussed through the differences in the styles of the Chuah family's paintings.

Currently, there are numerous studies on Chuah Thean Teng and batik painting. However, most focus on his painting style and creative experience or compare him with other batik artists of the same period. However, there are fewer references to the paintings of his children and grandchildren. This paper hopes to enrich the study of Chuah Thean Teng's art through a visual study of the works of three generations of artists, to learn about the batik legacy in Chuah's family, and to understand the styles used by artists of different periods.

Therefore, this paper chooses to use the catalogue of "THE PIONEER AND HIS LEGACY: Three Generations" exhibition held in ILHAM Gallery in 2016 as a data reference and conducts qualitative research on 13 works by three generations of painters of the Chuah family, using Feldman's art criticism theory as a guide. It also discusses the continuation and development of batik art in the context of their existing backgrounds. The results of this study are limited due to the small sample size, and the analysis of the batik style is only specific to the Chuah family. However, the findings of this study are understood to provide a valid perspective for research in the field, enabling the enrichment of the study of batik painting and Malaysian Chinese art styles.

2.0 Literature Review

The Indonesian word batik is related to the Javanese word "amba", meaning "painting". In Malay, it is related to "dot" or "titik". In its simplest definition, batik is a decorative product of artwork inspired by batik artists. When batik artisans design preferred patterns, the term is based on the action of the wax dripping or dripping onto the fabric (Wahed et al., 2022). Thus, by the simplest definition, batik is a decorative product of artwork inspired by batik artists.

There are two types of batik crafts in Malaysia, hand-drawn batik and block-printed batik, which mainly differ in production techniques and tools, while the third type is batik paintings created by artists with artistic value. Chuah Thean Teng, an artist who immigrated from China, has continuously dyed to experiment with new techniques and dyes, turning traditional batik patterns into figurative designs.

Shazani & Wan Samiati Andriana (2021) have suggested that traditional Malay arts, such as batik, have received significant attention from artists, especially since the National Cultural Congress 1971. The objective of the National Cultural Congress was to encourage artists to reflect national pride and identity in their works. During this period, most of the art world was centred on Western art as the centre of visual expression, and the artists' reliance on Western modes of art and aesthetic consciousness made the development of local art less than optimistic. Therefore, the emergence of batik painting is significant in the rise of national artistic consciousness among local Malaysian artists.

Chuah Thean Teng has moulded the Malaysian spirit and self through his batik paintings. Thus, in 1955, Chuah Thean Teng held his first solo exhibition of batik paintings at the Penang Library, and the following year, with the help of Frank Sullivan, he held his second solo exhibition in Singapore, which represented the formal presentation of batik painting as an artistic method to the public. In February 1965, as the first Malaysian Chinese artist to hold a solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery, he exhibited 125 batik works. As an artistic method derived from a heritage craft, Batik has served well in developing the country's culture.

His three children, Chuah Siew Teng, Chuah Seow Keng and Choy Siew Kek, were also influenced by his great interest in batik painting. The eldest son of Chuah Thean Teng, Chuah Siew Teng studied painting systematically at the British School of Art. His batik works, which focus on depicting Malaysian human landscapes, create a multi-layered spatial effect through intricate lines and layouts. Chuah Seow Keng is an accomplished sculptor and works as a batik painter. He was awarded a scholarship to study fibreglass sculpture in Germany, and his work focuses on capturing culturally significant moments, cultural narratives and personal experiences. Choy Siew Kek, who, like his brother, studied in Germany, specialises in the depiction of tropical plants, especially orchids, and his batik works emphasise changes in light and colour.

Even as the status of batik as an artistic medium with cultural influence and significance waned in the art world in the 1980s, Chuah Thean Teng's grandson, Chuah Seong Leng, persisted in his batik creations, and batik paintings in the Chuah family during this period have lasted for three generations. Moreover, Chinese descendants or native-born Chinese in Malaysia shape and reshape their identity by creating a Malaysian cultural identity (Matondang, 2016). The three generations of artists in the Chuah family coincidentally correspond to the first, second and third generations of the Chinese community in Malaysia, who have experienced a new socio-culture in Malaysia, which has influenced their cultural awareness and identity, as seen in their artworks.

There are many studies on Malaysian batik painting, and most scholars will focus on the painting elements such as pattern and form. According to Supana & Sudardi (2018), each batik motif reflects the natural and socio-cultural conditions of the community and is a complex expression of its society; therefore, batik is closely related to the natural environmental and social-social conditions. Shamsuddeen & Wan Samiati Andriana (2021) have analysed the form and content of Chuah Thean Teng's works based on the framework of Malay aesthetic values and differentiated between 'Batik Painting' and 'Painting Batik'. Wahed et al. (2022) argued that Malaysian batik is rich in design and colour but lacks a distinctive character and therefore needs more innovation, especially in the choice of design themes.

Some scholars will concentrate on the cultural attributes of the artist. For example, Salehuddin et al. (2022) argue that artefacts are an example of how artists use and display elements of national identity. Artists have been displaying an art style that defines the art of Malay culture, which is considered a cultural style based on cultural heritage imagery that binds the community and the artist together. Ramlan (2019) also suggests that batik is one of the proud heritage and national cultural symbols of Malaysians and that the overarching theme of batik as a national concept representing an aspect of Malaysian national and cultural identity is constructed as a cultural common ground for multicultural citizens.

As learned from previous information, Malaysian batik art symbolises national culture and shows the artist's sense of regional art and national identity. However, as mentioned by scholars, the current batik art is not well-publicised and documented and lacks innovation. Therefore, studying batik painting should keep abreast of the times and enrich the research perspectives by applying different theoretical frameworks and disciplinary knowledge so that more people can understand and pass on the art medium.

The Chuah Thean Teng family has inherited the technique of batik painting for three generations, forming a relatively complete creative system, which provides sufficient conditions for studying the development and change of batik painting and helps to compare








the styles and expressions of batik works by artists of different periods. Therefore, through analysing 13 artworks, this paper will explore the expressive styles and cultural attributes of Chinese artists in different periods and understand the influence of context on art.

3.0 Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach to visually analyse the works of Chuah Thean Teng and his children and grandchildren, a total of five artists. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample range directly. The data is derived from the catalogue of the exhibition "THE PIONEER AND HIS LEGACY: Three Generations" held at ILHAM Gallery in 2016, which included 13 batik works. The analysis process will be guided by Feldman's art criticism theory, which provides a brief description of the artworks and, through analysing elements such as artistic form, composition, and theme, explains the artist's intrinsic cultural attributes and ideological conveyance and ultimately evaluates the artworks. The study focuses on how three generations of Chinese artists have inherited and shaped the language of painting in the creation of batik paintings and explores the influence of the cultural environment on them.

The study focuses on how three generations of Chinese artists have inherited and shaped the language of painting in creating batik paintings. Specifically, the method includes four stages: description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Firstly, the visual information of each artist's batik work is depicted, including the content and theme of the work; secondly, the techniques and formal elements used in the work are analysed, concentrating on the principles of the design, the choice of colours, and the use of styles; in the third step, the ideas and meanings that the work may convey are explained about the context in which it was created, as well as the cultural attributes of the artist; and lastly, in the light of the previous results, the discuss the overall strengths of the work.

Table 1: 13 research samples

Chuah Thean Teng	Chuah Siew Teng, Chuah Seow Keng, Choy Siew Kek	Chuah Seong Leng
 <p data-bbox="300 1099 469 1122">By the river, pre-1950</p>	 <p data-bbox="699 1099 831 1122">Untitled, undated</p>	 <p data-bbox="1098 1133 1219 1155">Kampung, 2010</p>
 <p data-bbox="300 1379 459 1402">To market, pre-1950</p>	 <p data-bbox="699 1379 815 1402">Untitled, 1960s</p>	 <p data-bbox="1098 1402 1241 1424">Kampung life 2011</p>
 <p data-bbox="300 1574 480 1597">Construction, pre-1950</p>	 <p data-bbox="699 1657 794 1680">Orchid, 2015</p>	
 <p data-bbox="300 1715 517 1738">Perairan pulau pinang, 1952</p>		
 <p data-bbox="300 1888 488 1910">Kampung nelayan, 1959</p>		



Welcome, C, 1967



Festival Day, 1968



Satay Seller, 1970

(Source:) Images from ILHAM Gallery

4.0 Findings

As seen from the table, the sample size of this study totalled 13 paintings from five artists. Firstly, they will be categorised into first-generation (Chuah Thean Teng), second-generation (Chuah Siew Teng, Chuah Seow Keng, Choy Siew Kek) and third-generation Chinese (Chuah Seong Leng) based on their family relationship.

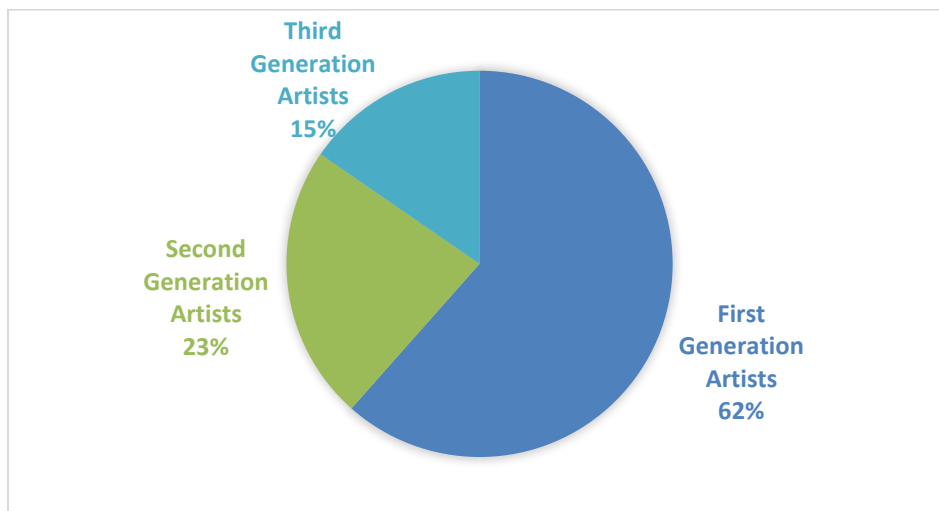


Fig. 1: Number of samples of artists' works from different periods

Eight paintings by Chuah Thean Teng, created by the first generation of Malaysian Chinese, are mainly based on people and rural landscapes. They depict the daily life of ordinary Malaysians, including washing, cooking, labouring and working. The colours are mostly warm, with red, light yellow and orange being his favourite colours. The whole image is warm and bright. In the treatment of figures, he specialised in exaggerated expression, simplifying and elongating the physical structure of the human body or directly replacing it with geometric shapes. For example, in Market, the women in this painting are all summarised as "portraits" of geometric shapes, with triangles and trapezoids at different angles.

In addition, his characters are Malay-based. For example, in the painting Festival Day, a Malay mother wrapped in a headscarf is holding a small boy in her arms on one side and a basket of fruits on the other side of her head, reflecting the mother's busy working schedule while juggling the responsibility of taking care of her family. The background also includes a scene of women in sarongs labouring. On the other hand, Satay Seller shows an image of a Malay man selling satay by the roadside with a bushel fan, which his dress can recognise.

The second generation of Malaysian Chinese artists, the three sons of Chuah Thean Teng, Chuah Siew Teng, Chuah Seow Keng and Choy Siew Kek, have three different painting styles, including figures, landscapes, plants and other subjects. Most of their works

are about things that can be seen everywhere, but you can still see the ethnic and regional characteristics through the details, such as the sarong dresses worn by the figures and the orchids seen everywhere in the tropics.

The colours of the artworks of this period tend to be diverse and different from the warm tones in which his father excelled. Chuah Seong Teng's *Untitled* is a neutral work with light tones, Chuah Seow Keng's *Untitled* is a fantastic coloured work with blue and white, and Choy Siew Kek's *Orchid* is a warm coloured work with yellow and green.

Moreover, the artists of this period improved the technique of Batik, an important decorative technique of batik painting, by placing the wax sheets of fabrics with drawn designs into the dyeing tank and artificially folding them to produce naturally cracked lines, generally known as ice cracks. For example, in Chuah Seow Teng's *Untitled*, the whole painting is covered with naturally formed cracks, dividing the picture into countless blocks and showing the artist's in-depth control of space and composition. To reflect the decorative nature of the cracks, the lines of the leading figures are weakened, while Chuah Seow Teng's treatment of the costumes is more detailed and is the only painting to use purple colour to depict them.

Choy Siew Kek's *Orchid* is also partially decorated with ice patterns. From this work, the significance of light can also be felt intuitively, as the artist carefully captures the changes in light, staining the background with various similar colours, such as gold, orange, pink, and light yellow. The white petals of the main body are also covered with a layer of warm light, making the picture harmonious and agreeable, and the picture is also more colourful.

For the third generation, two works by Chuah Seong Leng depict Malaysian village life with different painting styles. *2010's Kampung* uses realistic techniques to accurately and meticulously recreate the structure and perspective of the stilt house, with clean, straight lines, and the palm trees in the near distance are also very detailed. *Kampung Life 2011*, on the other hand, is a combination of abstract forms and expressionism, condensing many elements into a single geometric form and cutting the house into various parts. To satisfy the harmony of the layout, the subject matter has also been subjectively compressed, distorted, enlarged, etc.

In terms of colours, it is more inclined to lighter, brighter tones and transparent colours, similar to the sense of flow of watercolour painting. Moreover, the technique of the previous ice crack pattern has been improved. Besides better coordinating the layout and colour distribution of the picture, the pattern forms different colours due to the artist's drawing.

As Malaysian Chinese artists, the three generations of the Chuah family have persisted in passing down and shaping batik art at different times. Due to the influence of cultural environment, life experience and national identity, they have various understandings and expressions of the paintings. From the initial emphasis on highlighting cultural significance to the exploration of techniques and the diversification of styles, batik painting as an art medium has been continuously enriched and improved.

5.0 Discussion

The study results show that the three generations of batik artists of the Chuah family have different ways of expression and painting styles at other times. The first generation is represented by Chuah Thean Teng, whose works intuitively reflect the local figures and the lives of the masses in Malaysia, combining Chinese and Western painting techniques in using colours and shapes.

The second generation is based on the paintings of his three sons. Compared to the first generation, their subjects are more spontaneous and unrestrained, mostly everyday things in daily life. They all followed the study abroad craze in Malaysia at that time, so they had the opportunity to come into contact with the artistic concepts and methods of different countries, and they systematically learnt other artistic mediums apart from batik paintings, so their works are not only limited to traditional paintings but also added a lot of new elements and ideas. Therefore, their works are not only limited to traditional painting but also add many new elements and ideas.

In the third generation, the artist's works concentrate on the local scenery of Malaysia, but the difference is that there is an apparent change in the style of expression. During this period, the batik painting technique was perfected, and the artist could control the ice cracks' distribution, shape and colours, greatly enhancing the images' decorative aesthetics. Moreover, Chuah Seong Leng was skilled at combining various painting styles in his batik works. It can be said that the artists of this period returned to realistic themes, and the use of colours was more subjective, not deliberately restoring the original colours of the objects.

The reasons for these variations in style from period to period may be related to the artist's personal experience. For example, Chuah Thean Teng was a first-generation Chinese immigrant who learnt about Chinese painting in Guangdong in his early years and later moved to Malaysia to start batik painting. Therefore, although he is dedicated to depicting local people and landscapes, he is still influenced by traditional Chinese philosophical thinking, and most of his paintings show the theme of family and affection, which is very Chinese.

In addition, Chuah Thean Teng, the founder of batik painting, introduced batik during this period and widely recognised it as an independent art medium. Therefore, the techniques and materials used were inclined to be single, and there was not much difference between batik paintings and other paintings during this period. Moreover, compared with the artistic value of the works, artists of this period paid more attention to their cultural value. In the 1970s, due to the National Cultural Congress, artists of all races were working to mould the image of Malaysia. As a result, his works have prominent local elements and themes and have been spread internationally as Malaysian cultural icons.

In the second generation, the cultural significance of the works of this period was weakened. However, on the contrary, the techniques were improved and experimented with, and the painting style favoured the West. As a result, the works of the Chuah Seong Teng brothers varied in style, and they continued to experiment with new techniques in batik painting, not being satisfied with the traditional patterns and expressions. Ice cracks began to appear in batik paintings during this period, and by the third generation, the Malaysian art scene had diversified. Hence, the artists' works also had a variety of styles and expressions.

This vision change is closely related to the development of the era and the social environment. As a cultural symbol, Batik's works illustrate the themes envisioned by the artists at different times, and the choice of artistic elements and forms is highly dependent on the artists themselves. As a traditional Malay craft, Malaysian batik has been modified by the Chinese as an art medium. It represents the diversity of society and the cultural identities of the artists as a cultural artefact.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Since the beginning of Malaysia's independence, artists from various ethnic groups have been striving for Malaysian cultural identification, and the emergence of batik painting as a form of Malay cultural heritage has given the artists a unique cultural identity. The motifs and designs closely relate to Malaysia's traditional aesthetics and cultural beliefs. Therefore, the inheritance of batik painting has the significance of expression and communication with future generations.

The Chuah family, as Malaysian Chinese, was influenced by the local environment, and the national artistic consciousness that arose led them to persist in the creation and practice of batik painting and continuously refine and improve the painting method. This study analyses the images to understand the creative preferences of the Chuah family artists in various periods. It explores the phenomenon in the context of the time's historical and personal cultural environment. At present, we should not only study and discuss the batik paintings of the past but also pay attention to the current trend of batik paintings and create innovative works like the artists of the Chuah family.

The significance of this study is that it promotes batik painting art and makes more people aware of this cultural heritage. Moreover, Batik, as a product of multiculturalism and ethnic harmony, helps to confirm the sense of belonging and cultural identity of Chinese artists. Although the sample size of this study is relatively small and narrow, the survey results cannot summarise the discovery trend of batik painting throughout the whole period, which is a specific limitation. However, future research can expand the sample selection to analyse and appreciate the works of other artists.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper promotes batik art and expands its reach by making people aware of this artistic medium with Malay characteristics.

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