

Artistic Hybridity and Local Environmental Awareness: Modern ink painting by Nanyang pioneer artists

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Abstract

This paper examines the modern ink painting of the Nanyang pioneer artists, focusing on artistic hybridity and local environmental awareness, which blends traditional Chinese ink art with Western modern art in a Southeast Asian context. Using Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the Third Space, the study applies visual and contextual analysis within the New Art History and Cultural Studies framework, critically exploring artistic innovation through cultural integration. The findings highlight Nanyang pioneer artists' contributions to modern ink painting, emphasizing cultural exchange, localization, and their significant global impact on Southeast Asian art.

Keywords: modern ink painting; Nanyang pioneer artists; hybridity; localization

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1.0 Introduction

The Nanyang Pioneer Artists were Chinese émigré artists who settled in Malaya (modern-day Malaysia) and Singapore during the early to mid-20th century (Low, 2015). They were well-versed in both Western and Chinese artistic styles, techniques, and approaches, and created a distinct artistic movement that reflected their multicultural experiences (Sabapathy, 1979). This paper highlights the modern ink artworks and contributions of key Nanyang artists, including Chen Chong Swee (1910-1985), Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991), and Cheong Soo Pieng (1917-1983). They saw no strong contradiction between Western and Chinese art, preferring to integrate both, demonstrating their hallmark openness to new expressions and diverse art traditions (Piyadasa, 1979). For instance, artists like Chen Chong Swee incorporated Western fixed-point perspective and the use of shadows in ink artworks, which are traits not usually found in traditional Chinese ink paintings. Others like Chen Wen Hsi used their understanding of Western modern styles like Cubism and Abstraction to create unconventional compositions for their ink paintings (Low, 2020). Cheong Soo Pieng's career was marked by a harmonious blend of abstract and realistic elements, evolving into ink sketches with agile, spontaneous brushwork that paid tribute to modern ink art.

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This paper critically examines their adaptation of traditional Chinese aesthetic principles while integrating elements of modern Western art. Applying Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space to analyze how these artists created new forms and meanings through cultural integration, this study explores the hybrid nature of their modern ink art and their engagement with local themes. This study will highlight the Nanyang Pioneer Artists' unique blend of cultural influences, innovative techniques, and engagement with their environment. The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the unique contributions of Nanyang Pioneer Artists, which went beyond the Nanyang style and contributed to the global evolution of ink medium art.

2.0 Literature Review

In Singapore's art historical discourse, "Nanyang style" and "Nanyang art" are frequently mentioned. Art historians Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy first attempted to define these terms during a seminal exhibition of Nanyang artists' works. Piyadasa (1979) described Nanyang art as an extension of developments in China, highlighting a shift towards Western-style art and aesthetics. He noted that the first-generation Nanyang artists (the Nanyang pioneer artists) introduced sophistication and cosmopolitanism to British Malaya's local art scene, which had previously lacked these qualities. Although Sabapathy notes that the Nanyang pioneer artists training in both Western and Chinese art led them to adopt an experimental approach, blending "styles and techniques derived from two sources: Chinese pictorial traditions and the School of Paris," (Sabapathy, 1979). This synthesis of artistic techniques was not confined to a single medium. Nanyang artists produced works in both ink and oil. Notably, the use of the ink medium carried a strong cultural identity as Chinese.

Chinese ink painting, or "guohua" (国画), is deeply rooted in cultural symbolism and integrates poetry and calligraphy (Long, 1984). One of the most expressive ink paintings, known as "xieyi" (写意), emphasizes the expressive qualities of ink and the artist's mastery of minimalist ink and fluid brushwork, it conveys personal interpretation and emotional response. According to Aida Yuen Wong, the brush-and-ink technique (bimo, 笔墨) is paramount, reflecting the cultural and philosophical values of Chinese society (Wong, 2000). In the early 20th century, Chinese ink painting underwent significant transformations, driven by a confluence of cultural, political, and artistic changes with modernization and openness to Western influences (Du, 2014). Western modern art movements such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism were gaining global traction during this period. These movements emphasized abstract forms, bold compositions, and innovative uses of color and perspective, which contrasted with the traditional Chinese aesthetic (Vigneron, 2017). The changes in studying modern art movements and incorporating new techniques into their work were not limited to mainland China but also extended to Chinese communities overseas, notably Chinese immigrant artists in Southeast Asia. This region, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, became a melting pot of cultural exchanges due to its strategic location and colonial history.

Current research on the Nanyang Pioneer Artists has provided valuable insights of their modern art. For example, Ong Zhen Min emphasized their dual cultural identity, reflecting their Chinese heritage and modern sensibilities (Ong, 2015). Emilia Ong Ian Li and Izmer Ahmad examined the paintings of Nanyang artists from the 1950s and 1960s in Malaya/Malaysia, highlighting how their hybridity merged Chinese and Western traditions and addressed cultural identity and belonging (Li & Ahmad, 2015). Another study by Ong emphasized the deep roots of hybridity and diaspora in post-war Nanyang art, reflecting cultural identities and social realities (Li, 2015). Yvonne Low (2012) noted émigré artists' innovation of Western modernism with local themes in Singapore, while Low Sze Wee (2020) observed the incorporation of Cubism and Abstract Expressionism into Nanyang ink practices. Piyadasa identifies 1938 to 1965 as the golden period of the Nanyang art movement, while Ong points out that Nanyang art reached its maturity in the 1950s to 1960s (Low, 2022).

However, there are gaps in understanding their modern ink paintings, specifically after the golden period of the Nanyang style in the 1970s-1990s. The golden period was identified by Piyadasa from 1938 to 1965 of the Nanyang art movement, while Ong points out that Nanyang art reached its maturity in the 1950s to 1960s (Low, 2022). This persistence demonstrates that the modern ink artworks of the Nanyang pioneer artists went beyond the temporal confines of the Nanyang style, highlighting a research gap in understanding their continued influence and innovation in the ink medium beyond this period. However, as part of the globalized art scene, the ink medium remains the most authentic and original form for these artists. Therefore, an in-depth analysis is needed to explore these aspects and understand their significance in the broader context of modern ink painting. By addressing these gaps in current research, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the unique contributions of Nanyang artists to modern ink painting. It emphasizes the importance of cultural hybridity and environmental awareness in their works, this focus will shed light on how these artists transcended the traditional boundaries of the Nanyang style and continued to innovate within the ink medium.

3.0 Methodology

This study investigates Nanyang pioneer artists' innovative techniques in modern ink painting, their depiction of Southeast Asian environments and social contexts, and their contributions to the global art movement. It also seeks to examine the Nanyang Pioneer Artists' blend of traditional Chinese ink techniques with modern Western art, exploring their underlying motivations and processes of cultural integration through Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space. By addressing these aspects, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Nanyang pioneer artists' impact on modern ink painting, which went beyond the Nanyang style and contributed to the global evolution of ink medium art.

To achieve these objectives, the qualitative research design is employed, combining visual and contextual analysis within New Art History and Cultural Studies frameworks. By examining the composition, brushwork, color use, and subject matter in representative works by Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng, the study reveals the hybridity of artistic approaches and local awareness. Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity theory offers insights into cultural integration in Southeast Asia, highlighting the diversity in their techniques, themes, and materials. Academic sources and archival collections from institutions like the Singapore National Art Gallery support the research. While this study relies on qualitative visual and contextual analysis, future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys or interviews with contemporary artists and art historians, to gather diverse perspectives on the lasting impact of Nanyang pioneer artists.

Despite the comprehensive approach, the study faces certain limitations. First, its focus on specific Nanyang pioneer artists may limit broader generalizations about the wider Southeast Asian art movement. Second, the qualitative nature of the research, reliant on visual and contextual analysis, introduces an element of subjectivity, which may affect the reproducibility of findings. To deepen the theoretical foundation, future research could incorporate additional frameworks, such as postcolonial theory or global art history perspectives, to further examine the cross-cultural dynamics and global influence of the Nanyang pioneer artists. Additionally, the availability of archival materials and artwork collections may pose limitations, as access to certain works and historical records may be restricted or incomplete, potentially impacting the depth of analysis.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Artistic Hybridity in the Ink Art Works of Nanyang Pioneer Artists

Based on the shared educational background in China, Nanyang pioneer artists saw no contradiction between Western and Chinese art, preferring to integrate both. Each artist found ways to achieve this synthesis, as there were no prescribed methods. The distinctive artistic hybridity approach highlights the adaptation of ink painting as the pictorial language with traditional Chinese aesthetics but also represents a fusion of Western art with local awareness of Southeast Asia. It is marking a significant departure from traditional Chinese ink art styles, serving as a testament to the pioneering spirit of the Nanyang pioneer artists.

Chen Chong Swee's "Kampong Scene" (1937), was an early example of this hybrid approach, where detailed brush techniques and realistic depiction of Malay village life are combined. A common scene, coconut trees in Singapore are not found in abundance anymore. Despite their prevalence in the past — dotting the coastline and a regular sight in the kampongs (villages) — they were seldom included in local Chinese ink art. Similarly, traditional Chinese landscape paintings typically employ a moving multiple-point perspective (Low, 2020). Nanyang artists like Chen Chong Swee occasionally used a single fixed-point perspective, more common in Western art. The late artist's work is on display at the National Gallery Singapore as part of a collection of 200 works by prominent 20th-century artists who used Chinese ink as their medium of expression, alongside "Strokes of Life: The Art of Chen Chong Swee" (Singapore National Art Gallery, n.d.). For instance, Chen Chong Swee, in his essay "Zhongxihua zatan" (《中西画杂谈》1948, A Discussion of Chinese and Western Paintings), argued that Western art, before the rise of Impressionism, was not concerned with lines. He noted that artists like Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, and Gauguin began using linework in their paintings to convey emotional power and energetic rhythm, a practice influenced by Chinese art (Low, 2020).

Similarly, Chen Wen Hsi's "Herons" (1991) incorporates Cubist elements, showcasing his self-taught methods of integrating Western modern art movements such as Cubism and Abstract Expressionism into his ink practice. For instance, Chen Wen Hsi drew inspiration from the fragmented forms of Cubism to create interlocking mosaics of colored planes for his semi-abstract painting of herons. Likewise, these modernist influences allowed the artists to explore new dimensions of expression and abstraction, blending traditional techniques with contemporary art forms. By employing innovative techniques like interlocking mosaics of colored planes and grid-like patterns, he created a harmonious fusion approach that exemplifies the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary expression, demonstrating the potential for artists to innovate within a globalized art world.

In some of his early semi-abstract landscape paintings during the 1950s, Cheong Soo Pieng used overlapping color facets, grid-like patterns, and amorphous shapes to suggest kelongs—traditional wooden houses built on stilts over the sea—casting reflections on the watery surface. Cheong Soo Pieng's artistic vision was profoundly influenced by his travels to Europe in 1965-1967, where he encountered the abstract movement, a transformative journey to Europe catalyzed Cheong's artistic evolution, steering him towards an abstract and lyrical series deeply inspired by the natural world. Though not a conventional ink painter, Cheong's "ink-based" works are integral to regional modernism and Nanyang art. His career was marked by a harmonious blend of abstract and realistic elements, evolving into ink sketches with agile, spontaneous brushwork that paid tribute to traditional Chinese ink art. In his later years, Cheong's eclectic approach to modernity transcended traditional doctrines and the East-West dichotomy, redefining the boundaries of "Chinese painting" with his contemporary interpretations of the "ink aesthetic," demonstrating a unique form of artistic hybridity shaped by his innovative vision. This unique synthesis, initially identified as the Nanyang style during a certain period, has beyond the Nanyang style under the influence of globalization. The pioneer artists' innovation is not only evident in their ink-medium artworks but has also become a part of the worldwide art trends.

This paper argues that the hybridity art approach is evident in their adoption and adaptation of elements from both cultures, embodies a distinct artistic identity that transcends traditional boundaries, a negotiation between Chinese heritage and Western modernism. Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization is relevant in conceptualizing immigrants' cultural identities in the diaspora, including the immigrant artists as the diaspora as well. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space can be seen in the modern ink artworks of the Nanyang

pioneer artists, as they navigate and integrate multiple cultural identities to create a new artistic language. Hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural forms and identities arising from the interaction of different cultural influences. Bhabha acknowledges the plurality of voices and subjectivities in hybrid space. "In fact, he asserts that culture does not exist in isolation, but rather interact and overlap within a hybrid space. (Bhabha, 1994) ", it describes the interaction and blending of multiple cultures, generating new meanings and identities and moving beyond simple dichotomies like self/other or East/West.

The third space is an in-between space where these cultural identities and meanings are negotiated and transformed (Bhandari, 2020) It reflects Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and the Third Space, "It creates a sense of the new as a revolutionary act of cultural translation." (Bhabha, 1994) The Nanyang Pioneer Artists operated within the multicultural and dynamic environment of Southeast Asia, a region shaped by historical migration, colonialism, and cultural exchanges. Their modern ink paintings, with their cross-regional appeal, serve as a visual testament to this historical transformation. This hybridity approach is evident in the "Third Space", the artists adopted and adapted elements from both China and Southeast Asia, creating works that are neither purely Chinese nor entirely Western but a harmonious blend of Southeast Asia. It can also supported by Emilia Ong Ian Li: "The notion of hybridity is employed here to examine their formalistic explorations, which may be viewed as expressions of a diasporic community." (Li, 2015)

4.2 Local Awareness in the Artworks of Nanyang Pioneer Artists

Sabapathy (1979) also observed that Nanyang artists aimed to depict the local environment and people, approaching the concept of "local" fluidly and incorporating motifs from their surroundings to meet pictorial needs. Nanyang Pioneer Artists departed from these traditional themes to depict local Southeast Asian environments and experiences. They incorporated elements unique to their new surroundings, such as tropical landscapes, local flora and fauna, and scenes of local village life. This shift reflected a broader cultural exchange and adaptation, blending traditional Chinese techniques with local subjects to create a new, innovative visual language (Abdullah, 2010).

Traditional Chinese landscape painting is characterized by a multiple-point perspective that captures expansive scenes, adhering to principles of balance and harmony. Artists employ techniques of texture strokes to create the texture of rocks and mountains and leave white space to suggest mist or water, enhancing the ethereal quality of the landscape. However, Nanyang Pioneer Artists diverged from these conventions, opting to depict the local Southeast Asian environments and experiences. They infused their works with tropical landscapes, local flora and fauna, and village life scenes, reflecting a cultural exchange and adaptation. By blending traditional Chinese techniques with these local subjects, they crafted a new, innovative visual language that captured the essence of their tropical environment and local life, showcasing their adeptness at merging cultural heritage with contemporary art influences.

Similarly, Chen Wen Hsi incorporated local fauna into his works, as seen in "Herons," where he abstractly portrays herons, reflecting his engagement with local wildlife and the influence of Cubism. His use of fragmented forms and interlocking mosaics of colored planes demonstrates his innovative approach to integrating local subjects. Cheong Soo Pieng also focused on local life, depicting everyday scenes and local figures with a semi-abstract style. His semi-abstract landscapes skillfully merge local scenery with abstract techniques, showcasing traditional wooden houses on stilts through overlapping color facets and grid-like patterns. This innovative portrayal of Southeast Asian settings highlights the artists' ability to harmoniously blend their cultural heritage with contemporary art influences, creating a distinctive visual language that resonates with their multicultural environment.

The environmental themes in the Nanyang artists' works reflect their adaptation to and appreciation of their new surroundings. By incorporating local elements into their paintings, they not only document environmental consciousness but to underscore their ability to merge cultural traditions with contemporary experiences. This approach aligns with Bhabha's idea of the third space, where new cultural meanings and identities are created through the intersection of different influences. Bhabha's view on the creation of new cultural meanings in the Third Space: "It creates a sense of the new as a revolutionary act of cultural translation." (Bhabha, 1994)

Despite their innovative contributions, the Nanyang Pioneer Artists faced criticisms for their hybrid style. Some critics argued that their work diluted traditional Chinese art, while others felt it was overly influenced by Western modernism (Kee, 2011). The challenges faced by the Nanyang Pioneer Artists highlight the complexities of cultural hybridity and the difficulties of navigating multiple cultural identities. Additionally, the political climate of Southeast Asia during their time posed challenges to their artistic expression. The skepticism towards their hybrid style reflects broader tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the challenges of cultural integration in a rapidly changing socio-political context. It can be explained by the discussion of the fluidity of cultural identities in the Third Space "The third space is something like the idea of deferral in Post-structuralism... Thus, a culture's difference is never simple and static but ambivalent, changing, and always open to further possible interpretation." (Bhabha, 1994) These difficulties, however, also underscore the resilience and adaptability of the Nanyang artists, who continued to innovate and push the boundaries of artistic expression despite these obstacles.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study of the Nanyang Pioneer Artists' innovative use of artistic hybridity in modern ink painting illustrates how they went beyond the Nanyang style. Artists like Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng synthesized traditional Chinese techniques with Western modernist elements and Southeast Asian themes. By incorporating Western techniques and perspectives, and embracing abstract elements influenced by New York Abstract Expressionism, they created a new visual language. By incorporating local subjects such as tropical landscapes, indigenous flora and fauna, and everyday village scenes, they further enriched their art. This made their work resonate deeply with their Southeast Asian context, reflecting the unique cultural and environmental characteristics of the region. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space help to contextualize their works within the broader framework of cultural negotiation

and transformation, highlighting their contribution to the evolution of modern ink painting. Moreover, their work was not only influenced by global art trends but also became part of those trends, contributing significantly to the global art world. Their influence extended to the next generation of ink artists, encouraging ongoing exploration of modern ink art in Singapore and Malaysia, pushing the art form into new phases of development.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study makes significant contributions to modern ink painting by highlighting the artistic hybridity and environmental awareness of the Nanyang Pioneer Artists. By examining how these artists blended traditional Chinese ink techniques with Western art and Southeast Asian themes, the research provides a deeper understanding of their innovative practices. It also extends the discourse on cultural hybridity and the Third Space, as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, showcasing how these artists transcended traditional boundaries and influenced the global art movement. This study underscores the Nanyang Pioneer Artists' role in evolving modern ink painting and their impact on subsequent generations, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia.

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