

Malaysian Chinese's Mixed Cultural Identity in Painting Works

Wenyan Geng¹, Wan Samiati Andriana W Mohamad Daud², Azian Tahir³
{2021667748@student.uitm.edu.my¹, samiati@uitm.edu.my², azian572@uitm.edu.my³}

^{1,2}College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
³College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, Malaysia

Abstract. Malaysia's multi-ethnic social structure has led Malaysian Chinese artists to come into contact with and adapt to the cultures of different ethnic groups while maintaining their Chinese culture, resulting in a new mixed cultural identity. This study aims to analyse the visual changes and artistic language of the artists in their paintings and to understand the impact of cultural awareness on the style of expression through a qualitative study of seven works from the 1990s. The results show that Malaysian Chinese artists favoured Western artistic mediums and incorporated Chinese ink and wash elements in their works, using Chinese images and customs to reflect the local human life in Malaysia. Currently, the field is not widely researched, and the significance of this study is to provide perspectives on interpreting Chinese paintings and to enrich the research.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese; Mixed culture; Painting

1 Introduction

In a diverse social and cultural environment, Malaysian Chinese artists, on the one hand, maintain their own Chinese culture, developing and passing on traditional cultural practices and aesthetic styles through Chinese language education, and on the other hand, under the influence of local as well as Western cultures, have learnt and fused new artistic languages and styles of expression, gradually shaping a hybrid cultural identity.

Cultural identity is the sense of identification with and belonging to a group and the culture to which an individual is influenced by the group to which they belong. Thus, individual identity is often intertwined with collective identity. However, from the perspective of cultural studies, this identification is not fixed, and cultural identities react to environmental changes. As an immigrant group, Malaysian Chinese need to begin the process of cultural adaptation, which is different from assimilation in that they accept and identify with the culture of other ethnic groups. Still, it does not mean that they belong to that ethnic group.

Art and culture are at the core of the community; they are the identity, signs and symbols of the community and are essential aspects of the cultural shaping of each society [1]. They are two interdependent and inseparable entities. Art is a form of cultural practice; it reflects a group or community's lifestyle and thought patterns and is a visual material to record social change. A particular culture can be understood through works of art.

However, as [2] puts it, culture is rich and diverse, but the artist is anomalous. Artists are unsure of their materials - what they are depicting - or their purpose. Painting is an artistic activity encompassing a wide range of artistic elements and principles, and the artist's primary

task is to draw helpful inspiration from culture and realise the value of his creativity. Although each culture has retained its religion, customs and way of life in Malaysia, they have also merged to create Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage [3]. Therefore, the artist combines a variety of cultural perspectives to enrich the creative work, which makes Malaysian artists unique.

The main objective of this paper is to review the formation of cultural identities of Malaysian Chinese artists and to determine the impact of mixed culture on artistic practices through visual changes in the paintings of Malaysian Chinese artists in the 1990s. Seven paintings from the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery will be collected and analysed to define the expressive styles of Chinese artists. This paper will make a minor contribution to the study of contemporary Malaysian Chinese art, enriching the history of Malaysian Chinese art by stimulating scholars' interest in the field while providing perspectives for understanding and interpreting Chinese paintings.

2 Literature Review

In general, culture refers to the way of life of a nation or society, including specific beliefs, habits and practices. "multiculturalism" refers to the political, legal and philosophical strategies that emerged after the Second World War to accommodate this newfound social diversity [4]. The concept of "multiculturalism" has been used in many different ways to refer to a demographic description of a society. This ideology accepts and recognises diversity (racial, cultural or religious) and programmes or policies implemented by the state [5].

Conversely, mixed culture refers to the sociological condition experienced by those with a cultural heritage different from the culture in which they grew up or lived. In this mixing, the characteristics of the two remain distinct but coexist [6]. This is similar to the salad bowl theory of multiculturalism, in which culturally diverse societies integrate different cultures while maintaining the separate identities of the ethnic groups so that they do not form a single homogeneous culture.

As a multi-ethnic country, the policy formulated a corresponding cultural policy in 1971 to mould a unified cultural identity. The Chinese, being the second largest ethnic group in terms of numbers, due to the size of their community, Malaysia did not adopt a policy of cultural assimilation as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines did with the Chinese. Instead, an accommodationist policy was used, whereby groups developed working arrangements while maintaining their identity [7].

The Malaysian Constitution guarantees the cultural and educational rights of the Chinese. While allowing for the existence of a Chinese culture, it is also required for a citizen to learn the Malay language. Therefore, Malaysia is not a multicultural country. While recognising the principles of the dominant culture, the cultures of other ethnic groups are also evolving individually, making the definition of a mixed cultural environment more accurate.

When an individual moves from one nation-state or culture to another, whether for temporary or permanent residence or economic, political or educational purposes, aspects of the individual's cultural and ethnic identity are likely to change [8]. The accumulated experience of spending time with ethnic minorities such as Malays and Indians has prompted them to domesticate this Chineseness, embodying multiculturalism with a ubiquitous cross-cultural awareness [9].

This concept reflects the impact of culture on the social environment and includes mutual adaptation between different cultures. The cultural practices of the Malaysian Chinese can be

divided into two parts: one part is thoroughly adapted to the local culture, i.e. assimilated; the other part is partially adapted, accustomed to the local culture while maintaining its cultural characteristics. The first part is mainly the Chinese who immigrated to Southeast Asia during the Ming Dynasty, and their descendants, after intermarriage with the locals, were called Baba Nyonya and would also call themselves Peranakan to distinguish themselves from the later Chinese. Due to complete Malaysian indigenisation, most of the Peranakan were not educated in Chinese and spoke Malay in the early days and English in the last years.

On the other hand, the latter Malaysian Chinese are Chinese immigrants brought in from the 19th Century onwards to cater for the British exploitation of the Malay Peninsula. Unlike the Peranakan, who gave up their mother tongue, they can speak Chinese, receive a Chinese language education, and carry forward their traditional customs with the government's support. However, the long period has made them culturally different from the Chinese in other countries, and part of the difference is a result of Malaysian indigenisation, a transformation and re-creation of the Malaysian Chinese way of life [10].

Art can be seen as a process of discovery, interpretation and description of culture; communication and community beliefs gain value and substance by expressing shared conventions of meaning [11]. Artists transmit and share knowledge with the community through the visual arts, and paintings can be fundamentally viewed as products of the artist's thoughts and experiences, in addition to being a presentation of beauty in the form of images with the public to achieve knowledge sharing.

Modern Malaysian art was introduced by the British, who colonised Penang in the early 19th Century and received its initial impetus with the arrival of Chinese migrant artists in Singapore. By 1960, the Specialised Teachers Training Institute (STTI) was established in Kuala Lumpur, and a select group of graduates were sent to study in the West to acquire new knowledge of the arts. These STTI graduates became prominent figures in Malaysian modern art, who profoundly impacted the local art scene.

Whether it is Malay or Chinese artists, their works have been shaped by learning Western artistic concepts and blending them with original experiences to shape the local scene. This can be regarded as a cultural invasion and fusion of one art form into another, whether it is Eastern or Western. It is a phenomenon that continues to evolve the Malaysian art scene, providing the necessary renaissance In the encounter of cultures, new dimensions of values take root [12]. Thus, for Malaysian Chinese artists, whose art style is influenced by mixed cultures and presents different visual characteristics, paintings can be defined as reflecting and reproducing the social and cultural contexts.

3 Method

This paper adopts the qualitative method of observation to analyse the secondary data. The data was obtained from the National Art Gallery's list of works in its permanent collection (Inventory himpunan tetap warisan seni tampak negare 1958-2003), which is dominated by paintings by Malaysian Chinese artists from 1990-1999, with an eligible sample size of seven (Table 1). The analytical process draws on Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconography to interpret the form and the intrinsic meaning of the images and to explore the mixed cultural consciousness of Malaysian Chinese artists.

Table 1. Specific information on the study sample

NO.	Year	Title	Name	Media	Size(cm)	Image
1	1994	Some Dreamt of Malaya	Wong Cheong Hoy	Mixed	190 x 150	
2	1995	Black Moon	Eng Hwee Chu	Acrylic	243x163	
3	1996	The Soul Under Midnight	Tan Chin Kuan	Oil	208x460	
4	1996	Red Bride	Sylvia Lee Goh	Oil	121.5x91.5	
5	1996	Where There Is Life, There is Hope	Goh Ah Ang	Ink	79 x 79	
6	1996	Pre-war Building for Sale	Chuah Chong Yong	Acrylic	200x200	
7	1999	The Great Supper	Eng Hwee Chu	Oil	166 x 162	

4 Findings

As can be seen from the table, the sample size for this study is 7. Regarding medium, two pieces related to China, including *Some Dreamt of Malaya* (1994) and *Where There Is Life, There is Hope* (1996), use mixed media. Besides that, the artist has done all the paintings in Western style: three oil paintings and two acrylics.

In terms of image content, there are three related to the Chinese: *Some Dreamt of Malaya* (1994), *Red Bride* (1996), and *Where There Is Life, There is Hope* (1996). Firstly, the first two images depict the Malaysian Chinese women in Nyonya dress and men in Western clothing. In contrast, *Red Bride's* author, Peranakan, shows the Nyonya choosing Chinese dresses for their marriage. The third panel depicts the shape of a linden leaf made up of countless ants, which reflects the practice of Buddhism among most Chinese. Meanwhile, the first two images are closely related to Malaysia, and the other one remembers the local life scene, *Pre-war Building for Sale* (1996), which records the actual events and residential buildings at that time.

Regarding artistic expression style, the two paintings by Eng Hwee Chu and Tan Chin Kuan are more influenced by surrealism and magical realism, where real life is combined with fantasy and some magic and grotesque elements are inserted. On the other hand, the works of Wong Hoy Cheong and Goh Ah Ang are more in the style of Chinese painting with a unique ink and wash flavour, while the other two works are dedicated to depicting the local humanistic landscapes based on realism.

5 Discussion

Based on the above findings, it can be tentatively concluded that Malaysian Chinese artists in the 1990s favoured Western artistic mediums and styles of expression, mixed with some elements of Chinese ink and wash, and used Chinese images and customs as their themes, reflecting the local human life that was different from that of other ethnic groups.

The history of modern art in Malaysia is relatively short, dating back as far as the early 20th Century, and the main influences on the atmosphere of the art scene here were the native art of immigrant artists and the Western art of the colonial government. From this paper, it can be seen that the Malaysian Chinese had already formed a mixed cultural identity during this period. Influenced by the art atmosphere and native culture at that time, they were committed to taking root in the local area. They moulded some paintings that conformed to the aesthetics of China and the West, a situation in line with the diversified cultural environment. In sociological theory, this process can be regarded as a process of cultural adaptation, i.e., when two different cultural groups have prolonged contact and communication, the original culture of one or both parties will change to various degrees.

6 Conclusion & Recommendations

Each national identity has its history and is tied to its place of origin. This sense of identity develops and evolves in response to the social conditions of the time. Painting is a visual medium that expresses the artist's cultural experiences, emotional values and perceptions of society. Malaysian Chinese artists, after experiencing exchanges and collisions between their native cultures, Western cultures and local cultures, eventually developed a unique mixed cultural identity and recorded this ideology in their paintings.

This study helps to explore the visual styles of Malaysian artists of a particular period and understand the cultural awareness in the images. The convergence of artists with different cultural backgrounds in Malaysia enriches the themes and expressive styles of Malaysian contemporary art to varying degrees. However, the visual research on Chinese artists is not

extensive, and subsequent studies could analyse and interpret the paintings in greater depth to uncover more artistic knowledge.

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