

**THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN INK PAINTING
IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE (1950S–2020):
TRADITION, DIASPORA, AND IDENTITY**

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**THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN INK PAINTING
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by

CUI YI

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACM	Asian Civilisations Museum
CAA	Chinese Art Research Association
CAFA	Central Academy of Fine Arts
ICIPA	International Modern Ink Painting Alliance
KMT	Nationalist Party
MIA	Malaysia Institute of Art
NAFA	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
NAC	National Arts Council
NCC	National Cultural Congress
NGS	National Gallery Singapore
NEP	New Economic Policy
NTNU	National Taiwan Normal University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAM	Singapore Art Museum
SAA	Shanghai Art Academy
SAS	Singapore Art Society
UMNO	United Malaya National Organisation
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
XAA	Xinhua Art Academy

**EVOLUSI CATAN DAKWAT MODEN DI MALAYSIA DAN SINGAPURA
(1950-AN–2020): TRADISI, DIASPORA, DAN IDENTITI**

ABSTRAK

Disertasi ini mengkaji evolusi lukisan dakwat moden di Malaysia dan Singapura daripada tahun 1950-an hingga 2020, dengan menumpukan kepada bagaimana artis diaspora Cina dan artis etnik Cina mentafsir aalan dakwat tradisional sebagai respons terhadap konteks budaya Asia Tenggara dan di bawah pengaruh estetika modernis Barat. Kajian ini menangani peminggiran perkembangan seni serantau ini dalam wacana sejarah seni dan meletakkan lukisan dakwat moden di Malaysia dan Singapura sebagai satu bentuk amalan seni yang signifikan. Penyelidikan ini disusun secara kronologi kepada tiga fasa utama berdasarkan perubahan gaya dan sosio-politik yang ketara. Fasa pertama (1950–1965) meneroka bagaimana artis perintis Nanyang menggabungkan teknik berus Cina dengan subjek tropika dan strategi komposisi yang diilhamkan daripada modernisme Eropah. Fasa kedua (1965–1990-an) meneliti bagaimana artis Nanyang dan artis generasi kedua melibatkan diri dengan pendekatan abstraksi, simbolisme, dan eksperimen peribadi sebagai respons terhadap pembinaan negara pasca kemerdekaan dan ideologi modernis serantau yang berkembang. Fasa ketiga (2000–2020) mengkaji peralihan kepada pendekatan dakwat yang bersifat global dan antara disiplin. Dari sudut metodologi, kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang menggabungkan analisis visual dan kontekstual dengan tafsiran sejarah budaya. Perspektif teori diambil daripada kajian pascakolonial dan teori identiti budaya, terutamanya daripada pemikiran Homi Bhabha dan Stuart Hall, untuk meneliti bagaimana lukisan dakwat moden mencerminkan proses perundingan budaya, inovasi estetik dan keupayaan serantau. Dengan menelusuri perkembangan lukisan dakwat

moden di Malaysia dan Singapura, disertasi ini mencabar peminggiran historio-
grafinya dan menegaskan kepentingannya sebagai tapak kritikal untuk menilai semula
moderniti dalam sejarah seni global dan budaya visual transnasional.

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN INK PAINTING IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE (1950S–2020): TRADITION, DIASPORA, AND IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the evolution of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore from the 1950s to 2020, focusing on how Chinese diaspora artists and local Chinese artists reinterpreted traditional ink practices in response to Southeast Asian cultural contexts and under the influence of Western modernist aesthetics. It addresses the marginalisation of this regional artistic development in art historical discourse and positions modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore as a significant form of artistic practice. The research follows a chronological structure across three key phases marked by stylistic and socio-political change. The first phase (1950s–1965) explores how Nanyang pioneer artists integrated Chinese brushwork with tropical subject matter and compositional strategies drawn from European modernism. The second phase (1965–2000) investigates how both Nanyang pioneers and second-generation artists engaged with abstraction, symbolism, and personal experimentation in response to post-independence nation-building and evolving regional modernist ideologies. The third phase (2000–2020) examines the transition toward globalised and transnational ink art approaches. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach that integrates visual analysis and contextual analysis. Visual analysis examines formal elements such as brushwork, composition, colour, and iconography in selected artworks, while contextual analysis situates these works within their historical, socio-political, and institutional frameworks. Theoretical perspectives are drawn from cultural identity theory and postcolonial studies, particularly the works of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, to examine how modern ink painting reflects processes of cultural

negotiation, aesthetic innovation, and regional agency. By tracing the development of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore, this dissertation challenges its historiographical marginalisation and affirms its significance as a critical site for rethinking modernity within global art history and transnational visual culture.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The emergence of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore reflects a unique intersection of cultural legacies, colonial histories, and artistic transformations. Situated on the Malay Peninsula, these two nation's not only share geographical proximity and historical connections but also experienced divergent colonial trajectories and post-independence nation-building process that shaped a multi-ethnic cultural framework.

Within this context, ink-traditionally associated with Chinese literati aesthetics was reinterpreted through brushwork and rice paper. It gradually evolved into a modern artistic language that extended beyond its Chinese origins and engaged with the social and cultural realities of South Asia. Through this process of adaption, ink art become a vital site where cultural negotiation and artistic innovation converged. The modern ink art of Malaysia and Singapore reflects the intersection of Eastern traditions and Western modernity, a dynamic that has profoundly shaped their evolving art scenes.¹

This synthesis, known as the "Nanyang style," emerged between the 1930s and 1950s as Chinese émigré artists in British Malaya incorporated modernist techniques to depict local landscapes, people, and themes.² By recontextualising ink art within a Southeast Asian framework, regional artists transformed the medium, offering a fresh

¹ T. K. Sabapathy, Ahmad Mashadi, and Singapore Art Museum, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018). <https://worldcat.org/title/1014497789>.

² Redza Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," in *Pameran Restropektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia, 1979).

perspective to the global art discourse. This approach challenged the conventional paradigms of ink art. It also expanded the medium's expressive potential and redefined what ink could convey within the Southeast Asian cultural context. These modern ink artworks symbolised not only an artistic fusion but also a response to the shifting cultural dynamics of the period. They reflected the transition of Malaysia and Singapore from colonial rule to independent nation-states, a process that continues to shape their identities today.

According to T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, Nanyang art is distinguished by this intercultural blend, where Chinese artists incorporated elements of their heritage while adapting to their new environment. The term "Nanyang" (南洋), which translates literally to "South Seas," historically refers to Southeast Asia and has deep cultural and geographical significance for Chinese communities abroad. However, the term "Nanyang" not only denotes a geographical region but also symbolises the transcultural identity of the Chinese diaspora. For these migrant communities, Nanyang referred not only to a geographic location but also to a distinctive Chinese cultural heritage that was reshaped within new surroundings.

The term also conveys the cultural bridging that Chinese artists enacted between their origins and their adopted homeland. This synthesis did not merely reflect an attempt to maintain Chinese traditions but rather signified an intentional integration and reinterpretation of cultural elements. The Nanyang style embodies both the artists' Chinese roots and their responses to Southeast Asia's tropical landscapes, local customs, and multicultural societies. Artworks by pioneers such as Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee often combined traditional Chinese ink techniques with depictions of local flora, fauna, and people. In doing so, they symbolised a connection both to Chinese culture and to the "South Seas" region that had become their home.

Furthermore, Nanyang art has been viewed as a response to the Chinese diaspora experience, reflecting the desire of these artists to express a cultural identity that resonates within the Southeast Asian context. The use of ink and brushwork in Nanyang art symbolises a connection to Chinese artistic heritage, but the themes—such as village life, local markets, and tropical scenery—root the art in Southeast Asia.

The origins of modern ink art trace back to the transformation of traditional Chinese ink painting, an art form with a rich history deeply rooted in Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions.³ Traditional Chinese ink painting is characterised by its use of brush, ink, and rice paper or silk, emphasising expressive brushwork and subtle gradations of ink to depict subjects such as landscapes, figures, and flora.⁴ This art form was closely linked to the literati, who regarded it as a medium for intellectual and spiritual expression. It reflected the artist's connection with nature as well as the philosophical tenets of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.⁵

The transition to traditional Chinese ink painting commenced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during a period of significant social, political, and cultural upheaval in China.⁶ During this era, there was an encounter with Western art and ideas, leading to a reassessment of traditional art forms and the integration of new methods and concepts.⁷ Chinese artists like Xu Beihong (1895-1953) and Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), who studied in France in the 1920s, played crucial roles in this transformation by incorporating Western realist techniques and modernist aesthetics into traditional

³ Maxwell K. Hearn, "Chinese Art: Modern Expressions," *Choice Reviews Online* 39 (2002). <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.39-4992>.

⁴ Review of *The Art of Modern China*, by Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *Choice Reviews Online* 50 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.50-3055>.

⁵ Wen C. Fong, "Reflections on Chinese Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 142, no. 1 (2015): 47–59.

⁶ Wen C. Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 258–273.

⁷ Weihong Du, "A Turning Point for Guohua?: Xu Beihong and Transformative Encounters with the Socialist Spirit, 1933–1953," *Twentieth-Century China* 39, no. 3 (2014): 216–44, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1521538514Z.00000000046>.

Chinese painting.⁸ This blending of Eastern and Western styles marked the early stages of what would become modern ink art, as artists experimented with new themes and techniques, moving away from the rigid conventions of classical Chinese ink painting.⁹

However, the integration of Southeast Asian themes with modern Western art techniques began as early as the 1930s, primarily driven by Chinese immigrant artists who sought new forms of artistic expression in their adopted homelands.¹⁰ The complex identities of these artists, shaped by their negotiation between Chinese heritage and the influences of their new environment, were reflected in their works. This migration not only displaced artists geographically but also resulted in the hybridisation of traditional Chinese ink techniques with local Southeast Asian themes. Such hybridisation is crucial to understanding the development of the Nanyang style.

The mid-20th century saw a significant migration of Chinese artists to Southeast Asia, particularly to countries like British Malaya (now Malaysia) and Singapore, which were under British colonial rule at the time. This migration was largely driven by the social and political turmoil in China. Key events included the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Together, these developments brought about dramatic changes in Chinese society.¹¹ Many artists, intellectuals, and scholars sought refuge in Southeast Asia to escape the instability and to find new opportunities to continue their artistic endeavours.¹²

⁸ Maxwell K Hearn, *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 39, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.39-4992>.

⁹ Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973)

¹⁰ Yeo Mang Thong, "Xinjiapo zhanqian (1881–1941) huashe meishu huodong: yi lisan qingjie wei xushu kuangjia [Activities of Chinese Societies in Pre-war Singapore (1881–1941): Using the Chinese Diaspora as Narrative Framework]," unpublished, 2015.

¹¹ Abdillah Noh, "Transnationalism and Chinese Diaspora's Struggle for Identity in British Malaya (1900–1957)," *Akademika* 92, no. 2 (2022): 221–34. <https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2022-9202-16>.

¹² Emelia Ong Ian Li and Izmer Ahmad, "Expressions of Hybridity as Strategy for Malaysian Nationalism: Selected Artworks in Modern Malaysian Art," *Wacana Seni* 14 (2015): 1–30.

According to Piyadasa and Sabapathy, modern art in the region was predominantly pioneered by these Chinese artists, who initiated the movement in early twentieth-century British Malaya. The Nanyang style not only represented a fusion of diverse artistic techniques but also signified a deeper cultural synthesis.¹³

Broader recognition of this fusion occurred in the 1950s, particularly through exhibitions and events organised by the British Council in 1953, which played a crucial role in promoting the Nanyang style.¹⁴ During this period, the Nanyang style emerged not only as an artistic form but also as a reflection of the region's shifting social and cultural dynamics, shaped by the transition from colonial rule to the formation of newly independent national identities.¹⁵

This approach to the modernisation of ink art was unique as it occurred outside of China, enabling the region's artists to reinterpret traditional ink art through a local, regional perspective. This not only modernised the traditional art form but also introduced a fresh Southeast Asian viewpoint to the global art scene, challenging conventional understandings of ink art and expanding its artistic boundaries.

This transformation did not occur in isolation but was part of a broader dialogue between East and West, shaped by the historical context of colonial and post-colonial Southeast Asia. The influx of Chinese immigrants, the influence of Western

¹³ The term "British Malaya" is often used inaccurately to conceptualize all states in Singapore and Malaya as a unified political entity under British rule. However, this paper adopts the term to refer specifically to the broader historical context of Singapore under British rule, recognizing it as part of Malaya but not yet a distinct political entity. The terms "Singapore," "Malaya," and "Malaysia" are used in this essay according to the historical circumstances of the events discussed. Historically, "Malaya" referred to both peninsular Malaya and Singapore. In this essay, the category of Malayan artists encompasses those residing in both Singapore and Malaya until the region's independence in 1963, when Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and the Federation of Malaya formed the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore later became an independent nation on 9 August 1965.

¹⁴ Christine Neo Chai Yuan. *Constructing a National Identity: Pioneers of a 'Singaporean Art'*. BA (Hons) dissertation, The Glasgow School of Art Singapore, 2013–14.

¹⁵ Yvonne Low, "Becoming Professional Artists in Postwar Singapore and Malaya: Developments in Art during a Time of Political Transition," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2015): 463–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002246341500034X>.

colonial powers, and the artists' exposure to both traditional and modern art forms contributed to the emergence of a distinctly modern art scene.¹⁶ Within this context, modern ink painting emerged as a crucial medium for expressing the region's multicultural identity.

This study investigates how modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore emerged as a key artistic expression of both modernity and multicultural identity. Multicultural identity in this context refers to the blending of Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Western artistic elements. For example, Cheong Soo Pieng's *Drying Salted Fish* (1978) exemplifies this adaptation, combining local subject matter with a modernist composition and a bold use of lines and space (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Cheong Soo Peng, *Drying Salted Fish*, 1978, Chinese ink and colour on cloth, 70 × 103 cm. Source: National Heritage Board of Singapore.

Cheong Soo Pieng's *Drying Salted Fish* (1978) exemplifies the hybrid visual language of the Nanyang artists, who combined Chinese ink traditions with Western compositional techniques and Southeast Asian subject matter. Executed in ink and col-

¹⁶ Sarena Abdullah, "Expanding the Historical Narrative of Early Visual Modernity in Malaya," *Wacana Seni* 17, no. 2 (2018): 41–75. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2018.17.2>.

our on cloth, the painting depicts a kampung scene organised into three registers: suspended fish, women and children engaged in communal labour, and domestic tools and animals. This tripartite structure reflects Western formal clarity, while the flattened depth and rhythmic flow echo Chinese handscroll painting. Cheong's use of mineral pigments—particularly vivid reds and greens—draws from Chinese symbolic aesthetics, contrasting with muted background tones to animate the figures. His stylised trees, rendered through repetitive brush patterns, recall Chinese landscape idioms recontextualised in a tropical setting. The abstraction of nature into symbolic form reveals a persistent cultural memory embedded in brushwork. As T. K. Sabapathy noted, Nanyang artists like Cheong actively pursued local themes while retaining the discipline of Chinese ink traditions.

Beyond its formal synthesis, *Drying Salted Fish* holds cultural and political significance as a national symbol. Its selection for Singapore's \$50 note in 1999 by the Monetary Authority of Singapore marked it as a visual emblem of multicultural identity and modernity. According to MAS's official explanation, this selection was intended to "reflect Singapore's contributions in the field of art" and to visually articulate the nation's multicultural evolution and identity.¹⁷ The work's depiction of harmonious kampung life, shaped by both Malay and Chinese communities, aligns with state narratives of shared heritage.

As noted in the archival publication *BiblioAsia* (2011), *Drying Salted Fish* represents "a silent acknowledgement of the nation's roots"—the painting portrays not a modern urban landscape, but a nostalgic image of local village life, shaped jointly by

¹⁷ Monetary Authority of Singapore. "Circulation Currency: Notes – Portrait Series \$50." *MAS Official Website*. Accessed July 20, 2025. [https://www.mas.gov.sg/currency/circulation-currency/circulation-currency-notes\[^11^\]](https://www.mas.gov.sg/currency/circulation-currency/circulation-currency-notes[^11^]).

early Chinese and Malay communities.¹⁸ This choice of subject underscores Cheong's keen sensitivity to local lived experience and mirrors the state's broader strategy of cultivating a shared sense of historical community. Moreover, Cheong's stylistic approach—merging traditional Chinese ink techniques, Western compositional structure, and Southeast Asian everyday themes—can be interpreted as a visual articulation of cultural hybridity within a postcolonial context.¹⁹

Modernity, as expressed in modern ink painting, reflects the artist's engagement with global art movements and their efforts to break with the rigid conventions of classical Chinese painting. The migration of Chinese artists to Southeast Asia during the mid-20th century was deeply influenced by their education and artistic training in China, particularly in the 1920s.²⁰ Many of these artists were trained in classical Chinese painting techniques at renowned art institutions, where they were also exposed to both traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western art movements.²¹ This dual exposure provided them with a rich foundation that they carried with them during their migration.²² In Southeast Asia, Chinese immigrant artists found themselves in a new cultural environment, encountering different artistic influences and local themes, leading to a significant evolution in their artistic practices.²³ The fusion of these diverse elements led to the creation of a distinct style that combined traditional Chinese techniques with local Southeast Asian themes and modern Western artistic movements.

¹⁸ Biblio Asia, 2011. *Drying Salted Fish: A silent acknowledgment of the nation's roots*. *BiblioAsia*, 7(2), 42–47.

¹⁹ T. K. Sabapathy, "Traditions and Modernity: The Nanyang Artists I," *The Straits Times*, October 4, 1980, Section Two, 6–7. <https://reference.nlb.gov.sg/guides/arts/visual-arts/nanyangartists>

²⁰ Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 132–135.

²¹ David Low Kok Kiat, "The Russian Connection in Singapore's Local Art Identity," *Southeast of Now* 4, no. 2 (2020): 91–159, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2020.0008>.

²² Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, "'After the Break': Re-Conceptualizing Ethnicity, National Identity and 'Malaysian-Chinese' Identities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 7 (2014): 1211–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.859286>.

²³ Emelia Ong Ian Li and Izmer Ahmad, "Expressions of Hybridity as Strategy for Malayan Nationalism: Selected Artworks in Modern Malayan Art," *Wacana Seni* 14 (2015): 1–30.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) played a pivotal role in the development of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore. Established with the primary aim of providing art education, NAFA was staffed predominantly by Chinese teachers, and its student body was also primarily Chinese.²⁴ This institution not only offered employment opportunities for Chinese immigrant artists but also served as a crucial platform for educating the next generation of artists.²⁵ NAFA's curriculum emphasised both traditional Chinese techniques and the exploration of new styles, thereby creating a fertile ground for the development of the Nanyang style.²⁶

While Chinese immigrant artists brought with them a strong educational background in traditional techniques and philosophies, their initial adaptations to the local environments and multicultural contexts of Southeast Asia were not without challenges. Although they played a significant role in establishing and promoting modern ink painting, the process was far from straightforward. The emergence of distinct regional styles, such as the Nanyang style, was a direct result of their efforts, but it also reflected the complexities and tensions inherent in merging Eastern and Western artistic traditions.²⁷ This migration, while providing these artists with a more supportive environment, also forced them to negotiate a delicate balance between preserving their cultural heritage and embracing new influences. The resulting fusion of artistic traditions was vibrant, but it also highlighted the ongoing struggle to maintain cultural identity within a rapidly changing artistic landscape.²⁸

²⁴ Kelvin Chuah, Izmer Ahmad, and Emelia Ong, "Chinese Diaspora and the Emergence of Alternative Modernities in Malaysian Visual Arts," *2011 International Conference on Humanities, Society and Culture (IPEDR)* 20 (2011): 42–46.

²⁵ Yvonne Low, "Becoming Professional Artists in Postwar Singapore and Malaya: Developments in Art during a Time of Political Transition," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2015): 463–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002246341500034X>.

²⁶ Sze Wee Low, *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, National Gallery Singapore, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.110105>.

²⁷ Yvonne Low, "Becoming Professional Artists in Postwar Singapore and Malaya: Developments in Art during a Time of Political Transition."

²⁸ Eric Francis Eshun et al., "Exploring the Impact of Pedagogical Strategies in Drawing Instruction on

Several pioneering artists were instrumental in the development and growth of ink-based art in Malaysia and Singapore, particularly those associated with the Nanyang style. Among the most notable figures are Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, and Chen Wen Hsi, who are known as the Nanyang pioneer artists. Together, these artists and the movements they spearheaded contributed to the growth of modern ink painting in Southeast Asia, creating a rich and diverse artistic tradition that continues to influence contemporary art in the region.²⁹

The pioneering artists of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore faced significant challenges as they sought to adapt traditional Chinese ink techniques to a new environment and incorporate modernist elements. One of the primary challenges was the cultural and geographical shift from China to Southeast Asia, where the natural environment, cultural contexts, and artistic expectations differed markedly from those in China.³⁰ The tropical landscapes, diverse ethnic communities, and local customs presented new subjects that were not traditionally represented in Chinese ink painting, requiring artists to rethink their approaches to composition and subject matter.

Another challenge was the integration of modernist elements into a medium traditionally rooted in centuries-old techniques and aesthetics. Traditional Chinese ink painting, particularly the *xieyi* or literati style, emphasises personal expression, spontaneity, and a philosophical connection with nature.³¹

However, the introduction of Western modernist concepts such as abstraction, perspective, and the use of vibrant colours posed a challenge for these artists, who had

Drawing Skills Satisfaction: A Case Study on Ghanaian Communication Design Students,” *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 4, no. 2 (2018): 104–22.

²⁹ Christine Neo Chai Yuan, *Constructing a National Identity: Pioneers of a ‘Singaporean Art’* (BA [Hons] dissertation, The Glasgow School of Art Singapore, 2013–14).

³⁰ Low Sze Wee, “Chinese Artists in Nanyang – An Aspect of Modernity in Singapore Art,” (unpublished manuscript, 2020)1–18.

³¹ Wen C. Fong, “Why Chinese Painting Is History,” *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 258–273.

to balance maintaining the integrity of traditional techniques while embracing new artistic ideas.

Additionally, the expectations of a new and diverse audience in Southeast Asia added pressure to create works that resonated both with local sensibilities and the broader global art community. The transitional period that marked the dissolution of British colonialism and the rise of independent nations in the region created unique conditions that fostered the growth of local art education and the professionalisation of artists. These developments were deeply intertwined with nation-building strategies aimed at forging a unified Malayan culture and identity.

One key adaptation was the inclusion of Southeast Asian landscapes, local flora and fauna, and scenes of everyday life into their ink paintings. This marked a departure from the traditional Chinese focus on idealised landscapes and classical themes. For instance, Cheong Soo Pieng's works often featured depictions of local villagers, tropical plants, and kampong (village) scenes, integrating these new subjects with traditional ink techniques.

This study will not only examine the foundational periods of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore but also explore the subsequent developments that have shaped its current form. By investigating these different phases, the research aims to fill the gap in existing literature that often overlooks the continuous evolution and cultural significance of modern ink painting in Southeast Asia.³²

The graduates from NAFA emerged as key figures in modern ink art across both Malaysia and Singapore by the 1970s.³³ Their contributions were instrumental in the evolution of the Nanyang style, ensuring its lasting influence on the development

³³ Ong Zhen Min, "Nanyang Reverie." In *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century*, edited by Low Sze Wee, National Gallery Singapore, 2015.

of ink art in Southeast Asia. The academy became a hub for artistic exchange and innovation, attracting artists from across the region who sought to engage with the unique blend of traditional Chinese and modern Western techniques being explored there.³⁴

The influence of Western modern art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, significantly shaped NAFA-trained artists in Southeast Asia during the 1970s.³⁵ As they engaged with global art trends, these artists integrated the spontaneity and emotional intensity of Abstract Expressionism into their work, moving beyond the controlled techniques of traditional Chinese ink painting.³⁶ This fusion allowed them to create a new visual language that was both modern and rooted in their cultural heritage. The introduction of concepts like individual expression and the exploration of personal themes further modernised ink painting in the region, ensuring its relevance and evolution in a rapidly changing global art scene.

Although Malaysia and Singapore had become independent countries by this time, the connection among ethnic Chinese artists remained strong, facilitated by their shared ink art heritage and ongoing communication with the Chinese community.³⁷ The 1970s marked a period of cultural resurgence in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, as these newly independent nations sought to establish their cultural identities.³⁸

³⁴ Ong Zhen Min, "A History of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1938–1990)." PhD diss., National University of Melbourne, 2006.

³⁵ Junghee Moon, "Taiwanese Water and Korean Ink: Contemporary Ink Painting in Taiwan and Korea," *Art in Translation* 11, no. 1 (2019): 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2019.1582913>.

³⁶ Angela Wai Sum Liu, Athena Kin Kam Wong, And Evita So Yeung, "Challenges And Approaches In Conserving New Ink Art," *Studies In Conservation* 61 (2016): 120–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1191003>.

³⁷ James H. Liu et al., "Social Representations of History in Malaysia and Singapore: On the Relationship between National and Ethnic Identity," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2002): 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-839X.00091>.

³⁸ Seng Yu Jin, "Cultural Wars in Southeast Asia : The Birth of the Critical Exhibition in the 1970s," in *Charting Thoughts*, ed. Sze Wee Flores, Patrick D., Low and Published (National Gallery Singapore, 2018).

To distinguish these modern ink artists from the pioneer artists of the Nanyang style, this study will use the term “Neo-Nanyang” to refer to those influenced by NAFA or its ink art teachers, as well as by the pioneer artists. It must be noted, however, that the usage of the term "Neo-Nanyang" is not novel. The precise origins of the term remain unclear, but it has been broadly used to signify a modern reimagining or adaptation of the Nanyang style.³⁹ Their contributions during this period were crucial in solidifying the Nanyang style as a major force in the region's art history.

This study will not only examine the foundational periods of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore but also explore the subsequent developments that have shaped its current form. The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a profound impact of globalisation on the arts, and modern ink art in Southeast Asia has been no exception. Globalisation has significantly impacted modern ink art in Southeast Asia, offering new opportunities for artistic exchange and challenging the cultural specificity of the Nanyang style.⁴⁰ As artists adapt to global audiences, there's a risk of losing the unique characteristics that define their work, with pressure to conform to international standards potentially leading to a departure from traditional roots.

This new generation of ink artists sought to redefine modern ink painting in ways that addressed the changing realities of the region, including globalisation, urbanisation, and cultural hybridity. As these artists progressed into the new Millennium, they continued to evolve and adapt their practices, inspiring new generations of artists to further expand and reinterpret the Nanyang style, ensuring its relevance and vitality in the contemporary art world.

³⁹ Woon Tai Ho, “Renaissance at 100,” *Soul of Ink*, 2021, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811237034_0001.

⁴⁰ Daniel P. S. Goh, “From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 232–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00065.x>.

However, with the increasing globalisation of contemporary ink art, the number of people and artists actively engaged in this specific medium has diminished.⁴¹ The decline in artists practising this medium, driven by the rise of digital and contemporary art, underscores the need for blending traditional techniques with modern practices. This decline presents both challenges and opportunities for the future of modern ink art as it struggles to maintain its distinct identity while adapting to a rapidly changing global art scene.⁴²

1.2 Research Gap and Problem Statement

Despite its profound development over the past seven decades, modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore remains underrepresented in Southeast Asian art historical discourse. Scholarly attention has largely privileged Western-oriented modernist movements or traditional Chinese literati aesthetics, overlooking the complex hybridity and diasporic identities articulated through ink art in this region. This research addresses this critical gap by systematically analysing modern ink painting as a hybrid and transnational practice shaped by migration, cultural negotiation, and institutional frameworks.

Understanding modern ink painting in Southeast Asia is not only essential for rectifying national and regional art historical omissions, but also contributes to a broader rethinking of modernism as a global, multi-directional phenomenon. Through interdisciplinary analysis, this study offers new perspectives for curators, scholars, and contemporary artists interested in the role of ink as a medium of cross-cultural expression, identity formation, and postcolonial critique.

⁴¹ Sophie McIntyre, *Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (Canberra: Canberra Museum and Gallery, 2014). ISBN 978-0-9872457-3-1.

⁴² Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Contemporary Art by Chinese Diaspora in a Global Age," *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 2 (2016): 267–85. https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.2.2.267_1.

A notable example is Redza Piyadasa's influential categorisation of the Nanyang style, which omits modern ink painting entirely.⁴³ This exclusion reflects a broader structural neglect, where ink is sidelined in favour of oil painting and Western forms. Furthermore, research and exhibition initiatives—mostly led by Singaporean institutions—often underrepresent Malaysian contributions, creating an imbalance in regional narratives.

This marginalisation also manifests in academic curricula, art markets, and major exhibitions, where ink remains peripheral. The absence of sustained research limits theoretical understanding and erases the agency of diaspora artists who negotiate identity and modernity through ink.⁴⁴ By addressing these gaps and ensuring that Malaysian contributions to modern ink painting receive the scholarly and curatorial attention they deserve, we can achieve a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian ink art.

Despite its rich evolution, modern ink painting remains structurally marginalised within Southeast Asian art discourse. This neglect is evident in major exhibitions—such as those at the National Gallery Singapore or regional biennales—that often underrepresent ink artists, particularly from Malaysia. The marginal status of ink extends to academic curricula, institutional support, and market visibility, where Malaysian ink artists receive less recognition than their Singaporean counterparts. These patterns reveal a persistent hierarchy of medium and national priorities that overlooks ink's critical role in articulating modernity, identity, and hybridity in the region.

This study responds to this marginalisation by examining how the distinct hist-

⁴³ Redza Piyadasa, *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan Dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981*, (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1981), 31-32.

⁴⁴ John (Curator) Tung and Singapore Art Museum, *Singapore Art Museum : An Index of Exhibitions 1994-2018*, 2018.

orical and multicultural contexts of Malaysia and Singapore have shaped modern ink practices. It foregrounds the contributions of Chinese diaspora and ethnic artists who have explored identity, coexistence, and nationhood through ink, blending tradition with contemporary concerns. Through interdisciplinary analysis, the research positions modern ink painting not as a conservative continuation, but as an innovative and globally relevant medium. By recovering neglected artistic narratives, it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Southeast Asian modernism and expands global art historical frameworks.

1.3 Research Questions

This study seeks to address the research gap by exploring how modern ink artists negotiate local and global influences to create a dynamic and evolving art form reflective of Malaysia and Singapore's multicultural contexts. It focuses on the evolution of modern ink art from the 1950s to 2020, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Specifically, the study is structured with three main research questions:

1. What is modern ink painting, and how did it develop in Malaysia and Singapore from the 1950s until 2020?
2. What are the visual and contextual transformations in modern ink painting, and how do these shifts reflect the artists' negotiations of cultural identity, hybridity, and local belonging?
3. In what ways has modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore contributed to the development of Southeast Asian visual art in the broader context of modernity and globalisation?

1.4 Objectives of Research

This research aims to explore the definition, characteristics, phases of development, and diversity of interdisciplinary analytical approaches to modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore from the 1950s to 2020. The study emphasises the transformation of this art form from its traditional roots into a distinctive mode of artistic expression that reflects the convergence of local and global influences. It examines how modern ink painting has served as a medium for articulating identity, modernity, and hybridity within the Southeast Asian art discourse, contributing to broader conversations in global art history.

1. To examine the historical evolution and defining characteristics of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore between the 1950s and 2020..
2. To analyse the visual and contextual transformations of modern ink painting and to demonstrate cultural identity formation, hybridity, and local belonging among Chinese diaspora and ethnic artists.
3. To evaluate the contributions of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore to Southeast Asian visual art history within broader discourses of modernity and globalisation.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of Research

This research primarily focuses on the evolution, characteristics, and cultural significance of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore, within the broader context of Southeast Asian art from the mid-20th century to the present. The study is designed to trace the historical development of modern ink painting, starting with the Nanyang style to contemporary expressions shaped by global art trends.

The research encompasses the analysis of artistic characteristics and themes unique to modern ink painting in these countries, exploring how traditional and modern elements are combined, the influence of local cultures, and the response to global modernism. By focusing on the artistic and cultural significance of modern ink painting, the study aims to articulate how this art form reflected diasporic experiences and addressed socio-political narratives in Malaysia and Singapore. Additionally, the research will apply theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, particularly Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, to investigate the complex dynamics of cultural hybridity and identity within modern ink art.

An in-depth analysis will be conducted on selected artists, movements, and artworks that have significantly influenced the modern ink painting landscape in Malaysia and Singapore. The research will provide detailed insights into these contributions, situating them within the broader Southeast Asian art discourse and examining their impact on the global art scene.

While this research aims to offer a comprehensive overview of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may impact the study. Firstly, the research is geographically limited to Malaysia and Singapore, and the modern ink painting tradition extends across various regions in Asia. Comparative studies with other regions, while potentially enriching, are not within the scope of this research.

Secondly, while the study spans from the early 20th century to the present, the wide historical range may constrain the depth of analysis for certain periods or movements. The research may not delve as deeply into specific historical contexts or lesser-known movements due to time and scope constraints.

Another limitation is related to the accessibility of artworks. The examination of modern ink paintings is dependent on the availability of these works in public collections, private holdings, or published sources. Some significant works may not be readily accessible for study, which could limit the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Furthermore, while the research employs interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to enrich the analysis, integrating insights from diverse fields such as art history, cultural studies, and post-colonial theory presents challenges. Synthesising these perspectives into a cohesive analysis requires careful navigation and may result in some areas being explored more deeply than others.

The primary limitation of this methodology is the potential bias in data collection, particularly in the selection of interview participants and the interpretation of their responses. Additionally, the availability of secondary data and access to certain artworks may be limited, potentially constraining the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Despite these limitations, the chosen methodologies are expected to provide rich, in-depth insights into the modern ink painting tradition in Malaysia and Singapore.

By acknowledging these limitations, the research seeks to negotiate its scope effectively, providing meaningful insights into the modern ink painting tradition in Malaysia and Singapore. It aims to contribute to the larger discourse on art and cultural identity in Southeast Asia while recognising the constraints that shape its findings and conclusions.

1.6 Theoretical Dimension and Research Framework

The theoretical dimension of this research focuses on two primary theories: Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and diaspora, and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. These theories provide the foundation for analysing the complex cultural

dynamics reflected in modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore. While the detailed theoretical and conceptual frameworks are presented in Chapter 3, this section introduces the principal perspectives and explains why they have been adopted as the guiding frameworks for the research.

Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora emphasises the fluid and constructed nature of cultural identities.⁴⁵ According to Hall, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a continuously evolving process influenced by historical and social contexts.⁴⁶ This theory will be applied to understand how the identities of Chinese immigrant artists and their descendants are expressed and negotiated through modern ink painting. The research will explore how these artists use their art to reflect their diasporic experiences and the hybrid identities formed through their interaction with multiple cultures.

Homi K. Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity focuses on the creation of new cultural forms that emerge from the interaction between coloniser and colonised cultures.⁴⁷ His concept of the "Third Space" highlights how hybrid identities challenge and redefine cultural boundaries.⁴⁸ This theory will be used to analyse the blending of Eastern and Western influences in modern ink painting, particularly how Malaysian and Singaporean artists create new artistic expressions that transcend traditional cultural divisions. The research will investigate how these hybrid forms reflect the artists' negotiation of their cultural identities and their engagement with global artistic trends.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Homi K. and Bhabha, "The Location of Culture," *The Location of Culture*, 2004, 1–408, www.routledgeclassics.com.

⁴⁸ Behzad Pourgharib and Moussa Pourya Asl, "Cultural Translation, Hybrid Identity, and Third Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 30, no. 4 (2022): 1657–71, <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.30.4.10>.

These theories are chosen because they correspond closely to the transcultural and postcolonial realities of Southeast Asia, where migration histories, colonial legacies, and globalisation intersect.⁴⁹ They allow the study to move beyond purely formalist readings by embedding artworks within their socio-historical contexts, and they enable the interpretation of modern ink painting as both an aesthetic practice and a form of cultural–political expression.

By establishing this theoretical dimension in the opening chapter, the study is positioned within broader scholarly debates on art, identity, and hybridity in the post-colonial world. This ensures that the subsequent analysis is anchored in a coherent intellectual structure that links visual analysis to questions of cultural belonging, negotiation, and transformation.

1.7 Significance of Research

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on modern ink painting by providing a detailed analysis of its development and characteristics in Malaysia and Singapore that were previously underexplored in Southeast Asian art discourse. By tracing the evolution of modern ink painting from the 1950s to the present, the study fills a gap in the literature, offering new insights into how this art form has adapted to and reflected the unique cultural context of these countries.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of cultural identity and hybridity theories, specifically drawing on the works of Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall by applying them to the context of Southeast Asian modern ink painting. The

⁴⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

study explores how these theories manifest in the artworks of Malaysian and Singaporean artists, offering a nuanced understanding of cultural hybridity and identity negotiation in post-colonial and diasporic contexts.

This approach not only grounds the research in established theoretical discourse but also offers a new perspective on how these concepts manifest in the visual arts of this region. For example, the concept of cultural hybridity, as developed by Homi K. Bhabha, is particularly relevant to exploring how such artworks negotiate identity within post-colonial and diasporic contexts, providing a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics at play. Such as, artists like Cheong Soo Pieng combined traditional Chinese brush techniques with Western abstract styles, creating a new hybrid form that reflects the complex cultural identities in the region. This theoretical contribution not only enhances our understanding of these concepts but also enriches the broader discourse on global art practices.

Culturally and socially, the research is significant because it explores how modern ink painting serves as a medium for expressing complex identities and navigating the intersection of local and global influences. By focusing on the experiences of Chinese immigrant artists and their descendants, the study highlights the role of art in reflecting and shaping the cultural narratives of Malaysia and Singapore. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of how art functions within multicultural societies and the ways in which it can be used to bridge cultural divides.

This research can significantly inform curriculum development by advocating for the inclusion of modern ink painting from Malaysia and Singapore in art history courses. Such inclusion would help students grasp the global evolution of the ink medium, particularly in how it reflects the hybrid cultural identities present in Southeast

Asia. For instance, art educators might design modules focused on the unique techniques and themes of Southeast Asian modern ink painting, offering a more comprehensive perspective on global art practices. Moreover, this approach would enrich the art history of Southeast Asia by acknowledging the historical development of Chinese ink art—tracing its origins in China—and exploring how these traditions were adapted and transformed by Chinese diaspora artists in Southeast Asia. By emphasising the transcultural influences that have shaped modern ink painting, this research also contributes to a broader understanding of the global development of ink art, demonstrating how traditional Chinese art forms have interacted with and influenced other cultures worldwide.

Finally, this research lays the groundwork for future studies by identifying new research questions and suggesting areas for further exploration. The study's findings on the ongoing evolution of modern ink painting and its adaptation to contemporary challenges open up new avenues for research on art and identity in Southeast Asia, ensuring that the discourse continues to evolve and expand. The research has practical implications for art education, curation, and cultural policy. The findings could inform how modern ink painting is taught in academic institutions, how it is presented in galleries and museums, and how cultural policymakers support and promote this art form. By highlighting the significance of modern ink painting in articulating cultural identity and addressing socio-political issues, the study underscores the importance of preserving and promoting this art form in a rapidly globalising world.

The significance of researching modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore extends across various dimensions, impacting not only academic fields but also broader cultural narratives and identities within Southeast Asia and the global art

scene. This study's contributions are manifold, encompassing art history, cultural identity, artistic practices, and public engagement with art.

1.8 Chapter Outline

This research is organised into seven chapters, tracing the evolution, contextual dynamics, and global positioning of modern ink painting in Malaysia and Singapore from the 1950s to 2020. Across these chapters, the study examines how the medium has been shaped by cultural hybridity, identity negotiation, and postcolonial conditions, while responding to both local traditions and global currents.

Chapter One introduces the research background, significance, and objectives, identifying gaps in existing scholarship and formulating the research problem. It defines the research questions, outlines the scope and limitations, and presents the theoretical foundations—cultural hybridity, identity negotiation, and postcolonial perspectives—that guide the analysis. The chapter also provides an overview of the qualitative methodology, showing how visual analysis, contextual interpretation, and institutional inquiry form an integrated approach to understanding modern ink painting in this region.

Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature. It begins by examining the contested meanings of “modern” and “modernity” in art and their implications for ink painting, before tracing the historical evolution of Chinese ink traditions, classical aesthetics, and the six principles. The influence of the Shanghai School on Southeast Asian modern ink is then analysed, followed by a discussion of how institutions such as the NAFA and Chinese artists’ associations shaped the medium’s early development. The chapter concludes by outlining the theoretical frameworks—diaspora, cultural identity, and hybridity—that underpin the research.