

Investigating “Neo-Nanyang” Modern Ink Painting of Malaysia: Between Cultural Identity and Modern Expressions (1965–2023)

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ABSTRACT

Modern ink painting in Malaysia has evolved beyond the Nanyang style into a new paradigm, which characterised by the integration of regional themes and modern techniques, drawing upon the legacy of Nanyang pioneers and influences from Abstract Expressionism. This study uses the term "Neo-Nanyang" to illustrate how Malaysian artists adapt ink art to reflect Malaysia's complex post-independence context, which is marked by hybridity and shifting identities. The discussion examines the selected artworks of Neo-Nanyang artists, including Chung Chen Sun, Le Chek Wen, Cheah Thien Soong, Lok How Yuan, and Chong Choy, employing visual and contextual analysis within the framework of New Art History. This study also applies Stuart Hall's and Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concepts of Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and the Third Space as a conceptual foundation to investigate the underlying motivations for the development of Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting and its expression of Malaysian-Chinese identity. The findings of this study provide significant contributions to the field of Malaysian and Singapore Art History by addressing gaps in the scholarship on modern ink art in both countries, offering a new understanding and analysis of Neo-Nanyang's technical and thematic innovations, and how traditional Chinese ink art adapts to regional and global influences. These insights expand the discourse on Southeast Asian modern ink art in general and its relevance within the study of postcolonial and global contexts.

Keywords: cultural identity, Malaysian-Chinese, modern ink painting, Neo-Nanyang, post-independence Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

As a multi-ethnic country with a complex history, modern art in Malaysia has been used as a way to explore diverse cultural identities. Modern ink art blends traditional Chinese techniques with modern styles and themes, allowing artists to reinterpret

classic forms while engaging with modern cultural and social contexts. This practice builds upon the foundations of traditional Chinese ink painting, characterised by its use of ink, brush strokes, rice paper, and deep philosophical roots, which were introduced by a group of Chinese artists who immigrated to British Malaya in the early 20th century.¹ Since then, regional ink art has been developed by Chinese immigrants and local-born artists, drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese and Western modern art. Following Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, which allowed both nations to pursue their paths of development, a new wave of Malaysian-Chinese modern ink artists emerged, building on the foundations laid by their predecessors.²

However, scholarship on modern ink art in Malaysia remains limited. Most studies focus on modern ink art from mainland China, with occasional mentions of Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Chinese diaspora artists in a globalised context (S. W. Low, 2010). This neglects the significant contributions of Malaysian-Chinese artists. Moreover, research on Southeast Asian ink art tends to

be dominated by Singaporean institutions, which may overshadow the role of Malaysian artists.³ Notably, studies by Kwok (1996) highlight the Chinese cultural influences in Singapore and their implications for regional art narratives, emphasising the need to explore Malaysian perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of ink art in the region.

The history of modern ink painting in Malaysia is closely tied to the development of the Nanyang style, a term derived from the Chinese phrase 南洋 (Nányáng), which historically refers to Southeast Asia (Wang, 1964). "Nanyang" signifies the connection of immigrant artists with China, reflecting a state of political and cultural transition from their homeland (Quah, 2015). This fusion was significantly shaped by the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore, founded in 1938 by Lim Hak Tai (1893–1963), which became a pivotal platform for this artistic synthesis (Piyadasa & Sabapathy, 1979; Quah, 2015).

Nanyang pioneer artists' art exploration of the ink-based medium marked a departure from classical Chinese ink heritage, showcasing a unique artistic identity rooted in regional characteristics and sensibilities (Corey, 2020). Their modern ink artworks embodied a distinctive synthesis, blending Western modern art, traditional Chinese

¹ British Malaya refers to the territories on the Malay Peninsula and Singapore under British colonial rule from the late 18th century until 1957.

² Malaysia gained independence from British colonial rule in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, the Federation expanded to include Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak, forming the Federation of Malaysia. However, due to political and ethnic tensions between Singapore and the central government, Singapore separated from the Federation in 1965 and became independent. After this separation, the remaining states continued as Malaysia.

³ National Gallery Singapore is one of a prominent venue for showcasing modern art in the Southeast Asia region, frequently hosting a variety of ink art exhibitions and symposium for local ink-base artists. Such as "Strokes of Life: The Art of Chen Chong Swee" in 2017 and "Symposium: Living with Ink" in 2020.

ink techniques, themes, and aesthetics with Southeast Asian elements, including Malay and regional (such as Balinese) inspirations (Chuah et al., 2011). While Singaporean scholarship has extensively explored the Nanyang style, the influence of the Nanyang style on Malaysian-Chinese artists remains underexamined (S. W. Low, 2010).

In post-independence Malaysia, a new wave of Malaysian-Chinese artists began to integrate local cultural elements with international influences in their works, which evolved beyond the original Nanyang style of modern ink art, demonstrates how the works integrate local cultural elements with modern influences and even incorporate regional identity in the subject matter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Brief Context and History of Modern Ink Art in Malaysia

The history of modern ink painting in Malaysia is often intertwined with the broader narrative of Southeast Asian art, particularly the development of the Nanyang style, which NAFA heavily influenced in Singapore. This style, characterised by its eclectic combination of Eastern and Western elements, became a defining feature of modern art in both Malaysia and Singapore (L. K. C. A. Yeo, 2006).

Scholars such as Marco Hsu have provided valuable insights into the blending of Eastern and Western art traditions, yet these discussions often centre on Singapore, leaving a gap in the narrative regarding Malaysia’s artistic evolution (Hsü & Lai, 1999). Similarly, the writings of art historian

Sullivan (1973) also discuss the integration of Eastern and Western art narratives, paralleling the developments in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. His discussion highlighted one of the Nanyang pioneer artists, Cheong Soo Pieng (1917–1983), who integrated traditional Chinese aesthetics into modern art to foster unique cultural exchanges.

Artists such as Zao Wou-ki in Paris and Cheong Soo-pieng in Singapore, whatever manner they painted in, have never ceased to think of themselves as Chinese. This awareness of their origin may reveal itself, if at all, only in a particular kind of sensibility in the use of the line, a tendency to give colour a subordinate role or a subtly poetic feeling for space and depth, recognisable only to someone familiar with Oriental art. (Sullivan 1973, p. 194)

Similarly, as observed by Piyadasa (1981/2012), “the works produced by them (the first generation of Nanyang artists) and their locally born students are notable for a wide variety of approaches that were the outcome of an eclectic outlook” (p. 28). Piyadasa also emphasised the role of NAFA artist-teachers of Nanyang style in merging traditional and modern artistic philosophies, which was pivotal in shaping modern art in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula by acknowledging the mixed approaches and contributions of Nanyang pioneer artists, along with their students who were locally born.

However, scholars such as M. T. Yeo (2021) have critiqued Piyadasa and Sabapathy for overlooking Chinese-language sources in their analyses of the Nanyang style, arguing that these sources are essential for a more balanced understanding of Southeast Asian art. This gap highlights the need for a deeper exploration of the specific contributions of Malaysian-Chinese artists through Chinese-language sources, which can reveal insights into the complex socio-political context of post-independence Malaysia and its influence on artistic expression.

While the Nanyang pioneers established a foundation for modern ink artistic exploration, Malaysian-Chinese artists continued integrating local influences with modern ink techniques. This shift is best shown by the emergence of the "Neo-Nanyang", a new adaptation of the Nanyang style that reflects both the historical legacy and the modern realities of Malaysian society. This term has emerged in recent years to describe a renewed interpretation of the Nanyang style, reflecting the continuity and evolution of this tradition. Exhibitions such as "New Nanyang Style: 55 Years of Painting" (*New Nanyang style*, 2013) have demonstrated the ongoing relevance of this concept. Yet, there is still much to explore regarding how Malaysian-Chinese artists have redefined the Nanyang tradition to reflect their unique cultural identity.

Moreover, Singaporean modern artist Ho Ho Ying also uses the term "Post-Nanyang Style" to discuss the works of second-generation Nanyang artists who

nostalgically reflect on the past amid urbanisation (Ho, 1998). Another notable source that discussed ink painting is the exhibition catalogue "Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century", published by the National Gallery Singapore in 2015. The book features a range of scholarly essays, including a chapter entitled "Nanyang Reverie" by Ong (2015) and "Tradition Unfettered: The Story of Singapore Ink" by Heng (2015), which discusses the development of ink painting in Singapore, by tracing its evolution from traditional Chinese art forms to its transformation within the Singaporean context.

While these investigations offer a comprehensive overview of ink painting's evolution in Southeast Asia, they do not address the development of modern ink painting in post-independence Malaysia. Over and above, other research includes Yvonne Low's analysis that reveals how Nanyang artists have negotiated complex cultural identities, contributing to Southeast Asian modern art (Y. Low, 2012) along with Emelia Ong Ian Li and Izmer Ahmad's (2015) paper that highlights the need to re-evaluate Malayan art within the broader context of cultural and national identity formation through the study of dynamic nature of the cultural expression of modern artworks in Malaysia. Although these studies focus on Nanyang artists, their exploration of cultural hybridity and identity in understanding the development of Neo-Nanyang modern ink art is still understudied.

As such, this paper will attempt to address this gap by discussing how Malaysian-Chinese artists have engaged with questions of cultural identity through their artworks by applying Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as a continuous process of “being” and “becoming.” Hall (1994) states, “Cultural identity is not a fixed essence... it is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (p. 223). This perspective helps in discovering the inner reason of Neo-Nanyang artists constantly negotiate their identities within the Malaysian context, reflecting both their cultural heritage and adaptation to new influences that could be observed in their modern ink artworks. Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the “Third Space” is also relevant and will be used here. Bhabha (2004) writes, “It is that third space... which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (p. 55). This notion of a “third space” is useful in examining how Neo-Nanyang artists blend traditional and modern elements, creating a vibrant, evolving cultural expression through their art.

Research Objectives

This study aims to fill that gap by examining how modern ink artists engage with local and global influences to create a dynamic, evolving art form that speaks to Malaysia's multicultural context. It aims to address the evolution of modern ink art in post-independence Malaysia, an

area that has received limited scholarly attention. Specifically, it seeks to answer three research questions: What defines Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting? Why did Malaysian-Chinese artists adopt Neo-Nanyang modern ink art? And how do these modern ink artworks express the cultural identity of Malaysian-Chinese artists in post-independence Malaysia?

The study examines the modern ink artworks of Malaysian-Chinese artists who graduated from NAFA or were influenced by the Nanyang pioneers to investigate these questions. Key figures include Chung Chen Sun (1935–2024), Le Chek Wen (1934–1988), Cheah Thien Soong (1942–2024), Lok How Yuan (1956–), and Chong Choy (1970–). These artists were chosen for their ongoing exploration and dedication to modern ink art, their significant role in developing modern ink, not limited to their creativity, but also their community in promoting the arts and their impact on modern ink art trends in Malaysia.

Although this study analyses modern ink painting's evolution chronologically, tracing its progression from the post-1965 period to the present day, it will also examine how Malaysian-Chinese artists moved beyond the Nanyang style, embracing abstraction and modern techniques in the 1970s, integrating local heritage with global influences by the 1980s, and sustaining Neo-Nanyang's relevance in Malaysia's art scene through the 1990s. This paper will further discuss how, in the 2000s and beyond, Malaysian-Chinese artists have continued their commitment to sustaining

and redefining cultural heritage in a modern context despite contemporary art and diverse cultural influences. Hopefully, this chronological approach can offer more insights into Neo-Nanyang's role in the continually evolving cultural identity of Malaysian-Chinese artists, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on Southeast Asian modern ink art up to 2023.

METHODS

This study combines artistic and contextual analysis to examine Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting in Malaysia. Five artists were selected for their distinct contributions to Neo-Nanyang art, representing a range of innovative styles, thematic concerns, and educational impact within Malaysia's cultural landscape. The analysis focuses on two paintings by Chung Chen Sun, offering a comparative perspective on his evolving style. This is followed by an in-depth examination of individual creative approaches and thematic concerns through the discussion of one representative artwork by the following artists—Le Chek Wen, Cheah Thien Soong, Lok How Yuan, and Chong Choy, especially in the context of the artworks' visual qualities, stylistic and thematic details. This is done by referring to various secondary sources, including archival materials from NAFA and the Malaysian Institute of Art, monographs, exhibition catalogues, and academic publications detailing the works and careers of the selected artists.

The visual analysis will examine the composition, colour, brush line, and ink

medium, revealing how these elements contribute to each artwork's aesthetic impact and meaning. The stylistic analysis will investigate the fusion of traditional Chinese ink techniques with Western influences, such as Abstract Expressionism, to identify hybrid forms that challenge conventional boundaries.

An interdisciplinary framework combining New Art History and Cultural Studies approaches is used to contextualise the dimensions of Neo-Nanyang art. The study also draws on Stuart Hall's theories of Cultural Identity and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of Hybridity and the Third Space as a conceptual foundation to analyse the formation, transformation, and expression of cultural identities within the Malaysian Chinese artistic context. By situating these theories within Malaysia's unique cultural and social landscape, the study seeks to illuminate the motivations driving Neo-Nanyang's development and the expression of Malaysian-Chinese identity in transition, especially in the context of cultural narratives, personal experiences, and the socio-political shifts of post-independence Malaysia, capturing the tension between tradition and modernity and reflecting the artists' responses to globalisation and national identity formation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Neo-Nanyang Ink Art: Innovation with Local Elements

Most Malaysian Chinese modern ink artists received their formal art education from NAFA and were influenced by the Nanyang

pioneer artists. NAFA, as the earliest formal institution for modern art education in Southeast Asia, and the pioneers laid the foundation for the continued exploration of the ink medium in modern art, inspiring subsequent artists to move beyond (Tan, 1997). They encouraged students to explore their Chinese heritage and contemporary artistic practices, laying the foundation for what would later evolve into the Neo-Nanyang style. As artists and mentors, they were pivotal in shaping the course of modern ink art in Malaysia, fostering a legacy of creativity and cultural exchange. This influence inspired future generations of artists, who continued these new art approaches after graduation (Kwok, 1996; Ong, 2015).

Educated at NAFA, many Malaysian Chinese artists carried forward the legacy of Nanyang art, with some becoming key figures in the field of ink art. Upon returning to their hometowns, they continued to explore and push the boundaries of ink art, building on traditional Chinese ink heritage and the innovative approaches the Nanyang pioneer artists introduced. These artists adapted their practices to Malaysia's local subjects in the evolving cultural context by defining a regional identity that blended traditional Chinese techniques with Western modernism, contributing to the development of Neo-Nanyang modern ink art.

According to Tan Chee Beng, the Malaysian Chinese who identify as Malaysian and Chinese reflect a dual sense of identity shaped by their diverse local experiences. While maintaining

historical and cultural ties to China, the Malaysian Chinese identity has evolved through localisation, leading to a shared self-identification as Malaysians within a multi-ethnic context (Tan, 1997). This dual identity is evident in the works of Neo-Nanyang artists, who reinterpret traditional ink heritage while embracing a distinctly Malaysian identity.

The concept of a dual identity corresponds with Stuart Hall's ideas of “being” and “becoming.” Hall describes “being” as a shared sense of identity rooted in a collective history and heritage—a core basis that unites individuals with a common lineage (Hall, 1994). For Malaysian Chinese artists, “being” is expressed through a deep connection to traditional Chinese culture, history, and art forms, particularly in their ink painting techniques and medium. This element of “being” reflects their work in a shared cultural foundation, preserving the legacy of their Chinese heritage even as they evolve new artistic expressions. The traditional motifs, brush techniques, and aesthetic principles Neo-Nanyang artists incorporate continually affirm their Chinese identity, forming a core that connects them with their ancestry.

At the same time, Stuart Hall highlights “becoming” as the dynamic aspect of identity that evolves through continuous interaction and adaptation. This perspective is clearly visible in the Malaysian Chinese artists' shift in the subject matter to include Malaysian local people, local scenes, and tropical flora. Neo-Nanyang modern ink paintings demonstrate how cultural identity

can be rooted in heritage and open to change, embodying continuity and transformation.

Born in Malacca, Malaysia, Chung Chen Sun (1935–2024) began his studies in 1953 at NAFA’s Department of Art Education. Deeply impacted by Western modernism, Chung realised that Malaysian art could transcend traditional subject matter through innovative visual languages. His modern ink artworks reflected his philosophy of prioritising the medium’s expressive potential over representational accuracy.

Chung’s extensive work from the 1970s prominently features indigenous themes of Malaysian villagers, characterised by broad strokes achieved with wide brushes—a deliberate shift from the delicate precision of classical ink painting (Zhu, 2009). His *East Coast Villagers* (Figure 1) exemplifies the Neo-Nanyang style by

combining traditional Chinese techniques with Southeast Asian themes. This piece is notable for its innovative fusion of expressive brushwork and vibrant local imagery, illustrating Chung’s openness to experimentation. The artist’s inscription in Chinese calligraphy, “东海岸村民之生活情趣入画有殊境,” translates to “The village life of the East Coast of Malaysia has a unique charm when expressed through ink art,” highlighting his intent to celebrate the region’s distinct identity.

A formal analysis of *East Coast Villager* uncovers a composition where the interplay of bright colours and bold ink strokes generates a sense of movement and depth, creating a vibrant visual rhythm. Chung’s depiction of local figures, such as the blue-dressed men and the woman selecting fruits, roots the work firmly in the everyday life of Malaysian villagers, with darker skin



Figure 1. Chung Chen Sun, *East Coast Villagers*, 2004; Chinese ink and colour on paper, 136cm × 65cm. (Source: Chung Chen Sun Art Museum collection)

tones and traditional attire. The use of space and balanced figures hints at modernist influences yet raises questions about how these stylistic choices may shift the work away from classical ink traditions. His brushwork suggests the Southern Song artist Liang Kai influenced him,⁴ known for his expressive brushwork. Traces of these influences can be observed through how Chung merges the traditional spontaneity of his brushwork with a modern art form that can be observed through the black outline. This blending of styles enriches the work, although it could be viewed as distanced from the refined techniques of Chinese ink heritage.

Comparatively, Chung Chen Sun’s approach diverges from his teacher Cheong Soo Pieng’s idealised portrayals of local figures, which often featured elongated limbs and stylised forms, blending Chinese ink painting with an abstract aesthetic (Chua, 2011). While both artists explore the local figure, *East Coast Villagers* by Chung stands out for its looser, fluid brushstrokes that suggest a more grounded, authentic representation of cultural identity that differs from Cheong’s approach. Cheong’s stylised figures present an abstract, romanticised view of Southeast Asian identity, whereas Chung’s expressive brushwork captures everyday life with immediacy, emphasising lived experience over idealisation. This shift suggests that Neo-Nanyang artists,

like Chung, were increasingly interested in portraying cultural identity as something lived and authentic, reflecting the textures and rhythms of local life.

This corresponds with Stuart Hall’s “being” and “becoming” theory. Chung’s use of ink medium and techniques captures a shared cultural identity (“being”), while his experimental methods reflect the ongoing evolution of that identity (“becoming”). Chung’s use of traditional ink techniques reflects a shared cultural foundation (“being”), while his innovative methods and local themes embody an evolving identity (“becoming”). This dynamic interplay between continuity and adaptation is central to the Neo-Nanyang approach, prompting reflection on whether such innovations enrich or risk diminishing the cultural heritage they reinterpret.

Another key figure in Neo-Nanyang art is Cheah Thien Soong (1942-2024). Born in Negeri Sembilan, Cheah graduated from the NAFA in 1962. During his studies in Singapore, he was mentored by pioneering artists in both Chinese and Western painting. NAFA’s curriculum and environment encouraged experimentation and innovation, allowing students such as Cheah to explore various artistic styles and techniques. Cheah integrated his ideas with the knowledge he gained, developing his unique painting and calligraphy styles after he returned to Malaysia.

Cheah Thien Soong’s *Trees and Flowers* (Figure 2) reflects traditional Chinese aesthetics. However, upon closer examination, it also incorporates key

⁴ Liang Kai was active during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) of China. He was known for his expressive “xieyi” (写意) or “freehand” style, which emphasised spontaneity and captured the spirit of the subject rather than detailed realism.



Figure 2. Cheah Thien Soong, *Trees and Flowers*, 2005; Chinese ink and colour on paper, 136cm × 65cm. (Source: Private collection)

elements that position it within the new approach of ink art. While the composition, featuring large, tropical-like trees and the careful balance of Chinese calligraphy, remains rooted in traditional ink painting principles, Cheah's innovative approach to space, composition, and local subjects demonstrates his integration of contemporary composition techniques. This could be observed by how he divided the painting into various segments and used negative space (i.e., the dark background) to create visual depth. This strategic layout, combined with the tropical subject matter, reflects the Neo-Nanyang artists' focus on representing their Southeast Asian environment while preserving Chinese cultural heritage.

The fluidity and dynamism in Cheah's brushstrokes and his use of subtle yet bold colour contrasts embody the spirit of modern ink experimentation, a hallmark of the Neo-Nanyang approach. In *Trees and Flowers*,

the tropical trees symbolise the Malaysian landscape, while the calligraphy and ink techniques are linked to their Chinese cultural heritage. This synthesis of influences represents the essence of Neo-Nanyang modern ink art, where cultural identity is continuously redefined and expressed through innovative artistic exploration. Neo-Nanyang modern ink art goes beyond the foundational Nanyang concept by blending Eastern and Western techniques and emphasising a deeper engagement with local themes and an experimental approach to modern ink art.

As early NAFA graduates, Chung Chen Sun and Cheah Thien Soong modernised traditional ink painting techniques through their ink art expression. Chung Chen Sun's bold and innovative style, which emphasises human and social life, contrasts sharply with Cheah Thien Soong's meticulous and detail-oriented approach, which focuses

on nature and static beauty. Despite these differences, both artists share commonalities in their commitment to modern ink art and their integration of traditional techniques with contemporary themes. Both Chung and Cheah bridge tradition and modernity in Chinese ink art, blending classical techniques with innovative approaches. They are inspired by Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies, focusing on harmony and nature.

While Chung leans towards abstraction, Cheah emphasises expressive brushwork. Both contribute significantly to evolving ink art and mentoring future generations through exhibitions and education. Chung founded the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA) in 1967 and the International Contemporary Ink Painting Association (ICIPA) in 1982, promoting contemporary ink art across Asia (Bowen, 2023). Following in the footsteps of NAFA, Chung opened the first ink art department at MIA in 1990 (Bowen, 2023). Cheah founded the Cao Tang Men Eastern Arts Society (CTM) in 2005 to preserve Chinese ink art in Malaysia (*Introduction*, n.d.).

The NAFA graduates correspond to Hall's (1994) elaboration: “reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide us as ‘one people’” (p. 223). Their dedication to preserving ink art through education and artistic efforts meets with traditional ink art practices while embracing modern techniques. Their evolving practices demonstrate Hall's view that cultural identity is a fluid, evolving construct shaped by ongoing interactions and influences. Chung

and Cheah's contributions sustain and innovate this art form, fostering appreciation among new generations and promoting a Malaysian national identity through local subjects.

For example, the new generation of modern ink artists, Chong Choy, who graduated from the NAFA in 1993 and was the chairman of CTM, became one of the most prominent figures in Malaysian modern ink art. *Tireless of the Rain* (Figure 3) by Chong Choy captures the essence of banana flowers and a bird through fluid and expressive brushwork. The banana flower, a plant native to tropical regions, is a distinctive, localised subject seldom seen as the subject matter of Chinese ink art. The choice of subject matter in this work reflects tropical flora and fauna, tying the artwork to the natural environment of the region. The limited palette highlights the vibrant pinks of the flowers, drawing attention to their importance in the composition. The bird adds a sense of liveliness and movement, creating a dynamic interaction between the elements.

In *Tireless of the Rain* (2023), Chong Choy places the banana flower hanging from the top, mimicking the flow of falling water and creating a sense of movement and vitality. This choice of composition, along with the expressive brushstrokes, emphasises the flower's dynamic, resilience and energy. By selecting this unique subject matter and approach, Chong not only showcases the tropical lifestyle and environment of Malaysia but also underscores a broader shift in modern ink painting.



Figure 3. Chong Choy, *Tireless of the Rain*, 2023; 138cm × 39cm, Chinese ink and colour on rice paper. (Source: Image courtesy of the artist)

The discussion effectively highlights Neo-Nanyang modern ink art as a distinct evolution in Malaysian art, driven by the innovative contributions of post-independence artists who have built upon the foundations of the Nanyang pioneers. While the Nanyang pioneers initially blended Western modernism with traditional Chinese techniques, Neo-Nanyang artists

furthered this by integrating local Malaysian themes. This is evident in their broader brushstrokes, expressive use of colour, and thematic focus on local subjects, which set their work apart from traditional Chinese ink heritage and Nanyang styles.

The term "Neo" signifies not merely a continuation but a genuine transformation in the art form, as these artists explore new compositions and subject matter to create works that resonate with their regional identity. Techniques such as innovative uses of negative space, fluid board brushwork, and movement reflect this modern, experimental approach, where Malaysian landscapes and cultural symbols are integrated with ink art's Chinese heritage. Therefore, Neo-Nanyang embodies a hybrid identity that merges tradition with local context and contemporary realities, redefining ink art as an expressive medium for Malaysian Chinese artists.

Furthermore, Neo-Nanyang artists, such as Chung Chen Sun, Cheah Thien Soong and Chong Choy, assumed mentorship roles, sharing their technical expertise and encouraging the evolution of ink painting among younger artists. This tradition of mentorship and education has kept Neo-Nanyang ink painting vibrant and pertinent by enabling it to embrace Malaysia's rich cultural diversity while preserving and showcasing Malaysia's multicultural identity. Through this interplay of innovation and preservation, Neo-Nanyang art continues to grow, sustaining a dialogue between traditions and modern expressions within the Malaysian context.

Hybrid Art Approach of Abstract Expressionism

In the broader artistic context, Malaysian Chinese ink artists maintained their use of ink-based mediums and began experimenting with abstraction in the early 1960s. Movements at the time, particularly the internationalisation of American Abstract Expressionism, provided a key subtext to the collective response to abstraction and engagement with ink painting traditions in Singapore (Cai, 2015).

The international influence of American Abstract Expressionism significantly shaped their collective approach to abstraction and engagement with ink painting traditions. Artists of this period used the hybrid art approach with ink and calligraphy elements as “ink aesthetics” in modern art contexts (Moon, 2019). Abstract Expressionism is a post-World War II art movement that strongly emphasises spontaneity, emotional intensity, and abstraction (Ahmad & Darestani, 2017). Schinneller (1965) highlights how Abstract Expressionism rejected traditional craftsmanship and embraced intuitive and spontaneous techniques. This approach inspired movements integrating such methods into ink aesthetics, emphasising “action painting” and abstract dynamics. Roberts's (2015) discussion of the integration of abstraction in Chinese modern ink art highlights how conceptual ideas are inspired by Abstract Expressionism, enabling contemporary artists to redefine traditional brush and ink painting techniques. This

style often draws inspiration from Eastern calligraphy, particularly the “xieyi” style, which literally means “writing thoughts and emotions” (S. W. Low, 2020, p. 5). It emphasises the expression of feelings and spontaneous, free-flowing brushwork, much like the core tenets of Abstract Expressionism (Chow & Abdullah, 2024).

For example, Nanyang pioneer artists such as Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng were at the forefront of this challenge, experimenting with abstract styles (S. W. Low, 2020). This trend of abstract expression also spread to Hong Kong and Taiwanese artists, such as Lui Shou Kwan and Liu Kuo-sung, who ventured into abstraction (Lai, 2011).

Modern abstract art became popular in Malaysia in the mid-20th century. Artists were inspired by Western art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, but localised their approach in terms of subject matter. The artists mixed traditional and modern techniques to create unique styles. Lee (1992) explains that Malaysia’s version of modernity is influenced by its colonial history, ethnic diversity, and global connection.

The 1970s witnessed cultural shifts influenced by governmental policies, particularly regarding Islam, impacting the art scene (Abdullah, 2018). Many artists in Malaysia, such as Abdul Latiff Mohidin and Ibrahim Hussein, also developed a distinctive approach that blended local Malaysian elements and daily life with a mix of local and Western aesthetics (Abdullah, 2013).



Figure 4. Chung Chen Sun, *Abstract Figure*, 2004; Chinese ink and colour on paper, 136cm × 68cm. (Source: YNUFE Chung Chen Sun Art Museum)

In the context of post-independent Malaysia, the influence of Abstract Expressionism is also evident in another modern ink artwork by Chung Chen Sun entitled *Abstract Figure* (Figure 4). It exemplifies a vibrant application of Chinese ink, demonstrating a free and expressive style. More abstract than *East Coast Villagers*, the representation of a figure is suggested using gestural lines with ink medium and abstract forms. In *Abstract Figure*, the artwork transcends simple binary oppositions from the artist himself to the others and from local elements to the world art, offering a more complex site for cultural interaction.

This layered complexity is associated with the broader themes of Neo-Nanyang ink art, which similarly integrates diverse influences to craft a unique cultural expression. It is necessary to compare Neo-Nanyang ink art with Chinese ink

painting and Sumi-e to contextualise these characteristics further. Such comparisons reveal the shared traditional foundations and philosophical approaches while underscoring the distinctive philosophies and cultural influences that set Neo-Nanyang ink art apart, particularly in its embrace of hybridity and dialogue with global modernism.

Sumi-e is a traditional Japanese ink painting style that emphasises simplicity, minimalism, and capturing the essence of the subject, reflecting Zen Buddhist philosophy (Northam, 2023). This art form originated in China as part of the larger tradition of Chinese ink painting but was brought to Japan during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) (Levine, 2012). While its origins lie in Chinese ink traditions, its development in Japan shaped its unique identity, particularly through its emphasis on negative space and introspection. While

Chinese ink painting, Sumi-e, and Neo-Nanyang ink art share roots in using ink as a core medium, focusing on brushwork, tonal shifts, and the spiritual essence of their subjects, their philosophical and cultural contexts reveal distinct differences.

In contrast, Neo-Nanyang ink art represents a distinctly Southeast Asian evolution of the ink tradition and is shaped by cultural hybridity and regional identity. It diverges from the philosophical foundations of Chinese ink painting and Sumi-e by focusing on themes of local landscapes, community life, and postcolonial narratives.

Chinese ink painting, deeply rooted in Confucian and Daoist philosophies, balances expressive freedom (*xieyi*) and intricate realism (*gongbi*) (Mokhtar, 2023). Over time, it has embraced contemporary innovations while maintaining its connection to historical and cultural heritage. In contrast, Neo-Nanyang ink art adapts these traditional techniques to reflect the hybrid realities of Malaysia and Singapore, blending them with modern abstraction. This integration transforms the visual language and challenges the conventional boundaries of ink art. Despite these distinctions, the shared focus on spontaneity and abstraction offers a point of comparison. Sumi-e’s spontaneity arises from Zen practice, seeking spiritual resonance, while Neo-Nanyang abstraction stems from cultural reinterpretation and hybrid aesthetics.

Examining these traditions through the lens of their unique cultural and artistic goals can help us better understand the extent to which Chung’s work integrates

elements of spontaneity, abstraction, and cultural narrative. For example, Chung’s Neo-Nanyang ink art foregrounds regional identity and community life, illustrating how ink art adapts to new cultural landscapes.

Furthermore, this adaptability reflects Malaysia’s cultural hybridity, positioning Neo-Nanyang art as a bridge between Eastern traditions and Southeast Asian identities. However, it raises critical questions: Does this hybridity redefine ink art as a global form, or does it primarily adapt to local contexts? Exploring these dynamics could deepen the understanding of Neo-Nanyang art’s role in the global dialogue on modern ink painting.

Neo-Nanyang artists’ abstract expression can be analysed through Homi K. Bhabha’s (2004) concept of the Third Space, where cultural hybridity manifests as a site of negotiation and transformation. In this conceptual site, cultures interact and merge, producing new and transformative expressions that are neither wholly original nor entirely derivative. The “Third Space” emphasises transition and intersection, where time and space create dynamic figures of identity and difference. As Bhabha asserts, this is not about a complete departure from the past but about redefining and reimagining cultural practices for the future.

For instance, in Neo-Nanyang works such as *Abstract Figure*, traditional Chinese ink painting techniques converge with modern Abstract Expressionism, creating a compelling interplay of spontaneity and control. The quick, gestural strokes evoke movement and vitality, demonstrating

the fusion of Eastern and Western artistic traditions. This synthesis aligns with Bhabha's idea that the Third Space becomes a site of negotiation, where identities and practices are reinterpreted and reshaped. The artwork visually captures the fluidity of cultural identities, which are not fixed but are constantly redefined through interaction and exchange.

By embodying cultural hybridity, *Abstract Figure* challenges notions of static or pure cultural identities, illustrating Bhabha's claim that cultural identities emerge from processes of negotiation and translation. The reimagined use of traditional ink painting within a modern framework reflects how new meanings are created, situating the artwork as a manifestation of cultural transformation. This process exemplifies the transformative potential of hybridity, where diverse influences come together to produce innovative forms and ideas.

Furthermore, this dynamic mirrors Stuart Hall's theory that cultural identity is an ongoing process of becoming rather than a fixed essence. According to Hall, cultural identities are constantly shaped and reshaped through encounters with different cultural elements (Hall, 1994). In this context, Neo-Nanyang art becomes a dialogue between past and present, East and West, traditional and modern, highlighting the continuous evolution of cultural practices.

The transformative power of Neo-Nanyang art lies in its ability to reinterpret tradition without abandoning it, reflecting Hall's emphasis on the fluidity of identity.

By positioning works such as *Abstract Figure* within the Third Space, it can be seen how art becomes a powerful medium for exploring and shaping the dynamics of cultural interaction, paving the way for new possibilities in artistic expression and cultural understanding.

In contrast, Le Chek Wen's *Landscape* (Figure 5) employs a monochromatic palette, focusing on shades of black, white, and grey to emphasise form over colour, which differs significantly from Chung Chen Sun. This painting abstracts natural forms into bold ink washes and fluid lines. Le Chek Wen, born in Malaysia and a graduate of the NAFA in 1956, played a significant role in the evolution of modern ink painting. Like many of his contemporaries, Le was influenced by the teachings of pioneer Nanyang artists and incorporated spontaneity and emotional depth in his work, bridging "xieyi" and Abstract Expressionism (Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, 2014). His works, including *Landscape*, demonstrate a commitment to experimentation, employing bold ink washes and free brushstrokes to create a sense of movement and depth.

Le Chek Wen's work contrasts Western modern art, particularly Mark Tobey's abstract art. Tobey's work, *white writing* (1934), explores spiritual and cosmological themes, integrating Eastern philosophies into his abstract style (Yao, 1985). Le focuses on reinterpreting natural forms while maintaining a dialogue with traditional Chinese landscape painting, contrasting Le's hybrid approach of modern ink painting that blends abstract art with diverse traditions.



Figure 5. Le Chek Wen, Landscape, 138 cm × 68 cm, 1980s; Ink and colour on rice papers are part of the private collection. (Source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Le-Chek-Wen/3465F2DAA3001B52>)

Chinese ink traditions with modern Western art redefining the medium to reflect their hybrid identities and contemporary influences. Neo-Nanyang artists like Le Chek Wen and Chung Chen Sun incorporated Abstract Expressionism into their ink works through bold, expressive strokes and fluid compositions.

On the other hand, Lok How Yuan's work represents a form of cultural dialogue in which he maintains his distinctive identity while engaging with the broader narratives of contemporary art. Lok received his diploma in art from the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA) in 1979, furthered his studies, and majored in painting at the San Francisco Art Institute of the USA in 1981 (*Flying thoughts*, 2016). This experience of education abroad set the stage for a career marked by cross-cultural exploration and innovation.

Lok How Yuan's *The Absurd Combination* (Figure 6) merges traditional

ink techniques with modern themes on a large piece of rice paper. It explores the tension between abstraction and figuration using bold ink strokes and a limited grey with vivid touches of green. Upon closer inspection, the abstract form on the right initially resembles a cactus. The bold, exaggerated depiction raises questions about the boundaries of physicality and societal norms, sparking a conversation about sexuality, power, and identity. Lok challenges conventional representations, using this provocative imagery to blur the lines between abstraction and figuration. The female figure on the left, with its curvilinear shapes and angular background lines, contrasts softness and rigidity, hinting at the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity.

Unlike the landscapes and harmonious compositions often seen in traditional ink paintings, Lok's work disrupts these expectations by integrating absurd and



Figure 6. Lok How Yuan, "The Absurd Combination", 2007; 180 cm × 90 cm, Ink and colour on rice paper. (Source: Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist)

sexual elements. The artist deliberately uses the ink medium to challenge its conventional associations with serenity and balance, with provocative forms contrasting sharply with the more peaceful themes traditionally depicted in ink art.

Moreover, by positioning Malaysian ink art within these global frameworks, *Abstract Figure* can be viewed as a localised interpretation and an innovative response to global ink art movements. Le Chek Wen's abstract ink landscapes are minimalist, emphasising form over colour through fluid brushstrokes and a monochromatic palette, which evoke a meditative quality focused on nature's essence. In contrast, Lok How Yuan's figural abstractions, *The Absurd Combination*, use bold ink strokes and surreal forms to challenge societal norms, often blending abstraction with figuration to explore themes of identity and sexuality. Together, these artists demonstrate the diversity within Neo-Nanyang ink art,

where Le focuses on the serene abstraction of nature. At the same time, Lok uses abstraction to provoke critical thought on human experience and cultural hybridity.

This broader perspective highlights Malaysia's role in redefining traditional media through a multicultural perspective, thereby enriching the understanding of how ink art evolves across different cultural contexts. Emphasising Malaysia's contribution to the global ink art discourse illustrates how Southeast Asian artists contribute uniquely to modern ink art, asserting cultural identity while engaging with the international art community.

Moreover, the concepts of identity, fluidity and hybridity offered valuable perspectives on the development and significance of modern ink painting in the postcolonial context of Malaysia. As Bhabha (1994) articulates, the prefix in terms such as "postcolonialism" carries with it a transformative energy that redefines

the present and opens new possibilities for cultural expression and self-representation. This "restless and revisionary energy" transforms the present into an expanded and complex site of experience, offering opportunities for empowerment through cultural negotiation and redefinition. In the case of Malaysian Chinese modern ink artists, this energy is evident in what has been discussed: how they continuously reimagine traditional Chinese artistic practices within a postcolonial and multi-ethnic Malaysia. Their work reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity and engages with local, national, and global influences in new and innovative ways.

However, this process of cultural negotiation did not occur in isolation. The broader socio-political landscape of post-independence Malaysia, particularly the Islamisation policies implemented by the government, played a significant role in shaping the country's artistic and cultural output (Abdullah, 2020). These policies, which aimed to promote Malay-Islamic culture as the foundation of national identity, created a challenging environment for artists working outside this framework, especially Chinese ink painters. As Abdullah (2020) highlighted, although the Islamisation policy reinforced Islamic elements, many artists resisted these frameworks, choosing instead to engage with global art trends and individual expression.

Despite this cultural shift, Neo-Nanyang modern ink artists, particularly those of Chinese descent, found ways to navigate and resist these influences. Rather than conforming to state-driven

cultural mandates, their works were more profoundly shaped by global art movements such as Abstract Expressionism and the broader dialogues of modernism. It can be argued that their art has become a form of resistance, pushing the boundaries of cultural expression while adapting to, and sometimes resisting, the state-driven narrative of cultural homogenisation.

Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting represents an innovative blend of traditional Chinese techniques with Malaysian and global influences. While this approach has energised the art form, it raises complex questions about balancing cultural heritage with contemporary innovation. Arguably, with the shift from the Nanyang style to modernised ink art, artists prioritise adaptability and broader appeal over cultural authenticity. This tension reflects a core challenge in Neo-Nanyang's evolution: the balance between honouring tradition and engaging with global art.

For Malaysian Chinese artists, the Neo-Nanyang style serves as a bridge to their Chinese heritage and a means to express their Malaysian identity within a post-independence multicultural context. Yet, this dual focus can be fraught with tension. The desire to remain connected to their Chinese roots while adapting to Malaysia's diverse cultural context drives these artists into a delicate negotiation between continuity and change.

CONCLUSION

This study defines Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting as a hybrid art form that synthesises traditional Chinese ink techniques with

regional Malaysian subjects and global art influences by critically analysing the contributions of Neo-Nanyang artists such as Chung Chen Sun, Le Chek Wen, Cheah Thien Soong, Lok How Yuan, and Chong Choy, this study highlights their pivotal role in redefining traditional Chinese ink painting, as they integrated Abstract Expressionism and Southeast Asian themes and established a new artistic paradigm distinct from the Nanyang style.

The findings of this study provide significant contributions to the field of art history, especially in Malaysia and Singapore, as it addresses critical gaps in the scholarship on Malaysian-Chinese modern ink art. The discussion we have highlighted in this paper enriches the body of art history knowledge by examining how Neo-Nanyang artists navigate the interplay between cultural identity, hybridity, and modernity, offering a nuanced perspective on the evolution of Southeast Asian modern ink painting. These insights position Malaysian modern ink art as a regional innovation and a significant voice in global art narratives, expanding its relevance beyond local art history.

Through their artistic and educational efforts, both Chung Chen Sun and Cheah Thien Soong have played key roles in sustaining and transforming the legacy of the Nanyang pioneers. Their contributions extend beyond mere preservation, actively transforming traditional Chinese ink art into a platform for contemporary expression that bridges heritage and modernity. By combining traditional techniques with

innovative artistic approaches, they have established a dynamic framework that ensures the continued growth of modern ink art in Malaysia.

This paper also examines how Neo-Nanyang modern ink painting addresses the complex question of cultural identity. Employing Stuart Hall's concept of "being" and "becoming," this study explores how Neo-Nanyang artists balance the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary influences, illustrating the evolving process of identity formation. Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity and the "Third Space" elucidate how these works serve as cultural convergences, reimagining traditional forms within a multicultural and postcolonial framework.

By critically analysing selected artworks and applying theoretical concepts of cultural identity and hybridity, this study highlights Neo-Nanyang's transformative role in redefining modern ink art within Malaysia's complex socio-political and cultural landscape. These contributions, as discussed in this paper, enhance the understanding of regional modern ink painting within the broader global art historical discourse by positioning Neo-Nanyang as a distinctive and influential voice in postcolonial and modern art contexts. These works by these artists demonstrate the relevance of ink art not only as an aesthetic innovation but also as a medium for asserting identity amidst Malaysia's socio-political shifts and multicultural context.

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