

# Expressions of Hybridity as Strategy for Malayan Nationalism: Selected Artworks in Modern Malayan Art

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines selected artworks produced by Malayan artists of Chinese descent during the 1950s and 1960s within the contexts of Malayan nationalism and cultural identity. Local art historical writing frequently discusses their works as individualistic journeys in art, detached from nationalistic discourse and derivative of Western artistic movements. By employing the notions of hybridity to re-examine their works, this paper argues that this misleading view of their works is based on essentialist and static conceptions of Malayan culture. In contrast, this paper demonstrates how the artists employed non-essentialist concepts of identity based on otherness rather than similarity, to construct a criterion for authenticity and belonging. It emphasises the agency of the artists as active participants in the making of the new Malayan nation state within the field of art. It posits their works collectively as expressions of hybridity as strategy for Malayan nationalism. Subsequently, the notion of hybridity enables the viewing of cultural exchanges and borrowings in art within a horizontal model of cultural development rather than a concentric one which privileges Western culture*

*or Chinese culture at the centre. This research employs a qualitative research methodology based on primary and secondary resources. This includes semi-structured interviews, first-hand viewing of artworks at art galleries, state-owned museums and private collections; archival research and secondary sources such as books, exhibition catalogues, newspapers, journal articles and unpublished dissertations. The theoretical framework is interdisciplinary in approach, supplementing art historical methods with those from cultural studies. This approach is in line with methods of "the new art history" which avoids purely formalistic analysis and emphasises the importance of contextual analysis. This paper contributes not only to the writing and analysis of Malaysian modern art but may be viewed comparatively to other Southeast Asian modern art histories who share similarities in their employment of Western modern art and their search for a legitimate national cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** *modern Malaysian art, hybridity, Malayan nationalism, identity, Chinese diaspora, modernism*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at a number of artworks produced by Malaysian Chinese<sup>1</sup> artists who went overseas for art education from the 1950s onwards and returned to Malaya as art teachers and/or artists. The artists discussed in this paper include Yeoh Jinleng, Lee Joo For, Cheong Laitong, Patrick Ng Kah Onn and Chuah Thean Teng. These artists were mostly educated in Western universities with the exception of Chuah Thean Teng. The latter although educated in Amoy Academy of Art in China, learnt Western painting alongside Chinese traditional painting. Cheong Laitong and Patrick Ng were mostly self-taught but later also studied at western colleges.

This paper argues that even though the artworks produced by these artists were varied in subject matter, approach and style, their works may be viewed as a construction of Malayan

identity that was centred on the idea of the plurality of the different ethnic communities that make up the population of Malaya. Their notion of Malayan identity was built on the foundation of a Malayan nationalist sentiment and spirit that emerged during the 1950s.

Within this context, the notion of hybridity is positioned in this paper as a strategy for Malayan nationalism. The first part of the paper highlights the role of culture in the making of a Malayan nation-state and the various notions of a Malayan identity in art based on ideas of plurality of cultures. These artists employed non-essentialist concepts of identity and attempted to produce artworks, which are based on otherness rather than one located within a singular Chinese or Malayan identity. Their notions of the national Malayan cultural identity is not constituted on the idea of shared similarity among Malaysians, rather it is based on the otherness of different ethnic communities. Moreover, the idea of plurality also includes the embracement of Western education and concepts. Their artworks thus played an important role towards the creation of a national culture, which is a quintessential element in the constitution of a nation.

The second part of the paper is then divided into four subsections. Each section discusses how hybridity offers alternative frameworks from which we can re-evaluate these selected artworks. The first subsection posits that the artists' individual trajectories in art should be viewed within rather than apart from the larger national narrative. The second underscores how the artists looked towards their shared cultural past and present to conceptualise their artworks. The third emphasises the agency of the artists in constructing a criteria for authenticity and belonging. Finally, the fourth demonstrates how the artists viewed Chinese identity as artistic resource rather than a privileged essence.

### **ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYA DURING THE 1950s**

Several significant steps were taken during the 1950s to develop a Malayan national culture within the field of art. This included:

1. The nomination of Superintendents of Art to improve the teaching of art (Jamal 1988; Hsu 1999: 97; Piyadasa 1994: 34).
2. The training of teachers in Kirkby College, England and the Specialist Teachers' Training Institute (STTI), Cheras, Kuala Lumpur (Kirkby College 2009; Wong and Chang 1975; *The Straits Times* [Singapore] 1953: 1; Yeoh, J. pers. comm., 29 August 2012).
3. The funding of scholarships for study abroad.<sup>2</sup>
4. The founding of the Malayan Arts Council<sup>3</sup> (Piyadasa 1994: 35–36; Jamal 1988).
5. The establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG)<sup>4</sup> (*The Malay Mail* 1958: 1; *Straits Echo & Times of Malaya* 1958: 2)

These developments were enabled by the productive negotiation between the British government and the newly elected local members of the federal government, various prominent associations and members of the local community (see Sheppard 1979; Lim 2012). The establishment of these institutional structures facilitated a productive discourse on the definitions of Malayan cultural identity as we will see from the artworks. Its rapid development also signalled the significance of the role of culture within the formation of the nation-state.

## THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE MAKING OF THE MALAYAN NATION-STATE

The crucial role of culture in the formation of a nation-state has been pointed out by Smith who stated that, "nationalisms across the world, including those of Asia began, not with armed struggle but with cultural renaissances in areas like literature, arts and crafts or music and dance" (Smith 1971). This was reflected during the 50s in Malaya where there was a conscious effort on the part of the British government and the Alliance government to develop a common Malayan outlook in preparation for the creation of an independent nation-state. Harper observed that interest in culture as the key in developing national unity, emerged at first within European circles who were interested in promoting the practice of "Malayanisation" in culture. However, he pointed out that the early manifestations of Malayanisation was at first a process of Anglicisation, which promoted the use of English language and employed English content heavily and combined these with local culture. As a response to this brand of "colonial culture," local writers, poets, playwrights and artists began to reconstruct a Malayan national identity that was based on local inspiration and resources (Harper 1999: 276–299). The short decolonisation period between the end of the Japanese Occupation and achievement of independence became a time of intense national cultural imaginings.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the artworks discussed in this paper form an interesting contribution during this period of Malayan cultural imagining.

It is useful to note that the notion of hybridity as used in this paper also encompasses the idea of synthesis or "syncretism", a term that has been employed to describe the process of assimilation of two or more cultural traditions. For example, Piyadasa has applied it to describe the works of the Nanyang artists, which draw from Chinese traditional painting and *The School of Paris* (Piyadasa 1993: 18). Apinan Poshyananda also employed the term "cultural syncretism" to describe the assimilation of art styles from various cultures into Thai art (Poshyananda 1993: 93). Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk pointed out the historical use of the term "syncretism" by ethnologists and anthropologists emerged in the 1940s as a way

of understanding the cultural effects of the native communities' encounters with the West (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005: 73–74). The use of the term "syncretism" to refer to cultural borrowings thus overlaps with the term "hybridity". However, the notion of hybridity (instead of syncretism) is used in this paper, to align the arguments posited here with more current discussions on hybridity as theorised by writers such as Papastergiadis, Pieterse and Ang who have used it as a "heuristic device" to examine the problems of identity and difference within contemporary inquiries in diaspora, colonial and postcolonial discourses. Thus, in this paper, the notion of hybridity can bring to the fore the concept of a national culture based on otherness rather than assimilation.

We need to avoid notions of hybridity that limit culture to traditional spaces<sup>6</sup> or simply categorise practices of hybridity as a "commodification of cultural difference" (Papastergiadis 2005: 51). In the latter point, Papastergiadis noted that the linking of hybridity to the processes of globalisation could sometimes reduce the practice of hybridity by viewing it as a "result of the external force of economic domination" (Papastergiadis 2005: 52). However, by avoiding these notions of hybridity we may be able to see how hybridity works as a strategy for living with difference. The examples of artworks below demonstrate the different positions taken up by the artists, as it is related to the notion of hybridity as a strategy for Malayan nationalism. The artists thus played an instrumental role in the shaping of this culture, by not merely reflecting or recording their cultural experiences, but by exercising their agency as the architects of culture, constructing a coherent visual language that would gradually be recognised as Malayan in spirit and content.

## **HYBRIDITY AS STRATEGY FOR MALAYAN NATIONALISM**

In local art writing, there seemed to be a dichotomy between artworks with "nationalistic" content and those that are based on more individualistic expressions.<sup>7</sup>

The artworks that projected more typically "Malayan themes" like village scenery and life, as well as those with visually recognisable cultural symbols such as the buffalo or the fishing boat are viewed as embodying a nationalistic sentiment. While the latter often refers to abstract artworks that are viewed as a journey in self-expression that are isolated from the national narrative. For instance, the artworks of the Angkatan Seni Pelukis Semenanjung (APS) has been recognised by some as "an expression of cultural values" and contrasted with the art of the Wednesday Art Group (WAG) as the "art as self-expression" (Mahamood 2007).<sup>8</sup>

This paper argues however, that this comparison is rather misleading and reductivist in its envisioning of a national culture that is based on essentialist concepts of Malayan culture. It is a concept that stresses the homogeneity of Malayan culture and dismisses hybridity for being uncritical of colonial culture. Because of this seemingly uncritical posture, hybridity is rejected for being unable to mount a necessary challenge to colonial culture and to propose a stable and coherent national culture. Therefore, the works of these artists proceeded from a different stance—one that discards essentialist conceptions of Malayan identity—and it is within this premise that they must be read. They focused on the differences that make up the Malayan identity rather than looking at "what we share in common" as Malaysians. Thus, it is argued that their focus on difference rather than sameness makes use of hybridity as a strategy of Malayan nationalism. It needs to be reiterated here that the notion of difference itself is an integral component of hybridity, in the sense that the question of hybridity could not be raised in the first place if no boundaries were assumed to exist (Pieterse 2001: 226). However, it should be emphasised that this does not mean that by using the concept of hybridity the artists themselves necessarily assumed that these identities were essentialist in nature or were pure categories to begin with. Rather, we underscore that the notion of hybridity challenged the boundaries that were already assumed to be normative and unproblematic. By employing this notion, the artists were freed from the problem of "integrating" the major ethnic groups in Malaya, or in visual terms—developing a visual style which one could identify as "Malayan". It also liberated them from having absolutist notions of what Malayan culture is—which

meant that they avoided thinking in terms of "what do we want Malayan culture to be?" by refusing the attempt to list down a criteria for articulating that which is Malayan.

For these artists, there was also no proper Malayan subject matter that could be differentiated from non-Malayan subject matter. (This can be contrasted with the Nanyang artists who interpreted Malayan subject matter i.e. as a tropical environment or a village lifestyle). Here, the question of relevance is a moot question, in that everything they produced (which had been relevant to them personally) became relevant as part of this continually evolving culture.

### **RECOGNISING PERSONAL HISTORIES AS PART OF LARGER NATIONAL NARRATIVES**

Within the artworks produced by these artists—both in their processes and forms—the personal histories of the artists take on particular significance. These artists traced their personal individual histories and culturally divergent experiences and incorporated them into the larger national narrative. In this way, hybridity is also a strategy that highlights the interconnectedness between individual experiences and national collective consciousness. As Lee pointed out, "the inner world of contemplation and imagination; and the outer world of sensual experiences, should combine to formulate a basis and palette for the making of paintings or sculptures. Episodes in one's own life, struggles of existence... all are the gist for the mill for art expression."<sup>9</sup> His self-portrait for instance, titled *Complexity of Man, Self-Portrait* expresses both the particular within the universal and vice-versa. It is a picture of his own personal struggle within himself, as well as a symbol of the eternal struggle between good or evil; inside and outside, that goes on in humanity (see Photo 1).





**Photo 1** Lee Joo For, *Complexity of Man, Self-Portrait* (1966). Lithography AP. 17 × 25 in.  
Source: Tan (1995: 42).

In *Self-Portrait with Friends* (see Photo 2), Patrick Ng illustrates himself in the middle surrounded by four other friends who are arranged in a symbolic (rather than naturalistic) manner. The depiction of the five friends seems to refer to actual people, however the room on which they stand is a symbolic rather than an actual physical space.



**Photo 2** Ng, Patrick, *Self-Portraits with Friends* (1962). 69.7 × 59.5 cm. National Heritage Board, Singapore.

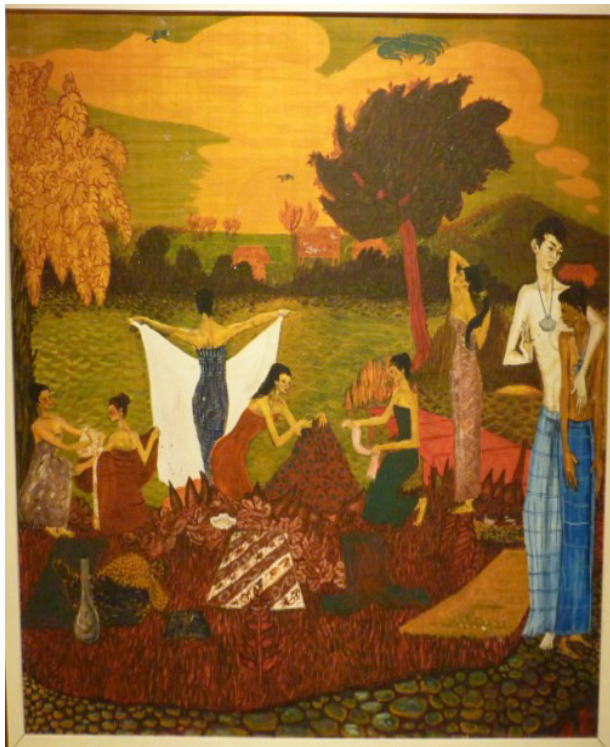
This background is patterned by the different tapestries and tiles, which carry different motifs. Symbolic meanings, creation myths and traditional narratives are often distilled into the motifs that are employed on the design of fabrics, rugs and mosaics. The motifs carry the cultural histories that have been passed from generation to generation. Further into the background stands a mosque. The juxtaposition of each figure against a combination of motifs reflects the different cultural lineages and their interconnectedness. Patrick appears in the middle playing an invisible violin, suggesting himself as the narrator in this scenario, bringing his friends together. Thus, this artwork suggests that his "self-portrait" is not one of himself alone but one that encompasses the portrait of the larger image of the nation, made up by different and individual narratives.

## **A SHARED CULTURAL PAST AND PRESENT**

These artists also traced the historical lineage of the various cultures that have constituted Malayan culture prior to the 50s and 60s. For instance, in *Di Tepi Sungai*, Patrick appears in the painting where ladies behind him spread out their *sarongs* to dry. The different textures and patterns of the *sarong*, which is a tubular skirt traditionally worn by Malay men and women in many parts of Southeast Asia, appear as a main motif in this painting. The garment may be viewed symbolically as the cloth that binds the figures together. But just as we think that this is merely a narrative of daily village life by the river, he introduces an unusual combination of traditional iconography that transforms the painting into a mythical account of life (see Photo 3). In this symbolic narrative, the tree in the middle of the painting is chopped off, while a "tree of life" springs up next to it, signalling the passing of the old, and the birthing of a new life (see Photo 4). In the iconography of Southeast Asian native communities, the "tree of life" is often employed as a symbol of fertility and life (Kerlogue 2004: 50). The notion of fertility in this "new" land is then repeated through his use of the shell, which he and his companion wear around their necks and another opened shell that lies on the ground. The notion of a

new life is further reiterated, as a woman with outstretched hands is placed visually above that shell. She stands erect, holding out a clean white cloth, which has not been stained or marked—alluding to a new beginning.

The heron in Southeast Asian iconography, which is sometimes used to symbolise the upper realm (Kerlogue 2004: 49) within the native tripartite conception of the universe (which Patrick had also portrayed in *Spirit of Earth Water and Air*) is depicted flying in the sky, thus invoking the idea of the co-existence of the spiritual and physical within the same realm (see Photos 3–5). Although he places himself in the painting, he separates himself (and his fellow artist<sup>10</sup>) visually from the rest of the composition (he is a dominant figure, and they are the only ones clothed in a different colour). This signals that his role as an artist is not only as actor in this creation myth, but also as author. This reiterates the notion that tradition is a construction that is continually rearticulated each time it is cited. Here, it may be suggested that Patrick uses Southeast Asian traditional symbols as a way to express the birth of the Malayan nation-state as merely a new phase within the historical development of the cultures in the region. His depiction highlights the *continuity* rather than a break from cultures past. His engagement with these symbols is what lends them their continued potency within the discourse of tradition in Southeast Asian countries.



**Photo 3** Ng, Patrick, *Di Tepi Sungai* (1963). Oil. 47 ½ × 47 ½ in. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Georgetown. Photographed by author.



**Photo 4** Ng, Patrick, *Di Tepi Sungai* (1963). Oil. Detail of tree stump and tree of life. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Georgetown.



**Photo 5** Ng, Patrick, *Di Tepi Sungai* (1963). Oil. Detail of heron. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Georgetown.

It may be argued that in their focus on cultural diversity, these artists also avoided working within the binary of Eastern versus Western artistic orientations. The notion of hybridity, in this way, allows us to focus on the "horizontal exchanges" that occur between cultures. Papastergiadis highlighted that it is significant to approach cultural exchange particularly between the West and the rest as a horizontal movement rather than as a concentric movement that privileges Western culture. This concentric model of culture, assumes the West as the dominant source of culture while placing other cultures in a marginal position. Patrick Ng's use of Southeast Asian iconography and Lee Joo For's symbolic horse that references both local and international issues are instances of such horizontal exchanges.

Another interesting example comes from the artist Chuah Thean Teng. He is well-known for his efforts to develop batik as a medium for fine art and a technique that can better express the local identity and culture (see Photos 6–7). Chuah acknowledged that batik has an important role to play in the production of Malayan culture. It is argued here that the move by Chuah to employ a technique that is foreign from Western cultural traditions is a critical move that attempts to divert our tendency to fall back on the hierarchical model of cultural development that privileges Western culture as high culture.

I will cite an example from literature to illustrate this point. The problem of employing a Western mode of expression has an interesting parallel in the field of literature. The challenge of employing a Western mode of expression in painting can be compared to the challenge of writers who struggled with the use of English language to express a local Malayan culture. The area of language and literature was particularly productive in the discourse of Malayan culture during the 50s. In the University of Malaya *Engmalchin*—a combination of English, Malay and Chinese was used to challenge English language, which was the colonial language (Harper 1999: 297–298). Harper noted that this was recognition that while the use of English language or content was inevitable, it was only one of the many ingredients in Malayan culture. One of the solutions, as practised by these writers, was to allow the content or subject matter to gradually transform the language itself—as a result

*Engmalchin* was born. In theory, it may be argued that this new hybrid form challenged the dominance of English language and its assumed completeness. However in the context of national identity, it continued to trap the Malayan people in a colonial hierarchy that places them perpetually at the periphery because this "new language" remains an adapted form of English, at least from the colonialist's viewpoint.

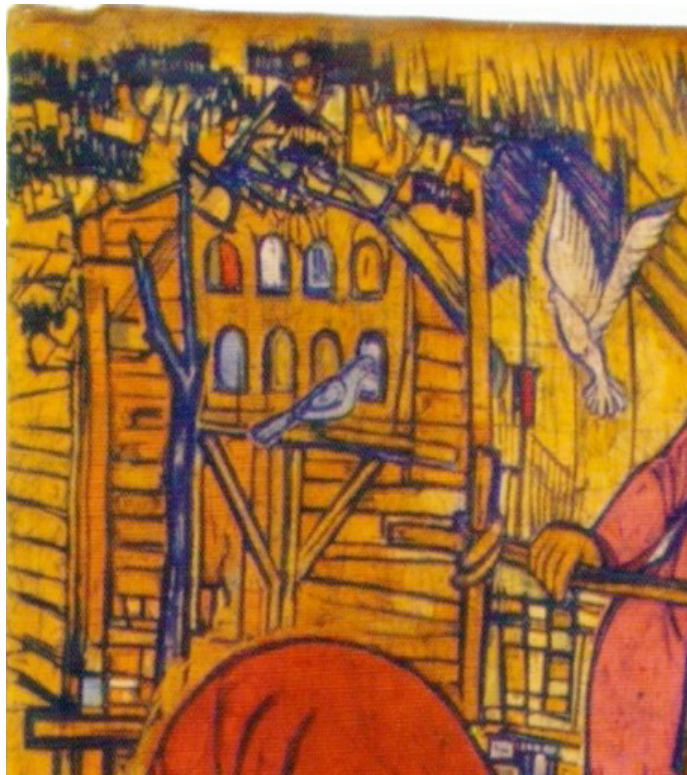
Thus, to avoid re-producing similar trappings in conceptualising Malaysian art history, the transformation of the medium of Western painting itself may be viewed as a way to provide a horizontal model of culture rather than a concentric model—where Western culture remained in the centre and the rest of the world tried to catch up. This approach highlights the complex horizontal forms of exchange that occur between different cultures, which do not rely on a privilege centre around which others are defined and justified. The choice of batik then is also significant since it is not only associated with the common culture of the people, it is also a carrier or source of traditional symbols and motifs of various cultures and histories.

In *Busy*, the woman in front bends down to scoop a bowl of rice, while the woman at the back is in the middle of pounding rice. As they work the grain, the animals come to feed on it. His interesting juxtaposing of the birdhouse against the *kampong* house in the background transforms the birdhouse into a metaphor for the *kampong* as a place from which rice is produced and from which the nation is fed. His idealistic visual stylisation and his transformation of the familiar into iconography, seeks to encapsulate the notion of a nation within the symbolic space of the *kampong* as a place we receive nourishment and a place we can return to. Younger generation of artists<sup>11</sup> have come to view these works as forming an inexplicable part of our national consciousness—not derived from rational justification of what makes a nation—but an equally powerful romanticised imagining.





**Photo 6** Chuah, Thean Teng, *Busy* (ca.1962). Batik. 91 × 68 cm.  
National Visual Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.



**Photo 7** Chuah, Thean Teng, *Busy*; detail (ca.1962). Batik. 91 × 68 cm.  
National Visual Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

On the other hand, his use of batik has also been critiqued as not representative of Malayan culture. For instance, Wharton cited Hoessein Enas and Chia Yu Chian who regarded batik as "not truly Malaysian because it originated in Java and the artists therefore are merely imitating the Indonesians" (Wharton 1971: 23). The issue here is not so much a question of difference (uniqueness) but a question of authenticity. This issue of authenticity is one that many postcolonial nations struggle with. The return to traditional sources and the problem of locating cultural practices, which are "uncorrupted" by colonial encounters are often limited to an essentialist notion of identity. Subsequently, such essentialist conceptions have become an unavoidable component of nationalism.

Chuah himself acknowledged that the production and practice of batik itself was developed from various places such as China or Java (not in Malaya). He conceded that there is undoubtedly much debate on the origin of batik and the original employment of batik in the field of fine art. However, for Chuah this question was irrelevant. What he identified as Malayan was the new technique he had initiated. Thus, we suggest that by his act of introducing or transforming batik techniques into the realm of fine art, he has transformed it into a Malayan technique simply because he is a Malayan. Chuah seems to demonstrate that the criterion for belonging was self-determined and not based on a checklist of similarity and difference. We also underscore here, his effort to re-create or re-formulate culture rather than simply re-installing a past culture. Chuah, as well as the other artists in this paper, see themselves as active participants in the formulation of Malayan culture. They acknowledged their agency in the process of identity-making rather than relied on a formula for culture that is authenticated by claims of originality.

## THE CRITERIA FOR AUTHENTICITY AND BELONGING

The subject of authenticity is a particularly problematic issue for postcolonial communities. Radhakrishnan pointed out that postcolonial hybridity often had to struggle for authenticity (Radhakrishnan 1993: 755). Consequently, many postcolonial communities find themselves attempting to recover a "lost" identity, presumably one that existed before the advent of colonialism. They also turn to various traditional practices and beliefs and claim these cultural practices as their "original" cultural identity; and by doing so fall into the trap of essentialism. Radhakrishnan thus proposed an approach towards authenticity that is based on choice. He stated, "...authentic identity is a matter of choice, relevance and a feeling of rightness." It means "ruling out certain options as incorrect or inappropriate" (Radhakrishnan 1993: 755). In this way, Radhakrishnan's theorisation of authenticity which centred on the idea of choice avoided the trap of essentialism or fundamentalism.

Instead of asking the question what cultural ingredients produce an authentic identity of Malaya, we may say that it is what we produce that becomes the cultural ingredients of an authentic Malayan identity since we are Malaysians. In this way, the artists recognised their agency to demarcate the boundaries of this identity as well as to define its constitution.

Through this approach, the artists need not rely on or invoke similar traditional sources of identity in order to validate their belonging. However, in the context of nationalism, it was necessary to construct a criterion for political loyalty and belonging. It is suggested that these artists attempted to transform the basis of belonging from a core ethnic into a civic one. Through this approach, one would "rule out certain options as incorrect or inappropriate" based on responsibility and duty as a citizen of the country.

Cheong Laitong, who has been well known more for his abstract works, have produced some semi-abstract and stylised figures. From these we may also have a glimpse of his ideals of the new nation. When Laitong was asked to make some adjustments to his mural

for the National Museum, he was insistent that the figures in the mural remained "unclothed." He said:

To capture a true Malaysian identity meant creating figures without identifiable ethnic costumes. I wasn't about to draw people in *kain songket* making kites, or women in *saris*. I didn't feel that Malaysians should be identified by stereotypes. That's the reason why I created semi-abstract figures which were half-naked (John 2003: 4–5).

This tells us that he was critically sensitive in producing an image that avoided essentialist characteristics (see Photo 8).



**Photo 8** Cheong, Laitong, *Mural*; detail (1962). Glass mosaic. 115 × 20 ft.  
National Museum Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

Source: [http://malaysia.com/galleries-kuala-lumpur-national-museum-4.html#image\\_top/](http://malaysia.com/galleries-kuala-lumpur-national-museum-4.html#image_top/)(accessed 20 June 2012).

In sum, the artists were critically aware of their positions as *Malayan* artists and the fact that they were producing art for the nation. To critique their work as lacking in nationalist sentiment is to judge their works from formulaic essentialist criteria that privileges certain forms as more authentic than others. Their approach to authenticity is thus, not based on essentialist criteria, "original" sources of tradition or a core ethnic. Instead it is based on the artists' agency to choose, to construct and to define that which is authentic. This is recognition of their own agency as *Malayan* artists that enabled them to dictate the criteria for authenticity and belonging.

### **CHINESE IDENTITY AS ARTISTIC RESOURCE RATHER THAN PRIVILEGED ESSENCE**

For this group of artists, identity was not centred or drawn from their Chinese ethnicity or heritage. For Lee Joo For, his Chinese heritage seemed to be simply a resource among resources, never a privileged origin, from which his art springs. For instance, he cited his interest in calligraphy as related to his father's talent as a calligraphist. However, it is only one of the many resources made available as part of his cultural heritage.

Lee Joo For who has taken the symbol of a horse—which has appeared throughout his artistic journey—said, "For many years I have pursued the horse. [...] More than anything, it kindled my interest in Chinese brush calligraphy." His elaboration of the horse as a symbol—by comparing it to Picasso's horse, Xu Beihong's horse or Francis Bacon's monkey in a glass cage to express his views on life—give us a picture of the competing artistic discourses of the day (Lee 1995: 18). His own expressions were assembled and constructed out of the combination of contemporary artistic considerations coupled with on-going socio-cultural and political debates (see Photo 9). His allusions to a variety of international artists counterpointed with local political discourses characterised his struggle to connect the local to the international discourses of art, rather than relying on the artistic discourse from China.

Yeoh Jinleng, when asked about his own absence of Chinese traditional influences, said:

... in *Ricefields*, I was also influenced by that calligraphic stroke but I went into colour having understood the Western medium and the relationship between space and colour, which artists trained in the Chinese medium tend to overlook... [Artists trained in Chinese traditional painting] use colour as tints only, not related to space or its spatial dimensions of tones and hues.

He observed that while many Chinese artists "used tints to lighten up the painting" they do not explore the "spatial dimensions of colour which the west had developed for over five centuries." (Yeoh, J., pers. comm., 29 August 2012) (see Photo 10).

In that sense, Chinese artistic traditions or approaches became only one of the many approaches that could be adopted, rather than employed as a cultural marker or preserved as a heritage.

Through these examples, it is suggested that the artists have adopted a horizontal model of culture rather than a concentric one. The artists did not view themselves as "Chinese artists". Their Chinese ethnicity, culture and tradition were a resource but not a centre from which artistic inspiration is derived. They may be differentiated from other artists who constantly looked to their Chinese ancestry and heritage as the original source of Chinese culture.



**Photo 9** Lee Joo For, *Cavorting Horses* (1968). Woodcut AP. 30 × 56 in.  
Source: Tan (1995: 44).





**Photo 10** Yeoh, Jinleng, *Ricefields* (1963). Oil. 84.5 × 104.5 cm. National Visual Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

## CONCLUSION

To reiterate, the artists in this paper employed the notion of hybridity as a strategy for *Malayan* nationalism. This approach views *Malayan* identity not only as a constructed identity but one that is based on otherness rather than on similarities. It is argued that even though the artists produced works which were diverse in subject matter, approach and style, these varied trajectories and seemingly personal narratives should be viewed *within* rather than *apart* from the national narratives. Conversely, their work should not be positioned apart from nationalistic contexts since this would be predicated on an essentialist notion of cultural identity. Consequently, this paper underscores their agency as artists to construct and define *Malayan* national identity. Further, by differentiating their works through the notion of "postcolonial hybridity", instead of a Western metropolitan hybridity, their struggle for authenticity was not based on a return to an "original" culture or tradition and did not privilege a Western or Chinese centre. Rather, their cultural borrowings can be understood within a "horizontal" form of exchange which regards Chinese, Western or Southeast Asian cultures as equally relevant sources for artistic inspiration.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted that the Chinese community in Malaysia are a heterogeneous group with different cultural lineages even though they are all recognised as "Chinese" in ancestry and ethnicity. The long history of relationship between the people of China with those of the Malay Archipelago have been spurred on by various factors such as religious pilgrimages, trade, the colonial economy and socio-political conditions in China. Consequently, there are as many types of migration from different provinces of China and as there are settlements in various parts of Malaya, each carrying its own set of cultural traditions and practices.

2. The first Ministry of Education scholarship was given to Tay Hooi Keat in 1948 (Tan 1992: 44). The first federal scholarship for art was created in 1957 and Yeoh Jinleng was awarded a place at Chelsea School of Art, and later to Hornsey College of Art for his master's degree. Anthony Lau got a Malaysian government scholarship to Brighton College of Arts and Crafts in England (1957–1958) and a Fulbright grant for his masters in Indiana University in the United States (1968) (Wharton 1971: 49). Patrick Ng was a recipient of a British Council scholarship to study at Hammersmith College in England.
3. Officially called the Federation of Malaya Arts Council.
4. The gallery's name has been changed to National Visual Arts Gallery since 2011.
5. For example, see Tang (2000: 361) for Mahua literature (Malaysian Chinese Literature); and see Van der Heide (2002: 138) for P. Ramlee's productions in cinema.
6. By this he means to view culture as originating from a singular or fixed space (Papastergiadis 2005: 54).
7. See Piyadasa (1994: 39).
8. See also Sarena Abdullah's journal paper "Absenteeism of identity in Malaysian Art in the early years of Independence" (Sarena 2010). Although her analysis does not explicitly classify the works as "nationalistic" or otherwise, the conclusion that Malaysian identity was absent is predicated on the assumption that Malaysian identity is an essential or pure category.
9. Lee, J. F. Email interview. 28 and 29 August 2012.

10. Redza Piyadasa who was a close friend of Patrick Ng, related in one of his lectures, how Patrick had included him into this painting. (In a series on Modern Malaysian Art, University of Malaya).
11. See Yee (2007: 46).

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