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Beyond Tang Chang's Self-Portraits

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses several self-portraits by Sino-Thai artist Tang Chang, renowned for his abstract paintings and concrete poetry. It examines how these works extend beyond mere self-representation to reflect his views on social roles, family, and the political climate of his time. Self-portraits were a significant part of Chang's body of work, with over 400 pieces created throughout his life. His self-portraits reveal his deep connection to his family, particularly his close relationship with his wife. They also played a key role in his artistic experimentation and served as teaching tools for his students. Additionally, his most renowned self-portrait in Thai society reflects his response to the political landscape. These self-portraits not only represent his identity but also function as autobiographical narratives, offering deeper insights into his life and beliefs.

Keywords: *Tang Chang, modern Art, Thailand, self-portrait*

INTRODUCTION

Tang Chang, a Sino-Thai artist active from 1934 to 1990, has garnered international recognition for his abstract paintings and concrete poetry, despite lacking formal academic training. While abstract painting is widely regarded as a core element of his work, his self-portraits, particularly a significant piece from 1973 that engages with the political events of 14 October 1973, also make up a sizeable portion of his oeuvre. This prominence suggests that self-portraiture became an increasingly important genre for Chang in the 1970s, continuing even as he shifted away from abstract canvases in the early 1970s and transitioned toward landscape painting around the 1980s.

Throughout his career, Tang Chang produced an extensive body of self-portraits. In 2000, the exhibition Tang Chang the Original, the Original Tang Chang, curated by his son Thip Sae-tang, showcased approximately 400 of these works. Spanning from 1954 to 1987, just three years before his passing, these self-portraits reflect a wide range of styles and techniques. Most were created on paper during the 1970s and 1980s.

Understanding Tang Chang's self-portraits requires looking beyond his written works, as he seldom wrote about this aspect of his art. Few texts explore this topic, one notable exception being by Shioda Junichi. Junichi argued that Chang's numerous self-portraits reveal his engagement with modernism and how he grappled with its implications. He saw these works as products of a modern spirit, exploring the existential question, Who am I? (Junichi 1995, 239). According to Junichi, this significant body of work represents Chang's personal journey in developing his interpretation of modernism.

A self-portrait is a distinctive form of portrait painting, traditionally defined as an artwork in which the artist depicts themselves. However, it goes beyond merely reproducing the artist's physical appearance. Like any portrait, a self-portrait expresses the artist's interpretation of their character and spiritual outlook, reflecting introspection, where the artist engages in self-analysis and reflection, capturing not just their aesthetic ideals. The process of creating a self-portrait involves deep introspection of their outward appearance, but the essence of their inner world (Mao 2021, 147). When painting a self-portrait, the artist must confront both the mirror and the canvas or rely on their memory of themselves. This requires constant shifting between two states. When the artist faces the mirror or recalls their self-image, they meticulously observe their own identity. Hence, the image on the canvas becomes a vessel for their emotions, desires, and ideals (Mao 2021, 148).

Self-recognition is a psychological concept that involves the insight and understanding of oneself, encompassing self-observation and self-evaluation. In many cases, a self-portrait is a reflection of the artist's life, captured as a shadow of themselves (Mao 2021, 148). Omar Calabrese argues that the self-portrait is a discourse constructed through the interplay of grammatical categories (ego), syntactic structure (reflexivity), and modalisation (will). These three components are in constant and paradoxical "movement": the "I" of the artist is simultaneously the subject, the object, and the process of the work. The variations from one self-portrait to another largely depend on how the artist interprets these different aspects of the process (Calabrese 2006, 30; quoted in Tinel-Temple et al. 2019, 7).

Thus, self-recognition is a vital stage that an artist must navigate, engaging with themselves as both subject and object before they can truly express themselves in their work. Chang also emphasised the importance of self-recognition in art creation. He believed that "creating art leads us to a deeper understanding of truth, the value of humanity, the world, and the creator." In other words, understanding truth involves grasping the interconnectedness of humanity, the world, and the creator. This process reflects the dynamic relationship between the self and the world, linking Chang's artistic practice with spiritual experience. As Chang (2021, 204) stated:

> ...We can create valuable poems and works of art through this process. All of these elements are nothing more than consciousness (*Sati*), intellect (*Panya*), and meditation (*Samadhi*), combined with breath and life, yet valuable work can emerge. I mention this to illustrate the divinity of Dhamma as taught by Buddha. This understanding is also crucial for the creation of poems and works of art.

Much like his approach to abstraction, Chang appears to have used the creation of self-portraits as a key aspect of his spiritual journey, a theme evident in his writings that often connect his art to spiritual elements. From the early 1950s until his death, he produced over 400 self-portraits in various styles and techniques. Although Chang did not write specifically about self-portraiture, the practice is generally understood as a means of projecting one's self-understanding into the work, which is closely linked to spiritual experience. Notably, Chang did not use a mirror in his practice, making his self-portraits a critical reflection of his inner self. The sheer number of these works suggests that they served as tools for ongoing self-examination.

While the idea of using self-portraits as a tool for exploring psychological states became prominent in the 20th century, self-portraits have long been deeply connected to an artist's sense of social identity. In the 14th and 15th centuries, new forms of self-portraiture emerged that placed the artist's social and spiritual relationships on a more formal and enduring basis. These self-portraits often took on a dynastic character, where the artist's image was juxtaposed with other portraits, asserting ties of friendship, kinship, love, and devotion. They reflect a newfound intimacy between artists and their patrons, as well as the social standing that artists could achieve while creating portraits from life. This kind of intimacy required the cultivation of certain social skills by the artists (Hall 2014, 51).

All self-portraiture involves the intriguing process of an individual seeing themselves as an "other." In creating a self-portrait, an artist objectifies their own body, essentially creating a "double" of themselves. This process allows artists to draw attention to the medium and the creative process, showcase their skill, or experiment with technique and style (West 2004, 165).

Since a self-portrait can serve as a reminder of the artist's profession, artists have often used them as visual manifestos, highlighting their artistic role or sense of place within society. For the viewer, a self-portrait presents the unique experience of looking into a metaphorical mirror that reflects not themselves but the artist who created the portrait. Viewing a self-portrait can therefore evoke a sense of stepping into the artist's shoes, making these works both compelling and elusive (West 2004, 165).

While self-portraits are traditionally understood as exercises in self-examination, this article approaches Tang Chang's self-portraits from a different perspective—one that seeks meanings beyond the artist's individual identity. Rather than simply reflecting his inner self, these works engage with broader themes, including personal relationships, social roles, and historical context. Through this lens, the article underscores the significance of Chang's self-portraits by situating them within key moments of his life. The analysis is structured into three parts: first, an exploration of the intimate dimensions of his self-portraits, especially their connection to family and autobiographical storytelling; second, a discussion of his role as a mentor, viewing his self-portraits as pedagogical tools; and third, an in-depth look at his seminal work 14 October 1973, which conveys his response to the political climate of the time. This interpretation centres on how artistic form emerges when creative impulses intersect with the shifting contexts of selfhood.

BEYOND "SELF": FAMILY AS THE SUBJECT

While self-portraits often offer a glimpse into an artist's personal state, they can also reflect broader themes such as relationships, societal roles, and responses to the surrounding environment. This article will explore these dimensions in several of Tang Chang's self-portraits, beginning with his intimate family connection. His self-portraits frequently express his deep appreciation for his family, particularly his wife. A prime example is Figure 1, one of Chang's few original woodblocks, which underscores the importance of family in his life. The woodblock uses calligraphic strokes to create a simplified representation of his face, subtly outlining key features like the eyebrows, eyes, beard, and mouth.

At the centre of the composition, arranged vertically, are eight distinct shapes: seven that are similar and one that differs at the bottom. The seven similar shapes seem to symbolise his seven children, closely resembling the Chinese character "子" (zi), which means "children." The differing shape at the bottom resembles a human figure, possibly representing someone receiving the seven children. It bears a resemblance to the characters "大" (da), meaning "major," or "人" (ren), meaning "human," likely symbolising his wife or the mother of his children. This piece

Figure 1 *Untitled* (1969–70). Woodblock, 52 × 50 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

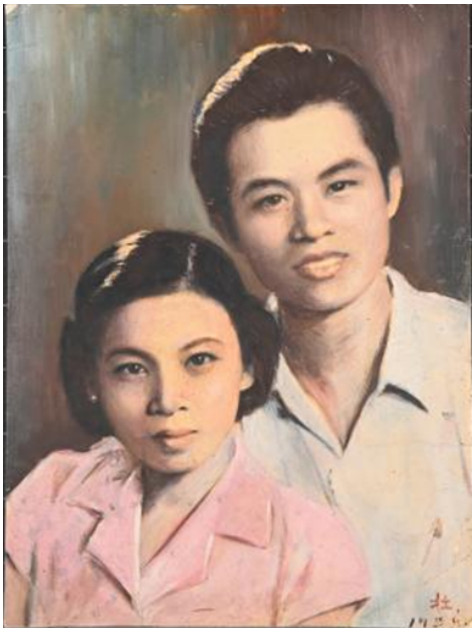

Figure 2 *Untitled* (1959). Poster paint on paper, 29 × 21.2 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

underscores the importance of family to Chang, as he integrates the symbols of his children and wife into his self-portrait, highlighting what he holds most dear.

For Chang, although most of his self-portraits focus solely on himself, one notable work includes another person, revealing a close personal connection. This rare depiction features his wife, as seen in Figure 2 from 1959. In this portrait, Chang presents a young version of himself with short hair and no beard, dressed in a white shirt, alongside his wife in a pink blouse. The realistic style, reminiscent of a studio photograph, shows his wife standing in front of him, partially covering him, while he tilts his head toward her. This intimate pose reflects their deep bond. Notably, this is the only self-portrait in which he includes another person, pointing to the significance of his wife in his life.

After 1959, Chang no longer depicted himself alongside others in his work, but his relationships are still evident in his portraits of those close to him. Though he closed his commissioned portrait studio in the late 1960s, he continued to paint portraits of those around him, particularly his family members, including portraits of each of his children. His wife remained a frequent subject in these later works, as seen in Figure 3. In this portrait, she is shown lying down with her arm raised above her head, a relaxed pose that reflects the close bond between the artist and his subject. While

Chang did not clearly define her facial features, he captured her in her typical daily attire with a recognisable hairstyle, identifying her as his wife. Created in the 1980s, when they were both middle-aged, this piece subtly suggests that Chang was more focused on valuing his wife as a significant presence in his life rather than on the physical changes that come with time.

Another work that reveals Chang's close relationship with his wife is shown in Figure 4, painted in the same semi-abstract style as his self-portrait in Figure 5. In his self-portrait, Chang used intense blue strokes to form his forehead ornament, hair, and eyebrows, while intense green strokes outlined his beard and moustache. The remaining space was filled with strong strokes of light blue and green, creating a nearly abstract image but still leaving identifiable elements of his face.

Figure 3 *Untitled* (1959). Poster paint on paper, 29 × 21.2 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

Figures 4 and 5 *Untitled* (1983). Oil on canvas, 120 × 100 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

Similarly, Figure 5 painted in the same style, emphasises red hues, possibly representing femininity or his wife. The intense blue, green, and red strokes construct the ornamentation and facial elements, while lighter shades fill the empty spaces with strong strokes. When compared to his self-portrait, this portrait likely represents his wife, symbolising their bond as a couple. These two works together highlight the close relationship between Chang and his wife, suggesting that he saw them as interconnected, reflecting their deep intimacy.

From Figures 1–5, Chang's self-portraits reveal the importance of family in his life, particularly highlighting his close relationship with his wife. Although Chang created numerous portraits of others, especially during his time as a commissioned portrait artist, he rarely depicted himself in relation to other people. However, through his self-portraits, we gain a clearer understanding of his sense of belonging within his community, especially his deep connection with his family. These works emphasise how closely he identified with and valued his familial relationships.

In the 1970s, Chang created more self-portraits compared to the 1960s, a period that coincided with significant changes in Thai society. This era saw a rise in liberalism and a more democratic atmosphere. By the late 1960s, Thailand's population had grown to over 30 million, yet the military still held significant power in the country's politics. The expanding business sector and economy led to the rise of the middle class, which contributed to a social awakening in the early 1970s that briefly challenged the military's monopoly on power (Kunavichayanont 2003, 87–88).

SELF-PORTRAITS AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS

During this time, many artists rejected the "art for art's sake" doctrine and the abstraction that dominated the academic mainstream at Silpakorn University, which seemed increasingly disconnected from the societal changes taking place. Splinter groups emerged, seeking new ways to connect art with social realities. Some artists drew inspiration from radical thinkers of the 1950s, like Jit Phoumisak, to create "art for life." Although the Artist's Front of Thailand, formed in 1974, was short-lived, it managed to achieve some independence from official taste, supported by the equally brief government of Kukrit Pramoj. However, the intellectual momentum of this period was violently curtailed by the brutal crackdown on student protestors on 6 October 1976 (Teh 2012, 573).

From the late 1960s, students from institutions such as the Poh-Chang Academy of Art and Silpakorn University began exploring new approaches to the art world. Some of these students became disciples of Chang, including first-generation artists such as Somyot Hananuntasuk and Somboon Hormtientong, as well as later figures like Chumpon Apisuk, Nittaya Sakcharoen, Sompong Sae-sung, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, and Vasan Sitthiket. Others ventured into various fields, including cartoonist Ittiphol (Om) Ratchawej, poet and national artist Kittisak (Saksiri) Meesomsueb, writer and songwriter Setthasak Srithongthuam (Kaew Laithong), and film critic Kittisak Suwannabhokin. Many of these individuals even lived with Chang's family for extended periods.

During this period, Chang's house became an important hub for alternative art education, attracting a growing number of students. He transformed his home into a space for exhibiting the works of his students, his children, and himself. Committed to making art accessible to the public, he also organised exhibitions in public venues, such as the Warner Movie Theatre in 1972 and Sanam Luang in 1975. In 1985, his home was officially designated as the Poet Tang Chang Institute of Modern Art (หอศิลป์ กวี จ่าง แซ่ตั้ง). It became both an exhibition space and a vibrant gathering place for Chang's colleagues, friends, students, and art enthusiasts (Cacchione2020, 27).

The increase in both the number of Chang's students and his self-portraits from the 1970s onward is no coincidence. According to a personal interview with the artist's son, Chang used self-portraits as a teaching tool to inspire his students, particularly those who claimed they lacked inspiration or did not know what to create. By using himself as a subject, Chang demonstrated that anything, even one's own image, can serve as a source of inspiration for creating art. He experimented with various styles and techniques in his self-portraits, using them as a canvas for exploration.

This approach echoes the practices of artists from the 15th and 16th centuries in the Western world, when the rise of academic and art theory emphasised the intellectual qualities of artistic production over the mechanical ones. Self-portraits became a way for artists to reinforce and enhance their intellectual and creative worth. Freed from the constraints of contracts, decorum, or sitter expectations, artists like Rembrandt used self-portraits to explore techniques such as chiaroscuro (West 2004, 164), while Chang used his self-portraits to experiment with different methods and delve into spiritual exploration.

Figure 6 Portrait of Somyot Hananuntasuk. *Untitled* (1969). Watercolour on paper, 39 × 27.1 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

Since Chang used self-portraiture as a teaching tool, it is important to discuss Somyot Hananuntasuk, one of Chang's first students. Somyot began studying under Chang in 1966, during his first year at the Fine Art School (Rong Rian Chang Sin; โรงเรียนช่างศิลป์), and later continued his studies in Germany in 1972, facilitated by Chang's connections.[1] Notably, Somyot is the only student who became the subject of Chang's portrait paintings. Due to their similar appearances, it can be challenging to distinguish between portraits of Somyot and Chang's self-portraits, as seen in Figure 6. Both men had long hair and similar beards, making identification difficult. To differentiate between them, we needed assistance from Chang's son, who helped identify subtle differences in facial features and beard shape.[2] This indicates that Somyot was one of Chang's most important students.

Figure 7 *Untitled* (1971). Oil on canvas, 209 × 245 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

For Somyot, Chang used his self-portrait as a teaching tool.[3] The result of this instruction can be seen in Figure 7, a complex painting from 1971, created a year before Somyot went to Germany. This work meticulously depicts the face of Tang Chang using black oil paint applied with small watercolour brushes. The portrait highlights Chang's distinctive features: long hair, a beard, and piercing eyes. The texture of the face resembles a cracked stone cliff, while the hair and beard evoke the appearance of trees and branches. Although there was a disagreement between Chang and Somyot later on, with Somyot claiming that this work was originally his creation, Chang (2000) addressed the matter in writing from 1984, clarifying the true origin of the piece:

> … This particular piece of work is based on my personal perception of how an artist may translate an idea into something concrete – a drawing or a painting. Actually, I instructed a new student of mine, who had recently decided to become my disciple, to start working on just a drawing, embarking on a process of creating a piece of work. From that point on, we both were drawn into this type of creative process, developing a drawing to this painting, working on the same painting for the next 11 months. We often worked till late at night, devoting our time, thoughts and physical energy together.
>
> As for myself, my first encounter with an exciting source of inspiration came quite early in my childhood days. I was only 11 or 12 when I went to a neighbourhood theatre showing one of Chaplin's films, black & white classics, in those pioneering days of moving pictures. The film was so old with a lot of scratches on the film, but I was amazed by the "Snow" effect I saw on the screen. Somehow those "Black and White Dots" on the screen did not bother me, instead it drew on me that all the moving images must have been formed by these small dots, some black and some white.
>
> My intuition told me that these small dots were like small grains of sand, tiny grains of sand. With my hand I could scoop only a handful and let them slip through my fingers, these tiny grains of sand would immediately make a small mound on the ground. But if I could only have a lot of sand and pour them on the ground, I could surely create a mountain, a great mountain.

In his writings, Chang explained that the work originated from his own idea, inspired by the grainy black-and-white imagery in Charlie Chaplin's films. He used this collaborative piece to teach Somyot how to translate an idea into a concrete form. While Somyot was involved in the creation of the work, Chang's writings suggest that it was primarily a product of his own guidance. This raises questions about authorship: if the idea was Chang's, then who is the true artist of the piece? Nevertheless, Chang acknowledged his student's role as a technician who helped to bring his vision to life. According to Chang (2000):

> It is, thus, fair for me to say that my students were the ones who elaborated my ideas and perceptions about things and matters. They were the ones who translated and transformed them into pieces of work, under my close supervision, guidance, or instructions. Similarly, they were encouraged to experiment with another medium as well, the oil. They actually created their own mountains from tiny dots, in the same manner as pouring sands into the grounds. The work was essentially made by numerous dots of Black oil paint, with small watercolour brushes.

To address this question, it is helpful to consider examples from art history. Many renowned artists did not create their works entirely by themselves. For instance, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Titian all had active studios with skilled apprentices who contributed to important commissions or managed the large volume of work that a single artist could not handle alone. Rembrandt's body of work often blurs the line between pieces created by the master and those produced by his studio, with attributions frequently shifting. This practice continues today on an even larger scale; for example, British artist Damien Hirst employed up to 70 assistants at the peak of his career, while Takashi Murakami reportedly had around 200 (Wagner 2023). However,

the contributions of these assistants are not always recorded or recognised as part of the artist's individual legacy.

Therefore, it is not always necessary for those who contribute hands-on to a work to be recognised as the artist. In this case, despite Somyot's claims and Tang Chang's writings, it is difficult to determine which account is more accurate. While Somyot clearly played a role in the creation of the work, this involvement alone does not definitively establish him as the artist. Given Chang's ability to articulate the related concepts, it is plausible to attribute the work to him. Additionally, considering that Somyot was only 22 at the time, questions arise about his capacity to produce such a complex piece independently. If he were capable of creating such a masterpiece, he would likely be regarded as a master himself rather than a student. Moreover, Somyot has not provided a detailed explanation of the concept and execution of the work. Chang's (2000) writings emphasise that without his guidance, his students might not have been able to create such artworks. He noted that:

> As their teacher, I impart my knowledge of oil painting and shared all the techniques with my students, who needed constant care and advice before they became more matured and more confident of their own ways of creating valuable work.
>
> This particular student of mine, a newcomer at that time, was the one I helped open up a new opportunity for him to continue his studies in Germany, with whatever goodwill I had. I soon found out that, in Germany, he had difficulty pursuing his creative endeavour under my influence. During his early years in Germany, everything he tried to accomplish seemed to be heading to a dead-end, without me as his mentor who once devoted time and energy to assist him closely. To help him struggling through his transformation period, I continued to offer him my advice by mail for some time.

In this case, our aim is not to resolve the complex issue of authorship, which may be subject to debate if new data or perspectives emerge. Instead, this example illustrates how Chang used self-portraiture as a teaching tool for his students. It demonstrates that Chang employed self-portraits to reinforce and enhance intellectual and creative value while experimenting with various techniques. Additionally, it highlights Chang's role as a teacher and sheds light on the relationship between him and his students.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION OF POLITICAL ALLEGORY

Another significant self-portrait that extends beyond the artwork itself is a masterpiece from 1973, as seen in Figure 8. Though originally untitled, it became publicly known as "14 October 1973." However, the artist's heir later renamed it "Tad Mue Kawi, Khwak Ta Chittakorn" (Cut the Poet's Hands, Remove the Painter's Eyes).

In this work, the artist depicts himself squatting at the centre of the canvas. His body is rendered in yellow and red, with black shorts, and shown from the torso down to his arms and legs, though his hands are absent. His feet are also missing, as they extend beyond the limited space of the canvas. The figure's head, with long hair and facial features like a beard and moustache, closely resembles the artist, but the eyes are filled with white. The background is filled with abstract, calligraphic-like characters in black and red, alongside bold red strokes. This piece can be seen as the artist's manifesto, using his own body to convey his position. It is particularly renowned when discussing works related to the 1973 Thai popular uprising.

Figure 8 *Untitled* (1973). Oil on canvas, 205 × 245 cm
Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

Due to the popularity of this work, numerous discourses have emerged around it. The most prominent and frequently cited is the seminal writing by Apinan Poshyananda (1992, 162), who stated that:

> Tang Chang's for instance painted a gruesome self-portrait, 14 October (1973), in which he portrayed himself from people and society. He is seated, showing his bearded face, scruffy hair, and naked torso. Both eyes have been plucked out because he does not want to see the slaughter of his compatriots. Both hands have been cut off because, as an artist, he does not want to paint what he has witnessed.

Another well-known publication on Thai modern art by Sutee Kunavichayanont also includes this work in his book. Unlike Apinan, Sutee does not convey the earlier interpretation. Instead, he focuses on the traces of brushwork and finger painting, which he believes express intense emotions. Sutee (2003, 93) noted that this work is often mentioned in discussions about art related to the 1973 Thai popular uprising, even though it only depicts the artist's body with no direct references to politics or society.

This work was first exhibited eight years after the 1973 Thai popular uprising, at the 27th National Exhibition of Art. It was shown in Thailand twice, first in 2000 at the Mercury Art Gallery and then in 2003 at Chulalongkorn University, before being exhibited internationally in Singapore in 2016 and France in 2023. The discourse surrounding this work has been shaped not only by writings from Apinan but also by an interview in which the artist's heir discussed the piece. During the 2000 and 2003 exhibitions, the estate displayed a label alongside the work, featuring the interview that provided insights into its meaning. The interview (Nawapooh 2019, 73–74) stated that:

> Being just a painter and a humble poet…
> fully committed to paint and write meaningful,
> as a tribute to the motherland and compatriots
> rising up angry

> against the military dictatorial rule,
> on
> October 14, 1973
>
> A painter and a poet,
> witnessing Thais slaughtering Thais,
> heeding the call from a clear conscience,
> responding with a self portrait
> of
> a painter and a poet,
> who scooped out his own eyes,
> who cut off his own hands,
> against a backdrop of turmoil caused by decades of oppressions.
>
> A painter and a poet,
> who no longer needed the eyes to witness such a massacre,
> in the land of his birth,
> who no longer needed hands to paint and write,
> a farewell to all creative endeavours,
> as the last of 1973 series!

Most interpretations, including Chang's own interview, focus on the absence of his eyes and hands, which many see as a manifestation of the artist's political stance. The missing eyes are often linked to his refusal to witness the slaughter of his compatriots, while the absent hands, which were used for painting and writing, symbolise his intent to abandon all creative endeavours in response to the massacre. However, Thanavi Chotpradit offers a different perspective, drawing on E.M. Forster's well-known quote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say." As an art historian, she not only examines how past interpretations of this piece were formed but also analyses its elements through her own lens. The rough, dark red figure of the artist, clad only in shorts, can be seen as representing the ordinary people. The turbulent, calligraphic-like abstraction in the background might be interpreted as a sign of deformity, resembling a strong invective from the artist. If the painting symbolises the cutting off of the poet's hands and the removal of the painter's eyes, it reflects the violence inflicted on the artist, who stands as a representation of the common people. The pain and suffering depicted on his face and in his deformed body could also represent the collective agony of the Thai people (Chotpradit 2020).

The primary interpretation of this piece seems to focus on the relationship between the body and politics. However, the concept of body politics has been deeply influenced by two significant theoretical shifts: Michel Foucault's work and the rise of feminist approaches (Sassatelli 2012, 348). Foucault's work, particularly in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), explores how modern power dynamics transform the body into a disciplined and useful instrument, emphasising the role of body and knowledge in shaping subjectivity (Sassatelli 2012, 352). Meanwhile, body politics gained prominence in the global arena during the 1990s, largely through transnational feminist movements that challenged traditional notions of rights, equality, and difference, thereby redefining what is considered political in the context of gender and development (Harcourt 2022, 111).

Foucault's ideas and the feminist movement gained widespread recognition by at least the late 1970s, potentially following the creation of 14 October 1973 by Chang. In this sense, the work can be seen as embodying a very progressive understanding of body and politics for its time. However, one might question the authority of these interpretations when applied to Chang's work. Therefore, we propose exploring another interpretation, distinct from the prevalent focus on body and politics, to offer an alternative perspective for discussion.

We do not completely dismiss the idea that this work is connected to the political context of its time, nor the fact that Chang used his own image to convey something significant. However, it is arguable that this piece was not intended as a direct political protest. In 1973, the same year he created this self-portrait, he also published his full translation of the Dao De Jing by Lao Tzu. His abstract works and self-portraits were deeply entwined with his spiritual journey. For instance, his earliest self-portrait, from 1954, was an imitation of a photograph—a technique he also employed in his commissioned portraiture early in his career. After the 1960s, he moved beyond mimetic representation, using self-portraiture as a means of introspection. Throughout his lifetime, he created over 400 self-portraits, many of which explored spiritual and philosophical ideas.

Figure 9 *Untitled* (1975).
Ink on paper, 44 × 39 cm

Source: Tang Chang Private Museum Collection

Some of these self-portraits explicitly engage with Taoist concepts, reflecting his spiritual progression. Up until the mid-1960s, his work showed a stronger Buddhist influence, with a focus on abstraction and concepts like Anatta (non-self). However, after publishing his Dao De Jing translation in 1973, his self-portraits became more concrete, portraying his complete self more directly.[4] For example, in one self-portrait (Figure 9), he uses strong, calligraphic strokes to create an oval shape that outlines his face. Within this shape, the strokes resemble facial features and suggest the Chinese character "Kan" (困), meaning "constraint," with "Tao" inscribed in the upper right corner. This piece reflects his self-view as someone bound by earthly constraints, striving for the universal understanding of Tao.

In our view, while this politically influenced self-portrait is linked to its historical context, it remains inseparable from the broader body of his self-portrait work. Furthermore, as both his abstract pieces and self-portraits were tied to his spiritual journey, we suggest that this self-portrait may be more accurately interpreted as an expression of his Taoist philosophy, with his own image as a symbol of deeper spiritual intentions.

Looking closely at the work, it becomes clear that Chang positions himself at the centre of the composition in a squatting posture. His eyes, depicted as empty white spaces, suggest a deliberate detachment from the world, indicating no direct communication with the viewer. While many interpretations suggest that his hands are absent, the visual elements reveal a misty form that vaguely resembles a hand, though its texture merges with his knee. His feet are also missing, possibly due to the constrained space, and his nearly naked body stands as the focal symbol in the piece, serving as the primary means of communication.

This depiction of a fragmented body, lacking the essential organs typically used to engage with the world, deepens the symbolism. His eyes and ears, obscured by his long hair, are absent, eliminating his ability to perceive his surroundings. Additionally, without hands or feet, he is deprived of the means to interact or move within the world. Through this portrayal, Chang appears to completely separate himself from worldly engagement, embodying an inability to act or influence his environment. This invites reflection on the Taoist concept of Wu Wei, or "non-action," which emphasises effortless action in harmony with the natural flow of life, suggesting that his detachment may represent a profound alignment with this central Taoist principle.

In the background, the artwork is filled with abstract, calligraphic-like forms in red and black. These were created with strong, varied strokes in different sizes and disordered arrangements, with some areas filled with red. This sense of "disorder" can be interpreted as a reflection of the chaotic external world, mirroring the political turmoil of the time, when the government was disorganised and disregarded its people. However, when considering the relationship between this background and Chang's figure, it becomes evident that his character, devoid of eyes and ears, cannot perceive this chaos. Additionally, without hands or feet, he is unable to engage with or influence the world around him.

"Wu Wei" translates to "non-action" or "non-assertion." When Laozi speaks of "wu wei," he is not advocating for laziness or asceticism. Rather, he encourages the cultivation of wise humility, selflessness, and restraint, rooted in the understanding that the Tao is infinitely wise and benevolent (Goddard and Borel 1919, 4). In this context, human wisdom involves being receptive and restrained, aligning oneself with the Tao's purpose. Wu Wei, or non-action, aligns with what Chang expressed in his interview. He did not want to witness a massacre or create art as a farewell to authority. Here, non-action means refraining from actions that do not align with the principles of the Tao.

In this work, we argue that Chang may be depicting the state of Wu Wei, or non-action. However, Wu Wei is not simply passive; it embodies a profound understanding of the Tao, the principle central to Taoism that one must strive to comprehend. For Laozi, the Tao represents the universal and eternal principle that shapes and underlies all things—an intangible cosmic force that harmonises and fulfils everything in existence. Through this painting, Chang appears to suggest that understanding the Tao is the ultimate truth. If people, including those in authority, could grasp the Tao, the chaos and disorder around them would not disturb their inner harmony.

To support this interpretation, we turn to the poetry of Saksiri Meesomsueb, one of Chang's students, who captures aspects of Chang's philosophy in his verses. In his poem, Saksiri (1992) writes:

> Activities
> (August 1, 1985, the old man with a long beard teaches that)
>
> Swatting mosquitoes one by one will never end
> Don't let the smell of the stinky pond get mixed in
> Make the source of the stream clear and not muddy
> Think thoroughly and carefully
> This is an activity that should be corrected and refined
>
> Don't just swat mosquitoes one by one
> Don't waste time pumping out the stinky pond
> Strive to add new water to alleviate
> Even if it takes a long time, the stinky water will fade
> It will reflect the clear shadow of the full moon
> Let the little birds enjoy and have a cool heart

Interpreting Chang's work through this poem and the context of his self-portrait, particularly in relation to his spiritual journey, reveals his engagement with Taoist and Buddhist ideas. The poem reflects Chang's teaching to his students: rather than attempting to correct everything around you—like endlessly swatting mosquitoes or draining a stagnant pond—the focus should be on self-improvement, akin to adding fresh water to alleviate the foulness of a pond. This approach resonates with Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, both of which emphasise that true transformation begins within rather than through direct attempts to alter the external world. In

Buddhism, self-cultivation is a means to enlightenment, while Taoism encourages understanding and aligning with life's natural harmony.

Seen in this light, Chang's self-portrait embodies this belief, portraying himself as a model for others. He implies that understanding and living by ethical principles, or the Tao, is the way to rise above the chaos of the external world. His self-portrait is not merely personal but conveys a universal message: genuine change begins with the individual, calling for a return to self-awareness as the foundation of a harmonious society.

For Chang, self-portraiture was not merely a means of self-examination through his spiritual journey. His self-portraits also reflect his place in society, his relationships with others, and his political ideology. They highlight how the artist, as a subject, perceives the world and responds to the interplay between himself and society.

CONCLUSION: THE SELF-PORTRAIT AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Discussing an artist's self-portrait often feels cliché, as many attempt to decipher how the artist perceives themselves and reflects their identity through this medium. Like any portrait, a self-portrait conveys the artist's interpretation of their character and spiritual outlook, encapsulating their aesthetic ideals. The creation of a self-portrait involves deep introspection, where the artist engages in self-analysis and reflection, capturing not just their outward appearance but also the essence of their inner world. However, a self-portrait can sometimes transcend the artist's identity.

All self-portraiture involves the fascinating process of seeing oneself as an "other." By creating a self-portrait, an artist objectifies their own body, essentially crafting a "double" of themselves. This process allows artists to highlight the medium and the creative process, showcase their skills, and experiment with technique and style. Thus, the artist assumes the role of observer in their own life, depicting not only their identity but also the surrounding environment. For Chang, who engaged deeply with everything around him, his family and students became integral subjects reflected in his self-portraits. He also utilised self-portraiture as a teaching tool for his students, embracing his role as a mentor. Furthermore, self-portraits serve as a double self for Chang, allowing him to manifest his reflections on the political landscape of his time.

Some of Tang Chang's self-portraits go beyond self-examination to reflect the world around him. First, they serve as a form of autobiography—not only illustrating his relationship with his wife and family but also revealing details such as the number of his children and the closeness they shared. Second, his self-portraits functioned as pedagogical tools, used to teach and inspire his students. Finally, his self-portraits also express his engagement with political issues, offering insights into his responses to the sociopolitical climate of his time.

As viewers, when we examine a self-portrait—particularly Chang's self-portrait—we perceive not only how he recognises himself but also the narratives he conveys through his art. For instance, his self-portrait reveals his close relationship with his family, including his wife and seven children. Furthermore, during the 1970s, he collaborated with one of his favourite students on a self-portrait, highlighting his role as a mentor. Additionally, his work reflects his engagement with the societal and political climate of the time. In this way, a self-portrait can serve as a condensed biography of the artist. In other words, artists often use self-portraits to narrate their own autobiographies. Hence, the study of self-portraits can move beyond self-examination to include an understanding of how these works relate to the world and the narratives surrounding the artist.

However, this article has sought to explore various examples of Chang's self-portraits, aiming to uncover narratives that extend beyond mere self-representation. It is crucial to acknowledge the substantial body of work left by Chang, which includes not only self-portraits but also abstract pieces, concrete poetry, and other genres. While the art world has recognised his abstract paintings, Tang Chang's extensive body of self-portraits not only reveals his understanding of himself but also conveys the personal narratives surrounding his life. Despite their richness, the study of his self-portraits remains underdeveloped, even though they offer a reflective view of the artist and his world. With over 400 self-portraits to analyse, there exists a rich opportunity to examine these works from multiple perspectives, ultimately contributing valuable insights to the discourse of art history.

NOTES

1. Somyot received a scholarship to study in Germany in 1972, followed by Somboon, another of Chang's students, in 1973. According to an interview with Thip, the artist's son, the Goethe-Institut, a German cultural organisation, initially invited Chang to participate in a project in Germany. However, Chang declined and instead recommended his students. Before leaving, there was an understanding that Somyot would help Somboon follow him to Germany, and Somboon, in turn, was supposed to assist Pisit, Chang's eldest son, in making the same journey. However, after Somyot and Somboon arrived in Germany, disagreements arose between them and Chang. Although there is no concrete evidence to explain these disagreements fully, Chang's strong connection with the Goethe-Institut in the 1970s is well-documented. This connection is evident from the numerous invitations and newsletters from the Goethe-Institut found in his archive, and he also held an exhibition there with his children in 1974.

2. In September and October 2024, I focused on researching self-portraits. During this time, Thip Sae-tang, Chang's son, assisted me in identifying and interpreting several works.

3. Personal interview with Thip Sae-tang, the fourth son of Tang Chang.

4. Nawapooh Sae-tang is incorporating this observation into his future research. For a deeper understanding, readers may explore his self-portraits at https://tangchangmuseum.com/web/html/hiswork.html

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