

Chinese Diaspora and the Emergence of Alternative Modernities in Malaysian Visual Arts

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Abstract. This paper investigates the early history of modern Malaysian art as evidence of alternative modernism. More specifically, we look at the Nanyang artists as representing a particular section of early modern Malaysian art whose works propose a particular brand of modernism that is peculiar to this region. These artists were formally trained in the tenets of both Western and Chinese art and transplanted into Malaya in the early 20th century. Consequently, their artistic production betrays subject matters derived from diverse travels, resulting unique stylistic hybridization that is discernible yet distinctive of the Malayan region of Southeast Asia. By positioning their art within the problematic of the modern we argue that this stylistic innovation exceeds the realm of aesthetics. Rather, it weaves a particular social and historical discourse that elucidates the Malayan experience and production of modernity. The art of Nanyang must therefore be understood as a local artifact within the global archaeology of alternative modernism. It is a site where modernity as a plural and culturally-situated phenomenon can be continually historicized and articulated in context. Research methods comprise a combination of archival research, field research which includes viewing the actual artwork as well as interviews with pertinent experts within the area such as the artists themselves, friends of the artists, art writers, historians and curators.

Keywords: Modern Malaysian art, modernism, alternative modernities

1. Introduction: Problematizing Modernity

Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent, it is one half of art the other being the eternal and the immovable...You have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element ... nor to dispense with it. If you do, you inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and undefinable beauty.

Charles Baudelaire

Charles Baudelaire, a 19th century French poet, defined the Modern as current or contemporary developments. Its cultural subjects embark on excursions into the vignettes of daily life and submit them in the form of art that is born from the privacy of their studios. Baudelaire's modern character delves into the beauty of modern life, as seen from multiple surrounding scenarios (Baudelaire 1972). This paper traces the early history of modern Malaysian art as a cultural modernity in the Baudelarian sense due to its reliance on modernizing the representations of the local environment. The analyses that ensue confirm the current debates on modernity that construe modernism as a multifaceted yet intricate subject of study.

Committed to analyzing modernism, this paper maintains a critical distance from the postmodern order of things. While postmodernism in general has announced the end of modernity, we argue that such apocalyptic rhetoric is fundamentally ethnocentric, perpetuating the Weberian fallacy that modernity is an exclusively Euroamerican triumph and phenomenon (Weber 1993). The fact is that not only the rhythms and forces modernity pulsates in every individual in the rest of the world, but also there the discourse of modernity has been brought to a turning point. We contended that the catalyst for this development is not the closure of modernity by "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). Instead, the turning point is due to the global and transcultural characters that modernism has brought upon itself. Globalization has spread in an unprecedented rate in modern history of the world, thanks to colonial initiatives, which consequently produced multiplicity of modernities. The appropriation and mutation of modernity by Africans, Arabs,

Indians, Asians, etc. do not imply westernization. They are fundamentally subversive gestures that bastardize the European legacy and refute the telos of classical theories (Durkheim, Marx, Weber) that prophesized the universalization of western modernism's cultural program.

In this paper, modern Malaysian art is conceived as one of the instances where cultural modernity is multiplied and pluralized. We define art and artists as the artifacts of 'alternative modernities'. "To think in terms of alternative modernities is to privilege a particular angle of interrogation" and to "examine the career and dilemmas of from a specific national/cultural site" (Gaonkar 2001: 14). Thus it should be stressed that, being a project of modernity, the notion of alternative does not signify a disjunction, deviation nor demarcation from modernity. Rather, the focus of analyses is to understand the Modern as a discursive formation, which continues to be 'under-construction' around the world. Alternative modernities are born from the inoculation of the modern into non-western communities, whose modernities mutate from its Euroamerican spring. This mutation is not fueled by some abstract or universal ideals regarding the natural destiny of mankind as it was posited by the positivist philosophy that supplemented Europe's entry into modernity. Rather, as it was with 17th century Europe, non-western modernities are shaped by the concrete and conscious rhythms of history.

2. Contesting Modernity in/through Art: The Sino-Malayan Experience

It is generally contended that the Modern Malaysian art occurred with the arrival of Chinese immigrant artists in Singapore during the early 1900s (Beamish 1954; Hsu 1999; Piyadasa 1994; Yeoh 1997). These artists, collectively named the Nanyang Artists, belong to the generation of Chinese artists, mostly from Shanghai, who migrated to British Malaya in the 1930s to find refuge from ideological conflict and Japanese invasion of China (Yeoh 1988; Piyadasa 1979). The term Nanyang is of Chinese origin designating the areas in maritime Southeast Asia. According to Wang Gungwu

the word "Nanyang", the "Southern Ocean", is used as an equivalent of the more recent coinage, "South-east Asia". But there is an important difference. There is implied in the word "Nanyang" territories which have been reached by sea, by the South China Sea, and consequently, the areas which specially concern the Nanyang Chinese have been the key coastal strips of mainland South-east Asia (Wang 1959: 1).

Nanyang is by definition indicates a very specific designation, referring exclusively to the coastal strips in the vicinities of Southeast Asia. Based on this definition, Singapore, which has historically been part Malaya until 1965, was without doubt a part of Nanyang, being an island strategically situated alongside the important sea trade route of the Straits of Malacca.

The migration of Chinese artists to Nanyang "proved to be consequential to the development of the contemporary movement in painting in the two island ports of Penang and Singapore and eventually in British Malaya" (Yeoh 1988: 52). Their endeavours eventually led to the establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) in 1938, funded by local Chinese merchants, elites and art collectors (Piyadasa 1979; Yeoh 1988). The teachers at NAFA were Chinese immigrants, most of whom were alumni of the art academies in China, notably from the Shanghai Art University, the Shanghai School of Fine Arts and the Sin Hua Academy. All of them were trained in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting and were also familiar with the European modernism training in China by a generation of artists who had studied in Japan and Europe to join the call for the cultural modernization of China.

It should be noted that Japan had started their modernization process earlier to some extent. Eventually, Chinese artists were educated abroad returned home and taught Western Art in the Academies. Art students were able to undertake Western and Chinese painting courses as part of their training. Art academies mushroomed in China, most notably Shanghai. As indicated above, the Nanyang artists were affiliated with these academies. Coming from Shanghai, they were already quite fully shaped by modernity. They would have been exposed to the latest fashion and trends not only in Shanghai, probably the rest of the major cities in the world as well. As the art historian Michael Sullivan noted: "In the Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s, to be cosmopolitan was to be smart. Men and women in the swim often took foreign names, wore Western clothes, and interlarded their conversation and letters with English and French words and phrases" (Sullivan

1996: 44). The citizens of Shanghai indeed personify Baudelarian dandyism, where modernism occurs through the aesthetics of the self.

The Nanyang artists subsequently transplanted their hybrid modernism into the Malayan soil. When they arrived in Malaya, the artists were teaching and practicing alongside each other. They may have percolated into local society and culture with artistic studies and observations. Examples may be seen in the various visual images created from the artists' productions depicting local subject matter. Using Baudelaire's model which was evoked at the beginning of this essay, one is compelled to imagine Chinese artists going places (in Singapore and collectively in Bali in 1952) in efforts to identify with and document their natural surroundings. This is an exemplary illustration of modernity at work.

While the Nanyang artists were equipped with a working knowledge of modern art practices and the intricacies of modernities due to their socio-historical and cultural background, they did not simply cling to and promote their artistic roots. Instead these artists aspired "to establish a uniquely Nanyang (south-seas) style" (Yeoh 1988: 54). This was done through the themes of local landscapes and subjects, which were consciously painted in manners that merged European modernism and Chinese pictorial tradition. The hybridization of the painterly vocabularies became more intensified with the arrival of Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi from the Sin Hua Academy (Shanghai) and Georgette Chen from Paris, whose visual experimentation attempted to fuse renaissance naturalist principles with the aesthetics of Chinese scroll-painting. Beamish (1954) wrote of Cheong Soo Pieng as an outstanding representative of the modern school of Malayan painting who is "constantly experimenting with new techniques" to combine "the flowing line of Eastern painting with Western cubism" (Beamish 1954: 37). A similar mingling of tradition and modernism is also evident in the works of Lai Foong Moi, whose *Gadis Melayu* (Malay Girl) (Fig. 1), for instance, abandoned the refinement of contour, resulting a certain harshness and monumentality in the human figure. Traces of Chinese aesthetics are more evident in *Rumah Panjang* (Long House) (Fig. 2) where linearity predominates her interpretation of Borneo's tribal heartland. Similar principle can also be seen at work in Cheong Soo Pieng's *Kampung Nelayan* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The aforementioned historical and aesthetic developments delineate the complexity of Malayan artistic modernism that was formed from pluralities of alternative modernities through Chinese diaspora. Early Malayan modernists were “irrevocably translated” to “inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages and to translate and negotiate between them” (Hall 1992: 310). As such many of their artistic decisions were grounded to issues of belonging to the new culture, in this case a Malayan culture located within the larger regional culture of the Nanyang. Although it might be argued that the common social strategy of diaspora communities is to turn to tradition and cultural roots produces another type of essentialist identity, it is the mixing of these selected cultural elements between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities that produces yet a different and altogether ‘new’ identity. Stuart Hall underscores this dynamics of diaspora that is not “defined by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of an identity which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew” (Hall 1990: 235). Within the Nanyang artistic community we may see how art becomes an important site where such an identity can be constructed, negotiated and represented. The artists had to search for ways to navigate between two identities in particular—one that was tied to the idea of belonging to China, while the other belonging to Nanyang and more specifically Malaya. It is an identity that continually re-positions itself, hence the transitory disposition of these artists “who are rooted neither in mainland China nor in the specificities of the Malaysian experience” (Carsten 2005: 5). Decisively excised from its Sino-Japanese-European paradigm, early Malayan modernism elusively emerged through a collective of displaced intelligence that negotiates, localizes and expresses its translated histories and subjectivities.

3. Concluding Remarks

To think of alternative modernities is to remind ourselves that modernity is plural and a culturally-situated phenomenon. It calls for a thorough historicization of modernity that is not simply descriptive but leads to the structuring of local agency. Such endeavor bears a critical weight we must bear in order to develop a critical self-reflexivity to address the western-centric classical theories and the apocalyptic rhetoric of postmodernism. Nonetheless, we stress that the notion of alternative modernities should not be construed as simply a quarrel with ethnocentrism. Its significance is located in the development of critical analyses to historicize modernity and thereby articulate the nature and meaning of *modernity in context*. Alternative modernities are the rhizomatic histories of contemporary life that continue to be manifested in various forms. This paper has privileged early modern Malaysian art as a form of alternative modernity that merits critical analyses. Subjected to the force of globalization and redeemed by the labor of Chinese diaspora, this particular history delineates a translated modernity that was formed through a plurality of alternative modernities. The art of this region, as well as its general spheres of life, are indeed the sites where modernity remains an ‘incomplete project’ that continues to incubate, spread, grow and mutate.

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