

The Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in Lantern-Themed Artworks by Nanyang Artists

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Abstract: *This article explores how Nanyang Chinese artists express cultural identity through the traditional symbol of the lantern, with a focus on analyzing the artistic creations of Nanyang painters from the early to mid-20th century and the symbolic significance of lanterns in their works. Through qualitative research methods, this paper collects and analyzes the lantern elements in Nanyang art works, explaining how these works demonstrate the Chinese community's adherence to and emotional attachment to Chinese culture in foreign lands. Through the analysis of the works of Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen, and Khaw Sia, this paper demonstrates the rich connotations carried by lanterns as cultural symbols, as well as their transmission and transformation in a cross-cultural context. Research shows that the Nanyang Chinese, through cultural symbols such as lanterns, have reinforced their identification with traditional Chinese culture, reflecting the continuation and recreation of culture in a foreign environment.*

Keywords: Nanyang Art, Lanterns, Cultural Identity, Artistic Heritage

1. Introduction

In the 1920s and 1930s, due to social turmoil in China, many graduates from the Shanghai Fine Arts School, the Xinhua Art School, and the Hangzhou Art School settled in Nanyang (Mei, 2016). In 1935, the alumni of these schools jointly established "The Society of Chinese Artists" (SOCA), and they began to consciously promote art, with themes featuring tropical landscapes gradually being incorporated into their works. Their gathering not only provided the opportunity for the establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1938, but SOCA and NAFA also became the main forces driving the development of Nanyang art (Zhong, 1999). These intellectuals and artists were primarily concentrated in Singapore and Penang, so their arrival not only made Malaysia and Singapore important bases for Chinese cultural and artistic exchange but also established the concept of Malaysia and Singapore as "Nanyang" (Lee, 2006).

In the early 1950s, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts teachers Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, and Georgette Chen successfully combined Chinese art, the French academic style, and local culture to explore the "New Art" style (Zhong, 1999). The first generation of immigrant painters depicted the landscapes and life of Nanyang with great enthusiasm, but for those born and raised during the turbulent years in their homeland, they also consciously took on the responsibility of spreading traditional Chinese culture. Lim Hak

Tai summarized the concept of "Nanyang Art" into six main principles, one of which calls on Nanyang Chinese painters to take on the role of bridging Eastern and Western art.

Lanterns originated during the Western Han Dynasty, with a history of over 1800 years. They hold significant symbolic meaning and practical functions, especially in ancient times, where they were widely used as lighting tools. At the same time, lanterns, as traditional Chinese folk crafts, are widely used in various occasions such as funerals, weddings, festivals, and religious events. It carries rich cultural connotations, symbolizing the brilliance of Chinese civilization and reflecting the prosperity and harmony of the nation (Xiao, 2015). Malaysian lantern maker Chuen Mun Wai (personal interview, February 28, 2025) pointed out that lanterns also carry important social functions in the Nanyang Chinese community:

In the era before electricity supply, lanterns were everyday lighting tools. With the widespread use of electricity, the function of lanterns gradually shifted, becoming symbols for specific occasions. Firstly, in the festive activities of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia, lanterns are often used to enhance the festive atmosphere, especially during the Mid-Autumn Festival, where the shapes of the lanterns express various beautiful meanings. Secondly, at wedding ceremonies, lanterns symbolize prosperity and sexual education, carrying blessings for the future. Thirdly, lanterns also play an important role in sacrificial activities, used to summon the souls of ancestors and pray for divine protection; fourthly, yellow lanterns are commonly seen in temples, symbolizing reverence for the sacred. Fifthly, some wealthy families use lanterns with their surnames written on them to showcase their family's status. Finally, in modern society, lanterns are also widely used by businesses in interior design, becoming unique decorations that reflect cultural connotations.

It can be seen that lanterns have become a symbolic representation of Chinese identity in the Nanyang society. At the same time, lanterns have gradually integrated into the creations of local Chinese artists, becoming an important medium for their artistic expression. They constantly remind the diaspora not to forget their cultural roots and, through the intertwining of tradition and innovation, emit a new cultural vitality.

2. Methodology

Creswell categorizes research approaches into three types: qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed methods research (Ishtiaq, 2019). Qualitative research is an exploratory method aimed at understanding complex phenomena by studying subjective experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. It has flexibility and adaptability, focusing on in-depth exploration of issues rather than hypothesis testing (Nick, 2023).

This study delves into the phenomenon of cultural identity and its significance through the lantern elements and social context in the works of Nanyang immigrant painters. It interprets and constructs meaning based on individual unique perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts. Therefore, this paper will adopt a qualitative research method.

This study primarily collects two types of data through interviews, observations, and literature: one is the visual art form, and the other is the meaning of visual artworks. Specifically, the data collection for visual art form includes: general information about the artwork (such as title, year, size, medium, and exhibition), subject, media and techniques, shape, style, etc. As for the

data related to the meaning of visual artworks, it includes: (1) situations or events of socio-cultural changes; (2) symbols or signs appearing in the artworks. The purpose of collecting the first type of data is to analyze the structural representation of Chinese lantern cultural identity in Nanyang paintings; while the second type of data aims to explore the context of Chinese lantern cultural identity in artworks, further analyzing the deeper meanings contained in the expression of this cultural identity.

3. Conceptual Framework

Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn believe that culture can be divided into explicit and implicit levels (Kroeber, 1952). Yang (2009) proposed the "three levels of culture," which break down the components of culture into material culture, institutional culture, and spiritual culture. The researcher, based on these theories, categorize material culture and institutional culture as explicit levels of cultural identity, mainly including seven elements: social organization, economic system, political, religion, language, arts and literature, customs and traditions. In contrast, spiritual culture belongs to the implicit level of cultural identity. Huang (1989) believes it is mainly manifested in deep-seated cultural connotations such as emotional, ideological, and values.

Peirce's semiotic theory involves the interaction and cooperation of three entities: sign, object, and interpretant. In Peirce's framework, the sign refers to the object, while the thoughts and meanings evoked in the recipient's mind by the sign are the interpretant (Peirce, 1897). The meanings opened by the interpretant can be divided into at least two types: denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotation (also known as extension) refers to the object that the sign denotes; connotation (also known as intension) refers to the characteristics, qualities, and attributes of the object that the sign denotes (Peirce, 1865).

Therefore, icons and indices can evoke some interpretants through observation, thereby obtaining a more superficial meaning of the sign—namely, the denotative meaning. In this process, the interpretant mainly reflects the explicit aspects of cultural identity, namely those cultural elements that can be directly observed, described, and analyzed. However, through further exploration of literature research and interviews, researchers can assign new interpretants to the sign, thereby delving

deeper into the sign's more profound meanings—namely, the connotative meaning. Based on semiotics and cultural identity theory, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) to guide the analysis of artworks with the lantern theme by Nanyang artists.

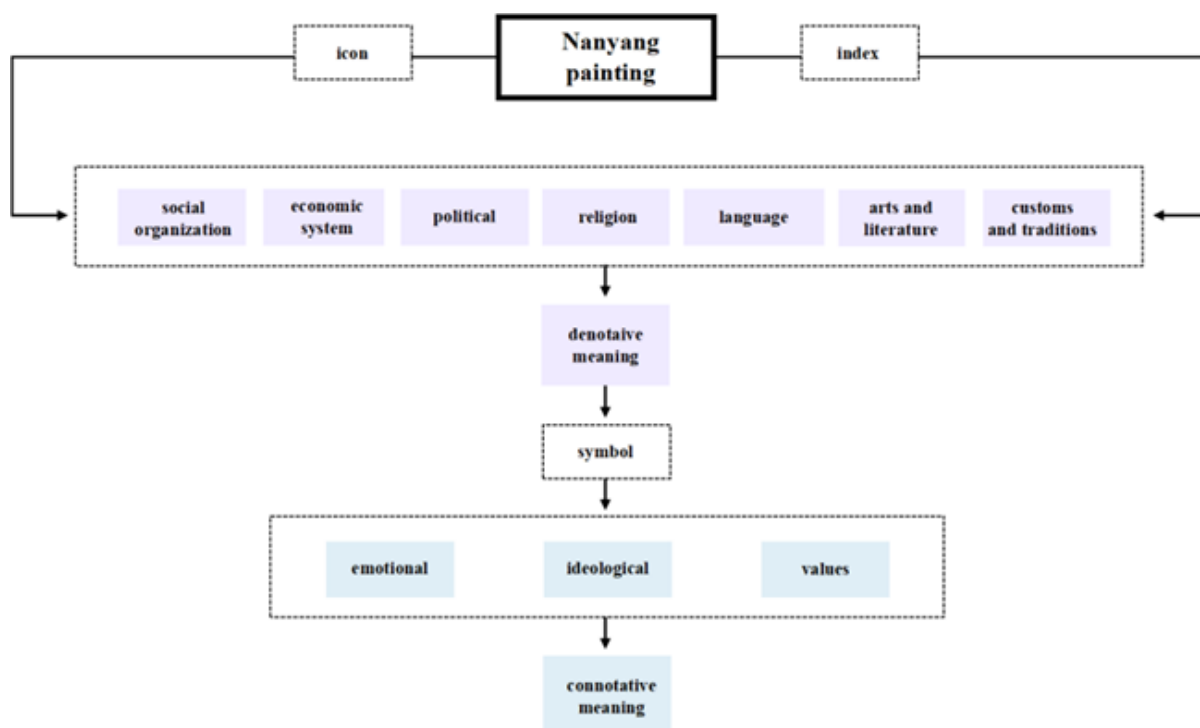


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in Lantern-Themed Artworks by Nanyang Artists
Source: The Researcher)

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in Cheong Soo Pieng's Lantern maker



Figure 2: Cheong Soo Pieng, Lantern Maker, mixed media on board, 91.5x66cm, 1970
Source: https://www.art.salon/artwork/cheong-soo-pieng_lantern-maker_AID333531

Cheong Soo Pieng's *Lantern Maker* (Figure 2) focuses on a craftsman drawing a lantern. He is bowing his head, carefully drawing a Long pattern on a rectangular lantern. His painting tools are very simple: two paint trays, a brush, and a cup-shaped container that is likely used for cleaning the brush. Above his head, there are various lanterns of different shapes, mainly round, oval, and long, with colors primarily in red, yellow, and green.

As a material carrier of Chinese civilization, the evolution of lantern designs reflects the cultural characteristics of different eras. Pan (2024) examines its origins, noting that the design of lanterns was initially established during the Han Dynasty. By the Yongping period of Emperor Ming, the practice of lighting lamps for Buddhist rituals, brought by the eastward spread of Buddhism, combined with the Shangyuan Festival, marking the beginning of festive lanterns. The craftsmanship of lanterns reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty, and their scale became a visual representation of the nation's prosperity. The flourishing of urban culture during the Song Dynasty saw lantern festivals begin to be integrated into the folk customs system. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, this further evolved into variations such as palace lanterns, silk lanterns, and revolving lanterns, which, through cultural assimilation, developed symbolic functions of warding off evil and inviting good fortune.

Malaysian lantern craftsman Chuen Mun Wai (personal interview, February 28, 2025) recounted the close intertwining of lantern culture's transoceanic spread and the history of Chinese immigration:

The lantern culture in Malaysia and Singapore is rooted in the historical context of Chinese immigration. From the first wave of Chinese migration triggered by Zheng He's voyages to the West in the 15th century, to the second wave of migration spurred by the flourishing tin mining in the 19th century, the Chinese community gradually brought traditional crafts to Southeast Asia. The lantern-making techniques we inherit are primarily derived from the Ming Dynasty. This craft in mainland China suffered a severe blow during the Cultural Revolution. As a descendant of the Baba-Nyonya, I deeply understand the importance of lanterns to our community. The use of lanterns by the Peranakan Chinese is very extensive, including for weddings, funerals, temples, and residences, etc.

However, contemporary inheritance faces a dual dilemma: first, traditional materials are becoming increasingly scarce; second, the high humidity in Malaysia requires precise control of temperature and humidity for the fabric to air dry, as even a slight mistake can cause discoloration or deformation. These difficulties deter the new generation of apprentices.

With the migration of populations, despite facing multiple challenges, this craft has been preserved and developed across time and space in the Nanyang region. From the connotative perspective of art semiotics, the lantern craft among the Chinese in Nanyang is not merely an object but has been elevated to a profound cultural symbol.

This transformation not only reflects the South Sea Chinese artisans' unwavering commitment to traditional craftsmanship but also their deep identification with the cultural mission of their ethnic group. Through lantern-making, South Sea Chinese artisans have reconstructed the collective memory of their community, making lanterns an important symbol of their cultural uniqueness. The power of this cultural symbol lies not only in its exquisite craftsmanship but also in its rich cultural memories and sense of national identity. Thus, lantern craftsmanship has become a bridge connecting the emotional ties of the Nanyang Chinese with Chinese culture, showcasing their respect and appreciation for their ancestral culture.



Figure 3: Chinese Totems in Lantern Maker
Source: The Researcher Recreated Lantern Maker

Moreover, the rectangular lantern hanging above with the character "寿" should be a basket lantern, and the character "寿" is surrounded by auspicious cloud patterns. The lantern being painted by the craftsman is also a basket lantern, with Long as its main figure, and it is similarly decorated with auspicious cloud patterns. Clouds and dragons, as one of the most important totems in Chinese culture, appear together in this artwork. From the denotative perspective of symbols, this piece showcases the reverence and inheritance of the original Chinese totems by the Chinese in Nanyang.

The Chinese nation, as a primarily agrarian society, has a profound dependence on natural conditions. The growth and failure of crops are closely related to the weather, which made ancient humans hold a deep reverence for the mysterious forces that govern the heavens and the earth, gradually giving rise to the worship of clouds and a sense of religious consciousness. In this cultural context, cloud patterns entered the decorative motif system of the Chinese nation. As time passed, various cloud-related patterns gradually developed, evolving from ancient totem worship into people's affection for clouds. Consequently, cloud patterns became an important auspicious motif for the Chinese nation. The working people express their beautiful hopes for favorable weather and abundant harvests through cloud patterns, embodying their longing for a happy life and pursuit of harmony with nature (Liu., 2007).

Moreover, "cloud" (云, Pinyin: yún) and "luck" (运, Pinyin: yùn) are homophones. It has gained a new layer of meaning in secular culture, expanding from a symbol of the heavenly way to a metaphor for fate.

The ceremonial attributes of the Long pattern constitute another symbolic dimension. Examining its form and origin, Long is regarded as a mysterious spiritual entity. The ancient ancestors' worship of natural phenomena, legends of its ability to summon wind and rain and control nature, made the natural world vibrant and orderly, thus becoming a symbol of royal power and divine mandate. The Long was created with rich imagination, combining the strengths of many animals, representing the spirit of unity, progress, hard work, bravery, and inclusiveness of the Chinese nation. Long patterns are also widely used in art, architecture, ritual vessels, and textiles, carrying the functions of blessing, warding off evil, and cultural identity (Lin & Zhu, 2010).

Moreover, according to Chuen Mun Wai (personal interview, February 28, 2025), in the context of Nanyang, the symbolic meaning of Long has undergone a transformation, with the symbol of imperial power being restructured as a mark of ethnic identity:

In the Nanyang region, items with Long motifs rarely appear in homes or civilian objects; traditionally, Long was for the use of emperor, so homes would display qilins. Lanterns with Long designs are commonly found in temples, palaces, and other places of religious or political significance.

In summary, totem worship is not only a reflection of decorative patterns but also a symbol of cultural identity. For the Chinese in Nanyang, despite being far from their homeland, they convey deep respect for their ancestors' wisdom and showcase their dedication and pride in traditional Chinese culture by continuing the use of totems like cloud patterns and Long motifs, which carry profound cultural significance, further reinforcing their sense of national identity. These totems are not merely an exhibition of artistic forms; they are also a medium for expressing ideological identity and cultural heritage, embodying a steadfast guardianship of one's cultural roots and the continuous promotion of the spirit of the Chinese nation.

Finally, the artist also presents, on a denotative level, the specific social group of artisans who migrated to the Nanyang region. The lantern, as a handcrafted item, was first introduced to the Nanyang region through Zheng He's maritime expeditions. Subsequently, with the rise of the "down to Nanyang" migration wave, some Chinese artisans brought their traditional skills to the Nanyang region. Their professions are diverse, including bakers, tailors, cobblers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, sculptors, locksmiths, painters, masons, weavers, and more, almost covering every field of handicraft. After Chinese artisans arrived in Southeast Asia, they not only introduced traditional Chinese craftsmanship to the region but also had a profound impact on local production methods, daily life, and economic development. Through inheritance and innovation, they provided significant support for the economic development of Southeast Asia, becoming a crucial driving force in the region's handicraft industry (Gao, 2014).

The continuation and dissemination of lantern-making craftsmanship rely on the tireless inheritance and efforts of generations of artisans. In foreign lands, Chinese artisans in Southeast Asia, while seeking their livelihoods, have integrated the richness of traditional Chinese craftsmanship and exquisite techniques into Southeast Asian society. It is precisely this "craftsmanship spirit" upheld by Chinese artisans—focus, perseverance, and the pursuit of excellence—that has allowed this cultural tradition to be passed down and carried forward. This not only showcases the beauty of the craftsmanship involved in lantern making but also imbues the work with profound connotative meaning. This work, by showcasing the making and application of lanterns, not only celebrates the beauty of Chinese craftsmanship but also reflects the profound recognition of the "craftsman spirit" by the Chinese in Nanyang, as well as their conscious commitment to the mission of passing it down through generations. It illustrates the continuity and sublimation of culture amidst migration and integration.

4.2 Analysis of Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in Georgette's Moon Festival Table



Figure 4: Khaw Sia, Joget Under Chinese Lanterns, oil on canvas, 122x212cm, 1972

Source:

https://hbart.com.my/index.php/component/virtuemart/?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage_lite_pdf.tpl&product_id=1870&category_id=18

Khaw Sia's Joget Under Chinese Lanterns (Figure 4) depicts a lively Joget dance performance. The main subjects are a group of men and women dressed in colorful costumes, dancing in pairs under the lanterns. The women are wearing brightly colored long-sleeved tops paired with elegant long skirts, adorned with intricate patterns and designs. It should be kebaya and sarong. They meticulously styled their hair and adorned it richly. The men wore light-colored long-sleeved shirts, with only the collar buttoned, the hems naturally parted, revealing the blue sampin at their waists.

This piece was auctioned by Henry Butcher art auctioneers, and its CEO Sim Polenn (personal interview, February 22, 2025) introduced:

Khaw Sia depicted scenes of early Malaysia in his work, where people perform the Jogte dance under the illumination of Chinese lanterns. This is a traditional Malay dance often accompanied by Malay musical instruments. This artwork was commissioned by a hotel owner for hotel decoration. Therefore, Khaw Sia also created other works of the same size, such as Horse Riding and Bersilat. Based on this creative need, the artist incorporated various ethnic elements into the works, depicting characters of Malays, Chinese, and other ethnicities, aiming to reflect the theme of ethnic integration.

Sim Polenn's views on ethnic integration resonate with the diverse skin tones of people in the artwork. Moreover, this phenomenon of ethnic integration can be attributed to Zheng He, whose multiple voyages to the South Seas sparked a wave of merchants going to sea for trade. According to Chen's (2011) research, early maritime technology was not very advanced, and merchants from the Fujian and Guangdong regions could not frequently travel back and forth between the two places by sailing with the monsoon winds. They could only choose to stay temporarily and leave their wives and children at home. For the sake of livelihood and business, some Chinese merchants would marry local non-Chinese women in the Nanyang region. This way, when they returned to their homeland, the task of managing the Nanyang business would fall to their wives. The descendants of the Straits Chinese often continued the practice of intermarrying with local women. After several generations of integration, a community of Straits Chinese emerged, combining the cultural characteristics of both the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups. These Peranakan Chinese males are called Baba, and females are called Nyonya.

Since the father was responsible for earning a living outside, their descendants preferred the "mother's language" (Malay) over the "father's language" (Hokkien) in terms of language choice.

Nevertheless, Baba and Nyonya remain very "Sinicized" in terms of religious beliefs and daily customs. They uphold the virtues of Chinese culture because they believe that without the Chinese language, they should pay more attention to the transmission of these customs and pass down both personal conduct and moral teachings to future generations. The founder of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Tan Cheng Lock, took pride in being a descendant of the Chinese. He was enthusiastic about Chinese education, defended the rights of the Chinese community, and was dedicated to improving the social status of the Chinese in Malaysia (Wang, 2007).

The Baba and Nyonya's adherence to traditional Chinese culture endows this work with a deeper connotative meaning. Despite changes in their living environment and cultural background, they still maintain strong "Sinicized" characteristics in terms of religious beliefs and daily customs, and they consistently strive to protect the rights of the Chinese community. The Baba Nyonya community's deep emotional connection to Chinese culture not only helps them better integrate into local society but also opens up a unique and important cultural adaptation space for Chinese descendants and new immigrant groups. The formation of this cultural identity and adaptability reflects the core Chinese value of "求同存异" (seek common ground while reserving differences). Especially the scene where different ethnic groups dance the Joget under the red lanterns vividly reflects this core value concept.



Figure 5: The Red Atmosphere in Joget Under Chinese Lanterns
Source: The Researcher Recreated in Joget Under Chinese Lanterns

Additionally, the scene in this work is predominantly red, with the pillars, lanterns, drums, and drum stands all displaying vibrant shades of red (Figure 5). Especially the red lanterns, which create a strong festive and celebratory atmosphere. At the denotative meaning level, this design reflects the Baba and Nyonya's love for traditional Chinese lanterns and their preference for red cultural customs.

Lanterns are used by the Peranakan Chinese in various important occasions. In the ancient rituals of the Peranakan Chinese, such as grand wedding ceremonies, the Umbrella Lantern is especially beloved by them:

First of all, because its bamboo cage opens like an umbrella (伞, Pinyin: sǎn), and its Chinese pronunciation is similar to the word for "spread out" (散, Pinyin: sàn). The components used in the Umbrella Lantern are also significant; for example, the candlestick represents "yang," while the lamp holder represents "yin," symbolizing the harmony of yin and yang. Taking the "Double Heart Candle" as an example, one flame ignites two candles, splitting into two, then four, symbolizing

"adding children" and "adding blessings," as good things come in pairs. If a couple has been married for a long time without having children, local Chinese will add one or more new lanterns to their ancestral home and pray to their family deity for the blessing of having children and expanding their family. The so-called "adding lanterns" is also about adding children (Chuen Wen Mun Wai, personal interview, February 28, 2025).

Moreover, the widespread use of red in Chinese festive activities stems from its deep cultural roots and symbolic significance. Firstly, red is traditionally regarded as an auspicious and celebratory color, symbolizing good fortune and happiness. Red also represents the expulsion of evil and the avoidance of misfortune; people believe that red can drive away inauspicious elements, which is why it is extensively used during festivals. Secondly, red embodies the Chinese people's reverence for vitality and prosperity. Red is associated with the sun and flames, symbolizing brightness and warmth. The use of red decorations during festivals not only creates a joyful atmosphere but also conveys the hope for a prosperous and thriving future. Moreover, the admiration and norms of the ruling class throughout history have also established the noble status of red. Since the Zhou Dynasty's "Shang Chi," red has been endowed with symbolic meanings of authority and nobility. This tradition has continued to this day, making red an indispensable visual and spiritual symbol in festive activities (Chen, 2018).

In the ritual customs of the Peranakan Chinese, the cultural symbol of the lantern is imbued with profound connotative meaning, fully reflecting the deep recognition of traditional Chinese cultural concepts regarding family prosperity and the continuation of the family line. At the same time, lanterns and the color red, as important elements symbolizing goodness in Chinese culture, embody the pursuit of family happiness and social harmony. The Chinese in Nanyang, through cultural practices, not only reflect their high recognition of Chinese auspicious culture but also demonstrate their profound understanding and creative transformation of the positive and optimistic spirit in traditional Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

With Zheng He's seven voyages to the West, lanterns gradually made their way to Nanyang, becoming an important medium for the practice of Chinese culture in Nanyang society. This long-standing and ever-renewing cultural heritage not only carries the deep affection of Chinese immigrants for their homeland culture but also breathes new life into the exotic environment of Nanyang. The symbolic significance of lanterns in Chinese culture far exceeds their decorative function. Historically, they have long served as tools for making wishes, embodying the broad aspirations and practical needs of the Chinese people for a better life. In many artworks from the Nanyang region, lantern elements are widely presented. Through the integration with local cultures, the Nanyang Chinese have incorporated lantern-making techniques into a multicultural framework, which not only evokes their recognition of their own cultural identity but also further enriches the expression of Chinese culture and makes significant contributions to the cultural diversity of Nanyang.

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