

# The Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in the Architecture Themed Artwork of Nanyang Artists

Ge Yaqian<sup>1</sup>, Issarezal Ismail<sup>1\*</sup>, Azian Tahir<sup>1</sup>, Chang Guotao<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Fine Art, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, 32610 Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Zhejiang Huazhan Institute of Engineering Research & Design, 435 Lianfeng Middle Rd, Haishu District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China

\* Corresponding Author: [issarezal@uitm.edu.my](mailto:issarezal@uitm.edu.my)

Received: 15 December 2024 | Accepted: 13 January 2025 | Published: 15 February 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2025.7.1.21>

---

**Abstract:** *Throughout history, multiple large-scale migrations from China to Southeast Asia have given rise to unique cultural phenomena in the Nanyang region. These migrations facilitated the dissemination and preservation of Chinese culture across various industries, particularly in architecture. This study analyzes three architecture-themed artworks by Nanyang Chinese artists to explore the representational meaning of cultural identity. In the early 20th century, many Chinese intellectuals and artists migrated to Nanyang due to war. They integrated traditional Chinese art with Western art, driving the development of Nanyang art and becoming the core force of this artistic movement. Using a conceptual framework and qualitative research methods, combining observation and document analysis, this study examines how Nanyang Chinese artists, through architecture-themed artworks, express and uphold their cultural identity from the perspectives of emotion, ideology, and values.*

**Keywords:** representation, Nanyang painting, Chinese architecture, cultural identity

---

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, Chinese people have continued to immigrate to Southeast Asia. Historical documents from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty contain records of transportation, trade and diplomatic relations between ancient China, the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Before the Opium Wars, there were two important waves of immigration. The first wave of immigrants occurred during Zheng He's voyages to the West in the 15th century. Zheng He made seven voyages to the West, and each time he passed through Malacca Sultanate (Wan, 2020). Since then, Chinese people's migration to Southeast Asia has gradually become a trend. The second wave of immigration occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries. Immigration during this period was mainly driven by two factors: First, the dynasty changes and political turmoil in the Ming Dynasty caused some Chinese to choose to emigrate; second, the development of Southeast Asia by Western colonists intensified the demand for Chinese labor. In addition, the Ming Dynasty the prosperity of private overseas trade in the later period also created more opportunities for Chinese immigrants (Zheng, 1993).

After the Opium War in 1840, China's social economy declined, people's lives became difficult, and wars broke out frequently. A large number of Chinese chose to immigrate to Southeast Asia. From the early 20th century to the early 1950s, this immigration wave reached its peak

(Liu, 2010). In the 1920s and 1930s, many Chinese intellectuals and artists also immigrated to Nanyang to escape the war, which promoted the inspiration of China's "May 4th Movement" to the "New Art Movement" in Nanyang. Singapore and Penang gradually became cultural centers where Chinese intellectuals gathered, so the concept of "Nanyang", that is, Malaya and Singapore, also emerged (Zhong, 1999).

Most of the artists who immigrated to Southeast Asia were born into aristocratic or scholarly families and had good traditional artistic accomplishments. Some of them had studied in Europe and had a solid foundation in both traditional Chinese art and Western art. They had a profound impact on the development of Nanyang art and became the main force in the formation and development of "Nanyang painting". These artists were born and grew up during a period of crisis for their motherland, and they consciously took it as their own duty to spread Chinese traditional culture. While expressing their love for Nanyang scenery and life, they often integrate Chinese painting techniques and elements into Nanyang paintings, and even directly depict local Chinese society (Wee, 2020).

A large number of Chinese immigrants are engaged in various industries in Nanyang, especially in the construction field. Chinese stonemasons, bricklayers, carpenters and other craftsmen were widely employed by the colonial government due to their superb skills. Some Filipino scholars even pointed out that most of the early architects and sculptors in the Philippines were Chinese (Zheng, 1993). While building houses, Chinese craftsmen spread Chinese construction techniques and styles to Southeast Asia, and also continued the influence of Chinese culture through architectural forms.

By analyzing the representation of Chinese architectural symbols in the works of Nanyang Chinese immigrant artists, the researchers further explored the meaning of this cultural symbol. The research questions are as follows: How the Chinese cultural identity representation in Nanyang painting through structure of representation?

## **2. Methodology**

Qualitative research focuses on the context of social phenomena and emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environment and broader social structures (Nick, 2023). This perspective is particularly important when studying Southeast Asian immigrant art. First of all, the immigration experience has profoundly affected artists' understanding and representation of Chinese culture, which helps us to more deeply interpret the Chinese cultural symbols and images in the works of immigrant artists. Secondly, in the social structure of Nanyang, Chinese immigrants are committed to maintaining their own cultural traditions while striving to integrate into the local society. Finally, Nanyang immigrants are also restricted by the social, political, economic and cultural environment. In a specific historical period, social ideological trends will also directly affect the creative direction and themes of immigrant artists.

The issue of Chinese cultural identity in the architectural-themed works of Nanyang immigrant painters is a complex artistic and cultural phenomenon. This study uses qualitative research on the characteristics of subjectivity, contextualization, flexibility, naturalistic setting, etc. (Nick, 2023) to reveal how immigrant painters express Chinese architectural culture in the dynamic multicultural environment of Nanyang, and to deeply understand how the Chinese in Nanyang express themselves in the dynamic multicultural environment of Nanyang. Uphold Chinese culture in the multicultural environment of Nanyang.

This study mainly collects two aspects of data elements: 1) the visual art form; 2) the meaning of visual. This researcher mainly used documents and analysis methods to collect data sources. The literature method is a method of comprehensively and correctly studying problems by reading, analyzing, and sorting out relevant literature materials (Gu, 1999). Can provide in-depth analysis of the context behind Chinese cultural identity in works of art. Analysis is a strategy for understanding the meaning and context of social phenomena. Through exploratory means, we study human behavior, cultural background and experience, and reduce the complexity of the research object to its essential characteristics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The analytical method was used in order to gain a clear understanding of the representational structure of Chinese cultural identity in architectural-themed paintings.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

Representation is the use of signs to represent and replace other things, and is related to aesthetics (art) and semiotics (symbols) (Mitchell, 1995). Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) adopted “representamen” as the term for all the A general term for sign or sign-like things. Peirce believes that sign (or representamen) represents the broadest meaning of "represents". And sign consists of three roles: object, sign, and interpretant. This is an irreducible ternary relationship. The sign of an object will lead to interpretants, and interpretants, as new signs, will lead to further interpretants (Peirce, 1897). That is, the object determines the sign, which in turn determines the interpretant.

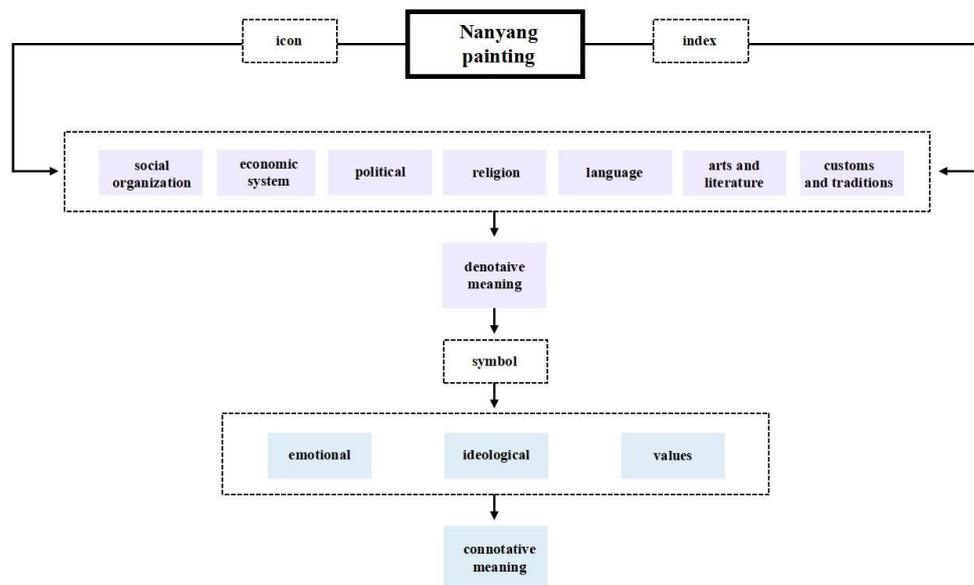
And Peirce divided the research methods of sign relationship into two types, extension method and intension method. Extension is the object of sign, also called denotation, breadth, or application. Intension is the characteristics, qualities, or attributes of the object referred to by sign, also called connotation, depth, comprehension, or significance (Peirce, 1865). Therefore, sign has denotative meaning and connotative meaning.

Peirce further subdivided each element in the triplet into three subtypes: icon, index and symbol (Atkin, 2010). The icon refers to a quality of itself (independent of the object), the index refers to its real connection with the object, and the symbol refers to a habit or rule of its interpreter. Therefore, each sign is either related to the icon is referred to by the similarity of the object, or the index is referred to through the factual connection with its object, or the symbol is referred to through the interpretation habit or reference standard of the object.

There are different views on the composition of culture, the most common of which is the "three-level theory" of material culture, institutional culture and spiritual culture (Yang, 2009). Many scholars have extended this cultural level theory to cultural identity: 1. It is the expression layer of cultural identity, the identification with material culture, that is, symbolic identification and formal identification; the second is the protective layer of cultural identification, identification with institutional culture; the third is the core layer of cultural identification, that is, the psychological identification with culture.

The researcher believes that identification with cultural artifacts and institutions is directly related to the external environment of national survival, and usually has a clear explicit form. Therefore, this study divides cultural identification into explicit and implicit levels. And based on Yang Minghua's composition of different levels of cultural categories, this researcher divided the explicit level of culture into: social organization, economic system, political, religion, art and literature, language, custom and tradition. The implicit level of cultural identity is divided into: emotional, ideological, values.

The following is a conceptual framework (Figure 1) constructed by this researcher based on the discussion of semiotics and cultural identity theory, which is used as a guiding artwork analysis tool.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in the Architecture themed artwork of Nanyang artists**

Source: the researcher

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 The temple



**Figure 2: Georgette Chen, The Temple, 1961, oil on canvas, 50.1x61.2cm**

Photo source: <https://collections.nationalgallery.sg/#/details/search/34965?search=Georgette%20Chen&artist=Georgette%20Chen>

The primary focus of Georgette Chen's painting is temple, which exhibits rich regional and cultural traits through delicate brushwork. The Temple (Figure 2) backdrop of verdant plantains gives the entire area a powerful sense of tropical nature. The couplets on the pillars on either side of the door, as well as the incinerator at the main door. Additionally, there is an offering table within the door and a high threshold at the second door, both of which have a significant

Chinese Buddhist temple design. The building's formal features are also highly unique; the hilltop's design, the orange-red tiles, the curved roof ridges, and the oversized cornices all perfectly capture the architectural style of Minnan. The specific manifestation of these Chinese architectural elements in Nanyang society is also the recognition of the denotation level of Chinese architectural art by the Nanyang Chinese.

In the Minnan region, traditional homes have a variety of roof styles, each with unique traits. Common styles include flush gable roofs, overhanging gable roofs, which are typically seen in hilly regions, and gable-on-hip roofs, which are frequently found in temple structures. The main ridge of the roof of the Minnan temple is gracefully curved, with a markedly elevated terminal that is divided in half. It is called the "dovetail ridge" because it resembles a swallow's tail (Lin, 2009). This architectural style was strictly hierarchical throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and it could only be used for structures in Juren families, imperial palaces, or ancestral shrines. It was regarded as an etiquette infraction if citizens embraced it voluntarily (Cao, 2006).

Furthermore, Minnan architecture attaches highly importance to Feng Shui, and "dovetail ridge" itself is a Feng Shui practice. Because of its swallow-like shape and the fact that swallows are associated with water, it provides fire protection. In addition, the roof above the door incorporates Feng Shui principles into its design, with a long rear slope and a short front slope. The slope in the front is higher, which means welcoming wealth and blessings; the slope in the back is gentler and lower, symbolizing retaining wealth and stopping ill luck (Lin, 2009). The causes of Minnan's dovetail ridge are extremely complex. First, the Minnan people have a special affinity for smooth lines since they have lived by the water for generations and are influenced by marine culture (Wang et al., 2014). Second, Minnan is near the source of summer winds and enjoys a humid subtropical monsoon environment. It is one of China's rainiest regions due to the strong influence of typhoons and abundant rainfall. This climate condition determines that the design of the sloped roof not only has aesthetic value but also has practical functions. The sloped roof can effectively prevent rain and drainage, and the design of graceful curves and angled corners reduces the center of gravity of the roof ridge, which helps to enhance the stability of the roof and also plays a positive role in reducing wind impact (Lin, 2009).

Additionally, Minnan's traditional architectural culture belongs to "craftsman culture," and local society has high respect for craftsmen. This respect inspired the creative enthusiasm of the craftsmen, who pursued the ultimate in architectural decoration and details and devoted a lot of effort and skills. Therefore, Minnan architecture presents a high-spirited character, with more flexible spatial organization and increasingly complex and delicate decorative styles, often with an irrepressible sense of joy. This emotion is particularly vivid in the use of red bricks (Lai & Zheng, 2007). According to Cao (2014), Red brick culture is also a major feature of Minnan architecture. Traditional Chinese architecture frequently uses blue bricks, while Minnan architecture stands out due to its distinctive red brick culture. The majority of Minnan's bricks and tiles are made from the region's red loam soil, which is then fired using fine processes to create sturdy, vibrant building materials with unique regional qualities.

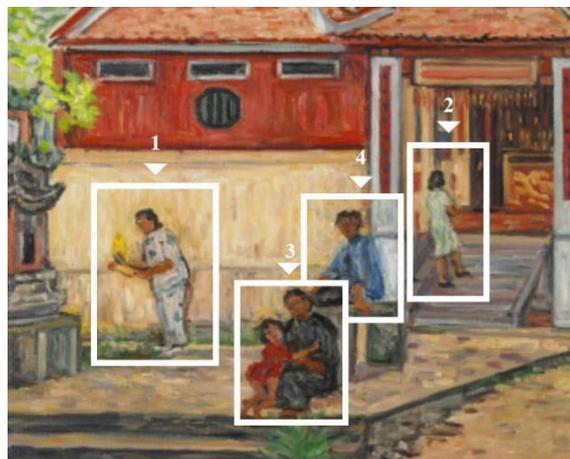
This Nanyang Chinese temple has deep and connotative meaning and symbolizes the Nanyang Chinese's affiliation with Chinese culture. In the first place, the Nanyang Chinese preserved the Minnan architectural style in a foreign land while also closely adhering to traditional Chinese customs in their new setting. It shows the Nanyang Chinese's devotion and longing for spiritual beliefs, particularly in places of worship, as well as their tenacity and resolve in

preserving spiritual culture. As a form of cultural legacy, architecture has evolved into a spiritual food source that is passed down to succeeding generations, preserving the Nanyang Chinese people's strong and enduring emotional ties to their homeland.

Second, the popular psychology and social customs in traditional Chinese culture have had a profound impact on architectural art. Feng Shui, as an important element, not only embodies the philosophy of environmental adaptation but also contains the wisdom of life. Through Feng Shui adjustments, architecture not only focuses on the quality of life, but also creates a peaceful and comfortable environment. Nanyang Chinese continue traditional architectural forms while incorporating Feng Shui practices, which not only demonstrate their recognition of the value orientation of their root culture, but also build a harmonious and stable living space in a different place.

Third, the history and geographical environment of the Minnan area have shaped a unique aesthetic and architectural style, which not only continues the cultural tradition but also demonstrates intelligent adaptation to the natural environment. Minnan architecture embodies adaptability, practicality, and the pursuit of beauty in response to natural challenges. The Nanyang Chinese follow the Minnan architectural style, which is also their recognition of China's aesthetic and practical design concepts.

Finally, when the Nanyang Chinese built Minnan-style temples, they not only reproduced religious and cultural architecture but also expressed their deep nostalgia for their hometown. The red brick buildings are particularly prominent, demonstrating the Chinese craftsmen's pursuit of beauty and emotional investment. This continuation of Minnan's architectural style not only reflects cultural confidence but also firmly protects the emotions and traditional values of the hometown.



**Figure 2a: Georgette Chen, The Temple (details), 1961, oil on canvas, 50.1x61.2cm**

Photo source:

<https://collections.nationalgallery.sg/#/details/search/34965?search=Georgette%20Chen&artist=Georgette%20Chen>

The characters in the picture are evenly distributed from far to near, and all of them are women, showing a religious life scene dominated by women. The woman (1) at the door of the temple has curly hair and is wearing a light green knee-length cheongsam. She is demonstrating her strong religious beliefs by approaching the temple with a dedicated gait. The woman (2) who is burning paper on the left side of the picture is wearing a white suit with blue patterns, focused and solemn. The woman (3) in the front of the picture is dressed entirely in black, squatting on

the ground and supporting a child in red, reflecting maternal care and family ties. Behind her, a woman (4) wearing a dark blue top and black pants sat on a stone bench and watched the interaction (Figure 2a). These indices highlight Nanyang Chinese women's strong adherence to Buddhism and their religious life as a social group.

From a physiological and psychological standpoint, numerous academics and Buddhist specialists have examined the causes and consequences of Chinese women's religious practices. In her master's thesis, Qin Yuqin (2007) studied the Buddhist beliefs of women in the Song Dynasty from three perspectives: the private domain, the public domain, and the cause and effect of belief. She believes that Buddhist life provides women with a positive attitude towards life and broadens their horizons and living space. During the Song Dynasty, female believers were also interested in social welfare initiatives. By performing good deeds and gaining virtue, they were a significant component of folk charity and contributed to societal stability.

Accordingly, Li Yongju (2004) examined the psychological motivations and behavioral patterns of women participating in Buddhist activities under traditional ethical norms during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. She pointed out that religious activities not only help women meet their needs for socializing and entertainment outside but also provide them with a way to release their emotions and seek spiritual sustenance.

Based on this, Shi Yongming (2013) examined the motivations behind women's active participation in religious activities from the standpoint of their physical and psychological traits. He believed that women had a stronger dependence on religion due to their weaker bodies, more physical disabilities, and lower social status. In addition, women bear multiple responsibilities, such as childcare and family care, which enables them to better understand the impermanence of the world and seek religious solace.

In summary, women not only gain spiritual sustenance and emotional release through Buddhist activities but also expand their living space to a certain extent and promote the development of social welfare undertakings. At the same time, they reflect their special situation and psychological needs in traditional society.

In traditional Chinese religious ceremonies, men are usually the dominant ones, but the introduction of Buddhism provided opportunities for women to participate in religious activities and promoted the liberation of Chinese women to a certain extent. Early Buddhism had an exclusive attitude towards women. In the Mahayana Buddhist classic *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra · Udayanavatsarāja-paripṛcch*, women are regarded as the incarnation of all disasters and the main obstacle to spiritual practice. Women are considered to be full of filth, "the evil among evils," and "the root of all suffering." Traditional Confucian ideas and the idea of asceticism had a significant impact on early Chinese Buddhism, which reinforced the disparaging portrayal of women. During the translation process, Chinese translators of Buddhist texts adopted Indian Buddhist ideas, which further reinforced Buddhism's exclusion of women and resulted in the early Buddhist art forms' total rejection of female imagery (Gao & Huang, 1995).

After the Tang Dynasty, with the development of Buddhism and the evolution of sects, the concept of women gradually changed. Zen Buddhism proposes that "all living beings have Buddha nature" and adopts a more positive and affirmative attitude towards women (Lin, 2001). This change began during the Sui and Tang dynasties. Out of concern about the loss of female believers, eminent monks began to create the image of female Bodhisattvas. Wu Zetian in the Tang Dynasty used Buddhist concepts to rationalize her political demands by creating

female Bodhisattva statues, which provided an opportunity for changes in Buddhist art and gender concepts. In modern times, with the rise of humanistic Buddhism, Buddhist views on women have become an important issue (Zhang, 2009).

Influenced by the modern feminist movement, Chinese Buddhism has gradually adjusted its concept of women, reinterpreted the derogatory remarks about women in the classics, and explored the idea of gender equality contained in Buddhism. At the same time, the Buddhist community actively advocates the improvement of female monks' educational rights and social status, demonstrating modern Buddhism's profound reflection on gender equality (He, 1998). Religion (especially Buddhism) has had a profound impact on Chinese women's lifestyle, including emotional expression, thinking, and values. Nanyang women continue and practice this tradition in daily life and religious affairs, demonstrating their deep identification with Chinese religious beliefs. This identity is not only reflected in reliance on spiritual comfort but also in the shaping and strengthening of women's social roles and cultural values by religion.

First, in traditional Chinese society, women not only shoulder heavy physical labor but also bear tremendous emotional labor pressure. Religious activities provide an important place for them to release their emotions, build social connections, and find support. For Nanyang female immigrants who are far away from their hometown and relatives, this extensive participation in religion further reflects their deep recognition and continuation of traditional Chinese female emotional expressions.

Secondly, Chinese religion takes "all living beings are equal" as its core concept, combines the actual needs of family, society, and culture, emphasizes the unity of personal liberation and social harmony, moral education, and sense of responsibility, and demonstrates strong social adaptability and values creativity. . In order to overcome the limitations of conventional society on women's duties and seek a wider space for social involvement, Nanyang Chinese women turn to Buddhism for spiritual solace. This demonstrates the religious value's practical significance.

The woman (1) is wearing a light green cheongsam with an elegant figure, and the woman (2) is wearing a white suit and has a plump figure. Neither of them looks like a working person and should belong to the upper class (Figure 2a). However, the other two women wearing dark clothes have darker skin colors than the other two women, and their hair is exposed on the forehead and tied up, making it easier for them to work. They should belong to the lower-class workers. It's fascinating to note that all of the people who worship Buddha and burn paper are wealthy. The Chinese social ritual of "rich people burning incense" is comparable to this as well.

During the early spread of Buddhism, the ruling class used Buddhism as an important tool to consolidate political legitimacy. They strengthen the hierarchy and maintain social harmony by donating to temples, supporting Sangha activities, and promoting Buddhist teachings (Gombrich, 2006). The emperors of China during the Sui and Tang Dynasties strongly supported Buddhism, not only promoting the spread of Buddhism with official power but also integrating it into the national management system to further consolidate centralization and social order (Kieschnick, 2003).

Moreover, the core teachings of Buddhism—karma and charity—have special appeal to the upper class. These teachings provide spiritual legitimacy for wealth and power, leading them to believe that accumulating merit through giving can transform material wealth into

"blessings", thus maintaining or even improving existing social status (Harvey, 2000). This logic allowed Buddhism to gain widespread support among the ruling class and become part of the social hierarchy. Not only that, businessmen and entrepreneurs are also actively involved in Buddhist activities. By funding temples and organizing charity, they not only enhance their personal brand image, but also accumulate valuable social capital. In the process of participating in religious activities, they expand their network of contacts, consolidate their social status, and even expand their business territory (Bourdieu, 2018).

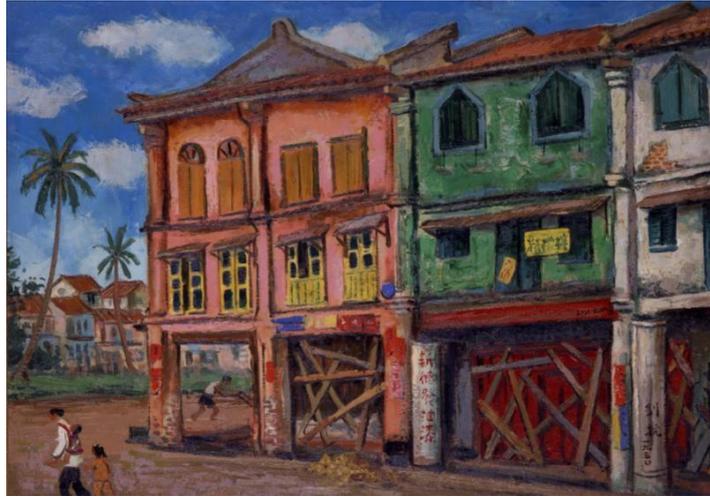
Therefore, this artwork's representation of Chinese religious life not only shows the living customs of the rich but also symbolizes the recognition of the wealthy Chinese in Nanyang as a way of thinking about expressing social responsibility through religious activities. The concept of "good deeds will be rewarded with good deeds and evil deeds will be rewarded with evil deeds" has profoundly affected Chinese people's values, making Buddhist activities regarded as a "psychological investment." This concept of karma has also had a profound impact on the wealthy in Nanyang Chinese society. It not only continues the value core of traditional Chinese culture but also reflects the important role of religion in the identification of thinking patterns and the operation of social capital.

**Table 1: Finding 1—Symbolic Meaning of Cultural Identity in the Artwork The Temple**

Detail of Artwork	Interpretant of Icon	Interpretant of Index	Denotative meaning	Interpretant of Symbol	Connotative meaning
	Buddhist temple architecture as the main body	East Asian hip-and-gable roof, orange-red glazed tiles, curved roof ridges, exaggerated cornices	【art】 Minnan architectural aesthetics	Chinese architectural etiquette	【emotional】 devotion to religious beliefs
				Feng shui concept of architectural design	【value】 spiritual and material satisfaction
				- marine civilization - aesthetic - Resilience to disasters	【thought】 Aesthetic and practical
				"Red Brick Culture"	【emotion】 The protection of hometown emotions
	Religious life dominated by women	1 is entering the temple, 2 is burning paper, 3 is taking care of the children, and 4 is resting	【social organization】 the dependence of southeast Asian Chinese on religion	Reasons why women rely on religion	【emotional】 Emotional release and care for family members
			【religion】 Women participate in Buddhist activities	Buddhism's contribution to women	【value】 Han Buddhism provides value norms for Chinese women
		1 and 2 are upper-class women, 3 and 4 are lower-class working women.	【custom】 Rich Chinese are more interested in religious activities	The significance of Buddhism to the upper-class society	【cognitive】 psychological investment

Source: The researcher

## 4.2 Old street



**Figure 3: Liu Kang, Old street,1950, Oil on canvas, 73x94cm**

Photo source: [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/old-street-0000/IgFa\\_-Kh7Nlexw?hl=zh](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/old-street-0000/IgFa_-Kh7Nlexw?hl=zh)

Liu Kang's oil painting *Old Street* (Figure 3) from 1950 depicts a typical street scene in Nanyang Chinese society. The palm trees in the distance are towering and active, and there are a few white clouds scattered throughout the blue sky. The foreground's tightly packed, vibrantly colored shophouses take up the majority of the image. The shophouses in the picture all have red-tiled sloping roofs, with a gable shaped wall exposed on the left. The artist uses these architectural elements to vividly express the Nanyang Chinese community's recognition of Chinese architectural art.

These shophouses are usually two to three stories high, with the first floor used for commercial operations and the second and third floors used as residential space. This design form is common in South China and Southeast Asia (Zhu, 2007). In Singapore's Chinese business sector, advertisements for the early iteration of the coupon-style structure date back to the early 1800s. By the early 20th century, shophouses had become the dominant architectural form in Chinese communities in Hong Kong and British colonies in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Penang. This kind of architecture is widely recognized by Chinese society because of its adaptability to tropical and subtropical climates and its dual residential and commercial functions (Peng & Yang, 2004). Among them, the "Five-foot way" design in front of the shophouse not only facilitates pedestrian passage but also improves ventilation conditions and provides rain shelter, further reflecting the practicality of this kind of building.

Liu Kang also vividly displayed the traces of time through the mottled walls, exposed brick surfaces, a door closed with wooden boards, and the vague Chinese sign "新德發油漆" on the pillars of the green shophouse. It not only presents a Chinese street that has gone through the baptism of time but also highlights the economic vitality of this Chinese neighborhood.

The artist also wrote his name and the time of creation—1950—on the far right column. It reminds people of that turbulent era in Southeast Asian history. Japan occupied Southeast Asia from 1942 to 1945. The economic policies implemented by Japan in the occupied areas restricted the commercial activities of the Chinese, especially in places such as Malaya and Indonesia. The Japanese military or Japanese traders seized wealth from many Chinese businesses and shops, forcing them to close. Even in order to eliminate potential anti-Japanese elements, the Japanese military carried out the Sook Ching Massacre against the Chinese. After

the end of World War II in 1945, many political parties in Southeast Asia regarded the Chinese as "outsiders" and restricted their political rights and economic activities.

However, looking back at history, a large number of Chinese have poured into Southeast Asia, and they have undoubtedly become the main force in local economic development. Most of the Nanyang Chinese immigrated from Guangzhou and Fujian. Fujian merchants in the Ming and Qing Dynasties closely integrated domestic and foreign trade, worked hard, and conducted various forms of trade, thus forming a very influential local merchant in the late feudal society of China. Lingnan culture influences Guangdong merchants, keeping them far from the political center and freeing them from the constraints of so-called "orthodox" and "authoritative" concepts. In order to make money, they are not afraid of the sky or the earth. Their most outstanding characteristic is their adventurous spirit. They always dare to be the first to try (Yan, 2008).

The architecture of this work reflects the Nanyang Chinese's identity of Chinese cultural connotations, mainly represented by:

Firstly, a deep recognition of China's "Yi" thinking. The core concept "Yi" in the ancient Chinese classic *Yi Jing* contains the three realms of life of simplicity, flexibility, and persistence and has profoundly influenced the Chinese people's philosophy of life. Therefore, the Nanyang Chinese quickly embraced the shophouse, an architectural form that combines residential and commercial functions and adapts to the local climate. However, while accepting new architectural forms, they integrated the design elements of Chinese architecture into the shophouse structure, giving this architectural form a distinctive Chinese cultural symbol, making it a symbol of the combination of Chinese tradition and Nanyang regional characteristics.

Secondly, the acknowledgement of Chinese business values is evident. Through hard work and diversified trade forms, they have promoted regional economic development and demonstrated a deep recognition of the core position of commercial activities in the social economy. Moreover, the adventurous spirit of Fujian merchants and Guangzhou merchants has also become an important driving force for the economic activities of the Nanyang Chinese. Even when faced with political and economic constraints during the Japanese occupation or after the war, they still demonstrated outstanding survivability and resilience.



**Figure 3a: Liu Kang, Old street (details), 1950, Oil on canvas, 73x94cm**

Photo source:[https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/old-street-0000/IgFa\\_-Kh7Nlexw?hl=zh](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/old-street-0000/IgFa_-Kh7Nlexw?hl=zh)

In the foreground of the picture, a woman wearing white clothes and black trousers is carrying two children. She is holding the older child in her right hand, and the younger child is carrying a colorful bag and quilt. This is an "inclusive gift" that Chinese families often prepare for their children. quilt". There are still traces of Spring Festival couplets on the pink shophouse behind them. These details more vividly represent the life scenes of this Chinese community. Traditional customs such as pasting Spring Festival couplets and sewing hundreds of quilts, as important symbols of Chinese culture, were also brought to Nanyang society by immigrants and became a part of their daily lives.

During the Spring Festival, people decorate their homes with spring couplets, writing auspicious New Year greetings in beautiful calligraphy on paper and posting them on walls and doors. In addition to adding to the festive atmosphere of the festival, it also has the sense of praying for blessings in the new year and warding off evil spirits (Wang, 1985). The tradition of making inclusive quilts also has a long history and is a unique custom in ancient Chinese society. It is said that when a newborn in the family turns 100 days old, the parents will collect fabrics from relatives and friends and sew them into quilts, which means that the children can grow up healthily under the "shade of hundreds of families" (Huey, 2018).

The Nanyang Chinese community has given new connotative meanings to these traditional customs. In a foreign country, the loneliness and homesickness caused by cultural differences make immigrants cherish these traditions passed down from generation to generation. Whether it is the solemn ritual of posting Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival or the use of "inclusive quilts" to express ideal wishes for children, these customs not only continue the roots of Chinese culture but also become an important emotional sustenance for them. They bring warmth and comfort to immigrants, creating a familiar sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment, further reflecting their deep identification and attachment to Chinese culture.

Although there are few characters in the picture, their activities add a sense of life to the decadent neighborhood. There is a man in the distance of the picture holding an armrest, as if he is transporting heavy objects, and his movements appear laborious. He may be working on rebuilding the neighborhood. Women take care of children, while men engage in manual labor. This social division of labor is very similar to China's natural economic model, marking the continuation of this economic model by the Nanyang Chinese.

In China's traditional agricultural society, farming requires a lot of physical strength, including plowing, sowing, harvesting, and other labors, so it is undertaken by men with stronger physical strength. Light physical labor within the family, such as textiles, sewing, housework, and taking care of family members, is relatively flexible and is therefore mostly done by women. This natural economy usually centers on the family, and cooperation among family members becomes the basis of the entire economic activity (Li, 1996).

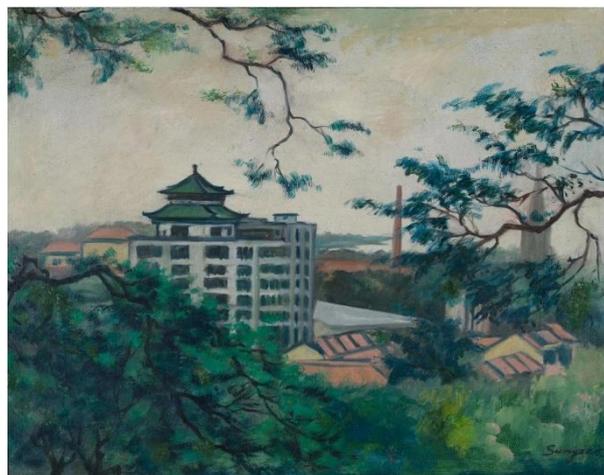
**Table 2: Finding 2—Symbolic Meaning of Cultural Identity in the Artwork View of Old Street**

Detail of Artwork	Interpretant of Icon	Interpretant of Index	Denotative meaning	Interpretant of Symbol	Connotative meaning
	Focus on Nanyang shophouses	The exposed horizontal wall is in the shape of a gable, and the roof is a red-tiled sloped roof.	<b>【art】</b> Has the characteristics of Chinese architectural art	Shophouse history and features	<b>【value】</b> The pursuit of value of "Yi"

		Several damaged Chinese signboards	【economic】 The economic vitality of Chinese streets	-The encounters of the Nanyang Chinese in the 1840s -Fujian and Guangdong merchants	【thought】 Recognition of Chinese business values
	life scenes	Chinese elements: Spring Festival couplets and inclusive quilt	【custom】 Continuing Chinese customs	Spring couplets and inclusive quilt	【emotional】 The spiritual sustenance of being far away from home
	Character activities	Men do manual labor and women take care of children	【economic】 The continuation of China's traditional natural economic model	Characteristics and causes of natural economy	【thought】 Guaranteed family economic development and social stability

Source: The researcher

### 4.3 View of Chung Cheng School



**Figure 4: Sun Yee, View of Chung Cheng School, oil on canvas, 62x79cm**

Photo source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/View-of-Chung-Cheng-School/C1252F23E76762DB>

Sun Yee's View depicts a landscape at Chung Cheng School. The framed view of trees and foliage in the foreground subtly guides the eye to the tall building ahead. Below this building is a modern-frame building, and above it is a hilltop building with double eaves covered with green glazed tiles. Even if the artist uses blocking techniques, it is difficult to conceal the majesty and solemnity that the double-eaves roof brings to this building. The school adopted such a magnificent architectural form, and its denotative meaning shows the importance that Chinese leaders and Chinese society attach to education.

In the 1930s, overseas Chinese leaders who were enthusiastic about education established most Chinese schools in Malaya. After completing primary education, students went to China to further their studies. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, many intellectuals took refuge in Nanyang, and graduates of Chinese primary schools were unable to study in China.

In October 1938, local sages Lin Wenqing, Li Zhendian, Lin Zhongxing, and others established a committee to prepare for the new school and obtained the consent of Chiang Kai-shek, the then top leader of China, to use his words "Chung Cheng" as the Chinese name of the school (Li, 2017).

The overseas Chinese community in Nanyang has deep emotions for the motherland. This emotion gives Chung Cheng School a more profound connotative meaning, making it a symbol of the cultural identity and feelings of the overseas Chinese society and the country.

Firstly, faced with the crisis of the motherland and the plight of the overseas Chinese society, the sages did not shrink back but chose to unite and overcome the difficulties together. In addition to providing students with urgent solutions, they used education as a weapon to instill confidence and hope in Chinese society abroad. In addition to being a potent reaction to the actual predicament, this act of self-rescue also exemplifies the tenacity and feeling of duty that are ingrained in the national character.

Secondly, during the war, the sages actively found solutions for overseas Chinese students who were unable to return to China for further studies, which also demonstrated their profound concern for the long-term development of future generations.

Thirdly, the school name "Chung Cheng" not only conveys their deep thoughts and support for the motherland but it also amply indicates their resolve to fend off attack and defend national honor, as well as the admirable sentiments of the ancestors who devoted their lives to the country's revitalization.

The sages' emotional engagement encompasses a wide range of topics, including social responsibility, cultural inheritance, community accountability, familial and national righteousness, and educational advancement. Their concerns and aspirations for the future of the Chinese people are the deepest foundations of this feeling. Their particular concern for the Chinese community abroad and the preservation of their cultural base is rooted in their strong sentiments for their homeland. In addition to improving the lives of Chinese students studying abroad and helping the Chinese community abroad throughout the war, this multifaceted emotional engagement gave Chinese society as a whole newfound hope and resilience. It became an emotional legend that transcended the war and set a spiritual benchmark for future generations.



**Figure 4a: Photo of Chung Cheng School**

Photo source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/CCHSMainBuildingSmall.jpg>

The building of Chung Cheng School combines the two-story eaves of traditional Chinese architecture with a modern steel-concrete structure. It also skillfully displays the characteristics of traditional Chinese architectural art. This building is the administration building (Zhulin Building) of Chung Cheng School (Figure 4a), designed by Chinese designer He Minghuang. He Minghuang entered the Department of Surveying and Mapping of Nanjing National Central University before graduating from high school and returning to Singapore after the Anti-Japanese War (Chen, 2009).

In Figures 4b & 4c, at the beginning of the 20th century, China's national consciousness was on the rise. People tried to rethink and interpret Chinese traditions and tap new strengths to rebuild national self-confidence. In the field of architecture, architects have pursued the goal of "promoting the inherent characteristics of Chinese architecture." They adopted an eclectic approach, combining modern construction techniques with traditional Chinese architectural forms, and designed a number of buildings known as "National Traditional Revival Style." Most of these buildings are covered with reinforced concrete structures with eye-catching large pitched roofs, so they are also called "big roof" buildings. The appearance of the Zhulin Building is simple and elegant, with only the eaves decorated with patterns. The towering doubleeaves roof in the center of the building displays green glazed tiles. Although the shapes of mythical animals at both ends of the roof have been abstracted, the layout still strictly follows traditional practices (Chen, 2009).



**Figure 4b & 4c: Line drawings & Elevation view (details) of the Zhulin Building**

Photo source: The researcher

The "national revival-style architecture" of this period profoundly demonstrated the symbolic and connotative significance of culture through exterior design. Ho Ming Huang is keenly aware of Singapore's unique advantages as a place where Eastern and Western cultures blend. With the help of the important platform of Chung Cheng School, he uses an eclectic approach to organically integrate modern architectural techniques with traditional Chinese architectural forms. His design thinking not only enables architectural works to display profound cultural connotations and distinct values of the times, but also skillfully expresses national self-confidence through architectural language. This concept not only enhances the cultural identity and social status of the Chinese community in a foreign country, but also demonstrates the unique contribution and vision of Chinese architects in the global context.

**Table 3: Finding 3—Symbolic Meaning of Cultural Identity in the Artwork View of Chung Cheng School**

Detail of Artwork	Interpretant of Icon	Interpretant of Index	Denotative meaning	Interpretant of Symbol	Connotative meaning
	Building as the main body	The double-eaves East Asian hip-and-gable roof building is majestic and solemn	<b>【political】</b> Chinese leaders attach great importance to education	The history of Chung Cheng school	<b>【emotional】</b> Responsibility for - self-salvation -Care for future generations -Support for the motherland and protection of national dignity
			<b>【art】</b> Chinese traditional architectural art	The architectural design concept of "National Traditional Revival Style"	<b>【thought】</b> The concept of innovation and persistence

Source: The researcher

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes three architectural-themed works by Nanyang Chinese immigrant artists and explores the art form of Chinese architecture and the symbolic meaning of Chinese elements such as Chinese beliefs, Chinese economic conditions, Chinese political strategies, and Chinese living customs reflected in the architecture, reflecting the complexity, diversity, and contemporary nature of Nanyang Chinese’s identity with Chinese culture. Specifically, three aspects summarize the symbolic significance of Chinese architecture:

On the emotional level, the Nanyang Chinese who are far away from home use the similarity of architecture to alleviate the loneliness and helplessness in a foreign land and express their deep longing for their homeland. In addition to creating physical space, architecture also conveys religious ideas, folk culture, and national aesthetics, serving as a significant conduit for local memories. This notion of cultural identification seems both straightforward and profound in light of globalization and diversification. For Chinese immigrants and their offspring, it is a crucial means of preserving their sense of self.

At the ideological level, Nanyang Chinese promote Chinese architectural art through inheritance and innovation. They not only uphold the nation's dignity and preserve China's material history abroad, but they also inspire the country and instil a strong sense of spiritual unity in Nanyang Chinese society. Self-assurance even establishes a spiritual standard for coming generations.

In terms of values, the Nanyang Chinese pay attention to the combination of architectural artistry and practicality, which reflects their pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. In keeping with the adaptable value standards of the Chinese people, they also flexibly modify architectural forms in response to variables including climate, geography, political climate, and

social development. This recognition of values is a conscious practice from the inside to the outside, from cognition to belief, and has become the core driving force for the continuation of Chinese culture in Nanyang society.

### Acknowledgement

My sincere thanks to everyone who supported and helped me with this article. I am especially grateful to my mentor Dr. Issaarezal Ismail for his guidance and many valuable opinions. This will be of great help to my future studies. This study was not subject to a research funding scheme.

### References

- Wan, M. (2020). 马六甲海峡崛起的历史逻辑--郑和七下西洋七至满刺加考实 [The historical logic behind the rise of the Strait of Malacca: A textual study of Zheng He's seven voyages to Malacca]. *Pacific Journal*, 28(3), 94–102.
- Zheng, F. H. (1993). 十六、十七世纪南洋华人移民与生产技术的传播 [Chinese immigration and the dissemination of production techniques in the South Seas during the 16th and 17th centuries]. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (1), 62–75.
- Liu, P. (2010). 下南洋: 晚清海外移民的辛酸历程 [Going to Nanyang: The bittersweet journey of overseas migration during the late Qing dynasty]. *Inheritance & Innovation*, (31), 32–33.
- Zhong, Y., & Zhu, Q. (1999). 馬來西亞華人美術史 [The history of Malaysian Chinese art].
- Wee, L. S. (2020). Chinese Artists in Nanyang – An Aspect of Modernity in Singapore Art.
- Jain, N. (2023). What is Innovation? Definition, Types, Examples and Process. Retrieved November, 4, 2022.
- Gu, M. Y. (1998). 教育大辞典: 增订合编本 [Encyclopedia of Education: Revised and Expanded Edition]. Shanghai Education Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. sage.
- Mitchell, W. T. (1995). *Repräsentation* (pp. 11-23). na.
- Peirce, C. S. (1897). The logic of relatives. *The Monist*, 7, 161–217.
- Peirce, C. S. (1865, May). Five Hundred and Eighty-Seventh Meeting. November 13, 1867. Statute Meeting; Upon Logical Comprehension and Extension. In *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Vol. 7, pp. 416-432). American Academy of Arts & Sciences.
- Atkin, A. (2010). Peirce's theory of signs.
- Yang, M. H. (2009). 有關文化的 100 個素養 (第 2 卷) [100 Literacies About Culture (Vol. 2)].
- Lin, X. Q. (2009). 浅析闽南传统建筑屋顶文化的形成 [An analysis of the formation of roof culture in traditional Minnan architecture]. *Fujian Wenbo (福建文博)*, (1), 50–56.
- Cao, C. P. (2006). 闽南传统建筑屋顶做法 [Roofing techniques of traditional Minnan architecture]. *History of Architectural*, (00), 90–104.
- Wang, Q. Y., Sun, J., & Wu, J. (2014). 闽南建筑的新表达 [New expressions of Minnan architecture]. *Fujian Architecture*, 8, 37–38.
- Lai, S. X., & Zheng, Z. (2007). 闽南红砖传统砌筑工艺及其启示 [Traditional red brick masonry techniques in Minnan architecture and their implications]. *Huazhong Architecture*, 25(2), 154–157.

- Qin, Y. Q. (2007). 宋代女性的佛教“空門生活”探微 [A study on the "Buddhist life in the monastery" of women in the Song Dynasty] (Master's thesis, Central China Normal University). Retrieved from [https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=ZZIi2iqmIcRdvWY0EZRJJ6iYuePDK7xolhj4u8fJrUkjPvVAeIHaCRu3GXPYofg10DdiOylbLnwaHA7W7GiRYgYTVI0qU\\_gbkOnIhvm9sp0FFe4xLtR4wdoAWpgiOo4glZU9aXsSU\\_yUDcQuaFBuRWdh6VQrj\\_mSJR\\_WXZzTkrRBLEXFgJIqOhhVEgONjeEf&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS](https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=ZZIi2iqmIcRdvWY0EZRJJ6iYuePDK7xolhj4u8fJrUkjPvVAeIHaCRu3GXPYofg10DdiOylbLnwaHA7W7GiRYgYTVI0qU_gbkOnIhvm9sp0FFe4xLtR4wdoAWpgiOo4glZU9aXsSU_yUDcQuaFBuRWdh6VQrj_mSJR_WXZzTkrRBLEXFgJIqOhhVEgONjeEf&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS).
- Li, Y. J. (2004). 明清女性参加庙会的文化需求分析 [An analysis of the cultural needs of women participating in temple fairs during the Ming and Qing Dynasties]. *Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, (05), 578–581.
- Shi, Y. M. (2013). 佛教的女性觀 [The Buddhist view of women].
- Gao, H., & Huang, C. (1995). 从印度古代文化看早期汉译佛经中妇女观和禁欲观的变异——兼论中国早期菩萨像男性化的原因 [Variations in views on women and asceticism in early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of ancient Indian culture: Also on the masculinization of early Chinese Bodhisattva images]. *Journal of Historical Science*, (4), 103–108.
- Lin, S. W. (2001). 人間佛教的女性觀--以星雲大師為主的考察 [The view of women in Humanistic Buddhism: A study focusing on Master Hsing Yun]. *Universal Gate Buddhist Journal*, (3), 228–271.
- Zhang, W. X. (2009). 中国大陆佛教女性研究述评 [A review of research on Buddhist women in mainland China]. *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*, (6).
- He, J.M. (1998). 近代中國佛教的女性觀 [The view of women in modern Chinese Buddhism]. *Buddhist Studies*, (7), 289–294.
- Gombrich, R. (2006). *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*. Routledge.
- Kieschnick, J. (2003). *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton University, 223.
- Harvey, P. (2000). *An Introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values and issues*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2018). The forms of capital. In *The sociology of economic life* (pp. 78-92). Routledge.
- Zhu, J., Sim, L. L., & Liu, X. (2007). Place remaking under property rights regimes: a case study of Niucheshui, Singapore. *Environment and Planning A*, 39(10), 2346-2365.
- Peng, C. X., & Yang, X. C. (2004). 骑楼制度与城市骑楼建筑 [The arcade system and urban arcade architecture]. *Journal of South China University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 6(4), 29–33.
- Yan, N. (2008). 中国十大商帮经商秘诀 [The business secrets of China's ten major merchant groups]. *Manager's Internal Reference (经理人内参)*, (1), 43–46.
- Wang, S. Z. (1985). 中國節令習俗 [Chinese Seasonal Customs].
- Huey, Y. (2018, March). 文化习俗：百家被 [Cultural customs: The inclusive quilt. Fairy Park Group]. Fairy park group. <https://www.fairypark.asia/cn/%E3%80%90%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96%E4%B9%A0%E4%BF%97%E3%80%91%E7%99%BE%E5%AE%B6%E8%A2%AB/>
- Li, B. (1996). 从“夫妇并作”到“男耕女织” [From "joint husband and wife labor" to "men plowing and women weaving."]. *Research in Chinese Economic History*, 3, 99–107.

- Li, Q. (2017, September). **新加坡华校史不能忽略中正中学** [The history of Singapore Chinese schools cannot ignore Chung Cheng High School] .Redants.-  
<https://www.redants.sg/perspective/story20170814-149>
- Chen, Y. (2009, January). **新加坡华族传统复兴式建筑** [Traditional revival-style Chinese architecture in Singapore]. Lianhe Zaobao. [https://web.archive.org/web/20090118003631/http://www.zaobao.com/fk/fk090113\\_512.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20090118003631/http://www.zaobao.com/fk/fk090113_512.shtml).