

# Chung Chen Sun: The Reform Process of Modern Ink Painting

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**Abstract:** *This article reviews Chung Chen Sun's artistic creation process from the 1960s to the present. As the second generation of Nanyang painter, he not only inherited the tradition of the first generation but also made innovations on this basis, integrating Western aesthetics and creating the artistic conception of ink and wash in his style. At the same time, he has also established 5 art academies in Malaysia and China. His art education philosophy has a certain influence and contribution to modern art design education in Malaysia and China. He is known as the "father of modern art education in Malaysia". The research methods used in this article are the literature re method and the visual analysis method. Through the collection of literature, the information about Chung Chen Sun is sorted, his creative style is divided into four major periods, and representative works are selected for visual analysis. Finally, Chung Chen Sun's transformation process of modern ink painting and its artistic characteristics are summarized.*

**Keywords:** *Chung Chen Sun, Modern ink painting, Nanyang art*

## 1. Introduction

Chung Chen Sun was born in 1935 in Malacca, a famous historical and cultural city in Malaysia, and his ancestral home in Meixian, Guangdong. In the early 1950s, he studied at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and was guided by a famous teacher. After graduating from the Department of Art Education, he returned to his hometown in Malaysia. He successively taught as an art teacher at Pei Chi Chinese Primary School and Kindergarten in Malacca, Negeri Sembilan Seremban Zhonghua Middle School, and Kun Cheng Girls' Middle School in Kuala Lumpur. He emphasized the mutual benefit of teaching. During the period when he was teaching in kindergarten, he observed that innocent children were not bound and possessed unlimited creativity, which gave him a lot of inspiration. This will also have a great impact on his future commitment to creation.

In the early 1960s, when Chung Chen Sun arrived in Kuala Lumpur, it was not long after Malaysia got rid of British colonial rule and independence, and all industries were waiting to be flourished, known as the "cultural desert", Chung was concerned about the country and the people. He saw that modern design art has a great impact on the country's future economy and cultural development, and he resolutely opened up the territory. In 1967, he founded the Malaysian Academy of Arts (MIA), which is also the only non-profit art academy in the history of Malaysian art education. Since then, it has also opened a glorious chapter in shaping the characteristics of Malaysia's multiculturalism.

From 1969 to 1970, Chung Chen Sun was invited by the governments of Germany, Britain, and the United States to investigate modern art education and was deeply inspired by the school guidelines of the German Bauhaus School of Art. And starting in the 1970s, MIA increased the adoption of the German "Bauhaus" educational concept and reshaped a new way of observing the world through a series of rational and strict visual training procedures. During school, Chung Chen Sun was also committed to promoting the development of Malaysian Chinese culture and promoting international exchanges. He also served as the president of the Malaysian Chinese Cultural Association for 15 years. In 1990, to popularize ink painting, he appointed his student to plan and promote the "National Ink Painting Examination" across the country.

In the late 1980s, just after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, Chung Chen Sun was invited to visit China. He set foot in China with the country's visit to China and saw that the motherland was waiting for prosperity. After returning to Malaysia, he co-founded the Malaysian International Modern Art and Design Group with several Malaysian alumni and went to China to look for cooperative colleges. Contacted by the Chinese Embassy in Malaysia and supported

by the State Education Commission of China, he initiated the one-school, two-system approach. In 1994, he co-founded the International School of Modern Design Art, Yunnan University, China, and the International School of Modern Design Art, Inner Mongolia Normal University, 2000. Established Zhengshan International Modern Design Art College with Hunan Zhuzhou Yandi Special Training University in 1988. Its mission of running a school is "taking the spirit of traditional Chinese culture and art as its connotation, absorbing the essence of western modern design, forming a new oriental design system, and cultivating advanced modern design talents that have reached Chinese higher education and international recognition", and creating Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools. The new model of "two systems" has become the pioneer of country's "transnational schooling" model.

In 2000, Chung Chen Sun put forward the art education concept of "the intersection and integration of art and technology" and founded the Malaysia International Institute of Information Art and Design. With the symbol of new information technology, it is oriented to 21st-century art education, with the help of the sharing of global resources. Create an artistic style with local and regional characteristics.

In 2007, Chung Chen Sun was hired as the chief professor and director of the Institute of Chinese Studies at Yunnan University of Finance and Economics in China. To support the establishment of the university, Chung Chen Sun donated more than 100 fine paintings and more than 1,000 collections from different periods to the Yunnan Provincial People's Government and designated them to be preserved in the Yunnan University of Finance and Economics. The Yunnan Provincial Government allocated funds to transform the original library into the Chung Chen Sun Art Museum. And in 2011, the Chung Chen Sun Art Museum completed the opening ceremony. As a result, China's Yunnan University of Finance and Economics owns the only art museum in the country's finance and economics colleges named after overseas artists, the Chung Chen Sun Art Museum.

## 2. Literature Review

Malaysia is the region most directly influenced by Chinese ink painting. It has been more than half a century since ink paintings were transferred from China to Malaysia, and the creators of ink paintings have had three generations of painters. If the first generation of Chinese ink painters were the founders and seeders, their task was to make ink painting take root in this new soil; the second generation of painters boldly reformed, not only taking advantage of traditional advantages but also absorbing the achievements of Western modern art. Taking the road of innovation with traditional ink and wash paintings makes ink paintings have distinctive characteristics of the times; then the third generation of painters builds on this cornerstone to make modern ink paintings more diverse and more colorful. [1]

1948 to 1957, this was the third year after the end of the war. There was turmoil in various parts of Southeast Asia, followed by the ideological struggle in the Chinese mainland. This long-term ideological struggle was at its climax after the war. Stability and hardship have caused many Chinese to leave the country. Many of the high-level intellectuals have migrated overseas. Singapore and Malaya, due to the political stability at the time, and also a large Chinese merchant population, are extremely attractive to these immigrants, so many painters came to Singapore and Malaya to settle down. At that time, Singapore and Malaysia were still under colonial rule and had no immigration control. Under these favorable conditions, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts has successively absorbed a group of talented painters. These painters became the most important pioneers of "Nanyang Art" and the first generation of masters and representatives of the "Nanyang Art" movement. From the efforts of Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang, and several first-generation painters, it can be seen that in the past ten years, "Nanyang Art" has appeared several characteristics: (1) In Western painting, special oil painting, which has incorporated the artistic characteristics of the Western modern "Paris School", especially the spirit of the modern art forms of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, into the local themes. Ali Island woodcut figures are also widely used. (2) Chinese ink and wash paintings are derived from the Maritime School, and the Jinshi in calligraphy are introduced into local themes, and the modern square structure of the West is used. [2]

Chinese ink painters influenced by Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee, such as Tan Tee Chie, Wee Beng Chong, Foo Chee San, and Chung Chen Sun, etc., have incorporated the characteristics of several teachers and wrote their styles. The most notable achievement in this decade is that the first generation of Nanyang painters has learned to apply the oriental spirit to get rid of the shackles of the modern Parisian school, and has more clearly and more skillfully combined the spirit of Chinese culture and modern Western culture features, to combine the diverse ethnic groups and cultures of Southeast Asia to produce a unique style. Secondly, more outstanding second-generation painters began

to seek new directions, not only paying attention to the expansion of skills but also trying to break through in their ideology and concepts. This has shown that second-generation painters no longer have to completely rely on first-generation painters during this period, and each seeks a new way of independent creation. More importantly, the second generation of painters from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts founded the Malaysian Academy of Art and the Kuala Lumpur Academy of Art in Kuala Lumpur in 1967 to spread the art of Nanyang art more broadly.

### 3. Analyses of Work

#### 3.1 *The 1960s and 1970s-From tradition to modern*

In the mid-1950s, he began to explore in-depth Chinese traditional painting. Once, like the first generation of painters who pioneered the style of Nanyang painting, he used ink to express Nanyang themes, but he quickly noticed sensitively that Malaya at that time under the impact of Western modernism, the painting circle appears to be very lively, but Chinese painting only stays at the stage of "traditional techniques and local themes" of literati painting. He quickly realized that the establishment of a new style of painting cannot stop at the change of themes, but more importantly, the innovation of language. He said: "I think that the choice of subject matter is the second priority. The most important thing is whether the content can fully perform the functions of ink and wash painting, whether it can still have the spirit and harmonious beauty of ink painting." He gradually put his focus on the exploration of ink language. Later, based on expanding his artistic vision in the 1960s, Chung Chen Sun thought and explored the integration of various techniques into ink from various aspects. He studied the dot-line structure of traditional calligraphy and its rhythmic beauty, he tried to use oil painting tools to express Chinese cultural Spirit. Use the color and texture effects of oil paintings and murals in ink art. In this oil painting "Zheng Shan" created in 1969, as shown in Figure 1, he boldly introduced the composition and abstract principles of modern Western art into his creation. The mountain in the painting is the superposition of the Chinese characters "Zheng" and "Shan", no matter whether it is in composition or modeling, it has laid a solid foundation for him to further boldly innovate in ink language. Such diverse concepts and various explorations have also enriched his ink language, media, and expression methods.

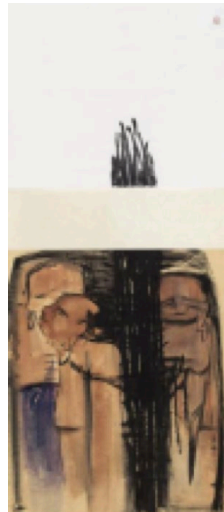


Figure 1: *Zheng Shan*, 1969.

#### 3.2 *The 1980s—Reform of Modern Ink Painting*

In 1979, after Chung Chen Sun traveled to East Malaysia to collect and sketch the aboriginal people, he created a new technique: drawing the natives with brushstrokes. He restored the objective image to simple, and abstract, and transformed it into a geometric block surface of stone and wood. With bold lines, square and rectangular blocks of black, ochre, blue, and red. A very general form expresses the sincere and honest temperament of the natives. In the composition, also boldly tried to split the picture, reorganize the composition, and think outside the frame. The representative works were created in 1979 and were selected by the Taiwan History Museum in 1981 to be exhibited in the "New Trends in Modern Chinese Painting Exhibition" at the Seniuschi Museum in France. They are, respectively,

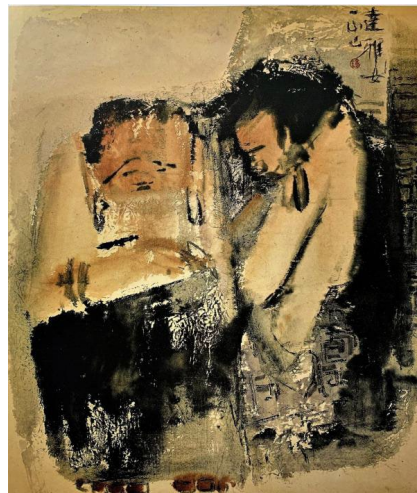
Figure 2 "Picking the woods", Figure 3 "Daya Couple", and Figure 4 "Daya Women".



*Figure 2: Picking the Wood, 1979.*



*Figure 3: Daya Couple, 1979.*



*Figure 4: Daya Women, 1979.*

In the context of globalization and modernization, national characteristics and national identity have become extremely complex and sensitive issues. Some local traditional folk customs are gradually forgotten, the national language is beginning to lose, the former way of life is considered primitive and backward, and the regional characteristics of various nationalities are forced to be integrated into the wave of globalization and modernity. Malaysia, which is located at the center of the international air

route, is more likely to feel the crisis of homogeneity in its nation-state in the modest advancement of cultural imperialism. Chung Chen Sun must have had a deep understanding of this and created a series of portrait paintings with Daya subjects. Chung Chen Sun's depiction of the Daya natives traces back to the origin of primitive art and records Daya's rituals, folk customs, cultural ecology, etc., which awakens the past ethnic history and gains attention. Its essence is a kind of self-ethnic imagination and cultural identity, which reflects the keen observation and humanistic care of contemporary painters from a global perspective. What's even rarer is that the use of a large number of plane compositions gives the original traditional ink language an extraordinary temperament, and the positive and deep ideological connotation conforms to the most simple and primitive desire deep in everyone's heart, allowing viewers to regain the memory of their homeland.[3] It can be said that Chung's long-term attention, excavation, and writing of the Daya tribe can help us reflect on the "integrity" and "diversity" in contemporary art practice, which is of great reference.

With the injection and impact of new elements, Chung Chen Sun's reform of modern ink painting is inevitable, and it is also an extension of his modern art education. From the early 1980s to the end of the 1990s, because of his active participation in international artistic exchanges and conferences, Chung Chen Sun was greatly impacted in terms of ideology, knowledge, and vision. In addition, he has a solid foundation in painting. The creative power he has been brewing for a long time burst out quickly, and he paints whatever he can think of. His creative line during this period mainly focused on semi-abstract and abstraction. The composition of the picture mostly uses changes in points, lines, blocks, and colors to achieve visual effects. This period is the most important period of Chung's creation, and it is also the peak period of his artistic creation.

The representative work of this period is Figure 5 "Alien Space", created in 1985. While based on the tradition of Eastern painting, Chung Chen Sun appropriately blended the abstract elements of Western modern painting to enhance the modernity of expression. Its innovative composition uses a method of segmentation: narrating a woman's life from different angles, different times, and different spaces. From young girl to marry, to stay alone. The whole picture is divided into several regional blocks and then recombined into a new composition, breaking the familiar concept of time and space and expressing the multidimensional space and time of the universe. [4]

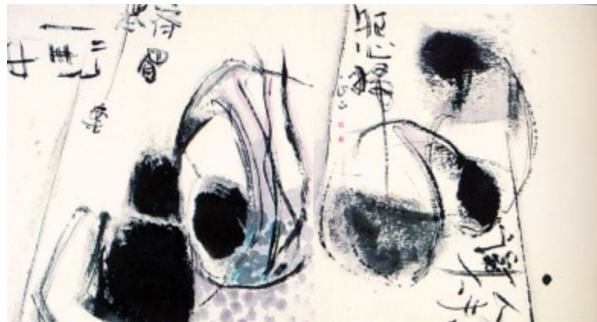


Figure 5: Alien Space, 1985.



Figure 6: Establishing the Right Position in the World Walking the Road of the World, 1986.

This 1986 "Establishing the Right Position of the World Walking the Road of the World" in Figure 6 is dominated by Eastern humanistic thoughts and is also the way of life and affairs that Mr. Chung upholds. A man stands up to the sky, his head is on the sky, and his feet are rooted in the earth, standing in the right position between heaven and the earth, it is magnificent, upright, and mindless, combining the image composition formed by points, lines, and blocks. A few simple and powerful lines outline the simple and unwilling clothes of a gentleman. The white clothes are entities, the imaginary and the real, and the imaginary and the real are intertwined. Viewed from a distance, this painting is a clever combination of dots (fonts), lines (frames of clothes), and blocks (heads and white clothes).

### 3.3 The 1990s - The pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty

In the early 1990s, during his schooling in China, Chung Chen Sun traveled across the sea and mountains, and deeply experienced the "benevolence", "emptiness", "insight" and "harmony of nature and man" in Chinese culture, seeking the fusion of spiritual beauty and natural beauty. Based on the spirit of oriental traditional painting, integrating the principles of modern art composition, and constantly exploring. The 70-year-old Chung Chen Sun believes that "a person who wants to create from the principles of the constitution he knows is limited in the end. If the heaven and the earth are the Dafa, every plant and tree in nature is a teacher." [5] His works are more childlike in the vastness. He humbly absorbs the innocent and natural interest from the children's paintings of his granddaughter in "Elephant is invisible" as in Figure 7, indulges casually and does whatever he wants, learns from nature, follows the laws of nature, and discovers the beauty of nature. The rich shapes and colors of his collection of elegant stones, primitive wood carvings, ceramics, root carvings, jade carvings, teapots, and other artworks are the source of his creative inspiration. Yuan Yunfu said: "Mr. Chung's home has very strong Chinese color. He pursues the spiritual world of the sacred Eastern civilization. It was only in Mr. Chung's home that I felt the greatness and the essence of the ancient Chinese civilization. His collection is of a very high level. His works are very harmonious with the style of his entire home." The graphics of the works of this period have been simplified to the integration of dots, lines and surfaces. The colors are bright and rich, which fully reveals the painter's simple and true temperament and his inherent humanistic accomplishment. The abstract shapes in the paintings are the artist's pursuit of artistic "truth, goodness and beauty". It has a tropical atmosphere of "Nanyang" and the meaning of "Heaven and Earth are with me". Everything is between "likeness and dislikeness", achieving "No need to say what to fix" the height.



Figure 7: *The elephant is invisible*. 1998.

### 3.4 21st Century - Harmony

While "learning from nature", Chung Chen Sun is also an artist who has a special liking for international affairs. In November 2004, the People's Republic of China and ASEAN signed the "China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement on Trade in Goods" in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, moving towards the establishment of a free trade agreement area. On the other hand, Japan and South Korea also announced that they will negotiate free trade area negotiations with the ten ASEAN countries from 2005 as the starting point for the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area. When the topic of cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea was hot, Chung Chen Sun drew this "Peaceful Coexistence Diagram" in Figure 8. The purpose is to use the tiger to express his views on "peaceful coexistence". He does not agree with the saying that "one mountain cannot accommodate two tigers" or "one tiger dominates the mountain gate". Tigers have a gentle side. They know how to take care of their young children. When tigers live in groups, if they kill each other, they can hardly survive and are going to be extinct soon. He agrees that ASEAN countries should coexist peacefully like a family, and his views on individuals, families, countries and global humanity are all

the same, that is, the pursuit of harmony.



Figure 8: Peaceful Coexistence Diagram, 2005.

The achievements of Chung Chen Sun's artistic style originated from his artistic accumulation for more than half a century. His paintings merged Eastern and Western art, integrating Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His modern philosophical freehand figure paintings created a new style of expressionism and shaped typical artistic images. His art has the most powerful vitality, providing reference and motivation for national modern art to open up new areas in the future. Reading his paintings, while appreciating his unique artistic language, it is more important to feel the artist's inner personality charm through understanding the spiritual connotation of the works. Liu Boshu, the former president of the National Academy of Painting of China, said: "In the cultural exhibition we held in 1988, Mr. Chung's speech and works at the time, his views on both Chinese and Western art have never wavered until now. From his past in his new works, the absorption and integration of culture are very natural. His works are oriental and modern." [6]

#### 4. Results and Conclusion

Through different periods of style combing and work analysis, we have seen the transformation process of Chung Chen Sun's modern ink painting, starting from tradition to modernization, absorbing Eastern and Western cultures and creating original painting methods full of national characteristics. The combination of nature and spirit allows him to gradually achieve a higher artistic level.

If we summarize the characteristics of his works from the perspective of artistic aesthetics, first of all, Chung Chen Sun's modern ink paintings maintain and carry forward the excellent traditions of Chinese ink paintings, paying attention to the expression of spirit and concepts. The purpose of his painting is not to show the correctness of the shape and outline of the object, but to show his inner thoughts and feelings, to show the power and beauty of a temperament. In this sense, it is not so much that Chung Chen Sun portrays an objective world, but rather that he expresses his rich inner world through art.

Secondly, Chung Chen Sun's modern ink painting maintains and promotes the characteristics of traditional ink modeling language, and is an innovation based on traditional techniques. He pays great attention to the tempering of pen and ink skills and the beauty of pen and ink. Especially good at dealing with the big relationship between black and white and gray, and cleverly using the dot and line structure of calligraphy to increase the vitality of the picture. Chung Chen Sun uses bold and cautious colors. This is because he considers that Chinese painting should not be separated from its modeling characteristics and compared with Western oil painting in terms of color. These traditional and quite individual styles in brush and ink modeling give his painting creation a distinctive oriental style.

Third, Chung Chen Sun's modern ink paintings are integrated with the achievements of Western modern art. He does not stick to the traditional ink and wash modeling formula, on the contrary, the pen and ink in his works are not rigid, but full of the breath of the times and full of vitality. What's more valuable is that while basing himself on the tradition of Eastern painting, he looked at the world and studied the development process and experience of world art, especially western modern art. He not only successfully used the sketching of western paintings in the creation of ink paintings, but also absorbed nourishment from western modernist paintings to enrich the language of ink paintings. He often transformed the composition principles of western modern painting into traditional ink and wash, making it a new means of expression.

Fourth, Chung Chen Sun's modern ink painting creation not only expresses his rich life experience and his spirituality and comprehension but also expresses the various aspects of cultivation in his painting creation. Finally, Chung Chen Sun is an artist who has never been satisfied with his achievements. He believes that a painter should like a scientist, continue to explore and pursue,

continue to invent and create and apply the experience, concepts, and feelings in different times and spaces to the paintings. We can see that Chung Chen Sun does not take the method of a family and does not stay in a painting method. He is constantly changing, exploring the true meaning of painting and life. Pursuing truth, goodness, and beauty!

At present, as the world is stepping into high-tech and high-information today, the wave of globalization is sweeping across all fields, and art is no exception. This has forced more and more people to think about the issue of protecting and promoting national and regional cultural traditions. More and more people are interested in language with a harmonious spirit, and more and more artists working hard to explore the modern language of ink and wash. Under such circumstances, we look back at Chung Chen Sun's artistic history and creative achievements and feel cordial. Undoubtedly, his artistic concepts and practices are forward-looking and pioneering. His artistic achievements, and his contribution to the spread and development of ink art, are of reference and inspiration to many oriental artists.

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