

# THE REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS-THEMED ARTWORKS OF NANYANG ARTISTS

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(Received 07<sup>th</sup> December 2024; revised 27<sup>th</sup> January 2025; accepted 05<sup>th</sup> February 2025)

**Abstract.** As China's doors opened to the world, an increasing number of Chinese people chose to leave their homeland and seek opportunities abroad. The "migration to Nanyang", the largest and most far-reaching cross-border migration wave in modern Chinese history, not only led Chinese migrants in the Nanyang region to uphold their ethnic beliefs, customs, and festivals but also fostered the development of a unique Chinese cultural identity in the area. This study constructs a conceptual framework and adopts qualitative research methods, integrating observation and literature analysis, to examine three festival-themed artworks by Chinese immigrant artists in Nanyang (Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Chinese New Year). The research aims to explore the cultural identity of Nanyang Chinese toward traditional Chinese festivals and its multifaceted representations. These artworks not only reflect the migrants' adherence to festival customs, decorations, foods, and activities but also highlight their efforts to preserve and practice the spirit of Chinese culture within a foreign environment.

**Keywords:** *Nanyang painting, Nanyang Chinese, Chinese traditional festivals, cultural identity*

## Introduction

Many Chinese writers and thinkers visited Singapore and Malaya between 1927 and 1948. Due to their presence, Chinese people in Southeast Asia began to concentrate on Singapore and Malaysia. The notion that Malaysia and Singapore were the "Nanyang" surfaced during this time. the idea. In contemporary Chinese history, Immigrate to Nanyang is among the three most well-known population migrations. In China's recent history, the "Immigrate to Nanyang" was the biggest and most protracted cross-border migration. The dangers of the journey and the difficulty of making a living were far beyond those of domestic migration. The "Immigrate to Nanyang" is more dramatic, transnational, and transoceanic than crossing the Guandong and entering by the west entrance. It also has a wider scope, a longer experience, and a more profound historical impact (Gao, 2014). In the 1920s and 1930s, a significant number of Chinese painters and intellectuals came to Nanyang. China's "May 4th Movement" rekindled the spirit of scientific "aesthetic education," and the "New Art Movement" quickly took over the city. Art publications, art societies, art education, and art activities all got underway in Nanyang. Alumni from Shanghai University of Arts, Xinhua Art College, and Shanghai Art College founded "The Society of Chinese Artists" (SOCA) in 1935 and started actively promoting art. These students traveled to Southeast Asia after being born in China. The majority of the first generation of Nanyang painters were artists who had previously been able to produce art and who made significant contributions to the development of "Nanyang painting".

Lim Hak Tai, the founder of NAFA, compressed the idea of "Nanyang Fine Arts" into six main themes in 1955; two of these topics are the blending of many racial traditions (Lim, 1955). In the process of advancing Nanyang art, Nanyang artists see the dissemination of ancient Chinese culture as both their personal obligation and the goal and duty of an intelligent generation. Although they frequently include Chinese customs, festival traditions, and other cultural components, they passionately convey their love of Nanyang beauty and life in their works. This study explores the meaning of these cultural symbols in depth by analyzing the representation of Chinese festival symbols in the works of Nanyang Chinese immigrant artists.

## **Materials and Methods**

Creswell (2014) divides research approaches into three types: qualitative research, quantitative research and mixed research. Jain (2023) pointed out that qualitative research is an exploratory method whose core is to understand complex social phenomena through the study of subjective experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Unlike research methods that test hypotheses, qualitative research focuses more on in-depth exploration of problems. By analyzing the Chinese elements and their social context in the works of Nanyang immigrant painters, this study aims to deeply interpret the social phenomenon of cultural identity and its meaning generation process. The formation of cultural identity is viewed as a dynamic process in which individuals interpret and construct meaning based on their unique perspective, cultural background, and social environment. Due to the flexibility and adaptability of qualitative research methods, this article chooses to use this method as the main research tool in order to more fully reveal the complex connotations behind cultural identity. This study mainly uses analytical and documentary methods for data collection. The analysis method focuses on cultural representation symbols in works of art, aiming to analyze their intrinsic meaning and their connection with cultural identity. The literature review provides rich historical and theoretical support for this study by sorting out and analyzing existing research, and further deepens the understanding of the cultural background of artistic works. The organic combination of these two methods not only provides a multi-dimensional perspective for in-depth interpretation of cultural symbols in artistic works, but also lays a solid foundation for revealing the identity expression behind them.

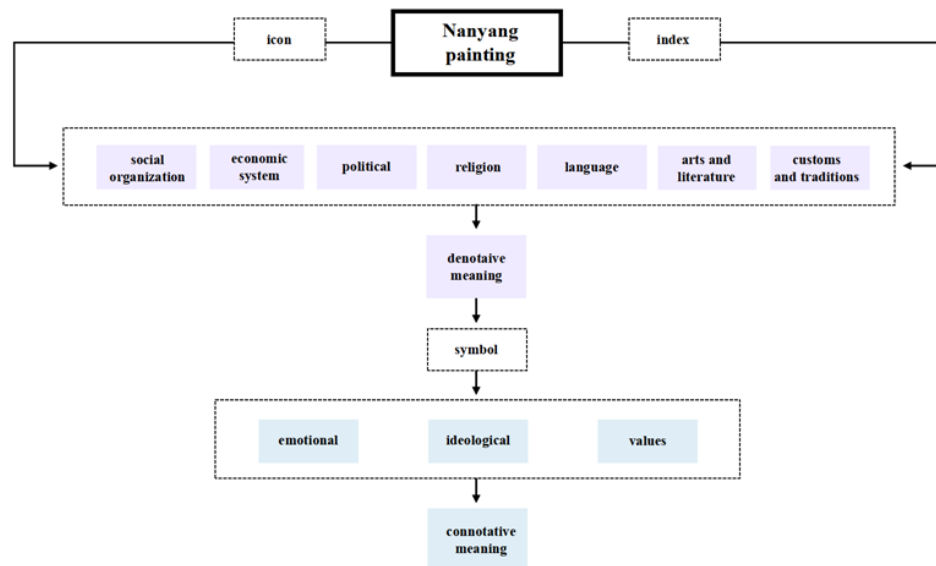
## ***Conceptual framework***

In Peirce's theoretical system, "Representamen" is a collective term for all symbols or symbol-like things (Bellucci and Pietarinen, 2015). Peirce's semiotic theory involves the cooperation of three basic elements, namely: sign, object and interpretant. Among them, sign is used to replace or refer to "object", and the thoughts or concepts triggered by sign in the mind of the recipient are called "interpretants". Interpretant expands the meaning of sign into a never-ending dynamic process. Specifically, object points to interpretant through sign, and the interpretant, as a new sign, will lead to further interpretant (Peirce, 1897). In the traditional study of sign relationships, two methods are usually used to analyze the meaning of sign: (1) extension: refers to the object referred to by sign, also known as "denotation"; (2) intension: refers to the characteristics of the object referred to by sign, qualities, attributes referenced, also known as "connotation". These two methods, although not sufficient, are indispensable

(Peirce, 1865). Therefore, the meaning opened by Interpretant is divided into at least two types, denotative meaning and connotative meaning. In addition, Peirce proposed several types of symbols and their definitions. Among them, a key type is icon, index and symbol. These three types of symbols are classified according to different mechanisms of reference: (1) icon: refers to the object through similarity to the object; (2) index: refers to the object through factual connection with the object (such as causal or spatial association); (3) symbol: to explain or refer to an object through custom, convention, or cultural norm (Burch, 2006).

The Nanyang Chinese's identification with Chinese culture involved in this study belongs to the issue of national cultural identity. "Cultural identity" is a complex and dynamic concept, including people's overall understanding of nature, society and human beings themselves, and embodies people's world view, values and outlook on life (Zuo and Wen, 2017). The identification model that uses national culture as the object medium asks how people define themselves in terms of cultural attributes and adjust their cultural needs and cultural responses based on the certainty and harmony between themselves and the social and cultural environment in which they live. Some scholars believe that national cultural identity is a dynamic process that belongs to the value system of cultural subjects. It is displayed through the psychological attitude structure and covers cognitive judgment, emotional attachment, behavioral choice and adjustment tendency (Wang and Hu, 2011). Clyde Kluckhohn believes that culture includes explicit and implicit levels. Explicit modes include: philosophy, politics, law, history, art, religion, customs, social systems, behavioral norms, language systems, etc., all of which use text and other symbol systems or people's specific behaviors as their carriers. The implicit patterns of culture include: values, emotional systems, and ways of thinking (Huang, 1989). Based on the cultural symbol system and people's specific behaviors, researchers divided the explicit level of cultural identity into seven elements: social organization, economic system, politics, religion, language, arts and literature, customs and traditions.

Based on semiotics and cultural identity theory, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework (*Figure 1*) to guide the analysis of artworks. This framework explores the representational relationship between cultural symbols and cultural identity of the Nanyang Chinese from both explicit and implicit levels. First, by observing the explicit cultural symbols in art works and analyzing their denotative meaning, we can reveal the superficial characteristics of cultural identity. Subsequently, through the literature review method, we deeply explore the cultural identity of Nanyang society at the implicit level such as values, emotional systems and ways of thinking, so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the deep meaning of cultural symbols.



**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Framework of the Representation of Chinese Cultural Identity in traditional festivals-themed artworks of Nanyang artists.*

## Results and Discussion

### *Analysis of representation of Chinese cultural identity in Liu Kang lanterns galore*

Liu Kang's *Lanterns galore* (Figure 2) gently draws attention to the figures and lanterns in the foreground of his paintings by using dark colors for the background. The picture has a lot of visual impact because of the sharp contrast between the dark background and the bold use of white, red, blue, and yellow. This is a really artistic use of color. The crowds of people below the lanterns depict a vibrant lantern viewing scene, while the top of the screen is covered in lanterns of all shapes, producing a powerful celebratory atmosphere. The painting shows the characters in a lively and natural way, with some reaching out to touch the hanging lanterns and others gazing upward. Appreciating lanterns during the Lantern Festival is a unique traditional custom in China. The details convey an active festive atmosphere. The characters in the painting wear summer clothes, suggesting they appreciate Lantern Festival celebrations in Nanyang. The picture captures a scene that not only highlights the enthusiasm of the Nanyang Chinese for this festival but also shows how they recognize the symbolic and denotative aspects of the Lantern Festival. The Lantern Festival is an important festival after the Spring Festival and the first full moon night of the Lunar New Year. In traditional Chinese festival with a history of more than 2000 year, Lantern festival has a beautiful meaning, including family reunion, new years celebrations, calamity eradication, and good luck prayers. It is a very representative Chinese cultural symbol that reflects the aspects of Chinese culture that all ethnic groups share. Rich ancient traditions like lantern gazing, dragon and lion dancing, lantern riddle guessing, lighting firecrackers, and eating Yuanxiao (glutinous rice balls) are the key features of the Lantern Festival (Wang, 2024). These activities have deep cultural meanings in addition to carrying people's wishes for good luck and happiness in the new year. All of it, includes guessing lantern riddles which enlightens wisdom and creates an active atmosphere; dragon and lion dances, which are symbolic performances to pray for a good harvest and ward off evil spirits and avoid disaster; eating during the Lantern

Festival, which symbolizes reunion and family harmony; and lighting lanterns, which means driving away darkness and danger and welcoming light and hope.



**Figure 2.** Liu Kang, *Lanterns galore*, oil on canvas in 1971.

As a sign of their understanding of the connotative meaning of Chinese culture, Nanyang's Chinese also participate in and spread joy during festivals. In addition to giving people emotional fulfillment, this group celebration strengthens a community connection and a sense of belonging. The joyous celebrations mirrored Chinese culture's pursuit for happiness and social harmony in addition to people's desire for a better life. Thus, the traditional Lantern Festival has grown to be a significant aspect of Nanyang Chinese culture and has contributed significantly to the enhancement of people's social and spiritual lives. Liu Kang cleverly used the golden ratio in his works and concentrated the lanterns in the upper third of the painting (*Figure 3*). Although the depiction of lanterns only occupies a small part of the painting, it successfully enhances the festive atmosphere of the entire artwork. The majority of the animals shown on these exquisitely shaped lanterns include horses, tigers, bunnies, chickens, fish, and dogs. Every animal, with the exception of fish, is a member of the zodiac. In addition to showcasing the beauty and inventiveness of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, this lantern's rich and varied shape also reflects Nanyang Chinese people's denotative appreciation of traditional Chinese culture. The twelve zodiac signs originated from totem worship in ancient China and developed with the creation of the stem and branch system and the formation of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation. It has a long history. It uses twelve animals to match the twelve earthly branches to mark the year and, at the same time, reflects the cosmology of ancient society (Zhang, 2008). The zodiac is closely associated with a person's personality, appearance, and destiny in traditional Chinese culture, in addition to being a symbol of fate. Witchcraft and zodiac-related traditions have been spawned by this idea. Especially during the year of the animal, people usually pray for luck and peace and use red objects to fend off evil spirits. Additionally, each animal in the zodiac has a cultural significance and is linked to unique personality qualities. For example, individuals born in the Year of the Rooster are determined, efficient, and have a strong sense of justice; those born in the Year of the Dog are loyal, socially concerned, and loving; and those born in the Year of the Tiger are romantic, adventurous, and eager to follow their goals. These cultural

depictions demonstrate how the zodiac is representative of individual character and has a big influence on folklore and culture (Guo, 2017).



*Figure 3. Lantern art of Lanterns galore.*

In Chinese culture, The twelve zodiac animals have connotative symbolic meanings in Chinese culture and run through many fields such as history, religion, philosophy and folk customs. In the Nanyang region, the Chinese actively inherit and practice the zodiac culture by celebrating traditional festivals and holding cultural activities. This further strengthens cultural confidence and national identity by preserving cultural ties to their homeland and highlighting the value they place on traditional Chinese rituals. Using zodiac items has also emerged as a significant means of fostering community togetherness in a mixed abroad setting. The Nanyang Chinese have created a strong sense of group belonging by sharing cultural symbols and practices, which fosters cooperation and solidarity among the community. It is evident that Nanyang Chinese have great pride in Chinese culture, which is shown in the significance they place on zodiac culture. It also serves as a significant emblem for preserving and passing along cultural identity. The remaining two-thirds of the picture (*Figure 4*) are filled with crowds of people admiring the lanterns. The artist mostly depicts the figures from the back or side, creating a busy and lively festival scene. But the picture's subtle elements show a more nuanced emotional expression. An intimate relationship may be seen in the image on the right side, where two adult men and women are near to one another and make physical contact. Beside it, a little girl in red wraps her arms around the woman's waist, suggesting a familial bond between them. Further observation shows that the female's right arm and the male's left arm are both tied with white cloth strips, and the little girl's right arm is also wrapped with a red cloth strip. These details hint at a traditional funeral custom: in many areas of China, if someone dies in the family, family members usually wear "funeral sleeves" to express their condolences-men wear them on the left arm, women wear them on the right arm, and children wear white sleeves. Cloth strips, while grandchildren often use red or navy blue cloth strips. People speculate that the family is mourning the death of a relative.





**Figure 4.** *Chinese community of Lanterns galore*

The adult man on the left side of the picture looks old, with sparse hair on the back of his head and a slightly hunched back. The boy on his left gently touched his back, while the baby in his arms turned his head and leaned down as if staring at the little girl in the blue dress in front of him. The girl in the blue dress is interacting with the little girl in the red dress, and the delicate movements and distribution of age levels suggest that they might be a family: a father, mother, four children, and a grandfather. The absent grandma in the picture makes people think that the relative the family is mourning may be the grandma who passed away not long ago. This speculation is further supported by the details of the picture-except for the little girl in a red skirt, the clothes of the other characters appear simple and elegant, which is in sharp contrast to the lively festive atmosphere of the Lantern Festival. This scene reflects from the denotation level how the Nanyang Chinese continue traditional Chinese funeral culture. Chinese family life, social ethics, and political practice have all been significantly impacted by the nation's unique ideological and cultural phenomena of filial piety. Its fundamental purpose was to uphold blood clan and societal order via respect for the mysterious power, and it sprang from the Yin and Shang Dynasties' worship of ancestors and gods. The Western Zhou Dynasty integrated filial piety into the patriarchal etiquette system, used sacrificial rituals to strengthen the order of the family and the country, and at the same time endowed filial piety with humanistic characteristics. By the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, filial piety gradually shifted from a patriarchal tool to family ethics as its core, emphasizing care and support for living parents. Confucian thinkers like Confucius, Zengzi, Mencius, and Xunzi turned filial piety into a strong feeling tied to family love and moral awareness. They linked it to values like "benevolence," "propriety," and "righteousness," making filial piety a key part of human ethics and social harmony (Guan and Zhou, 2024).

According to Sun (2024), through the etiquette system and cultural education, filial piety not only strengthens the cohesion within the family, but also plays an important role in social stability. Elders also have become the center of the family at the group level in traditional agricultural communities because of their extensive life experience and capacity for survival. Their significance encourages kids to progressively assimilate their appreciation and reliance on their parents into cultural practices passed down from old generation. Since the patriarchal system was established, filial piety has grown beyond home ethics to the social and political spheres, where it has become the fundamental ethical standard for upholding societal order. Filial piety, a distinctive

cultural and ideological phenomenon of the Chinese people, is founded on moral consciousness and familial devotion and is not just anchored in the significance of family ethics. It has profound connotation for the Nanyang Chinese. First of all, the Nanyang Chinese's persistence in filial piety fully reflects their high recognition of traditional family structure, social ethics, and cultural order. They preserved the essential elements of Chinese culture, which emphasize family love, gratitude, and duty, by passing on filial piety. This cultural identity is demonstrated by the Chinese culture's distinctive pursuit of social responsibility and human order, which is demonstrated not only by the observance and passing down of ancestral traditions but also by the family's unity and dedication to societal duties. Furthermore, the artist deftly incorporates the intense grief of the Nanyang Chinese family into the lively Lantern Festival scene in this picture. In addition to displaying the distinct emotional depth of Chinese culture, this implicit emotional expression also displays its rich and complex emotional structure, representing the culture's implicit and somewhat tragic emotional traits. The Nanyang Chinese's strong recognition and inherited understanding of the emotional depth of Chinese culture is further demonstrated by this emotional expressiveness.

This artwork vividly shows a Chinese family with many children through festive activities. In southern China, in dialects such as Hokkien, Hakka, Fuzhou, and Cantonese, "灯"(Lamp,Pinyin:Deng) and "丁"(Population,Pinyin:Ding)are homophonic, and "Ding" symbolizes population in a traditional context. Therefore, lighting up the Lantern Festival has also been given the beautiful meaning of "adding children." People in southern Fujian, Hakka, Fujian, Chaoshan, Guangdong, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other places generally regard the Lantern Festival lanterns as a good sign of a prosperous family and prosperous descendants. In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of "people are powerful" is deeply rooted. Family labor mostly depends on members' collaboration, particularly in traditional agricultural civilizations. Society generally regards having more children as a social virtue, in addition to providing a family's means of livelihood. In this regard, the ethical framework that has been established by China's traditional family support model is known as the "feedback model." Supporting parents is seen as an ethical duty by children, and this belief is reinforced by legal and cultural norms. China's feedback model is more focused on inter-generational reciprocity and continuity than the Western "relay model" (Fei, 1983). Though the economic development of modern society, the promotion of gender equality concepts, and changes in family structure have posed challenges to these traditional concepts, "carrying on the family line" and "raising children for old age" remain important among the elderly and have a profound impact on family life and social structure. "Carrying on the family line" is closely related to the continuation of clans and the inheritance of surnames, while "raising children for old age" is reflected in the economic support, daily care, and spiritual comfort that children provide to their parents (Yuan and Du, 2023).

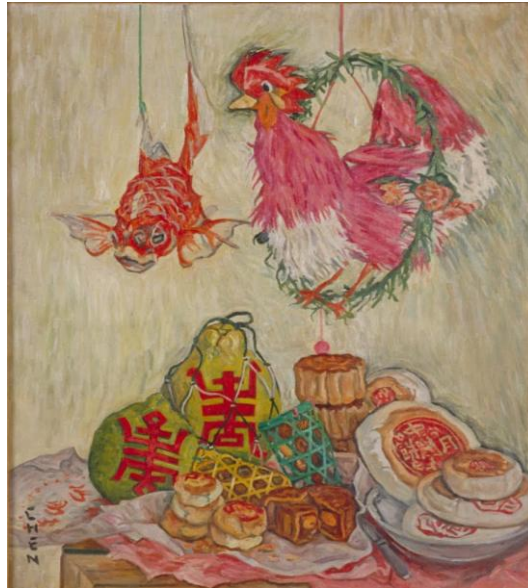
Traditional concepts such as "more children bring happiness," "raising children to protect against old age," and "more people are more powerful" have profoundly affected the Nanyang Chinese's understanding and practice of family. They regard the number of children as a symbol of family prosperity and happiness and believe that having more children is not only a guarantee of family prosperity but also a manifestation of social responsibility. In the process of Nanyang Chinese taking root in foreign lands, these concepts not only supported the continued development and reproduction of families but also enhanced the family's ability to cope with unknown risks. This mode of



thinking reflects the Nanyang Chinese's deep recognition of family values, social responsibilities, and future vision in traditional culture, and also demonstrates their tenacity and adaptability during the cultural migration process.

### ***Analysis of representation of Chinese cultural identity in Georgette moon festival table***

Georgette Chen created the artwork Moon Festival Table (*Figure 5*) in 1962 after moving to Singapore. The word "Mooncake" is clearly written on the mooncakes on the plate on the right side of the picture, which, together with the fruits on the table, create a strong Mid-Autumn Festival atmosphere. The mooncakes and two grapefruits on the table further emphasize the festival's symbolic components, while the fish and chickens hanging at the top of the image are very eye-catching. Warm colors predominate in the whole image, with red and yellow standing out in particular. This creates a cozy and joyous ambiance for the Mid-Autumn Festival and illustrates how well-known the Nanyang Chinese people are of it. Chang'e stole a fairy medicine and flew to the moon, separating herself from her husband Hou Yi. On the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, when the moon is at its brightest and roundest, the Mid-Autumn Festival takes place. Even if you are in a different place, people will feel connected to each other when they see the same bright place, people will feel connected to each other when they see the same bright moon. This emotion transcends region and time and space, giving the Mid-Autumn Festival a romantic and bright feeling and a distant artistic conception. The Mid-Autumn Festival food contains rich symbolic meanings: chicken ( "鸡", Pinyin: jī) is pronounced similarly to "吉" (auspicious, Pinyin: jí), symbolizing good luck; fish ( "鱼", Pinyin: yú) is related to "余" (surplus, Pinyin: yú) Homophones mean abundance and abundance; grapefruit ( "柚", Pinyin: yòu) has the same pronunciation as "佑" (bless, Pinyin: yòu), symbolizing peace and happiness; mooncakes are the iconic Mid-Autumn Festival food, and their round shape symbolizes reunion and family cohesion. Since ancient times, the Mid-Autumn Festival has also carried people's longing for their hometown and relatives. This emotional sustenance profoundly supports relatives, especially in ancient societies where they were often separated.



**Figure 5.** Gerogette Chen, *Moon Festival Table*, Oil on canvas in 1962.

The symbolism of the full moon, which represents reunion and completion, closely connects to the Mid-Autumn Festival. The Anshi Rebellion in the late Tang Dynasty brought huge social turmoil and psychological impact. Reunion shifted from being a daily habit to an unachievable luxury, and life and death became the norm, from the singing and dancing in prosperous times to the displacement in difficult times. People's desire for family peace and reunion has grown in the face of social upheaval and family separation. This psychological need is gradually assigned to the Mid-Autumn Festival, making the concept of reunion an important theme of the festival and further consolidating the cultural core of the Mid-Autumn Festival (Wang, 2012). For the Chinese, hometown is not only a hometown in a geographical sense, but also a spiritual belonging in a connotative sense. Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia experienced more homesickness because separation from their relatives and distance from their homeland affected them deeply. Through lavish festival celebrations, Chinese people share the beautiful moon with their native relatives during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which helps them cope with homesickness. As a result, the Mid-Autumn Festival has developed into a significant spiritual tie that binds them to their motherlands, hometowns, and distant relatives. In addition to upholding the thousands-year-old Chinese cultural history, this intense nostalgia strengthens the Chinese community's sense of identity and solidarity in Nanyang culture. No matter where we are, the Mid-Autumn Festival's representation of family and nationalism has always strengthened ties between the Chinese population and their homeland. On a denotative level, the combination (Figure 6) of these mooncakes and other festive items gives the entire image a clear visual hierarchy while also emphasizing the festive scene featuring abundant resources and prosperous people, which perfectly captures the rich cultural heritage of Nanyang Chinese and the continuation of traditional Chinese culture through the Mid-Autumn festival.



**Figure 6.** *Food of Moon Festival Table.*

The Mid-Autumn Festival coincides with the autumn harvest season in the eighth month of the lunar calendar, which is a harvest season of abundant grains and fragrant fruits. During this festival, Chinese people perform sacrificial activities by placing moon cakes, pomegranates, dates, and other foods and fruits, praising the moon god's great achievements, praising the good luck brought by the moon, and expressing gratitude for the gifts of nature. After worshiping the moon god, the whole family sits around to admire the moon and share the joy and good expectations of the harvest (Wang and Hui, 2017). In addition to being valued as priceless presents, these natural goods utilized in sacrifices also represent the joy of the harvest and the hopeful outlook for the future. After settling in a distant country and enduring hardship, the Nanyang Chinese have come to the profound realization that a happy life is difficult to achieve. As a result, even families with significant financial resources maintain a profound appreciation and respect for the gifts of nature. For the Nanyang Chinese, harvest celebrations have a deeper connotative value as a traditional way to honor a good life. In addition to being a significant cultural legacy, this type of appreciation for the crop and the natural world is a focused manifestation of the Nanyang Chinese ideal of "not forgetting the roots." This characteristic illustrates the dual significance of cultural inheritance and spiritual continuity by showing their steadfast adherence to traditional ideals in a foreign setting, in addition to reflecting their high respect of traditional Chinese culture. There are a large number of mooncakes in the entire work. Compared with other complete mooncakes, someone has cut the mooncake in the middle of the painting into four parts. This detail not only emphasizes the Mid-Autumn Festival as an important festival for family reunion but also hints at the large number of people in this family through the number of mooncakes. From the knives placed next to the mooncakes, we can infer that someone cut the mooncakes at the bottom of the picture with a knife. This scene reflects the eating habits of Nanyang families during the Mid-Autumn Festival-cutting and sharing mooncakes symbolizes sharing and reunion. This denotative meaning also reflects the Nanyang Chinese's understanding and practice of traditional Mid-Autumn Festival culture (*Figure 7*).



**Figure 7.** *Sharing mooncake of Moon Festival Table.*

The name of mooncakes appeared as early as the Southern Song Dynasty. People associate their round shape with a full moon, symbolizing reunion; they call them "mooncakes". During the Tang Dynasty, there is a saying that mooncakes originated from the rewards distributed to soldiers by Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty after his victory in battle. Mooncakes are a favorite traditional snack of Chaoshan people. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, Chaozhou people use moon cakes to worship the moon and express their wishes by giving moon cakes to each other. According to records from the Ming Dynasty, the Chaozhou people prayed to the moon for blessings and offered offerings to moon fruits at the Mid-Autumn Festival. Documents from the Qing Dynasty also recorded the custom of giving mooncakes to each other during the Mid-Autumn Festival (Luo, 2015). This ritual of sharing mooncakes symbolizes shared happiness and good luck and also conveys care and wishes for each other. The meaning of food during the Mid-Autumn Festival goes far beyond its own taste. By sharing these symbolic delicacies, Nanyang Chinese pass on their emotions and blessings to relatives and friends, making the festival more profound and connotative. While enjoying the warmth and joy brought by this traditional festival, it also further strengthens the connection and affection between each other and condenses the unity and warmth of families and communities. As a family tradition passed down from generation to generation, the Mid-Autumn Festival not only conveys the value of reunion to the next generation but also imparts deep emotions to the motherland, hometown, and traditional culture. This kind of inheritance is not only an important form of cultural continuity but also a manifestation of emotional connection, making the Mid-Autumn Festival an important cultural representation in the hearts of every Chinese.

In the entire picture, in addition to a large number of mooncakes, there is also a red rooster lantern with plump feathers and a majestic look in the upper right corner. The rooster holds its head high and looks to the left, standing on a wreath, full of momentum. The red fish lantern on the other side opens its mouth and spreads its fins in a vivid posture, as if it is rushing straight towards the table. Red ropes hang these two pieces of chicken and fish decorations, and their shapes are lifelike and exquisite (Figure 8). As red lanterns, they symbolize a prosperous and auspicious life. Furthermore, two grapefruits are positioned neatly on the table, and their surfaces are carved with the ancient Chinese symbol "寿" in various shapes, signifying longevity and good health. The two woven baskets in the middle of the tables showcase the exceptional degree of craftsmanship with their exquisite features and outstanding



craftsmanship. In addition to reflecting the Nanyang Chinese's desire for traditional beauty, the fact that these objects are all in pairs in the photo also shows how much they value the tradition of "pairs" at the denotation level. In addition to being a means of quantifying and expressing the world, numbers also serve as a distinctive cultural symbol. Even numbers have symbolic significance of harmony and auspiciousness in Chinese culture. Pairs of objects stand for harmony, balance, symmetry, and perfection—all of which are at the core of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Even numbers are a necessary and significant component of traditional festivals and ceremonies (Lin, 2004). Chinese people strongly want and culturally sustain happiness and reunion, which is why they employ even numbers to represent two-way dependency and the ideal of a happy life.



**Figure 8.** *Paired things of Moon Festival Table.*

In Chinese culture, people express their perception and respect for beauty through exquisite details. This pursuit not only extends beyond the material level but also cultivates and emphasizes spiritual connotation. Whether it is the beauty of the carvings of the lanterns, the presentation of festive food, or even the number of items in pairs, they all demonstrate the Nanyang Chinese's pursuit of an active and refined life. This pursuit not only reflects their ideal state of seeking internal and external harmony in a foreign country but also demonstrates their deep recognition and inheritance of the wisdom and values of traditional Chinese culture.

#### ***Analysis of representation of Chinese cultural identity in Khaw Sia's new year feast***

Khaw Sia created *New Year Feast* (Figure 9), a watercolor painting, in 1980. It shows a table of sumptuous food and is full of festive atmosphere. There are a wide variety of foods in the painting, including lobster, crab, tomatoes, and other delicacies, which are also paired with a variety of drinks and decorative chrysanthemums. The

details are delicate and vivid. The details of the drinks in the painting add life and cultural connotation to the picture. The yellow liquid in the straight cup with foam on the top is presumed to be beer, while the red liquid in the tall pot-bellied cup is likely to be red wine. A brown clay pot is also partially visible in the background. The two visible characters on the pot are "高" and "特". Based on the upper part of the character below "高," it can be determined that this character is "梁". Sorghum liquor is thought to be in the container. Combined with the background of Khaw Sia's ancestral home in Kinmen, Fujian, the painting further hints at the fame of Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor (金門高粱酒). From a denotative perspective, this painting shows the Nanyang Chinese's deep affection for Kinmen Kaoliang liquor, a specialty of their hometown. The founder of Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor is Yeh Hua-cheng (叶华成), who founded "Jincheng Distillery" in 1950, laying the foundation of Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor. Because the military favored the wine it brewed, it opened the "Jiulong River Distillery" at its original location in 1953. In 1956, with the establishment of the Kinmen Battlefield Government Affairs Experimental Zone, General Hu Lien suggested that Yeh Hua-cheng build a new factory to expand production of Kinmen Kaoliang liquor.



**Figure 9.** Khaw Sia, *New Year Feast*, watercolour on paper in 1980.

After many considerations, Yeh Hua-cheng finally chose this low-lying area near the seaside outside the South Gate of Kinmen. The place not only has abundant water resources and clean air; it is also conducive to the cultivation of yeast and can shelter from the north wind and absorb the southwest airflow. At the same time, from an economic perspective, the new factory site is located in Old Kinmen, which will help create employment for local residents and promote local economic development. On this basis, Yeh Hua-cheng gradually expanded production capacity, optimized equipment, and strengthened management, making Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor famous and even sold overseas. The raw resources, technique, and environment of Kinmen Kaoliang liquor are all crucial to its popularity. The vineyard uses the sweet and cool Baoyue Spring water, along with Kinmen's native dryland sorghum, which has a high protein, high acid, and high fat content. The clean climate conditions of Kinmen and the ancient brewing technology passed down to this day combine to brew mellow and sweet sorghum wine, a distinct taste. Due to these special circumstances, Kinmen Kaoliang



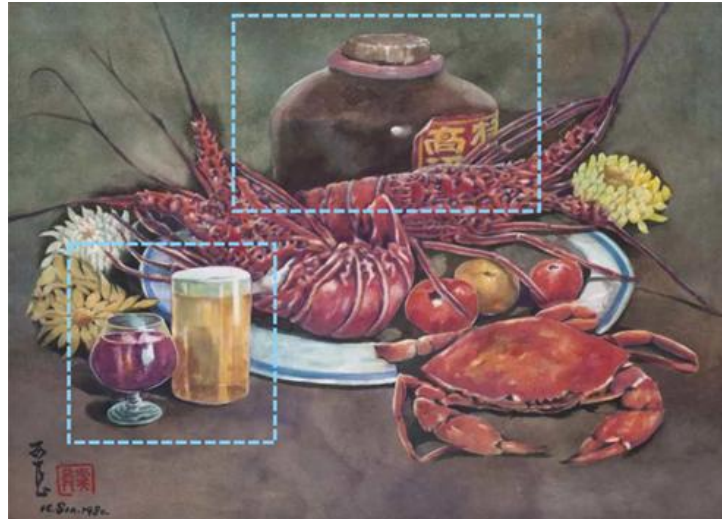
liquor is not only a well-known product in Chinese culture but is also adored by both domestic and international customers. For the Nanyang Chinese, Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor carries the nostalgia and emotional sustenance of the hometown culture, symbolizing the longing for the ancestral place and a strong sense of identity. This emotional connotation makes Kinmen Kaoliang liquor transcend the category of general commodities and become a spiritual bond.

When choosing the location for Kinmen Winery, Yeh Hua-cheng not only considered the financial advantages but also showed initiative in carrying out its social obligations by fostering local economic growth and generating employment prospects. "A gentleman values righteousness, while a petty person values profit." (君子喻于义, 小人喻于利). This attitude is a fundamental reflection of the Confucian value concept. In addition to illustrating the impact of Confucianism on corporate behavior, Yeh Hua-cheng's sense of social duty provides a strong basis for Kinmen Winery's success. Thus, Kinmen Kaoliang liquor goes beyond its characteristics as a simple commodity to become a symbolic product that embodies cultural identity and forges emotional connections. It not only meets consumers' demands for high quality and reasonable prices, but also deeply responds to the Nanyang Chinese's dual yearning for cultural identity and spiritual pursuit. On the Chinese New Year table, a variety of alcohol are served (*Figure 10*), which not only adds to the atmosphere of the festival but also reflects the Nanyang Chinese's inheritance of Chinese drinking customs at a denotative level. This drinking culture has a long history, and people trace it back to the Western Zhou Dynasty. At that time, wine etiquette was one of the strictest etiquette systems. When Zhou Gong formulated the "Ritual and Music System," he clearly stipulated that wine was limited to worshipping the gods of heaven and earth and ancestors and became an important tool for communication between humans and gods. At the same time, the drinking etiquette of the Zhou Dynasty standardized the order and behavior of drinking, laying the foundation for future generations' banquet etiquette. In banquet scenes, wine serves as an important link to maintain social relationships, and its manifestations include:

(1) Elders' and your ones gift. It highlights the moral hierarchy of loving the young and honoring the elderly. Elders and younger people must follow the order when drinking. Young people are not allowed to drink until the elderly have finished.

(2) The gift of humility and respect. This represent the hierarchical order, the dinner seats are rigorously arranged by status. The seating arrangement at early official banquets was a clear indication of the attendees' social standing.

(3) The courtesy of guest and host. "Book of Rites" has specific regulations on the welcome etiquette at banquets, the presentation of food and drinks during the banquet, the etiquette of seeing off guests, and the seating arrangement to reflect respect and courtesy.



**Figure 10.** *Alcohol of New Year Feast.*

Therefore, "no party is complete without wine" has become a consensus in Chinese banquet culture. Wine is not only the core of banquet activities but also an important medium to carry and express etiquette and ethics (Gao, 2011). For the Chinese, drinking is not only a personal enjoyment but also a cultural medium for emotional connection and social interaction. The core of the drinking ceremony culture, such as toasts, lies in the standardized expression of emotions. Through formal toasting and blessing ceremonies, people not only convey their inner respect and care but also further consolidate social relationships and a sense of group belonging. In addition to reflecting Nanyang society's acknowledgment of China's traditional social order and norms in a connotative sense, this type of ritualized thinking and emotional expression using wine as a carrier has grown to be a crucial component in preserving ethnic identity and cultural inheritance within the Nanyang Chinese community. The artist's depiction of the New Year's table differs greatly from Chinese eating traditions. In the work, red wine and beer stand in for the Western drinking customs, whereas lobster, crab, and other seafood are the favored treats of the Nanyang people. But the chrysanthemums surrounding the dinner dish and the sorghum wine show the shadow of traditional Chinese culture (*Figure 11*), particularly the denotative identification of the New Year's chrysanthemum placement ritual. When the blossoms have wilted, the chrysanthemum blooms in the fall. The distinct natural characteristics of the Chinese endow them with the qualities of being unconventional and honorable. In addition, chrysanthemums are a symbol of longevity and health in Chinese culture because of their extended blossoming season and resilient vitality. These traits have made the chrysanthemum a significant symbol of traditional Chinese thought: Taoists value the chrysanthemum's "reclusive" spirit over its pursuit of nature and spiritual freedom, while Confucians view it as a symbol of "nobility," which is consistent with the Confucian ideological connotation of promoting a gentleman's demeanor. The concept of Zen Buddhism combines the "purity" artistic conception of chrysanthemums with the pursuit of purity and inner transcendence. The chrysanthemum has therefore become an important cultural symbol under the fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Mao, 2006).



**Figure 11.** *Chrysanthemums of New Year Feast.*

In Chinese history, chrysanthemum culture has seen significant development. Chrysanthemum culture has steadily expanded, starting with the Tang Dynasty's private courtyard chrysanthemum viewing activities and continuing through the Song Dynasty's large-scale public chrysanthemum exhibitions and the Jin and Yuan Dynasties' distinctive Beijing Palace chrysanthemum exhibition. The chrysanthemum display achieved new heights in shape and scale throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties and became a universally attended cultural event. The spread of chrysanthemum culture is not only reflected in large-scale chrysanthemum exhibitions but also displays its spiritual connotation through a variety of chrysanthemum-related activities, such as the Double Ninth Festival custom with traditional Chinese characteristics, including drinking chrysanthemum wine, eating chrysanthemum cakes, and admiring chrysanthemums while waiting. Moreover, chrysanthemums have been extensively incorporated into daily life and are now a significant component of necessities like eating, drinking, and medicine (Mao, 2006). For many Cantonese, the chrysanthemum, known as China's "Four Gentlemen of Flowers," is an essential flower for the Spring Festival. Despite being in a different country, the Nanyang Chinese choose chrysanthemums as their New Year's flowers as a way to honor and remember their ancestry. This choice is not only a cultural inheritance but also a strengthening of self-identity. The symbolic meaning of the chrysanthemum's resilient vitality is especially significant to them when facing the difficult life in a foreign land. This emotional identification makes the chrysanthemum an important symbol of the cultural identity of the Nanyang Chinese, carrying their respect for their homeland culture and their hope for future life.

## Conclusion

This article analyzes three festival-themed works by Nanyang Chinese immigrant artists: Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Spring Festival. These works of art not only reflect the Nanyang Chinese's persistence in the festival customs, festival decorations, festival foods, festival activities, etc. These traditional Chinese festivals also reflect the Nanyang Chinese's aesthetic taste, social organization, and economic

status. The researcher thus explores the recognition of the spiritual aspects of Chinese culture by Nanyang artists, Nanyang Chinese, and Nanyang communities. And it highlights a certain degree of community, inclusiveness, and emotion. Specifically, Chinese artists actively highlight the significance of traditional festivals in three key ways: First, the representation of emotional identification. The Chinese culture nurtured by Chinese philosophical thoughts has profoundly affected the lifestyle of Chinese immigrants and become their spiritual source of survival in a foreign land. Under the influence of Confucianism, the "homecoming" complex has become a national emotion that Chinese people cannot let go of, and it has been sublimated with the development of the times. The Chinese who immigrated to Nanyang to make a living were far away from their motherland and family, so they regarded their hometown as spiritual comfort. Through their works of art, Nanyang artists express the Nanyang Chinese's solemn expression of their deep feelings for their hometown by adhering to traditional festival customs, making festive food, and arranging festival decorations. Nanyang artists express the customs and rituals of traditional Chinese festivals in their artistic works and also convey the Nanyang Chinese's emotional dependence and emotional identification with Chinese culture.

Secondly, the representation of ideological identity. Chinese traditional festival customs contain profound national philosophical connotations and demonstrate the core cultural characteristics of the Chinese people such as their thinking patterns, methods and etiquette concepts. These festivals are not only celebrations of time and space, but also symbols of national thought and carriers of cultural inheritance. Despite their slow assimilation into the local multiculturalism, the Nanyang Chinese continue to celebrate festivals according to their auspicious culture and etiquette. The Nanyang Chinese actively demonstrate their ideological affinity with the Chinese nation's ideology through this persistence, highlighting the continuation of Chinese tradition. Lastly, the presentation of value identity. The origin and the development of traditional festivals reflect the profound expression of the pursuit of beliefs and values of truth, goodness, and beauty. These festival artifacts, customs, and symbols used in the festival convey people's appreciation of beauty, their desire for a better future, and their appreciation of a happy life. For the Nanyang Chinese, the national values represented in these customary celebrations serve as both a cultural identity and an internal motivator influencing everything from thought to belief. This recognition of values has become an important basis for the Nanyang Chinese to maintain their self-awareness and cultural belonging and is also an important manifestation of their ability to maintain their national spirit in a foreign cultural environment.

## **Acknowledgement**

I sincerely thank 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.

## Conflict of interest

The author hereby states that in order to ensure the integrity and reliability of the research, this study has no conflicts of interest with any external groups, institutions, or individuals.

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