

Panel 3

Forming the Sinophone

Post-1965 Spatial Narratives of the Singapore River in Chinese Singaporean Contemporary Painting Practice

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This paper examines the artistic representations of the Singapore River—the nation’s most iconic waterway—in paintings by Chinese Singaporean artists since the country’s independence in 1965. As a witness to the city-state’s rise, the conflicts and collaborations between colonizers and the colonized, and the evolution of economic and commercial paradigms, the river has profoundly shaped Singaporeans’ geographical perceptions and spatial experiences, solidifying its role as the nation’s symbolic lifeline. Its shifting identity, moulded by urban development, river management, and landscape interventions across eras, has been reinterpreted through artists’ lenses, imbued with layers of historical memory, personal narratives, and emotional resonance. A majority of artworks depicting the Singapore River are created by Chinese Singaporean artists.

By tracing the river’s historical trajectory and analyzing post-1965 artistic strategies in depicting its spatial dynamics, this paper employs postcolonial theory to investigate how Chinese Singaporeans have utilized the river as a medium to project individual lived experiences, negotiate national identity, and construct modern identities. It highlights the interplay between colonial legacies (e.g. Raffles-era architecture) and post-independence reinventions, revealing how artists reconcile historical rupture with continuity. Works ranging from nostalgic portrayals of pre-industrial river life to critical engagements with urbanization reflect the river’s dual role as a site of collective memory and a canvas for envisioning futurity.

Furthermore, the paper addresses contemporary challenges in reimagining the river’s artistic spaces. It proposes strategies to enhance its cultural resonance, such as integrating community-driven art projects, leveraging on digital technologies for layered historical narratives, and fostering dialogue between ecological preservation and creative expression.

Ultimately, this exploration underscores the Singapore River not merely as a physical entity but as a fluid metaphor for the nation’s ongoing identity-making—a space where history, art, and politics converge to redefine what it means to be Singaporean in a postcolonial, globalized era.

Biography

Guo Yi is a PhD candidate in Chinese at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research focuses on literature, calligraphy, and painting in Yuan China (1271-1368), and text and image studies. He is also interested in Singapore’s cultural heritage and has published academic papers.