

MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA IN CHOW CHIN CHUAN'S ART

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**CULTURAL CENTRE
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ART

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MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA IN CHOW CHIN CHUAN'S ART

ABSTRACT

The bicycle as a form of wheeled transport appeared to be the main transportation that was used to carry passengers and goods during the old times, has consistently become the subject matter of Chow Chin Chuan's artworks over 20 years. Chow is an active artist within the Chinese artist community in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Penang area. Currently, there was no well-written research about Chow's bicycle themed paintings although he has been participated in numerous group art exhibition in oversea countries and also has a total of 8 solo exhibitions in Malaysia as of year 2017. Moreover, currently, there are lack of local research on the Malaysia art. Therefore, this paper can contribute to the documentation of Malaysia art for present and future generations. Apparently, the bicycle in his artworks represents the artist's childhood memories and reminiscent of his father, however, Chow's artworks not only just imply his childhood memories, but his paintings that combined the bicycle with street scenes, scene of local lifestyle and other elements may reflect the social and cultural environment of Malaysia. Besides, Chow's artworks seems to embody the sentimental condition of longing for the past and therefore, nostalgia were used as a conceptual framework to guide the research on Chow's paintings. A qualitative research will be carried out to study the bicycle as a symbol of his nostalgia and examine how his paintings could acts as a reflection of the Malaya's cultural past through the theme of nostalgia. The research will also make use of literature review of various publications from the internet, books and newspapers, together with the host of interviews with the artist. The result of this research show that Chow's bicycle themed paintings is not just reflect his memory and nostalgia, but also convey important ideas about the Peranakan culture and the contribution of traditional trade in Malaysia.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Memory, Malaysian Art, Bicycle

MEMORI DAN NOSTALGIA DALAM SENI CHOW CHIN CHUAN

ABSTRAK

Basikal sebagai pengangkutan yang digunakan untuk membawa penumpang dan barangan pada zaman dahulu telah menjadi topik utama dalam seni Chow Chin Chuan lebih daripada 20 tahun. Chow adalah artis yang aktif dalam komuniti artis Cina di kawasan sekitar Selangor, Kuala Lumpur dan Pulau Pinang. Walaupun beliau telah mengambil bahagian dalam pelbagai pameran seni kumpulan di negara luar dan juga mempunyai sejumlah 8 pameran solo di Malaysia setakat tahun 2017, tetapi masih tiada kajian mengenai lukisan Chow. Kini, penyelidikan tempatan mengenai seni Malaysia masih kekurangan. Oleh itu, pengajian ini boleh menyumbang kepada dokumentasi seni Malaysia untuk generasi sekarang dan masa depan. Nampaknya, basikal dalam karya seni beliau mewakili kenangan zaman kanak-kanaknya dan mengingatkan bapanya, tetapi karya seni Chow yang mengabungkan basikal dengan pemandangan jalan raya, pemandangan gaya hidup tempatan dan unsur-unsur lain juga dapat mencerminkan persekitaran sosial dan budaya di Malaysia. Selain itu, karya seni Chow seolah-olah merangkumi perasaan sentimental kerinduan untuk masa lalu dan oleh itu, nostalgia digunakan sebagai rangka kerja konseptual untuk membimbing penyelidikan mengenai lukisan Chow. Penyelidikan kualitatif dijalankan untuk mengkaji basikal sebagai simbol zaman kanak-kanak artis dan mengkaji bagaimana lukisannya dapat berfungsi sebagai refleksi budaya Malaya pada masa lalu melalui tema nostalgia. Penyelidikan ini juga akan menggunakan kajian literatur dari pelbagai penerbitan seperti internet, buku dan akhbar, bersama-sama dengan temuduga dengan artis. Hasil penyelidikan ini menunjukkan bahawa lukisan bertema basikal Chow bukan sahaja mencerminkan ingatan dan nostalgia, tetapi juga menyampaikan idea yang penting tentang budaya Peranakan dan sumbangan perdagangan tradisional di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Nostalgia, Memori, Seni Malaysia, Basikal

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Abstrak.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Appendices.....	x

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Artist's Background.....	1
1.2 Background of the Study.....	3
1.3 Research Objectives.....	7
1.4 Research Questions.....	7
1.5 Scope of Research.....	7
1.6 Significant of Study.....	8
1.7 Conceptual Framework.....	9
1.8 Research Methodology.....	15

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Memory, Nostalgia and Art.....	17
2.2 Bicycle as Symbolic Object.....	26

CHAPTER 3: VISUAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction.....	30
3.2 Rooted in the Memory.....	31
3.3 An Idealized Past.....	34

3.4 A Romantic Notion of Peranakan Culture.....	43
3.5 Scene of Everyday Life as a Reflection of Temperament of the Times.....	51
3.6 Door as Symbolic of Returning and Leaving Home.....	66
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION.....	71
REFERENCES.....	74
APPENDIX.....	81

Universiti Malaya

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 : <i>Be Ready</i> , Oil Painting, 203 cm x 92 cm, 1990.....	3
Figure 3.1 : <i>Tiga Kawan</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2004.....	37
Figure 3.2 : <i>Berbual-bual</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2004.....	38
Figure 3.3 : <i>Lalu</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2004.....	38
Figure 3.4 : Hsieh Ming Chang, <i>Bei Gang Chao Tian Temple</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 1999.....	39
Figure 3.5 : Hsieh Ming Chang, <i>Old Port of Yanshuei</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 1998....	39
Figure 3.6 : <i>Unlocked</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 38 cm, 2015.....	40
Figure 3.7 : <i>Love and its Vicissitudes, Blue</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2016.....	41
Figure 3.8 : <i>Love and its Vicissitudes #1</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 66 cm, 2016.....	49
Figure 3.9 : <i>Love and its Vicissitudes #2</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2016.....	50
Figure 3.10: <i>Love and its Vicissitudes #5</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2016.....	50
Figure 3.11: <i>Recycle Morning</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2007.....	51
Figure 3.12: <i>Untitled</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2014.....	52
Figure 3.13: <i>Morning Sunlight</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2008.....	52
Figure 3.14: <i>Lebuh Kimberley, Penang</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2014....	53
Figure 3.15: <i>Untitled</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2013.....	53
Figure 3.16: <i>Roti Man Series</i> , Oil on Canvas, 95 cm x 95 cm, 2014.....	54
Figure 3.17: Lee Weng Fatt, <i>Petaling Street #2</i> , Mix Media on Canvas, 76 cm x 76cm, 2015.....	63

Figure 3.18: Lee Eng Beng, <i>Beach Street Coffee Shop</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 40 cm x 50 cm, 2016.....	63
Figure 3.19: Khoo Cheang Jin, <i>Beach Street Houses, Penang</i> , Watercolor on Paper 56 cm x76cm, 2017.....	64
Figure 3.20: Wong Kean Choon, <i>Street Scene</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 2017.....	64
Figure 3.21: Cheah Yew Saik, <i>Mountain Song Series</i> , Oil on Canvas, 89 cm x104 cm, 2008.....	66
Figure 3.22: <i>Fu Hai Shou Shan</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2016.....	69
Figure 3.23: <i>At Home</i> , Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 51cm, 2016.....	70
Figure 3.24: <i>On the Spot</i> , Watercolour on Paper, 74 cm x 54 cm, 2016.....	70

Universiti Malaysia

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Chow Chin Chuan's Paintings	81
Appendix D: Newspaper Cutting	97

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Artist's Background

Chow Chin Chuan, who was born in Klang, Selangor obtained his formal art education from Kuala Lumpur College of Art (KLCA) in the year of 1983. He had participated in numerous joined art exhibition in local and foreign countries including Brazil, Sweden, Thailand, Taiwan, India and Belgium.¹ He was well known as “the bicycle man”² amongst Malaysia’s Chinese artist’s community as he has centralize his theme on a specific icon — the bicycle for over 20 years.³ Chow relates his artworks with the memory of his father and his bicycle. His father possessed a retail shop and Chow’s job was to help his father to carry goods to their customers from house to house using the bicycle. Thus, the bicycle is nostalgic and carry a sentimental value to him and subsequently became his inspirations in his artworks creation.

In fact, Chow’s ambition to become an artist was not supported by his father as his father think it was difficult to sustain as an artist. After graduated from KLCA with Diploma of Fine Art and Fine Figure Design in the year of 1983, in order to make a living, he became an art editor for magazine, freelance cartoonist for newspaper and part-time art teacher. During that time, Chow was struggle to become an artist until his artwork “*Be ready*” (1990) (Figure 1.1) won the Minor Award, Young Contemporaries (YC) (*Bakat Muda Sezaman*) in the year 1990 which has a great impact on his career. YC award is the most prestigious and significant Malaysian contemporary art competition and award.⁴ YC

¹ “Chow Chin Chuan’s 9th Solo / 曹振全第九次个展,” March 25, 2017, accessed Dec 2, 2017, <http://artnegeri.blogspot.com/2017/03/chow-chin-chuans-9th-solo.html>.

² Maizatul Nazlina, “Events,” *The Star Online*, last modified August 9, 2008, accessed Dec 2, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/community/2008/08/09/events/>.

³ Mabel Yan, “Bicycle has been the central theme in artist’s work for 28 years,” *The Star Online*, last modified Apr 7, 2011, accessed Dec 2, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/community/2011/04/07/bicycle-has-been-the-central-theme-in-artists-work-for-28-years/>.

⁴ Faizal Sidik, “Revolution in Malaysia Art, Sociocultural and Political Experiences Through Young Contemporaries from the 1970s until Today”, in *SEZAMAN 'Young Contemporaries 2010*, (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 2010).

award was started by the former National Art Gallery (NAG) director Ismail Zain in year 1974 with the members of the NAG Exhibition and Purchasing Committee.⁵ The competition take place every two years to showcase young artist who under the age of 40 at the cutting edge of Malaysian art.⁶ It has been organized by NAG since 1970s as a platform to found young emerging artist and it was considered as the supreme and most vital award in the career of a local young artist.⁷ It plays an important role in helping to shape and support the development of Malaysian art practice and aims to improve the controversy, provocative, controversy, daring and profitable debate for contemporary art, which sequentially can arouse people's interest in contemporary art appreciation in this country.⁸ The past winners of YCA usually gained recognition as leading artists of their generation.⁹ Therefore, the won of this award by Chow has motivated him and undoubtedly gave him recognition and confidence to pursue his career as an artist.

After that, he gradually quit his job as art editor and cartoonist and only until year 2002, 19 years after he graduated from KLCA, he have his first solo art exhibition organized by the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd with the title of “Tribute to the Bicycle”. Until the year of 2017, a total of 9 solo art exhibition has been held and he had participated in numerous group exhibition. Currently, he is a part time art teacher and also a full time fine art artist.

⁵ “Press Release The Young Contemporaries Award 2016,” *Lembaga Pembangunan Seni Visual Negara*, last modified March 14, 2017, accessed October 22, 2017, <http://www.artgallery.gov.my/?p=4947&lang=en>.

⁶ Adeline Ooi, Beverly Yong, Hasnul J. Saidon, *An A - Z guide to Malaysian art*, (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2012).

⁷ Faizal Sidik, *Revolution in Malaysia Art, Sociocultural and Political Experiences Through Young Contemporaries from the 1970s until Today*, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2010).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Adeline Ooi, *An A - Z guide to Malaysian art*.



Figure 1.1: *Be Ready*, Oil Painting, 203 cm x 92 cm, 1990.

1.2 Background of the Study

This research aim to study the bicycle themed artworks of the Chow Chin Chuan artist. The bicycle, a single-track vehicle with two wheels connected to a frame has become the common theme of Chow's artworks and his trademark for more than 20 year of career as an artist. This ordinary object, which could be found in many houses either in the old days or in modern days were used as his main subject matter. Bicycle is the common transportation during old days and it was significant to Chow's father who owned a retail shop as it was used for sending goods from place to place. Chow's job during his childhood was helping his father to bring goods to their clients from house to house by using the bicycle. For Chow, the bicycle holds a sentimental value to him and elicits variety of feelings and emotions due to the memories that it triggers which recalls his childhood and spark reminiscences of his father. Therefore, the bicycle has become

the stimuli for his nostalgic memories, yearning for the past and subsequently the bicycle has been adopted by Chow to become the symbolic figure in his artworks. Various sizes, positions and perspectives of bicycles were drawn by Chow with different background of Malaysia's social and cultural life in his paintings.

During the 19th century, the advent of bicycle at affordable price allows most people to travel afar and at will. It provides a mobility solution and more affordable transportation option, which was better for those who were not wealthy. The benefits of bicycle are endless and it was commonly used in our society. However, since when was a two-wheeled vehicle related to art? When Marcel Duchamp fasten a bicycle wheel to a wooden stool in 1913, he made a great artwork as it created an alternative definitions of what art is. Marcel Duchamp's *Rouede Bicyclette* or *Bicycle Wheel* which is considered as the first "readymade" sculpture.¹⁰ *Bicycle Wheel* created in year 1913 and it was a readymade comprising of a bicycle fork with front wheel mounted upside-down on a wooden stool. Marcel Duchamp challenged the concept that art has to be aesthetically attractive, or even refined, thus, he found alternatives to conventional art forms or original handmade objects through his readymade artworks and one of the readymade was the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913).¹¹ Duchamp's early bike-inspired work was seen as a precursor in the field. Since then, the bicycle has become the inspiration for artists to create paintings, sculptures and even mural art, for instances, bicycle sculpture *Forever Series* created by Ai Weiwei and mural art *Little Children on a Bicycle* (2012) produced by Ernest Zacharevic. Ai Weiwei produced his artwork *Forever Bicycle* (2003) with 42 bicycles. The 42 bicycles with 275 cm in height and 450 cm in diameter were installed and arranged in a circular form in the Tate Modern, London. The brand of the bicycle was named

¹⁰ Romana Karla Schuler, *Seeing Motion: a History of Visual Perception in Art and Science*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

¹¹ Ronald E. Martin, "The Artistic Process and the Wider Event," in *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge: Innovative Writing in the Age of Epistemology*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 157-174.

Forever (Yong Jiu Pai), a famous brand in China which was used by millions of people in China daily. However, the bicycles are disappearing in major cities of China and some cities began closing bicycle lanes as the country is modernizing. Although the bicycles have gone beyond their regular use and purpose, in Ai Weiwei's opinion, the bicycle still provides a sense of harmony, protection, and unity.¹² Although *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Forever Bicycle* (2003) are bicycle related artworks, but they have different meaning and intention which Ai's sculpture seems to be a critique in the context of the declining bicycling in China as the utility and significance of bicycle is diminishing, meanwhile, Duchamp's sculpture was created to challenge the definition of "art" itself. In spite of that, they still have similarity in the sense that both sculpture using bicycle as a material to reconstruct a new forms, rendering the bicycle functionally useless and make the audience to focus on the content behind the artworks. Meanwhile, *Little Children on a Bicycle* (2012) was the notable bicycle related artwork in Malaysia created on the wall of a shophouse on Armenian Street, George Town, Penang. The mural depicts a little girl taking her young brother on a bicycle ride. The children was depicted in a playful scene with joy and innocence which bring a sense of nostalgia about how fast time flies.¹³ The combination of installation of bicycle and paintings allow the audiences to interact with the artworks and encourage the visitors to explore the heritage site. The mural has transformed the perception of George Town, which the old narrow streets were change into a lively and engaging area. In short, the bicycle has become the inspiration to artists and made its way into painting and sculpture in the art world.

In addition, the bicycle has also become the popular theme of art exhibition in overseas countries. According to Withers, it was the bicycle's symbolic and connotative

¹² T.Le, My, "Culture Matters: Contemporary Art as a Philosophy of Society", *Human Rights in China 中国人权 | HRIC*, last modified 12 December 2009, accessed Jan 20, 2018, <https://www.hrichina.org/en/content/3189>.

¹³ Danielle Zoellner. "Childhood nostalgia in Ernest Zacharevic's street art," *Made in Shoreditch*, last modified 9 August 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://madeinshoreditch.co.uk/2016/08/09/childhood-nostalgia-ernest-zacharevics-street-art/>.

significance, in addition to its material advantages and practicality that attracted people to it.¹⁴ Withers mentioned that “ in both the art and craft worlds, bicycles are becoming trendy, as evidenced by some recent bicycle-themed art exhibitions and by a search of “ bicycle” on Etsy, the popular online craft site, yielding (for the moment) 37,248 results”.¹⁵ Furthermore, in art exhibitions across the country, bicycle related art exhibition were showcased by many art museums.¹⁶ For instance, a mix of bike-inspired art and functional bikes were displayed in the *Bike Rides: The Exhibition* at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in 2009, then a series of low rider bicycles were exhibited in *Anishnaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag (Native Kids Ride Bikes)* at University of Iowa Museum of Art and also a creations of six cutting-edge bike builders presented in *Bespoke: the Hand built Bicycle* at the New York’s Museum of Art & Design.¹⁷ Besides that, there are growing number of art museum bicycle project joins other effort to connect the art and bicycle world, such as *David Byrne’s urban bike racks* and *Art Crank’s itinerant events* displaying bicycle-inspired posters produced by local artist.¹⁸ Thus, it was obvious that many artists has created artworks that are inspired by the bicycle and this paper will show how this ordinary object-the bicycle has become symbolic for Chow Chin Chuan’s artwork.

Based on the above studies, evidently that the bicycle as a subject matter are commonly used in the artwork, however, what does the bicycle mean to Chow and what does it represented in his paintings? Therefore, this research aims to study Chow’s bicycle themed artwork, examine how Chow’s artworks use bicycle as a symbol to recall his memories and feeling from the past through nostalgia concept and explore the unrevealed

¹⁴ Jeremy Withers and Daniel P. Shea and Zack Furness, *Culture on two wheels: the bicycle in literature and film*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Robin Cembalest, “Pedal Pushers: How Art Museums Are Promoting Bike Culture,” *Artnews*, last modified 18 July, 2013, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2013/07/18/art-museums-embrace-bicycles/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

meaning of the bicycle themed artworks. Besides that, this paper will also research on how Chow's paintings provide important insights into past and present Malaya's culture and social activities.

1.3 Research Objectives

- a. To examine how Chow Chin Chuan use of the bicycle as personal nostalgic subject to remember the past
- b. To explore how Chow Chin Chuan's work reflect the socio-cultural environment and values of a particular time and place in Malaya.

1.4 Research Questions

- a. How does the bicycle as subject matter help the artist to relate to the past?
- b. How does his selection of subject matter tell us about the social and cultural past of Malaya?

1.5 Scope of Research

The research will focus on the Chow's bicycle themed artworks that were produced from the year 1998 until the year 2017. Although Chow has created hundreds of bicycle themed artwork but this research will only study selected pieces of artworks among each of the series. In this research, the artist's paintings are categorized into 3 types of series which are, bicycle parked on the floor tiles, bicycle with the scenery of local activities and bicycle placed in front of the doors or courtyard. This paper will identify and describe

trends in Chow's artworks and discuss how the issues of time, place and cultural influence are reflected in selected works of art.

This paper will use published sources, either traditional or electronic data to gather information on artist and his artworks. Literature reviews covering symbolic of bicycle, nostalgia, memory and art, and other related studies. A preliminary interview with the artist was carried out in order to understand the artist's ideas and messages better.

1.6 Significance of Study

The aim of this paper is to examine the use of bicycle as a symbol of reminiscent to artist's father through nostalgia concept. Currently, no local research has yet been done particular to examine the connection of artworks and nostalgia. Although Chow Chin Chuan has been painting bicycle for more than 20 years and was well known in Chinese artist's community but yet no research has been done about him and his artworks. Thus, this research will contribute to the knowledge of interpretation on the bicycle themed artworks from the perspective of nostalgia.

Chow Chin Chuan started his career as a full time artist since year 2001 and he has took part in various local and overseas group exhibitions and 9 solo exhibitions as of year 2017. Many of his works were rewarded and have been selected by corporate organizations such as the Malaysia Airlines, National Art Gallery, Petronas , Bank Negara Malaysia and Pacific Bank.¹⁹ Therefore, his artworks are worth for researching and the outcomes of this research will allow people to have better understand on the artist's ideas

¹⁹ "Runway: A Solo Exhibition by Chow Chin Chuan," *Arteri*, last modified 11 February, 2011, accessed December 14, 2018, <http://arteri.search-art.asia/2011/02/11/runway-a-solo-exhibition-by-chow-chin-chuan/>.

and messages brought through his paintings. This paper provide an insight to know the story behind the work and have better understanding of the interpretation of the artwork from different perspectives.

Besides that, through Chow's bicycle themed artworks, the Malaysian's past and present lifestyles have presented to the audiences. It communicates the Malaysia's social practice and cultural activities to everyone and it allow the transition of the values of our society to other generations. Hence, the output of this research will shows the significance of Chow's nostalgic artworks act as a reflection of Malaysia's social and cultural environment.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

This research will examine and analyze Chow Chin Chuan's artworks through the concept of nostalgia. In order to examine the nostalgia in Chow's artworks, the definition and characteristic that will provoke nostalgia should be analyzed adequately. With a view on the literatures, characteristics of nostalgia could be explained and therefore help in analyze the interrelation of nostalgia and Chow's paintings.

The word nostalgia has its etymological roots in Greek words, consisting of *nostos*, meaning "homecoming" and *algos*, meaning "pain".²⁰ The term nostalgia was introduced by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician and he has theorized nostalgia as a medical disease with adverse psychological and physiological symptoms including consistently thinking of home, irregular heartbeat, insomnia and anxiety.²¹ Johannes Hofer published a medical

²⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2001).

²¹ Willis H. McCann, "Nostalgia: a review of the literature." *Psychological Bulletin*, 38(3)(1941): 165-182.

dissertation in year 1688, which related nostalgia to *heimweh* - the German word roughly explained to a person's pain because he/she is not in his/hers mother land, or worry about never see it again, or merely, homesickness.²² However, the definition of nostalgia had changed during early of 19th century when it was no longer considered as a neurological disorder but, instead was viewed as a form of depression or melancholia.²³ In psychological perspectives, nostalgia was referred to mostly within the field of psychological disorders for most of the 20th century.

By the late 20th century, nostalgia has been distinguished from homesickness. According to Davis, nostalgia is associated to the words 'warm', 'childhood', 'old times', and 'yearning' and it goes beyond social groups and age, meanwhile, homesickness is focused on the psychological problems that arises when young people have to adapt beyond the home environment.²⁴ In addition, homesickness refer to one's native land, however, nostalgia can refer to various objects such as persons, events and places.²⁵ Holbrook defines nostalgia as a preference (favorable affect or positive attitude) towards objects that were more common during childhood.²⁶ Everyone in the world is likely to be influenced by nostalgia, regardless of age and personalities.²⁷ In sum, these writers generally conceptualise nostalgia as a form of sentimental yearning of any object, place or event in the past.

²² Carolyn Kiser Anspach, "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer 1688," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2, No.6, (1934), 376-391.

²³ Willis H. McCann, "Nostalgia," 165-182.

²⁴ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, (Free Press, 1979).

²⁵ Constantine Sedikides, et al., "Affect and the self," in *Affect in social thinking and behavior: Frontiers in social psychology*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas, (New York: Psychology Press, 2006), 197-215.

²⁶ Morris Holbrook and Robert Schindler, "Echoes of the Dear Departed Past: Some Work in Progress On Nostalgia," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, eds. Rebecca H. Holman and Michael R. Solomon, (Provo UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1991), 330-333.

²⁷ William J. Havlena, et al., "The Good Old Days: Observations ON Nostalgia and Its Role In Consumer Behavior," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, eds Rebecca H. Holman and Michael R. Solomon, (Provo UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1991), 323-329.

Sociologist Davis goes further to emphasize the social aspects of nostalgia. Nostalgia is recognized as a “positively toned evocation of a lived past.”²⁸ He explained on the connection between social power and collective memory and expound on how personal memories are localized within social contexts in his book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. As Davis remarked “nostalgia despite its private, sometimes intensely felt personal character, is a deeply social emotion as well.”²⁹ It means although one might experience nostalgia privately, however, nostalgia can be shared collectively among the people through public advertisements, photographs, images and others. As the technologies of communication are getting more advance, the imagined past is made available to the public. Subsequently, these means of representing the past may gradually be integrated into our memory and subsequently reconstruct our private recollections of the past. Thus, the personal experiences are blended with the collective representation of the past and become indistinguishable and therefore, nostalgia is complicated and far from a unified construction, and its relationship to memory can’t be easily simplified to a value judgment of false or true form.

Furthermore, Davis asserted that nostalgia “allows human beings to maintain their identity in the face of major transitions... in the life cycle from childhood to pubescence, from adolescence to adulthood, from single to married life, from spouse to parent.”³⁰ It means nostalgia act as a tool for identity construction which allow people to construct, maintain, and reconstruct their identities and consequently worked as a safety valve for those who wanted to retain a sense of continuity between past and present in their private memories.³¹ Thus, nostalgia is able to reassure us and reduce insecurity and self-threat by keeping fears of insignificance at a distance.

²⁸ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Apart from the above explanation on nostalgia from a social perspective, the nostalgic element can also be found in Romantic art. Poet Charles Baudelaire once wrote in year 1846, “Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling.”³² It indicates that part of the appeal of Romanticism was nostalgic, provoking a strong emotional response. Furthermore, Moscovici, an art and literary critic, mentioned that nostalgia is considered as one of the most notable characteristics of Romantic art. She said “Postromantic art and poetry evokes memories to help infuse youth in those who are no longer young. It stirs the imagination to nourish nostalgia not as malady, but as a source of renewed energy and strength.”

Besides that, Moscovici further proposed that there were at least two kind of nostalgia which are circumstantial nostalgia and constitutional nostalgia.³³ Circumstantial nostalgia is used to define those who currently can't live life to the fullest and are obligated to live it mostly in the past such as aged persons, and those who are physically ill or incapacitated. Meanwhile, constitutional nostalgia is nostalgic by nature and not primarily due to circumstances, it finds inspiration in art in recalling and recreating his past.³⁴ People who experience constitutional nostalgia tend to live life by concentrating upon their memories, thus favoring the past over the present as for them, the past is always more interesting and affecting, especially when it's enhanced by the imagination and its negative aspects are being ignored from memory.³⁵

As the nostalgia is difficult to be defined clearly, therefore, nostalgia has been categorized into different types according to various authors. There are two variant

³² Charles Baudelaire, "What is Romanticism?" in *The Mirror of Art*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, (NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 43-45.

³³ Claudia Moscovici, *Romanticism and Post Romanticism*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2007).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

components of nostalgia proposed by Boym, which are restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia arouses national past and future while reflective nostalgia is more likely to be related to individual and cultural memory.³⁶ According to Boym, restorative nostalgia is oriented toward collective pictorial symbol and oral culture however, reflective nostalgia gravitates toward an individual narrative that savours details and memory signs, perpetually deferring the prospect of homecoming itself.³⁷ Restorative nostalgia emphasizes on *nóstos* (home) and attempts a trans historical reconstruction of the lost home while reflective nostalgia cherishes *álgos* (pain), the longing itself, and delays the homecoming.³⁸ In other words, restorative nostalgia searches for a reconstruction of what has been lost such as reconstructing emblems and rituals of home while reflective nostalgia denotes to the longing, longing for place or longing for a different time. Reflective nostalgia is focused on historical and individual time, and appreciates shattered fragments of memory.³⁹

On the other hand, other researcher like Batcho, Holbrook and Stern have suggested to categorized nostalgia into different genre which is personal nostalgia and historical nostalgia.⁴⁰ Personal nostalgia refers to a personally remembered past (the way I was) while historical nostalgia regards as a remembered of time in history before one was born (the way it was).⁴¹ Personal nostalgia is evoked by the one's autobiographical memories,⁴² while historical nostalgia is aroused by collective memory.⁴³ Based on the

³⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Krystine Irene Batcho, "Personal nostalgia, world view, memory, and emotionality," *Perceptual Motor Skills*, (1988): 411-432; Morris Holbrook, "Nostalgia and Consumption Preferences: Some Emerging Patterns of Consumer Tastes," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(2), (1993): 245; Barbara B. Stern, "Historical and personal nostalgia in advertising text: The fin de siècle effect," *Journal of Advertising*, 2, (1992): 11-22.

⁴¹ Alan Hirsch, "Nostalgia: A neuropsychiatric understanding," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19, (1992): 190-395.

⁴² William Brewer, "What is autobiographical memory?," in *Autobiographical memory*, ed. D. C. Rubin, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25-49; Ulric Neisser, "What is ordinary memory the memory of?," in *Emory symposia in cognition*, 2. *Remembering reconsidered: Ecological and traditional approaches to the study of memory*, eds. U. Neisser & E. Winograd, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 356-373.

⁴³ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1950).

above studies, apparently Chow's artworks seems to be more relevant to personal and historical nostalgia and therefore, they will be used in examining the artist's paintings.

According to Sedikides et al., the structure of personal nostalgia is divided into three features which are the triggers of nostalgia, the objects of nostalgia and the role of self.⁴⁴ Regarding the trigger of nostalgia, Sedikides et al suggested that a positive emotion arouse a direct link between the past and the present was triggered by a few stimuli such as interpersonal, social or environmental stimulus.⁴⁵ The common object of nostalgic experience can be the friends and family which were close with one another.⁴⁶ Then, the second most popular objects of nostalgia were meaningful events such as festival gatherings and anniversaries while the rest regularly reported objects were places or settings.⁴⁷ In addition, Havlena also mentioned that both tangible and intangible object such as film, music, food, holidays, and photographs can constitute the formation of nostalgic stimulus⁴⁸ whereas Davis proposed that nostalgia could also happens in the situation of "present fears, discontents, anxieties, and uncertainties."⁴⁹ On the other hand, in relation to the role of self, Sedikides et al regards nostalgia as a self-related emotion.⁵⁰ Sedikides et al viewed the self as the main protagonist of the nostalgic experience which means that the "self" play an important role together with close others in the majority of nostalgic accounts.⁵¹ As refer to above studies, nostalgia is an emotion that may be understood psychologically and individually, but also historically and collectively. Chow's family and childhood may be acknowledged as his triggers of personal nostalgia and the object of nostalgic experience was the bicycle.

⁴⁴ Constantine Sedikides, et al., "Affect and the self."

⁴⁵ Constantine Sedikides, et al., "Nostalgia: conceptual issues and existential functions," in *Handbook of experimental existential*, eds. Sander L. Koole, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, (New York: Guilford, 2004), 200-214.

⁴⁶ William Havlena, et al., "Nostalgia: An exploratory study of themes and emotions in the nostalgic experience," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19, (1992): 380-387.

⁴⁷ William Havlena, et al., "The Good Old Days."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*.

⁵⁰ Constantine Sedikides, et al., "Affect and the self."

⁵¹ Constantine Sedikides, et al., "Nostalgia: conceptual issues and existential functions."

1.8 Research Methodology

Qualitative research method will be used to complete the research topic. Preliminary interview with artist via verbal and written communication have been done. In-depth interviews with Chow Chin Chuan have been carried out to collect detailed data on the artist' personal background, artist's opinion, thoughts, beliefs, attitude and experience in order to analyze the paintings better. Open-ended interview approach were used to obtain detailed and complete information about the artist. Interviews were carried out in Mandarin, recorded with field notes and transcribe the notes and other relevant information and findings into the documents on computer. Besides that, a biographical study on the artist and information related to his artworks will be gathered from books, articles, newspaper, and websites. Furthermore, around 50 pieces of his artworks within year 1998 to year 2017 with bicycle themed were selected for analysis. The paintings grouped based on their similar qualities. These groups included:

- **Bicycle** – The bicycle is partially or completely depicted in different position and perspective.
- **Bicycle placed on colorful floor tiles:** The common characteristic of these paintings were the bicycle was depicted placed on the Peranakan's floor tiles.
- **Street scene with bicycle and local people-** This group of artworks use social scene or scenery of human activities as the backdrop of the paintings.
- **Bicycle parked in front of doors/ at courtyard-** This group of works show the bicycle is parked in front of the old style wooden door or courtyard.

After sufficient information was collected from the artist through open-ended questions, proceed with formal analysis and interpretation on Chow's artworks through

conceptual framework. The conceptual framework were used in the analysis in order to extend the understanding of Chow's artwork and make it more explicit.

Universiti Malaya

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Memory, Nostalgia and Art

The artwork creation process is always connected with artist's personal memory which are things that have been heard, seen or learned consciously or unconsciously. There are number of studies have shown how are is a reflection of the artist's personal memory. Martinez Rosario is one of the researchers who examines the links between the contemporary art practice and cultural memory, nostalgia and melancholy in a chapter named *Representation of Nostalgia and Melancholy in Contemporary Artworks: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois* in the book of *Remembering Home in a Time of Mobility: Memory, Nostalgia and Melancholy*. The author study the works of 2 international renowned artists: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois on how their works are fused with memory, nostalgia and melancholy. Louise Bourgeois create works influenced by personal experience inspired by memories of her own childhood and traumatic events that happened in her past.⁵² Her artworks are either in abstract form inspired by body shapes or from objects with an iconography as a metaphor for melancholy and usually encompasses topics such as betrayal, anxiety, loneliness, trauma and sexuality which related to her memories of childhood, the unfaithfulness of her father in his marriage.⁵³ By recounting her memories repeatedly, Bourgeois aimed to control her fears of the current.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Tacita Dean's amateur photographs that are included in her art book, *Floh* (2001) displays images of everyday scenes such as group or personal portraits, home objects, pets or travel photos that could create nostalgic feelings as an image or a random encounter with past remnants is a mnemonic palimpsest.⁵⁵ Besides, photographs

⁵² Domingo Martinez Rosario, "Representation of Nostalgia and Melancholy in Contemporary Artworks: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois," in *Remembering Home in a Time of Mobility: Memory, Nostalgia and Melancholy*, ed. Maja Mikula, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 196-209.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

function as a *memento mori*, as they confront the death of the person in the picture and the unavoidable death of the viewer and through this method, the audience's melancholy was triggered by the photographs and cause them to rethink the significance of both life and one's destiny.⁵⁶

Through the analysis of Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois's works, the author comments that the key elements that enable the transmission of memory and the trigger of nostalgic feelings and melancholic sensation are index and the encountered sign.⁵⁷ Index is defined as a mode of significance based on registering physical qualities of elements in reality and an index gains its meaning via a physical relation with its referents.⁵⁸ The concept of the index especially for naturalism in art gives a documental quality to artworks.⁵⁹ Thus, "the index is considered a trace or imprint of the referent physical presence, a register of the real and of what actually existed It makes the viewer get involve in the stories represented and identify the pictures as traces of the past."⁶⁰

On the other hand, an encountered sign ia also used by artists as a strategy to represent and transmit memory and emotions. Encountered sign is a type of sign perceived through senses that could not be identify directly but could only be noticed and discerned.⁶¹ This sign is able to connect the affective actions of the image with a thinking process and subsequently stimulate thought, emotion and psychical engagement among the viewer, influence them to critically revise past.⁶² The notions of index and the encountered sign helps us to understand the ways in which the viewer feels empathy and

⁵⁶ Domingo Martinez Rosario, "Representation of Nostalgia and Melancholy in Contemporary Artworks."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

affect, which cause a moral engagement with and to the past via memory. Martinez Rosario also comment that banal and discarded objects could work as the materialization and physical trace of memory and represent a kind of effect, emotion and feeling that can catch the viewers' attention and trigger nostalgic and melancholic feelings.⁶³ It means that the objects and other elements that involved memory utilized in artworks could gain connections with human emotions and enable the transmission of affect.

In addition to the above semiotic approach that analyzes the influences of memory in the artists' works, there is another author who also studies the link between art and memory through a psychological point of view, which is Vera John-Steiner, a psychologist. He discuss the relationship between memory and art and study about how creative people think in his book, *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*. The author analyze the creativity process of creative person with the combination of imaginative insight with scientific precision to produce an explanation of the human mind working at its highest potential. Besides, he also study the creative thought of various writers, artist and philosophers through interview and carry out analysis on their journals, diaries, autobiographies and scientific records. According to Vera John-Steiner, the significant features of the creative mind and the basis of creativity is the concept of memory which is the power of memory that allow us to connect seemingly unrelated ideas.⁶⁴ He mentioned that

“Among the invisible tools of creative individuals is their ability to hold on to the specific texture of their past. Their skill is akin to that of a rural family who lives through the winter on food stored in their root cellar... The creative use of one's past, however, requires a memory that is both powerful and selective.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Domingo Martinez Rosario, "Representation of Nostalgia and Melancholy in Contemporary Artworks."

⁶⁴ Vera John Steiner, *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*, (Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 68.

It means that memories act as a mental repository of experiences and ideas that have been cumulated during childhood are the resource of artist's talent and facilitate their creativity. Thus, the artist are able to link the ideas generated from various sources and transform it into visual images. Subsequently, memory was used in different way by different artist in their artistic creation. Some artist will attempt to records things as exactly as they are in order to create an evidence for future, but some will reframe the past in another options to allow a diverse way of thinking. Based on the above study, it indicate that memory do play an important role in the creation of artwork.

Although the artist can get inspiration from memory as what has been explained above, however, it is impossible for any artist to capture a true memory because memory shifts and changes in a continuous process of mental revision over time. As for now the researchers in the psychological sciences recognized that “memory is not a literal reproduction of the past, but instead depends on constructive processes that are sometimes prone to errors, distortion, and illusions.”⁶⁶ It means that every remembering of a past experience is a construction process instead of a retrieval process. Neurologist Oliver Sacks further confirm that memory is not a recording equipment and described that “memories are not fixed or frozen, like Proust's jars of preserve in a larder, but are transformed, disassembled, reassembled, and recategorized with every act of recollection.”⁶⁷ Rosalind Cartwright agree that memory is not the same as it original by saying that “memory is never a precise duplicate of the original...it is a continuing act of creation.”⁶⁸ Besides that, many constraints, circumstances and influences have been factored in when recalling the memory. It was further proven by McClelland, a psychologist, mentioned that remembering the past is “simultaneously constrained by

⁶⁶ Daniel Schacter, et al., "The cognitive neuroscience of constructive memory," *Annu Rev Psychol*, (1998): 290.

⁶⁷ Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 93.

⁶⁸ Rosalind D. Cartwright, *The Twenty-four Hour Mind: The Role of Sleep and Dreaming in Our Emotional Lives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176.

traces left in the mind by the event we are remembering itself, by background knowledge of related material, and by constraints and influences imposed by the situation surrounding the act of recollection.”⁶⁹ The memories will even be sorted by human mind according to the significant level, which cause only some important memories stand out while others faded into the background, forgotten with the passage of time. John-Steiner further explain on how the ideas are being analyzed and remembered in human mind, she describe:

“An experience is processed in multiple ways, as each type of memory “storage” has its own special characteristic. The stories of one’s life are recorded in episodic memory, and these are tagged according to the time and place of their occurrence. More abstract knowledge lacks such coding; instead it is recorded in a more formal structure such as biological taxonomies or other facts, which are organized according to hierarchical concepts.”⁷⁰

Based on the above studies, it clearly indicated that memory is not exactly a “true picture of the past” however memory is a critical resource that keeps one’s knowledge up-to-date by connecting the known to new ideas and insight. This means that artworks can be viewed as an expression of the inspiration that the artist obtained from their memories rather than an accurate reflection of the artist’s past. In other words, instead of viewing the painting as a record of the past, most of the artists use art to convey personal or collective cultural memory that are open for interpretation from diverse points of view.

As mentioned, memory is a source of inspiration for artist, however, it is not only significant to art creation but also inseparable from nostalgia. Nostalgia and memory are linked as one cannot yearn the past without memory. Nostalgia is defined as yearning for

⁶⁹ Jay McClelland, "Constructive memory and memory distortions: A parallel-distributed processing approach," in *Memory distortions: How minds, brains, and societies reconstruct the past*, ed. D. L. Schacter, (US: Harvard University Press, 1995), 69.

⁷⁰ Vera John Steiner, *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*, 70.

an idealized past, a longing for a filtered impression of the past.⁷¹ In other words nostalgia refers to a screen memory that combines and integrates many different memories, processes and filters all our negative emotions.⁷² Tosh's opinion corresponded with Hirsch's view that, "nostalgia is a very lopsided view of history. If the past is redesigned as comfortable refuge, all its negative features must be removed."⁷³ Based on the above studies, researchers see nostalgia as an adulterated form of memory, which means that what has been remembered doesn't represent the truth as all negative elements are filtered out. Thus, instead of related nostalgia to a specific memory, some researcher see nostalgia as an emotional state.⁷⁴ The main thing that distinguishes nostalgia from plain memories is the emotional component that attached to certain memories.⁷⁵ Therefore, today, many researchers and theorists regard consistently that nostalgia is a universal emotion.⁷⁶

Some researchers consider nostalgia as positive emotion,⁷⁷ but some see it as negative emotion⁷⁸ or bittersweet component.⁷⁹ Although researchers has regard nostalgia as positive emotion but it still been critiqued by many people as the word is loaded with negative association during old days. In the late 17th century, nostalgia has been coined by Hofer from Greek word "nostos"-return home and "algia"- pain or longing, which mean "homesickness". Hofer refer nostalgia as medical condition that used to described an extreme homesickness experienced by Swiss mercenaries and the symptoms of nostalgia include melancholy, insomnia, anxiety and persistent thoughts

⁷¹ Alan Hirsch, "Nostalgia: A neuropsychiatric understanding."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ John A. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in The Study of Modern History*, (Longman: Harlow, 2006), 18.

⁷⁴ Alan Hirsch, "Nostalgia: A neuropsychiatric understanding."

⁷⁵ Krystine Irene Batcho, "Nostalgia and the emotional tone and content of song lyrics," *American Journal of Psychology*, 120, (2007):361-381.

⁷⁶ William J. Havlena and Susan L. Holak, "Feelings, fantasies, and memories: An examination of the emotional components of nostalgia," *Journal of Business Research*, 42, (1998): 217-226.

⁷⁷ Krystine Irene Batcho, "Personal nostalgia, world view, memory, and emotionality."

⁷⁸ Peters Roderick, "Reflections on the origin and aim of nostalgia," *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 30, (1985): 135-148; George Rosen, "Nostalgia: A "forgotten" psychological disorder," *Psychological Medicine*, 5, (1975): 340-354.

⁷⁹ Howard A. Kaplan, "The psychopathology of nostalgia," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 74, (1987): 465-486; Dan G. Hertz, "Trauma and nostalgia: New aspects of the coping of aging holocaust survivors," *Israeli Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, 27, (1990): 189-198.

about home.⁸⁰ However, the definition of nostalgia has transformed significantly over time, from Hofer's definition as a fatal medical condition, until now, nostalgia is regarded as a positive affect.⁸¹ Although the original pathological meaning has been lost, which the concept of nostalgia has changed from homesickness to positive emotion but yet, the term still connotes negative association and sounds unhealthily fixated. Based on the above studies, although there have been critique about nostalgia, but this research will not judge the artist's artwork, but will instead apply the concept of nostalgia to analyze and interpret the artist's paintings.

Regardless that the nature of nostalgia is either negative or positive, how does nostalgia affect art making? A research has been done by Specht and Kreiger to study the possible connections between survey participant's personal and historical nostalgia to various artwork.⁸² Personal nostalgia is regarded as how much an individual "misses" various facets of his or her own past⁸³ while historical nostalgia is consider as a desire to return to a past not experienced by the individual but thought to be superior to the present.⁸⁴ Respondent of the survey were being measured of their historical and personal nostalgia and then, they were asked to indicate how much they "liked" the artwork and "how much the artwork made them think". The artworks that used in the research were "abstract/human" and "representational/human" artworks. The result indicate that the respondents with higher personal and historical nostalgia like artworks that include human figures compare with those artworks that are not inclusive of human figures regardless of whether the artwork was representational or abstract.⁸⁵ The respondent with high trait nostalgia found that artworks with human figures are more thought provoking

⁸⁰ Willis H. McCann, "Nostalgia."

⁸¹ William J. Havlena and Susan L. Holak, "Feelings, fantasies, and memories."

⁸² Steven M. Specht & Tyson C. Kreiger, "Nostalgia and Perceptions of Artwork," *Psychological Reports*, 118(1), (2016): 57-69.

⁸³ Krystine Irene Batcho, "Personal nostalgia, world view, memory, and emotionality."

⁸⁴ Krystine Irene Batcho, "Nostalgia: A psychological perspective," *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 80, (1995): 131-143.

⁸⁵ Steven M. Specht & Tyson C. Kreiger, "Nostalgia and Perceptions of Artwork."

which make them to think compare with artworks that without figures.⁸⁶ Through this research, it seems that human figure in paintings can evoke people's nostalgic feeling, which means that "people" play an important role in nostalgia and this is supported by Holak & Havlena. Holak & Havlena study the social aspect of nostalgia and their research shows that nostalgic experience is connected with people, especially intimate person such as family members, friends and romantic partner.⁸⁷ In other word, people often remember the past that experience together with close person. For example, people remember riding a bicycle with friends or family rather than riding a bicycle alone. Therefore, human figure can be considered as one of the traits of nostalgic paintings.

Furthermore, nostalgia not only reflected in paintings, but can also be traced in literary works, for instance in Mahua literature. A study that examine the literary works of a first generation Malaysian Chinese (Mahua) writer, Yao Tuo has been carried out by Wan Lei. Mahua literature refers to Chinese literature that was developed by Chinese immigrants who came to Malaya and Singapore in the 20th century.⁸⁸ The Mahua writers wrote from the perspective of a *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners) and their works mainly reflect the local Chinese society rather than that of mainland China.⁸⁹ Among the literary works that were created by Yao Tuo, there are many literary writings that deals with the theme of nostalgia for "homeland."⁹⁰ The author commented that Yao Tuo writes in a light tone that is removed from the war and social turmoil to portray his youthful days with nostalgic fondness. Therefore, the author remarked that the nostalgic tales by the first generation migrants are a throwback to the delightful "good old days", their personalities and events, and recounted with a tint of happiness or sorrow.⁹¹ The author

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ William J. Havlena and Susan L. Holak, "Feelings, fantasies, and memories."

⁸⁸ Suryadinata Leo, *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity: Essays on Society and Literature in Indonesia, Malaysia & Singapore*, (Kent Ridge: NUS Press, 1993).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Wan Lei, "Yao Tuo: A First Generation Malaysian Chinese Writer," *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies*, (2012):119-135

⁹¹ Ibid.

stated that for one who has no homeland to return to, one's writing may be characteristically nostalgic as one invariably looks homeward while residing in a foreign land and regard Yao Tuo as a representative of such "homeless wanderers."⁹²

Moreover, research on the relationship between nostalgia and creativity has also been done by Tilburg et al. Tilburg's research study whether nostalgia fosters creativity through openness to experience.⁹³ Creativity involves useful ideas or behaviors and can be notable from mere originality.⁹⁴ Tilburg et al carried out a few experiments to test whether nostalgic elicitation boosts creative behavior, enhances openness and whether openness facilitates nostalgia's impact on creativity.⁹⁵ This research indicated that nostalgia encourage a sense of openness and creativity in comparison to positive experience.⁹⁶ Davis's opinion relevance to Tilburg's idea, which he mentioned the aesthetic purpose for nostalgia: "In art, nostalgia can become more than a revealing in the past, it can become the means for creatively using the past as well."⁹⁷ He further writes that:

"So frequently and uniformly does nostalgic sentiment seem to infuse our aesthetic experience that we can rightly begin to suspect that nostalgia is not only a feeling or mood that is somehow magically evoked the art object but also a distinctive aesthetic modality in its own right....."⁹⁸

Davis's opinion seems to regard nostalgia as a source of creativity or inspiration that can be used in art and this idea is supported by Stephan's study. Stephan et al linked nostalgia

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg, et al., "The mnemonic muse: Nostalgia fosters creativity through openness to experience," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 59, (2015): 1-7.

⁹⁴ Gregory J. Feist, "The Creative Person in Science," *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts* 8(1), (2014): 30-43.

⁹⁵ Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg, et al., "The mnemonic muse," 1-7.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 95.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 73.

to inspiration by concluding that nostalgia evoked inspiration which inspires individuals to enact new ideas and plan.⁹⁹

Based on the studies above, it indirectly shows that memory and nostalgia play an important role in creativity and inspiration as there are significant traits needed among artist in their artwork. Since memories are constructed anew every time when we retrieve them, which indicate that memories are not real. Thus, nostalgia is longing for an idealized version of the past that focus on the emotion that attached to memories rather than the accuracy of the memories itself and therefore, memories are potentially constructive that allow inspiration.

2.2 Bicycle as Symbolic Object

Since the invention of bicycle in the early 19th century, bicycle not only play significant role in transportation but also in social and cultural. As a reflection of its significance and impact on individuals, many authors and artist have incorporated bicycle into their works in symbolic ways. Adler study the use of bicycles in western literature from the bicycle boom decade of the 19th century to the mid-20th century and the works studied include a few writers that used bicycle not merely as a mean of transport vehicle but as symbols of social and personal transformation.¹⁰⁰ Adler noticed that novels written around 20th century often include bicycle into scenes of novels or a fundamental element of the plot structure in a symbolic and meaningful way to reflect the importance of bicycle in the cultural changes and personal freedom.¹⁰¹ The bicycle gave people unprecedented mobility especially women which allow them to access to personal freedom since the

⁹⁹ Elena Stephan, et al., "Nostalgia-evoked inspiration: Mediating mechanisms and motivational implications," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41, (2015): 1395-1410.

¹⁰⁰ Nancy J. Adler, "The Bicycle in Western Literature: Transformations on Two Wheels," *Master of Liberal Studies Theses*, (2012): 22.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

development of safer and cheaper bicycle. Therefore, the bicycle even came to symbolize the “New Woman” of the late 19th century especially in Britain and United States.¹⁰² "New Woman" was the term refer to the modern woman who against convention by working outside the home, avoid the traditional role of wife and mother, increase their presence in the public arena, freedom to attain education and travel which bring more work opportunities and greater independence than before.¹⁰³ Therefore, the bicycle act as a symbol of freedom and progress and its impact on the social and cultural environment was further agreed by Smethurst. Smethurst wrote in his book *The Bicycle: Towards A Global History*: “Bicycle mobility brought both men and women of the same class into closer proximity, and it did occasionally allow the separate spheres of class to intersect.”¹⁰⁴ It indicate that the bicycle is an important vehicle for human as it allow them to have physical freedom, social mobility and allow people to have connection with new people outside their region and explore more of their country.

Furthermore, Mikael Colville-Andersen, who is an urban mobility specialist that expert in bicycle planning, propose an idea to explain how bicycles are linked to symbolic of progress. Anderson found that when the bicycle looks better when it heading to the right, because human’s subliminal reading indicate us to see the movement from left to right and interpret pictures based on that.¹⁰⁵ Anderson support this idea with the reference of a theory regarding human reading behavior observed by a psychologist, Rudolf Arnheim. Arnheim found that reading from the left to the right has an impact on the way we look at art or photography. “Since a picture is “read” from left to right, pictorial

¹⁰² Clare S. Simpson, "A social history of women and cycling in late-nineteenth century New Zealand, " Ph.D. thesis, (Lincoln University, Christchurch,1998).

¹⁰³ Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria Elizabeth Thompson, *Women in nineteenth-century Europe*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Paul Smethurst, *The bicycle - towards a global history*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Mikael Colville-Andersen, “Designing Bicycle Symbolism - Towards the Future,” *The Blog by Copenhagenize Design Co.* last modified August 22, 2014, accessed Dec 2, 2017, <http://www.copenhagenize.com/2012/03/bicycle-symbolism-towards-future.html>.

movement toward the right is perceived as being easier, requiring less effort”¹⁰⁶ wrote by Rudolf Arheim in his book “*Art and visual perception – A psychology of the creative eye*”. Hence, based on this Left to Right perception, Anderson suggest that the bicycle heading off to the right can symbolic as a progressive future as it is going in the correct direction.¹⁰⁷ Based on the above studies, it show that the bicycle not only symbolize independence and self-reliance but could also symbolize as progressive movement.

The bicycle’s significant impact was not limited to social and cultural but also show up in the art world, where the two-wheelers act as an inspiration to the artist. A book *Bike Art: Bicycles in Art around the World*, conduct an extensive survey exploring aesthetic representations of the bicycle. The author Kiriakos Iosifidis present reader to a panorama of all kinds of works that are inspired by the bicycle. The books was a collection of artworks from various overseas artists including sculptors, painters, photographers and illustrator and the artworks consist of colorful bicycle paintings, extraordinary bicycle design, beautiful graffiti and various types of bicycle that can be found on the streets around the world.¹⁰⁸ Besides from showing their artworks, the artist also provide their personal thought and opinion to the bicycle. Although various artworks that presented in the book indicated that the bicycle was a favorite subject among the artists, but it does not demonstrate its connection with nostalgia and explain any or common symbolic meaning of the bicycle.

Based on the above studies, the bicycle has both influences in the social environment and in the art realm. In social context, the bicycle symbolize as personal freedom and progress during the period that advanced the increasing women’s

¹⁰⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and visual perception: a psychology of the creative eye*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011),35.

¹⁰⁷ Mikael Colville-Andersen, “Designing Bicycle Symbolism - Towards the Future.”

¹⁰⁸ Kiriakos Iosifidis, *Bike Art: Bicycles in Art Around the World*. (Gingko Press Inc, 2012).

emancipation movement and fostered the decline of class boundaries. On the other hand, although the bicycle may be seen as a favorite painting subject for artists but the bicycle does not express a common symbolic meaning in the art world or indicate any connection between the bicycle and the concept of nostalgia.

Universiti Malaya

CHAPTER 3: VISUAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

Chow Chin Chuan has created more than 50 pieces of bicycle themed paintings for almost 20 years. Until the year of 2017, Chow has 9 solo art exhibitions that featuring his bicycle themed artworks. Chow's bicycle themed artworks depict bicycle in detail and the bicycle are placed into different composition and arrangement with various background and scenes. As mentioned in the research methodology, the artworks are categorized into a few group according to the backdrops which are floor tiles, wooden door or courtyard and local life and activities for example street scenes and local lifestyle. Although it might seems to be boring to see the bicycle appeared repeatedly in Chow's paintings but when the bicycle is combine with these various backdrop, it can be understand and interpreted differently.

The bicycle has been the central theme in Chow's works and through his artworks, it seems to reflect the artist deep affection on bicycle that derived from his childhood memory. However, besides from the relating the artist's artworks with the memory of his father, the bicycle themed paintings could be seen as a reflection of the Malaysia's culture and social environment and may also be relevant with the element of nostalgia. Thus, this paper will then examine what does the bicycle represent, express or mean to the artist and how does the culture and social environment of Malaysia being reflected in his paintings. This paper begin with the investigation on the symbolism of the bicycle to Chow and then analyze the 3 series of bicycle themed painting accordingly.

3.2 Rooted in Memory

Bicycle has been employed for many uses, not only for transportation, but also used for recreational and entertainment purpose whereas in Chow's paintings, bicycle seems to be a symbol of nostalgia, a sign that trigger and evoking the artist's memories, or might also arouse the audience's memories. This paper begin with the examination of the connection of the bicycle to the artist and through that understand how the bicycle acts as the embodiment of his nostalgia. As mentioned, historically, nostalgia has been conceptualized as homesickness¹⁰⁹ but then defined as a yearning to the past in the late 20th century,¹¹⁰ and contemporary scholar see nostalgia as a self-relevant and complicated emotion with fond memories.¹¹¹ Holbrook & Schindler described nostalgia as:

“A preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth).”¹¹²

Generally, nostalgia is referring to memories associated with significant moment or someone's youth, and emotion that connects these memories with affective experience lived in the past times. As reference to the above definitions of nostalgia, things that trigger nostalgia can be items that related to childhood, objects that carry meaningful personal memory in one's past and emotions that attached to it. Nostalgic items are usually old things that still exist today as it is a significant evidence of the past and thus it able to establish a kind of connection with the people or event from the past. Therefore, individuals are able to link the specific objects with significant or emotional events from their past and subsequently the use or the sight of these object can reconnect them with

¹⁰⁹ Willis H. McCann, "Nostalgia."

¹¹⁰ William Havlena, et al., "The Good Old Days."

¹¹¹ Erica G. Hepper, et al., "Odyssey's end: Lay conceptions of nostalgia reflect its original Homeric meaning," *Emotion*, 12, (2012): 102-119.

¹¹² Morris Holbrook and Robert Schindler, "Echoes of the Dear Departed Past."

these events and able to revive the same emotions experienced in the past. For Chow, the bicycle is an object that can trigger his nostalgia as it has great sentimental value to him and carried so much of his childhood memories. Chow not only sees the bicycle as the significant companion of his younger days, but also an equipment to make a living which used for daily transportation of goods for his family grocery business. The ubiquity of the bicycle in Chow's personal experience has transformed it into the object that triggers his past memory, a nostalgic reminder of his childhood that evokes significant memories of his family. Thus, it has become the inspiration of Chow which has been integrated into his art creation and hence, hundreds of bicycle themed paintings have been created due to the artist's sentiment to the bicycle.

People's experiences of nostalgia varies depending on the cultural background and their growth environment. For Chow, the bicycle is the symbolic object that can develop nostalgic feelings to him, but it may or may not evokes nostalgic feelings for other people. People will reflect on a same nostalgic event only if they had experienced it together, which means they share a memory or experience a common past. People who experienced a common past would probably have a common trigger of nostalgia. For instance, a common trigger of nostalgia in many people were things that related to school. When we listen to our school song, we might recall the days when we have fun in school and the worries we had on exam or important things that happened in school and we were overwhelmed with mixed emotions. The common emotions that shared among individuals within the same generation of the cultural group known as 'collective nostalgia.'¹¹³ Collective nostalgia arise from a group experience such as stories passed down from generation to generation or mass media about one's cultural heritage.¹¹⁴ It is also interpreted as a sentimental longing for the collective past and the way society used

¹¹³ Faye Kao, "An Exploratory Study of Collective Nostalgia." *Advances in Consumer Research Volume 40*, (2012).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

to be ¹¹⁵ and described as “a collectivistic notion which makes the emotion more consistent between individuals of a similar background when it is presented in the same context.”¹¹⁶ It is a group level emotions originates from a group experience. It imply that Chow’s personal nostalgic object, the bicycle, might also be the nostalgia trigger to a certain group of people within the same generation of the culture. For people who are in the same generation with Chow, or for those who experience the bicycle era, which is during 1950s of Malaya when the bicycle is the major vehicle that closely related to people’s lives, will probably have the same nostalgia with Chow. The peak period of bicycle use in Malaya is referring to the period between 1950s to 1980s as the bicycle was the most popular items among the immigrant which 75% of migrants possess a bicycle compare with motorcycles 13.8% in the year 1958.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the popularity of the bicycle in Malaya has attracted Raleigh, who was once the biggest bicycle manufacturer in the world, expanded its market in the East especially Malaya and Singapore by the 1950s and subsequently the Raleigh Industries Ltd of the United Kingdom transfer the bicycle technology to Malaysia through the formation of bicycle manufacturing company, The Raleigh Cycle (Malaysia) Bhd in year 1967.¹¹⁸ Besides that, the favorable of the bicycle in Malaya further proven when The Malaysian Bicycle Dealers Association make an estimation that the domestic market for bicycle is about 200,000 per annum in year 1984.¹¹⁹ As reference to the above facts and statistic, it indicates that the bicycle was a widely used vehicle around 1950s to 1980s of Malaysia and hence, the bicycle may become the memory of a group of people within that generation and might also become their nostalgic object.

¹¹⁵ Wing-Yee Cheung, et al., "Collective Nostalgia Is Associated with Stronger Outgroup-directed Anger and Participation in Ingroup-favoring Collective Action," *Journal of Social and Political Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 2, (2017): 301-319.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 171.

¹¹⁷ *Malaysian journal of tropical geography*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dept. of Geography, University of Malaya, 1980).

¹¹⁸ Chan Onn Fong, "Basic Needs and Appropriate Technology in the Malaysian Bicycle Industry," in *Appropriate Products, Employment and Technology*, ed. Wouter von Ginneken and C. Baron, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 54-83.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Furthermore, nowadays, the bicycle is no longer popular as they used to be and it was displaced by the cars. Motorized vehicles such as cars and motorbikes are considered as more labor saving vehicles have superseded the human powered two wheeled transportation. The number of bicycle has shrunk and the bicycles are scarcely apparent in urban areas compared with before. Therefore, the use of the bicycle for daily transport represent a reminiscent of a historical period. Thus, the bicycle as an essential part of the lifestyle of the 90s, has become a shared memory of a few generations of peoples. The bicycle as one of the few popular items from childhood that is still existed today has consequently act as a significant link between the past and the embellished memory of reality and could revive visual memories of pleasant moments.

3.3 An Idealized Past

Apart from being an icon to trigger personal nostalgic memories, the bicycle in Chow's paintings could also be expressed as the symbol of time passed. "Time" is one of the key element in nostalgia. As the definition of the nostalgia is "a sentiment longing for a period in the past,"¹²⁰ the past is referring to a time that no longer exists. Different people perceive time or visualize the passage of time differently, some artist depicted the passage of time or time itself using both realistic method as well as using symbols or abstract method with hidden meaning. In term of symbolic meaning, various objects such as clocks, hourglass, calendar page or watches used to represent the passing of time in Vanitas still life paintings. In the early 17th century, Vanitas still life paintings made great use of symbolism and various objects has been used to message the transience of life to encourage the viewers to set their sights on life after death. Common vanitas symbols that related to time is sand timer, pocket watch or devices for measuring time, and candle that

¹²⁰ *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. "nostalgia", accessed July 10, 2018, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/nostalgia>.

burned down or just blown out with smoke rising from the wick which symbolize shortness of life, reminding the cliché” time flies.”¹²¹ The element of time not only presented by using the symbolic item mentioned above but also can be shown through in another way like what Pieter Claesz (1597-1660) has done which is in his painting *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball* (1625). The artist depicted himself appears to be painting this artwork reflected in the glass ball, and the inclusion of artist himself in Vanitas paintings looks like he is stopping the time with his preserving art which then helps to immortalize the artist in an ingenious way.¹²² Although the image is not time itself, but it do evoke the idea of passing time and the transient nature of human existence. Besides that, another notable example of use of time as a symbol in art would be the *The Persistence of Memory* painted by Salvador Dali, a Surrealist painter in year 1931 that depicted the melting clocks to show the loss of the meaning of time. The melting of the watches apparently contradicts to the significance of time itself, interpreting both time and the devices that measures it ineffectively and irrelevant. The “soft watches” that Dali created represent the symbol of the relativity of space and time, a Surrealist meditation on the collapse of our concept of a fixed cosmic order.¹²³ The examples above show how time is viewed, depicted, expressed and integrated into the world of art in various way and time could be interpreted differently by different individuals. However, how would “the passage of time” being seen, visualized or expressed in Chow’s paintings?

Chow’s paintings express time passing in a unique and subtle way by painting the suspended moment of activities. Chow capture the moment of our local lifestyle in which the activities were suspended in the paintings, represent a snapshot of a memory and past that can never longer access to. Chow portraying the real life scene using accurate

¹²¹ Bettina Kummerling-Meibauer, *Picturebooks: Representation and Narration*. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹²² Fred S. Kleiner and Helen Gardner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages, a Global History 14th Ed. Boston*, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2013).

¹²³ Dawn Ades, *Dali*. (Thames and Hudson, 1982).

perspective and the image represent a perception from his point of view. This singular perspective point of view not merely spatial but also temporal. The paintings only show images from the “front” and only at “present” which means that he is capturing the “moment”. Therefore, he is depicting the nostalgic images of an ideal past, so that the audience is immersed into the past. His paintings seems to slow down the time in order to let the audience enjoy the precious details and beauty of these local custom and practice. The scenes are timeless and suspended in the paintings, but at the present time, the scenes have gone and the situation has changed, which then create a realization of time passing and make it easy to conjure a memory among the audience and consequently led to a sentimental longing for the past. Therefore, when looking at Chow’s bicycle themed artworks, it could be interpreted as the paintings are communicating a message of the passage of time to the audience. Although the bicycle is a kind of transportation unlike the object that symbolize time which mentioned above like devices that measuring time such as clock, but in Chow’s paintings, the bicycle can be seen as a reminder that time flies.

Furthermore, as we know, colors play an important role in evoking emotions and feelings of the audience, but how would colors demonstrate that time is passing? People usually have the perception that retro style or vintage style images should be presented by using colors with warm undertones, black and white, monochrome, or dull colors. This is because warm undertones such as yellow are seems to be associated with old age as we observe that things turn yellow as they age such as tree leaves, old books and papers. Meanwhile, black and white was commonly use in photography to create quality of pastness in an image which can signify a historical time of the images. Photographer Thomas, author of a few published photography book mentioned that “converting to black and

white can lend your images a loneliness or solemnity, or can evoke a nostalgic feeling.”¹²⁴ Besides that, monochrome was used by media and marketers to create “nostalgia mode” during the revival in the use of monochrome in 1990s America.¹²⁵ As in a photographic context, color transforms history into news while monochrome transform news into history as when the colors disappear, it will leads us into the realm of changing perception of time which can cause feelings of nostalgia.¹²⁶ Therefore, the early works of Chow were using dull or yellowish colors to express the nostalgic feelings (see figure 3.1 to 3.3). These paintings has been painted with brown or duller hues and the saturation of the colors in the paintings were relative low.

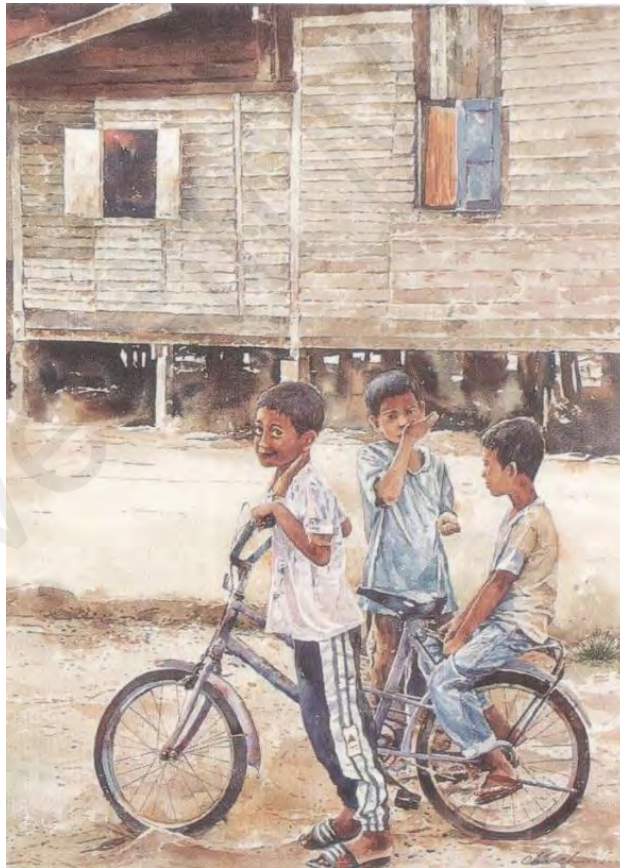


Figure 3.1: *Tiga Kawan*, Watercolour on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2004.

¹²⁴ Thomas J. Dennis, *Urban and rural decay photography: how to capture the beauty in the blight*, (New York: Focal Press, 2014), 56.

¹²⁵ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2012).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*



Figure 3.2: *Berbual-bual*, Watercolour on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2004.



Figure 3.3: *Lalu*, Watercolour on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2004.

The use of dull or yellowish colors as Chow's painting style in his early days were actually inspired by a Taiwanese watercolor artist named Hsieh Ming Chang (谢明谔),

an associate professor of the Department of Fine Arts, National Taiwan University of Arts. Hsieh is a well-known watercolor artist in Taiwan and has published many books on watercolor painting. Low hue or yellowish colors were also used by Hsieh to depict Taiwan local street scene of old days such as *Bei Gang Chao Tian Temple* and *Old port of Yanshuei* (see figure 3.4 and 3.5). Usually beginning artists often emulate the style of artists that they admire and so do Chow. According to Chow, he developed his painting skills through Hsieh's art teaching material published in a Taiwan magazine named *Huang Guan* (皇冠).



Figure 3.4: Hsieh Ming Chang, *Bei Gang Chao Tian Temple*, Watercolor, 1999.



Figure 3.5: Hsieh Ming Chang, *Old Port of Yanshuei*, Watercolor, 1998.

As time goes by, Chow's personal style progresses as he gains more experience, and acquires more skill with the materials. His artwork started to use lighter value and higher intensity of color such as yellow, red and orange which made the paintings more energized and attractive (see figure 3.6 and 3.7). Instead of using monochrome or using tones of single color, Chow's recent artworks used bright and vibrant colors to snapshots the beautifulness of bicycle of a moment in time and capture the fleeting moment forever in his artworks. He is trying to eternalize the moment by using the bright colors to display a warmth that invites the viewer to engage with the paintings and can draw the audience in as they can see afresh the people, the shops and familiar shared places that allow the viewer to feel present in the moment. Thus, it would then conjures the viewer's memory, evoking in them a familiarity momentary sense of emotional pleasure and connects past and present in that single enduring moment captured on the paintings.



Figure 3.6: *Unlocked*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 38 cm, 2015.



Figure 3.7: *Love and its Vicissitudes, Blue*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76cm, 2016.

As mentioned above, Chow was inspired by a Taiwan artist after viewing the artist's paintings through a Taiwan magazine. Chow who was born in year 1961, studied in Pin Hwa Private High School, received his education mostly in mandarin. After graduated from KLCA, he began his career in a publisher company, as an art designer for Chinese magazine and newspaper. Therefore, he was exposed to a lot of Chinese reading material especially from Taiwan and subsequently, Taiwanese art has some impact on the development of Chow's art. However, Chow is not the only person getting influences from Taiwan as during that time, it was an age where local Chinese readers or writers were also exposed to literary works from Taiwan due to the influence of Taiwan literature on Mahua Modernist literature. In year 1959, the Mahua Modernist Literature emerged due to the influence of Taiwanese Modern Literature rather than Chinese Modern Literature.¹²⁷ It was believed that the students who had exposure in Modernist Literature

¹²⁷ Seng Chiah, "The dissemination of Modernist Mahua Literature, 1959-1989," PhD thesis, University of Malaya, (2017).

in Taiwan returned to Malaysia and had new perspectives on modern literature and consequently, modern poetry, prose and novels were created since then.¹²⁸ Besides that, many writers have since the 1960s chosen to leave for Taiwan due to Malaysia's pro-Malay economic policies, and the limitation of the discussion on "critical and sensitive issues" such as political, ethnic, religious and education.¹²⁹ After arriving in Taiwan, those writers not only launched their own literary magazine in Taiwan, but also contributed to local literary magazine in 1960s and 1970s.¹³⁰ Since Mahua modernist literature and Taiwan literature shares various connections, local readers would be more or less open to Taiwan's socio-cultural currents. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chow was also exposed to Taiwanese art and this consequently affected his artistic development.

Based on the above discussion and observation on Chow's work, evidently that the use of color in Chow's paintings has changed significantly while comparing his early works to recent works. Although the use of vibrant color in Chow's paintings could better evoke pleasant feelings and positive emotion among the audience compare with using monochrome or low hue colors, but the use of bright colors by Chow could also be seen as romanticized the scene of the past, create an idealized past. As colors changed constantly due to the change of light in the real world, therefore the colors that painted by the artist reflect what he perceived or what he want audience to feel through his works. Thus, vibrant color seems more preferable by Chow to create delightful moment in his works rather than use low hue colors that decrease the vitality of the image which then correspond to Davis's definition of nostalgia, "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed."¹³¹

¹²⁸ Seng Chiah, "The dissemination of Modernist Mahua Literature, 1959-1989."

¹²⁹ Shu-Mei Shih, et al., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 37.

When Chow romanticized the scene of everyday through the color that he choose for his paintings, it then raise a discussion on the truthfulness of the content of his work as some people might think that it may affect how we view history. Whether or not an idealized image of the past in a painting could influence the audience's perception of the past, it is actually depends on what audience look for through the paintings, whether they are looking for historical accuracy or the emotional impact conveyed by the artist. As artworks is a mean of expression of the artist which allow the audience to temporarily shift to a different perspective of looking things, a view of things that we may not be used to or which we do not have easy access to. It is often one of the easiest tools to use for changing our perspective, entering a different time or place, different story and fueling our imaginations. Therefore, Chow's paintings that portraying the irrecoverable past that are lack of original moment or any true past provides the ground for nostalgic memories that allow the audience immerse in "memories" of an idealized past. It can be like presenting an alternate or modified reality that can freely explore and wander about entirely in audience own minds, before back to their regular lives.

3.4 A Romantic Notion of Peranakan Culture

Art is often related to culture as artists usually show their concern about life and the environment and record those in their paintings and therefore, their artworks are infused with various cultural elements. Art is reflective of the culture in a society and environment as art has the ability to indicate the time period it was created, the reason behind why the piece of art was created and the person creating or place of creation. Besides, the context of the painting might also able to show the economic status of that nation while the materials used can provide a glimpse into the eras in when the artwork was produced. Thus, art is not only an individual means of expression but is also a

reflection of culture. Although art and culture may not affect each other absolutely but they do affect each other indirectly in many instances. By looking at art, we may learn the outlook of the time as well as the development of the society which are reflected in the styles and the forms of artwork. For instance, art and culture were influenced by the Industrial Revolution which led to the transition of art movement from Romanticism to Realism. Painting style in Romanticism developed in response to the Age of Enlightenment emphasize strongly on emotion as well as freedom and creativity, on the other hand, realist artists portrayed a more truthful view, the harsh conditions of urban workers and unpleasant aspects of how people lived at that time. The changes of the environment and the society affected artists in many different way which then resulted the artists' distinctive painting style and subject matter from different era. All in all, art can reflect the culture and the environment of their time and therefore, art should be examined in relation to its' cultural contexts, identify the influences of the time, place, purpose and cultural settings of the artwork in which it was made. Hence, this paper examine how Chow express his affection for the Peranakan culture through his artworks that portray floor tiles, and study it's connection to the Peranakan culture during the 19th century.

The floor tiles that depicted in Chow's painting were usually found in the Peranakan shophouse. The term Peranakan¹³² literally means "locally born" and indicate a unique community that developed in Southeast Asia.¹³³ The term "Peranakan" in this research refers to the Peranakan Chinese who are descended from a particular Chinese

¹³² *Peranakan Museum*, accessed Febuary 17, 2019, <http://www.peranakanmuseum.org.sg/themuseum/abtperanakans.html>. The Malay term 'peranakan' which means 'locally born' also refers to other communities that developed in Southeast Asia like the Chitty Melaka and Jawi Peranakans. The Peranakan Chinese are descendants of Chinese traders who settled in Malacca and around the coastal areas of Java and Sumatra, as early as the 14th century. The Chitty Melaka, or Peranakan Indians, descended from unions between South Indian Hindu merchants and local women, from the time of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century. The Jawi Peranakans (or Jawi Pekan) are descendants of intermarriage between South Indian-Muslim traders and women of the local community.

¹³³ Peter Wee, *A Peranakan Legacy: The Heritage of the Straits Chinese*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012).

immigrants who arrived in the Malay Archipelago between 15th and 17th centuries¹³⁴ and married with the local people. The descendants of these marriages are known as the Peranakan Chinese or “Straits Chinese”. Most of the members of this community have lived along the Straits of Malacca for generations. The Peranakan culture is varied and special as they have their own unique mixture of customs and traditions.

Although neither Chow nor his family are Peranakan, but he often visits Penang as his wife was from Penang. Penang (including Melaka and Singapore) were part of the British Straits Settlement, where a majority of the Peranakan community settled. Over time, he was inspired by the decorative features of the Straits Eclectic shophouse as these buildings offer a window into a fascinating era of history, a space where multiple cultures coexist in a unique way. Subsequently, he developed a romantic notion of the Peranakan culture. Chow says, “I like the Peranakan culture, I admire their unique decorative elements especially the tiles used in their shophouse”. Thus, a series of paintings in Chow’s artworks that portrayed beautiful and colorful floor tiles with geometric pattern, floral motifs, vegetal motifs and abstract design (see figure 3.8 to 3.10) were created. The floor tiles depicted was the unique floor tiles that was commonly used in the old house or shophouse owned by Peranakan community, located in Malacca and Penang. Through this series of paintings, we get a hint of the lifestyle and culture of Peranakan community in Malaya during the 19th century.

As mentioned above, the floor tiles that Chow depicted was commonly found in the shophouse, a typical home for the Peranakan Chinese in Malacca, Singapore and Penang. The shophouse are well known with their Straits Eclectic style of architecture, a unique architecture style resulting from the blend of western and eastern styles and

¹³⁴ Jaime Koh and Stephanie Ho, *Culture and customs of Singapore and Malaysia*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009).

traditions. “Chinese immigrants brought the building style of their homeland to the peninsula, but mixed with the environmental particulars, local culture, and the European colonial presence it morphed to create a truly unique vernacular.”¹³⁵ It shows how these two culture influences each other to meet the users’ need, and subsequently a harmonious mixture of cultures has been created. Thus, the interior and the element of design in the shophouse represent its culture identity. The furniture, the walls, windows, doors and the decorations of the shophouses are all demonstrating the characteristic of a hybrid nature of the Peranakan Chinese aesthetic that mixed traditional Chinese and modern European elements. Other than the walls and the furniture, the floor tiles that used in their shophouses or mansion able to reflect the wealthy lifestyle of Peranakan community as the tiles are very unique and costly.

According to the book *The Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in daily life*, the floor tiles that are commonly found in the shophouses or terrace house is a type of encaustic floor tiles, referred to as “Malacca tiles” which did not originate locally.¹³⁶ Encaustic floor tiles refer to tiles where colored clay embedded into the body of tile are fused together during firing and the pattern or figure on the surface are not made of glaze but different colors of clay. The making of the Encaustic tile’s pattern is a hand crafted job which requires the pouring of the color ‘slip’ into the impressions by hand.¹³⁷ The slip is the term refer to wet clay mixed to the consistency of heavy cream. The tile usually consists of two colors but it also can be composed of as many as six colors while the patterns can consist of a combination of 2 simple geometric shapes and can be as complicated as six or more different pieces all moulded together for a more decorative

¹³⁵ Ashley Wagner, "Malaysian Shophouses: Creating Cities of Character," *Architecture Undergraduate Honors Theses* 20, (2017), 4.

¹³⁶ Ronald G. Knapp and Chester Ong, *Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in Daily Life*, (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2013).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

look.¹³⁸ The pattern seems to be embedded into the body of the tile, so that the design retained even the tile is worn down. This high quality encaustic floor tiles were mass-produced in Stoke-on-Trent, a city in England, then exported and sold widely in Southeast Asia in the beginning of 20th century.¹³⁹ These imported floor tiles were costly and was not affordable by ordinary people during that time. Thus, the use of this expensive imported floor tiles at the flooring of the Peranakan shophouses not only reveal the economic well-being of Peranakan Chinese community, but also showing the acceptance of foreign influences in their living environment.

The Peranakan community was strongly influenced by Western colonial culture during the period of late 19th and early 20th century¹⁴⁰ and the influence may come from their good relationship with the colonial community during that time. This close relationship is fostered by the Peranakan communities' involvement in civic projects and local government.¹⁴¹ Many of the Peranakan were appointed by the British authorities as community and civic leaders because most of them received education in English and is fluent in the language.¹⁴² Thus, as a result of their close relationship and support of the British, the Peranakan Chinese came to known as the “*King's Chinese*” in the 1800s during colonial times, in relation to their status as British subjects after the Straits Settlements became a Crown colony in 1867.¹⁴³ Besides, the ‘*Peranakan Golden Age*’, described by Knapp et al, refer to the years between 1870s and 1920s, a period of political eminence, economic predominance and materially exquisite lifestyles, which the Peranakan possessed a higher social status than other peoples as they are playing important roles in both the Dutch and British colonial ventures.¹⁴⁴ This greater status as

¹³⁸ Lotte Brouwer, “The Encaustic Floor Tiles Everyone Wants,” *Livingetc.* March 14, accessed August 14, 2018, <https://www.livingetc.com/whats-news/encaustic-tiles-188473>.

¹³⁹ Ronald G. Knapp and Chester Ong, *Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in Daily Life*.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Wee, *A Peranakan Legacy: The Heritage of the Straits Chinese*.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Joo Ee Khoo, *The Straits Chinese: A cultural history*, (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1996), 24-26.

¹⁴³ Jaime Koh and Stephanie Ho, *Culture and customs of Singapore and Malaysia*.

¹⁴⁴ Ronald G. Knapp and Chester Ong, *Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in Daily Life*.

social elites given by the British and the accumulation of wealth and education has caused the increasing influence of the British to the Peranakan throughout 19th century which then contributed to the development of their hybrid culture.

Although Chow's family background does not have any connection with the Peranakan community, but there is a certain amount of Chow's historical nostalgia towards the Peranakan culture. Chow's paintings that depict these beautiful floor tiles not only reflecting the Peranakan communities's taste, style and cultural background but also express the artist's historical nostalgia. As mentioned in the conceptual framework, historical nostalgia are reactions created from a period in history which the respondent did not experience it directly, even a time before they were born (the way it was).¹⁴⁵ Historical nostalgia comprises external sources that cover the entire past and that are beyond an individual's personal experience as plausible triggers of the emotion.¹⁴⁶ It means that events that are outside an individual's personal experience could also evoke nostalgic feelings. Since historical nostalgia elicit nostalgic sentiments to a moment and period exist before the perceiver's real life experience, thus, imagination and verisimilitude are needed.¹⁴⁷ Based in the studies above about historical nostalgia, although Chow is not born as a Peranakan, but he could experience nostalgic feelings through imagination or information that he learned about the Peranakan Culture. Now, the '*Golden Age*' of the Peranakan culture has become a past that no longer existed due to social developments such as the relocation of Peranakan households after World War II and the disappearance of the community's wealth over the past two decades, and thus, it has become the social memory of many Malaysians.¹⁴⁸ Thus, Chow's painting that depict the Peranakan's tiles can evoke nostalgic feelings, recall the glory periods of the

¹⁴⁵ Barbara B. Stern, "Historical and personal nostalgia in advertising text."

¹⁴⁶ William Havlena, et al., "Nostalgia: An exploratory study of themes and emotions in the nostalgic experience."

¹⁴⁷ Barbara B. Stern, "Historical and personal nostalgia in advertising text."

¹⁴⁸ Patricia Ann Hardwick, "Neither Fish nor Fowl": Constructing Peranakan Identity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Singapore." *Folklore Forum* 38.1, (2008): 36-55.

Peranakan community during old days, a past that no longer exist. It can be seen as a longing of an idealized version of the past in which complexities of history are conveniently forgotten but are represented in simplified visual motifs. What he has painted portrays a limited picture of a complex culture. It is a portrayal separated from the authenticity of either the present consciousness or actual history. In short, the artist romanticizes the past by combining his personal nostalgic object with the Peranakan culture.

In a conclusion, the paintings that portray the bicycle on the Peranakan tiles can be seen an expression of the artist's fondness of the Peranakan culture. The repetition of painting the beautiful Peranakan tiles with the artist's favorite bicycle demonstrate his deep interest on their unique, fascinating and iconic decorations. Although Chow's art is showing his personal perspective on the culture which is not an exact depiction of the past, but provides an opportunity or starting point for one to explore and establish curiosity to this vanishing culture. It can be considered as a way of knowing or a medium to discover the history, background and practice of the Peranakan culture. Thus, these artworks create an environment of interest toward this disappearing culture.



Figure 3.8: *Love and its Vicissitudes #1*, Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 66 cm, 2016.



Figure 3.9 : *Love and its Vicissitudes #2*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2016.



Figure 3.10: *Love and its Vicissitudes #5*, Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56cm, 2016.

3.5 Scenes of Everyday Life as a Reflection of the Temperament of the Times

Among the Chow's bicycle themed artworks, there are artworks that precisely paint the actual scenes of Malaysians' local lifestyle such as depicting a young man helping an old man carry the goods to the bicycle (see figure 3.11), unloading goods in front of grocery shop (see figure 3.12), people having grocery shopping (see figure 3.13) and others. These artworks not only just portraying local lifestyle, but the combination of the bicycle with the street scene and activities are closely related to the artist's personal delightful experience which remind him of his childhood moment with his father. For example, the artworks *Recycle Morning* (see figure 3.11) painted a young man helping the elderly man deliver the goods to the bike evokes the memory of Chow that he is helping his father unload merchandise from the bicycle, meanwhile artworks that paint the bicycle parking in front of old style grocery shop (see figure 3.12) will recall him of the grocery shop owned by his father. Through the examination of these works, it seems like Chow is giving shape to what he has experienced during his young age.



Figure 3.11: *Recycle Morning*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2007.



Figure 3.12: *Untitled*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2014.



Figure 3.13: *Morning Sunlight*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2008.



Figure 3.14: *Lebuh Kimberley, Penang*, Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2014.



Figure 3.15: *Untitled*, Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 56 cm, 2013.

characteristically depicted in a non-idealized way, and characters are not endowed with any heroic or dramatic attributes which means that the scene is demonstrating the characteristic life of its subjects in communal settings, instead of the drama of individuals in a critical situation. Chow is concerned about the accurate and close observation of outward appearances and therefore all his bicycle-themed artworks aren't painted *plein air* but were done in his studio with the reference of photograph pictures and this reflected his intention to convey a truthful and objective vision of contemporary rural life. Besides that, he included as much detail as possible in his artworks such as depth perception, light reflecting off of surfaces and perspective which needed to be considered carefully in order to capture the subjects with full clarity. Moreover, his paintings often depict full sunlight and he used the contrast between light and dark to create an illusion of space, volume and depth. For example, Chow differentiated indoor and outdoor (see figure 3.11 & 3.12) by coloring the inner area with deep colors such as black, grey, blue and violet and the outdoor was colored with a bright tint. This strong contrast of light and dark will draw the viewer's eyes on the subject located in front of the paintings. Furthermore, strong light sources are painted which lead to the emergence of shadows on the ground and the shadows appear on the bicycle, clothes and other objects in the paintings. Instead of white, Chow created the impression of white with very light values of colors such as soft yellow and laying them adjacent to each other in order to create some luminous whites and also leave the highlights on the skin, shirts and hair mostly unpainted in order to mimic the brilliance of the sun. These uses of shadow and light by the artist have created an excitement and interest in the composition of the paintings and make the artwork more realistic and more true to life. Thus, Chow's works can be considered as realistic genre paintings as they depict real life activities and scenes that happened around him and portray the human figure in real and not in idealized types.

Apart from the above justification showing that Chow's real life paintings are realism genre artworks, the bicycle that painted in the foreground with different position and perspective, would act as a potent representation that reflect the realistic of life of the working class. Working class is a social group comprised of people who earn less and usually do physical work¹⁴⁹ and this social class often become the subject matter of realist paintings. For instance, paintings that choose working class life as the subject matter were, *The Gleaners* (1857) painted by Jean-Francois Millet which depicts 3 peasant woman collecting leftover crops from a field of stray grains of wheat after the harvest, *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1873) painted by Ilya Yefimovich Repin illustrate the hardship of working men who physically dragging a barge on the banks of the Volga River, and the *Iron Rolling Mill* (1875) which display the interaction between man and machine painted by Adolph Von Menzel. The similarity of these paintings is, they are portraying the scene of peasant and labors who are working with their hands and involve hard physical effort. From a specific point of view, the way the bicycle functions is symbolic of the life of the working class. Although the bicycle is a machine, but it is powered by human muscle, thus, it convey an impression that corresponding to the life of working class which the working class people earn their living with physical effort similar to the bicycle which also require physical strength to operate. In addition, as the bicycle is inexpensive and reasonably priced, it is hardly related to the rich, however it seems typically relevant to working class people as it is affordable by them. Therefore, the bicycle is regarded as a lowly form of transportation compare to the automobile and was generally found in non-urban area where the people is using it as a mean of transportation in their everyday life. Thus, it seems that the integration of the bicycle in Chow's real life paintings is used in a symbolic and meaningful way to reflect the reality of life in rural townships.

¹⁴⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "working class", accessed October 21, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/working-class>.

Although genre paintings seems to be too ordinary, but this feature allow the viewer to easily identify with employed in situations that tell a story. Therefore, besides from reflecting the life of countryside, these paintings also telling a story of our past which it provide important insights regarding various types of traditional trade during the early days of Malaysia. The artworks are showing the trading activities such as the scene at morning market where people are buying products from the raw market, scene of people moving the goods manually in front of the shop, scene of people selling things with trishaw and others. Many of these traditional trades appeared in the early period of Malaysia's history and also some of the current township as a means of survival. Some of the traditional trades were influenced by the cultures from their respective homeland and developed to achieve the needs of a rapidly increasing local population and changing society. The skills, customs and knowledge of the trades were learned from living experience and passed on from generation to generation as well as transmitted verbally. The survival of these traditional trades indicate that the trader's ability to adapt their skills and business to the changing environment and would act as an indication of their continued ingenuity and perseverance. Such traditional trades was once visible in all sectors of Malaysia's socio-economic environment ranging from food to lifestyle and entertainment however, it is in danger of vanishing irretrievably with the rise e-commerce and modern trade. Today, the traditional trade are only found in rural area and continue to provide daily necessities and services to a small community. Chow's works not only portraying the old modes of buying or selling products and services, but also show the essence of these traditional trading activities which is the values and principle hold by the people in trade. It is noticeable that among these artworks, human figures play an important role as the people painted in detail, realistic or at least non-idealized manner instead of showing blurred image of the people. The working people in the paintings

represent important values associated with the social life of the local community, such as hard work, trust, honesty, ethical and others. These values is apparent in the traditional trading activities and also in the past scenes, but are lessen from present day as human seems to have compromised on their values, integrity and character for use and possess more and more of material wealth in this fast paced competitive world. Therefore, Chow's paintings that portraying the traditional trading activities not only help the audience to understand the evolution of the trade from tradition to modern in Malaysia, but also reflecting different values of the society and the development in social-economic context.

Besides from denoting the transformation of trading activities, the street scene depicted by Chow also reflecting the invaluable culture of Malaysia as these traditional trades are regarded as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) according to UNESCO. As refer to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003, UNESCO define Intangible Cultural Heritage as:

“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”¹⁵⁰

It means ICH can be seen as a transmission from generation to generation and is continuously re-formed by communities and groups corresponding to their environment, their relations with nature and their history, and give them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus encourage respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.¹⁵¹ Therefore, in reference with the definition of ICH and the encouragement to prepare inventories on ICH by UNESCO, the traditional trades that handed-down from the past is regarded as invaluable Intangible Cultural Heritage by George Town World Heritage

¹⁵⁰ UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," October, Article 2, (2003): 2.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Inc (GTWHI), a Penang state agency for conservation throughout Penang. Thus, Chow's works that capture the scene of traditional trading activities is a way of transforming momentary into static, allow the scene transcending time and space and then act as a reflection of a specific period of society and cultural environment. Moreover, although globalization has brought significant challenges to the survival of traditional trade and many of the traditional traders are struggle to adapt to the strong competition, Chow's paintings could also act as an awareness to alert the audience the importance to preserve this ICH in order to prevent the disappearance of the accumulated values, knowledge and skills that associated with traditional trades.

Additionally, the vanishing of the traditional trade and its value due to the transformation of traditional trade to modern trade or e-commerce could arouse nostalgic feelings among the people. According to Chase and Shaw, nostalgia is likely happen when social change is fast enough to be noticeable in one lifetime; meanwhile, there must have evidences of the past such as artefacts, images and texts in order to recall one of how things used to be.¹⁵² Social change can be regarded as the vital changes of social structure and cultural patterns, change in the population and social institution or the occurs of significant social events like WWII.¹⁵³ Social structure refer to a constant networks of social relationships where interaction between people or groups has become repetitive and convention meanwhile culture means a shared ways of living and thinking that involve language (verbal and nonverbal) and symbols; norms (how people are expected to behave); beliefs, knowledge and values (what is "good" and "bad"); and techniques, ranging from ordinary folk recipes to advanced technologies and material objects.¹⁵⁴ If one experience huge social change in his lifetime, he or she could probably have nostalgic

¹⁵² Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, "The dimensions of nostalgia," in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. M. Chase & C. Shaw, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 1-17.

¹⁵³ Charles L. Harper and Kevin T. Leicht, "American Social Trends," *Exploring Social Change*, (2018), 71-87.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

feelings when sighted an items from the past. Thus, for those traditional trades that are still survive until today not only act as a trigger of nostalgia, but also a reminder of the disappearing of the traditional trades. Besides, the vanished traditional trade is an irretrievably lost and thus would create a sense of loss among the people. Such sense of loss engenders a nostalgic perspective. Therefore, Chow's paintings that depict the scene of traditional trade could evoke sentimental feelings among the audience.

Although Chow's painting that depicted street scene of Malaysia could trigger the nostalgic feelings of certain people, but Chow is not the only artist who paint the local street scene. There are other artists who are also create paintings that portraying the scene of the street with old shops such as Lee Weng Fatt (figure 3.17), Lee Eng Beng (figure 3.18), Khoo Cheang Jin (figure 3.19) and Wong Kean Choon (figure 3.20). The connection of Chow with these artists is, they are the members of Malaysia Watercolor Society (MWS). The Malaysian Watercolour Society established in 1982 was disbanded briefly in 1990, and rebranded as the Malaysian Watercolour Organisation (MWO) in 1992, but then was reregistered as the MWS in 2007.¹⁵⁵ The favorite theme among the members of this society are rural, floral and fauna, figurative and picturesque scenes.¹⁵⁶ The members consistently depict scenes that are reminiscent of early years past, life in the villages and countryside, the going-ons of local scenes and historical landmarks and buildings as they have strong affiliation to their roots and heritage.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, the works that often created by the artists in MWS seems to be genre painting as everyday scene is the common subject matter in their works. Chow as a vice chairman of MWS not only actively promote the watercolor paintings to the public, but also actively interact with the members in MWS and thus, it is not surprising that they share an interest in

¹⁵⁵ Kok Chuen Ooi, "Motley talents," *The Star Online*, last modified March 25, 2012, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/women/2012/03/25/motley-talents>.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ "MALAYSIA. Malaysian Watercolour Society 2012 Art Exhibition," *Artmap.tv*, last modified March 24, 2012, accessed March 27, 2019, http://www.artmap.tv/news_detail.aspx?id=1272.

similar subject matter.. Although artists who have frequent interaction would likely choose the same subject matter, but their intention, focuses, style and techniques were different. For example, *La Grenouillère* (1869) created by Claude Monet and Pierre Auguste Renoir that portraying a popular meeting place on the river near Bougival, where people met to swim, dance and drink. Although both of them painted the same place with almost identical perspective from almost the same spot, but their artworks are obviously demonstrated their distinguishing characteristics of each artist's work that point to their future interest. For instance, Monet focus mostly on the nature such as he includes more water, more of the background woods and the river in Monet's painting has greater vitality than Renoir's, while on the other hand, Renoir concentrate more on people and how they interacted which he makes people larger and closer to viewer.¹⁵⁸ The difference between Renoir's work and Monet's work were further explained by Gary Tinterow in his book "*Origins of Impressionism*":

“Monet constructs his picture using clear, horizontal brushstrokes, using his highlights sparingly but forcefully. His brushwork is energetic, whereas Renoir's paint has an airily hazed look to it. Monet's colours are few, muted and cool, but Renoir's palette is a more tender things, warmer through its inclusion of reddish hues..... Renoir's range of colours is subtle, opposed to harshness; Monet accentuates the loud red of a skirt, the yellow of sundrenched trees, or the black reflections of water at twilight. Renoir's touch is always light and dancing whereas Monet's is broad, emphasizing the structures of the boats and the wooden constructions”.¹⁵⁹

Both artworks has reveals the artist's focuses in their future works which Monet later concentration on almost exclusively on landscapes, whereas Renoir put attention on figure painting and portraiture. This indicate that although artists paint the same subject

¹⁵⁸ Donald T. Phillips, *The Hidden Renoir*, (Illinois: DTP/ Companion Books, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Gary Tinterow and Henri Loyrette, *Origins of Impressionism*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994)

matter but each artist will choose what they want to convey in their own unique way of expression generated from their personal experience. Hence, although Chow and other artists painted the local street scene, but the messages that brought out in their works are varied.

The things that distinguish Chow's works with others street scene paintings are the incorporation of his personal nostalgic object, the bicycle in his works and the focuses of the human figures in his paintings. Chow's works emphasis more on human depiction rather than the streetscape from a distance. He paint a close up view of the street scene that able to see the human's activity or process of doing something meanwhile other artists' works depict the street scene from a comparable far point of view that capturing the overall appearance of the shops building and the human figures are roughly painted. Human image can be expressive and communicative in paintings as their gesture or face expression able to convey nonverbal language such as emotions, ideas and narrative. Chow's works that portray people in doing practical things has demonstrate the hard working personality of the individual. It seems to represent that Chow valued the physical labor of the common man as a worthy subject and thus the artworks infuse with a meaning of the artist's appreciation on diligent behavior. In addition, among Chow's paintings, there are also working people painted from various ages, physiques, and ethnic backgrounds as Malaysia has diverse mix of peoples. Today, the subject for a painting is varied and the images of hard working people can be seen as rare and worthy. Although it may not be viewed as a significant event that is worth for portraying, but there are some timeless truth or depth of character regarding the human being is revealed and would also contribute to the understanding of working life style of the small town community to the audience.



Figure 3.17: Lee Weng Fatt, *Petaling Street #2*, Mix Media on Canvas, 76 cm x76cm, 2015.



Figure 3.18: Lee Eng Beng, *Beach Street Coffee Shop*, 40 cm x 50 cm, 2016.



Figure 3.19: Khoo Cheang Jin, *Beach Street Houses, Penang*, 56 cm x76cm, 2017.



Figure 3.20: Wong Kean Choon, *Street scene*, 2017.

As mentioned previously, Chow as a vice president of MWS have a constant interaction with the members and many of the members of MWS were also graduated from KLCA same as Chow. For example, Tony Ng Chit Keong, Richard Wong Chin-Kim, Yong Look Lam and Calvin Chua Cheng Koon. Calvin Chua who is the current president of MWS mentioned that he received a strong foundation under the tutelage of artist Cheah Yew Saik and then Ng Gaik Hong and Lai Loong Soong.¹⁶⁰ Chow who also

¹⁶⁰ Sei Hon Tan, *The Joy of living: The Artistry of Calvin Chua*, (Selangor: Art Valley Sdn Bhd, 2016).

graduated from KLCA in 1982 with the Diploma of Fine Art is believed to have the same art education with Calvin who also graduated in 1982. It also imply that Chow was taught under Cheah Yew Saik and more or less Cheah have an influence on Chow's art. Cheah Yew Saik who was a renowned local artist, founded the Kuala Lumpur College of Art (KLCA) in 1968. Cheah is graduated from the highly reputable Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1961 and continued his education at Stroke-on- Trent College of Arts, United Kingdom. He was reputed to be one of the best students in the college and been awarded the National Diploma in Art and Design (N.D.D.) in 1965.¹⁶¹ Besides being the principal of KLCA until 2002 he was also the founder of the Malaysia Watercolor Society and the president of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Alumni Association of Malaysia from 1984 to 1985.¹⁶² Unfortunately, KLCA ceased operation in 2005, however over a period of 36 years, the college has nurtured hundreds of outstanding fine art artists, potters, sculptors, art teachers, photographers, and designers in fashion, commercial art field and in other art based professions.

Although Chow was taught by Cheah Yew Saik in KLCA, but one can hardly detect any trace of Cheah's influence on Chow's art through Chow's bicycle themed artworks as their favored painting subjects are different and the painting material that often used were different. Cheah have created artworks more on landscape (figure 3.21) with oil painting while Chow usually create still life and real life paintings with watercolor. During his interview with The Star, Cheah said "Back in the day, I only drew mountain sceneries during my free time as I taught daytime classes. Drawing mountain landscapes freed my mind from work."¹⁶³ The theme of artwork that was interested by

¹⁶¹ "Artist - Cheah Yew Saik 谢有锡", *Artisan Fine Art*, accessed April 10, 2019, <http://artisanfineartkl.blogspot.com/2013/04/artist-cheah-yew-saik.html?q=cheah+yew+saik>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Calvin Loo, "Six decades of aesthetic art," *The Star Online*, last modified November 2, 2015, accessed May 29, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2015/11/02/six-decades-of-aesthetic-art-exhibition-showcases-artists-depiction-of-nature-and-human-subjects/>.

Cheah is about nature while Chow's paintings are more on everyday scene. Cheah said, "The mountains can tell a lot of stories, such as the coexistence between men and nature, which I think is a topic worth exploring"¹⁶⁴. Thus, Cheah might have influence on Chow's works in many different way, but it is difficult to identify Cheah's impact by only looking at both of their artworks.



Figure 3.21: Cheah Yew Saik, *Mountain Song Series*, Oil on canvas, 89 cm x104cm, 2008.

3.6 Door as Symbolic of Returning and Leaving Home.

Among the Chow's artworks, there are paintings that depict the bicycle placed in front of the wooden door and these series of paintings could be interpreted into different meaning as the door has many symbolic meaning across the culture, social, literature and metaphorical level. Doors are a part of life as human encounter them daily as we see and touch them countless time. Thus, although in practice doors are used for privacy, shelter

¹⁶⁴ Calvin Loo, "Six decades of aesthetic art."

and a passageway between divided spaces, however, they are more than just functional architectural elements which it also possess symbolic importance and cultural significance in people's awareness.

Door is a movable barrier secured in an opening, through a building wall with the aim of provides an access to the indoor. It connects the outdoor and indoor, and allow free movement between internal parts and outside of the building. Within a structure itself a door serves as both an entrance and exit to other place. These characteristic of the door make it become metaphor for so many things. For example, an open door is a proxy for new beginnings while a closed door represents an ending.¹⁶⁵ It can be the gate to enter a new space or leave it behind which represent an opportunity or a closing of the past. When one enter the door, it represent one makes decision and enters new stages of life and subsequently signify the passing of time.¹⁶⁶ Thus, door is often symbolize transition and metamorphosis, a passage from place to other place, a change of state or situation. Meanwhile, in Chinese culture, the door as the first thing to be seen at the entrance of a building, not only plays an important role in traditional Chinese architecture but also has a special concept and symbol. To have a door means to have a home, safety, a place where you belong. Thus, door is often linked with home, and are the inlet and outlet of the whole family, provide a protection on people's lives and property and making them feel safe.¹⁶⁷

Apart from the above meaning of the door, the door can also be used to explain different meaning through the perspective of art and social. For instance, the *Door: rue Larrey* (1927) was created by Duchamp to illustrate "the reconciliation of contradictory or opposite entities", bringing together two opposing ideas of being opened and closed at

¹⁶⁵ Joey Yap, *Qi Men Dun Jia: The Doors*, (Joey Yap Research Group Sdn Bhd, 2016).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Shuhong Zhao, and Sheng Gui, "The Research on Door Guardian Painting's Function and Implication," *Chinese Sociological Dialogue* 2, no. 1-2, (2017): 52-66.

the same time.¹⁶⁸ While in terms of social context, Simmel relates the door with humanity in which door functions as a metaphor for human's desires to connect but also the need to keep separated from the public, to link whilst maintaining some separation.¹⁶⁹ The door helps to separate the space between private and public but also allow intermittently open to let people out or in. Thus, the mobility of the door can create limitedness whereas leaving the possibility at any moment of stepping out of its barrier into freedom which means the door represents both boundary and limits as well as freedom and movement.¹⁷⁰ The door, for Simmel, "represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act."¹⁷¹ Thus, the door go beyond the separation between the inner and the outer, link between the space of human and things that remained outside, and subsequently can be seen as an expression of human identity as it can be used to define one of the essential characteristics of humanity which is human behavior on keeping distance with others in their social interaction.¹⁷²

As discussed above, the meanings of door is broader in scope, it can imply many things. The door not only used by the artist to express art ideas, but also embody important cultural ideas about access, transition, protection and linked to human uses of space in their life. Furthermore, the characteristics of the door able to provide double entendre that open to two opposite interpretation. The doorway can have dual symbolic meaning which

¹⁶⁸ From the chapter "Marcel Duchamp: A Reconciliation of Opposites", an essay from the journal "Dada/Surrealism 16", Nauman (1987) discuss about the Door: rue Larrey (1927) that designed by Duchamp for the main room of a small apartment he moved into in year 1927 on the rue Larrey in Paris . The door located in a corner of the main living area, served two doorways either to close the entrance to the bedroom or to the bathroom, but not to both at the same time. The door allows for the panel to be simultaneously open or closed at two adjoining openings which means that the door opens towards one room simultaneously closing towards the other. Besides that, the door can be also both open and open to two doorways which visibly violating the French proverb claiming that a door cannot be closed and open at the same time. It signify that the door is splitting and at the same time bringing together two opposing, represent a paradoxical elision of equivalent opposing term: opened and closed . Thus, Naumann (1987) comment that Door: rue Larrey (1927) illustrate it as the reconciliation of contradictory or opposite entities while Naegele described it as a mechanical analogous to his paradoxical position on art . Through this readymade, Duchamp has ingeniously managed to challenge the assumption of mutual exclusively, uniting the contradictory theme into a compatible totality or describe it as, "a reconciliation of opposites" . It provided a breakthrough from the tyranny of old ideas and overbearing classifications in art.

¹⁶⁹ Georg Simmel, "Bridge and Door," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, (London: Routledge, 1994), 63-76.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁷² Ibid.

are a place where people leave and return, coming back and going out. As a result, various emotions can be evoked at the doorway. For instance, people leave with sadness and return home with happiness.

Therefore, with a casual observation about Chow and his work, the paintings that depict the bicycle parked in front of the wooden door seem to be telling a story that the bicycle has been through a long journey reminiscent of the past, and makes its stop in front of the door to have a moment of rest. As the bicycle was depicted repeatedly in different paintings, appeared in different social activities and in different places, therefore, the changes of background scenes seem to give an illusion that the same bicycle is moving from place to place, from time to time, like watching a sequential series of images. Finally, the bicycle stops at the door which seems to symbolize the returning to the home and temporary rest before travelling again to explore other places.



Figure 3.22: *Fu Hai Shou Shan*, Watercolor on Paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2016.



Figure 3.23: *At Home*, Watercolor on Paper, 76 cm x 51 cm, 2016.



Figure 3.24: *On the Spot*, Watercolour on Paper, 74 cm x 54 cm, 2016.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Chow has created more than 50 pieces of bicycle themed artworks for more than 20 years. The development of Chow's artistic theme and the factors that influence his artistic style has been discussed in this paper. This research has shown the important role of the bicycle in Chow's life not only as a nostalgic object that trigger his memory, but also as his art inspiration. The element of nostalgia has been reflected in each series of paintings in various ways and the social and cultural environment of Malaysia in a particular period has also been expressed in the artworks.

The artist's works not only inspired by memory, but also things and activities that happened around him. The bicycle act as a symbolic item for artist to convey his ideas and stories that took place in reference to the culture and social contexts. When Chow reinterpreted his memories through his artworks, it may bring familiarity and connectivity among the audience as some of them might share similar memories with him. Instead of integrating vintage black-and-white, monochrome or low hue color to re-present the past, the artist use vibrant color in order to let the audience immerse themselves in a moment in the past and create a sentimental longing for the idealized past.

Chow's view on the Peranakan culture is based on a romantic notion of that culture. His artworks that depict the bicycle parked on the floor tiles which commonly found in the shophouse could convey the way of living, styles, interests, and the idea of Peranakan culture which dates back to the old days. However, they seem to be idealized images of the past which are detached from his own personal history.

Besides that, Chow's paintings that portray the scene of street where the people is execute their role in contributing to the society reflect and express people's deep values as well as their collective experiences. The paintings not just depict the social environment of particular place in Malaysia but also reflect the temperament, values and traditions of the society which, in his paintings, became part of our cultural heritage.

Chow's paintings that depict bicycle parked in front of the door are symbolic of the bicycles journeys to many places, and its ultimate return to home for a rest. It also relates an idea that the bicycle will depart again to explore more memorable journeys. Through the bicycle, he expresses his joy of exploration of the places and streets that are pulsating with life. The bicycle is like a thread that connects the paintings, awaken a relation between past and present and thus plays a major role in conveying a story of these journeys.

Chow found his personal nostalgic object to conjure up an appreciation of the past, articulating an asynchronous reality which intermingles time and space. As Edgar Degas once said, "The painter, the true painter, will be the one who can reveal the epic side of present-day life, who can use paint or draw lines to make us see and grasp how great we are and how poetic in our neckerchiefs and patent leather boots."¹⁷³ Furthermore, Edgar Degas also mentioned that:

"It is all very well to copy what one sees, but it is far better to draw what one now only sees in one's memory. That is a transformation in which imagination collaborates with memory. You only reproduce what has made an impact on you-I mean what is necessary. In that way your memories and your imagination are freed from the tyranny nature exerts."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Bernd Growe, *Edgar Degas: 1834-1917*, (K In: Taschen, 2001), 33.

¹⁷⁴ Tout l's (Euvre Peint de Degas[Degas' Complete Paintings], op.cit., p.13, quoted in Nathalia Brodskaiia, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism* (Bournemouth: Parkstone Press International, 2018)

Chow's works invite the viewer to think about the past, to make connections between events, characters, and objects and to reconsider ways in which the past is represented in our memory.

Universiti Malaya

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