

Negotiating Cultural Identity through Community Murals: A Comparative Theoretical Analysis of Public Art Practices in China and Malaysia

Meng Zhu, Mohd Zahuri Khairani*, Hafizul Fahri Hanafi

Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI),
Tanjung Malim, Perak 35900, Malaysia.

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000165>

Received: 02 July 2025; Accepted: 07 July 2025; Published: 05 August 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a comparative theoretical framework for understanding how community murals mediate cultural identity construction in different sociopolitical contexts. Drawing on case studies from China and Malaysia, we examine how murals function as dynamic interfaces between institutional structures, community aspirations, and artistic innovation. Through analysis of specific mural projects, we propose three analytical dimensions: (1) modes of cultural negotiation ranging from institutionally-mediated to community-initiated forms, (2) aesthetic strategies that blend traditional symbolism with contemporary expression, and (3) the production of social space through visual interventions. Our framework challenges binary distinctions between state-sponsored and grassroots art, revealing instead a spectrum of collaborative possibilities. The analysis demonstrates how murals create what we term "negotiated spaces" where multiple actors—state agencies, artists, communities, and audiences—engage in ongoing dialogues about identity, memory, and urban transformation. This theoretical contribution advances understanding of public art as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere aesthetic production, offering insights for both scholars and practitioners working across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: community murals, cultural negotiation, public space, visual culture, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of community murals across Asian cities demands new theoretical frameworks that move beyond Western-centric conceptualizations of public art. While existing scholarship examines street art through lenses of resistance or grassroots expression, these frameworks inadequately capture the complex dynamics of mural production in contexts where state institutions, market forces, and community actors engage in multifaceted relationships. This paper develops a comparative theoretical framework for understanding how community murals function as sites of cultural negotiation in China and Malaysia, two rapidly transforming societies with distinct approaches to public art and cultural governance.

Since the 1980s, both countries have witnessed remarkable proliferations of community-based mural projects that reshape urban landscapes and mediate cultural identities. In China, the evolution from socialist realist propaganda to diverse contemporary expressions reflects broader transformations in governance and society, creating spaces for artistic experimentation within institutional frameworks (Li, 2022; Feng, 2020). Malaysia's multicultural context has fostered distinctive approaches that negotiate ethnic diversity, postcolonial identity, and rapid urbanization (Abd Rahman, 2022). As Tian (2018) documents, murals have evolved from decorative or propagandistic functions to become complex media for social dialogue and urban placemaking, demanding theoretical frameworks capable of capturing nuanced interactions between multiple actors.

This paper addresses three objectives: developing a theoretical framework that recognizes productive tensions between institutional structures and community agency; demonstrating through comparative analysis how

different contexts generate equally valid forms of cultural expression; and contributing to debates about public art in non-Western contexts. Our analysis draws on specific mural projects---including both celebrated successes and controversial cases---as empirical anchors for theoretical development, allowing nuanced understanding while maintaining analytical depth. We acknowledge the methodological limitations of conducting primarily theoretical analysis without extensive ethnographic fieldwork, which may constrain our ability to fully capture community voices and lived experiences. Future research incorporating direct community engagement would complement and enrich these theoretical insights.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: TOWARD A FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Reconceptualizing Public Art Beyond Binary Frameworks

Traditional approaches to public art scholarship often operate within binary frameworks that distinguish between official/unofficial, top-down/bottom-up, or authentic/co-opted forms of expression. These dichotomies, while useful for certain analytical purposes, obscure the complex realities of cultural production in contemporary Asian contexts. As Zhang (2020) observes in his reflections on modern Chinese murals, the actual practice of mural creation involves multiple actors navigating overlapping and sometimes contradictory objectives.

Instead of binary oppositions, we propose understanding mural production through a framework of "cultural negotiation"—ongoing processes through which different actors articulate, contest, and reconcile diverse visions of identity, aesthetics, and urban space. This framework recognizes that even state-sponsored projects involve negotiations with artists and communities, while ostensibly grassroots initiatives often engage with institutional structures for resources, permissions, or legitimacy.

The concept of negotiation here extends beyond simple compromise or accommodation. Drawing on insights from cultural studies and urban geography, we understand negotiation as productive processes that generate new cultural forms and social relationships. When artists, communities, and institutions engage in mural projects, they don't simply balance pre-existing interests but create new possibilities for expression and identification.

Three Dimensions of Analysis

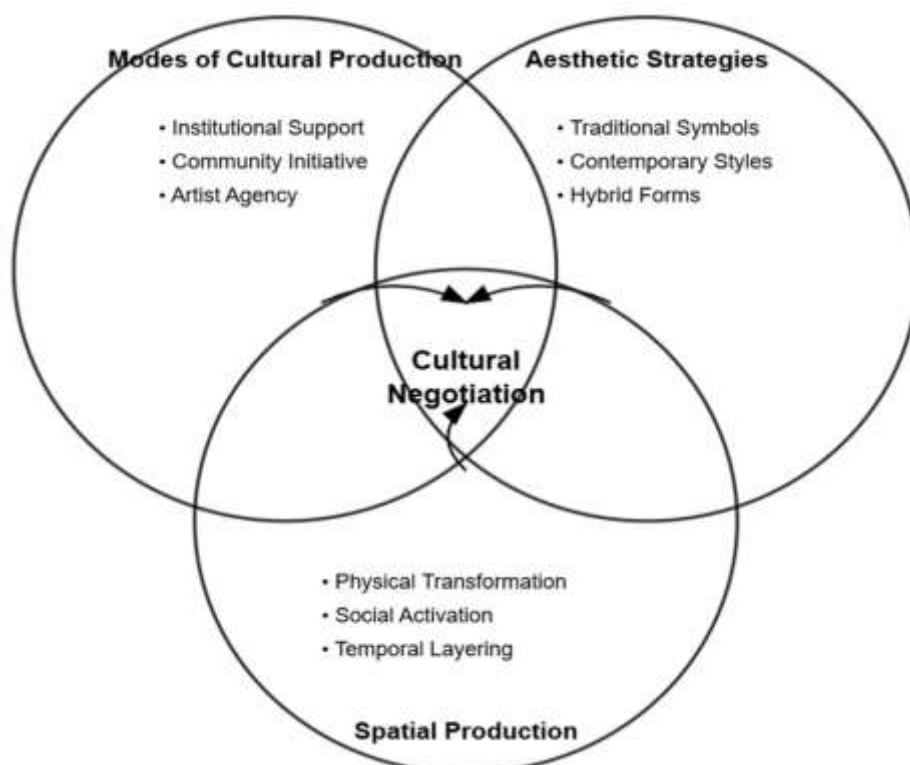


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework identifies three key dimensions for analyzing community murals as sites of cultural negotiation (Figure 1). While our primary focus remains on these three core dimensions, we recognize that digital media increasingly mediates how murals are experienced, circulated, and interpreted. Social media platforms transform murals into global cultural objects while simultaneously embedding them in local digital networks, adding layers of meaning-making that warrant future investigation. These dimensions—modes of cultural production, aesthetic strategies and symbolic resources, and spatial production and social relations—operate in dynamic interaction rather than as isolated categories. The framework visualizes how cultural negotiation emerges at the intersection of these three analytical dimensions, creating a conceptual space where multiple actors, aesthetics, and spatial practices converge.

1. **Modes of Cultural Production:** This dimension examines how murals emerge through different configurations of institutional support, community initiative, and artistic agency. Rather than categorizing projects as either state-sponsored or community-driven, we analyze the specific mechanisms through which various actors collaborate, compete, or coexist. This includes formal processes like commissioning and funding, as well as informal negotiations over aesthetic choices, thematic content, and spatial placement.
2. **Aesthetic Strategies and Symbolic Resources:** Murals draw on diverse visual languages, cultural symbols, and narrative traditions to construct meaning. This dimension analyzes how artists and communities mobilize aesthetic resources—from traditional motifs to contemporary styles—to articulate cultural identities and social visions. We examine how aesthetic choices reflect and shape broader cultural negotiations about tradition and modernity, local and global, unity and diversity.
3. **Spatial Production and Social Relations:** Murals transform physical spaces into social places, creating new contexts for interaction, identification, and contestation. This dimension explores how murals organize spatial relationships, mark territories, and generate new forms of public life. We analyze both the immediate spatial impacts of murals and their broader roles in urban transformation processes.

These dimensions interact dynamically rather than operating independently. Modes of production influence aesthetic possibilities, while spatial contexts shape both production processes and symbolic meanings. This multidimensional approach allows us to capture the complexity of mural practices while maintaining analytical clarity.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: NAVIGATING DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

China: Structured Innovation Within Evolving Frameworks

Chinese mural production exemplifies how artistic innovation can flourish within structured institutional contexts. The post-reform period has witnessed remarkable diversification in mural forms, themes, and purposes, challenging simplistic narratives about state control versus artistic freedom.

Historical Evolution and Contemporary Dynamics

The transformation of Chinese murals from primarily propagandistic tools to diverse cultural expressions reflects broader societal changes. As Zhu (2023) notes in his research on the "boundaries" of contemporary art, murals now occupy multiple positions within Chinese cultural landscapes—from official commemorations to experimental interventions.

Figure 2 illustrates this evolution through examples from Beijing's 798 Art District. These murals demonstrate how artists appropriate and transform socialist aesthetic traditions, creating layered meanings that speak to both historical memory and contemporary experience. The district itself, converted from military factories to art spaces, embodies the complex negotiations between preservation and transformation characterizing contemporary Chinese urbanism.



Figure 2: Beijing 798 Art District Mural (Photo by the authors)

The sophisticated visual languages employed in these works—combining socialist realist techniques with pop art sensibilities, traditional Chinese motifs with global contemporary styles—reflect what Chen (2019) identifies as a distinctly Chinese approach to street art. This aesthetic hybridity emerges not from unrestricted creative freedom but through strategic navigation of cultural policies, market demands, and community expectations.

Institutional Frameworks and Creative Strategies

Chinese subway murals (Figure 3) provide particularly illuminating examples of how institutional commissions can generate meaningful cultural expression. These projects emerge within specific policy frameworks shaped by urban development strategies, cultural governance priorities, and economic considerations. They typically involve multiple stakeholders---transit authorities operating under municipal development plans, cultural bureaus implementing national cultural policies, professional artists navigating regulatory requirements, and community representatives articulating local interests---negotiating aesthetic visions within these structural constraints.



Figure 3: Chinese subway station murals (Photo by the authors)

The production process for such murals reveals sophisticated mechanisms of cultural negotiation. Artists must balance multiple objectives: creating visually appealing works that enhance urban environments, incorporating local cultural elements that resonate with communities, meeting technical requirements for durability and safety, and aligning with broader urban development visions. This multiplicity of concerns generates creative constraints that, paradoxically, often stimulate innovation rather than limiting it.

Case Study: The "Water Splashing Festival" Controversy

Yuan Yunsheng's 1980 mural at Beijing Capital Airport (Figure 4) remains pivotal for understanding cultural negotiations in Chinese public art. The work's depiction of nude figures in a Dai minority festival setting sparked intense debates that continue to reverberate.



Figure 4: "Water Splashing Festival - A Tribute to Life" Mural, Beijing, 1980

(Source: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/406064859,2024>)

The controversy surrounding this mural illuminates' multiple dimensions of cultural negotiation. At one level, it represents negotiations between artistic expression and cultural conservatism. At another, it embodies tensions between representing ethnic minorities and Han Chinese aesthetic norms. The mural's repeated covering and uncovering over four decades demonstrates how public art becomes a site for ongoing cultural debates rather than fixed statements.

As Chen (2022) analyzes in his study of the Capital Airport murals, the controversy's significance extends beyond simple censorship narratives. The debates generated by the mural created new spaces for discussing artistic freedom, cultural representation, and public morality. Even in its covered state, the mural continues to influence Chinese public art discourse, demonstrating how controversial works can have productive effects beyond their immediate visibility.

Malaysia: Multicultural Dialogues and Urban Transformations

Malaysian mural development offers contrasting yet complementary insights into cultural negotiation processes. The country's multicultural composition and postcolonial history create distinctive contexts for public art that negotiates ethnic diversity, religious sensibilities, and rapid urban change.

The George Town Phenomenon

The UNESCO World Heritage city of George Town, Penang, has become synonymous with Malaysian street art since 2012. The murals here (Figure 5) demonstrate how public art can simultaneously serve multiple functions—heritage preservation, tourism promotion, community expression, and artistic innovation.



Figure 5: Murals in George Town, Penang (Photo by the authors)

What makes George Town's murals particularly significant for theoretical development is their emergence through complex negotiations between international artists, local communities, heritage conservationists, and

tourism authorities. While our theoretical analysis focuses on these structural dynamics, we recognize that fuller understanding would require ethnographic engagement with residents' daily interactions with these murals---how they navigate tourist crowds, maintain businesses amid heritage preservation, and negotiate their own cultural identities within these transformed spaces. As Foo and Krishnapillai (2019) document, these murals created new forms of "intangible living heritage" that complement the city's architectural preservation efforts.

The interactive nature of many George Town murals---incorporating three-dimensional elements, inviting photographic engagement, creating Instagram-worthy moments---reflects sophisticated understanding of contemporary media cultures. These works don't simply decorate walls but create what Jalaluddin et al. (2022) term "sites of splendour" that generate ongoing cultural performances through tourist photography and social media circulation.

Yip Yew Chong's "Old Kuala Lumpur": Memory and Nostalgia

Yip Yew Chong's mural series depicting historical scenes of Kuala Lumpur (Figure 6) exemplifies how artists negotiate between personal memory, collective nostalgia, and urban transformation. These works emerged without official commission, yet have become incorporated into municipal cultural strategies and tourism promotion.



Figure 6: "Old Kuala Lumpur" Mural (Source : <https://thehoneycombers.com>, 2024)

Woon's (2023) detailed documentation of Yip Yew Chong's artistic journey reveals how these murals negotiate multiple temporalities and cultural identities. The works depict scenes from the 1960s-1970s, a period many Malaysians regard as formative for national identity. By rendering these memories on contemporary urban walls, the murals create dialogues between past and present, inviting viewers to reflect on urban transformation and cultural change.

The aesthetic strategies employed---photorealistic technique, warm color palettes, careful attention to period details---generate what might be termed "productive nostalgia." While our analysis interprets these aesthetic choices through theoretical frameworks, we acknowledge that community members may experience and understand these murals in ways that exceed or differ from academic conceptualizations. Direct engagement with viewers---particularly elderly residents who lived through the depicted periods---would reveal additional layers of meaning and memory that enrich our understanding of how murals function as sites of cultural negotiation. Rather than simply lamenting lost pasts, these murals create spaces for intergenerational dialogue about Malaysian identity, urban development, and cultural continuity.

The "Pillars of Sabah" Project: Negotiating Colonial Heritage

The transformation of Kota Kinabalu's former Land and Survey Department building through the "Pillars of Sabah 2.0" project (Figure 7) demonstrates how murals can engage with complex colonial histories and contemporary identity politics.



Figure 7: Pillars of Sabah Mural

(Source : <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20190325/>, 2024

<https://news.seehua.com/post/641032>, 2024)

This project's significance lies not only in its artistic merit but in how it negotiates multiple layers of history and identity. By painting portraits of Sabahan heroes on colonial architectural elements, the project literally overwrites colonial narratives with local ones. Yet this overwriting doesn't erase colonial history but creates palimpsests where multiple temporalities coexist.

The selection of figures to portray involved extensive community consultations, revealing the complexities of representing diversity within diversity. Sabah's indigenous communities, Chinese and other ethnic minorities, Muslim and Christian populations all have different heroes and historical narratives. The negotiation process itself became as significant as the final artistic products, creating new forums for discussing Sabahan identity.

Aesthetic Innovations and Cultural Hybridity

Both Chinese and Malaysian murals demonstrate sophisticated aesthetic strategies that transcend simple categorizations of traditional versus modern, local versus global. These works create what might be termed "vernacular cosmopolitanisms"—artistic languages that speak simultaneously to local communities and global audiences.

Chen Yingjie's Synthesis of Ink and Street Art

Chen Yingjie's "Residual Temperature" (Figure 8) exemplifies aesthetic innovation through cultural synthesis. Trained in traditional Chinese ink painting yet influenced by global street art movements, Chen creates works that defy easy categorization.



Figure 8: Chen Yingjie - "Residual Temperature" Mural

(Source : <https://image.baidu.com/>, 2024)

The significance of Chen's approach extends beyond technical innovation. By bringing ink painting sensibilities to street art contexts, he negotiates between elite artistic traditions and popular cultural forms. This negotiation creates new possibilities for both traditions—ink painting gains contemporary relevance while street art acquires additional cultural depth.

Malaysian Cultural Fusion and Community Identity

Contemporary Malaysian murals demonstrate diverse approaches to cultural representation and community identity. Figure 8 shows examples that blend traditional motifs with contemporary urban aesthetics, creating visual languages that speak to Malaysia's complex multiculturalism.



Figure 9: Contemporary Community Murals in Malaysia (Photo by the authors)

These works employ what Rahman (2021) identifies as strategies of "cultural adjacency"—placing diverse cultural symbols in harmonious proximity without forcing artificial unity. This aesthetic approach reflects sophisticated understanding of Malaysian multiculturalism as a ongoing negotiation rather than achieved state.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: RETHINKING PUBLIC ART AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Beyond Participation: Toward Co-Production

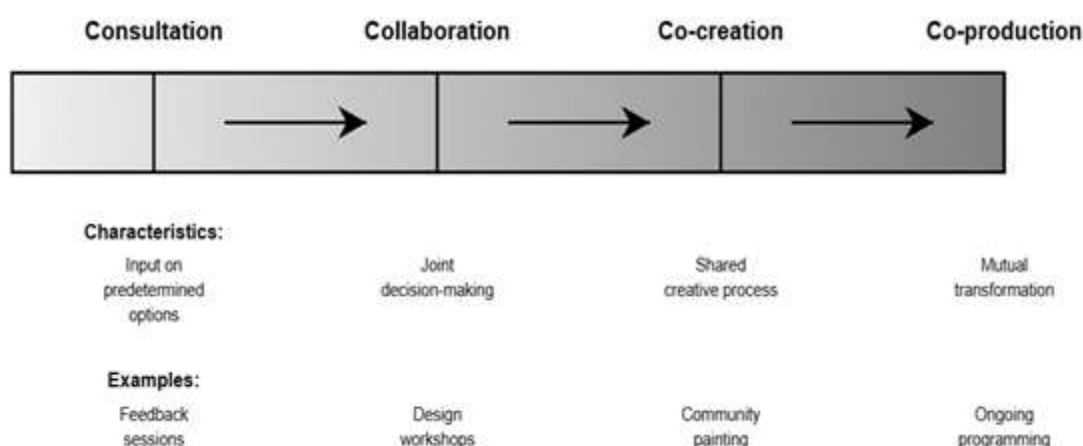


Figure 10: Continuum of Participation Modes in Mural Production

Our analysis suggests moving beyond conventional frameworks of 'participatory art' toward understanding murals as sites of cultural co-production. Rather than viewing participation as a binary state—either present or absent—we propose understanding it as a continuum of engagement modes (Figure 10). This continuum ranges from consultative approaches where communities provide input on predetermined options, through collaborative

processes involving joint decision-making, to full co-production where all actors undergo mutual transformation through the creative process.

In Chinese contexts, what appears as top-down cultural policy implementation often involves complex negotiations that transform both institutional objectives and community aspirations. As Li (2022) documents in her study of contemporary Chinese mural development, even highly structured projects create spaces for unexpected outcomes and meanings.

Similarly, Malaysian examples demonstrate how seemingly spontaneous community initiatives engage with and transform institutional frameworks. The incorporation of unauthorized murals into official tourism strategies, as seen in George Town and Kuala Lumpur, reveals the fluid boundaries between grassroots and institutional cultural production.

Aesthetic Agency and Cultural Innovation

Our analysis reveals how aesthetic choices function as forms of agency within structural constraints. Artists and communities don't simply select from pre-existing visual vocabularies but create new aesthetic languages through creative synthesis and strategic deployment of cultural symbols.

The concept of "aesthetic agency" helps explain how murals can simultaneously fulfill institutional objectives and express community aspirations. By developing visual languages that speak to multiple audiences and serve various functions, artists create what might be termed "multivalent" works that resist singular interpretations or instrumentalization.

Spatial Politics and Urban Futures

Murals don't simply occupy urban spaces but actively produce new spatial configurations and social possibilities. Our analysis identifies several mechanisms through which murals transform urban environments:

Territorial Marking and Cultural Claiming: Murals mark spaces as belonging to particular communities or cultural traditions, asserting presence and rights to the city. Yet this marking often occurs through inclusive rather than exclusive strategies, inviting dialogue rather than establishing boundaries.

Temporal Layering: By introducing historical narratives and future visions into present urban spaces, murals create temporal complexity that challenges linear development narratives. This temporal layering proves particularly significant in rapidly transforming Asian cities where development often erases historical traces.

Social Activation: Murals transform passive urban surfaces into active sites of social engagement. Whether through interactive design elements, community programming, or social media circulation, murals generate ongoing activities that extend beyond their initial creation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Rethinking Cultural Policy Frameworks

Our theoretical framework suggests several implications for cultural policy. Rather than choosing between top-down cultural planning and hands-off approaches to grassroots creativity, policymakers might develop what we term "enabling frameworks"—institutional structures that provide resources and support while maintaining flexibility for diverse outcomes.

Successful examples from both China and Malaysia demonstrate how institutional support need not determine artistic outcomes. When policies focus on creating conditions for cultural production rather than controlling specific results, they often generate more vibrant and sustainable mural ecosystems.

Supporting Sustainable Mural Practices

The sustainability of mural projects extends beyond physical maintenance to encompass social, cultural, and

economic dimensions. Our analysis identifies several factors contributing to sustainable mural practices:

Community Embedding: Murals with strong community connections—through production processes, thematic content, or ongoing programming—demonstrate greater resilience. This embedding requires time and resources often overlooked in project planning.

Aesthetic Durability: Works that create rich, multivalent meanings tend to maintain relevance longer than those serving singular functions. Aesthetic complexity generates interpretive possibilities that sustain engagement over time.

Institutional Recognition: While grassroots origins may generate authenticity, some form of institutional recognition often proves necessary for long-term survival. This recognition might range from formal heritage designation to informal incorporation into tourism circuits.

Fostering Cross-Cultural Learning

This paper has developed a theoretical framework for understanding community murals as sites of cultural negotiation in diverse sociopolitical contexts. Through comparative analysis of Chinese and Malaysian cases, we demonstrate how murals mediate between institutional structures, community aspirations, and artistic innovation in ways that transcend simple binaries of top-down versus bottom-up, authentic versus co-opted, traditional versus modern.

Our concept of "cultural negotiation" recognizes mural production as ongoing processes through which multiple actors articulate, contest, and reconcile diverse visions of identity, aesthetics, and urban space. The three analytical dimensions—modes of cultural production, aesthetic strategies, and spatial production—provide tools for analyzing mural practices while maintaining sensitivity to local specificities. Our integrated model (Figure 5) demonstrates how contextual foundations shape but do not determine cultural possibilities, explaining why similar frameworks produce diverse results and different contexts generate comparable innovations.

This analysis makes three key contributions: challenging Western-centric public art paradigms, demonstrating the value of comparative analysis for theoretical development, and offering practical implications for supporting sustainable mural practices. As Asian cities continue transforming rapidly, understanding how communities use murals to navigate change becomes increasingly important. Future research should prioritize ethnographic fieldwork to capture community voices and lived experiences that theoretical analysis alone cannot fully reveal. This might include exploring digital mediation of mural meanings through social media ethnography, documenting longer-term community impacts through longitudinal engagement, examining how government policies and urban development strategies shape mural practices, and extending comparative analysis to other cultural contexts. Such approaches would address the methodological limitations of purely theoretical frameworks and provide richer understanding of how communities actually experience and negotiate cultural identity through mural art.

Ultimately, this paper argues for understanding public art as always situated within specific configurations of power, culture, and possibility. Community murals offer particularly rich sites for such understanding, inviting us to see cities not as fixed entities but as ongoing negotiations through which diverse actors imagine and create shared futures.

REFERENCES

1. Abd Rahman, N. (2022). *The appreciation of Malay culture of mural paintings in Malaysia* (Doctoral dissertation). University Technology MARA (UiTM).
2. Abd Rahman, N., Ismail, A. R., & Abdul Rahim, R. (2020). Revolutions of Mural Painting. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(10), 1195-1200.
3. Abdullah, Q. D. L. (2021). Mural art as a medium of political and social commentary: A case study of mural art in Malaysia. *International Journal of Art and Art History*, 9(2), 1-12.
4. Chen, C. Y. (2022). The artistic achievements and historical significance of the murals at the Capital

- Airport. *Art Panorama*, (11), 54-59.
5. Chen, H. (2019). "Graffiti man" Chen Yingjie: Bringing a Chinese style to street art. *New Youth (True Love)*, (10), 26-27.
 6. Feng, J. (2020). *Research on the composition language in mural creation* (Master's thesis). Northwest University for Nationalities.
 7. Foo, R., & Krishnapillai, G. (2019). Preserving the intangible living heritage in the George Town world heritage site, Malaysia. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 14(4), 358-370.
 8. Jalaluddin, S. Z. A. S. A., Tohid, M. S., Shamsudin, M. K., & Othman, M. F. (2022). #CeritaKita: The splendour of Malaysia through mural painting on petronas gas station. *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, 7(SI8), 105-109.
 9. Jasmi, M. F., Abdul Ghani, I., Abdullah, M., & Bahaluddin, A. (2021). Sustainability of mural art trend in the urban environment: a review on literature. In *Virtual Go-Green: Conference and Publication* (pp. 488-494).
 10. Li, J. H. (2022). *Research on mural art in urban public spaces* (Master's thesis). Jilin University of the Arts.
 11. Li, Y. Z. (2022). *The current development of contemporary Chinese mural art* (Master's thesis). Henan Normal University.
 12. Poon, S. T. (2023). Talent & Tagging in Harmony: A Study of Graffiti Art as Subculture and Aesthetic Expression of Urbanization in Malaysia. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 26, 5-28.
 13. Rahman, N. (2021). The evolution of mural art in Malaysia: A historical overview. *Journal of Art and Design*, 3(1), 1-12.
 14. Tian, X. (2018). *Contemporary mural art*. Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House.
 15. Wan, H. Y. (2024). A brief analysis of new directions in the development of contemporary Chinese murals. In *Proceedings of the Symposium on Sustainable Social and Economic Development in the New Era* (pp. 197-198). Hubei Institute of Fine Arts.
 16. Woon, T. H. (2023). *Art of Joy: The Journey of Yip Yew Chong*. World Scientific.
 17. Zhang, T. (2020). Some thoughts on modern Chinese murals. *Industrial Design*, (07), 37-38.
 18. Zheng, Y. (2023). Thoughts on the "locality" of modern public mural creation. *Journal of Wuyi University*, (10), 65-70.
 19. Zhu, J. (2023). Research on the "boundary" of murals in contemporary art. *Art Education Research*, (20), 29-31.
 20. Zuo, S. (2023). An analysis of the characteristics of contemporary Chinese mural art language—Taking the mural "Nezha Making Havoc in the Sea" as an example. *Times Report (Running)*, (08), 43-45.