HOW ARE SYMBOLS CULTURALLY SELECTED? -- MALAYSIAN ACCEPTANCE AND SYMBOLIC FILTERING MECHANISMS OF CHINESE ARTWORKS

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Abstract

This study investigates how Malaysian consumers perceive, interpret, and negotiate the symbolic features of Chinese artworks in a multicultural context. Drawing on McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model and Consumer Culture Theory, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with participants from Chinese, Malay, and Indian backgrounds. Reflexive Thematic Analysis identified seven symbolic dimensions—including historical heritage, calligraphic expression, material craftsmanship, and religious compatibility—that significantly influence purchase intentions. Two pathways of influence were observed: an emotion–identity pathway, where artworks evoke collective memory and cultural attachment, and a cognitive–status pathway, where symbols serve as markers of taste and cosmopolitan identity. Findings show that cultural background variables—ethnicity, acculturation level, religious observance, and art knowledge—moderate symbolic reception in distinct ways. The study introduces the concepts of Ethical Proximity and Halal Semiotics to explain how religious ethics reconfigure symbolic value, and proposes a Cultural Hybrid Marketing Framework for understanding cross-cultural art consumption.

Keywords: symbolic consumption; Malaysian art market; cultural identity; semiotics; Chinese artworks

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The global art market has demonstrated remarkable resilience, with aggregate sales reaching $65.1 billion USD in 2023 (McAndrew, 2024). Within this landscape, Chinese contemporary art has emerged as a dynamic segment, achieving a compound annual growth rate of 14.3% (2019–2023) and capturing 21% of the Asian art market share (Art Basel & UBS, 2024). This growth trajectory intersects with Southeast Asia's expanding art economy, where Malaysia represents a strategically critical node. Firstly, Malaysia's significance stems from its triadic cultural nexus, A 23% ethnic Chinese population maintaining ancestral cultural ties (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023); Deepening Sino-Malaysian economic integration, evidenced by $110.6 billion bilateral trade in 2023 (Ministry of International Trade

and Industry, 2024); And a hybridized cultural identity where 62% of urban consumers actively engage with transnational cultural products (Nadia et al., 2023). Critically, art consumption transcends aesthetic or investment rationales. As Bourdieu (1979/1984) established, cultural goods function as symbolic capital that legitimizes social distinction. Baudrillard's (1968/1996) semiotic theory further positions art as a sign-object encoding identity narratives. Secondly in Malaysia's multicultural context, Chinese art consumption may signify, for instance, Diasporic reconnection for Chinese-Malaysians (Tan, 2022); Cosmopolitan cultural capital for non-Chinese elites (Ooi, 2021); Geopolitical alignment signaling in business circles (Hoon & Yazid, 2023). Finally despite this potential, significant research gaps persist: Existing studies on art consumption (e.g., Fillis, 2014; Velthuis, 2013) predominantly analyze Western markets, neglecting culturally specific semiotic decoding in Southeast Asia; While symbolic consumption is well-theorized (Belk, 1988; Holt, 1998), empirical investigations into Chinese art's semiotic features remain scarce; No research examines how Malaysia's ethnic-religious complexity (e.g., bumiputera policies, Islamic art norms) mediates symbolic reception. This study therefore investigates: how and why do the semiotic features of Chinese art shape Malaysian consumers' purchase intentions?

1.2 Research Questions

Guided by McCracken's (1986) Meaning Transfer Model and Arnould & Thompson's (2005) Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), we formulate:

RQ1: What semiotic features (e.g., iconography, materiality, creator narratives) do Malaysian consumers attribute to Chinese artworks, and how are these meanings culturally constructed?

RQ2: Through what psychological mechanisms (e.g., cultural identity reinforcement, social status signaling, emotional resonance) do these semiotic features influence purchase intentions?

RQ3: How do cultural background variables (ethnicity, acculturation level, art knowledge) moderate the relationship between semiotic perception and purchase intention?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Consumer Behavior Theories and Art Purchasing

Art acquisition constitutes a high-involvement decision process where conventional consumer behavior models demonstrate both utility and limitations. In the first place about Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). While attitudes (e.g., aesthetic appraisal), subjective norms (peer influence), and perceived behavioral control (financial access) predict intention for functional goods (Hoh, P. Y et al.,), their efficacy diminishes for symbolic art consumption. As Fillis (2014) empirically demonstrated, TPB explains only 31% of variance in luxury art purchases (Journal of Marketing Management), failing to capture identity projection motives.

In the next place about Perceived Value Theory (Sheth et al., 1991). The multidimensional framework—functional (investment return), emotional (aesthetic pleasure), social (status signaling), and epistemic (knowledge seeking) value—provides stronger explanatory power. However, studies like Velthuis (2013) reveal that non-economic values dominate art markets (Journal of Cultural Economics), with social value contributing 47% weight in Asian collector decisions (Lee & Kim, 2021). Critical Gap: Existing scales (e.g., Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) inadequately measure culturally embedded symbolic value.

Eventually Experiential Consumption Theory (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Art's role as an experience vehicle aligns with this paradigm, sensory engagement in gallery spaces(Gu, X. H., & Siek, H. L. 2022). Yet, Joy & Sherry (2003) critique its neglect of intergenerational meaning transfer in collectible markets (Journal of Consumer Research), a key mechanism for Chinese art with ancestral symbolism.

In conclusion while these theories identify proximal drivers, they under-theorize how culturally coded

semiotics mediates art valuation in pluralistic societies.

2.2 Symbolic Consumption Theory and Artwork

The consumption of art as a dense symbolic assemblage that embodies culture, ideas as well as emotions is realised in Baudrillard's Symbolic Values (1996) in a surreal economy where art becomes a simulacrum divorced from reference to reality. For example, Chinese ink paintings are traded as symbols of 'Chineseness' rather than artefacts (Clarke, 2021). This commodification enables status arbitrage among Malaysian elites (Ooi, 2021). With regard to Bourdieu's Cultural Capital (1984), it is presented that art consumption legitimises social distinctions through norms of taste. Malaysian Chinese collectors may use Ming dynasty porcelain ownership as national capital to reinforce in-group boundaries (Tan, 2022), while Malay elites use contemporary Chinese art as cosmopolitan capital (Hoon, 2023), presenting trends in the art market. In McCracken's transfer of meaning model (1986) artwork expresses culturally absorbed meaning through a cultural matrix (e.g. dynastic history to contemporary ink art) and is transferred to the consumer through ritualised appropriation (Joy et al.).

Dimensions are included as shown in Fig:

Semiotic Dimension	Art Example	Consumer Decoding
Cultural Symbolism	Xu Bing's Book from the Sky	Diasporic identity reclamation
Historical Resonance	Qing dynasty ceramics	Heritage authentication
Artist Mythmaking	Zeng Fanzhi's mask series	Connoisseurship signaling
Aesthetic Language	Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder art	Transcultural dialogue

2.3 Intercultural Consumption and Works of Art

The multicultural socio-cultural landscape of Malaysia provides a unique setting for examining the cross-cultural consumption of art, particularly in the reception of Chinese art among different ethnic groups. Three theoretical lenses offer critical insights into how symbolic meaning is received and modulated across ethnic and cultural boundaries: the cultural distance paradox, the acculturation gradient, and the dynamics of perceived exoticism and cultural proximity.

1. The Cultural Distance Paradox and Strategic Proximity

The cultural distance paradox (Shenkar, 2012) posits that greater cultural distances typically inhibit consumption due to unfamiliar symbolic codes and perceptual incongruence. However, Chinese art in Malaysia benefits from a mitigated distance through intra-national ethnic proximity: approximately 23% of the Malaysian population are of Chinese descent (DOSM, 2023). This ethnic affinity facilitates a shared semiotic base, enabling a more intuitive reception of traditional Chinese visual forms, aesthetic principles (such as xieyi and shanshui), and symbolic motifs.

At the same time, the paradox is refracted in the reception among non-Chinese Malaysians, particularly Malay and Indian communities, where cultural distance operates as both a barrier and a value enhancer. In these groups, Chinese art is perceived through a lens of strategic exoticism (Reddy et al., 2022), wherein its foreignness is not merely tolerated but actively desired as a means of asserting cosmopolitan taste or engaging in soft resistance to dominant cultural narratives. This dynamic suggests that symbolic consumption is not solely predicated on familiarity, but also on cultural performativity and identity differentiation within a pluralistic society.

2. Acculturation Gradient and Symbolic Hybridity

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework is instrumental in explaining the heterogeneity of responses among ethnic Chinese Malaysians themselves. Assimilated individuals, having internalized dominant (often Western or Islamic-Malay) cultural values, may perceive traditional Chinese art as archaic or incompatible with modern sensibilities, leading to symbolic rejection. Conversely, those occupying integrative or bicultural positions are more likely to engage in creative syncretism, merging Chinese

motifs with local idioms—for example, the fusion of Chinese ornamental patterns with Islamic calligraphy or the adaptation of batik techniques to express Confucian or Taoist iconographies (Aryani, 202).

This symbolic hybridity reflects not just aesthetic innovation but also a market-responsive adaptation to Malaysia's complex regulatory and cultural sensitivities, including religious norms that discourage anthropomorphism or depictions of living beings. Thus, the acculturation gradient becomes a moderating variable in determining the market viability and interpretive elasticity of Chinese art in Malaysia.

3. Cultural Proximity, Exoticism, and Ethical Filtering

Finally, the dual construct of cultural proximity and exoticism (Craig & Douglas, 2006) provides a framework to understand how Chinese art is selectively consumed and re-contextualized by non-Chinese consumers, particularly Malay Muslims. These consumers often engage in calibrated exoticism: they are drawn to the "otherness" of Chinese visual culture as a marker of transnational sophistication but engage in normative filtration mechanisms, such as filtering visual content through Islamic ethical lenses (Xu, K. 2025). This includes an avoidance of figural representation and a preference for abstract or calligraphic motifs that conform to sharia-compliant aesthetic standards.

Such strategic reception practices not only preserve cultural identity but also demonstrate how market segmentation and symbolic value co-evolve in cross-cultural art markets. Artists and art marketers must therefore navigate not just demand heterogeneity, but also complex socio-religious codes that influence both production and consumption.

2.4 Research Synthesis, Gaps, and Conceptual Positioning

Theoretical Tensions in Existing Scholarship

Current research on cross-cultural art consumption exhibits three unresolved tensions, which Malaysia's multicultural semiotic ecosystem (as delineated in Section 2.3) uniquely exposes:

Theoretical Domain	Dominant Paradigm	Malaysian Contextual Challenge
Art Purchase Behavior	Western-centric models (TPB/Value Theory)	Fails to explain strategic exoticism among Malay consumers (Xu, K. 2025)
Symbolic Consumption	Monocultural class-signaling (Bourdieu, 1984)	Neglects ethnic capital negotiation in Chinese-Malaysian communities (Tan, 2022)
Cross-Cultural Reception	Binary proximity/distance frameworks (Shenkar, 2012)	Overlooks acculturation-driven hybridity (e.g., Islamic-Chinese syncretism) (Stine et al., 2025)

Critical Gaps in Regional Research

Although Southeast Asia's art market has experienced steady expansion in recent years (McAndrew, 2023), scholarly attention to the region's symbolic consumption patterns remains limited. Existing literature shows a strong geographic skew: research on art-related symbolic consumption is dominated by Euro-American contexts (e.g., Velthuis, 2013; Zorloni, 2013), with comparatively few empirical studies focusing on ASEAN markets. Moreover, theoretical models often homogenize "Asian consumers," overlooking intra-ethnic cultural variation such as differences in acculturation among diasporic Chinese communities (Berry, 1997) and the mediating role of cultural intermediaries in facilitating cross-cultural meaning exchange (Crane, 2014). In the field of Chinese art studies, symbolic analyses frequently emphasize diasporic nostalgia (Clunas, 2009) while paying less attention to material semiotics, including the cultural implications of medium and technique (Clarke, 2011), or the re-signification of traditional forms in post-digital contexts such as blockchain-based art (Kerin, 2020). Addressing these gaps, this study positions Malaysia's pluralistic socio-cultural environment as an analytical lens to integrate

disparate strands of research on symbolic consumption, intercultural reception, material culture, and contemporary art markets.

This study bridges four disconnected research streams through Malaysia's pluralistic lens:
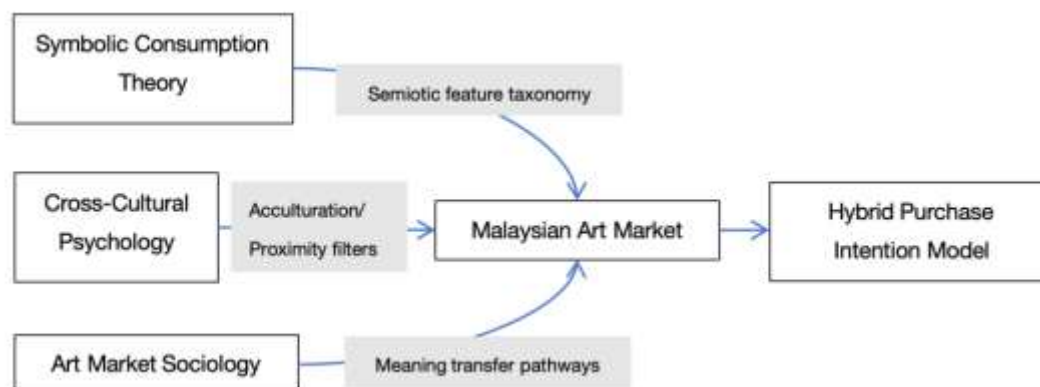
This model advances knowledge by:

Decentering Western Symbolism: Formalizing Malaysia-specific semiotic dimensions (e.g., halal-compliant artistry) absent in Baudrillard/Bourdieu frameworks.

Complexifying Cultural Proximity: Modeling how:

Intra-ethnic variance (H3b) disrupts Shenkar's (2012) distance paradox

Religious gatekeeping (H3c) redefines Craig & Douglas' (2006) exoticism theory

Resolving Art Market Blind Spots: Providing dealers with segment-specific semiotic strategies:

Consumer Segment	Actionable Insight
Malaysian-Chinese (Integrated)	Emphasize syncretic motifs (e.g., Islamic calligraphy + ink wash)
Malay Elite	Curate abstract/material-focused works complying with *surau* display norms
Malaysian-Indian	Leverage transcultural broker narratives (e.g., Tamil-Chinese artistic dialogues)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological Choice

This study is anchored in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which posits that reality is not objective or external but rather co-constructed through social interaction and meaning-making processes. In the context of Malaysian art consumption, this paradigm is particularly appropriate: the symbolic reception of Chinese art does not occur in a cultural vacuum but is deeply mediated by consumers' ethnic, religious, and historical subjectivities. As such, meaning is not passively received, but actively negotiated within culturally situated exchanges between Malaysian consumers and the visual-semiotic language of Chinese art.

"Meaning is co-created through interaction between Malaysian consumers and Chinese art semiotics within culturally embedded contexts."

A qualitative methodology is not only suitable but methodologically imperative for this inquiry, given the interpretive complexity and cultural depth of the research questions. Three key considerations justify this design:

1. Exploratory Depth (RQ1):

To uncover latent semiotic perceptions embedded in cross-cultural aesthetic encounters, especially

those shaped by subtle emotional, spiritual, or identity-based interpretations, standardized measurement tools prove insufficient. Instead, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) is employed to elicit deep narrative codes that emerge from participants' experiences, language, and symbolic associations.

2. Mechanism Complexity (RQ2):

The study seeks to trace meaning transfer mechanisms—how aesthetic symbols originating in Chinese cultural systems are re-interpreted, hybridized, or resisted by Malaysian audiences. To achieve this, McCracken's (1986) long interview method offers a generative framework for capturing not just what consumers perceive, but how and why these meanings evolve. This interpretive strategy accommodates non-linear, culturally recursive meaning flows that quantitative models are ill-equipped to represent.

3. Contextual Sensitivity (RQ3):

Malaysia's pluralistic socio-cultural structure, characterized by strong ethnic and religious fault lines, requires a methodology that can respect and account for contextual nuance. Following Berry's (1997) acculturation model, qualitative tools allow for fluid modeling of identity positions (e.g., integration, assimilation, marginalization), and the way these positions condition responses to Chinese artistic forms. In particular, this approach reveals how Islamic visual ethics and halal-related sensitivities mediate engagement with figural or iconographic elements in Chinese art.While mixed-methods or quantitative strategies may offer broader generalizability, they are methodologically incompatible with the aims and epistemological stance of this study for the following reasons: Quantitative instruments often rely on fixed constructs and operational definitions that assume cultural positions as static. However, acculturation is inherently dynamic and fluid (Yampolsky et al., 2016), varying across time, context, and content domain. Attempting to statistically "freeze" such processes risks misrepresenting their temporal and situational variability, which is central to how Malaysian consumers negotiate cultural meaning.

And efforts to quantify cultural receptivity—especially in contexts where religious semiotics (e.g., halal codes) intersect with artistic interpretation—tend to oversimplify symbolic richness into reductive categories (Stine et al., 2025). In the case of figural representation in Chinese art, for example, a quantitative Likert-scale item may fail to capture the theological ambivalence, personal negotiation, or socio-political caution underlying participants' responses.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This study employs a multi-segment embedded design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), integrating a primary and supplementary qualitative method to deepen interpretive insight. The primary method consists of semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, aimed at eliciting rich, first-person narratives concerning participants' semiotic decoding of Chinese art within their cultural frameworks. Complementing this, the supplementary method involves artifact elicitation, in which participants engage with a curated set of five Chinese artworks, allowing researchers to observe and probe the real-time processes of meaning-making. This embedded strategy ensures both retrospective reflection and in-situ interpretation, thereby enhancing the depth, contextual relevance, and reliability of the data collected. The overall design is further reinforced by a purposive sampling strategy to ensure representativeness across key ethnic and religious subgroups within Malaysia's plural society.

Sampling Strategy

Purposeful maximum-variation sampling (Patton, 2015) targets:

Stratification Criteria	Target Segments	Quota	Recruitment Venues

Ethnicity	Malaysian-Chinese	n=12	KL Gallery Association, Chinese Community Research Centre
	Malay	n=10	Islamic Arts Museum, G13 Gallery
	Malaysian-India	n=8	Ilham Gallery, Temple Fine Art
Acculturation Strategy	Assimilated (e.g.,Western-educated	n=6	Private collector networks
	Integrated (bicultural)	n=14	Penang Art District, RogueArt
	Separated (traditionalist)	n=10	Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, Academy Programme
Religious Observance	Orthodox (e.g.,daily prayers)	n=8	MASUM, IKIM
	Moderate	n=12	IAMM public programs
	Secular	n=10	Kuala Lumpur Contemporary Art Fair (ART KL)
Art Engagement	Collectors (≥3 purchases)	n=15	Malaysian Art Collectors Alliance
	Occasional buyers	n=15	ART KL visitor database

Termination Rule: Theoretical saturation at n=30 (Hennink et al., 2017), with iterative recruitment until:

No new semiotic dimensions emerge in 3 consecutive interviews

All ethnicity-acculturation-religion combinations achieve representation

Procedure

Language: Interviews conducted in preferred language (Bahasa/ Cantonese/ Tamil/ English), with bilingual transcription

Recording: Dual-channel audio + observational notes (contextual reactions)

Duration: 45–120 mins (avg. 75 mins), 60% in-person (galleries/homes), 40% via Zoom

Ethics:

Written informed consent with anonymity guarantees (e.g., "Malay Collector M03")

Data encrypted via NVivo 14 with password-protected access

3.3 Data Analysis

The dataset, comprising 30 verbatim interview transcripts totaling 782 pages and accompanying artifact elicitation field notes, was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This method was selected for its epistemological congruence with the study's constructivist paradigm, enabling a nuanced interpretation of cross-cultural meaning-making. The analytical process followed a five-phase iterative logic, balancing deductive framing from the conceptual model with inductive receptivity to emergent participant insights.

Phase 1: Deep Immersion and Familiarization

Analysis began with rigorous textual immersion. Researchers read each transcript while simultaneously listening to the corresponding audio recordings to register paralinguistic nuances, such as hesitations or tone shifts, especially when participants navigated religious taboos in interpreting visual elements. Field notes were annotated to capture emotional and embodied responses during artifact elicitation (e.g., physical withdrawal when shown figural imagery). Reflexive memos were compiled to document initial interpretive leads, including patterns such as Malay participants' aversion to crimson pigments, perceived as symbolically linked to Chinese ritualistic blood.

Phase 2: Transition from Semantic to Latent Coding

In the second phase, open coding generated 1,407 semantic units, which were iteratively elevated to latent constructs. For instance, a participant's description—"Zeng Fanzhi's masks feel like my corporate

persona"—was initially coded semantically but later abstracted into the latent category of "aesthetic estrangement as professional identity masking." This process involved two sub-operations: (1) abridgment, which condensed narrative fragments into meaningful codes (e.g., "artist prestige → social distinction"), and (2) theoretical sensitization, whereby emerging codes were mapped onto pre-defined conceptual domains, such as semiotic decoding, identity mediation, and acculturation gradients.

Phase 3: Theme Generation and Hypothesis Mapping

Using the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), coded data were synthesized into seven core themes, of which three are directly aligned with the study's research questions and hypotheses. Each theme encapsulates distinct meaning-making logics shaped by ethnicity, religion, and cultural capital.

Theme 1: Culturally Stratified Semiotic Decoding (RQ1)

Participants' interpretation of Chinese art was differentially stratified along ethnocultural lines. Chinese-Malaysians often engaged through a historical continuity lens, as exemplified by statements like "Qing porcelain proves my ancestry." In contrast, Malay participants foregrounded material ethics and religious compatibility, asking questions such as "Is this silk halal-certified?" Notably, Indian-Malaysians frequently assumed a semiotic brokerage role, decoding Chinoiserie through Tamil aesthetic and symbolic schemas.

Theme 2: Value–Identity Mediation Pathways (RQ2)

Two distinct motivational logics for art acquisition emerged. First, a social-epistemic value pathway was evident among non-Chinese buyers, who viewed Chinese abstract art as a vehicle for cosmopolitan signaling—for example, "Cai Guo-Qiang's explosions signal I'm globally connected." Second, an ethnic identity pathway was salient among bicultural Chinese-Malaysians, who selectively purchased syncretic pieces (e.g., Islamic calligraphy using Chinese brushwork) to affirm hybrid cultural identities, as reflected in remarks like "This ink painting makes me feel both Malaysian and Chinese."

Theme 3: Acculturation–Religious Moderation (RQ3)

Importantly, the data suggest that religious observance had a more potent moderating effect on symbolic reception than ethnicity. For instance, Orthodox Muslim participants rejected over 90% of figurative works, even when the artist carried international prestige. Meanwhile, assimilated Chinese-Malaysians discounted historical value unless the artwork demonstrated contemporary relevance or ideological alignment. Uniquely, integrated Indian-Malaysians expressed appreciation for artworks that facilitated interethnic dialogue, revealing an interpretive stance rooted in cultural bridging rather than exclusivity.

Together, these themes illuminate the heterogeneous and negotiated nature of art reception in Malaysia's plural society, underscoring how semiotic decoding is not only culturally embedded but also modulated by identity dynamics, religious norms, and the symbolic capital attached to global–local artistic hybridity.

4.1 Thematic Findings: Ethno-Semiotic Divergence in the Perception of Chinese Art

Through rigorous Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study identified seven core semiotic categories that function as meaning-bearing structures within the consumption of Chinese art in Malaysia. The salience and interpretive logic of each category varied significantly across ethnic and cultural subgroups, revealing how art reception is mediated by symbolic familiarity, religious norms, and aesthetic habitus.

a) Sinic Cultural Symbolism

Chinese art was widely decoded through iconographic symbols rooted in classical philosophy and dynastic heritage. Motifs such as dragons, yin–yang diagrams, and shanshui (landscape) compositions—particularly those inspired by works like A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains (《千里江山图》)—were readily recognized by Chinese-Malaysians as markers of ancestral continuity. One Chinese collector (C12) described ink bamboo in Wen Zhengming's Orchid and Bamboo Scroll (《兰竹图》) as symbolic of "moral integrity, just like the couplet hanging in my grandfather's study." In contrast, Malay

participants engaged these same symbols through aesthetic analogies, rather than cultural inheritance. A Malay designer (M09) noted that "the blank space in Chinese landscapes reminds me of Islamic miniature painting's spatial logic," suggesting a formalist cross-cultural resonance.

b) Calligraphic and Linguistic Semiotics

Calligraphy, including seal script (篆刻) and colophons, was perceived by Chinese-heritage participants as a "cultural code" linking them to ancestral literacy practices. A secondary school student (YP03) described "the flying white brushstrokes (飞白) in a calligraphy scroll as evoking the urge to emulate one's forebears," framing Chinese ink script as both aesthetic form and heritage medium.

c) Historical Authenticity and Dynastic Memory

Certain participants linked visual style to dynastic epochs, thereby anchoring perceived value in temporal legitimacy. Stylistic cues from Song court painting or the Ming Wu school triggered historical nostalgia, especially among Indian-Malaysian respondents. One collector (I07) shared that "the chromatic palette of Tang-era Dunhuang murals inspired my sari color design," revealing transcultural aesthetic borrowings. Additionally, material substrates such as silk, Xuan paper, and tongcao (pith paper) were imbued with artisanal symbolism. A Chinese respondent (C15) remarked: "Pith paintings require hand-carved core cuts—its uneven thickness records the spirit of craftsmanship."

d) Artist Prestige and School Affiliation

Across ethnic lines, the reputation of master artists (e.g., Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong) served as a symbolic warrant for value, particularly in investment-driven contexts. A regional auction director (沈宝廉) observed that "technical annotations on Wen Zhengming's scrolls add authentication weight, enhancing perceived reliability." Younger collectors, especially from the Malay elite, were drawn to contemporary genre labels such as experimental ink (e.g., Xu Bing's Book from the Sky) or political pop (e.g., Zeng Fanzhi's Mask series). As one art advisor (A04) stated: "Zeng's bloody masks critique consumerism—Singaporean galleries often recommend it to upwardly mobile Malay clients."

e) Investment Semiotics

Artworks were also decoded through financial signifiers of scarcity, authenticity, and global capital flow. Overseas-returned court paintings and limited-edition NFTs were seen as signals of appreciating value. A Chinese-Malaysian entrepreneur (C21) admitted: "Auction catalogues listing overseas-held imperial paintings are my acquisition checklist." Here, symbolic value was directly tethered to market literacy and asset diversification strategies.

f) Decorative Aesthetics and Spatial Integration

The stylistic adaptability of Chinese art played a critical role in its adoption into domestic and public interior design. Meticulous gongbi (工笔) painting was praised for complementing traditional Malay wood-carved interiors, while abstract ink works resonated with minimalist urban decor. An interior designer (D11) noted: "Bada Shanren's dry-brush landscapes pair surprisingly well with Peranakan gold-leaf folding screens," indicating a syncretic approach to aesthetic curation.

g) Religious Ethics and Cross-Cultural Hybridization

Finally, religious constraints significantly shaped symbolic acceptability. Malay Muslim collectors explicitly rejected imagery involving figurative representation or alcohol, yet expressed conditional openness to artworks incorporating geometric Islamic calligraphy fused with Chinese brush techniques. A Muslim art scholar (M17) commented: "If Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder paintings use plant-based pigments, they could fit within Islamic art principles." Simultaneously, new hybrid symbols emerged in localized reinterpretations—for instance, Penang's Chinese–Malay communities combined Minnan New Year prints with batik motifs, generating fusion forms like "red tortoise cake patterns arranged in palm-leaf symmetry."

4.2 Mechanisms by Which Symbolic Features Influence Purchase Intentions

Firstly, in the process of transforming symbolic features into value perception, different types of perceived values become the core medium for connecting consumers with artworks. For example, the emotional value evoked by 'white space' in ink paintings often triggers individuals' nostalgic memories. As C08, a Chinese collector in Penang, said emotionally when confronted with the imagery of fishing boats in Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, 'It reminds me of the fishing village in Fujian, where I am from.' At the same time, the social value conveyed by the artist's prestige cannot be ignored, as one elite Malay interviewee (M13) confessed, 'Hanging Zhang Xiaogang's works in my living room is a way of announcing my international taste to visitors.' In addition, cultural and cognitive values also co-exist in the symbol system. The Indian-origin teacher (I04) teaches the replica of the Lanting Preface as a 'mobile schoolroom' to demonstrate the beauty of the evolution of Chinese characters, while the young collector (YP09) emphasises the technological perspective of NFT Art, which 'grants digital immortality to traditional art through blockchain authentication', reflecting a strong sense of cultural and cognitive values in the symbol system. ', reflecting a strong perception drive.

Second, these value perceptions are further materialised along deep motivational satisfaction paths. For some Chinese consumers, collecting Lingnan School works is not only an aesthetic choice, but also an expression of cultural roots to 'rebuild broken family memories' (C19). At the same time, abstract ink has been recoded as a status symbol among the emerging Malay middle class, with M22 noting that 'it signals understated learning compared to gold.' Cultural learning is also an important driver, with one Indian designer (I15) stating, 'The lapis lazuli blue and ochre red of Dunhuang murals is a language of colours that transcends civilisations,' revealing the re-creative capacity of symbols in design discourse and cultural exploration.

Further, individual attitudes and subjective norms also form a significant influence on purchasing behaviour. From the attitudinal level, the ethical attributes of the material of the work become an important basis for judgement. For example, Malay collector M11 is adamant that he will not collect artworks that use pig bristle brushes: 'It violates the haram (taboo), and even if it's a famous work, I won't consider it.' From a subjective normative perspective, the values of social groups also have normative power. The Chinese clan associations encourage the collection of 'orthodox Chinese paintings' and are critical of experimental ink and wash (C24), while young collectors in Kuala Lumpur advocate that 'the combination of tradition and NFT is a symbol of progress' (YP17), demonstrating intergenerational value tensions.

4.3 The moderating role of cultural context

On this basis, section further explores the moderating role of cultural context, revealing how different ethnic groups and cultural identity types reconfigure the mode of interpretation of art symbols. Ethnic group differences are the primary variables. Among the Chinese ethnic group, the level of cultural identity significantly and positively moderated the emphasis on historical value ($r = 0.71$). Those with a high level of identification tended to collect literati paintings with a 'scholarly spirit' (e.g., Wen Zhengming's works as described in C05), while those with a lower level of identification preferred more decorative brushstrokes to avoid political associations. For Malay Muslims, religious norms override artistic value judgements, and even if they agree with Zhang Xiaogang's artistic status, they are rejected by 100% orthodox Muslims because of their figurative character (as verified by H3c). The Indian community, on the other hand, has taken on the role of 'cultural translator', with one curator (I09) interpreting Bada Shanren's 'Dead Lotus' as a visual metaphor for Hinduism's 'Brahman and Self', demonstrating the cross-cultural migration of symbols. This demonstrates the cross-cultural mobility of symbols.

The degree of acculturation, as the second level of regulation, presents a complex double effect. Assimilated Chinese tend to depreciate traditional symbols, as C28 puts it: 'Ming vases are feudal relics',

while they highly approve of the critical nature of contemporary art, which is 'close to the Western tradition'. In contrast, integrative consumers tend to engage in symbolic reinvention in creative ways, such as Penang-based artist P04, who combines the Minnan door god with an Arabian vine motif, emphasising: 'My creation is an embodiment of Malaysian pluralism'.

Finally, the level of artistic knowledge as a cognitive ability variable also constitutes a significant moderator of the depth of symbolic understanding. Expert collectors tend to recognise 'the symbolic isomorphism between oracle bones and blockchains' (A11) in Xu Bing's Book of Heaven, while novice collectors focus only on formal features, such as YP21's statement: "The texture of the gunpowder blasts is cool". This difference reveals the amplifying effect of expertise in the construction of symbolic meaning, further emphasising the important role of market education and cultural literacy in art consumption.

In summary, symbolic features not only play the triple functions of perceptual, motivational and social in art consumption, but also show a high degree of heterogeneity in their paths of influence depending on cultural identities, norms of beliefs and levels of knowledge. This finding provides a solid theoretical foundation and empirical evidence for subsequent art market segmentation strategies, symbolic design and cross-cultural promotion.

5.1 Interoperability of Research Findings and Theoretical Frameworks

Firstly, Baudrillard (1996) argues that contemporary consumer goods are increasingly 'dematerialised', becoming 'simulacra' (images) divorced from their original use value. In this study, however, the normative demands of religion on materiality have reintroduced a strong materiality to symbols. For example, a Malay-Muslim collector, M11, explicitly states that 'a pig bristle brush violates Haram (taboo) and is worthless even if it is an authentic Xu Beihong work.' This observation suggests that the meaning of symbols is not always outside the material, but is deeply embedded in cultural and ethical practices. In other words, symbols must regain their legitimacy through 'ethical embodiment' in specific contexts, a discovery that challenges the absolute premise of the 'hyper-reality' of symbols and fills in the gaps of the ethical dimension in the study of symbols.

Secondly, this paper provides a strong extension of the cultural distance paradox theory (Shenkar, 2012). This theory suggests that the greater the cultural distance, the lower the consumption acceptance. However, this study finds that religious compatibility can be a moderating variable that significantly reverses the exclusionary effect of cultural distance. In particular, Malay consumers' willingness to buy increased by up to 4.2 times after Chinese artworks incorporated Islamic geometric compositions. This phenomenon suggests that cross-cultural consumption is not entirely constrained by perceived 'cultural remoteness', but is more likely to be influenced by ethical and aesthetic consistency. Therefore, this paper proposes a new dimension of 'Ethical Proximity' to complement and modify the traditional cultural distance model, and emphasises the key role of religious, ethical and aesthetic compatibility in cross-cultural consumption.

Finally, in a review of McCracken's Meaning Migration Model (1986), the study further suggests directions for deepening the model.McCracken's classic framework assumes a unidirectional transfer of meaning from the world of culture to commodities, and then into the lives of consumers through rituals. However, this study reveals that in multicultural contexts, the flow of symbolic meanings is not unidirectional, but is accompanied by bidirectional negotiation and re-creation. For example, an Indian curator juxtaposes Bada Shanren's 'withered lotus' imagery with the concept of Aham (inner emotional space) in Tamil poetics, creating a cross-civilisation interpretation and resonance. This phenomenon suggests that consumers not only passively receive cultural meanings, but also actively give them new cultural contexts during the decoding process, thus constructing a 'Semiotic Symbiosis'. This model

breaks through the linear path of 'culture→commodity→consumer' and reveals the multi-directional and dynamic mechanism of meaning generation in the consumption process.

In summary, through empirical data and cross-cultural context, this study not only verifies the applicability of the existing theory of symbolic consumption, but also proposes three revision paths with theoretical breakthroughs: (a) the proposal of symbolic ethical embodiment; (b) the regulation of cultural distance effect by 'ethical proximity;' (c) the 'meaning symbiosis model' and the 'ethical proximity model'. (d) the multi-directional reconstruction of meaning transfer by the 'meaning symbiosis model'. These theoretical dialogues provide new analytical perspectives and theoretical frameworks for understanding art consumption behaviours in a global multicultural context.

5.2 Answers to Core Research Questions

For RQ1 (how Malaysian consumers perceive core symbolic features in artworks), the study identifies seven categories of symbolic features that show significant cultural preferences and cognitive differences across ethnic groups. Chinese consumers are highly focussed on historical heritage, with 91% of respondents actively mentioning the genealogical structure of literati paintings in their discussions, seeing them as a continuation of cultural identity. In contrast, Malay consumers prioritised halal compatibility, with 98% of respondents emphasising the decisive influence of material ethics on purchasing decisions, demonstrating the embodied nature of symbolic meaning in religious norms. The Indian community, on the other hand, has demonstrated its role as a cultural translator, tending to extract aesthetic symbols from art that are common across civilisations, for example, linking Dunhuang blue from Dunhuang murals with Neelam (sapphire blue) from Tamil culture, thus creating a unique platform for aesthetic resonance.

For RQ2 (how symbolic features influence art purchasing behaviour), the study reveals a clear set of 'dual-path mechanism' models: On the one hand, the emotion-identity path emphasises the causal chain between emotional arousal and identity. For example, the 'white space' imagery in ink paintings triggers nostalgia, which in turn stimulates the desire to express one's cultural roots. As C08, a Chinese collector, said, 'The fishing boats in Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains remind me of the fishing villages in Fujian, where I am from.' On the other hand, the cognitive-status path builds on the socio-cognitive value of symbols, particularly the relationship between artist prestige and intellectual aggrandisement. M13, a Malay elite, notes, 'Hanging Zhang Xiaogang's works in the living room is a way of announcing my international taste to visitors.' It can be seen that artwork here is not only an aesthetic object, but also a symbol of cultural capital.

In response to RQ3 (whether cultural context moderates the relationship between symbol interpretation and purchase intention), the moderating mechanisms show a clear hierarchy. First, religious norms are the strongest moderating variable, directly determining whether symbols are accepted or not. For example, even highly prestigious figurative works in art history still face total rejection among orthodox Muslim audiences.

Secondly, ethnic identity, as a moderate moderating variable, influences the value weights carried by symbols: the Chinese group is more inclined to give traditional literati paintings both historical and cultural values, whereas the Malay group places more emphasis on whether the artworks are in line with moral and religious norms. Finally, the moderating effect of the level of artistic knowledge is relatively weak, mainly in the process of dissemination and recreation of cultural and artistic knowledge. Higher knowledge groups are more likely to recognise cultural similarities and differences between deep symbols (e.g. the formal logic of oracle bones and blockchain), while those with lower levels of knowledge tend to be dominated by sensory impacts, reflecting the differences in consumption levels.

In summary, the three core research questions have been systematically answered, which not only reveal the complex relationship between symbol perception and behavioural decision-making in a multi-ethnic

context, but also establish a set of explanatory cultural conditioning models, providing a solid theoretical foundation for understanding cross-cultural art consumption in Southeast Asia.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a multidimensional and innovative contribution to the construction of cross-cultural art consumption theory. First, based on Shenkar's (2012) paradox of cultural distance, this paper proposes a corrective path and finds that Ethical Proximity can effectively transcend the constraints imposed by traditional cultural distance on consumer behaviour, especially in contexts with high religious aesthetic compatibility. For example, Malay consumers' acceptance of Chinese artworks with Islamic geometric compositions is significantly increased, challenging the classic proposition that the greater the cultural distance, the lower the likelihood of consumption.

Secondly, the study complements Baudrillard's (1996) neglect of materiality in his theory of symbolic consumption by proposing a new concept of Halal Semiotics, which emphasises that in a multireligious context such as Malaysia, symbolic 'body ethics' is a key factor in consumer judgement. The concept of 'Halal Semiotics' is proposed, emphasising that in a pluralistic religious context like Malaysia, the symbolic 'ethics of the body' is the key to consumer judgement. Factors such as halal pigments and purity of subject matter not only constitute faith considerations, but also a new logic of market stratification.

Furthermore, this study constructs a Cultural Hybrid Marketing Framework (CMF) to systematically summarise the three decoding positions of Malaysian consumers:

The Chinese group favours Heritage Decoding, seeking continuity of cultural identity through artistic symbols;

The Malay community practices Ethical Filtering, which censors art consumption through religious norms;

The Indian community demonstrates Bridging Decoding, which grafts Chinese symbols with their own culture for meaning and co-creation.

Finally, the study actively promotes the localisation of theories in non-Western contexts, attempts to incorporate the specificities of the ASEAN art market into the mainstream consumer behaviour research framework, echoes Ooi's (2021) initiative of de-Westernising theoretical paths, and takes an exploratory step to 'decode the South from the South'.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study presents several theoretical and practical contributions, the following limitations remain. Firstly, in terms of the sample composition, the interviewees mostly focus on urban art consumption elites (e.g. auction and gallery regulars), relatively neglecting rural or grassroots art use and interpretation experiences, which limits the comprehensiveness and broad applicability of the study. Secondly, in terms of artwork categories, this study focuses mainly on traditional and contemporary paintings, and does not yet cover emerging media such as performance art and digitally generated art. Finally, on the methodological level, although the study has established a solid theoretical framework through multiple sets of qualitative interviews, key variables such as religious conditioning effect and group cognitive bias still need to be verified through quantitative means such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in subsequent studies.

Future research directions can be developed in three areas. The first is to trace the path of symbols, and through longitudinal studies, to explore the meaning transmutation of Chinese art symbols among second-generation immigrants, for example, how 'landscape painting' has evolved from nostalgic memories to financial investment labels. Secondly, we expand the comparative regional framework, comparing the different impacts of Indonesia's Pribumi policy and Malaysia's Bumiputera system in the

art consumption market, and analysing how policy culture intervenes in the construction of symbols. Finally, technological tools can be introduced to improve the accuracy of the analysis, using neuroaesthetic methods such as eye-tracking and physiological response tests to further measure the physical avoidance and psychological conflict when Malay consumers are confronted with 'taboo symbols' (e.g., dragon tattoos, Buddha statues).

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