

***Identity, Modernity, and Occupation: The Colonial Style of Taiwanese Painter Chen Chengbo (1895-1947)***

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I feel very fortunate to have examined the personal journal of Chen Chengbo (1895-1947). It has become an invaluable source for my research about this Taiwanese oil painter, but what struck me most was the way the journal surfaced from obscurity over sixty years after Chen was killed by the Kuomintang government in the 228 Massacre of 1947. After Chen's death, his son hid the journal to protect the families it mentioned from government persecution, only deciding it was safe to release it this past fall. This modest yet heroic act to prevent others from meeting the same fate as his father underscores the violent and dramatic changes that Taiwan has experienced over the past century. Chen was born just a few months before the occupation began, he lived through the transitions that it brought for all Taiwanese of that era, and he was publicly killed in 1947 by the Nationalist Chinese government that replaced the Japanese colonial empire in governing Taiwan. In his short lifetime, he studied in Tokyo, taught in Shanghai, China, and then because of the Sino-Japanese war, returned to Taiwan and continued to exhibit and teach.

My research focuses on Chen Chengbo and issues of identity, hybridity,<sup>1</sup> and modernity, as manifested in his paintings. Taiwanese painters during the Japanese Occupation wrestled with the complexity of identifying themselves as modern painters in a Japanese colonial empire. Chen Chengbo serves as an excellent example of the transitions taking place during the occupation, as it presented him with opportunities for developing his artistic abilities but also challenged him as a Taiwanese individual and colonial subject. Chen worked within the artistic criterion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hybridity is a term that the theorist Homi Bhabha utilizes to describe the creation of new cultural forms within cross-cultural, colonial societies that reverses the colonial gaze to be directed back at the colonizers. See Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817", in *Location of Culture*, pp. 102-122.

colonizers and his exploration of this hybrid Taiwanese-Japanese culture in his paintings, as well as the seeming ease with which he moved from his work in Taiwan to Japan, to China, and finally back to Taiwan, highlights the complexity and cultural interchange of East Asian modernity in the early twentieth century. Chen, and his works, stand at the intersections of modernity, colonization, and the developing cultures of the three regions. As a painter, Chen was so broadly steeped in an all-encompassing East Asian cultural milieu that he, rather remarkably, became an award-winning artist in all three of these regions. My study aims to use his successful artistic career as a window into this cultural world of East Asia during the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular into the definitions of modernity and colonialist culture that developed in this non-European setting.

While it may seem that events occurring so recently as the Japanese Occupation (which ended with the close of World War II) and the 228 Massacre would be well documented, there is a surprising lack of independent research in this field. In the decades following Chen's death, the same forces that compelled his son to keep his journal hidden exerted pressure on scholarship about the colonization, suppressed information about the 228 Massacre, and restricted outside investigation. Much of the scholarship on Taiwanese art during the subsequent decades was heavily ideological. As a result, many subsequent studies treat Chen as a folk hero or attempt to advance a specific political agenda, making it difficult to distinguish the true story of Chen's life from the messages that others wish to convey. In the last few decades, access to the factual evidence of the occupation and primary resources has increased dramatically.

It is therefore extremely important to trace facts about Chen Chengbo and colonial Taiwan back to their primary sources to remove overt political biases and record the perspectives of eye-witnesses while they are still available. My sources are documents, such as the journal

mentioned, memories of individuals who lived through this period, and paintings that display the history of an island and an artist in constant transition. Essential parts of my research have been the interviews with the artist's son in Taiwan, as well as examining paintings from the family's private collection, along with additional travels to Taiwan, Japan, and China to seek additional sources from museums, libraries, and archives in the cities where Chen was born, educated, displayed his work, and died. This collection of resources has helped in separating facts from inaccuracies in other accounts of Chen's life.

In light of these research materials, along with the study of publications addressing this period in Taiwan's history and post-colonial concepts, I have had the opportunity to develop a fresh perspective and new understanding of Chen Chengbo's works. It is through an analysis of the primary documents alongside his paintings that reveals a clear development of his painting style, as well as the complexity of his identity as a colonial painter, and the understanding of hybridity within his paintings. The following presents a brief examination of Chen Chengbo's life as he traveled and exhibited throughout East Asia and an examination of three of his paintings that clearly depict issues such as colonial identity and hybridity. Although these present a very small portion of his considerable oeuvre, they demonstrate some fascinating characteristics of a creative and successful artist at the crossroads of modernity.

### **Identity, Modernity, and Hybridity**

Born in 1895 just a few months before the Japanese occupation began, Chen Chengbo was raised in the colonized state, completed further artistic training in Tokyo, was the first Taiwanese painter accepted into the Japanese Imperial Exhibition, and exhibited in all sixteen of the Taiwan National Exhibitions organized by the Japanese government. From this brief account, Chen could be considered an exemplar of the Japanese system instituted in Taiwan. Successful in

both his home region as well as the new “mother country” of Japan, his accomplishments could be extolled as an achievement by the colonial government.

In 1924, Chen entered the Western Painting department at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and after completing his four-year education at the Tokyo art school he continued on in the graduate program. The European styles taught by his teacher Okada Saburosuke (1869-1939) as well as other instructors in Tokyo, along with his exposure to exhibitions of European paintings and Japanese artists returning from Europe, revealed even more approaches to oil-painting than what he received while in Taiwan.

The following three examples of his paintings demonstrate the colonial influence on Chen’s painting style, as well as the effects on his Taiwanese identity, and the resulting hybridization of concepts and styles in his works.

The painting *Niju Bashi* is an excellent example that manifests a hybridization of forms. It demonstrates a shift in color palette, from the bright greens and reds typical in Taiwanese paintings of this period, to a lighter, almost pastel-like palette. This is most likely due to the influence of his education in Tokyo. In subject matter, Chen uses a very familiar sight to those living in Tokyo, the bridge to the entrance to the Imperial Palace. Stylistically, the work is a fascinating combination of a few Impressionist painters. The sky and water resemble the painting style of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, while the bridge reflects Vincent Van Gogh. Both of these artists were well known in painting circles in Japan as many of the instructors at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, as well as other art institutions in Japan, IIII studied the techniques of these artists in France. The thick, broad strokes are standard for Van Gogh’s bridge scenes, with each stroke forming the blocks of masonry. The sky contains the painterly brush strokes common for Renoir, with the light, wispy effects. Even the thinness of each line of the water is more similar to

Renoir. It is as if the bridge and the landscape surrounding it are in two different modes. The overall method of having the colors side by side to create a certain intensity of the paints and the mixing of the pigments in the brushstrokes is standard Impressionist work. While it is a common practice for artists to take characteristics of painters and apply them in a new way, the combination of styles that Chen uses is fascinating and demonstrates a hybrid quality.

### **Chen Chengbo in China**

After completing a four-year education at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, followed by some graduate work, Chen Chengbo moved to Shanghai to teach in 1929. In Chen's paintings from his period in China, instead of the "local color" of Taiwan or Japan, it is clear that he is working with a different color scheme, brushwork, and even subject matter.

The work *Clear Stream* from 1929 is one example from Chen Chengbo's time in Shanghai as a teacher and successful artist. As one of his entries to the First National Exhibition of 1929, where he was also invited to be a judge, it contains many similarities to Paul Cezanne's works, aside from the palette of the painting. Instead of the pastels in *Niju-bashi*, this work consists of more subdued shades like brown, dark green, and muted yellows. Many of the School of Paris artists like Henri Matisse, moved from painting in bright colors to a darker palette. This trend occurring in Paris with the Avant-Garde, also took hold in some art circles in Shanghai.

In addition, this painting indicates Chen's exposure to traditional Chinese paintings in China. The Chinese references may be observed in the tripartite division of the composition of foreground, midground, and background, with a tree reaching from the foreground towards the sky of the background. The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) artist Ni Zan (1301-1374) is renowned for his landscapes in this type of composition layout. Chen's painting also recalls in its subject matter the Chinese tradition of painting one of the views of West Lake, called Melting Snow at

Broken Bridge, which is the focus of this painting. I propose that this painting can be understood not just as a work demonstrating the combination of East meeting West, but is also more complex with its hybrid quality of amalgamating multiple styles and ideas to form one painting that reflects a more novel painting objective. This work traveled to the Chicago World's Fair as a representative piece in the Chinese Village. This association as a representative of China in a world event, while still a Japanese subject, adds to the complexity of Chen's Taiwanese identity, and also attests to the multi-national nature of his artistic individuality.

### **Chen Chengbo in Taiwan 1932-47**

After the violence of the Shanghai Incident in 1932, Chen sent his family back to Taiwan and moved to the Japanese concession in Shanghai. Shortly thereafter, he found himself back in Taiwan and on returning to the island, continued to have works accepted into the official exhibitions. Judging solely from the paintings that were accepted into the ten *Taiten* and six *Futen*<sup>2</sup> exhibitions in which he gained entrance, his works revisited the subject matter and style which had become commonplace for Taiwanese artists of the time.

*Coconut Trees* serves as an example of Chen's continued pastiche technique, after his return to Taiwan. In terms of perspective, Chen provides an all-encompassing angle where the viewer peers through the trees able to see the floor of the environment from above, figures and the trunks of the coconut trees at direct eyesight as well as the bottom of the palms of the trees as if looking from below. In essence it is similar to what is seen in Northern Song Dynasty (960-

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<sup>2</sup> The *Taiten* refers to the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition, and was begun in 1927 and lasted until 1936, with a one-year disruption in 1937 because of the Sino-Japanese War. The *Futen* was a continuation of this exhibition after the war, restarting in 1938 and ran through 1943. For more on these exhibits and their influence on the Taiwan art world see, Wang Hsiu-hsiung, "The Development of Official Art Exhibitions in Taiwan during the Japanese Occupation," in *War, Occupation, and Creativity*, pp 92-120.

1127) landscapes where multiple viewpoints are depicted to capture the entirety of the scene. While not naturalistic, it becomes a reappearing characteristic in many of Chen's paintings.

Also worthy of note is how this piece seemingly represents another of the exotic and tropical scenes of the island, as promoted by the Japanese colonial government. The Japanese-constructed Taipei Botanical Garden, is what is depicted in this scene. Coconut trees were an extremely popular subject matter for Japanese artists to portray in their works sent to the national exhibition in Tokyo, highlighting the tropical and exotic fauna of their newfound colony. What is interesting in Chen's paintings is that while the fauna are the title and subject matter of the work, it is what peers through the background that is of great interest. The architectural structure just beyond the fence-like assemblage is the former Taiwan provincial government's administrative office, built before the colonial era by the Qing empire.<sup>3</sup> Built towards the end of the Qing reign in Taiwan, it was torn down and replaced by a structure honoring the coronation of the new Showa Emperor. The structure Chen depicts then, is the rebuilt portions of the structure in the botanical gardens. Essentially what we have in this piece is this hybrid quality of Chen's life. The portrayal of the coconut trees appeases the Japanese adjudicators, blended with the Chinese history of the past, deconstructed by the occupiers and reconstructed within a display of modernization.

## **Conclusion**

My goal is to explore the topics of identity and colonialism in the Japanese Occupation of Taiwan through the context of Chen and his painting. Because of the political, social, and even emotional nature of this subject, it has lent itself to misinterpretation and over-interpretation. For these reasons, there is a gap in the art historical literature. I hope that my research of Chen will

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<sup>3</sup> *Buzhengshisi Yamen.*

highlight the value of cross-cultural perspectives and the significance of the development of identity within a colonial state. An additional, long-term goal in my research is to help define the unique stylistic features of Taiwanese artists and to build a framework for better understanding their works apart from and in light of Japanese and Chinese traditions.

Where historical accounts have captured the broad strokes of the transitions of Taiwan, Chen's paintings and the records of his life provide unique windows into the reality of an individual's experience during this tumultuous period. His work stands as a testament to both the challenges and amazing possibilities of a world of converging cultures that is just as relevant today as it was in Chen's time.

### Figures

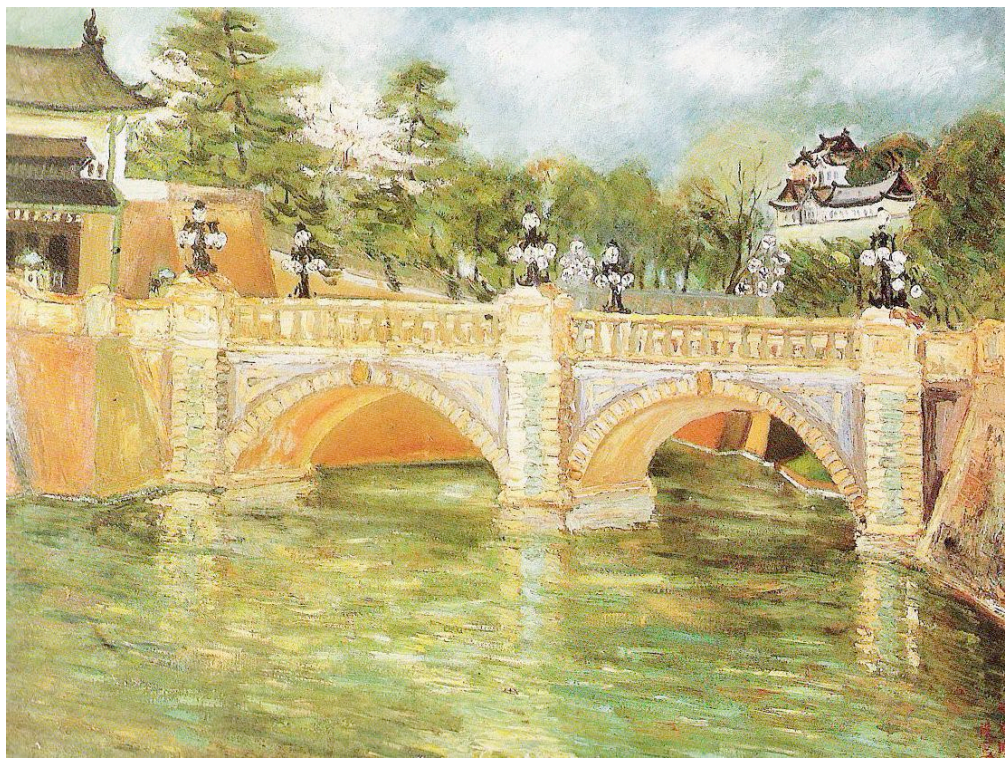


Fig. 1, *Niju-bashi*. Undated, Private Collection.





Fig. 2, *Clear Stream*, 1929, Private Collection.



Fig. 3, *Coconut Trees*, 1938, Private Collection.

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