



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural Identity in Art: A Comparative Review of Its Role in Contemporary Mural Art in China and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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This review examines the role of cultural identity in shaping contemporary community-based mural art practices in China and Malaysia. Drawing on critical and interdisciplinary perspectives, it investigates how mural artists engage with local cultural heritage, social diversity, and urban transformations in their works. Through a comparative analysis of selected cases, the review highlights the similarities and differences between the two contexts in terms of the forms, contents, politics of mural-making as a participatory process of identity representation and place-making. It argues that while community murals serve as vital platforms for cultural expression, social empowerment and urban dialogue, they are also constrained by the tensions of uneven participation, state/market cooption, and limited sustainability. The article offers critical reflections on the need to develop more inclusive, equitable and transformative approaches to socially-engaged muralism.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background and Significance

In recent decades, there has been a notable rise of community-based mural art in many Asian cities as a dynamic medium for expressing cultural identities, engaging publics, and revitalizing places in the context of urban redevelopment and cultural globalization. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in China and Malaysia, two rapidly urbanizing and culturally diverse Asian countries with rich histories of public art and community activism.

In China, murals have evolved from a socialist instrument of political propaganda to a vibrant field of artistic experiments, social interventions, and cultural representations in the post-reform era (Zhao, 2021). Emerging from both top-down state initiatives and bottom-up civic actions, the pluralistic mural scene encompasses propaganda murals that promote nationalist ideologies, avant-garde murals that address critical urban issues (*Figure 1*), and vernacular murals that articulate local identities and aspirations (Zuo, 2023; Zheng, 2023). These murals (*Figure 2*) are situated in a complex interaction between a particular social system, a market environment, and an increasingly diverse civil society.



Figure 1: Beijing 798 Art District Mural (Photo by the authors)



Figure 2: Nanjing Beitingxiang Old Street Murals (Photo by the authors)

Similarly, community-based murals have proliferated across Malaysian cities since the late 1990s, engaging with the country's multicultural heritage, diverse historical experiences, and evolving perspectives on modernity (Rahman, 2021; Abdullah et al., 2018). Pioneered by art collectives, independent artists and community organizations, these murals range from state-commissioned pieces celebrating national identity and urban development to community-based initiatives highlighting the diverse cultural experiences, local perspectives and creative expressions of various social groups, including different ethnic communities, working-class residents and mobile populations (Abd Rahman, 2022). Operating at the intersections of cultural heritage, urban development policies, and civic engagement, these murals (*Figure 3*) have become important sites for community identity formation, local placemaking, and participatory urbanism in Malaysia (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2019).



Figure 3: Murals in George Town, Penang (Photo by the authors)

Contextualizing Community Murals in China and Malaysia

Evolutions and Diversifications of Community Murals

In China, community-based murals have undergone significant transformations in the post-reform era, diversifying from a predominant state instrument of political propaganda to a more complex field of artistic creation, social intervention and cultural representation (Zuo, 2023). Alongside the continuing presence of state-sponsored 'mainstream' murals (*Figure 4*) that visualize official ideologies and imaginations of nationalism, progress and harmonious society, there has been a notable growth of more grassroots-oriented and socially-engaged 'new murals' (Zhao, 2021). since the 1990s (Hao, 2020). Initiated by avant-garde artists, NGOs, migrant communities and urban

residents, these murals often articulate more intimate senses of places, critical voices of marginalized groups, and visions of alternative urban futures (Zheng, 2023). They take more diverse and experimental artistic languages ranging from social realism to pop art, site-specific installations to community-mapping (Feng, 2020).



Figure 4: Chinese subway station murals (Photo by the authors)

Meanwhile, the development of community murals in Malaysia has been shaped by the country's multicultural composition, historical development, and evolving cultural landscape (Poon, 2023; Wen, 2013). On the one hand, there has been a state-driven endeavor to construct a shared 'Malaysian identity' through public art that celebrates the selective heritage, traditions and achievements of its diverse yet asymmetric ethnic communities. On the other hand, a community-based mural movement has flourished since the late 1990s, enriching public spaces with diverse cultural narratives and social perspectives, particularly highlighting the experiences, local stories and aspirations of various social groups including working-class residents, mobile populations and displaced communities. (Abd Rahman et al., 2020). These murals (*Figure 5*) aimed to promote cross-cultural understanding and community cohesion through collaborative artistic creation, encouraging inclusive participation across different social groups (Bin Ahmad et al., 2020).



Figure 5: "Old Kuala Lumpur" Mural (<https://thehoneycombers.com>)

In both contexts, the development of community mural art has been shaped by various international artistic movements and contemporary public art practices (Hao, 2020). While drawing inspiration from global influences, these artistic expressions have evolved to reflect distinct local characteristics and sociocultural contexts (Tian, 2018). This adaptation has led to the emergence of diverse mural categories in China (*Figure 6-7*), including urban neighborhood murals, community restoration murals, educational institution murals, and cultural tourism murals (Li, 2022). Similarly in Malaysia, different styles have developed to represent community engagement, social dialogue, and cultural celebrations (Juhari et al., 2022). These developments demonstrate how community mural art functions as an adaptive medium that integrates international artistic approaches with local cultural elements and social contexts.



Figure 6: The transformation of Chinese contemporary mural style (Photo by the authors)

Wider Socio-Political Dynamics

The development of community murals reflects the complex interplay between social changes and urban transformations in China and Malaysia.

In China, the post-reform period has witnessed significant transformations in governance and social structures. The economic reforms have led to a more diverse urban-rural development pattern and social composition (Chen, 2019). The evolving social environment has created new opportunities for artistic innovation and public expression (Chen, 2022). Within this context, various administrative and regulatory frameworks continue to shape artistic practices and their public presentation (Guo, 2019). The 'new murals' (*Figure 7*) emerge in this dynamic environment, where artists navigate multiple institutional relationships and market forces, while addressing questions of artistic authenticity and urban development objectives.



Figure 7: Chen Yingjie - "Residual Temperature" Mural (<https://image.baidu.com/>)

Recent decades have witnessed evolving social dynamics and economic developments that shape different communities' participation in public life (Tian, 2023). Community murals (*Figure 8*) emerged within this context as artistic expressions that contribute to discussions about national identity and civic engagement (Rahman, 2021). These artistic practices navigate complex relationships between cultural preservation, urban development initiatives, and community engagement, while facing contemporary challenges related to commercialization and institutional priorities (Li et al., 2024).



Figure 8: Contemporary Community Murals in Malaysia (Photo by the authors)

Community mural practices in both contexts reflect the dynamic interaction between social development, cultural identity and urban transformation processes. They demonstrate how different social actors, including institutional bodies, market participants, artists, and local residents, contribute to the cultural and physical development of urban spaces. These practices illustrate the multifaceted relationship between artistic expression, community identity, and urban development in Asian contexts.

Representing and Negotiating Cultural Identities

A key issue examined in the current literature is how community-based murals serve as an artistic medium for representing and negotiating cultural identities of places and groups through their contents, styles, and processes of creation (Tian, 2023). The studies show that these murals often engage with local histories, collective memories, socio-cultural diversities, and place-specific characteristics to construct and communicate a sense of shared identity and belonging. These visual

expressions also reflect the multilayered nature of cultural representation, as the murals contribute to an ongoing dialogue about community narratives and social perspectives.

Engaging with Local Heritage and Memories

Research indicates that community murals often enhance local distinctiveness by incorporating architectural elements, historical artifacts, traditional practices (*Figure 9*), and cultural motifs that reflect shared heritage (Zeng, 2018). In China, public art projects present historical themes and cultural elements in various ways: official installations often celebrate national achievements and collective memories, while community-initiated murals tend to focus on local traditions and neighborhood stories (Zheng, 2023). However, these artistic interpretations of the past warrant careful consideration regarding their contemporary relevance and accuracy.



Figure 9: The Old Woman Twisting Ropes for Flower Pots (Shi , 2023)

Some studies suggest that community murals play a role in shaping and reinterpreting local identities by engaging with challenging or overlooked aspects of the past, such as historical conflicts, periods of social upheaval, urban transformation, and intergroup tensions. By addressing collective memories of hardship and resilience, these murals function as a form of public art therapy and a means for communities to process identity shifts and foster mutual understanding. However, such critical initiatives are often constrained by self-censorship, external pressures, and the predominance of commercialized nostalgia. The case of Malaysia highlights similar complexities, balancing portrayals of harmonious multiculturalism with the challenge of representing sensitive historical narratives in community murals.

Expressing and Encountering Social Differences

A recurring theme is how community murals reflect social diversity and foster intercultural dialogue in multi-ethnic urban contexts (Zeng, 2018). Research in China indicates that community murals increasingly highlight the cultures of ethnic minorities, rural-urban migrants, women, and other underrepresented groups, recognizing their presence and contributions to the social and cultural fabric of cities (Wu, 2023). Some murals promote a sense of inclusion and social harmony by depicting everyday scenes of people sharing meals, engaging in conversations, and working collaboratively across different groups. In Malaysia, community murals frequently draw on cultural motifs, folklore, and multilingual elements to celebrate the richness of local heritage (*Figure 10*) as a resource for place-making (Woon, 2023).



Figure 10: Murals in George Town, Penang (Photo by the authors)

However, studies point out potential challenges in the representation of minority cultures, including the risks of simplification, stereotyping, and prioritizing tourist appeal over deeper cultural understanding (Ley & Cybriwsky, 2018). Research also raises questions about the dynamics of representation, particularly when artists from different social backgrounds depict marginalized groups, which can inadvertently highlight differences or reinforce external perspectives (Zuo, 2023). In contrast, collaborative projects created within minority communities often emphasize the importance of cultural preservation and local participation in shaping shared identities.

Imagining Alternative Urban Futures

Besides connecting to pasts and presents, studies show that community murals also project desirable urban futures and articulate people's aspirations for their communities (Zhu, 2023). In China, some murals depict utopian visions of eco-cities, community gardens (*Figure 11*), public transport and lively neighborhoods to counter the alienating and unsustainable realities of hyper-urbanization (Wu, 2023). They represent residents' desires for sociable, walkable and culturally vibrant cities as opposed to car-dependent and socially isolated urban sprawl (Zeng & Guo, 2018).



Figure 11: Li Guxia- "Chong Qin" Mural (Photo by the authors)

In Malaysia, community murals in underserved neighborhoods often reflect residents' hopes and dreams for their communities. These artworks serve as a platform for envisioning and advocating for positive changes such as enhancing living environments, upgrading facilities, and creating new economic possibilities. By visualizing the community's aspirations, these murals can inspire dialogue and collaboration towards inclusive urban development (Ley & Cybriwsky, 2018). Some murals incorporate traditional motifs and ecological themes (*Figure 12*) to explore alternative visions of sustainability beyond prevailing narratives of growth and modernization (Muhammad et al., 2016). However, studies observe that these envisioned futures are often short-term and fragmented, facing challenges in evolving into sustained initiatives due to resource constraints and limited institutional support (Mohamad et al., 2022).



Figure 12: Hatta' Mural (Hatta, Malaysia, 2024)

Practicing Participation and Public Engagement

The literature examines the social dynamics of community participation in mural projects and their role in urban development. Research analyzes various engagement approaches implemented in these projects, including community consultation, collaborative design, skills development workshops, and maintenance programs (Abdullah et al., 2018). Studies also reveal that participation processes can face operational complexities stemming from differing organizational structures, communication styles, and stakeholder priorities among artists, institutional partners, community organizations, local residents, and the broader public (Chen, 2019).

Collaborative Mural-Making

Many studies document the collaborative approaches of mural-making that involve community members in generating themes, images, and narratives through story-telling, asset-mapping, and digital crowd-sourcing workshops. In some cases, residents also co-paint and mosaic murals with artists learning creative skills. These processes can enable participants to re-discover community values, re-imagine place identities, and co-create a shared public culture (Zheng, 2023). But studies find varying levels of community inputs, with some projects pre-determining contents and tokenizing residents in accessory roles (*Figure 13*). Time limits and language barriers also hinder meaningful dialogues.



Figure 13: Kuching Community Mural (Photo by the authors)

Research also suggests that the collaborative dynamics are shaped by the trust-building, facilitation, and translation skills of artists and community organizers. Some manage to establish rapport with residents as empathetic listeners and co-learners of local idioms; others embody outsider mentalities of aesthetic critique and social engineering. Ethnic, gender, age, and class differences between artists and communities also mediate their interactions in complex ways (Zheng, 2023). More reciprocal collaborations emerge when mural-making is embedded in the ongoing community development processes beyond one-off projects (Abd Rahman, 2020).

Engaging Community Ownership & Publics

Studies also examine how community murals engage residents' long-term ownership and wider public participation beyond the painting phase (Jasmi et al., 2021). Some projects conduct community exhibitions, guided tours, and opening ceremonies to foster residents' identification with and non-expert interpretations of the artworks. Digital mapping, hashtag campaigns, and NFTs are used to amplify community voices and expand public interactions with murals. However, many mural projects lack such feedback mechanisms and sustained community programming after completion.

Scholars argue for the importance of building community capacity and public pedagogy through mural-making. Some Malaysian cases show positive youth development when young residents learn mural skills from more experienced peers and lead their own projects afterwards. Study tours and oral history collections with senior residents around murals also strengthen intergenerational learning and place attachment (Jalaluddin et al., 2022). In China, some universities offer mural courses to train 'art citizen' talents and engage students with urban communities (Li, 2022).

Research also points to the need for inclusive cultural governance to sustain community murals as public goods. Studies find that most murals face issues of weathering, vandalism, and redevelopment that threaten their survival (Bertasa et al., 2020). Public participation in mural evaluation, fundraising, and conservation is limited with responsibilities falling mostly on artists and underfunded neighbourhood committees. Incorporating murals into cultural heritage management and public art policies with clearer community roles and resources is crucial (Tian, 2018). More innovations are needed to transform community murals from temporal projects into 'permanent platforms' of collective place-making.

Analysis suggests that community art initiatives face institutional and operational challenges when integrated into urban development frameworks. Contemporary urban planning approaches may prioritize aesthetic standardization and place marketing over diverse participatory outcomes and community dialogue. This can result in reduced creative autonomy for community artists and demographic shifts in neighborhood composition. Studies emphasize the importance of balancing institutional objectives with grassroots artistic expression and community representation in public art development (Liu, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This article has critically reviewed the current literature on the practices and politics of community-based mural art in contemporary China and Malaysia. Through a comparative analysis of selected cases, it highlights the similarities and differences between the two contexts in terms of the forms, contents, and participatory processes of mural-making as means of identity representation and place-making. The findings show that community murals serve as vital platforms for cultural expression, social empowerment and urban dialogue, articulating people's desires for heritage preservation, inclusive diversity, participatory development and urban aspirations.

The review makes several conceptual, evidence-based and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances a critical and relational understanding of cultural identities as contingent subjects of ongoing sociocultural construction, symbolic articulation, and collective negotiation through community-based public art. Empirically, it synthesizes insights from recent research on the evolving roles and impacts of community muralism in two major Asian urban centers, examining its interfaces with institutional frameworks, cultural policies, and identity formation. Practically, it provides methodological insights for designing and assessing community art projects as participatory social practice, emphasizing the importance of inclusive engagement, local embedding, and adaptive governance.

Theoretically, it advances a critical and relational understanding of cultural identities not as essential attributes, but as contingent subjects of artistic articulations, public deliberations and collective practices in place- and context-specific power configurations. It reconceptualizes community murals as performative contact zones of identity-making and world-making through embodied encounters, symbolic re-imaginings, and material interventions in the social production of urban spaces.

Empirically, this study synthesizes insights from recent research on community mural art's evolving roles and impacts in two major Asian urban centers experiencing rapid development. Through comparative analysis, it examines how this globally circulating yet locally adapted form of public art interfaces with institutional frameworks, urban cultural policies, and community identity formation in contemporary China and Malaysia. The research highlights the interplay between international artistic practices and local cultural contexts, while analyzing the organizational dynamics among various stakeholders in urban art development.

Practically, this research provides methodological insights for developing, implementing, and assessing community-based mural art projects as participatory social practice. It emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive engagement processes that acknowledge community diversity and facilitate meaningful stakeholder participation. The findings suggest strategies for balancing

institutional requirements with community aspirations, while addressing practical challenges in project implementation across different urban contexts.

Built on the current research, the article also proposes some agendas for future studies on community mural art: 1) conducting more comparative research across different geographies, cultures, and politics to develop pluriversal understandings of participatory urbanism; 2) adopting innovative methodologies to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences, cultural translations and public pedagogies of community art-making; 3) connecting studies on community murals with wider debates on urban crises, cultural mobilizations, and public futures to explore the transformative potentials of socially-engaged creativity.

In conclusion, in an era of rapid development, equitable and transformative approaches to community-based mural art as a participatory medium for identity-building, place-making, and urban democratization in an age of unsettling changes and uncertainties. It calls for more critical and caring research to support and sustain such initiatives as emancipatory spaces of collective imagination and social innovation.

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