# AN EXPERIMENT IN CONCEPTUAL ART BASED ON THE HOKKIEN ZHI REN IN MALACCA OLD TOWN

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PERPUSTAKAAN UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged

Yi Li

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## ABSTRACT

## AN EXPERIMENT IN CONCEPTUAL ART BASED ON THE HOKKIEN ZHI REN IN MALACCA OLD TOWN

This study discusses the possibility of using the signified of the Hokkien Zhi Ren as the element to express the conception of art. The possibility is based on two attempts. One is a serious-minded analysis of the meaning, the form, and the relationship between the meaning and form of the Hokkien Zhi Ren; another is an experiment of application in which using the signified of the Hokkien Zhi Ren through transformation to express the conception of art through final fifteen works practice. The methodology of this study is experiment, and the main method in this research is participant observation. Five instruments were applied in this study, namely the theories of Conceptual Art, the basic Art elements, the Closure principle of Gestalt, the filter theory of Psychology, and the techniques of making the Hokkien Zhi Ren. To obtain the first-hand information about the situation of the Hokkien Zhi Ren in current time, and its correlative techniques, more than two months were spent for participant observation in Malacca old town. Comparisons with the counterview which was against to "play China Card", this study proves it would be able to enrich the Conceptual Art creation, through studying the traditional elements seriously, and finding out the relationship between the traditional elements and Modern society exquisitely, without utilitarian.



## ABSTRAK

## AN EXPERIMENT IN CONCEPTUAL ART BASED ON THE HOKKIEN ZHI REN IN MALACCA OLD TOWN

Pembelajaran ini melibatkan aspek aspek yang serius dengan menggunakan teori-teori Hokkien Zhi Ren sebagai keutamaan untuk menerangkan konsep kesenian ini dengan lebih mendalam. Aspek ini berdasarkan kepada dua idea iaitu pertama ia menganalisis proses pengertian, bentuk, serta perhubungannya dengan bentuk Hokkien Zhi Ren, yang kedua ialah pengunaan applikasi experimen tentang aspek khas Hokkien Zhi Ren bagi menentukanya melalui 15 langkah proses perkerjaan yang akhir dalam konsep kesenian ini. Dua methodologi pendidikan digunakan iaitu experimen dan langkah utamanya melibatkan perhatian yang serios. Lima cara digunakan bagi proses ini: 1) theori kesenian yang berkonsep; 2) elemen-elemen kesenian yang asas; 3) theori Gestalt; 4) theori psikologi; 5) teknik mengumpukan maklumat Hokkien Zhi Ren. Untuk mendapatkan semua maklumat terkini atau utama tentang keadaan Hokkien Zhi Ren zaman moden serta teknik yang bercorak dan beranika, masa dua bulan telah diambil untuk mengunjungi Bandar Melaka bagi tujuan tervsebut. Cara berdialog dan temuduga di kalangan penduduk setempat membolehkan konsep kesenian yang lama dan moden digabungkan dengan penuh keyakinan.



**KEYWORDS** 

Conceptual Art, Signified, Hokkien Zhi Ren, Post-Modern Art, Malacca.



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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Background

Joseph Kosuth, who is an influential American Conceptual artist, expressed his idea in his article "Art after Philosophy" as following: "All art (after Duchamp<sup>1</sup>) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually" and he also considered "Art changed its focus from the form to the language to what was being said." (Joseph Kosuth, 1969:844). The content of "was being said" is just the signified of the art of work. The term, signified is often appeared in art criticism to denote the conceptual aspect of the work lately. Actually, it was a term of linguistics, According to Ferdinand de Saussure,

the sign is constituted by a signifier and a signified. The signified is the conceptual aspect of the sign, while the signifier is its material aspect. They are relationally defined in terms of each other and constitutes together the sign. It is the theoretical relationships between signifier and signified that lets language temporarily fix meaning in different situations<sup>2</sup> (Saussure, 1965:67).

As the Conceptual Art movement brought the great achievement to art development, in art academic field, it also strengthened the view that the West is the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This term is also used in art and other field. More information, see Ferdinand the book: Course in General Linguistics.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp (July 28, 1887-October 2, 1968) was a French artist whose work and ideas had considerable influence on the development of post-World War II Western art, and whose advice to modern art collectors helped shape the tastes of the Western art world. (Wikipedia, This page was last modified 13:47,21 March 2007, Gnu Free Documentation License)

center of art in world; at the same time, Eastern artists lost their identity on the art stage. Since the mid - 1985s, some Chinese artists gradually realized the large disparity between Eastern art and Western art, and they also realized the limitation of the center of art world. Therefore, as the representative, Xu Bin, Lv Shengzhong, Cai Guogiang, Gu Wenda, and some other artists started to attend and find the specific elements from Chinese traditional culture and thought which are familiar with them. They wanted to find an outlet to advance the Chinese art development, through using the Chinese elements and thought. It is called "Play China Card"<sup>3</sup> and "exporting china"<sup>4</sup>. Actually, this situation even suits Joseph Kosuth's view, in the same article, he emphasized: "the 'value' of particular artist after Duchamp can be weighed according to what they added to the conception of art." (Kosuth, 1969:844) .The content of the signified in an individual work is a possibility that shaped by the final direction of each meaning and signified of inside element coming together into being. As an element, the "ready-made<sup>5</sup>" started to be used in the new way by Duchamp in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gradually, the ready-made and commodity have been used by more and more artists, likes a part of the Modern public culture. And, judging from the results we have seen, it really drew art closer to our life, and which is another way to saying, it had blurred the boundary that between art and life,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This term "ready-made" was created by Duchamp in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, it is the original and more commonly found object. See Hugh Honour &John Fleming, 1999, *A World History of Art*, Fifth Edition, pp.803, London: Laurence King Publishing



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Play China Card, is a claim that was preached by a Chinese artist, Cai Guoqiang, and was topic of China area in the Venice Biennale, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The very famous art critic, Li Xianting, considered that the situation of art today in the world likes palying card. The important thing is what the rule of the game was constituted by occidental, on the one hand, if you want to join, you must be a role; On the other hand, the game also needs the China card. For getting more information, see 《题内续补〈'春卷'与'外销瓷'〉》.

and let the form of art became secondary, the concept became the most important aspect in the art of work. Well then, except the commodities, whether or not the traditional items can also be used, and may add something to the conception of art? Same as the early attempts of artists, this study just based on the thought and idea above, to make an analysis and experiment to another Chinese traditional folk art – Hokkien Zhi Ren<sup>6</sup>. The aim of this study is to find the possibility of using the signified of Hokkien Zhi Ren to achieve the conception expression in art creation.

#### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The main concern of this study is to find out the possibility if the Hokkien Zhi Ren's meaning can be useful in Conceptual art creation.

#### 1.2 The Objectives of the Research

- 1. The purpose of the study is to know what the meaning of the Hokkien Zhi Ren is.
- This study is undertaken to know how the form of the Hokkien Zhi Rencarries its meaning.
- 3. This research is to analyze the relationship between complete meaning and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Hokkien Zhi Ren is a folk offering which made from paper and bamboo. More detail description of the Hokkien Zhi Ren see Chapter two.

incomplete meaning of the Hokkien Zhi Ren during the process of transformation.

- 4. This study is also undertaken to check the possibility if the Hokkien Zhi Ren's meaning cane be useful in Conceptual art creation,
- 5. This research brings a new form to conceptual art.
- 6. This study preserves the traditional folk art, and creates a new way to apply it.

### 1.3 Focus of the Research

The study focuses on the possibility of using the meaning of the Hokkien Zhi Ren from Malacca old town in Conceptual Art creation.

#### 1.4 Hypothesis

The meaning and the transformed shape of the Hokkien Zhi Ren can variously be used as element to express different conceptions in art work.



## 1.5 Significance of the Study

- This study attempts and proves the traditional items can also be used as element for Conceptual Art creation from theoretical angle and practice.
- To treat the Hokkien Zhi Ren as the object in art research is still rare in academic database, so this study will be the supplement to enrich it in the field.
- This study makes a new use to the traditional folk art. It would be an example to encourage later researcher taking a further step to realize the value of traditional culture, and apply it more widely and deeply.
- 4. The information that has been recorded truly is going to disappear fleetly. This study would be an attempt to help preserve its authenticity, and hence, minimizing the effect of culture erosions.

## 1.6 Limitation of the Study

- The information of paper offering is in the academic database, especially about using the signified of Hokkien Zhi Ren to express conception of art. Therefore, the insufficiency of the literature hinders researcher.
- 2. As a skill of life, the technique of the Hokkien Zhi Ren making is not easy to be learnt, because it is main way of the craftsmen earning their living. Such handcraft



in folk is only to impart to their family member. Therefore, not all information of the Hokkien Zhi Ren could be collected, so it would be incomplete information collection.

- 3. All techniques of Hokkien Zhi Ren making can not be learned in a short time. It needs more practices on difference of those special materials. So this study is only a record of the basic techniques and simple principle of the Hokkien Zhi Ren.
- 4. Every craftsman has his own techniques and comprehension, causing the techniques and forms of the human figure, sometimes are different. So this research can not collect all the personal technique and all different forms of the paper human figure. But the most outstanding techniques and forms can be found out in the thesis.
- The literatures which about other artists using ethical elements to do conceptual art are also not entire, but are familiar with researcher.



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