

Reimagining Junks in Taiwanese Art: Transcultural Translation and Virtual Interpretation of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's Paintings

Chao Jung Chen, National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper examines the transcultural translation of art in the junk paintings of Taiwanese artist Kuo Hsueh-Hu (1908–2012) under Japanese colonial influence, as well as the virtual reality interpretation of his paintings with modern technology. This paper explores how transcultural influences and elements intertwine in junk painting and how junk ships in the Asian maritime era are reviving and reconnecting viewers with virtual reality today. Drawing on Erwin Panofsky's iconology and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and the third space, this paper interprets Kuo Hsueh-Hu's paintings through the lens of transcultural translation, cultural diversity, and modern adaptations of virtual reality. Kuo once studied with the Japanese artist Gobara Koto, became the first Taiwanese artist to depict junk painting with gouache, and was awarded the Sunrise Prize (Asahi-shō) at the 9th Taiwan Art Exhibition in 1935 during the Japanese colonial period. As a renowned Taiwanese virtual artist, Hsin-Chien Huang reinvented junks using virtual technology in *Three States of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's Home Gazing* in 2020. This research investigates how junk is reinterpreted through transcultural translation and influences in Kuo's paintings, as well as its modern interpretation through virtual reality.

Keywords: Taiwanese art, junk, Kuo Hsueh-Hu, Hsin-Chien Huang, virtual art

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Introduction

Since ancient times, the junk ship was a wooden sailing vessel that operated between the southeastern coast of China, Taiwan, and the seas of Southeast Asia during the 16th and 17th centuries. The junk ship was not only a tool for international trade but also became a unique cultural landscape in the waters around Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period. The Tamsui River winds through the Taipei Basin in northern Taiwan, connecting to the sea. During the Japanese colonial period, Dadaocheng was the most important international trade port town along the Tamsui River and was also a foreign settlement area at the time, serving as a cultural intersection for international trade.

Taiwanese artist Kuo Hsueh-Hu was born in Fanzigou, not far from the Tamsui River. The junks moored along the riverbank became a unique and profound hometown memory from Kuo Hsueh-Hu's childhood. Kuo Hsueh-Hu was a self-taught artist with discipline and hard work and was also a diligent student of the Japanese artist Gobara Koto in colonial Taiwan. At the age of 20, he won the Provincial Exhibition in 1927. Kuo was very skilled at portraying the natural landscape with his close observation and was one of the most famous gouache artists at the first chapter of Taiwanese art history.

This paper will examine the transcultural elements and virtual interpretation of the Kuo's junk painting *Colorful Boats on the Tamsui River* (1982) from the perspective of iconology and cultural theories, aiming to explore the cultural diversity and modern interpretation with virtual reality by the Taiwanese virtual artist Hsin-Chien Huang's work *Three States of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's Home Gazing* in 2020. This artwork has been exhibited in the 2020 Kuo Hsueh-Hu Exhibition in Taiwan Art Museum, awarded the National Winner of the Asia Academy Creative Awards in 2020, and exhibited in the joint-exhibition *Blossoming: The Tech-Art in Formosa* in the Meet Digital Center in Milan, Italy, in 2024. Here I would like to explore the transcultural elements and virtual interpretation of this junk painting, which has conveyed both transcultural diversity and virtual artistic interpretation nowadays.

Methodology

In this paper, I would like to analyze the paintings of Kuo, Hsueh-Hu using the theories of visual analysis and explore the in-depth meanings of the symbols in his paintings. Using visual textual analysis with the iconological theory of Erwin Panofsky, the research provides an in-depth analysis of transcultural symbols in Kuo Hsueh-Hu's art. According to Erwin Panofsky, the principles of iconology include three stages: in the first stage of "pre-iconographical description," "primary of natural subject matter," subdivided into factual and expressional. As for the formal elements, the factual or formal elements will be examined, including colors, lines, constitution, proportions, scale, light and shadow, etc. The world of pure forms, thus recognized as carriers of primary or natural meanings, may be called the world of artistic motifs. An enumeration of these motifs would be a pre-iconographical description of the work of art (Panofsky, 1955).

In the first stage of pre-iconographical description, the formal elements and principles of composition are examined. There are some basic elements, such as line, space, and value, which are degrees of light and dark in a design. Shapes are created when lines are combined to form a square, triangle, or circle. Forms are three-dimensional shapes with length, width, and depth. The texture is the surface quality that can be seen and felt. In the second stage of "iconography," secondary or conventional subject matter will be examined for further analysis

of the visual subject. The researcher will collect a particular theme of images, interpreting the development of images in historical contexts. In doing this, we connect artistic motifs and combinations of artistic motifs (compositions) with themes or concepts. Moreover, in the third stage of “iconology,” based on the first and the second stages of analysis, we will find out intrinsic meaning or content from the frameworks of social, cultural, historical, and the artist’s distinctive traits, giving a systematic interpretation of his creative and unique styles, which reflect the profound meanings of the cultural, historical and humanitarian impulses of his time. “It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.” These principles are manifested by, and therefore throw light on, both “compositional methods” and “iconographical significance” (Panofsky, 1955).

Junks, therefore, in the first stage of pre-iconographical analysis, are traditional East Asian sailing vessels distinguished by their balanced proportions, flat-bottomed hulls, and battened sails. Their form emphasizes both functionality and visual harmony. The broad beam provides stability, while the high stern and pronounced bow create a distinctive silhouette. Segmented sails supported by horizontal battens produce a rhythmic geometric pattern that contributes to the vessel’s aesthetic character. Internal bulkheads strengthen the structure and improve seaworthiness. The relationship between hull, mast, and sail demonstrates an integrated design adapted to maritime environments. Collectively, these elements reveal a sophisticated synthesis of engineering, navigation, craftsmanship, and cultural expression. Additionally, in the second stage of iconography, junk boats embody centuries of maritime exchange across East and Southeast Asia, serving as vehicles of trade, migration, and cultural interaction. Historically, their development reflects Chinese naval innovation and adaptation to diverse coastal environments. From a transcultural perspective, junk boats function as mobile spaces where technologies, commodities, and cultural practices intersected across regional networks. Applying Panofsky’s iconological method, the vessel may be interpreted beyond its physical form as a symbolic expression of maritime connectivity and cultural memory. As Erwin Panofsky argues, deeper cultural meanings emerge through historical context, revealing junk boats as enduring symbols of exchange, mobility, and transcultural encounter. Therefore, in the third stage of iconological analysis, in this paper I will explore and highlight the profound meanings of junk boats from the perspectives of transcultural theories.

Junk as the Transcultural Contact Zone

Junks were regarded as cargo carriers and vessels of transportation from the 15th century to the decline in the 1940s, with the rise of steam engines and steamboats in modern times. Port cities are usually thought of as the contact zone of transcultural transmission and translation, where migrants, residents, and travelers exchange goods, languages, and messages, creating a new dynamic of cultural exchange.

Here, I would like to extend this theory a little further and assume that the junks are exactly the contact zone of cultural transmission and translation, where fishermen, merchants, stowaways, and passengers exchange transnational goods, exotic languages, and translation; news and messages cross seas. Junks are the first space and location of transcultural translation, transmission and transformation, a new site where humans create new identities of hybridity because “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ and ‘hybridity’ is the sign of productivity of colonial power” (Bhabha, 1994). In other words, junks have become a new space and site of transcultural transformation, where migrants create new

cultural translation and new identities of hybridity because “the migrants’ survival depends on translation of cultural difference.” That is, junk has become the “third space” of transcultural transformation for migrants in the context of globalization.

Moreover, the theme of “crossing” is the keynote of the visual story, which closely interconnects the three exhibited paintings. Crossing as a theme or motif in Kuo Hsueh-Hu’s art is well illustrated by his paintings of junk boats on the Tamsui River. It can be traced back to the artist’s childhood, when he was fascinated by the hustle and bustle of trading scenes on boats on the river. He still remembered the strange smells and odors of the goods intermingling with a variety of dried herbs, tea leaves, fish, and other goods on junk boats in some lines of his memoirs. In his later years, he traveled across Southeast Asia and even stayed in San Francisco. The theme of “crossing” was one of his motifs for his creation. Therefore, junk boats have become the symbol of diaspora, an eternal nostalgia for the homeland and for childhood memories.

Transcultural Elements in *Colorful Boats on the Tamsui River*

The painting *Colorful Boats on the Tamsui River* presents a clearer depiction of the layered contours and details of Guanyin Mountain. In this painting, Kuo Hsueh-Hu successfully depicted junk boats laden with cargo on the Tamsui River, where merchants conducted business at nearby ports. “Chinese ships—‘junks’, as the Europeans called them—crossed the Bay of Bengal, as they had long crossed the South China Sea.” These junks were built with “flat bottoms for shallow waters and a keel that could be lowered for deep-sea voyages” (Armith, 2013). Near Guanyin Mountain, the effect of swirling clouds and mist creates a sense of visual depth. The three junks, positioned at the visual focal point, have their hulls changed from black to white, with the first boat on the right painted closer, enlarging it and making the cargo hold and goods clearly visible, creating a foreground; the middle boat serves as the midground, accompanied by another boat, while a small sailing boat in the distance on the left served as the background. In terms of visual movement, the boat on the right seems to be advancing towards the viewer, as if it is about to reach the shore. Kuo Hsueh-Hu has slightly adjusted the layout of the boats, presenting a more rhythmic sense of progression, with richer layers of waves, making the overall scene more vivid and lifelike.

This depiction of junks showcases the important landscapes of northern Taiwan, including the Tamsui River and Guanyin Mountain. In Taiwan's trade history, junks have gradually declined, being replaced by steamships and larger cargo vessels as international trade flourished. Junks have become a symbol of past transnational trade and cross-cultural exchange. In addition, I would like to extend the theory of contact zone a little bit to the junks as the sites cultural translation, transmission and transformation, a living theater where merchants, fishermen, passengers and tourists interplay with diverse languages and dialects, with exotic goods and clothes, and with cultural differences. That is, junks have become the “Third Space” by Homi K. Bhabha, which “gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 1994). And the junk boats have become the transcultural contact zone for cultural translation and transmission.

Figure 1

Colorful Boats on Tamsui River *Gouache Painting by Kuo Hsueh-Hu, 1982*



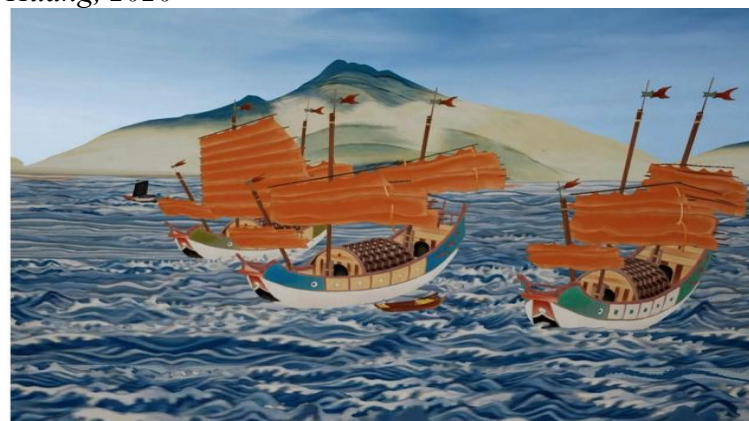
Source: Kuo Hsueh Hu Foundation

Virtual Soundscape and Interactive Space in *Three States of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's Home Gazing*

In this virtual reality exhibition by Hsin-Chien Huang, I would like to elaborate on the artwork's triple perspectives created in the virtual space. In the virtual space, diverse narratives and dialogues are created because “virtual reality storytelling is not about controlling the viewer’s gaze but about designing attention through space” (Bucher, 2018). This virtual reality artwork *Three States of Kuo Hsueh-Hu’s Home Gazing* by Hsin-Chien, Huang interpreted Kuo’s three paintings: *The Setting Sun by the Fort Provintia* in Tainan, *Colorful Boats on Tamsui River*, and *The Festival on South Street* in Taipei; these three paintings were recreated into three parts of this story: the State of Mind, the Gazed and the Enchanted. In the second scene *The Gazed*, which is based on the junk painting, the viewers can see the junk boats crossing the wavy ocean, the viewer gazes at the beautiful blue waves and the blue sky, a fantastic landscape of the Taiwanese Straits. The seagulls flew high and low, crossing the painting's framework.

Figure 2

Three States of States of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's Home Gazing *Virtual Artwork by Hsin-Chien Huang, 2020*



Source: Hsin-Chien Huang

In this virtual scene of junk boats, the artist arranged the violin music of the traditional Taiwanese folk song “The Sunset on Tamui River” written by Yen Chun Lin and sung by the singer Hung Yi-Fung in 1957 to the scene, which dramatically added a touch of nostalgia in

ancient Taiwan and brought cultural diversity to the scene. The calling of seagulls and the crashing of sea waves bring immersive vividness to the scene, which invites the viewers to immerse themselves on the junk boat on Tamsui river. The effects of soundscape are successfully highlighted with the arrangement of the folk song and natural sounds in real natural environment. Moreover, the viewers can watch the sea waves flapping and the boats moving forward, surrounded by natural landscape and soundscape. Such an immersive effect is so dramatic that the viewers seem to really step into the real scene of the original static painting. And this is also the dramatic approach to draw more attention of young viewers and invite them to the story of ancient art history of Taiwan. With the new technology of virtual reality, the gouache painting revived again with more immersive soundscape in the 3-D digital space, extending the viewers' imagination to full extent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper showcases the transcultural hybridity and virtual interaction of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's gouache painting and Hsin-Chien, Huang's virtual reality exhibition based on Kuo's gouache paintings. In this way, the artwork's diverse, interactive, and multi-narrative aspects are highlighted, inviting the artist Kuo Hsueh-Hu, the directors, and viewers to co-fabricate. The time and space of the original painting is extended to a more 3D-dimensional imaginative space where the inspiring dialogues between the viewers and the artists occur. Moreover, the production of a virtual reality exhibition of Kuo Hsueh-Hu's artworks aimed to embrace a diversity of virtual narratives, deepen understanding of the artist's work, and engage viewers for future generations. In addition, from the perspective of preserving the artist's work with digital creation and cultural archives, virtual reality and new technological methods are inspiring approaches to adopt for the storage of the precious paintings as well.

Additionally, Kuo Hsueh-Hu fully depicted his nostalgia for the homeland and junk has become his symbol of diaspora and transcultural crossing, a metaphor of self-identity in the world literary space, which fully exhibited the unique locality of Taiwanese landscape and the transformation of self-identity from a colonized citizen of Japan, a painter bewildered by controversies on the genre of the nationality in Taiwan to a world traveler with nostalgia of homeland in postmodern times. Junks, which shift from carrying cargo, crossing seas to conveying cultural diversity, have become the contact zone of cultural translation, transmission and self-transformation. In addition to the artistic form, the virtual narratives of Hsin-Chien Huang also add another profound interpretation of modernity nowadays. Most important of all, this paper aims to explore and interpret Kuo Hsueh-Hu's artwork and contribute to the reconstruction of the Taiwanese art history since Japanese colonial period through transcultural perspective and virtual reality interpretation. As the only gouache artist developing a series of junk paintings in colonial Taiwan, Kuo Hsueh-Hu not only successfully conveys the transcultural elements in colonial Taiwan but also incorporates the spirits of crossing and searching in his junk paintings. With the new virtual interpretation of Hsin-Chien Huang, the junk painting has dramatically transformed into a magical interactive space for future generation to renavigate and reimagine the Taiwanese art odyssey.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Contact email: chaojung@dragon.nchu.edu.tw