

Chan (Zen) Aesthetics in Sanyu's Works: A Case Study of Horse Paintings

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ABSTRACT

The given article looks at the contribution of Chan (Zen) aesthetic philosophy in the artistic activities of Sanyu (1901-1966) an artist based on the principles of Chinese literary art as well as modern oil painting. Taking his horse paintings as visual case studies, this research discusses how formal decisions such as composition, line, brushwork, and color can express essential concepts related to the concept of Chan thought such as its emphasis on the idea of Simplicity or the idea of the One being many (yijishiduo, 一即是多) and self-effacement (wuwo, non-self, 无我). In terms of methodology, the research includes both contextual literature review and close formal analysis so as to show how the image of horse operates as a representation, but also as a form of visual reflection and intercultural discussion. The results imply that Sanyu has moderated pictorial style that translates the traditional aesthetic values to an experimental modern language, which forms part of the larger debate of East-West cultural flow in world art history.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by examining how Chan (Zen) aesthetics inform Sanyu's horse paintings, providing a systematic framework linking visual composition, brushwork, and color with philosophical thought, and highlighting cross-cultural dialogue between Chinese

literati art and Western modern oil painting practices.

1. Introduction

Sanyu (1901–1966) was one of the most influential French-based painters on the 20th-century art scene (Wan & Cheng, 2025). He was born in Nanchong, Sichuan Province, and had a childhood training in calligraphy and Chinese ink painting, until he departed China in 1921 in the work-study abroad movement spearheaded by Cai Yuanpei. On getting to Paris, Sanyu attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, which was known to have an open and experimental approach to education (Shui, 2003). It was this transnational experience that allowed him to create a very personal visual vocabulary that did not merely replicate western modernism, but interact with it through sensitivities informed by the traditions of Chinese art.

In spite of Sanyu spending most of his lifetime in Paris in relatively obscure and economically challenging circumstances, his contribution to the arts has enjoyed growing interest among scholars over the last few decades (Chen, 2019). Researchers have often observed the fact that the paintings by Sanyu cannot be easily classified as part of Western modernist trends but can instead be understood as a soft change of traditional Chinese literati morals through the use of oil painting (Sun, 2025). His paintings demonstrate a subtle fusion between two cultural systems: on the one hand, they are underpinned by a profoundly traditional Chinese foundation, while on the other, they manifest through the formal elements of Western modernism (Gao, 2025). The works of Sanyu continue to have Chinese feeling of pictorial understatement when produced by Western materials, implying that the artist has not merely imitated the style but maintained the same aesthetic direction (Sun, 2012).

Of the constantly-reoccurring items in Sanyu artworks such as still-life flowers, female nudes, and animals, the subject of the horse stands out. In the list of his known oil paintings, the image of animals makes up a considerable part with frequent appearance of horses, especially in the late period of the aforementioned artist, the so-called Black Period (1942-1966), which saw the use of dark colours and the visual world became more subdued. On the Chinese history of art, it has been customary to regard the horse as an embodiment of life essence, vitality, spirit, and morality (Li, 2026). Nevertheless, In later horse portraits the artist gradually renounces the heroic symbolism in favour of emotional calmness and existential silence. In this respect, the horse ceases to be so much a narrative symbol as a visual vehicle of internal condition.

Although scholarship regarding Sanyu and where he stands in Sino-French modernism is developing rapidly, available literature has tended to focus more on biographical accounts, stylistic hybridism, or market response (Zhang, 2019). His philosophical-aesthetic standpoint behind his pictorial methods, especially concerning the horse depictions, has not received nearly so much coverage comparatively. To fill this gap, this paper looks at the imagery of the horses of Sanyu in terms of the aesthetics of Chan (Zen), defined in terms of an operative aesthetic approach instead of a religious or doctrinal one.

Here, Chan (Zen) aesthetics is used as an aesthetic approach that can be traced back to Chan philosophy and expressed via the means of visual restraint (Liu, 1996), formal

reduction, and contemplative composition methods. It has been used to denote visible pictorial trends, including controlled colours, open forms, rhythm lines and simplified forms as opposed to iconography symbols or religious depictions (Brinker, 1987). This comprehension is in line with the accepted literature on the aesthetics of Chan, where it is stated that the emphasis on direct observation, immediacy, and intuition prevails to the doctrinal explanation (Xiao, 2024).

The notion that Chan thought played a role in the intellectual environment that formed the literati painting, especially its focus on internal meditation and the development of aesthetic world (jingjie, 境界), has been acknowledged by the students of Chinese art already since the early times (Shen, 2017; Shi, 2002). Expressive reduction, suggestiveness and compositional restraint were seen as the key to reveal the mental state of the artist, instead of the importance of external resemblance. It is argued that Chan aesthetics operates through what Hisamatsu describes as a form of creative emptiness, in which meaning emerges from openness rather than from accumulative addition (Hisamatsu, 1982). These points imply that the Chan aesthetics can be understood not as a system of beliefs but as an aesthetic disposition within artistic activity.

Nevertheless, most of the available literature is still based on the conventional ink painting in which the instruments, materials, and the historical narrative are already quite consistent with the conventions of the literati school. Such focus has restricted the discussion of the possible functioning of aesthetic tastes based on Chan thoughts in contemporary mass media like oil painting. As evidenced by the primary sources compiled by Wu (2010), numerous contemporary Chinese artists have translated philosophical concerns into practices addressing novel material conditions. This trend raises methodological questions when aesthetic principles transcend the boundaries of their original mediums.

Several researchers have offered interpretive entry ways to this kind of approach in studies of Sanyu. Chen (2019) observes that Sanyu's technique aligns with the quintessential principle of traditional Chinese painting: capturing the spirit through form. Through visual simplification, the inner essence is revealed, rather than pursuing the representation of objective reality. A profoundly solemn atmosphere of Sanyu's later pieces are connected to a contemplative aesthetic stance informed by individual suffering but expressed via compositional quietness according to Liu (2013). In addition, Yu (2023) adds that the distortions and childishly simplistic portrayals that can be observed on some of the pictures of horses need to be viewed as a search of expressive sincerity as opposed to technical imperfection. Collectively, all these views imply that it is reasonable to assume that a reading of aesthetics based on Chan may be feasible, but it is common that such readings are implied, but not necessarily explicitly elaborated.

As such, this paper suggests that the analysis of Sanyu horse paintings should be considered as the case study of the visual expression with the influence of Chan (Zen). This research will examine the way compositional structure, line quality, spatial openness, and color restraint can allow the horse motif to act both as a site of contemplative looking and as an image of cross-cultural dialogue by combining the discussion of the context with careful analysis of the image. With this viewpoint, they can be conceived not only as examples of cultural mixing but as reflective contemporary acts determined by the received aesthetic dispositions and rephrased in the language of Western oil painting.

1.1. Research Objectives

The study analyzes the manifestation of Chan (Zen) aesthetics philosophy through Sanyu horse paintings in particular, focusing on the approach taken by the artist in his use of forms that build a meditative modern language of visual communication. Particularly, the aims of this work are as follows:

- i. To identify important Chan aesthetic concepts in relation to Chinese art practices such as; Simplicity as One is Many (*yijishiduo*), self-effacement (*wuwo*, non-self), and a contemplative manner of consciousness.
- ii. To analyse of the ways in which Sanyu has depicted his horses as a visual manifestation of these Chan-related orientations by use of composition, brushwork, and colour.
- iii. To examine how the horse depicted in Sanyu's works serves as an area of intercultural artistic dialogue between Chinese literati art and modern Western oil-painting techniques.
- iv. To elucidate the relevance of Chan-informed artistic thought in extending the modern interpretation of Sanyu on the history of global modern art.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

The research design that supports this study includes qualitative research based upon the close visual analysis and interpretive art history inquiry. Qualitative work is expressed in natural language (Gerring, 2017), it more appropriate in studying artwork that has both philosophical and aesthetic aspects since it allows long-term interaction with form, visual rhetoric, and situational meaning instead of quantitative assessment (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The objective is not statistical generalizing, but a detailed description of what could be stated as articulations of Chan (Zen) —inspired aesthetic tendencies by particular pictorial choices.

This can be seen as exploratory and interpretive research. It deals with the connection between visual form and aesthetic thought, describing how concepts related to Chan, including economy of form and reduction (often expressed as the concept of simplicity), the self-effacement (*wuwo*, non-self) and the idea of meditation, can be conveyed via the pictorial schemes utilized by Sanyu in his horse representations. The study explores how philosophical orientations are made real through painterly choices by combining theoretical discussion with close looking.

2.2. Research Materials and Case Selection

The main research sources are chosen oil paintings of horses by Sanyu created in 1930s-1950s. The selection of these works is based on three grounds.

To begin with, as one of the most common themes in Sanyu's work, the horse can be regarded as one that is best used to identify repetitive patterns, not solitary stylistic experiments. To sum up, there is no denying that imagery of equines has long-established cultural associations within the tradition of visual art in China. Chinese equine painting boasts a long history, with its style and connotations undergoing continuous evolution (Song, 2014), and this allows the discussion of continuity and

transformation in inherited aesthetics and contemporary expression. The chosen paintings manifest pronounced trends of reduction, restraint, and emotional self-reflection — qualities that can be considered formal and affective, which are particularly relevant to an interpretation of a painting from a Chan context.

All the images that will to analyzed in this study are from the exhibition *In Search of a Homeland — The Art of San Yu* held by the National Museum of History in Taiwan in 2001 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Sanyu's birth. Their ownership is trustworthy, and they have sufficient visual materials to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the analysis.

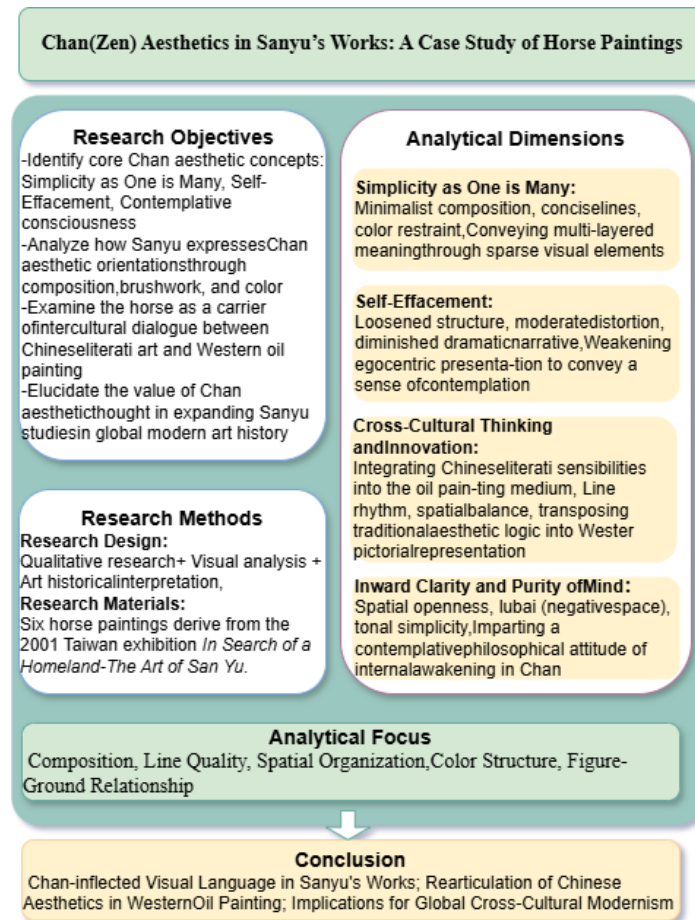
2.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis is conducted by means of a systematic interpretative framework combining Chan (Zen) aesthetic discussion and formal visual analysis. This research does not regard Chan as an amorphous spiritual ambiance but instead conceptualizes the associated aesthetics in four dimensions that are closely connected to the structure of the Results section:

- i. Simplicity as “One is Many” (*yi ji shi duo*) — it is observed how minimalistic composition, short form, and color minimalism work as the methods of an integral image implying a multilayered resonance without superfluous information.
- ii. Self-Effacement (*wuwo*) — examining the manner in which loosened structure, biased distortion as well as diminishing of dramatic narrative can weaken ego-centric presentation and permit the image to convey a sense of contemplation.
- iii. Cross-Cultural Thinking and Innovation — reflecting upon the way that Sanyu interprets the sensibilities of Chinese literati and brings them into the oil paint medium with line rhythm, spatial balance, as well as adapting traditional aesthetic logic to a Western system of pictorial representation.
- iv. Inward Clarity and Purity of Mind — how spatial openness, developed white space (*liubai*, 留白) and tonal simplicity, and existential silence may impart an inward philosophical attitude of contemplation in accordance with the Chan concept of internal awakening.

All paintings are analyzed under these dimensions with focus on composition, line quality, spatial organization, color structure and the relations between figure and ground. The scheme guarantees that the interpretation concerning Chan will be based on visible picture techniques, but not the impressionistic description. The analytical structure has been summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework



2.4. Procedure of Analysis

The research process involves four steps. First, appropriate literature on Chan aesthetics and Chinese literati paintings, as well as Sanyu studies are reviewed to come up with a conceptual and historical base. Second, thematic relevance and visual legibility are used to determine a set of horse paintings. Third, all the chosen works are scrutinized using direct visual inspection, concentrating on the composition, form, brushwork, and tonal or chromatic organization. Fourth, all the corpus is compared to find common recurring formal patterns and similar aesthetic tendencies.

This process allows making this analysis progress over particular visual data and more generalized interpretative assertions and thus guarantees a philosophical speculation being based on the pictorial framework, not an abstraction.

2.5. Limitations and Trustworthiness

The study also has a number of limitations that ought to have been considered. The paper is qualitative visual analysis of a specific set of artworks and it is not intended to offer an exhaustive view on the whole oeuvre of Sanyu. Although this research recognizes the presence of Chan-related sensibility in Sanyu's paintings, it is not asserting the conscious or explicit adoption of Chan thought by the painter. Also, the idea of Chan aesthetics is more complicated and historical, and so the interpretations given are interpretative and contextual and not definitive.

In order to maximize trustworthiness, the paper triangulates the visual observations with published scholarship and pertinent historical context. The reading of Chan related aesthetics and literati discourse is based on well-established sources within the academic literature, and readings and interpretations of Sanyu works are checked against available research in case it is necessary. Such a tactic enables minimizing the idiosyncrasy of interpretation and enhancing the validity of the analytical statements.

The results of the study being a qualitative analysis of a chosen corpus are interpretative and not exhaustive. Furthermore, Chan aesthetics cannot be summarized into one doctrine. Rather, it will be proposed that the notion of Chan-inspired aesthetic orientation expressed as reductionism, moderationism and the practice of emptiness can be an effective model of understanding the most significant features of Sanyu pictorial language. The constraints are those which circumscribe the range of the investigation but do not diminish its value to the art history discourse.

3. Results

According to the research framework (Figure 1), the findings have been grouped into four analytical aspects that represent different forms of visual representation of Chan (Zen) aesthetic attitudes in the Sanyu horse pictures. Simplicity as One Means Many (*yi ji shi duo*) (1), Self-Effacement (*wuwo*) (2), Cross-Cultural Thought and Innovation (3), and Inward Clearness and Purity of Mind (4) are found by careful formal study of composition, brushwork, spatial structure, and color. Selected works will be used as visual case studies to demonstrate recurring pictorial trends.

3.1. Simplicity as “One is Many” (*yi ji shi duo*)

One of the major outcomes of the presented work is the fact that Sanyu can express broad meanings with the formal constraints of pictorial structures. His representations of horses are sometimes straightforward, serene, but he works under a visual economy, which is an embodiment of the Chan idea, that one is many (*yi ji shi duo*). Based on the Huayan Sutra (699-700) theory of the Fourfold Dharma Realm, the notion implies that one can act as an entity, capable of holding multiple values, without having to rely on elaborate details. In the work by Sanyu, it may be interpreted that simplicity means not a mere simplification, but a resonance that occurs following a conscious simplification of form. To paraphrase Jiang (2022), this kind of simplicity points out at the world within the soul of an artist and is more about the integrity of painting as such.

The orientation is consistent with the aesthetic rationale of Chinese scholars painting that values the soul resonance more than the technical realism. The literati traditions value brevity in their brush strokes and ability to imply not depict, so that the fundamental character of its subject could be revealed by abbreviation. It was these principles that guided how Sanyu thought as an artist, that he believes painting should be an expression of one's natural inclinations, capturing the essence of one's spiritual refuge, without undue emphasis on technique or artistic theory (Yang, 2022).

An example would be *The Withered Tree, Two Horses* (Figure 2) created in the late period of Sanyu's Black Period, which would serve as an exemplar. Whereas in comparison to the lighter palette of his earlier pastel period, this piece uses cleaner but more saturated tones, and it produces a calm and contemplative mood. On the visual

aspect, the composition is built on almost flat divisions of complementary colours, i.e. red and green divide the space into regions of grass and water, whereas the black-and-white horses and the withered tree balance the canvas opposing each other. Nevertheless, the picture is emotionally full despite a small number of pictorial components, as it illustrates that the meaning of less can be an expression of more.

Figure 2: *The Withered Tree, Two Horses*



Figure 3: *Two Horses*



The articulated tree has withered and expressed its archaic simplicity and weight through strict contour lines. Conversely, horses have been portrayed with calligraphic outlines which imply motion and life with moderation. It is one black and one white and they bow their heads silently as they feed, seeming self-governing but somewhat conscious of each other. The lonely tree at the right adds a note of sadness to the picture, making it impossible to interpret the pair of horses merely tenderly and pulling the observer out of this simplistic sentiment into an additional level of feelings where the presence of friendship and loneliness are simultaneously possible.

This conservative arrangement mirrors the psychological environment of Sanyu in his later life. Although hardness and solitude are there as an undercurrent, the paintings do not make an emotional statement; rather, they communicate sincerity by compositionally calm and tone-controlled paintings. Yang (2021) notes that through his paintings, one can sense his sincerity and passion for art, as well as the profound understanding of nature's creations intertwined with his personal emotions.

There is also one in *Two Horses* (Figure 3), with red and black spots producing a warm but heavy ground, alleviated by the presence of a gray sky. The yellow which is normally associated with brightness is kept quiet in terms of the tonal restraint, so the horses may appear without too much emphasis. It is worth noting that when the horse shapes are taken away, the resulting composition resembles an abstraction, meaning that the simplicity of Sanyu is underpinned by an implicit modern pictorial organization as opposed to anecdotal narrative.

It is common among these works that the horses are designed with a great deal of caution and minimal detail, whereas the backgrounds are left relatively open and diverse. The contrast serves the purpose of directing the focus onto the horse as the most typical one type that does not break the unity of the theme allowing the larger picture area to support multiple levels of resonance other than direct representation. The colours chosen by Sanyu also surpass traditional expectation, acting more as a tone of emotion than a naturalistic representation. With this continued focus on the concept

of the one form, in his paintings he conveys the Chan-touched awareness that simplicity does not signify emptiness, but instead, it is a controlled reduction of multiplicity.

By doing so, the principle of Sanyu's horse paintings will be that of "one is many"; and it will show how limited visual vocabulary may have rich philosophical and emotional meaning.

3.2. Self-Effacement (*wuwo*)

The next finding deals with the idea of how Chan concept of Self-Effacement (*wuwo*, non-self) is manifested in the transition to an internalized picture in Sanyu. When discussing the psychology in art, Wang (2003) makes a distinction between two modes of creation based on experience: the so-called state with self (*you wo zhi jing*, 有我之境) and the state without self (*wu wo zhi jing*, 无我之境). This means the former can be taken as work in which subjective emotion is deliberately cast in the image of the scene depicted, and the latter as a condition in which the self is withdrawn, and the subject and the surroundings are merged together into a single sphere of aesthetic experience, in which both self and object are forgotten. This disintegration of an ego-based purpose has a lot of synergy with Chan aesthetics wherein sense is developed through introspective detachment instead of demonstrative claim.

Painting was one constant form of expression in Sanyu, but the manner of expression underwent a long change throughout the years. The early pieces tend to accentuate rhythmic contours and elegant gestures where animals are depicted with pliable lines depicting external attractiveness and life. Slowly, nonetheless, the research will note the change in focus on technical control to a less constrained and reduced form of pictorial language. Later works see animal forms done in ostensibly unforced economy of brushwork and the details are exchanged in favour of the silhouette-like simplification. Such a style shift can be viewed as a shift between the modes of the with-self and without-self, where expressive power is gained by the absence of expression.

One of the few multi-horse compositions in Sanyu's work is *Six Horses* (Figure 4). The horses are drawn using flowing, uncontrolled arcs, which are faint, elastic, and balanced with care. These curves create an evenness and tenderness that fits two positive white blocks behind them, which provides unity through pictorial rhythm and not through narrative relations. As Zhang (2019) points out, Sanyu purposefully lengthens the horses' waist and increases the size of their rumps with thick and simplified contour lines to define strength without any anatomical particularity. The almost flat black surface is archaic and peaceful and stands in sharp contrast with the figures to produce what can aptly be described as a mood of cheerful silence. The same brevity but saturation of calligraphic brush strokes is the expression of cultural calmness and spiritual tenderness that Sanyu sought inside.

Figure 4: *A Group of Horses*Figure 5: *A Rolling Horse*

An analogous principle of aesthetics can be found in *A Rolling Horse* (Figure 5), where the exaggerated and distorted effect is not an end itself, but an expression of the real feelings. Coarse and astringent brushstrokes are used by Sanyu to outline the animal into a bold simplification, but one that is composed of harmony. The created picture has a deliberate feeling of childishness and clumsiness (Yu, 2023) and does not so much signify technical inadequacy as it signifies the rejection of academic precision. The pink horse rolling playfully on the ground on a muted near-flat plane of mature tonal control suggests a weightless state of consciousness-that life continues in spite of constraining circumstances. This time the image is permitted to appear naturally, representing a Chan-influenced sense of openness that takes precedence over formal excellence in favour of spontaneity and authenticity.

These works make Self-Effacement (*wuwo*) no longer a lack of feeling but an exercise in restraint that is imposed upon oneself to avoid overstatement. Using immaculate color areas and intentionally crude shapes, Sanyu builds a picture world where subjects and background disappear in each other, conveying the kind of self-object unity as a freedom. His art expresses the way loosened structure, removal of detailed work and expressive restraint can be expressed through visual language. Here, the horse paintings of Sanyu also demonstrate a contemporary approach to aesthetics based on simplicity, disconnection, and reflective echo (Yang, 2022).

3.3. Cross-Cultural Thinking and Innovation

The third finding highlights Sanyu's intercultural visual thinking- the fact that he could function both as a guardian of tradition and as an autonomous modern artist with a critical mindset (Zhang, 2020). According to the study, his innovation is not based on the combination of motifs of different cultural systems but on transformation of the structure of pictorial logic. When using Chinese literati sensibilities to oil paint, Sanyu adds Western art materials with a sensibility that has historically been linked to ink painting, thus instilling oil painting with a specifically Chinese artistic sentiment. Such ability to transcend the static classifications is the manifestation of a cross-boundary attitude influenced by Chan thinking, wherein the tradition is not strictly preserved but always reconstructed by transformation.

Chinese ink painting and Western oil painting are entirely different visual systems due to the different materials, methods, and artistic considerations (Zhang, 2024). However, Sanyu who was educated in the traditional calligraphy and sensitive about modern European art tendencies did not agree to be restricted to one of these frameworks. On the contrary, he came up with a language that incorporates the spatial economy and expressive abstraction of the ink practice into the tactile potential of the oil pigment. Whereas modernists like Matisse or Picasso would often rely on colour-block modeling to enhance visual effects, Sanyu focused on the motion of line and the rhythm of space as the essential means of expression. Such a manner of doing things makes line not just simply descriptive contour, but the medium of spiritual tone and emotional restraint.

One especially illustrative instance is *Zebra Love* (Figure 6). This painting has Sanyu deviating from western standards of light, volume, and modeling in a naturalist way in favor of creating the zebra form using line, one of the most central motifs in Chinese artistic traditions. The black and white stripes alternate in regular intervals as if with a smooth change in water pattern, and the contour lines are alternately heavier or lighter. Lines dance is used as a compositional key that creates a structure by rhythm rather than by illusion of depth. Emotion therefore is not present but directly built inside of pictorial movement to evoke an ambiance of quiet and simplicity as opposed to dramatic presence.

Figure 6: *Zebra Love*



The use of white spaces is also equally important whereby Sanyu makes it his choice, a literati approach whereby emptiness acts as openness but not as absence. The background of *Zebra Love* is achieved by a monochrome almost flat field painted with oil brushes, however, worked to read like calligraphy and not like a picture. The brush strokes the surface with the immediacy of the flying white (*feibai*, 飞白) method, creating an impression of frankness, spontaneity, and finish at once, as though completed in a single breath. In this, oil painting is no longer regulated by Western depth construction, but converted into a surface of rhythmic suggestion, in harmony with the Chan spirit of naturalness and effortless movement.

In a wider sense, Sanyu always endeavors to communicate the richest information with the least number of symbols. By directional lines, soft differences in tones, and moderate forms, he can combine the rhythmic design of Western modern paintings with the suggestive character of Eastern art. Instead of copying things, his picture choices are rather based on emotion articulation and inner aura. These images are found to be ornamental to view with even some naiveté but they disclose compositional elegance and conceptual advancement.

With such intercultural creativity, Sanyu creates a visual language that can go beyond the customary traditions of both the Chinese and Western artistic culture. The legacy of literary painting combined with its sophistication and the openness to various possibilities of modern art allows him to express an original way of presenting things, which has a taste of restraint and profundity of contemplative thinking. His practice shows that cross-cultural modernism, in such a framework, is not a foreign synthesis of styles; it is rather the reorganization of the very principles of aesthetics within the boundaries of media.

3.4. Inward Clarity and Purity of Mind

The fourth outcome discusses how the late creations of Sanyu connect with the concept of inner clarity and spiritual purity of the Chan religion. According to Zen Buddhism, “everyone possesses Buddha-nature (*fo-xing*, 佛性),” also referred to as “true nature,” “original mind,” or “original essence” (Zuo, 2019). However, this inherent quality is obscured by attachment to external appearances. Awakening thus demands a turn inwards, which is a process of looking beyond appearances so as to go back to your original mind. In this scheme, the term, purity of mind, does not mean detachment of lived life, but instead refers to an internal clarity whereby emotion, suffering, and loneliness could be held without a twist. His constant interest in the inner experience can be considered in line with this Chan perspective implying that his mature visual language is also becoming more contemplative than descriptive.

Although many aspects of Sanyu life story may be characterized by some level of material hardship, his creative work demonstrates an enduring quest towards inner freedom similar to the concept of self-cultivation of the literati. Instead of expressing direct protests or theatrical gestures, he kept on with the aesthetics of quiet sincerity, which regarded painting as a space where the true mind could survive unaltered by external restrictions. Such inward tendency can be seen especially well in his late paintings of horses, in which existential loneliness turns into a controlled pictorial contemplation.

One intense instance is *Yuan Ye* (Figure 7). This painting depicts the horse isolated in an extensive and open space, putting into effect an ambiance of silence and fragility. Horses are usually social creatures, and it is unusual to see them individually in the wild; in this case, an individual is drawn in a reduced size compared to the enormity of the surrounding space, which exacerbates the feeling of existential quiet. The horse is shrinking more and more as a symbolic silhouette and not an anatomical model of the body, which means that Sanyu is no longer concerned with optical reality, but instead organises picturespace in such a way as to represent the internal condition in the externality of the image.

Just as important is the spatial form of the work. White space (liubai) that consciously encircles the figure has no role of emptiness in its purest formal sense but is an aesthetic space that provokes reflection. The big empty floor generates a visual quietness under which the observer is brought to a halt, in line with the Chan idea of removing distractions so as to have more depth of awareness.

Figure. 7: YUAN YE



There are bold and sincere brushstrokes forming the background, large pigmented patches that seem wild but emotionally controlled. Such strokes suggest a certain quiet resistance to the crushing power of the hardships experienced with white and green interactions subdued by the introduction of a slight spark of vitality into isolation. Instead of providing a narrative explanation, the painting expresses the complexity of emotions on the basis of compositional tension: the vast expanse pushes outwards, whereas the lone figure still hangs in contemplative aloofness. It is in this sense that the visualization of mental purity becomes a quality other than merely the lack of suffering, or the capacity to perceive suffering without being overwhelmed by it.

Sanyu uses such late works to express a pictorial language in which inner awakening can be made perceptible through form. The paintings are still concise and emotionally responsive, do not indulge in decorative profuseness but maintain a philosophical richness. The horse, rather, does not become so much a symbol of representation as a medium of introspection, a fact that indicates what Chan-impregnated spirituality might mean when it is brought to contemporary visual design. His later practice then shows an artistic allegiance to quiet truthfulness, the purification of the image corresponds to the development of an interior and tranquil mind.

5. Conclusion

The paper has explored the equine works of Sanyu under the perspective of Chan (Zen) aesthetics so as to clear some confusion on how philosophically inspired sensibilities of Chinese intellectual heritage can be rearticulated in the context of contemporary oil painting. Through the combination of the notions associated with Chan, such as the simplicity as One is Many (*yijishiduo*), self-effacement (*wuwo*), and Cross-Cultural Thinking and Innovation, Inward Clarity and Purity of Mind, into an organised form of

visual analysis, the study presents a narrow meaning of the artistic strategies used by Sanyu that goes beyond either biographical or stylistic description.

Through the exploration of a chosen piece, the paper establishes that the horse paintings of Sanyu always feature the use of formal reduction and subdued linear representation and open space organization to create a sense of tranquility with emotionally evoking visual language. Horses do not serve in traditional roles as symbols but as compressed messengers of inner feeling, a method of expression that places higher value on self-restraint rather than ostentatious exhibition. Such a method is in line with Chan aesthetics whereby meaning is derived by simplicity, purity within, and not through embellishment.

Moreover, the results indicate that the interest of Sanyu in the Chan aesthetics is not religious or ornamental. Rather, it is as though a Chan (Zen) associated sensitivity manifests itself as a way of artistic thought, which guides on the manner in which he would relate Chinese literati mind and Western oil painting. Sanyu turns oil painting into a vehicle of communication that can express quiet thoughtfulness and even deeper philosophical meaning due to his transborder creativity; most particularly, when he focuses on line rhythm and spatial balance. With regards to it, such a fact of his horse paintings proves ability of modern art to adopt the classic ideals of beauty without resorting to borrowing styles.

More generally, this study makes two contributions to scholarship. On one hand, it broadens the scope of conversations about Chan (Zen) aesthetics from ink painting to show how elements of Zen can manifest in modern oil painting formally instead of iconographically. On the other hand, it provides an interpretative structure for Sanyu's oeuvre such that his horse paintings are not disparate attempts but part of a unified practice guided by a common aesthetic direction. Both points help develop a deeper comprehension of Sanyu's place in the history of modern art worldwide and intercultural artistic dialogue.

The subsequent investigations can develop the presented research in various ways. To understand further how the aesthetic elements of Chan (Zen) work in various individual practices, comparative analysis between Sanyu and other Chinese modern artists practicing in the Western media may help elucidate better on the issue. Moreover, interdisciplinary investigations based on exhibition history, reception studies, or archival materials might provide better insight into how Sanyu's Zen-inspired visual language was received within different cultures. Lastly, the further development of animal motifs outside the horse theme could uncover new levels of spiritual and aesthetic unity in his overall artistic activities. These directions of the future would enrich the existing work and enrich our knowledge of what Sanyu has brought to the modern art.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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