

**The Outsider Artist in Thai Modern Art:  
A Study of Tang Chang (1934–1990)**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the growing academic interest in Tang Chang (1934–1990), a notable Sino-Thai artist whose work has received increasing recognition in recent years. Drawing on his Chinese heritage and a distinctive, experimental practice, Chang consistently challenged the conventions of Thai modernism. As a result, scholars have frequently labeled him an “outsider artist”—a designation that has shaped interpretations of his work both in Thailand and internationally. Through a historiographical review of research on Chang up to 2024, this article examines how his outsider status has been framed in academic discourse and what this reveals about the boundaries of Thai art history. It argues that “outsiderhood” offers critical potential for rethinking Thai modernism and highlights gaps in current scholarship. Finally, it suggests that the framework of outsider art may provide new perspectives for understanding other Thai artists whose practices fall outside dominant art historical narratives.

**Keywords:** Tang Chang, Thai modernism, outsider artist, Thai art history

## **Introduction: Tang Chang and Thai Modern Art**

Tang Chang<sup>1</sup> was born in 1934 into a Chinese immigrant family near Somdet Chao Phraya Market in Thonburi, just across the river from Phra Nakhon.<sup>2</sup> Though enrolled in compulsory education, World War II disrupted his schooling, forcing him to abandon formal studies after only a few days.<sup>3</sup>

Without formal education, Tang Chang pursued self-directed learning in art and writing, mastering both Thai and Chinese. His 1971 writings confirm that he actively created art from the 1950s until his death. Throughout his career, he prioritized artistic practice over commercial success, as reflected in his writings:

For the past 20 years, I have been more of a person who makes art than someone who talks or writes about it. When I talk or write about things from textbooks, I don't enjoy it—it feels too far from my own experience. But I do like to talk or write about art that connects to myself, whether it's something new I've discovered or something I've found that relates to existing art history. (Still, it doesn't come from textbooks—it comes from within me.) (C. Sae-tang, 2021: 41)

Beyond Chang, this period also marks the early formalization of modern art in Thailand. Its development traces back to the 1932 Siamese Revolution, which spurred the founding of the School of Fine Arts in 1933<sup>4</sup>—later Silpakorn University, now Thailand's premier art academy. The school's roots began in 1923 when Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci was hired to teach Western sculpture at Siam's Department of Fine Arts.<sup>5</sup> He later founded the School of Fine Arts and became its first principal. During World War II, to evade Japanese arrest, Feroci adopted Thai

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<sup>1</sup> “Chang Sae-tang” is the real Thai name of “Tang Chang.” However, he is usually referred to as Tang Chang as it is the name that he called himself. Tang Chang is the Teochew (Chiuchow) pronunciation of his Chinese name, Chen Zhuang (陈壮).

<sup>2</sup> Thonburi was merged with Phra Nakhon and became Bangkok in 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Thai law mandates that children must attend school from Grade 1 to 9.

<sup>4</sup> Modern art in Thailand can be traced back to the reign of King Rama IV, but the formal foundation of “Thai modern art” in Thai society was solidified with the founding of Silpakorn University.

<sup>5</sup> “Siam” was changed to “Thailand” in 1939.

citizenship in 1944, changing his name to Silpa Bhirasri.<sup>6</sup> Today, he is celebrated as the father of Thai modern art for introducing Western techniques and aesthetics to Thai artists.

While Silpa Bhirasri played a pivotal role in the early development of Thai modern art, the roots of modern artistic practices in Thailand date back to the 1850s. One notable example is Khrua In Khong, a Siamese monk-muralist who integrated European and American visual styles into his murals. This marked a significant departure from traditional mural painting and signaled early Western artistic influence (Clark, 2014: 71–73).

To fully understand Thai modern art's development, we must look beyond Silpa Bhirasri and his successors. Its evolution was shaped by complex, interconnected factors extending far beyond the Western influences often highlighted in traditional narratives. As Apinan Poshyananda argues, Thai modernism has a distinct genealogy, with modernization not always driven by Western powers. Historically, Thailand engaged with foreign influences—including political and economic ties with China, India, and neighboring Southeast Asian nations—long before Western contact (Poshyananda, 1990: 4).

Modernism in Thailand has its own genealogy... The revolutionary process of modernization in Thailand was not always motivated by western powers. For centuries this nation had been open to foreign influences. Before the arrival of westerners, the political and economic relationships among Thailand, China, India, and other Southeast Asian countries had been relatively strong (Poshyananda, 1990: 4).

Despite Apinan's insights, many scholars—particularly those aligned with the Silpakorn tradition—continue to prioritize Western-style painting in their narratives.<sup>7</sup> Their focus often centers on Silpakorn

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<sup>6</sup> When Italy, one of the Axis Powers, surrendered during World War II, Italians living in Thailand were detained by the Japanese military for political scrutiny. To avoid this fate, Corrado Feroci was granted Thai citizenship by the Thai government and changed his name to Silpa Bhirasri.

<sup>7</sup>In Thai social conventions, individuals are typically addressed by their given names, with nicknames reserved for closer relationships. The use of surnames is uncommon in direct address. For consistency in this article, Thai individuals will be referenced by their given names, while surnames will be retained when citing their works or referring to non-Thai individuals.

University's hegemony and its direct role in shaping Thai modern art, sidelining other historical, cultural, and political factors.<sup>8</sup> While Western influence on Thai modern art remains undeniable, this perspective risks oversimplification. As art historian Somporn Rodboon asserts, "Traditional Thai art began to lose its cultural significance due to the Kingdom's sustained embrace of Western influences" (Rodboon, 1995: 243), framing Westernization as a force opposed to local traditions.

This paradigm, which positions Western art as the primary driver of Thai modernism, dominates scholarly discourse. It is echoed by figures like Sutee Kunavichayanont (2003), Amnard Yensabai (1981), and Wiroon Tangcharoen (1991), all of whom reinforce the centrality of Western aesthetics in Thailand's modern art narrative.

Chang's writings reveal his awareness of the dominant Silpakorn-educated art establishment, yet he consciously distanced himself from this mainstream tradition. He saw their artistic approaches as fundamentally incompatible with his own philosophy of art. As he reflected:

I focused on painting for 15 years, up until 1958. That year, I had the opportunity to create what I call my "pleasure paintings," which reflected my own identity. At the time, many painters in Bangkok, as I observed in exhibitions, were producing landscapes in the Western style—mostly in realism or impressionism. When I saw a wide variety of paintings, I realized that each era had its own distinct characteristics. I began to think it would be meaningful to paint in a way that truly expressed myself. Back then, Thai painters tended to follow Western (Farang) styles—primarily realism, with some leaning toward impressionism, and more recently, cubism. But I wanted to paint in my own way. In 1958, this desire aligned with my expressive mood. What emerged was formless, distinct from others, and carried a certain intensity and visual impact.

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<sup>8</sup> There is no denying that Silpa Bhirasri and Silpakorn University played a key role in the development of Thai modern art. Most of the artists in Thailand in the early time graduated from Silpakorn University. They were trained through the course which was founded by Silpa Bhirasri and influenced by western academies. Hence, Those from Silpakorn was the influential group which had the power to determine the direction of Thai modern art.

Because of this, I felt a deeper sense of satisfaction with my work (C. Sae-tang, 2021: 54–55).

Chang’s monochrome abstract paintings (Fig. 1) reveal a stronger debt to Chinese calligraphic brushwork—reflecting his cultural heritage—than to academic traditions. His practice was equally shaped by spiritual discipline, as documented in a 2018 posthumous exhibition. Archival footage showed Chang describing his creative process as akin to Buddhist meditation: he would circle his canvases, mixing paint while achieving *ekaggata* (single-minded concentration in Pali) before executing his abstractions (Cacchione, 2020: 6). While his approach contrasted sharply with the academic conventions promoted by Silpa Bhirasri, the “father of Thai modern art,” Chang’s work nevertheless constitutes a vital strand of Thai modernism.



**Fig. 1:** Tang Chang, *Untitled* (1969), marine paint on canvas with impasto medium, 97 x 112.5 cm. Collection of the Tang Chang Private Museum.

Due to his Chinese heritage, Chang has often been framed within art historical discourse as an artist primarily shaped by Chinese cultural traditions rather than Western conventions (Rodboon, 1995: 246–247). His position within the Thai art world remained peripheral, as neither his life nor his work conformed to dominant notions of Thainess

(Kwampenthai)<sup>9</sup> that defined mainstream Thai modern art (Teh, 2017: 42). Despite this marginalization, Chang’s practice has gained recognition among curators of Asian modernism. His works were featured in significant regional exhibitions, including the landmark 1995 survey “Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand”<sup>10</sup> and the National Gallery Singapore’s 2016 “Reframing Modernism” exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2014, Tang Chang’s work has experienced a significant resurgence, attracting attention from major institutions like the Art Institute of Chicago and the National Gallery Singapore. This renewed engagement stems largely from his abstract aesthetic and his constructed identity as an “outsider” within Thai art history. As Enid H.Y. Tsui (2022: 6–7, 10) notes, the selective focus on his abstract works—while overlooking his figurative paintings—reinforces this outsider narrative: “the broad focus on his more abstract works and disregard for his more figurative paintings is a consensus that fulfils his supposed outsider status in Thai art.”

Chang’s growing international profile reflects his connection to transnational artistic developments beyond his immediate context. From 2014 onward, his works have been exhibited globally across China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Berlin, and the United States, culminating in a 2024 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. Notably, his pieces now form part of the permanent collections at the National Gallery Singapore, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Centre Pompidou.

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<sup>9</sup> Generally, it is hard to identify “Thainess”. Walwipha Burusratanaphand argued that there is absence of a definition of “Thainess”, but the interpretation and definition is meant to be an aggressive measure of standardisation. To answer what “Thainess” means, one can proceed the other way around by trying to define what “otherness” or “non-Thainess” is. She argued that Farang (Western ethnics), Kaek (Malay, Indo, India etc.), and Jek (Chinese) would be considered as “otherness” (Burusatanaphand, 2001: 76–80). Additionally, in the context of Thai modern art, Thainess is considered a traditional art form which is related to Buddhism and royal culture (Rodboon, 2005: 278). In the case of Tang Chang, he is of Chinese descent. Thus, he might be considered as the otherness, or non-Thainess, in the context of Thai Society. Furthermore, his works are relatively influenced by Chinese culture rather than western culture or traditional Thai art.

<sup>10</sup> See The Japan Foundation Asia Center (1995).

<sup>11</sup> See National Gallery Singapore (2016).

This increasing recognition has spurred scholarly interest in Chang’s marginal position—a status carefully framed within academic and curatorial discourse, as Tsui characterizes it, that of an “outsider.” This article surveys key research on Tang Chang through 2024, analyzing how his outsider identity has been constructed, disseminated, and instrumentalized in his rise within global art circles, setting him apart from conventional narratives of Thai modernism. Furthermore, it highlights critical gaps in the literature, calling for expanded inquiry not only into Chang’s practice but also into other Thai artists whose work challenges established paradigms and could be reconsidered through the lens of outsiderhood in Thai cultural discourse.

### **The Position of Tang Chang Within the Context of Thai Modern Art**

Sekitar tahun 1960-an hingga 1970-an, persembahan Terinai As Apinan Poshyananda (1992: xxii) argues, the development of modern art in Thailand follows a distinct trajectory shaped by the nation’s unique historical circumstances. Unlike colonized societies where modernization was externally imposed, Thailand voluntarily embraced it in the late 19th century as a means of asserting its status as a “civilized” nation. This autonomous engagement with modernity fundamentally influenced the evolution of its artistic practices.

Apinan’s *Modern Art in Thailand* remains the foundational text in this field, charting Thai modern art’s development from the early Rattanakosin period to contemporary practices. His analysis highlights its pluralistic evolution, with artists adapting diverse stylistic elements to local contexts rather than following a singular path (Poshyananda, 1992: 231). While Western art served as a significant catalyst—particularly through styles like Impressionism and Cubism—Thai artists actively reinterpreted these influences. The Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (later Silpa Bhirasri) played a pivotal role in this process, establishing the School of Fine Arts (now Silpakorn University) and institutionalizing Western-derived modernist principles (Poshyananda, 1992: 231).

Conventional scholarship identifies two key drivers of Thai modern art: The assimilation of Western artistic traditions, and Silpa Bhirasri’s institutionalization of modern art pedagogy. This perspective,

articulated by Apinan and supported by scholars like Somporn Rodboon (1995: 244–245), positions Bhirasri as the “father of Thai modern art” for introducing Western aesthetics. The narrative emphasizes how Thai modernism emerged through active engagement with Western ideas during the nation’s modernization, with artists selectively adapting foreign elements to local contexts.

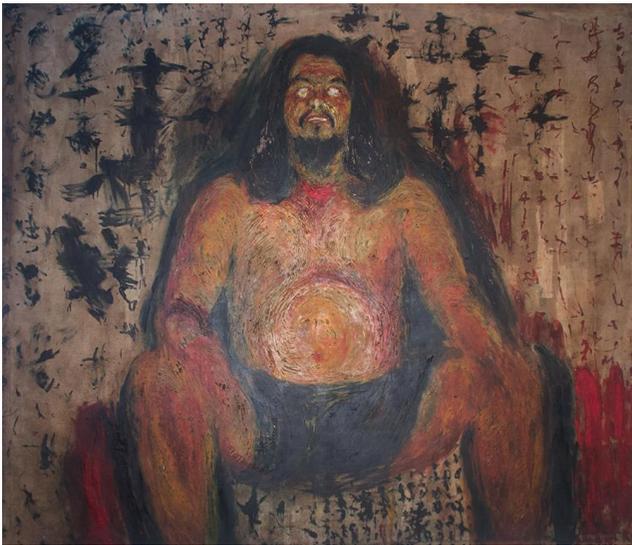
Silpa Bhirasri’s legacy is most visible through Silpakorn University, which became the epicenter of formal art training. His influence has been further cemented by Thai scholars—including Sutee Kunavichayanont (2003), Amnard Yensabai (1981), and Wiroon Tangcharoen (1991)—whose works, though primarily published in Thai, have reinforced the centrality of Western-influenced pedagogy in institutional histories of Thai modern art.

While Tang Chang has often been framed as an outsider within dominant narratives of Thai modern art, his significance is nevertheless affirmed in major scholarly works on the subject. Apinan Poshyananda’s foundational texts explicitly incorporate Chang into the historical trajectory of Thai modernism, documenting his participation in late 1960s private gallery exhibitions—an important alternative to state-controlled national exhibitions (Poshyananda, 1990: 102)—as well as his identity as a self-taught artist and involvement with The Artists’ Front of Thailand (Poshyananda, 1990: 162).

Apinan’s analysis reveals two crucial dimensions of Chang’s practice. First, in the domain of Buddhism and Abstraction, Chang is positioned alongside Pratuang Emjaroen as a pioneer in synthesizing Buddhist spirituality with abstract visual language. Unlike Western abstract movements like Abstract Expressionism or Tachisme, Chang’s approach emerged organically from his engagement with Chinese philosophy, nature, and poetry, reflecting influences from Zen, Taoism, and Theravada Buddhism (Poshyananda, 1990: 134–137). This spiritual-abstract synthesis later extended into his innovative “concrete poetry.”

Second, Apinan highlights Chang’s powerful political statement in 14 October 1973 (Fig. 2), created in response to the 1973 student

uprising.<sup>12</sup> In this work, the artist depicts himself squatting at the center of the canvas. His body is rendered in yellow and red, with black shorts, and shown from the torso down to his arms and legs, though his hands are absent. His feet are also missing, as they extend beyond the limited space of the canvas. The figure's head, with long hair and facial features like a beard and moustache, closely resembles the artist, but the eyes are filled with white. The background is filled with abstract, calligraphic-like characters in black and red, alongside bold red strokes. This piece can be seen as the artist's manifesto, using his own body to convey his position. It is particularly renowned when discussing works related to the 1973 Thai popular uprising. This work has become a touchstone in analyses of Thai political art, exemplifying what Apinan Poshyananda (1990: 162) describes as “artistic and ethical resistance” through its deliberate negation of conventional representational strategies.



**Fig. 2:** Tang Chang, *Untitled* (14 October 1973), marine paint on canvas, 205 x 245 cm. Collection of the Tang Chang Private Museum

These dual thematic strands—spiritual abstraction and political engagement—have cemented Chang’s place in Thai art historiography

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<sup>12</sup> Originally, the artist did not title this work. However, due to its connection with Thailand’s political uprising on 14 October 1973, it became known as “14 October 1973.”

while simultaneously underscoring his peripheral status relative to institutional modernism. Apinan's foundational work has inspired subsequent scholars like Sutee Kunavichayanont (2003) and Somporn Rodboon (1995), who have further examined Chang's abstract innovations and his seminal political works responding to the October 1973 uprising. These aspects of his practice have gained particular curatorial traction, featuring prominently in international exhibitions.

However, this recognition remains contested within more traditional art historical circles. Government-commissioned scholar Amnard Yensabai (1981) and Silpakorn University academic Viboon Leesuan (2005) notably exclude Chang from their narratives of Thai modernism. Given Amnard's institutional affiliations and Viboon's conventional Silpakorn-oriented perspective, these omissions systematically reinforce Chang's constructed identity as an artistic "outsider"—a figure operating beyond the boundaries of state-sanctioned modernism.

### **Tang Chang's Artistic Journey: A Study of His Impact on Thai Modern Art**

Tang Chang's oeuvre has drawn significant scholarly attention, particularly in Thai-language research. Notable examples include dissertations by Sinchai Suksawang (1977), Atchara Tangpornprasert (2002), and Sapisara Khemthong (2013), which analyze the formal elements, concepts, and practices in Chang's art and poetry. Sinchai identified Daoism as central to Chang's poetry, while Atchara and Sapisara examined the influence of Chinese culture on his artwork. However, their findings often echoed earlier arguments by Apinan Poshyananda, especially regarding the alignment of Chang's abstraction with Eastern philosophies such as Zen, Daoism, and Buddhism.

A shift toward broader socio-cultural contextualization began with Shioda Junichi's essay for the *Asian Modernism* exhibition catalogue (1995), where he contrasted Chang's work with the dominant Silpakorn University tradition established by Silpa Bhirasri, thereby challenging prevailing definitions of Thai modernism. This framing also inadvertently distanced Chang from mainstream art associated with Silpakorn.

Building on Junichi's insights, David Teh described Chang as a "pre-ter-national" figure—one who operated beyond conventional national narratives (Teh, 2017). Teh expanded on this in the catalogue for *Misfits: Pages from Loose-leaf Modernity* (Teh et al., 2017), which exhibited Chang alongside Bagyi Aung Soe (Myanmar) and Rox Lee (Philippines) at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. The exhibition presented artists working on the margins of modernism in diverse regional contexts, thereby challenging dominant national art histories. Teh argued that while Chang embraced various international influences and foregrounded his Chinese heritage, he remained deeply engaged with the struggles of the Thai people, positioning his work outside dominant national frameworks.

In 2019, my master's thesis (N. Sae-tang, 2019) expanded on Teh's approach by investigating Chang's marginalization within canonical Thai art history. The study examined representations of Chang in Thai public discourse and introduced perspectives from cultural studies into traditional art historical frameworks. It highlighted Chang's refusal to conform to any singular frame of reference, particularly that of mainstream Thai modernism, and repositioned his practice within the broader narrative of Thai modern art.

Other scholars have also situated Chang's work in socio-cultural contexts. Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, a Thai art historian and University of Michigan graduate, offers a compelling analysis in his dissertation. He explores the artistic practices of Fernando Zobel and Chang in relation to urban development, state-building, and religious reform in the postwar and postcolonial era. Drawing from diverse artistic lineages—from East Asian calligraphers to European old masters—Chanon suggests that Chang's paintings and concrete poetry critically engage with Thai-Chinese diasporic memory, illuminating tensions around religion, ethnicity, and national identity during a time of postwar reconstruction (Praepipatmongkol, 2020).

Enid Hiu-yue Tsui's study (Tsui, 2022), based on her master's thesis (Tsui, 2020), focuses on Chang's renowned self-portrait *14 October 1973*. Tsui argues that international interest in Chang's work reflects a teleological effort to incorporate it into a globally recognized art canon. She critiques existing evaluations of Chang's legacy for overlooking a significant portion of his self-portraits, warning that this neglect reinforces Eurocentric narratives in art history. Recognizing these omissions, she

suggests, could reveal major gaps in our understanding of Chang's work and prompt alternative narratives for Thai modern art.

Studies that contextualize Chang within socio-cultural frameworks often highlight two key themes: his departure from the established canon of Thai modern art and the relevance of his work within broader international movements. These analyses point to a persistent yet underexplored gap between Chang and the mainstream art historical narrative. They also reveal a deeper tension between Eastern and Western paradigms. While Thai modern art was largely shaped by Western artistic traditions and later institutionalized under authoritarian influence, Chang's work remained rooted in Eastern philosophies—particularly Chinese cultural and spiritual traditions, which reflect Thailand's cultural diversity. This divergence underscores the distinctiveness of his practice and reinforces his construction as an outsider within Thai modernism. It also reflects the ongoing negotiation between established canons of authority and the plurality of cultural and artistic expression in Thailand.

Exhibition catalogues and curatorial essays by Cheng Jia Yun (2016), Yin Ker (Ker & Lista, 2023), and Orianna Cacchione (2020) have also advanced scholarship on Chang. Notably, Ker and Cacchione provide critical perspectives that position Chang's work beyond national boundaries. As curator of Chang's solo exhibition in Chicago, Cacchione examines the interplay between his abstract paintings and concrete poetry, arguing that his repetitive gestures in painting evolved into a defining feature of his poetry. Ker's writings for the 2024 Pompidou exhibitions explore not only Chang's abstract paintings but also related drawings and poems. Her analysis highlights the influence of Chinese culture, particularly Chang's deep engagement with traditional and religious Chinese painting.

### **Tang Chang: The Outsider in Thai Modern Art**

From the above discussions, Tang Chang scholarship can be grouped into three categories. The first includes historiographical studies of Thai modern art that build on Apinan Poshyananda's foundational work. These studies typically situate Chang within abstraction, explore Chinese cultural influences, and consider the political climate of the 1970s. The second group comprises MA theses by Thai students analyzing Chang's artworks

and poetry. While Sinchai Suksawang's study focuses on Chang's poetry, Atchara Tangpornprasert and Sapisara Khemthong expand on Apinan's ideas, offering more detailed analyses and categorization of Chang's visual work. These theses are primarily written in Thai. The third group includes more recent studies that, while initially drawing on Apinan's frameworks, attempt to place Chang within broader socio-cultural contexts. Influenced by Shioda Junichi's perspective, these works view Chang as an "outsider" to Thai modernism. Despite this shared premise, their analytical focuses diverge—exploring aspects such as Chang's Chinese heritage, national belonging, the relationship between visual art and poetry, and intersections with culture and spirituality.

Overall, research on Tang Chang has largely drawn upon an early historiographical framework of Thai modern art shaped by Apinan. His emphasis on Chang's Chinese roots and role in abstraction, along with Junichi's writings, has reinforced Chang's status as marginal or peripheral to the dominant Thai modernist narrative.

Thai modern art itself emerged as part of a larger civilizational project aimed at reforming visual culture through realism. Central to this shift was the pursuit of visual truth—a defining theme in Thailand's modern art development. This began under King Rama IV, when photography and portraiture influenced artistic practices, and accelerated under King Rama V. A key figure in this transformation was Khrua In Khong, a traditional muralist who adopted Western visual techniques after encountering European prints and photographs. He was the first Thai artist to use three-dimensional perspective and chiaroscuro, bringing lifelike qualities to depictions of figures and architecture (Rodboon, 1995: 243).

The formalization of modern art education in Thailand followed a similar trajectory to Western models. In 1933, Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci—who had arrived in 1923—was appointed principal of the School of Fine Arts (*Rongrian Praneetsilpakam*), later renamed Silpakorn University. Working alongside Phra Sarotratananimman, Feroci developed a curriculum modeled on European art academies, emphasizing realism, observational training, and academic discipline (Rodboon, 1995: 244). Students received systematic instruction in painting, sculpture, and life drawing, rooted in classical methods. Prominent alumni such as Fua Haribhitak, Pimarn Mulpramook, and Sittidet Sanghiran created works noted for their realistic representation and fidelity to nature. As Apinan

Poshyananda noted—citing an interview with Sanit Disatapundhu—Silpakorn’s curriculum prioritized technical skill through a structured sequence of training, from plaster cast sketching to figure drawing and oil painting, with minimal exposure to modernists like Van Gogh, Gauguin, or Picasso (Poshyananda, 1992: 33).

Reassessing Thai modern art history reveals key differences between Tang Chang and this dominant tradition. Beyond the binary of Western versus Eastern influence, the central role of realism in mainstream narratives further marginalizes Chang’s abstract practice. If realism defines the main trajectory of Thai modern art, Chang’s abstract works place him outside its core. Furthermore, while academic institutions shaped formal developments in Thai art, Chang was a self-taught artist who worked outside these structures. These factors collectively underscore Chang’s peripheral position within the canonical history of Thai modernism.

Chang’s outsider status can also be interpreted through the lens of “Outsider Art”—a term used to describe late 19th- and early 20th-century works produced by individuals detached from conventional society, often celebrated for their originality born of isolation (Tsui, 2022: 7). David Maclagan classifies Outsider Art into three categories: art created by individuals experiencing psychosis; work produced through automatism, often linked to spiritualism; and art that combines formal originality with social marginality (Maclagan, 1991: 32). Chang’s practice aligns with the latter two: it was grounded in spiritual processes and shaped by formal innovation rooted in his cultural background. His Chinese heritage further positioned him within a socially marginal context.

From the late 1930s to the 1950s, the Thai state pursued aggressive assimilation policies targeting the Chinese community—enforcing property confiscation, cultural suppression, and systemic discrimination. During this period, Thai-Chinese people were subjected to state-sponsored prejudice, while ethnic Thais received preferential treatment.<sup>13</sup> Enid Hui-yue Tsui argues that Chang’s outsider status is further supported by Apinan Poshyananda’s depiction of the artist as someone who withdrew from the art world, grew disillusioned with peers, and lived in isolation

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 8 in Chua (2003).

and poverty until his death in 1990 (Poshyananda, 1992: 137). Tsui suggests that this description reflects a “primitive” or “primal” force in Chang’s art, rooted in nature and reinforcing his outsider identity. Yet she also contends that despite his marginal status, Chang has gained growing recognition. His exhibitions and subsequent publications highlight his distinctive vision and innovative methods, distinguishing him from his contemporaries (Tsui, 2022: 10).

### **Conclusion and Direction for Further Research**

Two key areas warrant further exploration in the study of Tang Chang. First, his positioning within Thai modern art history is often framed in contrast to mainstream academic narratives, which tend to separate self-taught artists from institutionally trained ones—sometimes based on reductive stereotypes. A more nuanced reevaluation of Thai modernism could illuminate not only Chang’s contributions but also the diversity of artistic practices across the Thai art scene. Second, while Chang’s abstract paintings and concrete poetry have garnered significant scholarly attention, a substantial portion of his oeuvre—including over 400 self-portraits and numerous works in genres such as landscape, figuration, and still life—remains underexplored. Deeper investigation into these lesser-known works would enrich our understanding of his artistic practice.

Moreover, dominant narratives of Thai modernism continue to emphasize the influence of Silpakorn University and Western-style realism, often accepting the framework of modernism without critical engagement. Although a few younger scholars have begun questioning this paradigm, many still overlook how artworks relate to broader theoretical debates. Artists like Tang Chang, whose work and identity diverge from conventional norms, are often labeled as “outsider artists”—a categorization that complicates their relationship to Thai modernism. While Chang was recognized as a modern artist, his approach challenged the very framework of Thai modernism itself.

Mao and Walkowitz (2008: 737) describe the expansion of modernist studies as “temporal, spatial, and vertical,” advocating for the inclusion of materials and practices previously excluded by Western aesthetic standards. From this perspective, Tang Chang’s work invites a reconsideration of modernism in Thailand, especially the contributions of

self-taught artists outside the Silpakorn tradition. Among these, Pratuang Emcharoen—a close friend of Chang—stands out. Like Chang, Pratuang was self-taught and developed a distinct style rooted in nature and bold color. Other self-taught artists such as Somkiat Panasirisilp, Suchart Watchanadilok, Somchai Hattakitkosol, and Chamras Phrommin (from northern Thailand) also contribute to an alternative narrative of Thai modernism.

Broadening the scope of Thai modern art to include these figures allows for a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of its development. It also highlights the diverse dialogues taking place among artists across the country. Although scholarly interest in Thai artists has grown, the field remains significantly underexplored, offering ample opportunities for future research on figures like Tang Chang.

As the nation-state is increasingly seen as a constructed and potentially limiting framework for art historical analysis, it is both timely and necessary to situate Chang's practice within wider regional and global discourses. His recognition on the international stage underscores the need for this expanded perspective. With the advancement of digital archives, new technologies, and evolving theoretical frameworks, the study of Chang's legacy—his artistic output, personal history, and cultural milieu—remains a dynamic and fertile field for future scholarship.

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