

Space That Thinks and Objects That Speak, The Rückenfigur in Contemporary Chinese and Malaysian Painting

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ABSTRACT

The back-turned figure, or Rückenfigur, entered art history as a device of German Romanticism, yet its migration into contemporary Asian painting has received little sustained comparative study. This article examines five painters, three working in China (Liu Xiaohui, Song Yige, and Zhaoming Wu) and two in Malaysia (Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Fadilah Karim), through close visual analysis supplemented by six anonymized specialist interviews used as contextual consultation. Reading form together with institutional and cultural context, it argues that the selected Chinese and Malaysian works resolve the same pictorial problem, how a figure that withholds the face can still organize meaning, through different mechanisms. The Chinese works tend to make space carry the interpretive weight, while the Malaysian works tend to load meaning onto surrounding objects. This difference of emphasis produces five functional modes: perceptual mediation in Liu Xiaohui, where spatial arrangement makes looking itself the subject; psychological allegory in Song Yige, where unstable spaces externalize inner tension; corporeal assertion in Zhaoming Wu, where the body acquires meaning through painterly materiality; symbolic substitution in Ahmad Zakii Anwar, where objects and divided panels disperse identity; and autobiographical containment in Fadilah Karim, where the turned back protects privacy while domestic objects carry emotion. The typology repositions the Rückenfigur as a culturally adaptive device rather than a fixed Romantic sign.

Keywords. Rückenfigur, contemporary Chinese painting, contemporary Malaysian painting, formal analysis, cross-cultural aesthetics, comparative art history

INTRODUCTION

A figure stands with its back to us, and the painting changes. The face that would ordinarily anchor a portrait, supplying expression, mood, and narrative direction, is withdrawn, and the viewer is left to make sense of the image through posture, scale, surrounding space, and whatever the figure appears to see. This is the pictorial logic of the Rückenfigur, the back-turned or partially withdrawn figure that Caspar David Friedrich made famous in works such as *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. Friedrich's back figures fused solitude, the sublime, and spiritual introspection into a single posture, and the device has been read ever since as a Romantic emblem of contemplation before nature (Koerner, 2009). Its afterlife, though, has been far wider than Romanticism. The motif recurs across photography, film, and digital media, where it continues to invite identification while holding the viewer at a distance (Schott, 2020).

Most scholarship treats the Rückenfigur either as a passive formal charm of nineteenth-century landscape or as a European convention that later artists inherit. What has gone underexamined is how the device operates once it is transplanted into non-Western pictorial systems that carry their own spatial grammars and symbolic economies. Contemporary Chinese and Malaysian painters use the back-turned figure often and deliberately, yet the two contexts have rarely been read against one another. Chinese art criticism debates whether oil painters can absorb the spatial logic of literati landscape without lapsing into pastiche, while Malaysian scholarship situates figurative painting within a post-independence condition of hybridity and multicultural identity (Abdullah, 2018; Yi & Abdullah, 2025). Both conversations touch the Rückenfigur, and neither has fully compared the ways it works across the two settings.

That comparison is taken up here. Working from a corpus of five painters, the article asks how the back-turned figure organizes aesthetic engagement, how it encodes cultural memory and identity, and whether a comparative account can hold the two contexts together without flattening them into a crude East-versus-East binary. The central claim is that the two groups answer the same problem with different means. In the Chinese works, meaning gathers in the treatment of space. In the Malaysian works, it gathers in the treatment of objects. Liu Xiaohui reduces a coastal scene until the viewer becomes aware of looking as such. Zakii Anwar surrounds a nude body with doors, matchsticks, and animals until identity disperses into its symbolic proxies. Between these poles lie Song Yige, whose voids and unstable architecture turn space into psychological pressure, Zhaoming Wu, whose dissolving interiors let the body emerge from paint, and Fadilah Karim, whose lemons, binoculars, and oversized garments carry private feeling that the turned back keeps reserved.

This difference of emphasis, which is compressed here into the phrase space that thinks against objects that speak, is the article's organizing argument. It is not a wall between two national styles, since Chinese works contain symbols and Malaysian works rely on spatial compression. It marks a strong tendency within the selected corpus, and it helps explain why the emotional register of the Malaysian paintings reads as denser and more theatrical while the Chinese paintings read as sparser and more meditative. Reading form and context together, rather than treating visual description and cultural interpretation as separate steps, allows the comparison to stay anchored in what the paintings actually do.

Approach

The analysis proceeds from the artworks outward. Each painting is examined first for its formal organization, the position of the figure within the pictorial field, the orientation of the body, the handling of scale, colour, and spatial depth, and the distribution of visual weight, before that description is connected to iconographic content and cultural context. This layering follows the three-stage progression that Panofsky (1955) set out, moving from the pre-iconographic description of form, through the identification of symbolic content, toward the interpretation of cultural function. The stages are treated here as a sequence of attention rather than a rigid hierarchy, since the meaning of a back-turned figure rarely settles into a single register.

Two theoretical commitments shape the reading. The first concerns perception. Following Arnheim (1974), looking is taken to be an active construction of meaning rather than passive reception, so that the placement and scale of a figure organize the viewer's engagement before any symbol is decoded. Schott (2020) observes that the device confronts the viewer with "a figure which sees without visible eyes" (p. 600), and that omission is precisely what shifts interpretive labour onto the rest of the image. The second commitment concerns the body. The phenomenological tradition treats the body as at once perceiving and perceived (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), and the Rückenfigur stages that doubleness with unusual clarity, inviting the viewer to occupy the figure's orientation while remaining aware of an unbridgeable gap (Carman, 2008). Where symbolic content becomes central, the analysis draws on Chandler (2017) for the treatment of the image as a cultural text, and on postcolonial readings where the works demand them (Bhabha, 1994).

The corpus was selected for coherence rather than coverage. Each artist returns to the back-turned figure repeatedly and systematically, which allows the device to be tracked across a small group of works rather than isolated in a single image. The three Chinese painters and the two Malaysian painters were chosen because their practices are strong, distinct, and rarely compared, and because between them they span the range of functions the motif performs, from perceptual restraint to symbolic theatre.

To prevent nationality from functioning as a substitute for explanation, the comparison also records each painter's institutional and professional formation. Liu Xiaohui's mural training at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Song Yige's training at the Lu Xun Academy place them within China's academy-based oil-painting system; Zhaoming Wu's transnational career links Chinese and Western academic realism. Ahmad Zakii Anwar's practice belongs to Malaysia's post-independence figurative and urban field, while Fadilah Karim works within a contemporary domestic and autobiographical realism. These differences provide a contextual basis for the divergent uses of space and objects examined below, without treating either tendency as a fixed national essence (Andrews & Shen, 2012; Abdullah, 2018; Yi & Abdullah, 2025).

Alongside the visual evidence, the analysis draws on six structured expert interviews conducted specifically for this study, three with China-based specialists in contemporary Chinese painting and three with Malaysia-based specialists in contemporary Malaysian painting. Their relevance to the study lies in field-specific professional familiarity with the artists, institutions, and visual traditions under discussion rather than statistical representativeness. Each responded to the same structured questions while consulting a common set of image plates. In accordance with the confidentiality agreement, participants are identified only by code, CE1 to CE3 for the China-based specialists and ME1 to ME3 for the Malaysia-based specialists, and their names and affiliations are withheld. Because the sample is small and non-representative, the responses are not presented as a broad consensus, treated as an independent data set, or subjected to systematic coding. They function only as contextual consultation, offering field-grounded observations that reinforce, complicate, or occasionally correct the visual reading, and they remain subordinate to the paintings.

The Chinese works, where space carries the meaning

Across the three Chinese painters, the back-turned figure most often becomes legible through its spatial condition. The environment is not a neutral backdrop against which a symbol is displayed. It slows, blocks, expands, compresses, or destabilizes the viewer's relation to the figure, and the meaning of the work follows from that spatial pressure. This tendency has deep local roots, since the literati landscape tradition long treated void and distance as active carriers of feeling rather than as empty ground (Fong, 1992; Clunas, 1997). What the contemporary painters add is a reduction of narrative so severe that space becomes the near-exclusive bearer of significance.

Liu Xiaohui, the figure as perceptual mediator

Liu Xiaohui trained in mural painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and the discipline of that training, its concern with spatial organization and frontal address, carries into his easel work. He returns to back-turned female figures again and again, and he describes the repetition as a way of stripping away falsehood to expose what he takes to be the truth of painting, the conditions under which seeing occurs. Three works trace a clear spatial progression. *Sea Level* (2013) places the figure before an open coastal field, *Corridor No. 2* (2014) sets her in motion within an architectural interior, and *Untitled, Sitting Position at Seaside No. 3* (2015) compresses the field until the body nearly fills it.

The formal argument of *Sea Level* lies in its refusal of grandeur. The canvas divides into three horizontal zones, a broad foreground of pale sand, a mid-ground band holding stones and the standing figure, and a low strip of blue-grey sea beneath an almost empty sky. The Rückenfigur stands slightly left of centre, hands clasped behind her back, her verticality interrupting the horizontal rhythm. Liu keeps the sea to a thin compressed seam rather than an expanse, and he holds the palette to whites, greys, and muted sand so that the body shares the tonality of its surroundings and is held within the field rather than lifted out of it. The single dark accent, the cast shadow of the large stone at lower left, pins the gaze downward and refuses the eye an easy drift into the distance. This is a deliberate departure from the Romantic model. The viewer is not offered a heroic subject contemplating infinity but a modest body standing within a flattened field of perception. The clasped hands intensify the reticence, since the hands, the body's other primary means of expression, are withheld alongside the face. CE2, drawing on his own practice as a painter, describes the back figure as a stand-in for the viewer's perspective, a device that lets us enter the pictorial space. Meaning here is a matter of perceptual economy, not confession.

Corridor No. 2 converts the figure from a mediator of openness into a body caught mid-transition. A pale blue-grey door sits left of centre, and the Rückenfigur, placed to its right, walks toward it, right leg forward and left heel raised, a handbag in her lowered hand. A dark band across the top lowers the visual ceiling, and a broad diagonal shadow crosses the lower right. The door is closed and offers no recession, so the walking figure is arrested at a threshold the painting will not let her cross. The corridor, ordinarily a space of passage, becomes a site of suspended arrival. ME1 draws a useful distinction between figures with open space before them and those enclosed by architecture, describing the latter as more thoroughly immersed in themselves, inhabiting a kind of physical prison. What the work depicts is the deferral of passage, an approach that never completes.

The third work carries Liu's reduction to its limit. The seaside survives only as a thin blue-grey line behind a seated figure who is cropped close and enlarged to fill the canvas, her weight settled onto one supporting arm. The environment is reduced almost to nothing, and the figure becomes the whole of what the painting offers to be seen. Contrary to a reading of dissolution, her contour stays firm and legible against the pale ground, a solid body set clearly against a void, so that what registers is a settled, undramatized solitude rather than melancholy. Read together, the three works move from mediation, through obstruction, to withdrawal, and the sequence is produced by measurable changes in placement, tonal contrast, and the treatment of the figure's edge. Liu's Rückenfigur is a perceptual instrument. The more the external world is reduced, the more the viewer becomes aware of looking itself.

Song Yige, the figure as psychological allegory

Song Yige occupies a sharply different emotional register. Trained at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, she builds atmospheres that hover between reality and dream, with thin luminous paint and dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Her back-turned figures are affective and metaphorical where Liu's are restrained, and CE3, formed in both Chinese and American traditions, distinguishes the seclusion of Chinese landscape painting from the specifically modern loneliness that Song's work produces, a loneliness that is urban and psychologically acute rather than philosophical.

In Encounter (2012), a classical, statue-like figure wrapped in pale drapery stands at the foot of a staircase that climbs diagonally out of the frame. The architecture is quietly irrational. The stair has no banister where a banister should be, while a railing is fixed uselessly to the wall, and the figure is given only a handful of scattered floor tiles to stand on, as though she could not step beyond them. The staircase conventionally promises ascent, yet the misplaced supports and the confining tiles withdraw that promise. Song works in a controlled realism shaded toward the uncanny, and she quotes antiquity without honouring it, setting a possibly Aphrodite-like figure down in a contemporary space that will not carry her anywhere. The turned, sculptural back denies gaze and expression and redirects attention to the spatial predicament. CE3 notes that a centrally placed back-turned figure can create a void at the centre that feels heavy with contemplation, and that heaviness is the subject here, a threshold seen but not crossed.

Male Star (2014) lodges its strangeness in an ordinary act. A head, seen from behind against a near-black ground, is lathered in what reads unmistakably as shaving foam, with a razor track cut cleanly through it and foam sliding onto the neck. This is not the destruction of anatomy but its temporary covering, since the skull remains legible and the razor track confirms a process under way. The unsettling charge comes from the impossibility of the act, since shaving the back of one's own head cannot be done unaided, which hints at an unseen second presence or at a self divided against itself. The concealed face denies expression, so the foam, the razor's path, and the slight lean of the body carry the whole of the figure's condition. What Song stages is estrangement within routine, the self made strange to itself through the very rituals meant to maintain it.

Looking Within pushes the allegory further by pairing a bare-backed boy with a brilliantly coloured macaw perched at his shoulder, both isolated against darkness. The boy is modelled softly and left anonymous, while the bird is rendered feather by feather in saturated red and green, so that the chromatic energy of the image sits with the animal rather than the human. The expected hierarchy inverts, and the eye goes first to the bird. Read symbolically, the macaw becomes the visible colour of an inner life the boy does not show, and since the parrot is traditionally linked to speech, it seems to address the viewer on his behalf, carrying a voice the silent body withholds. Across the three works Song transforms the Rückenfigur from a spatial device into an affective structure, moving from art-historical threshold, to bodily rupture, to symbolic companion. Her figures are anonymous less because they lack identity than because identity itself appears unstable, wounded, or displaced.

Zhaoming Wu, the figure as corporeal assertion

Zhaoming Wu, whose transnational career situates him between Chinese and Western academic traditions, deploys the Rückenfigur less as a fixed motif than as an occasion for painterly handling. His figures foreground the fall of light on cloth and skin and the sweep of the palette knife, and the turned or partly turned body keeps

meaning reserved while directing attention toward surface and gesture. Wu's practice illustrates the view that contemporary Chinese oil painting matures by engaging international dialogue from a confident local standpoint rather than retreating into isolation (Andrews & Shen, 2012).

Venus (2023) turns on the gap between its title and its setting. The name summons the goddess and the long tradition of the idealized nude, yet Wu seats a young woman in a pale slipping dress on the bare floor of a cool interior marked by exposed pipework and what appears to be an electrical box. The palette is silvery and faintly clinical rather than golden, and the classical reference is invoked precisely so that its absence can be felt. Seen from behind, her head turned just enough to deny us her expression, the figure withholds her interior while the title raises an expectation the room deflates. ME1 observes that Wu's women often seem out of harmony with their surroundings, as if inhabiting borrowed circumstances, and the remark fits with unusual directness here, a figure dignified by the painter's touch seated in a place that does not match her name. The turned back makes that distance legible.

Demo I (2023) reduces the situation to the act of painting itself. A woman sits from behind against a flat brown ground, her gown built from broad, confident knife-strokes that grow more abstract toward the deliberately unfinished lower edge of the canvas. The upper back is described with care, softly lit and anatomically clear, while the dress dissolves into open marks, so that the viewer travels from resolution toward dissolution within a single figure. What moves is the brushwork, not the body. CE1 associates Chinese painting with an embedded flow of lines and a breathing quality of mark-making, and a loose echo of that calligraphic confidence surfaces in the rhythm of Wu's knife. The Rückenfigur gives him an anonymous, self-contained body on which to perform the making of an image, and the unfinished canvas keeps the demonstration honest, showing the figure both arriving and dissolving. Where Liu withholds and Song wounds, Wu asserts, letting the body gain material presence through flesh, garment, and gesture even as the face turns away.

The Malaysian works, where objects carry the meaning

The two Malaysian painters build meaning more strongly through objects and symbolic inserts. The back-turned body rarely stands alone. It is surrounded by doors, matchsticks, animals, furniture, insects, garments, and domestic things that operate as active agents, organizing the viewer's reading of identity, memory, burden, and transformation. ME1 identifies this directly, noting that the Malaysian artists deploy symbols with far greater frequency and prominence than their Chinese counterparts, surrounding the turned figure with horses, doors, lemons, and butterflies, each carrying weight. This density has its own local logic, since Malaysian painting has long negotiated a multicultural inheritance and a post-independence condition of shifting identities, adapting inherited pictorial languages under conditions of accelerating global cultural flow to express hybridity and cultural memory (Appadurai, 1996; Abdullah, 2018; Yi & Abdullah, 2025).

Ahmad Zakii Anwar, symbolic substitution and the dispersed self

Ahmad Zakii Anwar is a sustained figurative painter whose work carries a psychological and cinematic quality and a preoccupation with the metaphysical dimensions of urban life. He describes his male nudes as a stage where markers of race, culture, and social standing are removed, leaving an ambiguous figure whose stillness carries *rasa*, or emotional resonance, while meaning stays elusive. His own formulation, that he reveals and hides at the same time, names the operation his Rückenfiguren perform. The three works examined here come from the series *My Shadow's Shadow*, and each deploys a multi-panel structure that separates body, object, animal, and atmosphere into adjacent compartments. This separation prevents any unified narrative reading and produces meaning through intervals and cuts, so that identity is dispersed across the image rather than located in the human subject alone.

I Am Not Home (2017) sets three panels side by side, an aged closed door, a near-blank white field interrupted only by a half-burnt matchstick, and a male nude seen from behind, cropped and faceless, his head tilted slightly as if in recollection. The panels do not share an illusionistic space, and the blank central field keeps door and body from touching, functioning as a pause or a wound. The sequence enacts an accumulation of refusals. The closed door blocks physical entry, the spent match blocks temporal return since its action has already passed,

and the turned back blocks recognition. The matchstick rewards close reading. Set beside the inclined head of a middle-aged figure, it suggests a portion of life already consumed, a set of possibilities burned down behind a door that will not reopen, and the everyday title becomes a decoy for a subject that is ontological displacement rather than domestic absence. This symbolic density confirms what ME3 describes as the tendency of Malaysian works to intensify emotional tension through fragmented spatial arrangements. The Rückenfigur here mediates access to meaning rather than to space, becoming the last term in a chain of blocked access.

Live by Day (2017) expands the logic into a more elaborate staging, a bowed male nude beside a schematic pale horse, then a dark, fully modelled horse standing next to an ornate chaise longue in a deep green interior. The chaise, with its associations of comfort and display, evokes a cultivated, even borrowed life, and the pale horse reads as its fading, half-realized and drawn rather than fully painted. The most telling contextual observation concerns reading direction. Read left to right, in the Latin convention, the work moves from the body outward into its symbolic proxies. Read right to left, following the orientation of Jawi and Arabic script native to the Malaysian setting, the sequence reverses into a legible elegy, from the emblems of a settled past, through the whitening horse that departs from memory, to the bowed and sorrowful man. That the right-to-left reading yields the clearer story aligns the work's interpretive grain with the reading order of its own cultural context, and it gives concrete form to the negotiation between inherited legacies and global pressures that CE3 calls a post-colonial condition. Zakii's own account of shifting from male models to animals in order to unravel the contradictory aspects of his personality supports this reading, and ME1's observation that the figures hold dignity alongside suffering applies in a tempered key, since the lowered head turns strength inward into grief.

The Cicada's Dream (2017) is the most openly metaphysical of the three. A man stands from behind in dark seawater beneath a heavy sky, arms held slightly open, while a separate panel isolates a butterfly rendered in fine black and white within a barely perceptible pink halo. The title names a cicada, yet the insect shown is a butterfly, and that discrepancy between word and image belongs to the work's dream-logic. Both creatures signify metamorphosis, the shedding of one form for another, and the butterfly in particular carries associations with the soul and with fragile release. Set against the half-submerged, faceless figure, the insect becomes a sign of change without stable identity, the exact counterpart to a body without a face. What might read as a Friedrich-like confrontation with a stormy sea is transformed by the metamorphic insect, the panel structure, and the restrained rasa-based handling into something local and distinct. ME3 cautions against reducing such works to imitations of European Romanticism, and the caution holds, since here a Romantic motif becomes a quiet, suspended rite of transformation. Across the three works Zakii treats the Rückenfigur as a disciplined method for producing interpretive openness, the turned back holding each composition together while doors, animals, furniture, and weather speak around the silent body.

Fadilah Karim, autobiographical containment and the ethics of privacy

Fadilah Karim works in an intimate, domestic, and emotionally subdued register that sets her apart from Zakii's allegorical theatre. Her large-scale realism stages solitary figures, frequently children or young women, in shallow interior spaces, and the Rückenfigur lets her make autobiographical reference while withholding confession. ME1 offers one of the most nuanced observations in the interviews, identifying a quality of hope that persists beneath the loneliness her figures embody, as if they were rethinking the past and planning for the future. That reading resists the straightforwardly melancholy interpretation that muted palettes and isolated figures might invite.

Big Blue Dress (2024) presents a young girl turned away against a pale wall, holding a lemon while three more lie scattered on the floor, a few of her own drawings taped to the wall and one fallen before her. The oversized blue dress pools around her feet and becomes the painting's dominant mass, so that the small body inside it seems at once sheltered and weighed down. The lemon is the key symbol, and its meaning exceeds bitterness. In the Dutch still-life tradition the fruit carried a doubled sense, its sourness held together with a bright, cleansing freshness, and the painting leaves both readings open, so that the single lemon the child holds, distinct from the loose others, feels chosen or kept, perhaps to be given. Where Liu's figures stand in nearly bare environments, Fadilah surrounds her child with legible, resonant things, and the excess of garment over body visualizes a child wearing something, a role or an inheritance, that is still too large for her. The mood is not despairing. She stands,

she holds her lemon, and she keeps her place among her own drawings, a figure poised at a beginning rather than a loss.

Isolation (2020) turns looking itself into a structure of distance. A woman seen from behind raises binoculars to her eyes, her yellow top a single warm mass against a dim, near-abstract ground. Crucially, no window or vista appears before her, and her own shadow on the wall suggests she faces something close, even a blank surface. The instrument made to collapse distance is aimed at a near wall, so that the tool of far-seeing becomes a measure of confinement. The viewer watches someone in the act of looking yet is denied her view, an inversion of ordinary pictorial access, and the Rückenfigur becomes at once the object of observation and a rival observer. Painted in 2020, the work resonates with pandemic isolation without literalizing it, formalizing loneliness as a condition built into seeing. The yellow top keeps the scene from tipping into despair, insisting on vitality within confinement, and it supports ME1's sense of hope persisting alongside solitude.

Too Big to Handle (2022) removes the symbolic clutter and proves more oppressive for the reduction. A child sits from behind in an oversized dark denim jacket whose sleeves spread far past her hands across the floor, her hair gathered into a bun, facing a near, blank wall. The jacket absorbs light and reads as a dense central weight, and the sleeves that overrun the hands show a body not yet equal to the task the title names. The disproportion is temporal as well as physical, since the tied hair suggests a child who has made herself ready while the garment of the task remains cut for someone larger. Yet the content is not despair. The child does not collapse, and the slight outward reach of the arms within the swallowing sleeves registers a persistence of orientation that the viewer recognizes as quietly remarkable. Across the three works Fadilah uses the turned back to protect the figure from direct exposure while making bodily vulnerability more visible, an approach with a distinctly ethical quality. The viewer is allowed to witness vulnerability but not to possess it, and the face is withheld to preserve privacy rather than to manufacture mystery.

Comparative synthesis

Set the two groups side by side and both the shared ground and the divergence come into focus. What the works hold in common is a structure of withheld access. In every case the face is removed from the field of interpretation, and that absence redistributes meaning across the painting, forcing the viewer to attend to posture, scale, orientation, surface, and surrounding things. ME3 puts the shared function plainly, describing the Rückenfigur as a surrogate presence through which viewers enter the painting conceptually and emotionally, and ME2 similarly notes a common emphasis on introspection and viewer engagement across both contexts. CE1 locates the convergence at the level of human concern, arguing that painters in both settings use the back to express a common loneliness and introspection, while CE3 identifies a shared post-traditional anxiety, a negotiation between inherited legacies and the pressures of globalization for which a figure that turns away from both viewer and world is an apt visual correlate. The transferable element, then, is interpretive delay. The back-turned figure asks the viewer to remain with uncertainty long enough for other visual elements to become meaningful, which is why the motif can travel between contexts without becoming identical in each.

The divergence concerns the character of the pictorial environment in which the figure is embedded, and here a recurrent pattern within the six interviews aligns with the visual evidence. Within this limited sample, all three China-based specialists and two of the three Malaysia-based specialists read the Chinese works as sparser, quieter, and more spatially expansive, generating meditative effects, while the Malaysian works read as denser, more symbolically loaded, and more dramatically contrasted, generating emotional tension. CE1 draws the contrast with precision, rooting the Chinese works in the freehand visual language of literati and landscape painting and their pursuit of an integration of the human and the natural, and the Malaysian works in Western realism and urban culture, with a more concrete language, stronger contrast, and sharper emotion. CE2 develops a complementary point through brushwork, identifying an embedded writing quality, a calligraphic logic in the handling of the mark, in the Chinese case studies that the Malaysian works, more indebted to Western realist modelling, do not share. ME1 cuts across the formal dimension to the role of objects, noting that the Malaysian painters use symbols far more prominently, an asymmetry visible across the corpus.

This is where the argument crystallizes. The two groups can be clarified through the distinction between space-based and object-based meaning. In the Chinese works, meaning is most often generated through the organization of space itself. Liu Xiaohui's open horizon, enclosed corridor, and compressed field do not merely contain the figure, they determine its perceptual and psychological function. Song Yige's dark voids and unstable architecture turn space into an extension of inner disturbance, and Zhaoming Wu's dissolving interiors let the body emerge from and return to painterly atmosphere. Space here is not a neutral background but an active interpretive structure that slows, blocks, expands, or compresses the viewer's relation to the figure. In the Malaysian works, objects and symbolic inserts carry that weight instead. Zakii's doors, matchsticks, animals, chaise, cicada, waterline, and storm fields, and Fadilah's lemons, drawings, binoculars, and oversized garments, function as symbolic agents that surround and extend the meaning of the silent body. To compress the contrast into a phrase, the Chinese examples tend to make space think, while the Malaysian examples tend to make objects speak.

This distinction must be guarded against two misreadings, both of which the experts raise independently. The first is the reduction of the back-turned figure to simple loneliness or melancholy. CE1 warns against equating the back view only with sadness while ignoring that it also carries tranquillity, freedom, and self-reflection, and ME3 concurs that reading the figure merely as a symbol of loneliness or anonymity is an oversimplification. The formal evidence bears this out, since Fadilah's figures hold a thread of hope, Wu's assert a serene corporeal presence, and Liu's rest in a settled rather than sorrowful solitude. The second misreading treats the two national contexts as though they operated within a single framework, judging both, as CE1 puts it, by one standard without seeing the tension between a Chinese back rooted in an ancient internal tradition and a Malaysian back shaped by colonial history and multicultural plurality. CE3 adds a related caution specific to the Malaysian works, against reading the concealed face as an expression of Eastern inscrutability, a move that leans into Orientalist tropes by mistaking a deliberate compositional strategy for mystery. Comparison, to be responsible, must hold the difference without collapsing it into a cultural stereotype.

Taken together, the close readings support a provisional typology of five functions. In the Chinese works the Rückenfigur operates through perceptual mediation in Liu Xiaohui, arranging the viewer's relation to horizon, wall, and surface so that looking itself becomes the concern, through psychological allegory in Song Yige, where the concealed face intensifies the symbolic pressure of animals, erasure, and unstable architecture, and through corporeal assertion in Zhaoming Wu, where the body gains material presence through flesh, garment, and brushwork. In the Malaysian works it operates through symbolic substitution in Ahmad Zakii Anwar, where identity disperses across doors, animals, and panel structures, and through autobiographical containment in Fadilah Karim, where the turned back protects privacy while garment, object, and scale carry emotional pressure. These are tendencies rather than fixed categories. Song Yige's symbolic allegory brings her closer to the Malaysian register, and Fadilah's spare environments share something of the Chinese aesthetic of meaningful reduction. The typology labels what the Rückenfigur does within particular pictorial conditions, not what artists do by nationality, and it is precisely this functional framing that allows comparison without forcing the works into rigid binaries. Liu Xiaohui and Fadilah Karim both use restraint, yet Liu's is spatial and perceptual while Fadilah's is ethical and autobiographical. Song Yige and Zakii Anwar both build symbolic systems, yet Song internalizes symbolic pressure within psychological atmosphere while Zakii distributes it across theatrical objects. Zhaoming Wu stands between the poles, foregrounding the body as both painterly matter and art-historical problem.

CONCLUSION

The Rückenfigur crossed into contemporary Asian painting as an inherited European device, and it has been remade in the crossing. Reading five painters through form and context together, the article has argued that the back-turned figure resolves a single pictorial problem, how a body that withholds the face can still organize meaning, through two distinct mechanisms that map onto the two national contexts as strong tendencies rather than fixed rules. The Chinese painters make space the primary carrier, arranging horizon, corridor, void, and painterly surface until the act of looking becomes the subject. The Malaysian painters make objects the primary carrier, surrounding the silent body with doors, animals, garments, and insects that speak on its behalf. Space

that thinks against objects that speak names a real difference of emphasis, one supported by the limited interview observations and legible in the paintings themselves, without dissolving into the cruder claim that Chinese art is meditative and Malaysian art theatrical.

Two contributions follow. Methodologically, the analysis shows the value of keeping visual description and cultural interpretation in the same movement rather than separating them, since the meaning of a back-turned figure emerges only through the interplay of what it withholds and what the image supplies elsewhere. Substantively, the five-part typology offers a vocabulary for comparing the motif across cultures without flattening the works, treating perceptual mediation, psychological allegory, corporeal assertion, symbolic substitution, and autobiographical containment as analytic tools rather than national labels. The Rückenfigur, on this account, is a culturally adaptive pictorial device whose formal structure travels while its symbolic consequences depend on the system into which it is inserted. That adaptability, and not any fixed Romantic melancholy, is what keeps the turned back alive in contemporary painting, and it invites further comparative work across the wider field of Asian visual culture where the motif continues to migrate and change.

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List of Works Discussed

1. Friedrich, C. D. (c. 1818). Wanderer above the Sea of Fog [Oil on canvas]. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.
2. Liu, X. (2013). Sea Level [Oil on canvas].
3. Liu, X. (2014). Corridor No. 2 [Oil on canvas].
4. Liu, X. (2015). Untitled, Sitting Position at Seaside No. 3 [Oil on canvas].
5. Song, Y. (2012). Encounter [Oil on canvas].
6. Song, Y. (2014). Male Star [Oil on canvas].
7. Song, Y. (n.d.). Looking Within [Oil on canvas].
8. Wu, Z. (2023). Venus [Oil on canvas].
9. Wu, Z. (2023). Demo I [Oil on canvas].
10. Ahmad Zakii Anwar. (2017). I Am Not Home [Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 41 × 91 cm, 3 panels]. From the series My Shadow's Shadow.

11. Ahmad Zakii Anwar. (2017). *Live by Day* [Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 61 × 107 cm, 4 panels]. From the series *My Shadow's Shadow*.
12. Ahmad Zakii Anwar. (2017). *The Cicada's Dream* [Acrylic and graphite on paper, 61 × 107 cm, 4 panels]. From the series *My Shadow's Shadow*.
13. Fadilah Karim. (2024). *Big Blue Dress* [Oil on linen].
14. Fadilah Karim. (2020). *Isolation* [Oil on linen].
15. Fadilah Karim. (2022). *Too Big to Handle* [Oil on linen, 152 × 152 cm]. Courtesy of the artist and Gajah Gallery.

Finding the works. Each entry can be located by searching the artist, title, and year together, which is specific enough to return the correct painting. The most reliable starting points are the representing galleries and platforms. Zhaoming Wu shows with Broadmoor Galleries (Colorado Springs), Fadilah Karim with Gajah Gallery (Singapore and Yogyakarta), and the three Ahmad Zakii Anwar works belong to his 2017 series *My Shadow's Shadow*. Friedrich's painting is in the public domain and held at the Hamburger Kunsthalle.