

The Visual Politics and Aesthetic Strategies of a “Grey Publication”: A Study of the Image Narrative of Hai Kwang Literature Monthly

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Abstract:

Hai Kwang Literature Monthly (1966–1967) was a literary periodical published amid the politically sensitive climate of Cold War Hong Kong. Taking Issues 1–13 as the primary corpus, this study employs quantitative image analysis and close reading to examine the periodical’s visual practices across its covers, art/fine-arts columns, illustrations, and advertisements. It argues that the periodical mobilized the visual symbols of world-famous paintings and the female body to strike a balance between elitist and popular appeals; simultaneously, through strategies of excision, modification, and depoliticization, it softened its leftist coloring and cultivated an ambiguous “grey” image. In the later issues, the introduction of Southeast Asian themes opened up a cross-regional “third space.” These visual strategies demonstrate how the periodical mediated competing political and market pressures, and they offer a fresh perspective for understanding publishing and visual culture in Cold War Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hai Kwang Literature Monthly, Cold War Hong Kong, Aesthetic Strategies, Third Space, Visual Narrative

Introduction

1.1 Research background and problem awareness

Founded in 1966 and discontinued in 1967 with a total of thirteen issues, Hai Kwang Literature Monthly was a product of Cold War Hong Kong of Hong Kong. Although spearheaded by individuals with a

leftist background, the periodical deliberately crafted a “non-red,” or “grey,” posture to circumvent the restrictions imposed by both the Taiwanese authorities and the colonial government. Committed to an inclusive editorial policy, the periodical attached particular importance to visual storytelling: From Issue 2 onward, each cover reproduced a work of world art; dedicated art/fine-arts columns were established; and numerous paintings, photographs, and prints were

published. The visual output was not only abundant but also highly strategic.

Research on *Hai Kwang Literature Monthly* remains sparse both domestically and internationally. Mainland scholarship has focused on case studies of the journal, popular culture and market perspectives, as well as archival reviews; overseas scholarship tends to adopt a macro lens on the role of Hong Kong literature and publishing within the global Cold War. Existing studies largely situate the periodical within the frame of leftist publishing and Cold War politics, emphasizing textual content or ideological function while lacking a systematic examination of its visual system. With the rise of visual-culture studies, scholars have proposed that images function as independent media of cultural transmission; some have further asked whether images can bear discourse and ideas apart from language. These discussions provide the theoretical foothold for the present inquiry.

Images often package, soften, or even aestheticize ideology. In political propaganda, they may articulate ideas explicitly, or, via aesthetic forms, “dissolve” critical consciousness. This duality resonates with the propagandistic purpose of a literary publication produced in the Cold War. Using all thirteen issues of *Hai Kwang Literature Monthly* as the core sample, this study combines quantitative tabulation with micro-level readings to address three questions: (1) How do covers, dedicated columns, illustrations, and back covers collectively construct the visual visage of a “grey publication”? (2) How do images negotiate among market attraction, aesthetic packaging, and depoliticization? (3) Drawing on the concept of a “third space,” how do the Southeast Asian themes appearing in the later issues signify and function within cultural politics? Methodologically, I count all images to trace shifts in type, subject matter, and provenance, and I select representative cases for close reading to illuminate visual rhetoric and latent metaphor. The aim is to reveal how the periodical employed carefully orchestrated image narratives to secure legitimacy and a space of survival in Cold War Hong Kong—packing a “red” core within a “grey” surface—and to contribute a new vantage to the study of Hong Kong’s publishing and visual culture of the era.

1.2 Theoretical framework and research methods

This study deploys multiple theoretical tools. Perspectives from visual culture and iconology guide interpretation in the periodical’s images; the Frankfurt School’s concept of the “culture industry” helps analyze how consumerist logic operated in images. The “third space,” narrative theory, and word–image interaction further provide conceptual support. Methodologically, I integrate literature review, image narratology, and comparative analysis, cross-referencing the journal’s texts with historical context to construct mutual corroboration and thereby present the complexity of its image narratives in a comprehensive manner.

2. Constructing the magazine’s visual system

2.1 Image types and distribution

Across its thirteen issues, *Hai Kwang Literature Monthly* made dense use of images. Statistical tabulation (see Table 1 and Table 2) indicates that images are concentrated at four levels: covers, the art/fine-arts columns, illustrations embedded in the main text, and back-cover advertisements. From Issue 2, the covers almost always featured paintings as the primary visual, ranging from French classics and modern masters to works by local and Southeast Asian artists. The art/fine-arts columns—present since Issue 1—contain a large quantity of images spanning painting, photography, and sculpture. Textual illustrations, chiefly for fiction and essays, tend toward concise line drawings without attribution, serving chiefly as visual accompaniment. The back covers and advertisements also frequently deploy images; for example, Issue 11 reproduces Robert Gibbings’s wood engraving *Shipbuilding*. Such high-density visual arrangement made the periodical stand out among its peers—many of which relied mainly on text serials—signaling an intent to shape a distinctive cultural profile through visual means.

2.2 Covers: composition and evolution

Table 1. Covers of *Hai Kwang Literature Monthly* (Issues 1–13)

Issue	Cover Artwork Title (standardized where available)	Artist	Nationality	Movement	Detailed Introduction Included?
1	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No
2	Young Woman Sitting with Bouquet of Flowers (probable)	Henri Matisse	France	Fauvism	No
3	The Bath	Edgar Degas	France	Impressionism	No

4	La Grande Odalisque	Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres	France	Neoclassicism	No (title/artist omitted in issue)
5	Tahitian Festival (title uncertain)	Paul Gauguin	France	Post-Impressionism	No
6	Girl before a Mirror	Pablo Picasso	Spain	Cubism	No
7	Young Woman (title uncertain)	Henri Matisse	France	Fauvism	No
8	Dancers (general title)	Edgar Degas	France	Impressionism	No
9	Two Women at a Window	Bartolomé Esteban Murillo	Spain	Sevillian School	No
10	Horses Leaving the Sea (Chevaux sortant de la mer)	Eugène Delacroix	France	Romanticism	No
11	Fatmawati (retitled in magazine as “South Sea Girl”)	Basuki Abdullah	Indonesia	Realism	No
12	Family of Saltimbanques	Pablo Picasso	Spain	Cubism (as labeled)	Yes
13	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data

The cover is the most immediate visual signifier. Some shifts are evident across the run. While most issues featured world-famous paintings, Table 1 summarizes the cover selections: Issue 2 lists a work by Henri Matisse (likely *Young Woman Sitting with Bouquet of Flowers*), Issue 3 includes a bathing scene by Edgar Degas (commonly rendered in English as *The Bath*), Issue 4 reproduces Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque*, Issue 5 features Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian theme, Issue 6 presents Pablo Picasso’s *Girl before a Mirror*, Issue 8 returns to Degas’s dance theme, Issue 9 reproduces Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s *Two Women at a Window*, and Issue 10 demonstrates Eugène Delacroix’s *Horses Leaving the Sea* (*Chevaux sortant de la mer*).

In the early issues the periodical evinced a preference for European masterworks, often focusing on female figures. Detailed introductions, present in Issues 2–3, disappear from Issue 4 onward; in some cases, even the painter and title are omitted, and images are cropped to avoid potential controversy (e.g., only the head from *La Grande Odalisque* was used in Issue 4). This editorial prudence reveals a visual rhetoric: leveraging the cultural authority of canonical art to attract readers while trimming away elements that might incite political or moral censure.

By Issues 11–12 a shift is evident. Issue 11’s cover, Basuki Abdullah’s portrait *Fatmawati*, was retitled “South Sea Girl,” while Issue 12 reproduces Picasso’s *Family of Saltimbanques*. The magazine thus moved from “world art” in an elite register toward themes closer to local and Southeast Asian realities, signaling a recalibration of visual strategy.

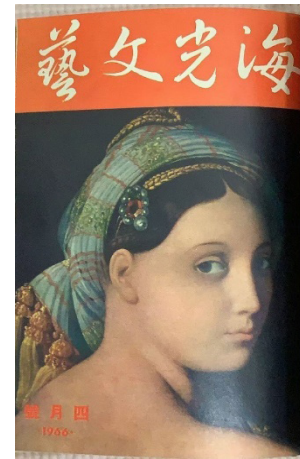


Figure 1. Cover of Issue 4 of **Hai Kwang Literature Monthly** (detail cropped; original work: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, **La Grande Odalisque**).

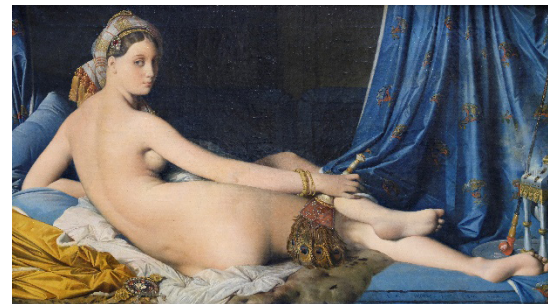


Figure 2. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, **La Grande Odalisque** (1814, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

2.3 Visual features of the art/fine-arts columns

Table 2. Statistical Overview of Images in the Art/Fine-Arts Columns of Hai Kwang Literature Monthly

Issue	Title(s)	Author(s)	Image Type(s)	Number of Images	Source of Images
1	The Nude Maja and The Clothed Maja	Yun He	Painting	3	Goya's works
2	Spring Message	Huang Ling	Photography	1	Author's own
3	Cover only (see Table 1)	See Table 1	Painting	1	See Table 1
4	Impression: Sunrise	Wu Yin	Painting	1	Claude Monet's work
5	Chinese Painting and Photography	Xu Fang	Photography, Painting	6	Classical Chinese paintings and related photographs
6	News from Paris Galleries	Dai Zhen	Photography	2	Cézanne works and auction photographs
7	1. Critics and Impressionist Painting 2. Sketching in Hong Kong	Chen Fushan	Painting	9 (1) + 2 (2)	1. Multiple Impressionist works 2. Chen Fushan's works
8	1. Nanyang Figure Painting 2. Gallery Stroll (I)	Liu Kang, Lin Zhou	Photography, Painting	6 (1) + 5 (2)	1. Works by Liu Kang; portrait of Liu Kang 2. Balzac sculpture, photographs, works by Lin Zhou, Daumier, and Millet
9	1. Paintings of Cheong Soo Pieng 2. Gallery Stroll (II)	Cheong Soo Pieng, Lin Zhou	Painting	8 (1) + 5 (2)	1. Works by Cheong Soo Pieng 2. Works by Millet, Vermeer, Gustin
10	1. Sketches of Xu Guanghan 2. Life of Parisian Painters 3. Swiss Open-Air Sculpture Exhibition	Pan Shou, Li Mei, Dai Wenqing	Photography, Painting	5 (1) + 2 (2) + 5 (3)	1. Works by Xu Guanghan 2. Works by Parisian painter Xie Yuqian; Paris scenes 3. Photographs by Dai Wenqing
11	1. Forty Years of Lu Xueshu's Painting 2. Batik Works of Sen Tianding 3. Paintings of Shi Wu 4. Impressionist Painter Toulouse-Lautrec	Yu Xueman, Sen Tianding, Shi Wu, Lin Zhou	Photography, Painting	3 (1) + 6 (2) + 4 (3) + 5 (4)	1. Photographs and works of Yu Xueman 2. Works of Sen Tianding 3. Works of Shi Wu 4. Works and photographs of Toulouse-Lautrec
12	1. Selected Figure Paintings 2. Gallery Stroll (IV) 3. On This Issue's Cover	Wu Buyun, Lin Zhou, Yu Huai	Painting	8 (1) + 9 (2) + 1 (3)	1. Works by Wu Buyun 2. Works by Rembrandt, Delacroix, Meissonier, Brouwer 3. Picasso (cover)
13	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Insufficient data

Each issue contains a stable column devoted to art-related content. This section presents, among other things, painting, photography, film, calligraphy, and art criticism, and

is the periodical's most image-dense zone. For the purposes of this study, analysis focuses on items accompanied by images (see Table 2). Three features merit attention.

First, the topics are broad: Western movements such as Impressionism and Cubism appear alongside Chinese painting and Nanyang (Southeast Asian) art. For instance, Issue 8's "Nanyang Figure Painting" showcases works by Liu Kang; Issue 9 focuses on Cheong Soo Pieng. Second, the quantity is substantial, often presented as image suites; e.g., Issue 7 prints nine Impressionist works in "The Critic and Impressionist Painting," while Issue 10's "Swiss Open-Air Sculpture Exhibition" reproduces five photographs of sculpture. Third, the function leans toward art education and appreciation rather than overt political messaging: explanatory texts are typically art-historical or critical in nature and avoid explicit ideological slogans.

Over time, painting grows in prominence within the column, indicating a clear preference for fine-art reproduction. The orientation also shifts from a "work-centered" introduction in early issues (largely Western artists, occasional Chinese painting) to a "painter-centered" mode in the later run, including self-promotional submissions. The serial feature "Gallery Stroll" spans four installments (Issues 8, 9, 11, and 12), even occupying space from the "Profile" column in Issue 11. The serialized rhythm and authorial continuity cultivate recognition and anticipation—an incipient move toward brand building—though the periodical's short life precluded further development.

2.4 Visual elements in illustrations, back covers, and advertisements

Illustrations appear chiefly alongside literary works—especially serialized fiction and essays—usually as concise line drawings that decorate the text and subtly anchor meaning. The back covers likewise adopt images; e.g., Issue 11's back cover features Robert Gibbings's wood engraving *Shipbuilding*, which not only functions as art display but also elevates the periodical's overall cultural tonality. Advertisements signal that the periodical was not a purely literary endeavor but one that relied on visuality to sustain market appeal. Beginning with Issue 8, color advertisements appear for "World Correspondence School," explicitly emphasizing "no restrictions on time or age"; a detachable reply card was included for mailing—evidence of collaboration with other industries. The coexistence of art images and commercial imagery reflects the periodical's dual role between culture and market.

3. Visual politics and aesthetic strategies

3.1 Aesthetic strategies under market orienta-

tion

The periodical's image configuration conforms to the consumer logic of the culture industry. As the chief visual lure, the covers frequently present paintings of the female body—including semi-nude or nude figures—thus aligning with the "cover girl" paradigm while avoiding vulgarity by invoking the legitimizing aura of "world art." The female image attracts visual attention; citation of canonical art confers cultural legitimacy on the act of viewing. In a relatively conservative Chinese society, the public display of the female body also served as a signifier of "openness" and "modernity," subtly masking leftist associations and contributing to the cultivated "grey" profile. Notably, although the editors announced in the postscript to Issue 2 that each subsequent issue would feature and introduce a world masterpiece on the cover, detailed introductions largely vanished after Issue 4—an indication that such images functioned less as content-related illustrations than as symbolic, attention-winning packaging.

The later "Gallery Stroll" series accentuates serialization: large suites of images are split across issues under a stable authorial voice, building continuous consumption through regularized format. This "standardization + serialization" pattern corresponds closely to the Frankfurt School's description of the culture industry.

To expand its audience, the periodical pursued a dual strategy of elitism and popularization. Early reliance on European masterworks accumulated cultural capital; the later turn to Nanyang themes and folk life foregrounded familiarity and locality. Issue 12's *Family of Saltimbanques* typifies a shift from Western classicism toward the everyday. The advertising strategy—sustained, mass-oriented promotion for the World Correspondence School—similarly reveals a two-track marketing logic. By placing art and commerce side by side, the periodical sought equilibrium between market viability and cultural prestige.

3.2 Political metaphors behind depoliticized representation

The periodical was founded with a united-front ambition toward Taiwan, yet survival required the downplaying of "redness" in favor of a neutral "grey." The visual program exhibits pronounced depoliticization. Unlike conventional leftist periodicals, whose images are tightly coupled to ideological text, *Hai Kwang Literature Monthly* favored modern Western art on its covers—imagery that orthodox leftist taste might dismiss as "decadent" or "toxic." Choosing such sensitive images was itself a declaration of "non-redness." Issue 10's cover, Delacroix's *Horses Leaving the Sea*, is politically neutral compared with his revolutionary canvases, though metaphors of freedom

and resistance remain legible—and deliberately unspoken. Issue 11's portrait Fatmawati—retitled “South Sea Girl”—is the only cover not by a Western painter, but the renaming effaces the Indonesian independence symbolism of Basuki Abdullah's original, recoding it as exotic yet neutral “Nanyang” flavor. Issue 11's back cover, a wood engraving of Shipbuilding by Robert Gibbings, likewise channels a South Seas ambience. In short, the periodical's “erasure of politics” was a key survival tactic: images avoid overtly sensitive signifiers while leaving space for interpretation.



Figure 3. Cover of Issue 11 of **Hai Kwang Literature Monthly**, retitled “South Sea Girl” (original work: Basuki Abdullah, **Fatmawati**, oil on canvas).



Figure 4. Back cover of Issue 11 of **Hai Kwang Literature Monthly**: Robert Gibbings, **Shipbuilding** (wood engraving, c. 1930s).

3.3 Third space and cultural mediation

The late-emerging Nanyang themes are particularly distinctive. Whether on the cover (e.g., “South Sea Girl”) or in the art columns' presentations of Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, and others, the periodical intentionally linked Hong Kong with Southeast Asian art. The move held political meaning. While Southeast Asia was not the period-

ical's primary target market, Nanyang topics are neither a return to mainland “red” orthodoxy nor a purely localist Hong Kong turn; rather, they articulate an interstitial “third space” in the sense theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. This cross-regional mediation allowed the periodical to avoid the most sensitive ideological and colonial triggers while offering readers the allure of the exotic. Often depicting laborers, tropical landscapes, and ethnic mingling, these images enact a populist aesthetic. In the Cold War's binary, the “othered” South Seas could function as a compromise discourse—neither the mainland's orthodoxy nor a narrowly colonial localism—thus becoming a peculiar cultural mediator in the periodical's image narrative.

4. Historical context and comparative perspective

4.1 The publishing ecology of Cold War Hong Kong

1960s Hong Kong was a front line of Cold War cultural contestation. Colonial censorship of leftist publications was strict; pressure from Taiwan further complicated the ecosystem. Although founded by left-leaning figures, Hai Kwang Literature Monthly carefully maintained an ambiguous, centrist visual and textual profile to extend its lifespan—an apt response to Hong Kong's cultural predicament of seeking survival in the interstices while forging a distinct identity.

4.2 Comparative analysis

Compared with explicitly propagandistic leftist periodicals (e.g., cultural supplements of *Wen Wei Po*), where images are tightly yoked to ideology, Hai Kwang Literature Monthly invested more in artfulness and aesthetic appeal and deliberately minimized overt political iconography. Relative to right-leaning publications such as *The Chinese Student Weekly* and *Contemporary Literature and Art*, which often evinced a localized Hong Kong sensibility, Hai Kwang's political background and aims meant that localism was less foregrounded.

4.3 The magazine's demise: explanatory factors

The magazine survived for only thirteen issues (1966–1967). Three vectors help explain its end. Market-wise, it targeted a relatively small, art-interested intellectual readership and struggled to build a broad, stable commercial base; despite some mass-oriented strategies, weak localization hindered wider reach. Politically, the 1967 disturbances in Hong Kong intensified scrutiny of cultural organizations linked to the left. Although the periodical's

surface cultivated “grey” neutrality, its editorial network’s leftist ties exposed it to heightened risk. Organizational pressures compounded the difficulties. Short-lived though it was, the periodical nonetheless occupies a distinctive niche in the cultural landscape of the 1960s.

Conclusion

Despite its brief run, Hai Kwang Literature Monthly left a deep impression through its distinctive visual practices. It maneuvered between politics, market forces, and aesthetics under a “grey” banner and enacted a specific visual politics: deploying the authority of “world masterpieces” on its covers, the pedagogical function of art columns, and the diversity of illustrations and advertisements to craft a depoliticized yet symbolically charged profile. The strategy hinged on ambiguity and mediation: avoiding direct mobilization while relying on symbolism, metaphor, and selective cropping to circumvent risk. Simultaneously, the periodical adopted a dual-track aesthetic—amassing elite cultural capital via canonical art while sustaining popular appeal through accessible visual elements. The late turn to Nanyang themes further addressed the complexities of regional identity by constructing a legitimizing “third space.” The periodical’s abrupt end underscores the structural dilemmas of “grey publications,” but its visual legacy offers a vivid case for understanding Hong Kong’s role as a cultural intermediary in the Cold War.

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