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## **CONTENT**

### **THEME 1: ASEAN, ASEAN COMMUNITY**

#### **EXAMINING THE COMMON POSITION OF ASEAN MEMBER STATES IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS: UNITY IN DIVERSITY? (1)**

Laila Suriya Ahmad Apandi (Universiti Utara Malaysia)

#### **STRENGTHENING NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH IN THE ASIA PACIFIC THROUGH THE NTS-ASIA CONSORTIUM (8)**

Serina RahmanS. (Rajaratnam School of International Studies Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

#### **ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY 2015: LIFTING THE BARRIERS OF LEGAL SYSTEM IN ASEAN TO ACHIEVE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT (15)**

Saidatul Nadia Abd Aziz  
Salawati Mat Basir  
(Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia)

#### **PARALLEL 5D: PANEL PRESENTATION ON RUMPUNISM AS THE SOUL OF ASEAN COMMUNITY**

#### **AN INQUIRY INTO SOME HISTORICAL AND ORDINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (24)**

Marsha R. Robinson (Miami University, Ohio, USA)

### **THEME 2: POWER, STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY, SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION (TRANSFORMATION AND CONTESTATION)**

#### **CHINA'S "BELT AND ROAD" AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS (33)**

Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim (Longus Institute for Development and Strategy)

#### **CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND ITS INNER CONFLICTS: EXAMINING THE CASE OF THE "OWNERSHIP" STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMULO HALL THROUGH A REVIEW OF PHILIPPINE LEGISLATION, PRESIDENTIAL DECREES AND OTHER LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUMENTS ISSUED BY PRESIDENT FERDINAND E. MARCOS (43)**

MCM Santamaria (University of the Philippines Diliman)

**POLITICS, POWER AND PEOPLE: DECONSTRUCTING THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS IN MINDANAO (53)**

Ariff Hafizi Mohd Radzi (University of Malaya)

**AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RA 9994 (EXPANDED SENIOR CITIZENS ACT 2010) IN THE PROVINCE OF BUKIDNON (65)**

Angelita I. Jacobe, MA

April Rose S. Figueras-Buntod, MA  
(Central Mindanao University)

**THEME 3**

**ETHNICITY, RELIGION, CONFLICT AND PEACE**

**MALAYSIAN-THAI COOPERATION IN COMBATING THE COMMUNIST THREAT IN THE MALAYSIAN BORDER, 1968-1989.**

**(KERJASAMA MALAYSIA-THAILAND DALAM MEMBANTERAS GERAKAN KOMUNIS DI PERBATASAN MALAYSIA, 1968-1989) (81)**

Ho Hui Ling (University of Malaya)

**THEME 4:**

**MOBILITY, DIASPORA, LABOUR, CITIZENSHIP HERITAGE AND RIGHTS**

**THE SANSKRITIZATION OF PANGALAY: INTERROGATING THE CASE OF AN EXTREME INDIANIZATION PERSPECTIVE IN A DISCOURSE ON A SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE DANCE TRADITION (97)**

MCM Santamaria (Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman)

**FACTORS OF BRAIN DRAIN AND FUTURE OF MALAYSIA (117)**

Kalaiyarasi Danabalan (University of Malaya)

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TEACHERS TO STAY AND LEAVE THEIR WORK (127)**

Elisheba D. De Vera, Perlita L. Atendido, William Jerick L. Mambil & Ava Ann P. Semorlan (School of Saint Anthony, Quezon City, Philippines)

**THE IVATAN WOMEN: MIGRATION AND ACCULTURATION (142)**

Rotchel L. Amigo (Bukidnon State University)

**THE SETTLEMENT OF THE MINANGKABAUS COMMUNITY IN PAHANG (154)**

Nelmawarni (Fakultas Syariah IAIN Imam Bonjol, Padang)

**READING PAINTING AS VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: PERANAKAN PAINTINGS BY SYLVIA LEE GOH (164)**

Sarena Abdullah (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

**THEME 5:  
MARITIME RESOURCES, POLITICS, CULTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY**

**THE POWER-POLITICS EXPLANATION OF BOUNDARY DELIMITATION IN BRUNEI BAY, 1945-1963 (175)**

Nik Nor Suhaida Ali (Universiti Utara Malaysia)

**CHANGING TRENDS IN PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY ATTACKS IN THE STRAITS OF MALACCA: A NEW AND MAJOR THREAT (181)**

Salwani Arbak, Nik Nor Suhaida Ali (Universiti Utara Malaysia)

**THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF MARINE LIFE: A STRUGGLE BETWEEN PATRONAGE AND GRASS ROOT DEMOCRATIZATION (190)**

Raquelyn Jumawan-Dadang (Central Mindanao University Mindanao, Philippines)

**SMALL-SCALE FISHING PROBLEMS AND EFFECTS IN TUKURAN, ZAMBOANGA DEL SUR (205)**

April Rose S. Figueras-Buntod, Liwayway S. Vilorio (Central Mindanao University)

**AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REPUBLIC ACT 8972 (SOLOPARENTS' WELFARE ACT OF 2000) IN THE PROVINCE OF BUKIDNON (214)**

Rocelito A. Duropan (Central Mindanao University)

**THEME 6:  
RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNIT CAPACITY FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND MANAGEMENT: FROM DISASTER TO RESILIENCE (232)**

Eva P. Natividad-Mendoza, Angelagrace Toledo-Bruno & Alex Olpenda. (Central Mindanao University, Philippines) (

**MÊRANAO BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS RELATED TO CONSUMERISM: ITS IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT (242)**

Maylanie Sani-Boloto (Mindanao State University)

**THEME 7:  
TRADE, COMMUNITIES AND INFORMAL ECONOMY**

**A THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVE AGENDA FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGION (277)**

Jungkeun LIM (Kyunghee Cyber University, South Korea)  
Jonghyun PARK (Hosei University, Japan)

**TRADE UNION IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECT (291)**

Balakrishnan Parasuraman, Bidin Kifli & Mohd Shahril Nizam Bin Md Radzi  
(Universiti Malaysia Kelantan)  
Ganesan Shanmugavelu (Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Ipoh)

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS AT INDONESIA TIMOR LESTE FRONTIER:  
COMMON TRADITIONAL MARKET AND PEOPLE MOBILITY AT TIMOR'S NORTH  
CENTRAL FRONTIER- OESILO OECUSSE TIMOR LESTE (311)**

Eni Sugiarti, M. Hum. (Airlangga University, Indonesia)

**THEME 8:  
REFUGEES, UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLES AND CITIZENSHIP**

**PANEL: CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES, SECURITY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING  
AND ROHINGYA**

**DEMOCRATIC CHANGES IN MYANMAR: HOPE OR DESPAIR FOR THE  
ROHINGYA? (331)**

Lee Seo In (Changwon National University, South Korea)

**THEME 9:  
MEDIA AND ISSUES PERTAINING TO GENDER, DEVELOPMENT,  
ECONOMY, POLITIC AND SOCIAL**

**GENDER ROLE DIFFERENTIATION AMONG WOMEN AND MEN FARMERS IN THE  
NGO'S SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROGRAM IN ILIGAN CITY, SOUTHERN  
PHILIPPINES (350)**

Grace Majorenos-Taruc (Mindanao State University)

**LESSON LEARNED FROM THE ANTI CORRUPTION AND THE CHANGING SOCIAL  
RELATIONSHIP IN K DRAMA (375)**

Widjajanti M Santoso (Indonesian Institute of Sciences)

**PENGLIBATAN WANITA MELAYU SEBAGAI WAKIL RAKYAT PARLIMEN DI  
MALAYSIA, 1999-2008 (387)**

Fatimi binti Hanafi, Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman, Arbaiyyah Mohd Noor  
(University of Malaya)

**THEME 10:  
LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, SOCIETIES AND CROSS CULTURAL  
MANAGEMENT**

**THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE ON ASEAN MOBILITY STUDENTS'  
SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT (419)**

Hartini Husin (Universiti Utara Malaysia)

**TEACHING AIDS AS EFFECTIVE APPROACH IN TEACHING JAWI AMONG  
PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT (430)**

Muhamad Zahiri Awang Mat, Siti Salwa Md. Sawari, Zarqo' Bt Ahmad Mustakim &  
Siti Zuraidah Bt. Ab Rahman  
(International Islamic University Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia)

**THEME 11:**

**VARIOUS ISSUE IN INTEGRATING SOUTHEAST ASIA-MEDIA,  
GENDER, POLITICS, SPORT, LEISURE, LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND  
ART**

**A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF AVIAN 'SPIRIT' ICONOGRAPHY AMONG THE  
DAYAK AND OTHER PEOPLES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA (436)**

Reuben Ramas Cañete (University of the Philippines-Diliman Campus)

**A DESIGN ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER FRONT PAGE IN THREE SELECTED  
MALAY NEWSPAPERS: JAWI PERANAKAN, CAHAYA PULAU PINANG AND  
SAUDARA (463)**

Elizabeth Joanny Openg, Sarena Abdullah (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

**COMMUNICATING CULTURE THROUGH MAGICAL REALISM ON SELECTED  
MALAYSIAN SHORT STORIES (480)**

Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad (National University of Malaysia)

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORA TRADITIONAL DANCE TEACHING APPROACH:  
A STUDY OF BAAN KATING SCHOOL, SONGKHLA PROVINCE (495)**

Thatsaniya Kanthacha (Rajabhat Songkhla University) (495)

**THE EMERGENCE OF BADMINTON AS A GLOBALIZED GAME AND THE NEED  
FOR ASEAN COUNTRIES TO CREATE AND INTEGRATE A REGIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT PLAN TO REGAIN THE THOMAS CUP AND OLYMPIC GOLD  
MEDALS GLORIES (507)**

Lim Peng Han (University of Malaya)

**SIMILARITIES OF CHARACTERISTICS OF BRITISH HILL STATIONS IN SOUTH  
ASIA AND MAINLAND SOUTH EAST ASIA: BRITISH INDIA, CEYLON, BURMA AND  
BRITISH MALAYA (526)**

Robert C.M. Weebers, Mohammad Raduan Mohd Ariff, Hanizah Idris  
(University of Malaya)

**Abstracts (544)**

## READING PAINTING AS VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: PERANAKAN PAINTINGS BY SYLVIA LEE GOH

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### Abstract

Sylvia Lee Goh had her first solo show in May 1998 at the Creative Center of the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in an exhibition entitled “Two Decades of Art from the Heart”. Having partaken in more than 50 exhibitions locally and abroad, Sylvia's works exemplify a captured and frozen moment in time of the Peranakan life and social legacy. The Peranakans, otherwise known as the Babas and Nyonyas, is a conspicuous group of acculturated Chinese in Malaya, particularly in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) hence its other name, the Straits Chinese. For the last 30 years, Sylvia Lee Goh's paintings, as I deliberate in this paper capture and encapsulate her own memories and personal narratives in the form of her own visual autobiographical paintings.

*Keywords: Peranakan culture, Sylvia Lee Goh, visual autobiography, memories, narratives*

### Introduction

The stories that we tell, tells us about our lives and this defines our identity as individuals, within particular families, cultures and historical periods. This paper, as I will demonstrate that the artworks produced by Sylvia Lee Goh, can be interpreted as a form of visual autobiography. Sylvia Lee Goh, is a Malaysian self-thought artist who has, over the years, produced series of artworks based on childhood experiences growing up in a Peranakan household and family.

Sylvia Lee Goh was born in 1940 in Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang. Although she has never had any formal art education but her artistic practices were as matured as other artists contemporary to her. Sylvia is active in the Malaysian art scene and she has participated in a few group exhibitions at national as well as international level. In the 1980s, Sylvia Lee Goh became a member of the Art and Craft Association holding the post of Committee Member for two years and her solemnity towards becoming a professional artists was further advanced when she was invited by Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, the president of the Malaysian Artists Association, to join the association of which now she is a life member.

Since then, she has never turned back on her artistic journey. In 1995, one of her works received an honorary award at the Phillips Morris Exhibition. Notably, it was a very significant achievement for a self-taught painter as her. After about a decade of participating in various group exhibitions, she was finally given an opportunity for her own solo in the National Art Gallery, now known as National Visual Art Gallery, in 1998. The exhibition, entitled “Two Decades of Art ‘From the Heart’ 1978-1998” was held at the National Art Gallery’s Creative Centre. Almost 17 years later, she was given another chance to hold her second solo exhibition entitled “Sylvia Lee Goh -- *Dulu Dan Kini: Jiwa Abadi*, Then and Now: The Enduring Heart” in 2015. The exhibition presented her selected works in her almost thirty years of artistic career.



Similarly, with other Malaysian artists, Sylvia was also influenced by western art especially the Impressionist and the Post-Impressionist art movement (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, p. 29), and yet her works reflected her psyche and the interests of her immediate local realities (Abdullah & Chelliah Thiruchelvam, 2015). The major themes or subject matter of her works were inspired by her own cultural background and her childhood memories, living as a Peranakan and surrounded with various Peranakan paraphernalia herself. These visual renditions of her Peranakan memories re-introduced Peranakan culture, at least among the Malaysian art public. Her treatment of her subject matter in an impressionistic way has emboldened her paintings as a form of her own visual autobiographical memories.

Who are the Peranakans? In Malay, *peranakan* means “locally-born” and *Peranakan*, can therefore, refers to the descendants of indigenous women and Chinese, Indian Muslim (*Peranakan Jawi*), Arab, and Jewish men born in the Malay-speaking world although Suryanita points out that the use of the term “*Peranakan*” from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards was generally denoting the *peranakan Cina* (Suryadinata, 2005). Therefore, the Peranakans are unique hybrid community that is the product of intermarriages between early Mainland Chinese immigrants and the indigenous population of the Malay archipelago and mainland Southeast Asia. *Peranakan Chinese*, also known as *Baba* and *Nyonya* or *Straits Chinese* are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who came to the Malay archipelago and British Malaya as far back as 500 to 600 years when Chinese traders arrived in the Malay Peninsula (Lee, 2008, p. 162). In Singapore and Malaya, they adopted Malay customs and they were mostly assimilated into the local communities. They were usually traders, the middleman of the British and the Chinese, or the Chinese and Malays, or vice versa and they were mostly English educated.

Sylvia’s *Peranakan* paternal lineage was rooted in Alor Star, Kedah. Her great grandfather, Lee Yoke Cheng was the Private Secretary to Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Mukarram Shah (1855-1879). Loo Yet Leong, who was her maternal great grandfather, was a well-known Patriarch in Pagar Tras, in Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, pp. 33–36). Today, the days of the *Peranakan* are numbered and the size of their community is rapidly declining. Modernization, migration and intermarriage with non-*Peranakans* are among the main reasons for the decline and it is just a matter of time before the community disappears (Lee, 2008, p. 168). However, in the past 25 years in Malaysia and Singapore, public awareness of *Peranakan Chinese* culture has been enhanced through exhibitions, plays, and numerous publications on *Peranakan Chinese* silverware, furniture, jewellery, beadwork and embroidery, porcelain, and dress. On top of that, several *Peranakan*-based societies were also established such as *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang*, *The Peranakan Association of Singapore*, *The Peranakan Association of Malacca* and *Phuket Peranakan Association*. Although researches on the culture of the *Peranakans* are mostly based on material culture, Sylvia Lee Goh’s works are important contribution for further understanding of *Peranakan* culture. This paper will examine Sylvia’s *Peranakan* painting as a form of visual autobiography of her *Peranakan* background.

### **Sylvia Lee Goh’s Paintings as Visual Autobiography**

The autobiographical narratives are the stories that individuals tell about their lives. It can be explained and analysed at multiple levels. For individuals, for example, autobiographical narratives define who they are in relation to their family, nation and/or history (Fivush, 2008). Similarly, Kuhn (2010) explains that “memory is a process, an activity, a construct; and that memory has social and cultural, as well as personal, resonance.” In the reading of Sylvia’s artworks that were inspired by her personal memories, I argue that we can read her paintings as a form of a visual autobiography, although it was done visually rather than in a form of oral or

writings. According to Fivush, autobiographical memory is commonly defined as memories related to the self and it differs from simply recalling what happens to oneself as autobiographical memory not only includes memories of the events, but most importantly why the events are interesting, important, entertaining, memorable etc. (Fivush, 2008, p. 50). Fivush further adds “it is the evaluative and interpretative information that transforms a memory from a simple recounting of what occurred to a reminiscing about what the event means.” (Fivush, 2008, p. 50)

Mimi Y. Yang in examining Frida Kahlo’s paintings as an autobiographer explains,

“Autobiography is considered as a kind of description which looks back over one’s life or a portion of it; therefore, the concept of self is held as the soul of this genre. Autobiography enacts self by recasting one’s own images from the past and transmits memories and ideas for the present and even future through imagery reconstruction. Exploring a theoretical definition of the hybrid genre of visual autobiography requires a keen understanding of the links and transference between discursive and visual perceptions as what the etymological root “-graphy” | “-graphic” suggests, that is, the transgression between writing and painting in the process of manipulating the self.” (Yang, 2015, p. 122)

Referring to W.J.T. Mitchell’s genealogical tree of images, Yang explains that “verbal words and graphical pictures have no difference and they are transformable into each other as they originate from the same imagery root and they are all representations of ideas and memories. ... Words and pictures assume the same function of transmitting messages through images and ideas although the former does not operate with the same degree of visibility as the latter.” (Yang, 2015, p. 123)

Based on these previous works and the applicability of understanding artworks as a form of visual autobiography, I will discuss Sylvia Lee Goh’s paintings as such – the approaches that seems to prevail in her works persists as a form of personal memories that indirectly tells her personal narratives as well. In the simplest form of understanding, I would like to point out here is that Sylvia’s paintings can be interpreted as a form of visual autobiography that relays her personal memories and narrative. I will demonstrate that Sylvia Lee Goh’s visual autobiography, although not linguistically represented, was still expressed and organized through the multiple visual sensory components that were turned into a visual form that can be communicated to the audience. Therefore, language in her work, in this case visual language can modulate her autobiography -- either in sharing her memories of the past with the audience and through the narration of past personal events.

### **The Memories of the Peranakans**

“The many visits to my paternal grandparent’s home which was filled with Peranakan culture as a child left deep impressions that somehow surfaced naturally when I decided to to (sic) paint. Besides romanticizing the tradition and cultural practices, I paint my Peranakan heritage as a form of remembrance and as a reminder of my roots. It is my cultural identity that defines me socially.” (Tan, 2015, pp. 32–33)

It must be highlighted that most of Sylvia’s works are based on her memories of her Peranakan ancestry. A few of her important works produced during the 1990s reflected this inspiration based on her childhood memory of her paternal grandparents’ home and memories of growing up ~~years~~ listening to classical music on the gramophone and watching Chinese opera. It must also be noted that Sylvia was born in 1940, during the World War II, and she grew up after the

golden years of the Peranakan. Nevertheless, such memories were imbued in most of her work. Which could be seen in how she painted her daily lives (as her own self portrait or the painting of the people around her) in the appropriate cultural setting, that requires her to probe and investigate her own Peranakan background, as well. We can find pertinent Peranakan cultural marker embodied in her visual autobiographies. Sylvia herself explains,

“The Peranakan culture is not only colorful and aesthetically captivating, it is also rich in its imaginative amalgamation of motifs and elements from Malay and Chinese cultures, harmoniously blended into something sumptuously inviting, elegant and distinctive. From the couture (batik from Indonesia and lace from Switzerland), textiles (sulam) and accessories, the Peranakan culture is unique to this side of the world.” (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, p. 32)

In the “Red Sarong” (1992) (Figure 1), Sylvia encapsulates herself as a lady dressed in a *kebaya*. A typical Peranakan *kebaya* is made from light and sheer fabric such as gauze, cotton, voile or georgette with fine embroidery at the neckline, sleeves and hem, worn with a red batik sarong, sitting in her garden, surrounded by various tropical plants and white flowers. Sylvia, does not paint the past, she painted herself adorned with a *kebaya* but unlike the olden days, when the Peranakans wore *kasut manik*, she painted herself wearing a pair of heels – alluding to the past, and yet she is present, in contemporary times. She captures herself in a solitary mood, as most of her self portrait, contemplating, remembering, deep in her own nostalgia and memories.



**Figure 1**

The Red Sarong (1992), 28 x 48 in

Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998*, BSLN

In the “Red Bride” (1996) (Figure 2), Sylvia portrays herself as an elegantly dressed Nyonya bride in red. It must be noted that one of the most colourful and elaborate aspects of the Peranakan culture was the wedding that requires a tremendous amount of preparation and great expense. The wedding ceremony of the Peranakan is largely based on Chinese tradition and in this work Sylvia has chosen to paint herself wearing not the typical wedding dress with the straight broad sleeves with intricate embroideries as generally portrayed in tourism and coffee table books of the Peranakan heritage, but she chose to paint herself wearing a more simple red embroidered wedding dress, putting on lipstick leaning in front of a mirror. The subject matter was not about the glorious and elegant wedding, usually captured by photographers with the immaculately dressed bride and groom displaying their intricate embroidered garment. But her renditions were just a glimpse of the important day, perhaps in a less glorified moment of applying lipstick in front of the mirror, insinuating that there are other moments of intimacies of a Peranakan Nyonya.



Figure 2

The Red Bride (1995), 36 x 48 in

Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art “From The Heart” 1978-1998*, BSLN

In “Nyonya Nostalgia Series III – Nyonya Maternal” (1994-1995) (Figure 3), Sylvia painted a photo-like family portrait of a Baba and Nyonya family. In her rendering of a complete Baba and Nyonya family, the figures range from the little nyonya, to the married couple and the extended family including the maternal nyonya as well. The family is small in comparison to the Baba Nyonya stylized motives mostly red in the background. This is a family portrait and we can observe that the Nyonya wore a *baju panjang* or a long dress adapted from the native Malay's baju kurung, complete with a Chinese collar. *Baju panjang* is a long loose calf-length top with long sleeves worn over a batik sarong and a pair of Peranakan beaded slippers or *kasut manik*. It is important to note that by the end of the 1920s, young Nyonyas abandoned the old-fashioned austere *baju panjang* for the more modern nyonya kebaya (Lee, 2008, pp. 164–165), that could be seen in Sylvia's “The Red Sarong” (1992), as I have mentioned in the earlier part of this paper.



Figure 3

**Nyonya Maternal (1994-1995), 34 x 46 in**

**Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998, BSLN***

For the Peranakans, the customs practiced were still however heavily Chinese in form and substance. Although the Peranakans historically practiced elements of Malay culture, not many of them adopted the Islamic faith. Instead, many Peranakan families retained the Chinese practice of ancestor worship, although some embraced Christianity or Catholicism, like Sylvia herself. Therefore, ancestral worship was still at the core of Peranakan culture, and as remembered by Sylvia, an altar was commonly found in her paternal grandparent's home for the worship and remembrance of ancestors. She reminisces,

"Though Christianity as a religion was already adopted by the many generations of Peranakan families, mine being one of them, the traditional rituals and festivals were not something that was regarded as alien or shunned. As an artist, I love the elaborate settings of the traditional altars. Systematically arranged with each object serving as symbolic function. It shows intelligence and sensitivity imbued in the act of devotion and thanks giving for blessings of peace and prosperity received. This spirit of devotion and attitude of gratitude is what I try to present. ..." (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, p. 32)

Sylvia's altars and other paraphernalia were captured in her still lives – "The Nyonya Altar" (1995) (Figure 4), "New Year Still Life" (1996) (Figure 5), "Chinoiserie in Blue" (2013/2014), and "Chinoiserie in Yellow" (2013), are among her works that capture these altars complete with its various paraphernalia for worship. The renderings of the altars were captured and frozen in time, this arrangement of various items takes the central stage -- incense and incense stand, bowls of fruits, candles, flowers and huge vase and other unidentified items, complete with a jarring curtain in the dark background or positioned against a pillar carved with what can be seen as a dragon.



**Figure 4**

The Nyonya Altar (1995), 36 x 48 in

Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998*, BSLN



**Figure 5**

New Year Still Life (1996), 36 x 47 in

Source Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998*, BSLN

Her dedication to still lives and her fascination in freezing a moment in time can be seen in her other still lives as well. Capturing memories and nostalgia becomes her main preoccupation, even though her paintings were just of the Peranakan *kuehs*. Sylvia explains, "Each object, from my own collection of antique ceramics, flowers from my gardens, my favourite local fruits and Nyonya *kueh* are placed accordingly to heighten the pleasure of looking at something beautiful, aromatic and nostalgic. ..." (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, p. 32) Her renderings of the delicacies of the Nyonya *kuehs* can be seen in "Nyonya Koay" (1990) (Figure 6), "Orchids, Teh and Koay" (1997) (Figure 7), "Teh, Chye Koay and Ang Koo" (Tea, Vegetable Dumpling and Red Tortoise) (1997), "Yellow Bowls and Rambutans" (1998), "Red Mango and Koay" (1998), "Blue Bowl and Koay" (1998). Traditional *kuehs* are sometimes made in conjunction with festivals that the Peranakans celebrate such as *kueh genggang* or *kueh lapis*, is a type of multi layered cake, often appear in Sylvia's work. Other *kuehs* include *kueh kochi*, *galeng galoh* (or *seri muka*), vegetable dumpling and red tortoise. Local fruits such as *rambutans*, were often included in her arrangements, others fruits include mandarin oranges and mangoes too.



As the artist previously explained, the setting arrangements usually used items that are available and immediate to her in her own home and garden and this helps to consolidate how her immediate realities inspire her own art making. Therefore, as we can see in her still lives and other works as well, her colours and techniques were the important factor that her painting imbued with a sense of evoking memory and nostalgia. Her impressionistic painting style, her colours, textures and lines help her to evoke such feelings. More often than not, her subject matters were bold and warm and then the background colour subdued and receded to the ground. Although Sylvia's artistic treatment of her oil on canvas were mostly bold in terms of colour, her subject matters are women and children, only in her later works since the 2000s for example in her recent "Sister Act Series", her colours were mostly subdued employing mostly cooler colours from the palette.



**Figure 6**

Nyonya Koay (Kueh Muih) (1990), 50 x 38 in

Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998*, BSLN



**Figure 7**

Orchids, Teh and Koay (1997), 56 x 50 in

Source: Sylvia Lee Goh, *Two Decades of Art "From The Heart" 1978-1998*, BSLN

Sylvia does not only tell the stories of personal memories of her Peranakan background in her paintings but she tells the story of her grown up life as well. Her visualization of Peranakan

culture fits into what Fivush explains “... By being immersed in a particular culture, each individual internalizes aspects of these cultural models and creates individualized representations of their life and their self, forming a life narrative in relation to the cultural script, whether it is conforming or deviating from these ideals.” (Fivush, 2008, p. 51)

The subject matter of friends and friendships resonates strongly in her work over the years. These intimate and quiet moments were captured in “Woman, Oh! Woman, II” (1988-1991) (Figure 8) and “Woman, Oh! Woman, III ‘Camaraderie’” (1988-1991) (Figure 9). Her subsequent series, “Sister Act Series” also highlights the same sisterhood-friendship bond. In images such as these, Sylvia painted intimate moments of two ladies seated in the garden, surrounded with flowers and plants, in a tranquil, beautiful setting, free from hectic life, sharing individual stories with each other, witnessed by an array of Peranakan delicacies. The colours of background mellow gradually into the seclusion on the garden with tropical flowering plants. Her impressionist technique created an interesting juxtaposition of characters very much defined by the way she plays her color and lines. The composition of these painting is not very expressive but the effective choice of colours gives a marked impact on these works.



**Figure 8**

Woman, Oh! Woman, II (1988/1991), 50 x 39 in

Source: *Sylvia Lee Goh, Two Decades of Art “From The Heart” 1978-1998, BSLN*





**Figure 9**

Woman, Oh! Woman, III “Camaraderie” (1988/1991), 50 x 38 in

Source: *Sylvia Lee Goh, Two Decades of Art “From The Heart” 1978-1998, BSLN*

Significantly, many of her works as discussed in this paper, red and other warm colours are often used. Red is the lucky colour widely used during festivals and important events like wedding. This is prominent in another self-portrait “After A Thousand Tears” (1987). As in the formality required of the Nyonya bride, her pose in this work is formal and her facial feature is simply devoid of emotion. An intricate facial expression was never her concern, her efforts were simply focused on the arrangement of the grandeur setting of her ‘throne,’ surrounded by tropical plants, flowing textiles, a shady umbrella and a few Peranakan markers such as the ornate vase and figurine. An immediate reaction could be felt through the appraisal of Sylvia’s paintings as the painting emanate a sense of longing for the bygone days of youth. In this painting, red becomes the most prominent colour while other colours are muted and subdued evoking a sense of memory and nostalgia. In her works, muted hues perhaps represent her pangs of sadness or her nostalgia.



**Figure 10**

After A Thousand Tears (1987), 46 x 40 in

Source: *Sylvia Lee Goh, Two Decades of Art “From The Heart” 1978-1998, BSLN*

There is a sense of diversity in Sylvia’s painting, technically -- she plays with paints, whether thick or thin, swath stores over large area and difficult angles and yet still filled with precise

details, where relevant. Sylvia works to attune her skills in creating perceptual impression and recreate this impression based on her own eyes, rather than recreate details of a reality. Similarly, in Western Impressionist work, Sylvia depicts the mundane contemporary objects or subjects. But these objects or subjects were mundane to her. These are her memories, although not all images are equal in memory. Some are sewn into our minds, and others are forgotten. As in Sylvia's paintings, her Peranakan memories are sewn into her mind that she had to memorialize it into her visual autobiographical paintings as discussed in this paper. As explained by Tan Sei Hon who curated her solo in 2015,

"With her heart on her Nyonya kebaya sleeve, she let loose her brushes on a handful of subjects she would lovingly revisit again and again. Her still lives, figures and landscapes are imbued with the autobiographical and more. Her oil and acrylic paintings are tapestries rich with private ruminations, observations and unabashed celebration of self, friends and the natural world, realized in a very special vernacular visual." (Tan & Lee Goh, 2015, pp. 11–12)

## Conclusion

From the perspective of ideas, the choice of the Peranakan theme in most of her works reflected how paintings can also be presented as another form of artefacts in which identity and culture forms one's visual autobiography. A distinctive feature of Peranakan fashion, however, seems to be missing from her works. *Kasut manik*, hand made glass cut beads strung, beaded and sewn into slippers were absent for her renditions. Perhaps these glass beaded embroideries were absent on purpose. These objects as memories were not strong enough in her visual memory, hence was not significant in her personal visual autobiography.

As a talented and committed artist sensitive to her surroundings and feelings as Wong Hoy Cheong observes,

"For Sylvia Lee Goh, time has stood still. Her world is still located within such an upbringing, class and milieu. She is totally immersed within this Malaysian Garden of Eden, this world of wonder, pleasure and abundance. Her women continue to sit in their embroidered voile kebayas, gossiping over afternoon teas and kueh. Or read a book, comfortably seated on Victorian cast-iron garden furniture, in a lush tropical garden with hibiscus flowers strewn all over. Or recline in complete repose among silks, flowers and embroidery. In her world, there is never any lack of natural and material abundance. There are always enough fruits and kuehs to eat. The gardens and fields are always in full bloom. The clothes are always elegant and beautiful." (Wong, 1998, p. 11)

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