

THE ART OF SHIA YIH YIING:
PROBLEMATIZING MALAYSIAN MULTICULTURALISM

TAN KIM

CULTURAL CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA
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**THE ART OF SHIA YIH YIING:PROBLEMATIZING
MALAYSIAN MULTICULTURALISM**

TAN KIM

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
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THE ART OF SHIA YIH YIING: PROBLEMATIZING MALAYSIAN MULTICULTURALISM

ABSTRACT

"Malaysia, Truly Asia" is the popular slogan used when it comes to promoting Malaysia as a tourist spot. We could see the description of Malaysia overall as a country on the official tourism website, "There is only one place where all the colours, flavours, sounds and sights of Asia come together – Malaysia.", multiculturalism is one of the key selling points of Malaysia. Most often the media represent happy Malaysian multiculturalism, by focusing on the diverse cultures, the exotic traditions of multiple cultural identities, and how these cultural identities coexist together. However, as suggested by many scholars, the idea of multiculturalism is not at all unproblematic. In a glance, Shia Yih Yiing's artworks fit perfectly into the government narrative of happy multiculturalism, the representation of multiple cultural identities, coexisting in a harmonious setting. Nonetheless, through the reading of secondary resources as well as personal interviews with Shia Yih Yiing, she mentioned her attempt of incorporating poetic resistance strategies in her artwork, revealing her intent was not to simply show happy Malaysian multiculturalism. Therefore, this research attempts to analyse further on the representation of the multiple cultural identities of Malaysia, with a special focus on fairy tale as her poetic resistance strategy, how she chose to represent these Malaysian identities with specific fairy tale character. An attempt will also be made to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the discussion of Malaysian multiculturalism situation vis a vis the specific choice of fairy tale characters she has used to represent a certain cultural identity, as well as the inclusion and exclusion of a certain cultural identities in the representation.

Keywords: Malaysian multiculturalism, cultural identities, fairy tale, representation, poetic resistance

THE ART OF SHIA YIH YIING: PROBLEMATIZING MALAYSIAN MULTICULTURALISM

ABSTRAK

"Malaysia, Truly Asia" adalah slogan popular yang digunakan untuk mempromosikan Malaysia sebagai tempat pelancongan. Ini dapat dibuktikan melalui pernyataan di laman web pelancongan rasmi yang mengatakan bahawa Malaysia merupakan satu-satunya tempat di mana kita dapat melihat pengabungan unsur budaya yang berpelbagai dari Asia, multikulturalisme merupakan salah satu tarikan pelancong untuk Malaysia. Pihak media sering memaparkan keadaan multikulturalisme Malaysia yang gembira, dengan mengfokuskan kepelbagaian budaya warga Malaysia, tradisi yang eksotik dari pelbagai identiti budaya, dan bagaimana pelbagai warga budaya ini hidup bersama. Akan tetapi, seperti yang disarankan oleh banyak warga akademik, multikulturalisme Malaysia tidak seringkas itu. Sepintas lalu, karya seni Shia Yih Yiing kelihatan selari dengan naratif kerajaan di mana pelbagai budaya hidup bersama secara harmoni. Walau bagaimanapun, melalui pembacaan sumber sekunder serta wawancara peribadi dengan Shia Yih Yiing, dia mengatakan penggunaan strategi 'poetic resistance' dalam karya seninya, ini menunjukkan niatnya bukan hanya untuk memaparkan berbilang budaya Malaysia yang hidup secara harmoni. Oleh itu, penyelidikan ini cuba menganalisis lebih lanjut mengenai representasi pelbagai identiti budaya Malaysia, dengan fokus kepada 'fairy tale' sebagai strategi 'poetic resistance' Shia Yih Yiing. Problematisasi multikulturalisme Malaysia akan dilakukan melalui perbincangan mengenai situasi multikulturalisme Malaysia seiring dengan pilihan watak-watak 'fairy tale' yang telah digunakannya untuk mewakili identiti budaya tertentu, serta identiti budaya yang dirangkumi dan juga dikecualikan dalam representasi oleh Shia Yih Yiing.

Kata kunci: multikulturalisme Malaysia, identiti kebudayaan, *fairy tale*, representasi, strategi 'poetic resistance'

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CMIO	:	Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others
NCP	:	National Culture Policy
NEP	:	New Economic Policy
UMNO	:	United Malays National Organisation

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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

"Malaysia, Truly Asia" is the popular slogan used when it comes to promoting Malaysia as a tourist spot. We could see the description of Malaysia overall as a country on the official tourism website, "There is only one place where all the colours, flavours, sounds and sights of Asia come together – Malaysia."¹, multiculturalism is one of the key selling points of Malaysia. Most often the media represent happy Malaysian multiculturalism, by focusing on the diverse cultures, the exotic traditions of multiple cultural identities, and how these cultural identities coexist together. However, as suggested by many scholars, the idea of multiculturalism is not at all unproblematic. In a glance, Shia Yih Yiing's artworks fit perfectly into the government narrative of happy multiculturalism, the representation of multiple cultural identities, coexisting in a harmonious setting. Nonetheless, through the reading of secondary resources as well as personal interviews with Shia Yih Yiing, she mentioned her attempt of incorporating poetic resistance strategies in her artwork, revealing her intent was not to simply show happy Malaysian multiculturalism. Therefore, this research attempts to analyse further on the representation of the multiple cultural identities of Malaysia, how she chose to represent them, and how she chose not to. The inclusion of certain elements as well as the exclusion would bring us to the problematization of the multiculturalism. An attempt will also be made to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the analysis her artwork, as well as the analysis of her choice of fairy tale to represent a certain cultural identity. It is important to look at her work in a context, therefore it is crucial to understand her background as it affects her perspective of seeing things and her representation of a Malaysian multiculturalism in her artworks.

¹ "Tourism Malaysia Corporate Site," accessed February 12, 2019, <https://www.tourism.gov.my/campaigns/view/malaysia-truly-asia>.

Shia Yih Yiing is a woman artist from Kuching, Sarawak. She has moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1990 after enrolling in the Malaysian Institute of Art and subsequently settled in Kuala Lumpur after her marriage. After graduating from the Malaysian Institute of Art, she produced a series of symbolic rural family portraits for her first solo exhibition, "Homage to Ordinary Life," and won the Commonwealth Foundation Fellowship in Art & Craft in 1998. The primary subject matter in her paintings for the exhibition was her self-portrait and her family members. She used the fellowship opportunity to further her studies in Australia, and that led to research focusing on the subject of motherhood, and the result of that research was then transferred onto canvas in an exhibition entitled "wOm(b)" that was held in Petronas Gallery. Ever since then, she is often being talked about as a woman artist who dwells on feminist issues and associated with the theme of motherhood. Undoubtedly, the identity of a mother, as a theme, has been quite prominent in the artwork that was produced by Shia Yih Yiing, from the earliest work such as the paintings from the "Homage to Ordinary Life" series, until the recent works from "The More We Get Together" series in 2014, where she featured her daughter in the representation of multiple ethnic identities in her paintings. In relation to the consistent motherhood theme that could be seen in her artworks, during Shia Yih Yiing's artistic journey that spans from the 1990s to the 2000s, we could see a shift from the apolitical to the political in her artworks. This shift was driven by her concerns about the future of her children amid the unstable political situation during the 2000s² in Malaysia. She has mentioned the use of poetic resistance during the interview with Cecily Cheo for the 'Motherhood Games' exhibition.³ These particular resistance strategies were inspired by the book "The Study of Political Resistance

² Cecily Cheo, *Motherhood Games* (The National Institute of Education, Singapore, 2008).

³ *Ibid.*

Poetics of Malaysian Literature in Chinese.” It would be interesting to study further on the incorporation of these poetic resistance strategies by Shia Yih Yiing in her artworks.

It is essential to highlight that the artworks that Shia Yih Yiing produced also revolved around the questioning of identities. Acknowledging the popular viewpoint of looking at the arts of Shia Yih Yiing as a woman artist who focused on motherhood themes⁴, this research aims to break away from the view. It would be refreshing to look at her work from a different lens, hence this research attempt to study Shia Yih Yiing’s artworks from the perspective of multiculturalism. While Shia Yih Yiing’s recent artworks in the 2000s seem to be portraying different ethnic groups in harmonious settings, I suggest that there are complex ideas to be discovered beneath the seemingly beautiful and peaceful paintings. There is an underlying uncanniness in her artwork. She does not represent happy multiculturalism, nor does her work align easily with the national narrative of a unified nation, as suggested by Sarena Abdullah⁵.

Since Malaysia is a country that consists of multiple cultural communities, and Shia Yih Yiing’s work deals with the representation of various cultural identities, the link to multiculturalism is inevitable. Multiculturalism in Malaysia is vastly different from the multiculturalism discourse in other countries, especially the Western countries that started the multiculturalism discourse in the 1970s when there was a significant number of migrants that immigrated to the countries such as Canada, Australia, and Britain. Therefore, if this research discusses Shia Yih Yiing’s artwork from a multiculturalism viewpoint, it could contribute to the multiculturalism discourse in Malaysia. The

⁴ See, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, *WOM(b): A Search for Women Narratives* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 2004). Laura Fan, “Written on the Body,” *The Edge*, May 24, 2004. 朵拉, “我是女人, 也是艺术家——谢意颖” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 23, 2005.

⁵ Sarena Abdullah, *Malaysian Art Since the 1990s: Postmodern Situation* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2018, 163).

representation of multiple ethnic identities in her artworks suggested that she is exploring the issues of identities in Malaysia. The exploration of cultural identities by Shia Yih Yiing aligns well with the attempt to problematize multiculturalism in Malaysia. Apart from the fact that there is a lack of studies in terms of multiculturalism in Malaysia, but the study of multiculturalism concerning visual arts is also limited. Hence, there is a need to address the lack of visual analysis of her artwork through the lens of multiculturalism.

Therefore, this research analyses the representation of multiple cultural identities in Shia Yih Yiing's artwork and calls for an examination of how the hyphenated identity of Shia Yih Yiing as a Malaysian-Sarawakian-Chinese has given her a different stance when it comes to representing different cultural identities. In his seminal text entitled 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall emphasized the importance of "enunciation", "Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write - the positions of *enunciation*." In this study, we will be looking at the positions from which Shia Yih Yiing paint. This research aims to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the study of representation of multiple Malaysian cultural identities in Shia Yih Yiing's painting in relation to the choice of fairy tale she employed in her representation. The examination will be done within the context of Malaysia's socio-political situation, in line with her artistic shift in the 2000s.

1.1 Research Objectives

- 1) To analyse the representation of multiple cultural identities in Shia Yih Yiing's artwork.
- 2) To problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the study of fairy tale as a resistance strategy employed by Shia Yih Yiing in her representation of different Malaysian cultural identities.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How does Shia Yih Yiing represent Malaysia's multiple cultural identities in her paintings?
- 2) How is multiculturalism explored in Shia Yih Yiing's artwork? Did she resist or reinforce the official narratives of multiculturalism in Malaysia?
- 3) How does Shia Yih Yiing incorporate fairy tale as a poetic resistance strategy in her artworks?
- 4) How can Shia Yih Yiing's artworks be analysed in relation to Malaysian's socio-political context?

1.3 Statement of Problem

While multiculturalism was quite a prominent theme used in Shia Yih Yiing's paintings, there have not been many writings on her work regarding this aspect. Her representation of Malaysian multicultural situation has been repeatedly shown in her series of paintings. However, most of the writings on her artworks focused on motherhood as a theme and her role as a woman. There were only a few writings that discuss her representation of the multicultural identities of Malaysians. In one of the written mentions of hers regarding the representation of multiculturalism in her artwork,

Sarena Abdullah claims that her artworks are aligning with the government's vision of "unified Malaysia." However, this research argues that there are more complexities in the representation of multiple cultural identities in her artwork instead of being in line with the government's ideal narratives, and she intended to resist the government's narration through the incorporation of poetic resistance strategies in her artworks.

Moreover, this research would like to suggest that through the poetic resistance strategies, Shia Yih Yiing actually problematizes Malaysian multiculturalism. There is also a lack of thorough visual analysis of her artworks in relation to multiculturalism. This research contends that this study could contribute to the understanding of the multicultural situation in Malaysia through the analysis of fairy tale as a poetic resistance strategy was incorporated by Shia Yih Yiing in her artworks, and also to contribute to the study of the representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia.

In spite of that, there has been little scholarly work so far that includes the analysis of artworks done by artists originated from East Malaysia, and particularly on Shia Yih Yiing's artwork, which incorporated numerous representations of multiple cultural identities. Writings on Malaysian art such as the whole series of the *Narratives in Malaysian Art*⁶, *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey*⁷, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*⁸ and *Modern Malaysian Art*⁹, *Vision, and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*¹⁰ had few to no mention at all of the Sarawakian artists. There is a lack of writings on the artist from East Malaysia within the Malaysian art history works of

⁶ *Narratives in Malaysian Art* is a four-volume publication project, consist of Volume 1: *Imagining Identities*, Volume 2: *Reactions-New Critical Strategies*, Volume 3: *Infrastructures* and Volume 4: *Perspectives*. These four books do mentioned artist from East Malaysia; however it is comparatively lesser compared to artist from West Malaysia.

⁷ Dolores D Wharton, *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey* (Petaling Jaya: Asia Society, 1971).

⁸ T K Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1983).

⁹ Mulyadi Mahamood, *Modern Malaysian Art: From the Pioneering Era to the Pluralist Era, 1930s-1990s* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 2007).

¹⁰ T K Sabapathy, *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994).

literature. This study grapple that it is vital to study how an artist from East Malaysia represented multiple cultural identities in Malaysia because the background of the artist could influence how they view and look at identities. Quoting artist Yee I-Lann from East Malaysia, Sabah “...to become Malaysian is a conscious choice. It is easier for Sabahans and Sarawakians, because it was much clearer for us, but I don’t think Malaysians from Peninsular Malaysia fully grasp that they are more than just Malayan, and what this means.”¹¹ In this case, Yee I-Lann is suggesting that Peninsular Malaysian and East Malaysian have different visions of Malaysia, the reason for her making the statement was based on the artworks that she produced commemorating Malaysia Day, which is 16th September 1963, the day Sabah and Sarawak joined Malaysia. The production of the artwork serves as a form of resistance towards the dominant narrative from Peninsular Malaysia. Hence, this research hopes to contribute to the writings of East Malaysian artists as well as encompassed a different view and representation of multiculturalism from analysis of work of arts by Shia Yih Yiing, an artist from East Malaysia. This study proposes that, by providing an alternate narrative from an East Malaysian’s perspective, it also could be seen as a problematization of Malaysian multiculturalism.

Another concern within this specific area of study is the deficiency of writings, especially in multiculturalism in Malaysia. There is a limited scholarly discussion focusing on problematizing multiculturalism in Malaysia, not to mention the interconnections between art and multiculturalism. Even though there are numerous scholars works on multiculturalism internationally, there is a significant distinction between multiculturalism from the Western perspective as compared to multiculturalism in Malaysia or the entire region of Southeast Asia. Malaysia, in comparison to western

¹¹ Yee I-Lann, “Yee I-Lann, Malaysia Day Commemorative Plates (2010),” in *Narratives in Malaysian Art, Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies* (RogueArt, 2013), 86–90.

countries that deal with multiculturalism after the increasing presence of immigrants, Malaysia was highly diverse even before it achieved its independence in 1957. The issue with multiculturalism is it fixes culture; there are specific criteria for each culture as if culture is frozen in time. It does not look into the process of identity formation. In Malaysia, multiculturalism is taken literally, which is the coexistent of multiple races/ethnic, and each race/ethnic have their specific traits and cultures. However, this view inhibits the possibilities of transformation of identity. Through the study of resistance by Shia Yih Yiing towards the government narrative, which showcases multiple narratives of different cultural groups, problematize the notion of Malaysian multiculturalism. The problematization enables us to look further, to understand the identity formation for different cultural groups in Malaysia and the problematic classification of race/ethnicity instead of looking at it as fixed, given stable identities that do not change, contrary to the official narratives. The lack of studies and research of problematization of Malaysian multiculturalism reveals the lacuna that needs to be addressed in order to contribute to the discourse of multiculturalism in Malaysia, as well as the Malaysian art history.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study will be of significance to students of Malaysian art as it will provide an analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's artworks in relation to the historical context of art development in Malaysia. Moreover, the analysis will be done within the context of Malaysian history, particularly on the history of the 'origin' of the multiple races/ethnic in Malaysia, namely Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sabah dominant group Kadazandusun and Sarawak dominant group Iban. It will also contribute to the writings of the artist from East Malaysia in Malaysian art history.

This study benefits not just to those in art history but also expand to those researching in the context of cultural studies in relation to arts. This research also hopes to contribute to the discourse of multiculturalism in Malaysia, benefiting other researchers who are interested in multiculturalism and how it is negotiated through art. Since the involvement of power relations in culture and identity formation is inevitable, this research also encourages a better understanding of the relationship between them and help us to better comprehend the multicultural scenario in Malaysia.

Artist in Malaysia produce interesting artworks, but there were insufficient writings of the artworks in general. Therefore, there is a mean for critical reflection and discussion of the issues raised in the artworks. By analysing the artworks, this research also wishes to raise key concerns, make useful interventions, and generates a dialogue between writer and artist, which might help the artist to create more works that are relevant.

1.5 Methodology

The qualitative method is employed in this research. Unstructured interviews with Shia Yih Yiing were carried out at her home cum studio, located at Jinjang, Kuala Lumpur, Site visits to galleries which have collections of Shia Yih Yiing's artwork such as National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

Secondary information will be gathered through writings that are related to Shia Yih Yiing. The writing material includes exhibition catalogues, newspaper/magazine cut-outs, thesis, journals, books, and articles. Art history books and general history books in Malaysia will also be reviewed in order to understand Shia Yih Yiing's artistic development in relation to Malaysian socio-political context and Malaysian art. A brief

study on the historical background of Malaysia will also be conducted in order to understand the multicultural situation in Malaysia and to better situate the study. The information gathered will then be discussed in parallel with the formal and visual analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's artworks.

A formal and visual analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's artworks will be carried out. The choice of colours and compositions will be analysed along with visual strategies such as fairy tales, allegory, juxtaposition, and appropriation in order to discover how Shia Yih Yiing used it in the exploration and representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia. Moreover, this research will problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the analysis of her representation of the multiple cultural identities in Malaysia and how she uses fairy tale as a poetic resistance strategy, if this specific strategy actually resisted the dominant narrative, or reinforces it.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

Visitation to Shia Yih Yiing's studio only enable a few photo documentations and viewing in person of her artworks due to most of her artworks were owned by anonymous private collectors. While many of Shia Yih Yiing's works form part of private collections, the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia holds several of Shia Yih Yiing's paintings, including *Homage to the Vanishing World*, *Zu Yi*, *Fairy Godmother*, *Mermaids*, *Sleeping Beauties* and *Snow White*, 60's, 70s, 80s, 2000s *Homage Couture*. I have applied for a photo shooting session in the National Art Gallery as there might be some details in her artworks that were unable to be seen in photos of the artworks. However, the application was rejected due to safety reasons, and an alternative was provided by the person in charge of the National Art Gallery, which is purchasing the higher resolutions photos of the artworks at the price of RM100 per

image. In addition, some of the paintings that were acquired by the anonymous collector were also not able to be viewed in person, nor could any photo documentation be done. Having financial constraints for the purchase of images from the National Art Gallery and having already acquired images of the paintings from the artist herself, this analysis will only be done based on the images of the artworks that were provided by the artist.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

This research will be focusing solely on the analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's painting. Selected artworks are the 6 paintings from the series "Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids," and "Once Upon a Time," which incorporated the fairy tale or myth such as "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," "The Little Mermaid," as well as mythical or magical character from fairy tale such as Fairy Godmother. The selected artworks are also artworks that were produced after 2005, where there was an intended shift from apolitical to political by the artist in her artistic journey.¹² All the paintings selected are oil on canvas. The selection of paintings is based on the criterion of painting that is showing hints of dealing with issues of identities, different races/ethnicities, and the relationship between them, in relation to the explicit reference to multiple fairy tales. Moreover, these paintings showed that she is using overt cultural markers that represented different races/ethnicities in Malaysia. "Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids," and "Once Upon a Time," are selected because these paintings are interrelated in terms of Shia Yih Yiing's narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism. Even though Shia Yih Yiing also took reference of fairy tale in other paintings such as "Sarong of Unity, Joy, Abundance, Questions," which was inspired by "The Emperor's New Clothes", as well as "Vest of

¹² Cheo, *Motherhood Games*.

Wealth, Vest of Prosperity, Vest of Honour” which took reference from the Chinese mythical character, Caishen¹³, these are excluded in this research. This is because for “Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids,” and “Once Upon a Time,” Shia Yih Yiing do not just take the idea of the fairy tale, she is representing a specific cultural identity with a specific fairy tale character. In addition, the choice of fairy tale characters used by Shia Yih Yiing in the selected paintings to represent Malaysian cultural identities are also characters from Western fairy tales that has been popularised¹⁴. It is through the discussion of Malaysian multiculturalism situation vis a vis the specific choice of fairy tale characters she has used to represent a certain cultural identity that we will problematize Malaysian multiculturalism in this research.

¹³ Caishen, 财神 the god of wealth, is a mythical character that is popularly known by the Chinese. The uniqueness of this myth character is that there are multiple myths associated with this character, and there is no absolute truth on who Caishen is. Most of the Caishen were dressed in the minister’s uniform, indicating the importance of the minister as the bearer of moralities. 李小光 also claims that the creation of multiple versions of Caishen is due to the elements of wish fulfilment. Nevertheless, there are different wishes from people from different backgrounds, but yet the wishes are “universal” in a way, is the reason why there are multiple Caishen, but there is a unified name for the mythical character as Caishen. See, 李小光 “道教与民间财神信仰文化背景之比较” 宗教学研究 4 (1997).

¹⁴ Jack Zipes, “The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films,” in *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (Routledge, 2011), 23.

CHAPTER 2 : LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been quite a number of writings about Shia Yih Yiing that could be found in exhibition catalogues and newspaper articles. Writings on Shia Yih Yiing and her artwork could only be found mostly in newspaper articles at the beginning of the artist's career, followed by the exhibition catalogues during the latter part of her artistic journey. There were also a few brief mentions on Shia Yih Yiing in books, journals, thesis, and articles. Another important source of writings that was acquired through the interviews with the artist was the book that was read by the artist and influence her artistic development.

The earliest written mention of Shia Yih Yiing that I have found was in the judge's report when Shia Yih Yiing received an award for a drawing competition themed "Rural Malaysia" in 1993 when she won the first prize with her artwork "Tranquility."¹⁵ It is a painting where the subject matter is two figures, which was shown wearing clothing that has traditional Malay clothing elements. According to the judge's report, her artwork won the first prize because of her brave attempt in the representation of "Tranquility" and the rich content of her artwork presented in a harmonious hue. This writing provided us an insight at the beginning of her artistic journey, where her earlier artwork was already using figures as her primary subject matter and the incorporation of multiple cultural elements as well as the juxtaposition between the urban and rural; reality and fantasy. The report also revealed the state of ambivalence and the questioning of identity in her earlier artwork.

¹⁵ In a personal interview with the artist on 9th May 2017, the artist gave a copy of a judge's report on their decision to award her the best prize for a drawing competition themed "Tranquillity". This report indicated that the judges comprised of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Dr Wong Seng Tong, Khalil Ibrahim and Ahmad Khalid Dato' Yusof, the reasoning for selecting Shia's artwork, a short description of her artwork, an image of her artwork and also brief mentioning of other artworks that won the second and third prize.

Following Shia Yih Yiing's first solo exhibition "Homage to Ordinary Life" in 1998, it has led to increased exposure to her artworks and more written discussion on her artworks. Nevertheless, the writings are limited to newspaper articles such as *Sunday Star*, *New Straits Times*, *The Sun Magazine*, *Guang Ming Daily*, and *Nanyang Siang Pau*. In contrary to the English newspaper articles that consist of more in-depth reviews that were written by J. Anu,¹⁶ Ooi Kok Chuen¹⁷, and Sharifah Hamzah¹⁸, respectively, *Guang Ming Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* only have descriptive information regarding Shia Yih Yiing and her exhibition. The exhibition reviews in English newspaper by three of the writers provided a glimpse of Shia Yih Yiing's theme and strategies used in her artistic expression. Both Sharifah and Ooi mentioned the use of juxtaposition by Shia Yih Yiing in her artworks. While collage is the choice of word used by Anurendra to describe her method, he also mentioned that her story-telling is fragmented. However, there is no further visual analysis of her artwork to investigate her employment of story-telling, collage, or juxtaposition in her artworks. Therefore, this research aims to elaborate further on the method or strategies used by Shia Yih Yiing in her artistic expression.

Through Shia Yih Yiing's second solo exhibition entitled "wOm(b)," she started to gain recognition in the art industry as a women artist who dealt with issues of feminism. This exhibition, which was held in Petronas Gallery, marked an important stage in her artistic journey, as she began to receive recognition as a women artist in Malaysia. In the exhibition catalogue for "wOm(b)," Nur Hanim¹⁹ discussed heavily on the women's identity of Shia Yih Yiing and positioned her as an artist who overtly dealt with feminist

¹⁶ Anurendra Jegadeva, "An Honest Look at Everyday Life," *Sunday Star*, July 12, 1998, 4.

¹⁷ Ooi Kok Chuen, "Peeking into an Ordinary Life," *New Straits Times*, July 8, 1998, 3.

¹⁸ Sharifah Hamzah, "Ode to the Everyday," *Sun Magazine*, July 7, 1998, 10-11.

¹⁹ Nur Hanim Khairuddin, *wOm(b): A Search for Women Narratives* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 2004), 34-35.

issues. Laura Fan²⁰ and 朵拉 (Dora)²¹ reviewed and discussed the series of work in the exhibition from a feminist viewpoint as well. The artist did an MA at the University of Western Sydney, where she investigated how representations were used in producing conceptual art vis-à-vis Motherhood. The title of her thesis was *Mother and Child: Representations and Implications*. Her thesis mentioned the development of feminism in the West as part of the inspirations of her research, and it contributed to the production of artworks in “wOm(b)” as well. While it is essential to take into account that the motherhood experience of Shia Yih Yiing is very significant in her artistic journey, this viewpoint of Shia Yih Yiing as a woman artist who focused only on motherhood themes are found to be limiting, by focusing on her identity as a women artist who are concern only about issues regarding motherhood. The representation of multiple cultural identities in her artwork could be expanded and to be discussed in a new lens if it could be studied beyond the feminist viewpoint, using the multiculturalism viewpoint.

An interview transcript by Chai Chang Hwang²² in 2006 provided us another insight on the artistic enlightenment through the exposure of Shia towards feminist theory, Shia mentioned that through the reading of feminist theories during her studies in Australia, she began to view body differently, as a blank paper which anything external that is put on are like writing on a blank paper. In an attempt to confer the use of the body in constructing the narrative of Others in Malaysia, Tan Zi Hao²³ mentioned Shia Yih Yiing’s wise strategy in using the “*mother-hood* to underline the estrangement of *mother-nation*, she mingles with the estranged bodies for solidarity – her (m)othering instinct.”

²⁰ Laura Fan, “Written on the Body,” *The Edge*, May 24, 2004, 6.

²¹ 朵拉, “我是女人, 也是艺术家——谢蕙颖,” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 23, 2005, 14.

²² Chai Chang Hwang, “Arty-Arty: Interview with Malaysian Artist Shia Yih Ying,” *VMAG*, 2006, <http://www.heath.tw/nml-article/artly-artly-interview-with-malaysian-artist-shia-yih-ying/> (accessed October 10, 2016).

²³ Tan Zi Hao, “Invisible Body: An Othering Narrative,” in *Narratives in Malaysian Art, Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies* (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), 113–26.

Even though the present research does not attempt to study Shia's artworks through the feminist viewpoint, Shia's interest and understanding of the body, something she gained from studying in Australia, will be a core element, indeed the groundwork, for my analysis of her artwork.

While Nur Hanim²⁴, Laura Fan²⁵, 朵拉²⁶ look at the identity of Shia Yih Yiing as a woman, Sarena Abdullah²⁷, Uthaya Sankar²⁸, and Ng Soon Mang²⁹ look at Shia's Sarawakian identity. However, the hyphenated identity of Shia as a Malaysian-Sarawakian-Chinese influence in her artistic journey has not been explored in any scholarly writing. In an attempt to study the tendency of Sarawakian artists in employing images with Sarawak cultural elements in their artworks, Shia was one of the 15 Sarawakian artists that were chosen by Ng Soon Mang for his unpublished postgraduate thesis. However, the thesis is more of descriptive research as the result of the study was listed out in table form. He merely listed out the subject matter, styles, medium, and techniques chosen by 15 Sarawakian artists, also the factors that influence the Sarawak artist to incorporate Sarawak cultural elements in the artworks. This research does not provide critical analysis of the reason behind the choice of incorporating Sarawak cultural elements into the artist's artworks. Albeit inconclusive, this research does provide a helpful reference on the factors which influence Sarawak artist to employ Sarawak cultural elements in their artworks.

²⁴ Khairuddin, *WOM(b): A Search for Women Narratives*, 34-35.

²⁵ Fan, "Written on the Body", 6.

²⁶ 朵拉, "我是女人, 也是艺术家——谢慧颖," Kuala Lumpur: *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 23, 2005, 14.

²⁷ Abdullah, *Malaysian Art Since the 1990s: Postmodern Situation*, 14.

²⁸ Uthaya Sankar, "Semangat Hari Malaysia," *Free Malaysia Today*, 2012,

<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/02/10/semangat-hari-malaysia/> (accessed November 2, 2017).

²⁹ Soon Mang Ng, "Kecenderungan Pelukis-Pelukis Sarawak Menggarap Imejan Bercirikan Sarawak Dalam Karya Seni Tampak" (Kuching: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2009).

Another unpublished undergraduate thesis by Siti Hajar Khuzai made an effort to discuss the symbolism in Shia's artwork. The writing regarding the symbolism in Shia's artwork was quite inconsistent through the thesis, and there is a lack of arguments in the writings. Also, there was no critical visual analysis of Shia's artwork about symbolism in the thesis as well. The two unpublished theses and also writings that look at her identity individually demonstrate the need to study Shia's artwork through critical visual analysis in relation to her hyphenated identities and how it affected her representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia.

It is also worth noting that there have not been many writings on the artist from East Malaysia as compared to West Malaysia. This could be seen from the majority of academic writings in Malaysia, namely the whole series of the Narratives in Malaysian Art³⁰, Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey³¹, Modern Artists of Malaysia³², and Modern Malaysian Art³³. In Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies, an artist from Sabah, Yee I-Lann stated that “I was ignorant as to how silent Sabah is, in the context of the Federation,” “I didn't notice it, growing up there. But it's very obvious when I'm here in KL.”³⁴ I am bringing attention to this interview transcript carried out by Zedeck Siew with Yee I-Lann in 2013 because it revealed the reason of the productions of art by an artist from Sabah, how they look at the situation of art in Malaysia, the different perspective or cultural experience between West Malaysian artist and East Malaysian artist and how the limitation of representation of East Malaysia in

³⁰ Narratives in Malaysian Art is a four-volume publication project, consist of Volume 1: Imagining Identities, Volume 2: Reactions- New Critical Strategies, Volume 3: Infrastructures and Volume 4: Perspectives. These four books do mentioned artist from East Malaysia, however it is comparatively lesser compared to artist from West Malaysia.

³¹ Dolores D Wharton, Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey (Asia Society, 1971).

³² T K Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, Modern Artists of Malaysia (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1983).

³³ Mulyadi Mahamood, Modern Malaysian Art: From the Pioneering Era to the Pluralist Era, 1930s-1990s (Utusan Publications, 2007).

³⁴ Yee I-Lann, “Yee I-Lann, Malaysia Day Commemorative Plates (2010),” in Narratives in Malaysian Art, Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), 86–90.

the capital of Malaysia has triggered them to produce artwork that could represent Malaysia in a whole in their own perspective.

The production of a series of artworks by Shia Yih Yiing was parallel with what Yee I-Lann has said regarding the reason behind the production of her series of artworks. In a book review of the children storybook entitled “The Special Day”³⁵ illustrated by Shia Yih Yiing³⁶, Uthaya Sankar provided a more elaborated insight on the situation of Sabah and Sarawak as part of Malaysia and how the major mass media has marginalized Sabah and Sarawak when it comes to the portrayal/ representation of Malaysia and majority representations done by the media that was under the reign of Putrajaya have always focused only on Malaysia which is dominated by three different races: Malay, Chinese and Indians. Therefore, besides studying the representation of multicultural identities of Malaysian beyond the popularly represented multicultural group of Malay, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia, visual analysis of Shia Yih Yiing’s artworks in this research will address this lack of discussion of artworks by East Malaysian artist in Malaysian art academic writings.

Both Simon Soon³⁷ and Anurendra³⁸ have taken notice of the influence of Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong on Shia Yih Yiing’s artistic development. J. Anu stated that Shia was “...another young graduate of the Wong Hoy Cheong school of art and philosophy.” Wong Hoy Cheong was Shia’s lecturer at MIA, and notably, Simon also

³⁵ “The Special Day” is a 32 pages children storybook illustrated by Shia Yih Yiing and the content was written by Mahani Zubedy, it is produced in relation to Malaysian Day which has been officially announced as public holiday in 2010. Illustrations in the storybook was later reproduced in a larger scale on canvas.

³⁶ Uthaya Sankar, “Semangat Hari Malaysia,” Free Malaysia Today, 2012, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/02/10/semangat-hari-malaysia/>(accessed November 2, 2017).

³⁷ Simon Soon, “A Room of One’s Own. In Jinjang.,” Our Art Projects Sdn Bhd, 2013, <http://www.ourartprojects.com/exhibitions-essay.php?id=5>. (accessed January 4, 2017)

³⁸ Jegadeva, “An Honest Look at Everyday Life.”, 4.

claimed in the exhibition catalogue written for “Shia Yih Yiing: The Weaver” in 2013, that figuration has been one of the methods that were preferred by Wong in contrary to abstraction in order to produce artwork that with socio-political significance. This gives us a glimpse of the artistic influences of other artists on Shia Yih Yiing's employment of figurations as her visual strategies. Other than J. Anu and Simon Soon, Elaine Lau³⁹ and Sarena Abdullah⁴⁰ also mentioned Shia as a figurative artist. Nonetheless, there were no relations been made in how the use of figurations could produce a more socio-politically engaged artwork in relation to the visual analysis, and this research aims to fill this dearth of visual analysis.

One of the most recent academic writing mentioning Shia, Sarena Abdullah positions Shia as one of the postmodern artist who deals with the issue of identity directly within Malaysia's national construct, which Sarena claims that Shia is has taken a more positive approach that was in line with the government's vision of a “unified Malaysia” in comparison to other artists such as Yee I-Lann and Simryn Gill who dealt with the issue of race in a more “open ended and obscure way.”⁴¹ The analysis that was based only on a series of artwork to justify her work as more aligned with the national vision of united Malaysia is debatable. Nonetheless, this book provided a great reference on the discussion of postmodern art strategies in artworks and the position of figuration in paintings, which both are related to Shia's artwork.

Contrary to Sarena's writings, Elaine Lau, Simon Soon, Tan Zi Hao and Shireen Naziree has taken a different stance in viewing Shia's work, while they looked at her

³⁹ Elaine Lau, “Cultural Index, the Arts at a Glance,” *The Edge*, May 30, 2011, 16.

⁴⁰ Abdullah, *Malaysian Art Since the 1990s: Postmodern Situation*, 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 163.

work beyond just aligning with the dominant narratives, she was exploring and creating her narratives instead. During an interview with Krishen Jit, Wong Hoy Cheong mentioned the reason behind the lack of rebellion in the Malaysian art scene, where any distinct voices expressed would be seen as a challenging act.⁴² This provided a viewpoint to look at the subtle resistance of Shia's art. These writings of different viewpoints prompted this study to investigate further on the representation of Malaysian multiculturalism in Shia's artwork, as well as the idea of a Malaysian multiculturalism. This study suggests that her work could be used to problematize the official dominant narratives of Malaysian multiculturalism.

Shireen and Simon situate Shia's art in the context of creating a narrative, such as in the exhibition catalogues for the 'The Weaver' and 'Telling Tales,' they both mentioned the complexities of her artwork within the representations of multi-cultural identities. Simon even encourages us to look beyond the figures and discover "...how the arc of migration, colonial legacy, ethnic identity, demands of motherhood, domestic life and livelihood, and post-colonial reimagining of national space thread across Yih Yiing's pictorial fabric."⁴³ Migrations, colonial legacy, and post-colonial and diaspora consciousness are always interrelated. Interestingly, there has been no other written account discussing diaspora consciousness in Shia's artworks. Other than that, the "Telling Tales" exhibition writeup revealed that there is still much to explore regarding the subject matters in Shia's paintings in relation to state-initiated policies, which might have affected Shia's art directly or indirectly.

⁴² Wong Hoy Cheong, "New Art, New Voices: Krishen Jit Talks to Wong Hoy Cheong on Contemporary Malaysian Art," in *Narratives in Malaysian Art, Volume 2: Reactions - New Critical Strategies* (RogueArt, 2013), 146-53.

⁴³ Simon Soon, "A Room of One's Own. In Jinjang.," 2013, <http://www.ourartprojects.com/exhibitions-essay.php?id=5> (accessed January 4, 2017).

These two exhibition catalogues provided great viewpoints to look at Shia's work and provide reasoning to probe deeper on her artworks. It also revealed that a link to the historical background of Malaysia is needed in order to better situate and analyses Shia's artwork. The absence of a brief historical background of Malaysia in these two exhibition catalogues that could better situate and analyses her artworks provided a lacuna in which this research will fill by providing a brief history of the socio-political background and the complex multicultural situation of Malaysia in relation to the analysis of her artworks.

Michelle Antoinette⁴⁴ offered a different discursive position to look at Malaysian art through his writing of Wong Hoy Cheong, which is via the lens of postcolonial multiculturalism. Noting the significant influence of Wong on Shia's artistic development, this research intends to expand on the discussion of multiculturalism through visual analysis of Shia's artwork in order to discover how Shia's artwork problematizes Malaysian postcolonial multiculturalism.

In the "OUT OF THE MOULD: The Age of Reason" group exhibition that took place in Gallery Petronas in 2007, Shia Yih Yiing was one of the tenth Malaysian new generation women artists whose works were selected for the exhibition. Shireen Naziree provided a different perspective to view her artworks, aside from the feminist viewpoint, despite the heavy focus on the feminism discourse as the exhibition only consisted of women artists. Shireen claims that Shia Yih Yiing uses juxtaposition and

⁴⁴ Michelle Antoinette, "The Art of Race: Rethinking Malaysian Identity through the Art of Wong Hoy Cheong," in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 205–206.

fairy tales in her alternative narratives of social commentary artworks.⁴⁵ Shireen provided a great entry to look at her work, a social commentary artwork that uses juxtaposition and fairy tales as her strategies, therefore the employment of juxtaposition and fairytale in her artworks would be further explored in this research.

The categorization of Shia Yih Yiing's paintings as social commentary artworks by Shireen⁴⁶ in the same text was contrary to the statement made by Shia in *The Sun Magazine*⁴⁷, 1998. In the magazine, Shia Yih Yiing stated that she does not intend to produce social commentary artwork because she thinks that instead of painting with other motivations, she should paint from her heart. This shift from apolitical to political is also visible in the exhibition catalogue by Cecily Cheo in 2008, where Shia Yih Yiing personally mentioned the reason for the transition during the interview for the "Motherhood Games" exhibition⁴⁸.

As a mother I have become more and more concerned about our political situation. Previously I didn't care. In the *Homage* series, I never thought of that sort of thing. I never thought of the world outside my home. But now I feel that I have a responsibility to do something, thought I can't do much, I can tell a story. And this is why I began to use Fairy Tales, as a strategy to help me tell these stories.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Shireen Naziree, *OUT OF THE MOULD: The Age of Reason. Exhibition Catalogue* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 2007), 16. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5705e317f8baf3bdbbbddcc9/t/57062a3355598649bd37ebfc/1460021826091/ohtm.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2017).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sharifah Hamzah, "Ode to the Everyday," *Sun Magazine*, July 7, 1998. The statement was made during an interview with Sharifah Hamzah in 1998. The interview with Shia Yih Yiing was mentioned by Sharifah Hamzah in *The Sun Magazine*. This research did not have access to the original interview transcript.

⁴⁸ Cheo, *Motherhood Games*.

⁴⁹ Cheo.

In the same text, Cecily states that Shia Yih Yiing expressed her employment of other visual strategies such as the strategy of poetic resistance, manipulation of visual elements⁵⁰, and also the “*small covert manoeuvres*”⁵¹.

In the same text, Cecily merely stated what Shia Yih Yiing has mentioned during the interview regarding her artistic strategies, she did not make connection between those strategies. However, this exhibition catalogue revealed the reason behind the important transition in Shia Yih Yiing’s artistic development and also the deliberate choice of the fairy tale, manipulations of visual elements, small covert manoeuvres, and poetic resistance as the strategies to produce political undertone artworks, which would serve as a great starting point for this study.

‘The Study of Political Resistance Poetics of Malaysian Literature in Chinese’ is one of the books that Shia Yih Yiing took great inspiration from in her art-making.⁵² Khor Boon Eng claims that there are five typical types of “political resistance poetics” of Malaysian Literature used by the Chinese authors, namely “the call of ethnic culture,” “the appropriation of ‘Others,’” “the intertextuality,” “the mystical/magical writings” and the “diaspora consciousness.”⁵³ This specific strategy of ‘poetic resistance’ was also mentioned previously by Shia Yih Yiing as one of her strategies in art-making during the interview with Cecily Cheo⁵⁴. This book provided a great lens to look at Shia Yih Yiing’s artworks, in relation to her attempt of resistance.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Referencing the consistent sarong motif that is visible in her multiple artworks, Shia Yih Yiing stated that the consistent use of certain visual elements “...accrues different shades of meaning as it combines with different images.” is one of her visual strategies.

⁵¹ Ibid. In the same text, Cecily claims that Shia Yih Yiing’s visual strategies could be understood in terms of *xiao dong zuo* 小动作, a Chinese idiomatic expression that could be roughly translated as making small covert maneuver.

⁵² Shia Yih Yiing shared that she took inspirations from the book during an interview with her on 10th May 2017.

⁵³ 许文荣, 南方喧哗: 马华文学的政治抵抗诗学, XV.

⁵⁴ Cheo, *Motherhood Games*.

Together, Cecily, Naziree and Khor's work indicate a link between the poetic resistance strategy, namely "the mystical/magical writings" and the employment of fairy tale in Shia Yih Yiing's paintings. As mentioned by Khor, "the mystical/magical writings" as a writing strategy could be a form of expression, an attempt to somehow be set free from the repression of reality, but at the same time it has underlying elements of resentment towards the reality.⁵⁵ Drawing this mystical/magical writing poetic resistance strategy from the book by Khor Boon Eng, the specific strategy is resisting the dominant narrative by showing the unfairness encountered by the marginalized group through a magical setting in order to not confront the dominant narrative overtly. Also, Khor Boon Eng asserts that by disguising the narrative within a mystical/magical story, the writer is free to express by incorporating magical/mystical elements, and it enables the writer to express their dissatisfaction and also their wishes.⁵⁶ This is similar to fairy tale described by Warner, that it is able to provide aspiration of a liberty from impoverishment, injustice and oppression.⁵⁷ , I am suggesting that Shia Yih Yiing took inspiration from the book on poetic resistances, as she finds that it aligned with her personality of not fond of making big statement, she preferred covert *manoeuvres*. Also, considering the similarities of "the mystical/magical writings" and "fairy tale" which Shia Yih Yiing mentioned that she is employing, it could suggest that she is actually using fairy tale as a form of poetic resistance strategy, to resist the dominant hegemonic power.

⁵⁵ 许文荣, 南方喧哗: 马华文学的政治抵抗诗学, 138.

⁵⁶ 许文荣, xvi.

⁵⁷ Marina Warner, *Once upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (OUP Oxford, 2014).

It is important to firstly understand the unique feature of the fairy tale as a form of storytelling and how it could be used as a resistance strategy towards the dominant narrative. Fairy tales are a popular genre of storytelling in literature, and they are used heavily as a form of entertainment and education. Because fairy tale is usually passed down orally from generation to the next, they are constantly evolving, and there are usually multiple versions of a fairy tale. According to Arthur Frank, he claims that fairy tale “encourages a dialogic mode of interpretation so that all voices can be heard, and open up a story for various interpretations and possible uses.”⁵⁸

According to Jack Zipes, it is not possible to trace the exact origin of the fairy tale. However, it could be suggested that storytelling began when humans can speak.⁵⁹ The first time the word fairy tale was used in print was by D'Aulnoy, where she named her stories *contes des fees* (published in 1697-1698), which means “tales about fairies.”⁶⁰ The English term “fairy tale” has come into common usage in the year 1750.⁶¹ Writers who collected tales and published it was widely known in the world such as Hans Christian Anderson, Grimm’s Brothers, Charles Perrault due to the popularity of their work such as “The Little Mermaid,” “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauties,” “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood.” Other than that, there are also “Alice in the Wonderland” and “Peter Pan” by Lewis Carroll and James Matthew Barry, which considered a fairy tale originally written by the author. There are many more other fairy tales that could be considered as canonical as Disney popularised it.

⁵⁸ Jack Zipes is quoting Arthur Frank in his book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4. For more insights of the book, see Arthur Frank. *Letting stories breathe: A socio-narratology*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

⁵⁹ Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁰ The English Translation of this book were published in 1707 as *Tales of the Fairies*.

⁶¹ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 23.

Many scholars have tried to fix fairy tale as a genre; some scholars studied and came up with a system grouping fairy tale into certain tale types such as the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index (ATU Index) and Vladimir Propp’s morphological analysis. However, the genre itself is very fluid; therefore, fixing it has always been problematic. Multiple scholars have also criticized the categorization, for example, Jean-Michel Adam and Ute Heidmann, who criticize how just by studying the tale types tend to neglect the intertextual connotation as well as the socio-cultural background⁶². Given the above, instead of defining fairy tale, this research will focus on the unique feature of fairy tale incorporated by Shia Yih Yiing in her artworks that allow resistance towards the dominant Malaysian narrative and, in return, problematizing Malaysian multiculturalism.

Before anything else, it is crucial to understand what is so special about the fairy tale that it is so prevalent in the world we are in right now. Jack Zipes asserts that fairy tale has gone beyond the initial form as an oral tale and printed text to what we popularly see now in the multimedia industry, ranging from advertising, cinema, social media and many more. By making a relation to the ‘selfish gene,’ he also explained why the fairy tale is memetic and how a particular fairy tale is considered as canonical compared to others.⁶³ Jack Zipes suggested that canonical fairy tale became canonical because we made them so.

...a tale that draws a person’s attention and is recorded in his or her brain will not be told again as a communication, whether oral or written, in exactly the same way, but the person will tell it because he or she feels it is relevant in a certain sociocultural context. It will also not become part of a cultural tradition or canon unless it is vital to the survival of a community and the preservation of its values and beliefs. [...] and they will continue to retell it and transmit it in a variety of ways.

⁶² Zipes.

⁶³ Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (Routledge, 2013).

Therefore, canonical fairy tale such as Cinderella, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, The Little Mermaid, etc. was canonical because of their relevance to the reader's socio-cultural context and they have made it canonical. This also explains the choice of specific fairy tale incorporated by Shia Yih Yiing in her paintings; she has found it relevant to her own Malaysian experience.

Nevertheless, we would have asked, why pan-European fairy tales? Some might question her use of fairy tale that was from the pan-European countries. It is important to note that Shia Yih Yiing has chosen these pan-European fairy tales that have been popularized by Disney, either in the form of animation, movies, or storybooks.⁶⁴ Moreover, these fairy tales are very popular in Malaysia; especially in the urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur. As suggested by Jack Zipes, "Certain fairy-tale texts have become formative and definitive, and they insert themselves into our cognitive processes, enabling us to establish and distinguish patterns of behaviour and to reflect upon ethics, gender, morality, and power."⁶⁵ Therefore, Malaysian might be able to resonate better with these fairy tales comparing to specific myths or folktales that are tied to a specific culture. Quoting Arthur Frank, storytellers "...learn to work with stories that are not *theirs* but *there*, as realities."⁶⁶ These pan-European fairy tales that have been popularized by Disney is *there*, and by already knowing the original story, the audience could focus on the localization of the fairy tale.

It is undeniable that the fairy tale is culturally marked, where the narratives were constructed within the context of a particular culture in their respective language.

⁶⁴ In 1937, 1951, 1959 and 1989, Disney produced the animations/movie for "Snow White", "Alice in the Wonderland", "Sleeping Beauty" and "The Little Mermaid" respectively. Disney also published a storybook adaptation of "The Emperor's New Clothes" in 1975. See, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/The_Emperor%27s_New_Clothes.

⁶⁵ Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, 26.

⁶⁶ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 4.

However, Jack Zipes claims that there are cross-cultural elements in these pan-European tales that could surpass cultural boundaries. While attempting to inculcate their symbolical tales with a particular remark on the social norms and ways of life during their era, writers adopt “universal” motifs and experiences from other cultures intentionally or unintentionally. Other cross-cultural elements are that these tales grapple with issues that occurred while human strives to “civilize” the “common instinctual drives.”⁶⁷ Jack Zipes also mentioned the complexities of the fairy tale, where it “creates disorder to create order [...] to give voice to utopian wishes and to ponder instinctual drives and gender, ethnic, family, and social conflicts. In doing so, it reflects upon and questions social codes to draw a response from readers/listeners.”⁶⁸

By referring to the tales from French and Italy, which was written at different times and shared distinct culture, Jack Zipes claims that the tales from these two regions have something in common, which

they lay bare the contradictions of the civilizing process, reveal how power works for those who are opportunistic and well situated, and propose modes of self-restraint in keeping with the civilizing process. Moreover, they often use irony, sarcasm, and farce to make a mockery of the abuse of power and to indicate possibilities for change.⁶⁹

As the issues of identity vis-a-vis power has always been sort of a taboo in Malaysia, the common feature of fairy tale mentioned by Jack Zipes also justify the use of fairy tale by Shia Yih Yiing in her paintings, where the usage of fairy tale excused the censorship that might have complied with her expressing her views of the socio-political situation at the time.

⁶⁷ Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*.

⁶⁸ Zipes, 15.

⁶⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (Routledge, 2012) 22.

To conclude this section, the literature identifies a lack of existing writings on Shia Yih Yiing and her artworks. Despite the representation of multiple cultural identities in her artwork, her artwork has not been looked at in a deeper depth from a multiculturalism perspective. Moreover, the visual strategies that were approached by Shia Yih Yiing in her art-making are not adequately analysed as well. As her work was mentioned by different scholar as both aligning and resisting the dominant narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism, it suggests that we could problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the analysis of her representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia. What is Malaysian multiculturalism and how did her work could be seen as aligning or resisting the dominant narrative? Making relation between the poetic resistance strategies employed by Malaysian Chinese writers employed, namely “the mystical/magical writings” as a resistance strategy towards the dominant power, and fairy tale, this research suggested that fairy tale was employed by Shia Yih Yiing as a form of resistance to the dominant narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism. This research will attempt to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the representation of multiple cultural identities in Shia Yih Yiing artwork, how she has chosen a specific fairy tale in her representation as a form of resistance, and how the socio-political situation in Malaysia, as well as Shia Yih Yiing’s position in this context has influenced her approach and stance in the representation.

CHAPTER 3 : HISTORICAL BACKGROUND & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Historical Background

This section provides a brief historical background to the formation of Malaysia as well as the important socio-political events that made up the multicultural situation in Malaysia. By linking the past and present of the multiple social actors in Malaysia before and after independence, it lays the groundwork for problematizing Malaysian multiculturalism, and this will be then explored through the analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's artwork in following chapters.

Before independence, Malaysia⁷⁰ has had a long history of being colonized, begin with the arrival of Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641 and then by British in 1874. Lastly occupied for three years and eight months by the Japanese from 1941, and then taken over by the British again after the Japanese surrendered. British have brought the most changes in Malaysia in terms of social, economic, and political. Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957. However, it was only officially established on 16 September 1963, when Sarawak, Sabah, and Singapore, joined Malaya and form the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore seceded from the Federation in August 1965⁷¹; therefore, Malaysia recognized as a nation worldwide at the current time only constituted the Peninsular Malaysia, which also known as West Malaysia and East Malaysia that consists of Sarawak and Sabah. It is important to note that geographically, East Malaysia and West Malaysia detached by the South China Sea, and the demographics of both regions are vastly divergent.

⁷⁰ Also known as Federation of Malaya before the merging took place in 1963.

⁷¹ There was conflict between Lee Kuan Yew's vision of "Malaysian Malaysia" and the then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's "Malay Malaysia".

During British colonization, there were significant changes brought by the colonizer, not only in economics and social, but the political structure is also greatly influenced. Malay, Chinese and Indian with a number of other races/ethnic groups, these categories of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) was established during the colonial period and continue to be mainly employed in local discourse, since it was introduced by the British administration.⁷² The rigid categories of Chinese, Malay, and Indian has ignored the diversity among the sub-communities among the same category, where the multiple communities' culture, religious practice and even language spoken are not entirely the same. Moreover, the term "Others" in CMIO have actually aroused a sense of being side lined among the natives in East Malaysia⁷³, as well as a sense of do not belong among Malaysians of mixed parentage⁷⁴. Malaysian multicultural situations are much more complex than that, if we look into the controversial "Other" categories which include every races/ethnicities in Malaysia that doesn't fit into the Chinese Malay and Indian category. This will be further elaborated in the coming sections.

Before the merging of West Malaysia as part of the Federation of Malaysia, the independence was achieved by the negotiation of the Barisan National (BN) alliance with the British colony. The alliance consists of a communal representative party of the three major ethnics that resided in East Malaysia, namely the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) that represented Malay, Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) that represented the Chinese and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) that represented Indian.

⁷² Goh et al., *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore (Routledge Malaysian Studies Series, 3)*.

⁷³ See, Stephanie Lee, "Natives Want to Be Classified Separately | The Star," accessed September 12, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2015/11/12/natives-want-to-be-classified-separately-state-working-on-official-list-of-ethnic-groups-categorised>; Julian Chan, "Sabah Lists 42 Ethnic Groups to Replace 'Lain-Lain' Race Column | Malaysia | Malay Mail," accessed September 12, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/02/13/sabah-lists-42-ethnic-groups-to-replace-lain-lain-race-column/840691>.

⁷⁴ Beverly Siaw-Yuin Chong, "A Note on Malaysians of Mixed Parentage," *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* 46, no. 1 (2009): 93.

In Malaysia, Malay was considered as the *bumiputera*⁷⁵, son of the soil. While numerous scholarly works discuss the origin of Malay in Malaysia⁷⁶, they were deemed as the ‘original’ people from Malaya in contrast to the Chinese and Indian early sojourners who immigrated from China and India. The criteria for UMNO to accept the citizenship of all Malayan residents was by birth (*jus soli*) or through attaining years of residency and language ability, as well as affirmation of loyalty; this was the assurance of Malay privileges in the Merdeka (‘Independence’) Constitution.⁷⁷ On the other hand, Orang Asli in the West Malaysia, also legally known as the “aborigines”, and the “natives” group in Sabah and Sarawak are also included in the *bumiputera* group.⁷⁸ The Orang Asli are believed to be the first group of people that settled in West Malaysia, about 5000 years ago, way before the founding of Malay kingdoms. Orang Asli is a Malay term referring to original people, it is used to identify the earliest population in West Malaysia as a group, despite the fact that this group is actually heterogenous in terms of culture, languages, or even demographical differences. This group could be categorized into 3 main tribal groups which consisted of the Senoi, Aboriginal/Proto Malay and Semang (Negrito)⁷⁹. Under the category of Senoi, we have the Temiar, Semai, Mah Meri, Che Wong, Jah Hut, Semak Beri, and Temoq. Meanwhile, Orang Selatar, Jakun, Orang Kuala/Laut, Orang Kanaq, Temuan and Semelai falls under the group of Aboriginal Malay. Lastly, Kintak, Lanoh, Kensiu, Jahai, Mendriq and Batek

⁷⁵ Bumiputera, or “sons of the soil”, a word invented after independence, it refers to the Malays as well as indigenous people both in Peninsular and East Malaysia who are not Muslim, which was termed non-Malay Bumiputera.

⁷⁶ In their work to discuss Orang Asli in Malaysia, multiple scholarly works were quoted on the claims made regarding origin of the Malays. See, Rohaida Nordin, Matthew Albert Witbrodt, and Muhamad Sayuti Hassan, “Paternalistic Approach towards the Orang Asli in Malaysia: Tracing Its Origin and Justifications,” *Geografia-Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 12, no. 6 (2017). For the works quoted, see Frank Sir Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (Routledge, 2018), Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (University of Malaya Press, 1964). and Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, “A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 355.

⁷⁷ B W Andaya and L Y Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 281.

⁷⁸ Nordin, Witbrodt, and Hassan, “Paternalistic Approach towards the Orang Asli in Malaysia: Tracing Its Origin and Justifications.”

⁷⁹ “Suku Kaum - Laman Web Rasmi Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli,” accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.jakoa.gov.my/suku-kaum/>.

fall under the group of Semang (Negrito)⁸⁰. Despite also falls under the category of Bumiputera that should be entitled for special privileges, Orang Asli are marginalized both sociologically and economically in Malaysia.⁸¹

The Chinese history of settlement in Malay archipelagos could be traced as far back as the fifteenth century during the time of Malacca Sultanate⁸², some claimed it was as early as 14th century⁸³, before the nation was established, and there are no clear borders between the whole region of Southeast Asia. This could be evidenced by the assimilated group Chinese Peranakan (Baba Nyonya)⁸⁴. While the factors behind the immigration vary, majority of the Chinese that made up the population in Malaysia was the group of Chinese that came from South China to Malaysia during the large-scale immigration in the nineteenth century after the British officially took control over the economic activities such as the rubber, tin, and palm oil production.⁸⁵

The economic flourishing of the Straits Settlements by the British colonization during the same period has attracted a massive amount of Chinese from the South China region that was facing the political turmoil caused by Taiping revolutionary movements in the mid-nineteenth century. It is during this time that the Chinese begin the monopoly of the tin mining and commercial agriculture industry despite the early involvement that had begun in the eighteenth century. People from Fujian revealed that the reason for

⁸⁰ To know more on the categorizations and the elaborations of each distinct group of Orang Asli, read Tarmiji Masron, Fujimaki Masami, and Norhasimah Ismail, "Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: Population, Spatial Distribution and Socio-Economic Condition," *J Ritsumeikan Soc Sci Humanit* 6 (2013): 75–115.

⁸¹ Rusalina Idrus, "The Discourse of Protection and the Orang Asli in Malaysia," *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 29 (2011): 68.

⁸² Yen Ching-Hwang, "Historical Background," in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, ed. Kam Hing Lee and Chee-Beng Tan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

⁸³ Virginia Matheson Hooker, "A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West," 2018, 26.

⁸⁴ "Baba" was widely used to identify the Chinese who was born in the Straits Settlements vis-à-vis the Chinese immigrant who was born in China. See, Chee-Beng Tan, "Chinese in Malaysia," *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World*, 2005, 697–706.

⁸⁵ Jonas Daniel Vaughan and Jonas Daniel Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (Printed at the Mission Press, 1879).

migration was to flee raiders and escape military enlistment. The massive migration halted during 1930 due to the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Ordinance, with the exception of women and children for a balanced proportion of gender.⁸⁶

While Chinese in Malaysia may have been generalized as one ethnic/race based on their original nationality, they consist of different sociolinguistic group that have their own distinctive culture, language, and origin of China regions, such as the Hokkien from Fujian; Hakka from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian; Teochew and Cantonese from Guangdong; Hainanese from Hainan. The category of Chinese is actually heterogenous.⁸⁷ The expansion of the Chinese population was not only limited in West Malaysia, but there was also influx of Chinese who came to East Malaysia.⁸⁸ For instance, during 1840, Kuching, a Malay village in Sarawak have also become a predominantly Chinese town by the end of the century.⁸⁹

Even though the British colonial has largely favoured the economic cooperation of the Chinese, the British were wary of the association of Chinese with different 'secret societies'⁹⁰. Not only that, but the demand for cheaper labour also caused the British colony to seek alternative labour sources. In order to acquire cheaper labour, as well as counterbalance the Chinese dominance in the colonial economy, in 1872, the migration of laborers from India was legalized.⁹¹ Through the establishment of the indentured

⁸⁶ Tan, "Chinese in Malaysia.", 698.

⁸⁷ Tan Chee-Beng, "Chinese Identities in Malaysia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 25, no. 2 (1997): 103–16.

⁸⁸ See, Kam Hing Lee and Chee-Beng Tan, eds., "The Chinese in Sabah: An Overview," and "The Chinese in Sarawak: An Overview," in *The Chinese in Malaysia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 370–405.

⁸⁹ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*.

⁹⁰ B W Andaya and L Y Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 150&183. These secret societies granted a sense of security and assistance to the Chinese migrant that arrived in a foreign land (with the same dialect spoken, they are not deemed as an outsider among the same secret societies), it also served as a medium for the migrant to sustain the bond with China and to uphold the Chinese culture and values.

⁹¹ Andaya and Andaya, 186.

labour system⁹² and the Kangani system⁹³, there is a massive increment of Indian laborers brought into Malaya in the nineteenth century.

The indentured labourer to Malaya was mainly the South Indians. However, similarly to China, the labourer from India was not entirely homogenous, there were linguistic differences, different religious affiliations, and distinctive culture of their own, their identity as a Chinese and Indian are much more complex than merely an identity commonly grouping them through their nationality of China or India. For instance, the South Indians could be separated into Tamil, Malayalees, and Telugus. They do not only have different languages; the economic activities that they were engaged in were at variance. As the bigger community of the South Indians labourer who came to Malaya, the Tamils were mainly involved in the estate plantation; specifically, rubber estate, only small of them were involved in trading or professional job. In contrast, the Malayalees mostly work as a dock worker, clerk, or building trades, and they were situated in town, unlike the Tamils who lived in the estate area.

While there are a majority of the Indian labours who were brought into Malaya are from South India, there was also a substantial number of migrants from North India which consists of the largest community Punjabi Sikhs, followed by a small number of Punjabi Hindus, Marathis, Sindhis, Pathans, Gujeratis, Marwaris, and Bengalis⁹⁴. There was also significant linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity among the North Indian settlers. It is also worth noting that besides these differences, a new generation of Indians that was

⁹² Sunaina Pathania, "India's Indentured Labour Migration to Malaya: A Historical Study," *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research* 03, no. 04 (2018): 1217–26.

⁹³ Kangani system is a recruitment system that was first introduced in Ceylon (known as Sri Lanka now) but later employed by few other British colony. For more details on the Kangani system, see Asoka Bandarage, *Colonialism in Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of the Kandyan Highlands, 1833–1886*, vol. 39 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2019).

⁹⁴ Kernial Singh Sandhu, "The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 1st reprint (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 151–62.

born in Malaya and received English education has produced a new middle-class Malaysian Indian that further the gap between the labour class and the middle-class. Nonetheless, Sinnappah claims that after World War II, the different groups from India "...buried their linguistic, religious, class, and caste differences and faced up to common problems in a united fashion. This unity continued into post-war Malaya, and there was a realization that the Indians must function on the political plane as one entity, in defence of their rights and their interests"⁹⁵ This explains the situation of the umbrella term to describe the group consisted of the descendants from India as Malaysian Indian despite their distinction among different ethnic internally. It is worth mentioning that there is also a cultural group called Jawi Peranakan, which is the descendant of the marriage between Malay and Indian or Malay and Arabian.⁹⁶ This group of people could not be easily fitted into the rigid categories of Malay or Indian.

Contrary to the significant influx of Indians in the Straits Settlements, the number of Indian immigrants in East Malaysia was considerably lesser. However, the arrival of Peninsular Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other groups from elsewhere in the archipelago has made the demographic in North Borneo even more complex.⁹⁷ North Borneo, known as Sabah now, was previously under the control of the Sultanate of Sulu and Brunei but later achieved the independence of both the Sultanate and went under the control of Baron von Overbeck of the title of 'Maharajah of Sabah, Gaya, and Sandakan.'⁹⁸ Separated by the South China Sea, Sabah and Sarawak's religious and ethnic demography differs significantly from Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah, the

⁹⁵ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, "MALAYSIAN INDIANS: The Formation of Incipient Society," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 1st reprint (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 190–210, https://books.google.com.my/books?hl=en&lr=&id=TeExjdWUmJYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=indian+malaysia&ots=PXNUJvBiTf&sig=tx16lluHOA8OIjifmnKv2gx0Wc4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=indian+malaysia&f=false (accessed July 8, 2019).

⁹⁶ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 188.

⁹⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 197.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 193-197.

majority group is the people of the Kadazandusun, while the word itself is contested as it has a complex historical and political underpinning the founding of the ethnic label.⁹⁹

Although received criticism¹⁰⁰, the word Kadazandusun became an officially recognized designation in the 1990s, and it has come into general use. The ethnic label 'Kadazan'¹⁰¹ was introduced by Donald A. Stephens (Tun Fuad Stephens) in 1961 in order to unite all the non-Muslim indigenous groups. He and another Kadazandusun leader have admitted that they regretted it in 1967, as they feel that they should not neglect the existence of Dusun. Knowing the conflict between Kadazan and Dusun group, in 1989, Joseph Pairin Kitingan¹⁰² decided to include the word 'Dusun' into the name of the Kadazan Cultural Association (KCA), known as Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA). In the KDCA constitution, the ethnic groups described as Kadazandusun includes "Bonggi, Bundu, Dumpas, Gana, Garo, Ida'an, Kadayan, Kimaragang, Kolobuan, Kuijau, Lingkabau, Liwan, Lobu, Sonsogon, Lundayo (Lundayeh), Makiang, Malapi, Mangkaak, Minokok, Murut, Nabai, Paitan, Pingas, Rumanau, Rungus, Sinobu, Sinorupu, Sukang, Sungei, Tatana, Tangara, Tidong, Tindal, Tobilung, Tolinting, Tombonuo, Tuhawon, Tutung, Bisaya and Lotud. The number of sub-ethnic groups described as Kadazandusun was increased to 40 with the inclusion of the Bisaya community in 1995."¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Anthony Reid, "Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, no. 1 (1997): 120–36.

¹⁰⁰ Kadazan Sabah Society claims that Kadazans and Dusuns were different and that one should only identify as either Kadazan or Dusun. See, Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi Bagang, "Ethnicity, Culture and Indigenous Leadership in Modern Politics: The Case of the Kadazandusun in Sabah, East Malaysia.," *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 29 (2011), 183.

¹⁰¹ Contrary to the word 'Dusun' that means orchard, that might imply socioeconomic backwardness, the word 'Kadazan' was chosen instead. See, Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi Bagang, "Ethnicity, Culture and Indigenous Leadership in Modern Politics: The Case of The Kadazandusun in Sabah, East Malaysia.," *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 29 (2011), 181.

¹⁰² Joseph Pairin Kitingan, an Australian-trained, Roman Catholic Kadazan lawyer which is the president of Kadazan Cultural Association, later known as Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association in 1989.

¹⁰³ Puyok and Bagang, 182.

According to Herman James Luping, “the Kadazans, Bajaus and the Muruts are the original inhabitants of Sabah.” Most of the Kadazandusun have their own animistic belief that is related to the myth of their origin, the descendants of “Kinoingan” and “Suminundu,” who once lived under a tree known as “Nunuk Ragang.” However, some of them embraced Islamic faith and then asserted a Muslim Malay identity, while most of them converted into Catholicism and Christianity.¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that modern political, economic, and cultural forces brought changes in their life, but some elements of “traditional” culture were preserved, such as the traditional costume of the Kadazan, the mythological origins, and the Keamatan celebration.¹⁰⁵ .Being mostly Hakka, a vast number of Chinese came to Sabah from 1881-1941 in order to work for British North Borneo Company. The relationship between Kadazandusun and the Chinese was in proper terms. While Herman also claimed that there are no real Malay in Sabah, most of them being the indigenous people who converted to Muslim, they have asserted the identity of a Muslim Malay.¹⁰⁶

Located right beside Sabah, the political situation of Sarawak was comparably more stable. Sarawak began to be recognized as a state after the ruling of James Brooke. The Brooke government James began his ruling of Sarawak in 1841 with the title of ‘Raja of Sarawak,’ setting his capital at Kuching, a small Malay village. Andaya claims that “the Brookes divided the range of linguistic and cultural groups in Sarawak into three basic categories, each with distinct role.”, “...the Malay as administrator, the Chinese as trader and cash-crop farmer and the Iban as police and soldier.”¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the linguistic and cultural groups in Sarawak are much more complicated. There are

¹⁰⁴ Herman James Luping, “The Kadazans and Sabah Politics” (Victoria University of Wellington, 1985).

¹⁰⁵ Anthony Reid, “Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia), 120-136.”

¹⁰⁶ Luping, “The Kadazans and Sabah Politics.”

¹⁰⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 257.

multiple different ethnic identities in Sarawak, namely the Chinese, Malays, Melanau, Iban, Penan, Bidayuh, Selako, and Orang Ulu that consisted of “Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan), Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Lugat Lisum, Lun Bawang, Penan, Sian, Tahun, Ukit and Saban.”¹⁰⁸ The linguistic and cultural for Iban, Selako, and Bidayuh were distinctive, but they are all categorized as ‘Dayak,’ Iban as Sea Dayak and Selako and Bidayuh as Land Dayaks.¹⁰⁹

Similar to the Kadazandusun situation in Sabah, the smaller Bumiputera group in Sarawak also combined and formed a new “composite identities” so that they could “compete successfully for federal resources.”¹¹⁰ The dominant group in Sarawak is the Iban; however, the political realms were dominated by the Muslim Malay-Melanau parties since 1970. Other than the majority of Muslim Melanau, most of the indigenous people from Sarawak, especially the Iban, have embraced Catholicism or Christianity. While this happened at the later stage after Sarawak has joined the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia, during the Brooke era, Brookes has advocated the amalgamation of smaller groups into another group, which is of a bigger population. For instance, even though being culturally different, the non-Muslim indigenous people were categorized with the Iban while the “Muslim Melanau were encouraged to become ‘Malay.’” Andaya and Andaya claim that “...this simple logic of the Sarawak rulers did nurture a sense of an Iban people, an ideal that eventually helped to overcome the reality of numerous distinctive and often rival groups.”¹¹¹ This could somehow explain

¹⁰⁸ Welyne Jeffrey Jehom, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity in Sarawak,” *Akademika* 55, no. 1 (1999), 90.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁰ For example, the ‘Dayak’ and ‘Orang Ulu’, See, Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 378.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

the phenomenon of representing the Dayak Iban identities in the art scenes as well, disregard whether they are of Dayak descent or not.¹¹²

It is important to note that the various cultural groups mentioned above was not all the cultural groups that existed in Malaysia. We will also need to acknowledge that migration in Malaysia does not stop after independence. We have continuous migration from other countries. For instance, there were great amount of Filipinos from Western Mindanao that fled to Sabah since 1960s¹¹³, refugees and asylum seekers from Vietnam that came to Malaysia during mid-1970s¹¹⁴, large scaled labour migration from Indonesia in the 1990s¹¹⁵, migrant workers from Bangladesh that started coming to Malaysia since the mid-1980s¹¹⁶, the Chin refugees that fled Myanmar since 1962¹¹⁷, and the immigration from the Myanmar as well, by the Rohingya refugees which have sparked controversy among Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia in recent years¹¹⁸. There is also a need to mention that there was also migration from China to Malaysia which were termed “New Chinese Migration” by some scholar which happened after 1978¹¹⁹. In contrast to the refugees from Vietnam that was systematically placed by government in refugees camp at Pulau Bidong and Sungei Besi, who were then either resettled in third countries, or returned to Vietnam, other group of refugees mostly were staying in urban areas, usually involved in low-wage jobs as there were unable to work legally¹²⁰.

¹¹² Natasha binti Rusdy Wong, “Representation of Dayak Culture in Sarawak’s Modern Paintings” (University of Malaya, 2018).

¹¹³ The migration from Philippines started in the 1960s, due to the war that occurred in Western Mindanao, the second wave occurred during the 1970s, in the form of labour migration for the search of more economically stable life. See, Anne-Marie Hilsdon, “Migration and Human Rights: The Case of Filipino Muslim Women in Sabah, Malaysia,” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 29 (Elsevier, 2006), 407.

¹¹⁴ Zakaria Haji Ahmad, “Vietnamese Refugees and ASEAN,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 1, no. 1 (1979): 66–74.

¹¹⁵ Graeme Hugo, “Indonesian Labour Migration to Malaysia: Trends and Policy Implications,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 21, no. 1 (1993): 36.

¹¹⁶ Petra Dannecker, “Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Malaysia: The Construction of the “Others” in a Multi-Ethnic Context,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33, no. 2 (2005): 246–67.

¹¹⁷ Gerhard Hoffstaedter, “Place-Making: Chin Refugees, Citizenship and the State in Malaysia,” *Citizenship Studies* 18, no. 8 (2014): 871–84.

¹¹⁸ Shazelina Zainul Abidin, “Housing the Rohingyas,” *New Straits Times*, 2015, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2015/09/housing-rohingyas>.

¹¹⁹ Diana Wong, “Introduction: The New Chinese Migration to Southeast Asia,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 1 (2013).

¹²⁰ Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad, Zulkanain Abdul Rahim, and Abdul Majid Hafiz Bin Mohamed, “The Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia: The Malaysian Experience,” *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences* 3, no. 6 (2016): 80–90.

The historical background provided a basic understanding of the social actors who was part of Malaysian multiculturalism. It is important to comprehend the history of Chinese and Indian in Malaysia as the diasporic consciousness was a large part of multiculturalism, and it has been a prominent theme to be seen in some of Shia Yih Yiing's painting. On the other hand, the historical background of the construction of cultural identities by the Sabahan and Sarawakian reveals the complexities of the issues of identity on the west coast of Malaysia as well. The complexities of the multiple ethnic groups and the problematic identifications of the different ethnic groups revealed the political interference in the categorizations of different ethnicities and how the Kadazandusun and Iban become the dominant representation of Sabah and Sarawak. The changes after colonization and modernization that Sabahan and Sarawakian experienced also shows the constant transformation of the people of the regions. Furthermore, the continuous migrations from the neighbour countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and China have further complicated the multicultural situation in Malaysia, albeit often being left out of the representation of Malaysian multiculturalism.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

3.2.1 Multiculturalism

...my conviction that far from being an obvious, overused, platitude, questions of multiculturalism, properly understood contain the seeds of a major disruption of our normal common sense political assumptions and is calculated to have disruptive effects on all sides. Multiculturalism, I want to argue, can't just happen. It has to be seriously, actively, put in place and interrogated. – **Stuart Hall**¹²¹

¹²¹ Stuart Hall, "The Multicultural Question" (Firth Hall Sheffield, 2000), http://red.pucp.edu.pe/wp-content/uploads/biblioteca/Stuart_Hall_The_multicultural_question.pdf (accessed February 11, 2019).

This research will be based heavily on multiculturalism. First of all, a definition is needed to clarify what the term means in this research. Defined by the International Federation of Library Associations, “Multiculturalism is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking and communicative styles.” While multiculturalism itself has its own philosophical underpinnings that originated from the Western theoretical philosophy, Malaysian has adapted the term locally, as to describe the co-existence of multiple cultural entities.

The discourse of multiculturalism began in the 1970s in the West when there was a significant number of migrants that immigrated to Western countries such as Canada and Australia. Official multiculturalism policy has been introduced to ensure the recognition of diverse cultural identities. Despite that, during the mid-1990s, there have been quite many critics on multiculturalism itself, how it is problematic as in the enforcement of recognition of identities. When the identities are being recognized, identities are fixed.¹²² As several writers have argued, the essentialist viewpoint that was taken by multiculturalist has also posed a danger in the communities as they look at communities as static. For instance, instead of promoting togetherness, Lisa Lowe criticizes how multiculturalism divides through the act of categorizations in the United States.¹²³ Steven Vertovec and Suzanne Wessendorf have made a compilation of the main critiques of multiculturalism that mostly drawn from statements coming from Britain but resonates with the backlash of multiculturalism in other places.¹²⁴ As Steven and Suzanne claim, the critics of multiculturalism paint “the picture of multiculturalism

¹²² K. Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149–63.

¹²³ Lisa Lowe, Avery F Gordon, and Christopher Newfield, *Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism*, 1996.

¹²⁴ Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, “Introduction: Assessing the Backlash against Multiculturalism in Europe,” in *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 6.

as a dogmatic, debate stifling, separateness fostering, common value refusing, problem denying, overly relativist, terrorist harbouring entity.”¹²⁵

However, Malaysia used to be known as the Malay Archipelago, was already a highly diverse state before it achieved independence¹²⁶. Different from the situation in western countries which multiculturalism existed as a policy to deal with immigrants from Africa and Asia after world war II. Before Malaysia achieved independence, economic activities brought in Chinese, Arabic, Indians, Eurasian, Siamese, Bugis, and many others more from other regions where nations have not been established. Despite the differences in the form of multiculturalism, the problems of multiculturalism exist as well in Malaysia. Multiculturalism that was formulated in Malaysia during the colonial period was postulated on the founding races, which is the “Chinese,” “Malay,” “Indian” and “Others,” also known as the popular ‘CMIO’ categorizations that are deemed problematic but yet widely used since colonial period till the present day. It is undeniable that the ‘CMIO’ multiculturalism as part of the colonial legacy that was left behind by the British that was still practiced until today by the Malaysian government.¹²⁷

In multiculturalism, identities are fixed, somehow frozen in a specific time. Therefore, it allowed the identities of Malay as *bumiputera*, the ‘original’ people from Malaya, to be fixed and entitled to special privileges. It could be suggested that the National Cultural Policy (NCP) and Nation Economic Policy (NEP) that was introduced as a result of the ‘racial riots’ incidents on 13th May 1969 enhances the rigid ethnic/races categories of

¹²⁵ Ibid, 6-13. Each of the critiques are elaborated in the same book.

¹²⁶ Zawawi Ibrahim, “Globalization and National Identity: Managing Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia,” *Growth and Governance in Asia*, 2004, 115–36.

¹²⁷ Daniel P S Goh et al., *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore (Routledge Malaysian Studies Series)*, 2009,3.

the CMIO as it was established according to races/ethnicities. NCP clearly stated that Islam, Malay language, and Malay culture would be central to Malaysia's culture, and other cultures would be selectively included, which deemed appropriate. The criterion is based on the classification of Malay as the 'original people' or 'son of the soil' of Malaysia. On the other hand, NEP, which aims to reduce the income gap between different races/ethnic, executed a few affirmative policies which aim to reduce poverty among the Malay. There were also quota systems being introduced in the education and economic sector. The essentializing of identity also happened to the other social actors in multicultural Malaysia, where the identity of the Chinese and Indian whom ancestors migrated from China and India never loses their identity as immigrants despite being third or fourth generation born in Malaysia. A similar situation happened to the dominant group of Sabah and Sarawak, namely Kadazandusun and Iban, where their identity somehow was fixed as well and often being represented the way they were before colonization.

Multiple affirmative action policies favouring the *Bumiputera* reinforces the notion of a fixed identities in multiculturalism. NCP that was implemented could be seen as one of the multiculturalism policy, that allowed the existence of different cultures, but emphasized on the Malay culture, as their culture deemed as the 'original' culture as they are considered the 'son of the soil,' *bumiputera*. As Stuart Hall argues, when there are exclusion or rejection, there will be resistance.¹²⁸ Through the resistance of the hegemonic power, the other cultural identities experienced a resurgence of the identity of their own. In this context, Malaysian might be more conscious of their identity, especially the non-Malay as their culture were deemed secondary in comparison to

¹²⁸ "Personally Speaking: A Long Conversation with Stuart Hall," 2009, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Personally-Speaking-Transcript.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2019).

Malay culture, as well as having less economic privileges in comparison to the Malay or *Bumiputera*. Making relation to her own identity as a non-Malay, this might explain why Shia Yih Yiing think that there is a need to represent her own version of Malaysian multiculturalism, by incorporating fairy tale in her representation of Malaysia multiculturalism as a resistance strategy to resist the dominant narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism.

3.2.2 Postcolonial Multiculturalism

Daniel P.S. Goh and Philip Holden, along with the other editors in the book 'Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore' have taken up the non-dichotomous stance when it comes to discussing about the resistance towards multiculturalism vis-à-vis racial governmentality, and it looks into "the complexities that emerged from the intercultural interactions between different disciplined subjects on the ground in the context of engagement with state multiculturalism"¹²⁹ Daniel also argued that in Malaysian and Singapore multiculturalism,

...transcultural is monopolized by the nationalist elites so that the rest can be ruled according to their ascribed ethnic identities. The multicultural in this situation does not enrich but is institutionalized in the public arena according to specific scripts that locate individuals in parochial communities, while the nationalist elites unite the divided national community through the official multiracial institutions of the technocratic state.¹³⁰

This study will also take the same stance where the research does not attempt to problematize multiculturalism in a binary way where it is either positive or negative; good or bad; oppressed or suppressed, but merely served as a discussion on the socio-

¹²⁹ Goh et al., *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore (Routledge Malaysian Studies Series)*, 12.

¹³⁰ Daniel P. S. Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore," *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 232–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00065.x>.

political action and reaction that incurred in the Malaysian multiculturalism and how does it affect the representation of multiculturalism in Shia Yih Yiing's paintings.

While the term coined postcolonial multiculturalism by Goh and Holden is referring to a postcolonial Malaysian multiculturalism, and they have criticized the problematics CMIO categories, their book has mainly focussed on the issues of the main ethnic groups, which is the Malay, Chinese and Indian. We are able to see this trend in other academic work, for example in Rozita Ibrahim's research on "Multiculturalism and Education in Malaysia", the discussion mainly includes only the Malay, Chinese and Indian, excluding the other ethnic/cultural groups.¹³¹ There were multiple cultural groups in Malaysia that existed before independence as well, that remained lesser explored comparing to the 3 main race/ethnic groups, such as the Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese.¹³² Not only that, we also have the *Orang Asli* who are extremely heterogenous, but being categorized under the umbrella term of *Orang Asli*, often being left out from the discourse or research of Malaysian multiculturalism, and have remained mostly marginalised culturally and socioeconomically despite being the earliest population that resides in West Malaysia.¹³³

In contrast to the Western multiculturalism that begin after the large influx of immigrant group coming into the country, Malaysian multiculturalism's largely exclude newly immigrant groups in their multiculturalism discourse. After independence, there has been continuous migrations that occurred, as demonstrated in section 3.1. Nevertheless, the Malaysian multiculturalism discourse still evolved around the pre-existing races/ethnics group before the Independence was achieved, which is the popular

¹³¹ Rozita Ibrahim, "Multiculturalism and Education in Malaysia," *Culture and Religion* 8, no. 2 (2007): 155–67.

¹³² Patrick Pillai, *Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015), 1.

¹³³ Masron, Masami, and Ismail, "Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: Population, Spatial Distribution and Socio-Economic Condition."

'CMIO' discourse. Other than the claimed bumiputera, non-bumiputera such as Chinese and Indian are still being discussed as a migrant group and due to this identity, that they are unable to receive equal privileges that the bumiputera could, such as the economic privileges brought by the NEP. In discussion as such, the non-bumiputera are often represented as the marginalised group in comparison to the bumiputera.¹³⁴ I argue that as a result of these representation, the newly migrant groups from Vietnam, Myanmar, Philippines, Indonesia and etc were often left unrepresented as the focus are more often lean towards the 'old immigrant group' (being labelled as non-native group), albeit most of them are now born and raised in Malaysia and entitled of the Malaysian identity. Collectively, these findings outline a need to discuss the Malaysian postcolonial multiculturalism situation beyond just the three main ethnics/races in Malaysia.

What also makes Malaysian multiculturalism different from the Western multiculturalism is also the affirmative action policy that was implemented to protect the majority group in Malaysia, which is the Malay, that is holding the political power in Malaysia¹³⁵. On the other hand, in the Western model of multiculturalism, affirmative action policy was introduced and implemented in order to protect the minorities group which is more powerless¹³⁶. Furthermore, in comparison to the grassroot bottom to top politization of multiculturalism in United States, or the Australia's ruling power's top to bottom political strategy¹³⁷, I would like to postulate that in Malaysia, the politization of multiculturalism worked not only on one way, but both. As suggested by Andaya, the special economic

¹³⁴ See, James Chin, "Malaysian Chinese Association Politics a Year Later: Crisis of Political Legitimacy," *The Round Table* 99, no. 407 (2010): 153–62. and Vibhanshu Shekhar, "Malay Majoritarianism and Marginalised Indians," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008, 22–25.

¹³⁵ The policy itself is aimed to eradicate poverty among the bumiputera, however, the exact execution was leaning towards eradicating the socioeconomic disparities between the Malay and Chinese in Malaysia. For further reading, see Kwame Sundaran Jomo and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, "The New Economic Policy and Interethnic Relations in Malaysia," 2004, 18.

¹³⁶ Enzo Colombo, "Multiculturalisms: An Overview of Multicultural Debates in Western Societies," *Current Sociology* 63, no. 6 (2015): 801.

¹³⁷ Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, "Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA," *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (1994): 124–58.

and social privileges given to the 'Malay' has resulted in "many individuals to re-examine and recast their ethnic identity".¹³⁸ At one hand, we have the top down governmental policy which lays a rigid structure of a multiculturalism, and at the other hand we have the non native or non *bumiputera* responding to it, by resisting the dominant narrative of a 'Malay' centric multiculturalism, this resulted in the situation of the Malaysian multiculturalism now.

Goh and Holden also claim the overlooked of postcolonial studies on 'postcolonial visual culture' and how the important role that visual arts played as a medium for decolonized actors.¹³⁹ This claim was made concerning Michelle Antoinette's essay about artworks by Wong Hoy Cheong, the Malaysian artist that has much influence on Shia Yih Yiing's artistic journey. It was said that Wong

...take these deposited colonial images and meanings and reposition them in new configurations to pose postcolonial questions of racial and cultural belonging, of historical location and dislocation, of transfigurations of racial representations and enunciations in the neoliberal present.¹⁴⁰

It was also stated that this essay by Antoinette tied the "racial governmentality, representation and performativity themes in a tangled web of postcolonial multiculturalism."¹⁴¹ It draws back to the postcolonial multicultural questions posed by Holden, Ting, Goh, Poon, and Devadas in the same book.

¹³⁸ B W Andaya and L Y Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 378.

¹³⁹ Goh et al, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 16.

Charles Taylor's approach to multiculturalism also problematized by Goh and Holden, where Taylor assumed that "...scripting of modern identities is a privately given fact.", which is opposed by multiple scholars. They suggested that the view of the identities should not be binary, and they call for a study on "different ways these scripts are lived, and therefore also the improvisations that invariably follow real-life performances with unanticipated consequences of multiculturalism."¹⁴² Therefore, this study is hoping to serve as an extension of work on postcolonial multiculturalism call upon by Goh, Holden, and the other editors for a new perspective in analysing the multiculturalism in Malaysia.

3.2.3 Race and Ethnicity

Speaking of multiculturalism, the relation to race and ethnicity is inevitable. As Daniel claims,

...postwar social sciences witnessed the shift from the race concept to ethnicity [...] the decolonization of Africa and Asia that convinced scholars to drop the race concept for a more neutral term that described a more flexible and positive cultural mode of group belonging. But the conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity was not a strong one [...] the race concept often comes out as containing domination and false biological meanings, while ethnicity is seen as indicating natural or organic socio-cultural life – ethnicity is what people do naturally in their group interaction with each other and nationalism is a self-conscious political derivative of ethnic identification.¹⁴³

The words race and ethnic were often used interchangeably in the discourse of multiculturalism in Malaysia. A study by Rie Nakamura revealed the choice of word race as the more favourable description when it comes to describing Malay, Chinese

¹⁴² Ibid, 14.

¹⁴³ Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore, 239."

and Indian. On the other hand, the word ethnic is more widely used to identify Sabahan and Sarawakian. The term race also tends to be used in relation to issues with a negative connotation.¹⁴⁴ While this research is aware of the negative connotation along the use of the word ‘race,’ and that it is different from the word ‘ethnic,’ it will still be used interchangeably in this particular research in order to discuss the issues in the Malaysian context as the word ‘race’ has been used extensively in the media¹⁴⁵ as well as in the academia¹⁴⁶ to discuss the different ethnicities or cultural groups in Malaysia..

3.2.4 Cultural Identities

Stuart Hall’s writing provided the base for this research, as it shed light on the understanding of cultural identity. According to Hall, cultural identity could be viewed from two different perspectives; the first is looking at it through the identifications that emphasize similarities of a community that tends to essentialize. Cultural identity, in this sense, also implied an identity that is fixed in a certain time and place. Hall asserted that this view of cultural identities had played a significant role in inspiring the feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist art and activism, but it is not sufficient for the understanding of the impact of colonialism. In the second viewpoint, cultural identity for Hall “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’”¹⁴⁷ Instead of viewing cultural identity as something that is fixed, for Hall, it is “subjected to continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.”¹⁴⁸ For him, the second perspective of cultural identities

¹⁴⁴ Rie Nakamura, “Malaysia, a Racialized Nation: Study of the Concept of Race in Malaysia,” *International Proceedings of Economics Development & Research* 42 (2012): 134.

¹⁴⁵ “Malaysiakini - Is Multi-Racialism a Problem for Malaysia?,” accessed November 29, 2020, <https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/473370>.

¹⁴⁶ See, Lian Kwen Fee and Jayanath Appudurai, “Race, Class and Politics in Peninsular Malaysia: The General Election of 2008,” *Asian Studies Review* 35, no. 1 (2011): 63–82; Geetha Reddy and Hema Preya Selvanathan, “Multiracial in Malaysia: Categories, Classification, and Campur in Contemporary Everyday Life,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification* (Springer, 2020), 649–68.

¹⁴⁷ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Contemporary Sociological Thought*, ed. Sean P. Hier (Ontario: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc., 2005), 445.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 445.

imply that cultural identity is not Janus-face or absolute, it is always in motions and continually transforming.

Therefore, it important to note that these changes in cultural identities affected greatly by power relations in order to understand the effects of colonial power on cultural identities in Malaysia or as suggested by Goh, the 'postcolonial multiculturalism'¹⁴⁹. This notion of cultural identity that is "subjected to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."¹⁵⁰ could be evidenced in section 3.1 on the discussion of Sabah collective ethnic group of Kadazandusun, whereby we are able to see that cultural identities is influenced by the relations of power, and multiple cultural identities reasserted a certain collective cultural identity to become a bigger group, in order to fight for federal resources.¹⁵¹

As Shia Yih Yiing tried to resist the hegemonic power by incorporating fairy tales as a form of poetic resistance, it was inevitable to somehow give a more rigid representation of a certain cultural identities, as she represents, the identities were somehow fixed, in a certain time and place which she decided to represent. This aligns with the first perspective of cultural identities mentioned by Stuart Hall. As mentioned previously, this perspective of cultural identities is crucial in initiating social movements, to speak out for the marginal group. As Shia Yih Yiing mentioned that she wanted to tell a story

¹⁴⁹ Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore."

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 445.

¹⁵¹ Puyok and Bagang, "ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MODERN POLITICS: THE CASE OF THE KADAZANDUSUN IN SABAH, EAST MALAYSIA."

of Malaysia¹⁵², it could be suggested that she actually hope to speak out for a certain marginalized group or issues in Malaysia through her painting.

Taken together, the two perspective of viewing cultural identity could be both used in the analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's painting. By understanding her choice of a representation of a certain cultural identity in the context of a fixed cultural identity perspective, we are able to problematize the Malaysian multiculturalism, by employing the second perspective of cultural identity as fluid and ever-changing in relation to power differences instead.

¹⁵² Cheo, *Motherhood Games*.

CHAPTER 4 : FAIRY TALE AS A FORM OF POETIC RESISTANCE STRATEGY

The thrifty use of poetic language in fairy tales can fill us with wonder but can also leave us wondering, challenging us to fill in all the descriptive and causal blanks—in short, as Einstein recommended, to use our imaginations. With their witches and woods, roses and thorns, golden balls and slimy suitors, fairy tales create shimmering visuals, verbal icons—sleeping beauties, skulls decorated with flowers, homicidal birds with jewel-encrusted plumage—that oblige us to “think more” and “think harder.” In short, we have to interpret and backfill as well as listen and absorb. – **Maria Tatar**¹⁵³

4.1 Introduction

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, on the connection between fairy tale and “the mystical/magical writings”, through the discussion of the similarities of both, I postulate that fairy tale is used as a form of poetic resistance strategy by Shia Yih Yiing, to resist the dominant hegemonic power. This chapter will focus on the discussion of the incorporation of fairy tale by Shia Yih Yiing in her artworks. Shia Yih Yiing incorporated different fairy tale characters in different artworks, this chapter attempt to discuss how the employment of this artistic choice as poetic resistance strategy could leads to problematizing Malaysian multiculturalism by analysing her artworks at each section. Acknowledging the other poetic resistances such as “the call of ethnic culture,” “the appropriation of ‘Others,’” “the intertextuality,” and the “diaspora consciousness”¹⁵⁴ were also noticeable in her painting, this chapter will be discussing mainly on the fairy tale, which falls under the poetic resistance strategy of “the mystical/magical writings,” while briefly talks about the other poetic resistances which Shia Yih Yiing employed in final section.

¹⁵³ Maria Tatar, “Show and Tell: Sleeping Beauty as Verbal Icon and Seductive Story,” *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 142–58.

¹⁵⁴ 许文荣, 南方喧哗: 马华文学的政治抵抗诗学, XV.

Moreover, this chapter aims to discover the relevancy of the specific fairy tale chosen by Shia Yih Yiing within the socio-cultural context of Malaysia by making a relation of the “universal” motifs and experiences included in the fairy tale which could be found commonly shared by the pan-European communities and Malaysian communities. Subsequently, this chapter will also analyse how the incorporation and explicit/implicit references of a specific fairy tale problematize Malaysian multiculturalism and how Shia Yih Yiing has adapted the pan-European fairy tale into a Malaysian one.

I will analyse Shia Yih Yiing’s use of fairy tale, firstly by interpreting the idea of fairy tale, followed by examining her paintings to explore how the unique feature of fairy tale enable it to be used to problematized Malaysian multiculturalism. This chapter will focus more on the incorporation of fairy tale in Shia Yih Yiing’s artwork because the incorporation of the tale or the character from the Western fairy tale are more prominent in her artwork even though she also incorporates another mystical/magical writing element which is a mythical character from Chinese myth, which is the Caishen¹⁵⁵ or to be known as the God of Wealth in the Chinese myth in her other paintings. The selected series of artworks are “Once Upon a Time” and “Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids” which incorporated the fairy tale such as “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “The Little Mermaid,” as well as mythical or magical character from fairy tale such as Fairy Godmother.

This chapter will be divided into sections by firstly looking at the painting titled “Once Upon a Time”, as it foregrounds the narration of a Malaysian multiculturalism in relation to power structure, and such narration are represented through Shia Yih Yiing’s

¹⁵⁵ Caishen, also known as Ts’ai Shen, Cai Bo Xing Jun, God of Wealth or God of Prosperity.

experimentation with fairy tale characters, and incorporation of multiple iconographical symbols. Next, we will be analysing each fairy tale character that was adapted into the Malaysian context in her artwork by Shia Yih Yiing. The series of work entitled “Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids” will be heavily discussed in sections 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 as Shia Yih Yiing incorporate the fairytale elements in her paintings by using the title of renown fairytale as the title of her paintings as well as through the multiple symbolic representations in her paintings. Except for the Fairy Godmother, which is a recurrent character that appeared in the fairy tale, all these paintings featured the fairy tale where young women are the heroin. These fairy tales are *Snow White*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*. There are six paintings in total, a Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids. For better discussion, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids will be named Mermaid I, Mermaid II, Sleeping Beauty I and Sleeping Beauty II and be discussed accordingly, followed by the individual image of the painting. These two sets of paintings might have been paired by Shia Yih Yiing due to similarities and the links between the two paintings; these similarities include subject matter, visual elements, and symbolism. Therefore, it will also be discussed as a collective painting at the end of the analysis under each section. The set of paintings is very complex, and there are mixtures of Malaysian and western inspirations. Shia Yih Yiing also juxtaposed multiple Malaysian cultural symbols in these paintings. All of the figures in the series of paintings are wearing a fluffy white dress but embodied with different materials, colours, patterns, and styles that resemble various traditional clothing of the different ethnicities/ races in Malaysia.

4.2 Once Upon A Time



Figure 4.1 Shia Yih Yiing, *Once Upon a Time* (2007), Oil on canvas, 122cm x 122cm; 250cm x 200cm. Private Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

Firstly, we will be looking at “Once Upon a Time”. In this painting, a square image consists of a grown women holding a baby, with four other babies placed at the bottom part of her robe has occupied almost half of the painting. She was dressed in a white shirt beneath a light-yellow robe. The baby that she is holding is wrapped in a cloth which is in darker pink. She is holding the baby in one hand and an object that looks like a fruit in another. The fruit is round in shape, red in colour with a shade of green. The other four babies were dressed in different colour cloths too, from bottom left its light pink, black, bright red and red. All of the babies have their feet shown, except for two babies. Both babies at the far left and far right have their feet covered, with clothes draped in a ruffles design at the bottom of their cloth, which resembles a tail. At the

background, there is a check pattern with the combination of white, pink, and red colours, with thin golden lines.

Beneath the large image, there were three paragraphs of text. There were 3 versions of text that could be extracted from the painting, the Malay version, Mandarin Chinese version, and the English versions. All of the texts begin with an illuminated initials, where the first letter of a section of a text that was decorated and enlarged¹⁵⁶. In this case it is not just limited to alphabet, as Chinese characters were also included. The illuminated initial is P, 在, and O. Illuminated initial like these are often seen in medieval times manuscript, as well as in Bible manuscripts. There are floral patterns at the left and right side of the painting seemingly framed the whole painting. These kind of framing is popularly used in medieval manuscripts. The pale light-yellow colour used in the background of the painting gave a sense of age for the painting, also resembling a medieval manuscripts which turned yellow due to oxidation. At the lowest part of the painting, under the text sections, we have another baby riding on a wooden horse toy, with a soccer ball placed at the right side of the baby. Further to the right side, we can see a crocodile, a rhinoceros hornbill, and an orang utan.

For the English version, it is written that “Once upon a time, five little princesses were put under deadly spells, their anxious royal parents sent them away to a Twin Tower in Central SEA. They were taken care by a fairy godmother till Prince charMing comes to break their spells, marry them off and live happily ever after”. All the three versions shared the similar story, just in different language¹⁵⁷. For the English and Malay

¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth MacDonald, “Lighting the Way,” National Library of France, 2019, <https://www.europeana.eu/en/blog/lighting-the-way-how-illuminated-initials-guided-medieval-readers-through-books>.

¹⁵⁷ The Malay versions: “Pada zaman dahulu, lima puteri telah dihasuti sumpah zalim, maka tuanku dan permaisuri pun hantarkan mereka ke Twin Tower yang terletak di Central SEA. Mereka dijagai oleh nenek ajaib sampai seorang Putera yang Menawan muncul, membebaskan mereka dari sumpahan lalu memperisterikan kelima-limanya dan hidup dalam kedamaian selama-lamanya.”; The Mandarin Chinese version: “在很久很久以前, 有五位小公主为魔咒所困! 为了保护她们, 忧虑的父王和母后将她们送往遥远的马来岛双峰塔, 由圣母仙子来照顾。日思夜盼等待传说中的王子出现, 将魔咒解除, 娶她们为妻, 永远过着幸福美满的生活。”

version, we can see the word P and M were capitalized for the word ‘Prince charMing’ and ‘Putera yang Menawan’. When I asked regarding the capitalization during an interview with Shia Yih Yiing¹⁵⁸, she mentioned that it is actually her tiny visual hints to refer the character as the prime minister of Malaysia. In this story, the five princesses were to be seen as a vulnerable character that was cursed, which could only be saved by the prince charming. This formulaic story could be seen as an influence of Disneyfication of the fairy tale. Most of the fairy tale adopted by Disney in their animation production have a happy ending story, where at the end, the princesses were to be rescued by male characters, either by the King or the prince. According to Zipes, western classical fairy tales became canonical, as it was dispersed widely through the mass media in the beginning of twentieth century. All the three fairy tales incorporated by Shia Yih Yiing in her series of painting which will be discussed in the following sections, which is “Snow White”, “The Sleeping Beauty” and “The Little Mermaid”, was mentioned by Zipes when he listed out the major tales that were canonical and still are canonical till now¹⁵⁹.

I am suggesting that it is by no coincidence that Shia Yih Yiing have chosen these fairy tales, she was also greatly influenced by the western classical fairy tales, specifically those that has been Disneyfied, as her poetic resistance strategy involved the elements of wish-fulfilment, the happy ending Disney versions of fairy tale had could provide this. Moreover, Shia Yih Yiing has also mentioned the choice of fairy tale characters in her artistic expression due to the popularity of movies that uses fairy tale elements or storyline during the time she produced these artworks.¹⁶⁰ Jack Zipes asserts that the retelling of fairy tale through their artwork by contemporary artist undeniably represent

¹⁵⁸ In a personal interview with the artist on 30th May 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Jack Zipes, “The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films,” in *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (Routledge, 2011), 23.

¹⁶⁰ In a personal interview with the artist on 30th May 2019.

their dissatisfaction with their current circumstances. As wish-fulfillment gave birth to fairy tales¹⁶¹. In Malaysian multiculturalism, the affirmative policies that favor the bumiputera are deemed unfair for the non-bumiputera. Showing a happy ending of the fairy tale, where all of the princesses were rescued by the prince and married altogether, *Once Upon a Time* (2007) could be seen as a utopian wish that Shia Yih Yiing hopes to see: where every race/ethnic in Malaysia being given the same privileges. Here, we are able to see the issues with Malaysian multiculturalism that view identity as static, which allows certain identity to enjoy a certain privileges.

As claimed by Zipes, Disney films “impose a vision of life, the better life, on viewers that delude audiences into believing that power can and should be entrusted only to those members of elite groups fit to administer society...*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) ...*Sleeping Beauty* (1959) ... *The Little Mermaid* (1989) ...follow conventional principles of technical and aesthetic organization to celebrate stereotypical gender and power relations and to foster a word view of harmony.”¹⁶² We are able to see the similarities of Disney fairy tale with “Once Upon a Time” through the relation she made between the prince charming that would save all the five princesses with Malaysian prime minister. From this perspective, we are also able to see the paternalistic approach that has been long exist in Malaysian multiculturalism. In this painting, the prince charming will be the one who rescued the five princesses, the princesses were portrayed as passively waiting in the twin tower, waiting to be saved. The communal political party that has been ruling Malaysia for 61 years since Independence, relies on this paternalistic approach to maintain their position. For leader that practiced paternalistic leadership, the follower will be giving their support and

¹⁶¹ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 155.

¹⁶² Zipes, “The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films.”

respect in return to the assistance given by the leader¹⁶³. Communal parties are greatly link with the political survival among the politicians. In the case of Malaysia, the Alliance parties mobilise along communal lines, where the political leader in each communal party took care of their own communal communities, for instance UMNO took care of the Malay's issues, while MCA and MIC took care of the Chinese and Indian. The support gained from communalistic practice this way has maintained the Alliance's ruling power for 61 years.

4.3 The Little Mermaid



Figure 4.2 Shia Yih Yiing, Mermaid I (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

¹⁶³ Lutfan Jaes, Nurul Aimi Razali, and Khairul Azman Mohamad Suhaimy, "Mahathir as the Prime Minister: Peak of 'Paternalistic Leadership' in Malaysia," *Journal of Social Transformation and Regional Development* 2, no. 1 (2020): 43.

The second painting we will be looking at is the Mermaid I. A full body women figure almost took up the entire space of the painting. Mermaid I is dressed in a fluffy white dress, but with a pink and beige drape that was worn across her shoulder. The design of the neckline and also the drape on her cloth show similarities to a saree¹⁶⁴. A saree is Indian women's traditional clothing, which consists of a 4.5 to 8-meter cloth usually draped around the waist, with the loose end worn across the shoulder.¹⁶⁵ It is usually worn with a blouse and a petticoat. A substantial amount of gold jewellery could be seen on the body of the Mermaid I, gold jewellery has been an essential part of the Indian culture, and it is worn heavily, especially during wedding ceremonies.¹⁶⁶

Another cultural marker is the red coloured marking between the eyebrow on her forehead. Indian of the Hindu religion wears coloured markings on their foreheads; each carried different cultural/religious significance according to the colour, shape, and material. These red-coloured dots on an Indian women's forehead are usually identified as bindi or pottu.¹⁶⁷ While bindi might be a religious forehead marking that could denote the different branches of Hinduism the wearer belongs to; it could also indicate the marital status of Indian women. For widows, they either wear a white dot bindi made of ash or not wearing at all while unmarried women's bindi is black in colour. On the other hand, bright red bindi is usually seen on married Indian women. All of the cultural markers suggested that Mermaid I is a representation of a married Indian woman.

¹⁶⁴ "Sari." Fashion, Costume, and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear through the Ages. Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sari> (accessed July 21, 2019) Also known as Sari.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. There are different style of draping the saree, but the style worn by the figure in the painting are the most popularly seen among Malaysian Indian.

¹⁶⁶ Karen V. Fernandez and Ekant Veer (2004), "The Gold That Binds: the Ritualistic Use of Jewelry in a Hindu Wedding", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 31, eds. Barbara E. Kahn and Mary Frances Luce, Valdosta, GA: Association for Consumer Research, 55.

¹⁶⁷ "Forehead Markings." Fashion, Costume, and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear through the Ages. Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/forehead-markings> (accessed July 12, 2019).

The full body of the Indian woman fills the entire frame of the canvas, and the sea is separated in the middle by a red curtain. There is old sailing ship and modern boat shown partially in each section, where the modern boat is positioned at the left, and the old sailing ship at the right. The placement of the shawl on the women figure, and the bubbles create a sense of motion. The shawl's curvy lines and the bubbles seems to be moving to the left side of the painting, suggesting that they are being blown by the wind. The use of lines by Shia Yih Yiing enable us to see where the wind is blowing, and it could be suggesting that the wind is blowing at the direction of right to the left, indicating the direction of the ship. Where the old sailing ships is moving toward the directions of a modern boat. Underneath the ocean is the chequered-work of black and white flooring patterns, then followed by a red carpet with ornamental design. According to the artist, the chequered patterned floor was an inspiration from the ground floor of Solomon's Temple, where it represented the good and evil, yin and yang, light and dark.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ In an interview with Shia Yih Yiing on 30 May 2019.



Figure 4.3 Shia Yih Yiing, Mermaid II (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

On the other hand, Mermaid II was also dressed in a fluffy white dress, but underneath the fluffy dress, there is a red skirt with a slit at the side, we could also see a mandarin collar on the neckline design. As the colour of white is very prominent in the painting as the dresses are mainly in white, the red skirt beneath the white dress stands out. These designs on the dress could be associated with Qi Pao¹⁶⁹, a traditional Chinese costume. A mandarin collar is a round, unfolded stand-up collar, which is a common collar design used in traditional Chinese clothing such as Qi Pao or Samfu.¹⁷⁰ Mermaid II is also wearing a pair of green colour bangles in both of their hand, which could be identified as a jade bangle. Jade stone has its own significance in Chinese culture, where

¹⁶⁹ Also known as Cheong Sam.

¹⁷⁰ Also spelt as samfoo, and it is commonly worn by the Malaysian Chinese in the early times. In a personal interview with Shia Yih Yiing on 30 May 2019, she mentioned that her grandma worn samfu as well.

it is the most highly treasured comparing to diamonds or gold.¹⁷¹ Chinese believes that good thing always comes in pairs; therefore, historically bangles (or ring) were made in pair¹⁷². Jade jewellery is also commonly given to the daughter as the bride's dowry¹⁷³ and gifts for a new-born baby. Through the analysis, Mermaid II could be identified as a married Chinese woman. We could also see that Shia Yih Yiing incorporated plenty of visual clues in order to represent the specific cultural identity in her paintings.

As we will be analysing these painting from a Disney version of a fairytale, we first need to understand the story of the Disney versions of "The Little Mermaid". The story of "The Little Mermaid" is generally about a mermaid princess who trades her voice for a pair of legs so that she could gain human form and live on land. Some scholars interpreted the story as an expression by Hans Christian Anderson on his personal love story. However, there are also underlying "universal" motifs or experiences that could be seen in the work, which asserted by Jack Zipes, the quest for identity. There is also a moral story in this fairy tale where the little mermaid understands that "self-sacrifice, humility and devotion" are needed for her to gain a different identity.¹⁷⁴ Exploration of identity is a "universal" experiences shared by human being, using this specific fairy tale which have the explicit undertone of questioning identity, and with the splendid amount of symbolic cultural elements which represented the two women as of Indian and Chinese ethnic in these paintings, I am suggesting that the representation reveals how Shia Yih Yiing perceived the identity of the Chinese and Indian in Malaysia. She is

¹⁷¹ Lyons, Elizabeth. "CHINESE JADES." Expedition 20, no. 3 (1978): 4.

¹⁷² Richard Hughes et al., "Burmese Jade: The Inscrutable Gem," Gems & Gemology 36 (April 1, 2000): 21, <https://doi.org/10.5741/GEMS.36.1.2>.

¹⁷³ Refer to: Lin James, "What's behind Jade's Mystical Appeal? | Apollo Magazine," Apollo Magazine, 2016, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/whats-behind-jades-mystical-appeal/>. In Malaysia, it is also very common for Chinese to pass down jade bangle as bride dowry, also known as 嫁妝 for Chinese.

¹⁷⁴ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (Routledge, 2013), 122-123.

looking at Chinese and Indian community as a group of people that still in quest of their own identity.

The identity as a sojourners is still omnipresent when it comes to the discussion of the identity of Malaysian Chinese and Indian, despite the fact that most of them have been born and raised in Malaysia. This sense of diaspora consciousness could be understood by how Chinese and Indian were labelled as non- bumiputera in Malaysia. Furthermore, as asserted by Chin, the frequent use of the term ‘pendatang’¹⁷⁵ by the UMNO politician might further worsen the diaspora sentiments of the Chinese as they were always seen as an immigrants¹⁷⁶. The representation of Chinese and Indian using the character of little mermaid could be understood from how the majorities who made up the community shared similar migration pattern during the nineteenth century, as explained in section 3.1.

In both painting, we could clearly see the leg of the women; the tail is not visible even though she was referred to as a mermaid. This indication suggested that Shia Yih Yiing may be illustrating the point in the narrative of the fairy tale in which the mermaid has already taken the poison from the sea witch and transforming into human form by sacrificing her voice. If we think of the Mermaid I and II as representing the Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians, it can then have a political dimension. During the negotiation to achieve independence from the British, Malaysian Chinese and Indians compromised on retaining the special rights of the Malay as the son of the soil and Malay would have the Bumiputera status through ‘social contract’¹⁷⁷. The Chinese and

¹⁷⁵ A Malay word for immigrant.

¹⁷⁶ James Chin, “From Ketuanan Melayu to Ketuanan Islam: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese,” *The End of UMNO*, 2016, 172.

¹⁷⁷ Gungwu Wang, *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).

Indians' positions in the political realm are relatively lower than the Malay, who is deemed the original people from Malaya. Her reference to “The Little Mermaid” is interesting when we understand this painting from a political perspective. We are reminded of the protagonist’s struggle or conflict to make life-changing decisions that could make an impact on their identity.

We might make a relation of the decision by the little mermaid to trade her voice in order to gain human form with the decision of the Chinese and Indian to become Malaysian citizens. There is a risk that the little mermaid will never be able to regain her mermaid form forever. I am suggesting that she is using the little mermaid to represent the Indian and Chinese as a resistance towards the affirmative policies that was introduced by the government that side-lined the cultures of the non-Malay. She is showing the uncertainties that was faced by the Indian and Chinese communities. This is also revealing the issues of Malaysian multiculturalism, where there is a main culture as aligned in the National Cultural Policy: the Malay culture that is deemed the ‘true’ culture as they are the ‘original inhabitants’ of Malaysia¹⁷⁸.

The background of Mermaid II is almost similar with Mermaid I, however the position of the bubbles is different, it is only shown on the right side of the paintings, where the modern boat was positioned. Again, indicating the sense of movement from the left, the old sailing ship that could be suggesting the old migration, to the right side where modern boat is visible, is a symbolism of a modern day’s migration. This symbolism could be suggesting the brain drain situation that is a phenomena in Malaysia.¹⁷⁹ Many Malaysian Chinese and Indian has chosen to immigrate again to other countries such as

¹⁷⁸ Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, “Cultural Clash between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia: An Analysis on the Formation and Implementation of National Cultural Policy,” in *2012 International Conference on Humanity, History and Society*, 2012, 1–6.

¹⁷⁹ A migration that involved professional or highly skilled individual that left their home countries to other countries for better opportunity.

Australia, Singapore, United Kingdom and Brunei Darussalam to seek for better education and employment opportunity, as a result of the introduction of NEP.¹⁸⁰ The emphasis on struggles of the little mermaid to make a decision and the fact that it has already undergone the process of gaining human form as well as its relation made by Shia Yih Yiing with the Malaysian Chinese and Indian is suggesting that the idea that Malaysian Chinese and Indian has undergone the transformation too, losing the mermaid form and gaining the human form, becoming a Malaysian. By making this relation to the fairy tale, we could problematize the essentialist view of Chinese and Indian, where they are still deemed as immigrants despite most are already the second, third, or even fourth-generation Malaysian born. The essentialist views also somehow fractured the sense of belonging of the Chinese and Indian to Malaysia, pushes them to continue moving, seeking a better place to settle down. This might explain the new phenomena of a 'Malaysian diaspora'¹⁸¹.

The old sailing ship and modern boat has symbolised the earlier immigration as well as the re-immigration movement by the Malaysian Chinese and Indian. This representation of immigration by Chinese and Indian are nevertheless found to be limiting. As was pointed out in section 3.1, there were continuous migration to Malaysia even after independence. While there are high rate of skilled labour flowing out from Malaysia, Malaysia also have drawn a huge amount of low-skilled labour from other countries¹⁸². Among of the new group of immigrant, refugees are a huge part of them. The earliest group from Vietnam, were even called the 'boat people'¹⁸³, this might reveal the lack of acknowledgment of these new immigrant group by Shia Yih Yiing when she uses the

¹⁸⁰ Adam D Tyson et al., "Ethnicity, Education and the Economics of Brain Drain in Malaysia: Youth Perspectives," *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2017): 175–84.

¹⁸¹ Sin Yee Koh, "Everyday Lives of the Malaysian Diaspora," *New Mandala: New Perspectives on Mainland Southeast Asia*, 2012.

¹⁸² Junaimah Jauhar and Yusliza Mohd Yusoff, "Brain Drain: Propensity to Leave by Malaysian Professionals," *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology* 2, no. 2 (2011): 119.

¹⁸³ Nghia M Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (McFarland, 2005).

symbolism of the boat. These group of people remained unrepresented in the discourse of Malaysian multiculturalism, as well as in Shia Yih Yiing's artwork. Hoffstaedter takes issues with the phenomena where refugee worked at places where Malaysian might encounter every day, but their existence as part of Malaysian community were never really recognized by the Malaysian, largely due to how they were represented in the media and by politician.¹⁸⁴ Again, we are seeing how power relations comes into influence when it comes to the discourse of Malaysian multiculturalism. Malaysian multiculturalism that excludes the other cultural identities such as the refugees from Philippines and Myanmar, the migrant workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh are deemed problematic. In multiculturalism context, sense of displacement and diaspora are inevitable. By using the fairy tale of "The Little Mermaid," which focused on the questioning and exploring of identities, it also problematizes the very issue of fixed identity in the notion of multiculturalism, in return problematizing Malaysian multiculturalism.

¹⁸⁴ Hoffstaedter, "Place-Making: Chin Refugees, Citizenship and the State in Malaysia."



Figure 4.4 Shia Yih Yiing, Homage to the Vanishing World (1996), Acrylic on Canvas, 122 x 91cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

If we look at Shia Yih Yiing's other paintings (Figure 4.3), one of the three panels from the triptych titled "Homage to the Vanishing World", we are able to see the similarities between this painting and the "two Mermaids" (Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2) All three of these paintings are self portrait of Shia Yih Yiing. We can see that Mermaid II which represented Chinese, is having the exact same posture that the women subject had in Figure 4.5. Even though during the interview Shia Yih Yiing mentioned that she does not identify with any of the fairy tale character, we could see from the visual elements, she relates herself with the Chinese identity, despite her other identity as Sarawakian. This painting also further reveals the diaspora consciousness in her painting. Diaspora is not just on cultural identities, it is a feeling of uncertainties towards the idea of identity, her marrying her husband and move to Kuala Lumpur, leaving her families and her

identity as a daughter behind in Sarawak, might have prompt her in choosing the sleeping beauty to represent the Chinese identities as well. The sense of diaspora is prominent in *Sleeping Beauty*, enhanced by the sense of movement, as if there were wind blowing the dress, and the bubbles. Bubbles could have brought many meanings, easily broken, dreamy and light.

4.4 The Sleeping Beauty



Figure 4.5 Shia Yih Yiing, *Sleeping Beauty I* (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's Photograph.

Sleeping Beauty I is also the painting of self-portrait of Shia Yih Yiing. The women figure is wearing a dress with a fluffy bottom, similar to a wedding dress. Her body is positioned in the centre of the canvas at the foreground. The background of the painting is separated into four sections horizontally. The uppermost part of *Sleeping Beauty I* is filled with sky and cloud, followed by the image of the river, the chequered floor, and

red carpet with ornamental design. She is standing in the middle of the canvas, with her hands folded, her head slightly tilted with her eyes closed.

In *Sleeping Beauty I*, the woman is wearing a dress with ornamental designs that resemble the Dayak Iban's traditional hand-woven cotton cloths, *pua kumbu*. *Pua kumbu* has its significance in Iban's headhunting tradition. *Ngar* or mordanting ritual where the *pua kumbu* was weaved could also be called as ritual women's headhunting. This ceremony could only be done by the master weaver, a woman who has significant status among the Iban community. This practice as women's headhunting is equivalent to the actual headhunting practice carried out by the Iban man in the Iban's culture, albeit officially the White Rajah¹⁸⁵ seems to endeavour on putting a halt on the tradition, the Rajah somehow encouraged it by granting the special status of 'Rajah's personal army'¹⁸⁶ to the Iban, where they would fight the Rajah's enemies on their behalf. The *pua kumbu* also served its utilitarian function where it was used to wrap the decapitated human heads that were acquired from winning the headhunting war by their male counterparts as well as to be worn as a shawl in a ritual ceremony.¹⁸⁷

The women also worn a belt across her dress, which could be identified as *lampit*, which a belt made of silver that is part of an accessories worn by the Iban.¹⁸⁸ From these symbolic visual elements, we could identify that *Sleeping Beauty I* is representing the Iban from Sarawak. By identifying the identity of *Sleeping Beauty I*, we can assume that the river at the background of the women subject could be identified as the Rejang and Balleh rivers of Sarawak. The river has its significance in the Sarawak

¹⁸⁵ Also known as 'White Rajas' in other historical books, it is to refer to the ruler of Sarawak during the Brooke era, namely James Brooke, Charles Brooke and Vyner Brooke.

¹⁸⁶ Taxes were exempted for the Iban people by the Rajahs, as they fight for them.

¹⁸⁷ Audrey Low, "Social Fabric: Circulating Pua Kumbu Textiles of the Indigenous Dayak Iban People in Sarawak, Malaysia" (University of Technology, Sydney, 2008, 13-15), <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/2100/637> (accessed September 8, 2019).

¹⁸⁸ Wan Juliana Emeih Wahed and Patricia Pawa Pital, "Ngepan Indu Iban: The Aesthetic Features of Female Iban Costume in Sarawak," in *2nd Asia International Conference of Arts & Design, Langkawi, Malaysia*, 2018.

communities, especially for the Iban. Having labelled as the son of the soil, the Iban migrated to Sarawak in the mid-1600s; the migration took place along the river systems.¹⁸⁹ River environments were one of the ideal environments for the early settler to move in as they secured economic activities. The Iban people were deemed the 'original' people in Malaya too, being categorized under the label bumiputera. The notion of a fixed identity and 'original' people in Malaysian multiculturalism could be problematized, through this iconography of the river, as it reveals that the Iban was also migratory, way before the founding of Malaya.

Moreover, the pua kumbu worn on the body of Sleeping Beauty I, which carries the connotations of the old animistic religious practices, was juxtaposed with the hand gesture of the women, which resembles the gesture of Virgin Mary that symbolized the new Catholic beliefs.¹⁹⁰ The majority of the indigenous people in Sarawak converted into Catholicism, except Melanau, who are mostly Muslim. There is a considerable number of Chinese who are Catholic as well, including Shia Yih Yiing herself.

Catholicism could be traced back to the reign of the Brooke Kingdom, a colonial legacy as well as a result of Christian or Catholic missionaries and the Catholic school.¹⁹¹ This suggested the transformation of the Sarawakian identities before and after Brooke's era.

This juxtaposition represents the intersection of old and new identities of the Iban. She positions different cultural symbols using costumes and hand gestures, which indicated two religions that are entirely different, showing the idea of transitions and yet not entirely transformed state of Sarawakian identities. Identities were shown to be not static in her painting, the Sleeping Beauties I is showing both the animistic beliefs and

¹⁸⁹ Low, 67.

¹⁹⁰ Albeit the hand gesture also could be seen as a hand gestures of a Taoist or Buddhist, during a personal interview with Shia Yih Yiing on 30th May 2019, she have revealed that she is more familiar with the image of Virgin Mary because she is a Catholic.

¹⁹¹ Liana Chua, "The Making of a 'Not Yet Pure Christian' Village," in *The Christianity of Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 81–105.

the Catholic belief as well. Hence, we are able to problematize the notion of Malaysian multiculturalism as through this juxtaposition, identity formation is shown to be more complicated than in the dominant narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism.



Figure 4.6 Shia Yih Yiing, *Sleeping Beauty II* (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's Photograph.

In *Sleeping Beauty II*, the woman is wearing a black colour dress that resembled the traditional costume of the Kadazandusun from Sabah, specifically the Sinuangga of the Kadazan tribe from the Penampang area¹⁹². The dress was made of black velvet fabric, and it is decorated with a hip belt, also known as *tangkong*, that was made from silver

¹⁹² Getrude Cosmas et al., "Does the Possession of a Kadazandusun Traditional Costume and the Capability to Play a Traditional Musical Instrument Differentiate an Individual's Identity Orientation?," n.d.

coins.¹⁹³ Albeit the Sinuangga costume itself does not have any specific religious connotation, the black skirt has similarities with the costume worn by the priestesses in the community, also known locally as *bobohizan* or *babalian* of the Penampang district. The position of the priestesses has been very significant in the Kadazan community, where Monica Glyn-Jones remarks in 1953, “Until Christianity took root among the people the priestesses held schools in which to instruct their successors [...] Though the training schools have been practically died out now, priestesses are still to be found in every village, even those which are largely Christian”.¹⁹⁴ There was actually a transition of belief system from pagan/animistic belief to Christianity by the Kadazandusun people in Sabah based on Monica Glyn-Jones' statement. Here we could also see the transformation of a cultural identities of the Sabahan Kadazandusun people, further challenging the notion of a fixed identities in Malaysian multiculturalism.

Sleeping Beauty II has a similar background with Sleeping Beauty I, except the section showing the river image is showing images of mountains instead. Mountain Kinabalu has always been a sacred place for the Kadazandusun people where they believe that Mountain Kinabalu is a place where their ancestor's spirits rest, also, most of the Dusuns were to be found in the shadows of the 13,455 feet tall Mount Kinabalu, where they carried out their hunting and agricultural activities.¹⁹⁵ We can see that Shia Yih Yiing is using an iconic symbol, the Mount Kinabalu that could lead the viewer to associate *The Sleeping Beauty* (2007) with Sabahan, aside from the visual elements present in the subject's costume.

¹⁹³ Getrude C Ah Gang et al., “The Effect of Ethnic Self-Identity on the Kadazandusun Sense of Community,” n.d. The silver coins belt was also known as Himpogot in local language.

¹⁹⁴ R Phelan, “The Form of Priesthood in the Kadazan (Dusun) System of Religion,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 115, no. 1 (1983): 55–73.

¹⁹⁵ Father J Staal, “The Dusuns of North Borneo. Their Social Life,” *Anthropos*, no. H. 4/6 (1923): 958–77.

There are multiple versions of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. The title might be different, but the core of the story remained the same, and they all feature a sleeping princess. These fairy tales are “Sun, Moon and Talia” by Giambattista Basile in 1634, “Sleeping Beauty” by Charles Perrault in 1697, and “Little Briar Rose” in 1812.¹⁹⁶ All of these versions were heavily criticized by feminists because the main character in the fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty appeared to be passive and lack of agency throughout the whole story, where she was just awaiting the prince/king to rescue her.¹⁹⁷ Being passive and without agency is a universal motif/experience shared by human being, especially the minorities, which in this study, we can see that Shia Yih Yiing has found it relevant to the condition faced by the indigenous group from Sabah and Sarawak. In the Malaysian context, while multiculturalism strives for the harmonious co-existence of multiple ethnic in Malaysia, the rigid categorization of ethnicities and the introduction of National Cultural Policy focusing on the Malay culture as well as the National Economic Policy which focused more on the citizens from Peninsular Malaysia has taken away the agency of the people from Sabah and Sarawak.

The choice of using the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty” to represent people from Sabah and Sarawak revealed how Shia Yih Yiing perceived them in Malaysian multiculturalism, as a passive social actor, rather than an active one. Nevertheless, it is arguable that their role is passive, especially the Kadazandusun and Iban. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, these two groups are not heterogenous itself, and that under the umbrella term of a categorizations, they consisted of multiple indigenous group that have combined in order to fight for federal resources. There are many more other cultural groups in Sabah and Sarawak such as Bajau and Murut in Sabah and Melanau,

¹⁹⁶ D. L. Ashliman., “Sleeping Beauty,” 2013, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html#contents>. Accessed on 10 August 2019. All three versions of the fairy tale are readable at this website.

¹⁹⁷ Tatar, “Show and Tell: Sleeping Beauty as Verbal Icon and Seductive Story, 142.”

Bidayuh and Orang Ulu in Sarawak. However, Shia Yih Yiing have chosen to represent the Kadazandusun and Iban. This is by no coincidence, again we are able to see the relation between power and representation. Pointed out by Francis Loh, there is an emergence of “a new political consciousness among the non-Muslim Bumiputera communities: the Kadazan-dusuns in Sabah and the Dayaks in Sarawak”¹⁹⁸. By contrasting Shia Yih Yiing’s representation and the complexities of the identity formation behind the Kadazandusun and Iban, this further challenge the popular conception of Malaysian multiculturalism, where the indigenous from East Malaysia was seen as a fixed identity, also as the passive agency, waiting to be saved by the federal government.

Maria Tatar claim that the word “sleeping” in the name of Sleeping Beauty is implying a passive participle and the word beauty shows the attractiveness of the Sleeping Beauty as she also remarks that “Beauty may be sleeping, but we want to look at her to indulge in the pleasures of her visible charms.”¹⁹⁹ This unique character of Sleeping Beauty “remain hauntingly seductive figures in our cultural imaginary, reminding us of the pleasures of beauty but also of the attractions of morbidity.”²⁰⁰ The condition of multiculturalism described by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown as the '3Ss': saris, samosas, and steel drums where multiculturalism was said to be focusing on cultural markers such as fashion, food, music, and the festival could be seen as relatable to the current situation of the Sabah and Sarawak’s indigenous people; which their identity seems to be frozen in time, continually being represented in various media with their traditional costume. While the dominant Malaysian narrative often portrayed the happy multicultural situation where multiple ethnicities shared their traditional cuisine in their traditional

¹⁹⁸ Wah, Francis Loh Kok. "Understanding politics in Sabah and Sarawak: an overview." *Kajian Malaysia* 15, no. 1-2 (1997): 1-14. Quoted in, Zawawi Ibrahim, “The New Economic Policy and the Identity Question of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah and Sarawak,” *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia–Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities and Social Justice*, 2013, 303.

¹⁹⁹ Tatar, 143.

²⁰⁰ Tatar, 156.

costumes, celebrating different festivals, it tends to neglect the inequality issues faced by the Sabah and Sarawak people both economically and politically.²⁰¹

This fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty is about a princess who is cursed to prick her finger on a spindle on her 15th birthday and fall asleep for a hundred years. In the story, a King who celebrated the birth of his daughter did not invite one of the fairies, and this resulted in an enraged uninvited fairy who cursed the princess, where she would be dead when she turned fifteenth by pricking herself with a spindle. Fortunately, one of the fairies who has not offered wish for the princess granted the princess a hundred years of sleep instead. While the King did whatever he can to stop the princess from pricking her hand with a spindle, she still did, and the princess fell into a deep sleep. However, in the end, the princess was awakened by a prince/King.

While there are multiple versions of "Sleeping Beauty," both Perrault and Grimm's Brother's versions begin with a conflict, where one of the fairies received an unequal treatment during the celebration of the birth of the princess in the kingdom. The unequal treatment is the main reason why the fairy got mad and cursed the princess into a sleeping beauty. According to William Anderson, the central conflict of the tale is "the relationship of a ruler to a world order." In which in his analysis, he claims that the king's "inadequacy as a ruler" was shown by the fact that there are not enough golden plates for the fairies, which caused one of the fairies to be uninvited.²⁰² This specific analysis was based on the Brothers Grimm's version of Sleeping Beauty. However, this research would like to suggest that it is social inequality, which triggered the followed tragedy where the princess fell asleep. Social inequalities occurred in every place in the

²⁰¹ Will Kymlicka, "Multiculturalism : Success, Failure, and the Future," *Transatlantic Council on Migration*, 2012, 1–37.

²⁰² William Anderson, "Fairy Tales and the Elementary Curriculum or" The Sleeping Beauty" Reawakened," *Elementary English* 46, no. 5 (1969): 563–69.

world; it is one of the reasons why there are many conflicts in this world. Civil wars take place because the ruling government does not provide equal treatment. In Chapter 3, where I mentioned the issues where multiple ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak have to combine to form a bigger group to fight for federal resources. While these ethnic groups are also deemed the Bumiputera people in Malaysia, they have received different treatment by the government, where some of the indigenous leaders resorted to using the term 'Bumiputera minorities' as a description of their deemed second class Bumiputera status.²⁰³ Multiculturalism focused on the identity of a particular group, therefore protecting the certain privileges of the deemed original people from the Malaya. However, despite also being labelled as bumiputera, there are inevitable inequality among the bumiputera in East Malaysia and West Malaysia. Here, we are also able to problematize the Malaysian multiculturalism by looking at the issues of social inequalities in Malaysia, where the affirmative policy focusses on the discussion of economic equalities from a race/ethnic perspective rather than class perspective.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Ibrahim, "The New Economic Policy and the Identity Question of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah and Sarawak."

²⁰⁴ Brennan has attempted to show the racial conflict in Malaysia actually arises from the struggles between class, but this class-consciousness has been strategically abated by the ruling party to serve their own political agenda. See, Martin Brennan, "Class, Politics and Race in Modern Malaysia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 12, no. 2 (1982): 188–215.

4.5 Snow White



Figure 4.7 Shia Yih Yiing, Snow White (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

In the foreground of the painting titled Snow White, similar to the Mermaids and the Sleeping Beauties, there is also a women figure that was dressed in a white dress. She is wearing a top which is also white in colour, with a pink coloured cloth draped over her body at her waist. The pink coloured cloths have repetitive floral patterns that is in gold colour. The pink cloths with its repetitive floral motifs which looks like weavings resembled the *Kain Songket Limar*, which is a type of traditional Malay woven textile that was usually worn during ritual ceremonies and it has its association with the royal court²⁰⁵. While the clothing design is slightly ambiguous comparing to the other princess's dress that was discussed in the previous sections, the neckline of the white

²⁰⁵ Siti Zainon Ismail, "Tekstil Melayu: Sejarah Fungsi, Simbol Dan Keindahan," *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah, Bil. 18, 1990, p. 50-66.*, 1990.

blouse worn by the women still shows resemblance to the Malay traditional clothes, *baju kurung*. The neckline design was round in shape with a slit at the front for an opening.²⁰⁶ The women in the painting are holding the kain songket with her right hand, and a fruit in her left hand. Contrary to the posture of the two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids, the posture of the women in Snow White is standing straight, facing at the viewers, giving a more assertive impressions. By using the traditional textile, *songket*, and *baju kurung* to represent the Malay in Malaysia, Shia Yih Yiing localized Snow White into Malaysian context.

Similar to the mermaid and sleeping beauty series, there is a black and white flooring pattern, and below that, a red carpet with the ornamental design was shown. However, contrary to the background of the mermaid and sleeping beauty that has a background that shows motifs/symbols indicating the socio-historical context of the specific races/ethnic that Shia Yih Yiing is representing, the background was painted in black instead. The black background could be seen as a strategy Shia Yih Yiing used to avoid expressing her own view of the socio-historical background of the Malay. As there is a Sedition Act in Malaysia, which stated that questioning “any matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative’ of the Bumiputera” is illegal.²⁰⁷

This painting has an explicit reference to the fairy tale “Snow White,” as it shared the same title of the fairy tale. The tale of Snow White is about a mother/stepmother who wanted to kill her daughter/stepdaughter due to the fear of being replaced as the most beautiful woman in the world. This tale is by the Grimm Brothers, and they had revised the story. In the first edition, it was Snow White’s mother, not her stepmother, who

²⁰⁶ Hanisa Hassan, “A Study on the Development of Baju Kurung Design in the Context of Cultural Changes in Modern Malaysia.,” *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 15 (2016).

²⁰⁷ Gordon Paul Means, “Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation,” 1991, 14.

wants to kill the beautiful girl out of envy. Regardless of the modifications, the story still evolved around the “universal” experience, which Jack Zipes claims as “dealing with competition and selection.”²⁰⁸ He stated that this particular tale echoes the universal instinctual struggle faced by women and how the conflict among women made it “relevant for families, tribes, and communities many years before it began to take shape in literary form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”²⁰⁹

Through the visual description, we are able to deduce that the women in this painting are representing the Malay in Malaysia. The issue of competition and selection could be localized to the Malaysian context. With the rigid ethnic categorization in Malaysia, to be able to survive and have a strong identity among all the other races/ethnicities, Malay’s identity as the original people (*Bumiputera*) in Malaya has to be maintained. According to Trixie M. Tangit, “Bumiputera is a controversial label among Malaysians because government continues to deploy the colonial race construct to advance ‘Natives’ over other groups. The Malaysian Constitution guarantees a ‘quota of entry’ for Bumiputera to civil service jobs, public scholarships and education”.²¹⁰ Multiple policies introduced by the government to secure the status of the Malay could be seen as one of the strategies to maintain as the strongest player in the competition among other races/ethnic in Malaysia.

²⁰⁸ Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, 135.

²⁰⁹ Zipes, 133.

²¹⁰ Trixie M Tangit, “Ethnic Labels and Identity among Kadazans in Penampang, Sabah (Malaysian Borneo)” (The Australian National University, 2017).

4.6 Fairy Godmother



Figure 4.8 Shia Yih Yiing, *Fairy Godmother* (2007), Oil on Canvas, 137 x 101cm. National Visual Arts Gallery Collection. Source: Artist's photograph.

This painting also shows a full figure woman, wearing a similar white blouse as “Snow White” in Figure 4.8. Other similarities she shared with “Snow White” is that she also holds a fruit in her hand, and the background was also painted in black, followed by a black and white floor as well as ornamental carpet. Besides holding the fruit in her left hand, she also holds a black coloured gourd-shaped object, which is identifiable as *labu sayong*. *Labu Sayong* is a type of pottery made by Malay, popularly made in Perak. It has a utilitarian function where the Malay used it to store water.²¹¹ There is also a tiny silver-coloured spindle in her left hand. On her right hand, she is holding a long sword. The long sword has a handle that resembles the dagger called *keris*. *Keris* is a dagger

²¹¹ Shamsu Mohamad, “The Malay Pottery in Malaysia,” in *Asia Ceramics Network Conference, Seoul, Korea, 2005*, 12–18.

that was popularly used by the Malay and Indonesian in the old days. It is still used by people who practice *silat* nowadays, a form of martial arts practiced by the Malay. During a rally in October 1987, Najib Razak, the then UMNO Youth Leader, was claimed that he threatened to ‘soak Chinese blood’ with traditional Malay dagger, namely Keris.²¹² Even though Najib Razak denied that he has ever made this statement²¹³, Keris has always been associated with the Malay supremacy ever since.²¹⁴

On top of the white blouse and dress, we could also see a yellow cloth draped on the body of the women. The colour of yellow has always been a symbol of the Malay royal.²¹⁵ Pink, red-coloured cloth with a logo is also draped on the bottom part of her body. This particular cloth is identifiable as a batik cloth, a traditional textile made by Malay and Indonesian. The logo on it is recognizable as the logo of UMNO, the United Malays National Organisation. During the time this painting was produced (2007), the UMNO was the ruling party at the time. Looking at all the visual cues, it is deducible that “Fairy Godmother” is a representation of the Malay ruling elite.

Fairy Godmother is a character that is recurrent in many of the fairy tale. They are women who have magical power. The most famous Fairy Godmother is the one in “Cinderella,” where she assists the protagonist, Cinderella, to escape her tough life and fulfil her wish in the tale. In most of the fairy tale, good and evil are usually clearly defined. Nevertheless, Jack Zipes shows the ambiguity of the character through the comparison of the powerful women character with magical abilities in the fairy tale with Baba Yaga, a woman character that holds magical power in the Slavic fairy tale. Jack

²¹² Harold A Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 107-109, quoted in Chin, “From Ketuanan Melayu to Ketuanan Islam: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese.”

²¹³ “PM: We’re No Racists, No ‘bloody Keris’ at Rally,” *Malaysiakini*, 2015, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/312951>.

²¹⁴ Yang L Fong and Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, “Framing Interethnic Conflict in Malaysia: A Comparative Analysis of Newspapers Coverage on the Keris Polemics,” *Ethnicities* 14, no. 2 (2014): 252–78.

²¹⁵ Hans-Dieter Evers and Ramli Nordin, “The Symbolic Universe of Cyberjaya, Malaysia,” *Malaysia (June 1, 2012)*, 2012, 10–11.

Zipes suggests that there is an important link between goddesses, witches, and fairies. He also mentioned that “Baba Yaga will frequently emerge in the story as the decisive figure, turning the plot in favour of or against the protagonist.”²¹⁶ We could find the similarities of the decisive figure in the story of “Sleeping Beauty,” where one of the fairies cursed the princess, while the other gives her good wishes as gifts, as well as twisting the curse to avoid her death. In the tale, the character is described by different names, such as fairy, godmother, or wise woman.²¹⁷ We could see the “universal” motif/experience of this fairy tale, where the decision of someone with power, would have the ability to alter someone’s life. In a world in which we live in a group, there will always be someone in power, which could make a decision that would have an impact on our life. Our life is not entirely controlled by ourselves.

Shia Yih Yiing localized this experience and character in the Malaysian context. By using the character of Fairy Godmother with magical power, it is as though representing the ruling party, UMNO, which also has the power in altering Malaysian’s lives . Each princess faces a major change in life after encountering the objects held by the Fairy Godmother.²¹⁸ Shia Yi Yiing adapted these objects into a Malaysian context by using an alternative fruit to replace poisonous apple given to snow white by her stepmother; labu sayong as a container to store the magical potion given to the little mermaid by the witch as well as a spell-bound spindle that puts sleeping beauty into eternal sleeps.

It is important to note that the exploration of the fairy tale by Shia Yih Yiing begins in *Once Upon a Time* (2007). Looking at the paintings that we have discussed earlier, we can see that while Shia Yih Yiing tried to resist the dominant Malay supremacy, her

²¹⁶ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 63.

²¹⁷ Jack Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (Oxford Companions, 2015).

²¹⁸ The *labu sayong* contains the poison for The Little Mermaid, information given by Shia Yih Yiing personally during an interview on 30 May 2019.

representation of the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Sabahan Kadazandusun and Sarawakian Iban actually echoed the dichotomous representation of multiple Malaysian identity which was ‘engineered by the state’, as suggested by Ibrahim, where “...on the one hand, the diverse Bumiputeras of the peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak constructed as a single homogenous identity bloc; and, on the other hand, the non-Bumiputeras – the Chinese and Indians of immigrant origin – constituting another collective identity bloc...”²¹⁹

We will have to take notice of the fruit that is round in shape, red in colour with a shades of green were recurrent in all the 3 paintings of *Once Upon a Time* (2007), *Snow White* (2007) and *Fairy Godmother* (2007). Based on the interview with Shia Yih Yiing, she has mentioned that it is a mango. As her grandfather own and orchard, she has included many local fruits in her paintings since her debut in 1998. The same mango could be seen in her “Homage to Ordinary Life” series, in Figure 4.4, the mango was positioned at the foreground, at the bottom left of the painting. Even though Shia Yih Yiing has localized the fruit in Malaysian context, as mango is a local fruit in Malaysia, she has chosen the type of mango that resembles an apple, which is the mango variety that could be found in Malaysia²²⁰, the symbolisation of the apple that is related to the fairy tale of Snow White is still pertinent in her artwork. Moreover, the word NEP is visible on the mango in the three paintings.²²¹

Making connection with the symbolism of the poisonous apple in the Snow White and the mango with the word NEP, it might be suggested that Shia Yih Yiing is trying to

²¹⁹ Zawawi Ibrahim, “The New Economic Policy and the Identity Question of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah and Sarawak,” *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia—Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities and Social Justice*, 2013, 301.

²²⁰ “MANGO – Common Varieties,” 2016, <https://www.itfnet.org/v1/2016/05/mango-common-varieties/>.

²²¹ I was unable to view the real painting, due to the restriction from National Art Gallery as mentioned in section 1.6. I am aware of this visual elements based on the interview I carried out with the artist on 9th May 2017. Hence, I am taking the word of the artist for the analysis as I was unable to get a high resolution image of the said painting to be included.

show her resistance towards the government's affirmative policy, as the apple was actually a poisonous object used by the stepmother of Snow White to poison her. While the apple is poisonous in Snow White, for Girardot, it might annotate another symbolism as a medicine of life, instead of a deadly poison. He also made a relation to the symbolism of apple in the biblical story.²²² We might be able to problematize the Malaysian multiculturalism by looking at the duality of this symbolism. The affirmative policy introduced by the government was to eradicate poverty among the Bumiputera, especially the Malay. However, this policy that was executed along the racial/ethnic lines instead of class structure were deemed problematic. It has successfully created a group of Malay business class, but it has also enlarged the gap between the poor and the rich among the same community.²²³

4.7 Conclusion

The writers/speakers of this genre knowingly play upon a scale of memorable and notable motifs, conventions, and topoi to engage the audience in a dialogue that harks back to a tradition of oral folk tales and literary fairy tales and refers to present and future social conflicts. This fairy tale acts through language to depict all kinds of issues and debates that concern socialization and civilization. Once a fairy tale has gelled or been artistically conceived so that it is ostentative, it seeks to perpetuate itself indiscriminately. – Jack Zipes²²⁴

Through the analysis, we are able to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism, through the discussion on Shia Yih Yiing's choice of fairy tale in representation of a certain Malaysian identity. These fairy tales or myths all have a "universal" motif or experience that Malaysian could relate to. By using the fairy tale as one of the poetic resistance strategies, her artworks help to question the multiculturalism cliché in Malaysia, where the multiple races/ethnic often portrayed happily posing in traditional clothing in the

²²² Norman J Girardot, "Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," *The Journal of American Folklore* 90, no. 357 (1977): 292.

²²³ Robert S Milne, "Malaysia-beyond the New Economic Policy," *Asian Survey* 26, no. 12 (1986): 1372.

²²⁴ Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, 15.

print media, online media, and official tourism site. Her work enables us to see and discover the underlying complexities of each race/ethnicities, the fluidity of identity as well as the relation of cultural identities with power.

While this research mainly focused on her incorporation of the fairy tale as a form of poetic resistance, other poetic resistance strategies such as “the call of ethnic culture,” “the appropriation of ‘Others,’” “the intertextuality,” and the “diaspora consciousness” were also visible in her visual strategies. For instance, by using all the cultural markers of different races/ethnicities in Malaysia in order to adapt the fairy tale in the Malaysian context, she is employing the strategies of “the call of ethnic culture” and “the appropriation of ‘Others.’” Moreover, the “diaspora consciousness” was also incorporated in her artwork, especially “two mermaids,” which incorporated “The Little Mermaid” fairy tale. Not only she makes a connection between the diaspora and displacements issues faced by the Malaysian Chinese and Indian by using “The Little Mermaid” fairy tale, which grapples with the issues of identity. Her visual strategies, such as choice of colour, a sense of movement created through the formal elements in the paintings, also enhances the diasporic elements in her painting.

Lastly, it is “the intertextuality,” this is one of the poetic resistances employed by Shia Yih Yiing in her painting too. In the series of her work, “Fairy Godmother, Snow White, two Sleeping Beauties and two Mermaids,” she put together all the different fairy tale, which featured princesses with a distinct characteristic that deal with various conflicts and issues. By including one of the fairy tale character, “Fairy Godmother,” she created her own narrative of the Malaysian multiculturalism. These different fairy tales each have their own “universal” motifs or experiences that were relevant to a specific race/ethnic in Malaysia. Within the multicultural context, she opened up

endless possibilities to look at the issues of cultural identities in Malaysia, as well as questioning the fixity of identities in the notion of multiculturalism and the issues which arise from the fixation of identity.

Shia Yih Yiing mentioned that during the whole process of her exploration of the fairy tale, the Fairy Godmother transformed into “Fairly Good Mother.”²²⁵ The character Fairy Godmother also experiences changes through the series of paintings done by Shia Yih Yiing using this particular fairy godmother and five princesses’ narrative. She has produced multiple paintings by incorporating the same fairy tale character in her series of paintings, with similar cultural symbols. A look at the whole series of her work that incorporated fairy tale and was interrelated enable us to see the intertextual link between these paintings. A problematization of multiculturalism is done by making relation of the “universal” motifs/experience in each fairy tale with the multicultural situation in Malaysia. The ruling party that was represented by the Fairy Godmother, where it is supposed to be a malevolent character who took care of all the princesses, could also be seen as a benevolent Fairly Good Mother that causes the conflict that arises in each of the princesses’ fairy tale. The ambiguous character of Fairy Godmother is challenging the dichotomous of what is good and what is bad for the multiple social actors in multicultural Malaysia.

²²⁵ In a personal interview with the artist on 30 May 2019. Also mentioned by the artist in the book by Emelia Ong, *Living Art: The Inspired Lives of 14 Malaysian Artist & Their Art Practice* (Penang: Areca Books Asia Sdn Bhd, 2020).

CHAPTER 5 : CONCLUSION

“Shia Yih Yiing’s has always been a storyteller.”²²⁶ Shireen Naziree mentioned her role as a storyteller in 2014, from narrating her own “Sarawakian personal history” to a larger narrative evolving the issues surrounding her. She also took references from famous artist from Europe and Southeast Asia, weaving it together with the protagonist from well-known fairy tales²²⁷ This research has explored further on her role as a storyteller and provide further comprehension of her incorporation of the fairy tale in her artwork. Jack Zipes suggests that “...dissonance is the key to understanding” artworks by contemporary artists, particularly artworks that incorporated fairy tale motifs.²²⁸ While there were other scholar who suggests that Shia Yih Yiing’s work portrayed a harmonious multicultural situation which aligned with the government narrative; this study has further elaborated the dissonance found within her artworks, showing that her work might reinforces a certain element of the state engineered multiculturalism discourse, it does not align perfectly with the dominant narrative. This was done by relating the universal elements in fairy tale as well as the central issues of multiculturalism.

Shia Yih Yiing adapted the pan-European fairy tale into the Malaysian context by incorporating all the cultural markers or symbols of multiple races/ethnicities of the Malaysian citizens. Not only that, her choice of a specific fairy tale character to represent a particular race/ethnicity is not arbitrary. It was chosen according to the relevancy of the “universal” motif or experience in the fairy tale with the socio-political context of a particular race/ethnicity. Through the analysis of her work, her representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia was done using cultural

²²⁶ Shireen Naziree, “Telling Tales BY SHIA YIH YIING — Chan + Hori Contemporary,” Chan + Hori Contemporary, 2014, <https://www.chanhor.com/telling-tales>.

²²⁷ Naziree.

²²⁸ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 155.

markers such as clothing, jewellery, utilities such as water containers (*labu sayong*), and weapon (*keris*). These cultural markers carried specific meaning for the particular races/ethnicities. Shia Yih Yiing laid out significant cultural markers in her paintings, and instead of looking at identities as something innate, she juxtaposed different cultural markers in one painting, revealing the complexities of the ethnic formation of multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Every cultural identity of different races/ethnic in Malaysia is not as straightforward as to be portrayed by the dominant narrative. It is fluid and continuously undergo transformations through what Stuart Hall calls it, the “‘play’ of history, culture and power.”²²⁹ The complexities of the different races/ethnicities are elaborated in Section 3.1. Instead of the government narratives of multiculturalism, her representation of Malaysian multiculturalism enables us to look beyond the time-freeze identities of multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia. We are able to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism through the juxtaposition, fairy tales, and also through the use of the body by Shia Yih Yiing. By incorporating fairy tale in her artworks, Shia Yih Yiing explores human nature’s characteristics, and its relation to every conflict arises in life. She also invites us to create our own imaginative stories.

The fixation of identities in the notion of multiculturalism has always been the central critic by multiculturalism scholars. As mentioned in Section 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, many of the affirmative policies which favour the *Bumiputera* might have enhanced the problematic categorization of CMIO, the popular representation of Malaysian multiculturalism. The rigid categorization of races/ethnicities in Malaysia also look at communities as static, and this led to many socio-political conflicts that arise in

²²⁹ Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”

Malaysia. These conflicts are also the conflicts that were found in the fairy tale that was chosen by Shia Yih Yiing in her retelling of fairy tale through her paintings. By using these fairy tales, Malaysian multiculturalism could be problematized by the analysis of Shia Yih Yiing's attempt in questioning or resisting the dominant narrative of happy multiculturalism.

Instead of a melting pot, Shia Yih Yiing mentioned that Malaysian multiculturalism is more like the popular local food, *rojak* than a melting pot. *Rojak* is a local dish which consists of different tropical fruits and vegetables, eaten together with a sweet sauce and peanuts. The word itself also has another meaning, which indicates a mixture.

According to her, instead of assimilating into one big community, Malaysian from different races/ethnics still preserve their own "identity" while living with each other.²³⁰

In an attempt to problematize boutique multiculturalism through analysis of food fiction, Tamara Wagner remarks on the negligible presence of the Peranakan community. "The ethnic rojak is still there, ready for global consumption, yet the Peranakan is digested, if not always in silence, then as a disconcertingly silenced commodity."²³¹ Hence, it also needs to be considered that while Shia Yih Yiing resisted the dominant narrative of multiculturalism, she might also be reinforcing the "CMIO" narratives through her representation. In all the paintings selected, the representation of multiple cultural identities in Malaysia has left out many other races/ethnics/cultural groups in Malaysia. For instance, the Chinese Peranakan (Baba Nyonya), Jawi Peranakan, as well as immigrants brought by the continuous migration from neighbour countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Myanmar, and etc. As mentioned in Section 3.2.3, Malaysian multiculturalism differs from western multiculturalism, and

²³⁰ In a personal interview with the artist on 30 May 2019.

²³¹ Tamara S Wagner, "Boutique Multiculturalism and the Consumption of Repulsion: Re-Disseminating Food Fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean Diasporic Novels," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42, no. 1 (2007): 31-46.

it focused on the races/ethnic that were clearly defined by the colonial British. A cultural group such as the Chinese and Jawi Peranakan is not recognized, and it remained so in the multiculturalism discourse in Malaysia even after Independence. In Shia Yih Yiing's painting, we could also see the exclusion of these social actors of other countries that have also become part of the Malaysian multicultural actors. This exclusion might be contributing to the limited and yet controversial CMIO discourse, reinforcing the idea of the multicultural situation in Malaysia is only made up of these limited social actors.

Instead of taking the representation of the quintet combination of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban (Sarawak) and Kadazandusun (Sabah) version of Malaysian multiculturalism as it is, this research problematizes the notion of a popular representation of cultural identities in Malaysian multiculturalism, as well as the relation between representation and power. The discussion on the multiple cultural identities that was not represented in Shia Yih Yiing painting also revealed the complexities of different cultural identities in Malaysia, we are actually a huge heterogeneous community. For instances, the heterogeneous group of Orang Asli, that not only have different culture and language, but they are also separated geographically afar. There was lesser representation of these group of people, due to the lack of political power. From the understanding of power relation and representation, this research also suggest that the discourse of Malaysian multiculturalism might need to move beyond just the dominant cultural identities that existed before independence, to include the less dominant ones, as well as inclusion of new cultural groups that migrated into Malaysia. By doing so, we might be able to discuss issues that is substantially interconnected to the Malaysian society. Multiculturalism itself might be problematic as it is promoting rigid categorization of cultural identities. However, as

Stuart Hall stresses, the notion of an ‘unchanging’ cultural identities, which have “continuous frames of reference and meaning” has played a crucial role in many significant social movements such as the anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist movement. Hence, the study of multiculturalism is still important in Malaysia, as it might be able to bring up discussion on the lesser known issues faced by marginalized cultural group.

Nonetheless, this research hopes that from the analysis of Shia Yih Yiing’s work, it could perhaps benefit the artist in producing more relevant works through the communication between writer and artist. This research also hopes to contribute to the discussion on Malaysian multiculturalism in relation to visual arts. Aside from using fairy tale as a form of poetic resistance in resisting dominant narrative of Malaysian multiculturalism, as elaborated in Chapter 4, Shia Yih Yiing also uses other poetic resistance strategies in her art-making such as “the call of ethnic culture,” “the appropriation of ‘Others,’” “the intertextuality,” and the “diaspora consciousness.” The use of all these poetic resistance strategies, and her juxtaposition of it, Shia Yih Yiing forces the audience to question and provoke them to think of the current multicultural situation in Malaysia. Notwithstanding, further analysis of other poetic resistance strategies is needed to explore how Shia Yih Yiing incorporates each of the poetic resistance in her artwork. There is much more to explore regarding the employment of poetic resistance in her artwork. She has also produced other series of work that could be analysed together through the lens of multiculturalism. (Refer to Appendix) An in-depth study of other poetic resistance strategies incorporated in Shia Yih Yiing’s artwork might reveal a different approach to problematize Malaysian multiculturalism.

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