

# **The Subjectivity of Malaysian Art: A Study on “MERDEKA 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art”**

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia authorities held the exhibition “MERDEKA 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art” at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur from August through September, 2007. This exhibition featured 67 artists from all corners of Malaysia of various ethnicity, who introduced a diversity of artistic medium, such as oil paintings, acrylic, and synthetic materials in an attempt to display the enchanting facets of contemporary Malaysian art.

As a Chinese - Malaysian artist, I'd like to reflect upon which “Identity” was revealed in this 2007 Art Exhibition, and which “Ideology” has dictated Malaysian artistic structure in a unique atmosphere that was fashioned by Malaysian politics, religions (Islam, Buddhism and Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity), social, economic, and racial (Malays, Chinese, Hindus, the aborigines, and people of various ethnicities) during this great art event, and thereby establish a national artistic integrity. From here I'd like to consider the future possibilities of Malaysian art development.

The layout of this thesis will focus on the exhibition organization direction of Malaysian government, and the “illusion” structure on which Malaysian government positions itself - through the post - colonial viewpoints of “hybridity” and “multiculturalism”. The thesis will also explore how the “Other” identity manages to “settle” itself in this particular exhibition.

*Keywords: Malaysian Art, Hybridity, Multiculturalism, Subjectivity, Post-colonial,*

## 1. Foreword

Malaysia authorities held the exhibition "MERDEKA 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art" at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur from August through September, 2007. One can learn more about the special attributes of this exhibition in writing through the following official statements:

Dr. Rais Yatim, the Culture, Arts, and Heritage Minister of Malaysia, deemed that this exhibition witnessed "the assorted challenges and experiences that artists faced during national independence and progression. This publication provides invaluable reference value for historians and art connoisseurs, and more than qualified to serve as a witness for national heritage and artistic diversity." (The original text was Malay)

Perdana Leadership Foundation CEO Nik Mohamed Nik Yaacob (one of the hosting organizations) holds that the research tasks of the foundation is "to trace and preserve Malaysia's national and historical heritage"; it therefore introduced 67 painters and sculptors as representatives for the exhibition.

Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia undertook this spectacular show, and its curator believed that this exhibition "created a picture of piece" for the people and the government.

The organization of the show adopted four major themes to illustrate the Imageries of Independence of the artists on MERDEKA 50.

- (1) The Flag Bearers (works in this section were characterized by patriotism through national flag symbols).
- (2) The Current Chroniclers (the creations in this section were works by notable artists — be it their personal conduct or professional achievement).
- (3) The Obligued Turners (the pieces in this area display an alternative viewpoint on the status quo).
- (4) Memory Enlisters (a look into the past around which life prior to independence was constructed).

shall reflect upon the exhibition from the following angles(1)An examination on the status of Chinese artists in Malaysia.(2)The religious, political, social and educational limitations on the Malaysian artistic system development implied in the government-sponsored exhibition.(3)How I, as a Malaysian Chinese artist, look upon the artistic system development in my own country.

## 2. Factors Influencing Malaysian Artistic Integrity Structure— Politics, Religions, Social Makeup, and Education

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### 2.1. Politics

The British Malaya celebrated its dissolution from the British colonial government and declared independence on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957; the Federation of Malaya and later recognized as an independent nation in 1957. Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and the Malaya Union joined to form Malaysia on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963. (Singapore dropped out of the Federation 2 years later and established a country.)

Before Malaysia announced its independence, the “Malaya Union,” established in 1948, consisted of several specific points on citizenship: first, the Act emphasizes the unique status of Malays, and the principle to assimilate non—Malays. The subjects of the Sultan would be regarded as the primary targets for citizenship conferrals. The non-Malays who have been born in Malaysia, who speak the Malay language, and adhere to Malay customs will be granted citizenship. This was a concession made by the British colonial government under pressure from the Malays, because Malay leaders were the mainstay in the British colonial government, and the unequal treatment of non-Malays in Malaysian politics was thereby established (Lin, 1996: 26).

Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia provides an overview of issues concerning privileges unique to Malays only, stipulates that for safeguarding the rights and privileges of the Malays and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia, the ratio of Malays and non-Malays entering the federal government: the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, the Police Administration and the Armed Forces was marked at 4 : 1 as the minimum. In other words, the number of Malay officials was four times as much as non-Malay in these 4 departments. That ratio rose to 3 : 1 in the Judicial and Customs Duties Departments, meaning that Malay officials were twice as many as non-Malays. This racial proportion was discriminative and did not at all reflect the ethnic percentages of different peoples in Malaysia, and caused tremendous impact on Malaysian internal unity and economic constructions.

Malay privileges: here shows the quotas for entry into the government agencies. The quotas for employing first-class officials are (You, 1988: 95):

- (1) Interior and Foreign Ministries: 4 Malays to 1 Non-Malay.
- (2) The Judicial Department: 3 to 1.
- (3) Customs Duties Department: 3 to 1.

- (4) The Police Department: 4 to 1.
- (5) The Armed Forces: 4 to 1 from the upper level to the rank and file.

## 2.2. Economy

With an aim to eradicate poverty plaguing Malays in the countryside, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented in 1971, and on the surface the policy aimed to expand the economic pie, but the greater target was for the Malays to increase their equity share of the economy at an annual growth rate of 2.5% to arrive at 30% in 1990; in other words, the Federal Government, through national assistance and political interventions, reassigned and organized economic differences among various races. Certain privileges were given to the aborigines, and the Chinese were not included in the preferential program (You, 1988: 133).

The implementation of NEP deteriorated the aboriginalism and the antagonism between the races. Local Chinese in general did not benefit from the fair treatment of the policy, and it gave rise to another form of oppression on the Chinese community. The Malay privilege clause in the federal constitution ensured the legitimacy of Malaysian government's policy and administrative measures. Though the NEP has improved the financial status of the Malays and the aborigines, it in turn permitted Malaysia to become a Malay-centric country.

Under the NEP umbrella, the Malaysian government can certainly attain the establishment of a Malay-centric Malaysia. But for the Chinese communities, NEP not only failed to resolve the racial tension between Malays and ethnic Chinese, it further worsened the relationship between the two races. After Malaysia's independence, the Malays came into political power and actively promoted a Malay-centric assimilation policy in an attempt to realize the ultimate goal of one country, one race, one religion, and one educational system. This Malay-centric policy was the primary factor in polarizing the racial tension between Malays and Chinese—it can all be ascribed to the deliberate differentiation between “Malays and non-Malays” (Lin, 1996: 100).

## 2.3. Education

Will Kymlicka said that “any written language, so long as it is given a monopoly, in principle it can bring into full play such a function. And because the officials of a monarch are bound by a national machine that forbids him or her to deflect to the rival monarch, hegemony therefore earns further development and endorsement” (Kymlicka, 2004: 65).

Will Kymlicka's statement was a near perfect illustration of the Malaysian governmental intervention; the government meddled in the provision of "Article 152 of the Constitution of Malaysia that guarantees the freedom of learning and using of other languages," and rejected a request by the Chinese to establish an "Independent University" without burdening government coffers (the Chinese community of its own accord planned to set up a private university; the "Independent University" referred here indicates a private institution, meaning that the Chinese language can be used as a teaching medium), but the proposal was overruled by the Malaysian authorities. The Federal Court responded to the provisions in Article 152 as such: (1) Malay is the national language; (2) Malay is the official language; (3) Everybody can use other languages when conversing on objects not related to official purposes; (4) no one shall ban other parties from using other languages for non-official purposes; (5) no one shall ban others from teaching Chinese; (6) no one shall prohibit others from learning Chinese; and (7) the Federal or state government has the right to preserve and maintain the operations of non-Malay organizations and the learning of languages. The Federal Court cited (3) and ruled that the government's rejection of IU's application was not a violation of the constitution, on grounds that "college is a public facility; by using Chinese as a medium, the Independence University aimed to use Chinese as an official language, and such was prohibited by Article 152 of the constitution" (Zhou, 1997: 298).

Malaysian government moved to cite Article 152 of the constitution to say that Malay would be the only official language in Malaysia; but the policy was an injustice to the languages used by the Chinese community — 26% of the total population, and Hindus — 10% of the demographics (1995). To tie in with the new language policy, the government actively followed out education strategies that were characterized by Malay as the primary teaching medium. After 1983, all the colleges also adopted Malay as the main language for giving lectures. It was no wonder that the Federal Court overruled the demand of the Independence University. Federal ruling stated that the purpose was to "ensure the prevalence of the Malay language, until that it becomes a commonly used national language." On July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1982, the Court ruled that IU lost the case (Ceng, 2001: 77). In 1982, "New Elementary Curriculum Guidelines" (the 3M system) were promulgated, stipulating that in addition to the Mandarin lesson and math, all the other classes in Chinese elementary schools have to be written and taught in Malay, a move that ran against schools' establishment principles (Zhou 1997: 55-56).

From October 15<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup>, 1987, Chinese elementary schools across Malaysia organized students' strikes, and the hostility between Malays and Chinese escalated to an

extent of a nationwide racial confrontation. The then prime minister Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, on early morning of October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1987, arrested 106 people in accordance with the Internal Security Act on charges of endangering public order and national security. After the arrest the prime minister explained to the Malaysian parliament that he had taken necessary action because he did not want to instigate another 1969 racial bloodshed. However, the 1969 racial conflict (the 513 Incident) was triggered by the election flop of the ruling "Alliance" government, and the landslide victory of the Chinese opposition party — the incident was a far cry from the Chinese elementary schools strikes in 1987. Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad's reaction to the strikes were clearly distorted, a deliberate misjudgment that directed a Chinese education issue into a political incident for ulterior motives. 106 people were nabbed on charges of endangering public order and national security.

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1995, the Malaysian government submitted a motion to the parliament, and thereby approved the 1995 education act, in which the foreword stated that "a new national education system has been adopted, stipulating the national language (Malay) to be the principal education medium for all national curricula and exams." In the new education act, the constitutional protection of all the peoples' rights to teach and learn their mother tongue was challenged; educational institutions that chose not to use Malay as the principal teaching medium had to earn an "immunity" from the minister (through an application process) to teach their native language (Zhou, 1997:325-326).

The subjectivity approach in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis derived from linguistics and structuralism; he deemed that subjectivity was not an unconscious decision, but a centrality of languages. Lacan held that the unconscious basically was determined by languages. He said that "In other words, the man who is born into existence deals first with language; this is a given. He is even caught in it before his birth. Symptoms, those you believe you recognize, seem to you irrational because you take them in an isolated manner, and you want to interpret them directly." In other words, the subjectivity is the language, and that subjectivity is only the words and speeches of "Others". Subjectivity is not about the internal attribute of an individual, nor is it self-disciplinary; rather, it's the structure of a language (Wang, 2007:135). To ensure the permanence and prevalence of Malay, the Malaysian government flagrantly ignored the constitutional protections of teaching and learning of mother tongues rendered to various races, and attempted to build Malaysia as "a Malaysia of the Malays."

## 2.4. Religion

In the Islam religion, Allah is worshiped as the monotheistic, supreme, true god; it rejects all other religions and gods due to its monotheistic nature. In Islamic doctrines, images and portraits of any living thing is prohibited; one would run the risk of offending of the creator or saints if he or she moves to fashion or depict any human form or animal. The Malaysian artistic development was severely stifled under this religious faith. In the Islamic religion, Muslim artists did everything they could to avoid portraying human forms or animals, or tried to provide nonrepresentational or conceptual renditions of their objects. Such normalization measure will end up victimizing art as a symbolism process (Islamic Art, 1991: 1-2).

Under such iconoclastic principles and an widespread aversion to three-dimensional forms, an 2-D object representation method came to the forefront of the art world; an inclination to patterning and abstraction gave rise to art deco and handicraft development, becoming the centerfold of Islamic art (Deng, 2003:152). Malaysia boasts a diversity of ethnicities; religious beliefs of the Malays, Chinese and Hindus consist of Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. For Malaysia, a Malay culture - centric (Islamic) nation, manifold restrictions were imperceptibly imposed upon local artistic creation and liberal ecological discourse—the limitations are most noticeable in artistic subject matters.

## 2.5. Society

Malay nationalism, a Malay culture-centric ideology, has always been the major driving force behind the discourse on Malaysian nationalism, which is constructed by Malaysians of various ethnicities. The United Malays National Organisation, or UMNO, as the country's largest political party, is in control of the national powers; and it's incumbent on the Malays to ensure the welfare of all the peoples under the principles of justice and fairness. Nevertheless, those in office are always compelled to care for the interests of the group ( the Malays ) to which they belong in the event of clashes between government policies and ethnic welfare just so they can garner support of their own group. In light of that, the Chinese communities find themselves continuously marginalized, and incapable of contending for their interests in major policymaking of various fields (Yang, 2006: 124).

Daerah Sepang in the state of Selangor in 1993 for example. Putrajaya is named after the first Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra. The Malaysian government

planned to relocate most of the administrative departments to Putrajaya by 2005. Former prime minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad said that “we need a new identity”. And Kuala Lumpur fails to do that. She started out as a mining city, yet we need a metropolis that can reflect Malaysia after its independence...therefore we need Putrajaya (Putrajaya for short—as the new federal administrative center). The significance of relocating Malaysia’s administrative facilities to Putrajaya — in addition to the search for a new identity — lies more in the implication of “eradicating the Chinese traces in Kuala Lumpur in history.” Yap Ah Loy, who became a Kapitan Cina (Chinese Kapitan) and the headman of a settlement of Chinese inhabitants, started the development of Kuala Lumpur as a commercial and mining centre in 1854. By building Putrajaya on the Malay/Islamic imageries, the Malaysian government wanted to prove that the new-generation Malays are more than capable to face challenges triggered by globalization. By removing all the Chinese traces in their history, the government wanted to declare Malaysian sovereignty in guiding national development. The buildings in Putrajaya were rich with the Islamic architectural spectacle, and became the must—see tourism “mecca” in Malaysia of the time (Yang,2006: 132-133).

The Malays indeed were beset with several social dilemmas prior to the 513 Incident in 1969; yet since the implementation of the New Economic Policy, the Malay predicament has been replaced by Chinese plights, because the NEP became tantamount to the Aboriginal nationalism(Lin,1996: 95). Also, the NEP was dedicated to institutionalizing and legalizing the prevalent racial prejudice attitude in government agencies and other public service sectors. Such an approach sparked off abominable effects among different ethnicities in the Malaysian social structure.

### 3. The Imaginative Community under Multiracialism

What is Multiculturalism? The many functions of multiculturalism has been detailed in Wang Xiaolu’s book, *A Research on Cultural Comment Keywords*, and the thoughts and viewpoints discoursed in the book can be regarded as an educational idea, a type of historic outlook, a cultural comment theory, also a political attitude and an ideology (Wang, 2007: 78).

In addition, the book also expounds the following connotations encompassed in multiculturalism—the word, multicultural, has evolved from a descriptive vocabulary to a buzzword rich with political and philosophical significance. The core of multiculturalism is to



overthrow the cultural and educational dominion of the Europe-centralism, while establishing a fresh knowledge speech system. For the multiculturalists, there's potential danger of cultural imperialism encouraged by the Western bloc in the course globalization process; and that their foremost mission is to carry out the global cultural "decolonialization," the central key being the presentation of critique of economic injustice to that of cultural injustice, and the promotion of cultural diversity and equality and exchange among cultures to break down the western cultural dominance over human thoughts and speeches(Wang, 2007: 79-80).

The eminent feature of "cultural politics of difference" in multiculturalism is defined by "the replacement of singularity and homogeneity with diversity and variety; using specifics and particularity to block away abstraction, generality and universality, and execute historicity, contextualization and multiplicity by means of the projection of contingency, temporariness, variability, experimentalism, transformation and variation to." This identity with "cultural politics of difference" signifies a sense of belonging for a particular people and race. On this cultural identity foundation, the minorities challenge the so-called common cultures, racial cultures, and mainstream cultures by way of organized clashes to vie for equal rights and esteem. And again, by way of this "identity politics" or "individuality politics" (both politics of difference), the minorities demand equality amid cultural differences, instead of "equality" in assimilation. Since her independence in 1957 and the coming into power of the Malays, to a certain extent, "Europe-centralism" has been eradicated to an extent in Malaysia; however, the country transplanted "Islamism" from the Middle East to substitute for the glory governance of the past. This is more like a demand for equality amid cultural differences, rather than "equality" in assimilation. Malaysia nevertheless fails to realize the core value of "cultural politics of difference" under the banner of Islamism.

In summary, multiculturalism has assembled ethnic, racial, gender, and linguistics theory to involve political and cultural demand; it's a social policy, an ideology, a resistance against cultural homogeneity triggered by globalization; it's a means by the disadvantaged cultural minorities to fight for their cultural status, a battle against cultural hegemony; however, the Malaysian government, which has been run by native Malays, exploited such Islamization policy, and moved to augment the content of the Malay nationalism in order to extend its legitimacy in the Malay society, protect the interests and privilege of the Malay, and violate multicultural principles to prevent minority cultural groups to fight for their cultural position. Under the manipulation of the Islamization policy, the three major ethnicities that made up the country — other than the Malay—both Chinese and Hindus have fallen prey to this ploy and become disadvantaged cultural minorities.

In light of the fact that there's an intimate connection between multiculturalism and the imagined political community, Mr. Benedict Anderson defined "nation" as such: "It is an imagined political community —and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow — members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Renan referred to this imagining in his suavely back-handed way when he wrote that "However, the essence of a nation is based on the concept that individuals in the nation have many things in common, but also that they have forgotten many things" (Anderson, 1999:9-11).

The imagined political community refers to the "cognitive" aspect of a collective group — it's "imagined" rather than "fabricated" —and an indispensable cognitive process demanded by the formation of any community identity. Therefore, the "imagined community" refers not to the end result of a "false consciousness", but "le fait social" in social psychology. In other words, for Anderson, "nation" as an "imagined community" was firstly and primarily "imagined" through texts (reading) (Anderson, 1999:10).

"Nation" is an idealized citizen group; "nation" is the objective or instrument for this citizen group to self-realize. The reason why Anderson defined nation as "imagined community" was because this definition fully grasped the concept as a psychological and subjective "vision." The concept of "nationalism" has missed out an important implication in mass nationalism, and failed to provide descriptions of categories that combine both authoritative and populism characteristics (Anderson, 1999:VXII). In Malaysia, the nationalism discourse is used as a soft-toned, ideological political appeal; in addition to being exploited by privileged groups as a tool for solidifying their edge in national resource allocations and strengthening the inequality of such allocation systems. It's even employed by the disadvantaged groups as an instrument for protecting their own interests. Furthermore, it's exercised as a political implement for winning political rights, mobilizing the masses; therefore it could never attain the vision of "not being a concocted community, not being a phantom with which politicians manipulate the people, but a structure that's related to historical and cultural shifts and rooted in the deepest level of human consciousness" depicted by the "imagined community"(Yang, 2006:121-122).

Now I'd like to make reference to an incidence in the Malaysian educational sector to illustrate that the government still fails to implement the distinctive national characteristics in the "imagined community" expounded by Mr. Anderson. In 1986, the government promulgated new regulations that students of the Chinese Department of the University of

Malaya would not be allowed to write their theses in Mandarin Chinese. Dean of the department Hong Tian Si therefore announced his resignation. The Department of Languages and Linguistics — Chinese was one of the most important institutes for educating Chinese instructors. The new regulation was so outrageous that outcry and protests were heard throughout the Chinese communities. Former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, in September, 1987, appointed more than 100 English—educated Chinese (who did not know the language well) to be the headmasters, deputy headmasters and assistants to headmasters at many private Chinese elementary schools, citing reasons that certain teachers were not qualified to teach at these establishments. Local Chinese representatives held that the Malaysian government did so to undermine the schools through administrative means, and the move infuriated discontent (Lin, 1996: 91). Under such bizarre academic survival rules, how would the vision of “not being a concocted community, not being a phantom with which politicians manipulate the people, but a structure that’s related to historical and cultural shifts and rooted in the deepest level of human consciousness” be attained?

Malaysia’s “Vision 2020” remains characterized by Malay ideology; it’s an old tune whose main objective is to consolidate the power upstarts who have taken up the Malaysia Capitalism. However, the Chinese and Hindus were forcibly included in the Malaysian nationalism objective in “Vision 2020”, but were denied access to national resource and political rights allocations. To these minorities, this was a demoralizing truth. Under Malaysian constitution, the Chinese and Hindus were treated unequally by the nationalism policy. In addition to being marginalized, they have to endure the outlandish “new Malay’s” ideology (Yang, 2006:131).

As a constructed “imagined community”, “Malaysian nationalism” provides a clear-cut and highly exclusive cultural community symbol for Malaysia’s national identity. On the other hand, the Chinese communities, who are victimized and marginalized, exploited the “Chinese culture” identity strategy and chronicled their plight caused by the Malay political cause, in order to remodel their own ethnic history memory and propose a new supremacy discourse as a counteraction, while upholding the survival rights of different ethnicities in a diverse society. Now we have two sets of nationalsim theories coexisting in Malaysia: the Malays who champion collective values, and the Chinese communities who embrace diverse, democratic equality. The latter apparently is more similar to Mr. Anderson’s “Imagined Community” (Yang, 2006: 121-122).

## 4. The Malaysian Artistic Illusions — Thoughts on the Exhibition

"The Truth is Out There." The relations between illusions and the horror of the real hidden in these illusions are more obscure than what they appear to be, because illusions have ensconced the horror. At the same time, they also create what they have declared to ensconce, namely the "repressed" reference point (From the gigantuan cuttlefish in the depth of the seas to the devastating hurricanes...the imageries of this ultimate "Things of Horror" are the optimal illusional creations.) ( Zizek, 2004: 8-11).

The Malaysian government, run by the Malays, deliberately make Malays as they are (born to be Muslims). For the Malaysian society, its ethnic awareness originated from the "otherness" imagination constructed during British Colony. "Otherness" referred here includes the British colonialists and Chinese and Hindu immigrants. Long after the dissolution of British colonial rules, Malaysia continued its administrative and ethnic structure from the colonial period. For the Malay aborigines, the "Others" now referred to non-aborigines, and not the system built by the colonialists. The Malays and Chinese hold different views on "Malaysian nationalism" during the process of establishing a country. Malays wanted to build a country with themselves as the principal constituents. This attempt to build Malaysia as a country of the Malays, and the illusion of Malaysia as the illusion of the "Other" for Islamic countries.

In "Ke angkasa-Malaysia Boleh" (The artist proclaims there must be no limit to the flights of the Malaysian imagination), a work by Malay artist Hashim Hassan, the audience sees a traditional Malay kite soaring in the skies, and can enjoy the combination of traditional Malay textile dyeing patterns and aboriginal designs found in Borneo (the Malays and aboriginals are listed and protected as the indigenous peoples). It seems impossible to foresee a nationalism ideology under multiculturalism. The Chinese populations hope that as the new nation formulates its supremacist notions, it'd allow the participation of different races, and that they should access the same civil rights as other racial groups. The allocation principles of Malays can be extended to every sector. Following the marginalization of the Chinese community, the guard against Chinese of the Malays have turned into actual policymaking, and structuralized racial inequality. The Chinese can only back down to educational and cultural issues to counteract Malay cultural hegemony (Yang, 2006: 124). "Positive Vision is the Way to Success" by Chinese-Malaysian artist Koay Soo Kao seemed to imply that the only "positive vision to success" is to "do without obvious racial skin color, facial features,

and identity.” The posterior of the piece was arranged to face the audience, and does it imply that the approach could skillfully obliterate racial color differences to near the nationalist ideology and bridge the gap between races?

Indian-Malaysian artist Syed Thajudeen named his piece, “Merdeka” (independence). Traditional Malay costumes were portrayed here as the centerpiece, beckoning the Islamic-styled architecture—the Prime Minister Hall in the new capital, Putrajaya, intended to convey the glory of independence. In the description it’s said that, “The artwork symbolizes the celebration of independence. The main character is the Tunku and other freedom Fighters. We could not have achieved the development and prosperity that we are enjoying now if not for the sacrifices of our leaders. Malaysia has developed rapidly from an agricultural country to being a high-technology hub. This painting is a tribute to all who made it possible.” The last statement said that “We are proud to be Malaysians,” but is it because of the faith in the Islam religion that the Hindu message is lost in the piece?

Most of the other Chinese artists who participated in the exhibition also characterized their work with the idea that “Malaysia is built upon Malay culture and the Malays”, and such a conception is also reflected in the ideology of their art. Take Chinese-Malaysian Choon Kam Kow’s work, “Image and Identity V” for example. He was born a Chinese, but his work was about the Malay rice dumpling (ketupat), instead of the Chinese zongzi. The piece was called, “Image and Identity,” but it instead provided all sorts of fascinating imageries. Long Thien Shih named his piece, “Don’t Prey-Prey!” while Chinese-Malaysian Wong Seng Tong presented “Merdeka 50 Years: A Tribute to Our Prime Minister”—featuring the portraits and figures of all previous prime ministers in reflection of most Chinese’ concern for politics. In “Lima” (translated as “5”, with 5 Chinese dragons on the tableau) by Malay artist Mohammed Raduan Man, the 5 dragons symbolized the 5 prime ministers in office since 1957. Instead of directly giving their portraits, he opted for the 5 dragons on a 2—D piece. He said, quote, “The dragon is tied to wisdom and strength. I used woodcut transferals combined with painting to create the visual projections of golden dragons embedded in the Jalur gemilang’s dark blue. Gold is a metaphor of elegance reflected by the five PMs. The dragon drifts in and out of the work to suggest the past and present of Malaysian dreams.” As a Muslim, did he chose his motif, the Chinese dragons, as a mean of expressing good will to the Chinese people? Was the Muslim artist trying to avoid human images and therefore moving to abstract the regular portraits with dragon designs to symbolize the racial tension? Or, was it the end result of the “imagined community” under multiculturalism?

Out of the 13 Chinese-Malaysian artists, a statement from Victor Chin was noteworthy

as he wrote, "This is one painting from my new series of abstract works expressing movement. My aim is to convey visually, with all the brush lines, shapes, values, textures and colours, what it is like to be free and to freely move one's arms with the brush. It is about personal freedom derived from knowing some history of art. Our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence has something to do with this belief." And in Tang Hon Yin's statement, he said, "Ambiguity is a desirable element in my work." They execute their visions on individual artistic ontology, hence the absence of post-colonial or racial/cultural totems. Of course, one may wonder if there was a post-colonial symbol begotten from the Western Art Development under globalization hidden in his work? Or was it a passive protest against the political absention due to a sense of disappointment and disillusion in politics? In "The Distant Mountains" by Jolly Koh, he reenacted a horizontal landscape composition (the Song dynasty landscape presentation), and I wonder if he resorted his nostalgia and memory of his cultural motherland to his creation? Or was it a "petit object á" in the absence of "Otherness"? He said that, (the work) "refers to an ancient tradition that goes back to Song Dynasty paintings of mountains in turquoise blue. However, the painting is executed in colours that express optimism for the future."

## 5. Conclusion

If one looks at "MERDEKA 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art" from "Hybridity" and "Multiculturalism" in the culture after the nation's independence, he or she may better understand the inclination and positioning of the present Malaysian government-sponsored art exhibitions. As a Chinese-Malaysian artist, I was interested in reflecting upon my own position in this particular combination of political, religious (Muslim, Buddhist/Taoist, Hindu and Christian), social, economic, and racial (Malays, Chinese, Hindus, aborigines, and people of mixed blood) structure and ambiance. In other words, I tried to reveal and explore "Identity" and "Ideology" issues in MERDEKA 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art, and how they dictate the Malaysian political scene and cultural structure.

Out of the 67 artists, there were 53 Muslim participants (they were known to be Muslims from their Islamic names). And most of them were proud Malays of Malaysia to execute their artistic visions.

If we were to meet the ratios of 4:1 (4 being Malays, 1 being non-Malay) or 3:1 (3 Malays to 1 non-Malay), there should be 17 or 22 Chinese artists in the fair. Here again we

witnessed another racial inequality. (In Chapter 1, we discussed the privileges of the Malays; the Chinese employee quota as first-class officials among government departments should be: (1) 4 Malays against 1 non-Malays in the Interior and Foreign Ministries; (2) 3 to 1 in the Judicial Department; (3) 3 to 1 in the Customs Duties Department; (4) 4 to 1 in the Armed Forces; and (5) 4 to 1 from upper levels down to the grass root officers.) In addition to the non-Muslim Chinese artists in the exhibition roster, we also found that there were 2 Hindu participants (one being a Muslim. It's reasonable to assume that, in addition to the 13 Chinese and 2 Hindu artists, there is a possibility that there is a small number of non-Malays out of the rest of the 53 participants). The government has never been the neutral factor of the Malaysia racial issues—this fact should be one of the most powerful weapons to non-Malays who strive for human rights equality and cultural democracy. We can't measure how severe the racial polarization problem is in Malaysia, but these issues are rampant in certain institutions (schools, colleges, and official organizations), including the media and the political circle. Such inequality also threatens the artistic ecological development of non-Malay artists in Malaysia.

When we refer to Malaysians under the nationalism discourse, they encompass more than just Malay people — these Malays include all sorts of ethnicities who swear their allegiance to Malaysia and who own Malaysian citizenship. This calling presents a tremendous appeal to non-Malays, and a daunting challenge to UMNO followers who wish to monopolize their privileges. It also touches off resentment and panic among Malays. For reasons that “Malaysia is a country of the Malays,” Malays should not acknowledge and accept an excess of Malay-only privileges (the country is made up of three major races — Malays, Chinese and Hindus — plus other privileged aborigines and peoples of mixed blood.)

The New Economic Policy was a plan of an accomplished fact launched after the 1969 “513 Incident.” The two major objectives of this plan was to: 1, restructure the society in order to correct the imbalance caused by the unjust wealth ownership, and the racial identification process caused by such economic activity; and 2, to eradicate poverty. NEP aimed at benefiting the already-wealthy Malays. But Social restructuring only attained to profit a small knot of high-ranking Malay aborigines.

The non-Malays directly felt the abuse and prejudice induced by the implementation of NEP, and it damaged racial good-will. Take the 1985 Malaysia Airlines (MAS) issuance of stocks. Such a publicly listed company has to save 30% of the total shares for the aborigines, *and* to save another 30% out of the rest of the 70% stocks to the people. The approach

infuriated non-aborigines. This incident involving MAS clearly manifested the racial disunity nature caused by NEP.

The Malaysia racial (nationalism) awareness should be understood in the context with other large cultural systems — and not comprehended as other political ideologies upheld by other blind believers. Such a cultural system at the same time becomes the backdrop in which nationalism is formed. One can only understand nationalism by combining nationalism and other cultural systems. Anderson argues that the cores of racial and nationalism issues lies not in “truth and fabrication,” but should be seen through the mirrors of knowledge and understanding. To him, all the existing and races that left their mark in history are the products of the greater history background. And only by objectively understand the historical course and mechanism formulated by a unique national identity (including self-identity and identity with otherness) can one truly get rid of the racial supremacy complex, and in turn look for ways to coexist, and search for a peaceful way to face each other in the “imagined community.” The root of racism is in fact rooted in hierarchical ideology, and not racial ideology.

We can probably be enlightened by Singapore’s racial identity establishment in the context of Mr. Anderson’s racial viewpoint interpretation: Singapore is a neighboring country to Malaysia with similar racial structure. And Singapore’s racial policy can serve as a great precedent for Malaysia. By the time Singapore broke away from Malaysia, the world had the impression that a third China was being born. Though Singapore is not at all another “China,” its population makeup is mostly Chinese, or the offspring of Chinese; these people are in control of Singapore politics and economic powers. Singapore customs and practices are also very conventional Chinese; and most of the Singapore citizens undeniably have Chinese blood.

Mr. Lee Kuan Yew—Singapore’s first prime minister who led People’s Action Party—was not targeting at building the third China. He wanted to build a “Singapore of Singaporeans” that embraced many ethnicities. Lee’s ideal has long transcended racial limitations. His achievement serves as a sobering reminder to Malaysia, a country embroiled in racial disputes and entanglements. It’s an excellent reference point from which one can draw inspirations. In “Imagined Community,” it’s said that “take the national anthems sung during national holidays: no matter how hackneyed the lyrics, how mediocre the tune, the action of actually singing the anthem embodied a simultaneous experience. Precisely at this time, people who are total strangers to each other are in sync, singing the same song(Anderson, 2004: 3).

In this “unisonance” imagery, we witness a selfless action. We know that while we’re



singing the song, others — total strangers — are also singing. We're not aware of their whereabouts, yet they're singing in a place inaccessible to us. The song has united us, and it's an application of an imagined community built on music, and provides directions to establishing nationalism (Anderson, 2004:158). I feel that, if Malaysia can manage to look for answers in history under this context, they also need to find a thread of ideas extending from the colonial period till now, and create a sense of belonging that multiculturalism offers to a certain race and people.

The minorities emphasize that they will challenge the so-called common culture, ethnic culture and mainstream culture in a form of collective battle on this cultural identity foundation in the hope of seeking equality and esteem. The known “equality execution” is not tantamount to “equality” in assimilation; it's the equality between cultural differences. Malaysia's future artistic development can transcend the bondage of religious and political ideologies, and give rise to fresh hopes and possibilities through multicultural baptism and nourishment, and truly and fully manifest the beauty of Malaysian art. Racism and racial polarization were not necessary caused by multi-ethnic society.

Let me conclude this paper with the statement from the work by Raja Zahabuddin's “*Temuduga Terbuka*”: “My work is based on the idea of freedom of expression, freedom of choice, freedom of doing art, freedom of movement, practiced by Malaysians for the last 50 years, with little interference from the government.” My expectations for Malaysia's future are that the government can honestly implement equality for the peoples — instead of “equality” in assimilation practices. I hope for equality among cultural differences, and I hope for more possibilities in Malaysia's future art development.

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