

# *Methodology*

## Iconological Analysis of the Peranakan Intimate Lifestyle: A Case Study of Sylvia Lee Goh's *Woman, Oh! Woman* Painting Series

**Eddy Izuwan Musa\* and Sarena Abdullah**

*School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA*

\*Corresponding Author: Eddyizuwan@hotmail.com

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Peranakan Chinese, sometimes known as the Baba Nyonya, are known for their hybrid culture. Most studies on the Peranakan examine the architectural heritage, material culture and cuisine; there is limited focus on the study of visual artworks of the Peranakan. This paper explores and analyses a painting series entitled, “Woman Oh! Woman Series” by Sylvia Lee Goh, a descendant of a Peranakan family in Kedah, who works predominantly in producing Nyonya-themed paintings. This paper provides a deeper reading of this series by drawing on Panofsky's theory of iconography and iconology as a tool in discussing these artworks within the larger context of Peranakan culture. Through Panofsky's three stages of iconography, this paper explores how the four artworks in the “Woman Oh! Woman Series” could be read through three main significant trajectories in parallel with the Peranakan ethos—the persistence of nature veneration against mortality and ancestor worship, refined etiquette and gender roles, and camaraderie and communal guest reverence.*

**Keywords:** *Peranakan Chinese, Peranakan community, lifestyle, Baba Nyonya, Sylvia Lee Goh, iconography analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

Peranakan Chinese culture has sparked critical interests in recent decades due to the renewed findings about Peranakan contributions to the nation during the early pre-colonial years of the early 20th century. In Singapore, the release of the critically acclaimed, 34-episode Mandarin Drama serial entitled *The Little Nyonya*, which made its debut on 25 November 2008, on Singapore's MediaCorp TV Channel 8, also helped to create interests in the culture. The drama acted as a catalyst for renewed research on this subject particularly around the Southeast Asia region (Dawis 2015: 68). The tourism industry as well as the national heritage forces had realigned their efforts to augment the presence of this once submerged culture back to the populace (Henderson 2003; Worden 2003; Stokes-Rees 2008). This renewed vigour, in turn, sparked on-going debates surrounding issues on authenticity alongside its controversial stand when placed in contrast with nationalism (Imran, Abdullah and Bustami 2015: 2).

The photographic historical sources used in most museums are mainly collected images of 'posed' family portraits by Peranakan families of individual Peranakan, either produced alive or after their death (Foo 2015: 20–25). Although many of them were depicted in various settings and 'natural-inclined' poses, the subjects within the still frames were still made aware of their moments being 'captured' by the photographer. This is largely attributed to the fact that still frame photography during the 19th century required elaborate setup for a single shot; hence, 'candid portraits' or 'street-style photography' style shots were not a commodity option until almost a century later. Nevertheless, these photographs are historical sources that can preserve information regarding visual motifs and costumes of the Peranakan.

For knowledge pertaining to matters concerning the ethos, philosophy, anthropology, doctrines, or the intimacy lifestyle of a Peranakan household, historians often turn back to literary writings or oral depictions of such events. Yet, the interpretation of words proved to be a malleable medium as it grants authority to its readers to formulate their own visual descriptions of what they have read. In this case, the lack of an affirmative strong visual guide would aggravate this issue. Even *The Little Nyonya* series had critiques revealing several errors in terminologies used, the over exoticization and romanticization of Nyonya embroidery, cuisine, and clothing, that were deemed to unjustly emphasize a stereotypical aspect of the culture (Dawis 2015: 74).

This paper, therefore, proposes an alternative to the current literary writings or oral depictions of the Peranakan by examining the works of Sylvia Lee Goh, a renowned Malaysian

painter. A Peranakan descendant herself, her lifelong works depict her childhood to adulthood experiences growing up in a Peranakan household and family. With regards to her work, Sylvia explains, “My colours translate the moods and messages of my culture, belief, worship, and experiences” (Tan and Lee 2015: 32). The series of paintings that the artist painted were also depicted as if there were vivid activities ‘frozen’ in a frame, much like a paused-frame of an actual event. The characters of her paintings were often portrayed in a relaxed, natural, or ‘intimate’ state, devoid of any ‘intruding’ presence of any observers. By employing Panofsky’s method of art analysis to look at Sylvia’s art works, we will demonstrate that this nostalgic series of paintings can be used as an alternative source of analysis of this rich culture and perhaps give impetus for another angle for discourse on the Peranakan. Besides written accounts and papers regarding the Peranakan, this paper also refers to two Peranakan documentaries entitled *Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story* (2009) and *Not a Worthless Scrap/Bukanlah Perca Tidak Berharga* (2015). The narrative form of the two documentaries, allows the understanding of the social structure and the Peranakan community as a living society, rather than as Worden frames it, “...an exoticization of the Peranakan, and a freezing of their existence in a past time which bears little relation to the present” (Worden 2003: 37).

## PANOFSKY’S ART ANALYSIS

We will limit the scope of this paper only to one series of Sylvia’s work entitled the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*. Sylvia herself resonates more with the *Woman Oh! Woman Series* in contrast to another series entitled the *Sister Act Series*, as she included herself as one of the characters in the painting. The women portrayed in the *Sister Act Series*, however, do not represent any particular person as Sylvia intended the *Sister Act Series* to be more of a public message portraying her thoughts on female to female relationships. In contrast, she was more personal and delicate with her handling of the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*, therefore, making it a more valid choice for this paper.

We will employ the theory of iconography and iconology via Panofsky’s approach of art historical analysis. In Panofsky’s own words, “Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form” (Panofsky 1939: 3). As the study of iconology and iconography is often used to study Western religious painting, this paper is significant as it will demonstrate how Panofsky’s analysis can be used, despite the contrast, in a local Malaysian context, in this

case, Sylvia's artwork as a way to understand the artist and the culture that she was brought up in. It must be stressed that the employment of Panofsky's art analysis in previous iconography studies in Malaysian art has often been done in a general descriptive way. We intend to use this framework to specifically analyse and theorize the allegorical messages, thoughts, instinct, and 'intent' of the author in her series to further understand the intricacies of a Peranakan's views on society, relationships, and life.

Panofsky reiterates that to fully understand the significance of the painting and its nuances, the lens of the researcher should not only be "...familiar with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization" (ibid.: 4). In Panofsky's own words, "Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form" (ibid.: 3).

Each painting will be placed under critical analysis in three distinctive stages, as proposed by Panofsky's theory as seen in this table below (ibid.: 14):

**Table 1** Erwin Panofsky's Three Stages of Iconographic/Iconological Analysis

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION
I – Primary or natural subject matter - (A) factual, (B) expressional - constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis.)
II – Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word
III – Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values.	Iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis.)

While the figure above explains briefly the three stages of analysis, Panofsky provided another table that further illustrates the 'activities or focuses' that should be carried out in each subsequent stage (ibid.: 15).

In summary, as shown in Table 1 and 2 above, Panofsky's analysis requires an intensive background research on Sylvia Lee Goh and the Peranakan culture as the fundamental knowledge that would help us in analysing the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*.

**Table 2** Methodology for Erwin Panofsky's Analysis

EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CONTROLLING PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION
Practical Experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).
Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung.'	History of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).

Thus, the next section in this paper explores the Peranakan culture distinctively as well as Sylvia's background alongside her documented responses regarding the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*. The subsequent section will then explore the iconological aspects of each painting in the series.

## THE PERANAKAN—AN OVERVIEW

The history of the Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia stretches back to 500–600 years ago, the time when Chinese traders arrived in the Malay Peninsula and established themselves as contributors to the new culture in parts of the Malay Archipelago (Lee 2008: 162). The term 'Peranakan Chinese' is commonly associated with the Baba and Nyonya community in Singapore, Malacca, and Penang. It denotes a local-born acculturated community. The Peranakan practises a lifestyle following their Chinese heritage while integrating some parts of the Malay culture. The combination of the original and Malay cultures resulted in the Peranakan Chinese culture (ibid.: 162).

Nevertheless, there are two dominant theories that narrate the origins of this community. Firstly, some sources infer that the Peranakan came about through intermarriage between immigrants from China with the local populace of Malacca during the 15th century. It is believed that a political marriage took place between his Highness, Sultan Mansor Shah of the Malacca Sultanate with Princess Hang Li Poh of China. The princess was escorted

by five hundred maids who eventually settled down via marriage in the Malay Archipelago (*Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story* 2009).

A second version claims that the community evolved more than 700 years ago during the 14th century, when Chinese traders from the Fujian province of South China travelled to Malacca Sultanate for the purposes of trade (Ng and Karim 2016: 94). These traders came by sea, and upon waiting for the change of the monsoon; intermarried with the local women in Malacca (*Not a Worthless Scrap/Bukanlah Perca Tidak Berharga* 2015; Lee 2016). The nomadic trading business was not a place for womenfolk at the time, thus inciting the need for these newly-wed families to settle in the port of Malacca as their husband folk roamed the seas (*Not a Worthless Scrap/Bukanlah Perca Tidak Berharga* 2015). While these two theories differ with regards to the origins, there is consensus that these newly formed communities were held as esteemed traders. The Peranakan families were therefore assistants to the traders in conducting their businesses (Ng and Karim 2016: 94).

Among the cultures of this community that are still being celebrated and preserved today are their exquisite and distinctive architecture and cultural artefacts. Its pottery, furniture, costumes, and embroideries have been marketed to tourists. The Peranakan culture exhibited elements from the cultures of many of its neighbouring nations; especially with regards to their architectural and costume motifs. The Peranakan was also influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial powers. The strong influence of the British in Malaya, especially during the late 19th to early 20th centuries, had significant impacted on the community. As the Peranakan was receptive of English culture, they sent their children to English missionary schools instead of Chinese schools. Some of these children furthered their tertiary education or professional qualification in England and came back to Malaya to serve in the British public firms. As a result, the Peranakan dominated the public service and established their influence in the Straits Settlements. They were widely recognised as the King's Chinese due to their undivided loyalty to the British (Png 1969: 100).

The Peranakan continues to practice Chinese traditional customs such as celebrating Chinese New Year and the Lantern festival. At the same time, they embrace some aspects of Malay and English cultures. The influence of these two cultures along with Portuguese, Dutch, and Indonesian elements, has significantly affected Peranakan culture.<sup>1</sup>

## Peranakan households

Peranakan households have very distinctive setups, which are well replicated across its communities; thus suggesting a sort of ubiquitous lifestyle that each family shares. The information presented here is essential to inform the outcome of the next stage of this research.

“... a Peranakan townhouse basically consists of five sections on the ground level, namely the reception hall, the sitting room, the ancestral hall, spacious courtyards, the kitchens and the washroom whereas [on] the first level is [are] the bedrooms and bridal chamber.” (*Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story* 2009)

One of the distinguished characteristics is the reception hall, aka ‘Thia Besar’; reserved particularly for guests, who, unless permitted were not allowed to roam any further into the household (Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum n.d.: 2). Directly after it, lies the ‘Thia-Gelap’; translated as ‘Dark Space’. This room is the outermost part of the house where the unmarried Nyonyas could wander. They would often peek at guests through slits of holes in dividers or walls into the reception hall. The divider is often carved with floral or animal ornaments chosen to reflect not only the wealth of the household but also their status in the local community (*Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story* 2009).

Beyond that lies the ancestral hall, also known as ‘Thia-Abu’ where the Peranakan established an altar to honour their deceased ancestors and gods (Ng and Karim 2016: 100). Despite their imminent desire to emulate the West, the Peranakan held on to many of the customs and traditions associated with Chinese culture (Lim 2008: 33). The community mainly practices Chinese customs of filial piety, alongside a combination of Daoism, Buddhism, and ancestral worship (Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum n.d.: 97). Many other scholars claim this section to be the most important part within the household. The living descendants of the family are tasked to appease the spirits of their ancestors by paying respect to them daily at this space (Dawis 2015: 69).

Peranakan houses are blessed with having two courtyards that are often used by adults to have parties. These courtyards are often not roofed; this allows fresh air to circulate around the house. It is also their belief that rain is a symbol of wealth flowing into the house (*Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story* 2009).

The current Peranakan descendants such as the artist under discussion are extremely proud of their ancestral heritage; more and more Peranakan are defending their culture to endure the era of modernisation.

### SYLVIA LEE GOH

Sylvia is a Malaysian self-taught painter noted for celebrating her Peranakan heritage in her unique self-developed painting style of still life, self-portraits and the womenfolk clad in Nyonya *kebayas* or *sarong* at rest or play.<sup>2</sup> Tan Sei Hon, who curated her exhibition, deemed her approaches to be ‘idiosyncratic’, which ultimately differ from those of the academically trained and the conventionally inclined. He remarked that these unschooled artists were less concerned about appropriating their art to the prescribed standards; therefore dictating their work to exist mainly via self-instinct and intuition (Tan 2015: 11). He also claimed that this factor drew out the earnestness of her efforts, thoughts, and feelings as the subject matter of her art encompassed her personal life and matters close to her heart (ibid.: 14).

Sylvia’s paintings are not necessarily predicated on the focus of formalistic perfections, instead she plays with the overall moods and manners of the scene, of the characters and their activities. The narrative stemming from an autobiographical base of Sylvia’s own life plays a large role in depicting her works (Abdullah 2015).

### PANOFSKY ANALYSIS: *WOMAN OH! WOMAN SERIES*—THE FOUR PAINTINGS

According to Sylvia Lee Goh, the *Woman Oh! Woman Series* was painted to reminisce Maimun Din of the early 1970s (1971/2). Sylvia described the series as, “...a tribute of sorts to a very special woman, strong and resilient, a bureaucrat, a wife, mother and friend” (Tan and Lee 2015: 39). Unlike the conventional portraiture milieu where the subject is made into a spectacle for an unknown spectator (viewer); this series totally alienates the spectator’s presence to the side. The spectator is turned merely into a voyeur; totally irrelevant to the outcome of the scene. Maimun Din was Sylvia’s neighbour who was said to be extremely supportive of Sylvia’s early attempts of exploring her artistry. Perhaps burdened by the uncertainties of being an early aspiring artist, Sylvia found a kindred refuge in Maimun, who responded well to her intense efforts. Sylvia exalted her close friend being the first woman appointed to the post of a Secretary General in the Justice Ministry in Malaysia, that she



deemed was an “...unprecedented move which happily led to more capable women into the higher echelons of the civil service”. Maimun was described to be delightful, warm, intelligent, and open-minded. Sylvia further lamented her friend’s tragic short-lived life as she passed away due to cancer in 1991 (ibid.: 39).

The series consists of three paintings initially presented in her first published catalogue, *Sylvia Lee Goh: A Malaysian Artist Two Decades of Art “From the Heart” 1978–1998*. However by 2015, Sylvia notably replaced the third painting with another as shown in the release of her other catalogue entitled, *Sylvia Lee Goh—Dulu dan Kini: Jiwa Abadi, Then and Now: The Enduring Heart*. The replacement of the third painting, however, does not affect the reading of this series. In fact, it can be argued that the memorialization of the similar theme persists strongly within the artist even later, produced through another wave of artistic vigour that developed and grew within the artist herself. Thus, we will present all four of the paintings in this paper as they are all relevant to the focus of this analysis.

In an interview with Sylvia, she further narrated that Maimun faced her last days abroad in Australia, presumably happily with her family and children, with whom she (Sylvia) had limited contact apart from handwritten letters. Thus, the first painting of the series, *Woman Oh! Woman—The Letter* (1988) is actually Sylvia’s illustration of Maimun’s cancer condition as she read Sylvia’s letter. Sylvia also was exasperated that an important line that she held dearly in her written work describing the series was left out in the print of her 2015 catalogue (See Figure 5).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the object of interpretation in the case of Table 1, are the four artworks from this series.

1. *Woman, Oh! Woman, I—The Letter*, 1988 (Figure 1)

The painting appears to be portraying a woman (Maimun) sitting comfortably on a metallic ornament chair in a very lush garden. She is seen to be reading a letter with a somewhat satisfied face.

2. *Woman, Oh! Woman, II*, 1988/1991 (Figure 2)

The painting appears to be portraying two women sitting comfortably on metallic ornament chairs in a very lush garden. They are seen in a relaxed pose, and conversing with one another over assortments of delicacies, or *kuih(s)*. The painting appears to be a recollection, albeit in an enhanced ideal setting. During our

personal interview, she pointed that the figure on the left appears to be Maimun, a compositional arrangement she maintained throughout the series.

3. *Woman, Oh! Woman, III—Camaraderie*, 1988/1991 (Figure 3)

The painting seems to be a variation of Figure 2, except this time Maimun appears to be more dominative of the conversation, and Sylvia instead, is the listener. It is interesting to note that this painting was removed from the updated *Woman Oh! Woman Series* in the 2015 publication. It was replaced with Figure 4—*My Friend, My Sister!* Sylvia herself never really came out to explain why this replacement took place.

4. *Woman, Oh! Woman—My Friend, My Sister!* 2008/2014 (Figure 4)

While sharing a similar theme with Figure 2 and 3, this painting appears to take place within a well decorated interior. Scattered around the characters are the traditional Nyonya ‘baskets’ indicating that the delicacies that were transported to the scene. These Nyonya ceremonial baskets are known as *sianah* or *bakul siah*. This particular ‘basket’ is used to store *kuih* as gifts during ceremonial events such as birthdays, weddings, or inaugurations. The painting appears to be a recollection, albeit in an enhanced ideal setting. The posture of Sylvia (right) leaning heavily towards Maimun (left) while gently holding her shoulder, is suggestive that they were conversing in hush, secretive voices. This fact suggests the painting depicts a behind the scene scenario of an important event that the two women are a part of.

Although the most consistent aspects of Sylvia Lee Goh’s paintings throughout all of her works would be the constant presence of ideal beauty; “...even in adolescence, girls are shown almost withdrawn, sitting in fairy-like gardens, quietly anticipating that which is sensed but not quite known” (Anurendra 1998: 8). Yet, the characters of her works are always portrayed as indulging themselves into refined manners of pleasure, and in abundance. But they are not ever depicted as greedy or overwhelmed by any of what the pleasure has to offer, instead they maintain a stoic innocence throughout their activities. Her display and exaltation of this attribute in most of her paintings can be deemed naïve and frivolous in terms of artistic style and subject matter; and also a total contradiction when placed in contrast with



**Figure 1** Sylvia Lee Goh, *Woman, Oh! Woman, I—The Letter* (1988).



**Figure 2** Sylvia Lee Goh, *Woman, Oh! Woman, II* (1988/1991).





**Figure 3** Sylvia Lee Goh, *Woman, Oh! Woman, III—Camaraderie* (1988/1991).

the current times of anguish and economic crisis (Wong 1998: 11). Nevertheless, if we were to analyse Sylvia's work with deeper engagement as espoused by Panofsky based on the various equipment of interpretation and the controlling principle of interpretation (Table 2), sometimes contradictory elements or visions can persist as well. Thus, these artworks will be discussed based on three major inclinations that can be observed and analysed from her works.

1. Nature Veneration versus Mortality and Ancestor Worship
2. Refined Etiquette and Gender Roles
3. Camaraderie and Communal Guest Reverence



**Figure 4** *Woman, Oh! Woman—My Friend, My Sister!* (2008/2014).

## NATURE VENERATION VERSUS MORTALITY AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP

One particular significant observation of her work is the persistence of floral elements on the overall visual motif, which is distinctively Peranakan. Anurendra writes (1998: 8) “...motifs, symbols, subject and themes explored—the various paraphernalia; which is Peranakan, the rituals that go hand-in-hand with the paraphernalia; the reverence paid to nature.” Thus, we can observe that three of the paintings from the series itself occur within the setting of a lush garden (Figure 1, 2, 3). While Figure 2 and Figure 3 could be a recollection of Sylvia’s memories; it must be noted that the imaginative inspiration of Figure 1 also displayed a prominent garden setting. Sylvia claimed that due to the absence of information, she had no visual images of Maimun’s supposed garden in Australia. However, being a Peranakan herself, Sylvia imagined or envisioned that in this painting, Maimun could have, ideally speaking, a garden within her home.

Figure 1 places a higher attribute to the nature elements with regards to the narrative. It is seemingly unfitting at first, for bright lush colours to be used to depict the theme of death. Even the ‘cancerous’ indicator adorning Maimun’s head, presumably the short scarf that she used to cover her balding hair (due to chemotherapy) had floral patterns inscribed upon it. This could be argued as largely attributed to Sylvia’s perception with regards to mortality, which is by itself reflective of Peranakan customs. About Sylvia’s treatment of nature, Sharifah Fatimah Zubir and Chu Li write in *Pameran Seni Cipta Puteri Malaysia* as cited in *Sylvia Lee Goh—Dulu dan Kini: Jiwa Abadi, Then and Now: The Enduring Heart* (2015: 100), “...the innate link between nature and man... We are destined to follow an eternal cycle of growth and decline, life and death. Nature and human beings are forever linked in this cycle.”

In Figure 2, the theme of death lingers in subtlety; for Maimun is clad in blue. She is seen there, arguably as the only ‘cold’ element within the overall scene, as she is clad in blue attire. This could be attributed to the Peranakan’s perception of the colour blue, where it is likened to funerals and death (Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum n.d.: 7).

While these paintings invoke a sense of nostalgic happiness of those idealistic times, Sylvia also hints that it is only a temporary event, and therefore this makes it much more valuable. Perhaps her usage of flowers and plants as a major motif in the works to emphasize this particular concept of mortality equals beauty. Much akin to the value of a flower versus its plastic form, with the former holding higher aesthetic value and beauty, not only due to its authenticity but also to the fact that its beauty is temporal, a fleeting moment that will soon

face the inevitability of death. Beauty, in terms of narrative here, however, represents ‘joy’, which in itself is also of short duration (Anurendra 1998: 8). The fleeting moment of a flower, for Sylvia’s perception is an allegory of the preciousness of life due to death.

The perception of death or mortality that the initial part of this section has mentioned varies from the conventional norm. Affected by her Peranakan lineage, which values ancestral worship, Sylvia perhaps sees death as a gateway that transfers a worshipper to the worshipped. She likens the concept of death to a rite of passage, which is also exemplified in her other work entitled *The Light at the End* (1997). She also laments that it is unfortunate that we, as a society are conditioned to fear it. Life, as she described, is about making the right choices that will eventually lead to a deserving afterlife (Tan and Lee 2015: 41). To further understand Sylvia’s optimistic view of mortality, Sylvia’s very own epitaph in reassurance for herself when painting death-themed works is included in both of her catalogues.

Do not fear,  
 Though the kiss of death is inevitable,  
                     And the unknown blur,  
                     For the generations before us,  
                     And the histories we hold so dear,  
 And although we shake and quake with fear,  
 To abandon the loved ones we hold so dear,  
                     It can’t be all that bad,  
                     Or living won’t be worth it here,  
                     Wasted would be,  
                     All the restraints and self-denial,  
                     To an end that justifies the fear,  
 And life would have no meaning here.

Cover me with flowers where I lie,  
                     Remember me with a smile,  
                     Instead of a tear in your eye,  
                     For are not all things transient,  
                     Even you and I,  
                     Destined to pass through,



The final portal of mortality,  
To the waiting arms of eternity.  
(Lee 2015: 72; 1998a: 58)

From the description of how profound her action was when she included the ‘addition’ to her written work in the prelude of this series, it is of no question that her intent was to make it clear that Maimun’s children should always remember their mother. The most important element in a Peranakan’s household is the ancestral shrine, for the practice of ancestor worship is another attribute to be explored among the Peranakan, as it appears time and time again in almost all scholarly works and oral accounts of this culture. Even in the Museum of Melaka, the ancestral shrine is a key centre piece of the exhibit there, resonating with Aimee Dawis’s claims. Sylvia, however, sees it beyond a mere dutiful obligation; she celebrates the kindred relationship between family members that should transcend through death. While mortality is inevitable, Sylvia advocates the relationships between people to be immortalized, even more so, in this case between family members.

Drawing from her epitaph, “cover me with flowers where I lie,” what is depicted in the scene in Figure 1 seems curiously the opposite. Maimun, appears to be sitting ‘on’ a bed of presumed flowers, or nature. This could be indicative of Maimun being very near fate as of the moment depicted in this painting—as if the ‘bed’ is preparing to accept her when her time comes. Death is a topic that can be argued as intimate by normal social standards and only discussed in a more private setting. Yet, as evident here, the burden of it is shared. While she was perhaps not so eager to face death, she, in Sylvia’s eyes, had accepted her fate and was satisfied with the life she had. It is a fitting thought, that the letter sent by Sylvia helped ease her eventual departure from this world.

## REFINED ETIQUETTE AND GENDER ROLES

Among the first key features that both Baba and Nyonya display would be their refined self-portrayal at all times, even during their more intimate moments. This aspect could be largely attributed to their high status in the community by being esteemed traders; and also influenced by their obsession of flaunting their wealth and achievements. They strive to be regarded as noble, respected, and powerful; therefore their constant vigilance of self-presentation seem

evident. Some claim that the Peranakan were brought up in a ‘fine or polite’ cultural setting and through child-rearing, they were taught to uphold the values of high integrity (Low 2014: 132).

In his research on leadership qualities derived from the Peranakan’s lifestyle, Low outlined some of his interviewee’s comments describing the refined etiquette of this community: “...being refined is considered good...” and “...they are gentle people, and they would, in most instances, be accommodating and attend to the needs of their people” (ibid.: 136).

For this research, we shall limit our observations to how refined etiquette is represented in the works of Sylvia. Anurendra, for example, describes the women depicted in Sylvia’s works as hopeful and independent “...yet they seem in conflict with the ever present aura of sensuality...” (1998: 8). Even within a private scenario as illustrated in this series, there are certain refined elements omnipresent in the subtle, less bombastic posture, in the modesty of the clothes, in the exquisite manner of arrangements of the assortments onto various plates, in the mere act of sustaining a lush garden, to the act of presenting elaborative packaging of gifts.

The Peranakan household practiced a distinction between the roles of the men and women. The Baba identified their roles as external household participants while the Nyonya acknowledged theirs as being internal household managers, caretakers, custom bearers, status presentation, and in some cases; wealth ‘flaunters’.

Characteristics that suggest femininity are well ‘performed’ by all the female characters in Sylvia’s works in this series, who even in their most intimate, candid states, maintained individual ‘refined’ poses. The female figures do not exalt the loud, big, and boisterous, but are presented as rather quiet, soft, polite, and demure in her series. The territorial authority can be seen through the setting of Figure 4 that takes place either in the dining hall or in the kitchen. If we appropriate the territorial authority as represented in Figure 4, it can be noted that the male figures rarely trespass into the female ‘territory’ unless they need to. There is no absolute law forbidding them entry (apart from guests), yet there is an unspoken affirmation of this practice.

Gender roles can be further defined by the tradition of the woman of the household holding absolute power such as through the *bibik* who are even more powerful over the men in some cases, but restricted only within the domain of their homes. The *bibik* are matriarchs of the family—the role often carried out by the eldest living female, who would also commonly

be the mother figure. The matriarch oversees all family household matters, including the daily management of the ancestral hall, or 'Thia-Abu' and often will be aided by her female kin (Ng and Karim 2016: 100).

### CAMARADERIE AND COMMUNAL GUEST REVERANCE

While most of the themes explored here were subtly derived; camaraderie was one of the core aspects illustrated in the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*. Sylvia, in two occasions, portrayed the importance of relationships between individuals in the *Woman Oh! Woman Series*, as well as *Sister Act Series*. Sylvia held on very dearly, the memories of her friendship with Maimun Din, to the extent of immortalizing her 'essence' in her paintings. The *Sister Act Series* is also her way of propagating her views regarding the stages of relationships with a hopeful closure to her audiences in her attempt to encourage the bonds between people.

Building upon Sylvia's decision to compositionally place Maimun in the most flattering of angles (her dominance to the viewer and as the active participant in the narrative), she also suggests the intimacy of their friendship via her poses. In Figure 2, Maimun's (seated on the left) pose of crossing her legs and resting her shoulders on the table suggests the state of candidness and the shared intimacy. The postures of both women in Figure 3 seem to suggest they were both inclined towards each other. Figure 4 places Sylvia's (seated on the right) posture leaning heavily towards Maimun while gently holding her shoulder. The poses can be argued as serving to illustrate the bond and camaraderie between Sylvia and Maimun, and the intimacy of friendship lies beyond the casual talks in the garden, extending even into the dining hall or kitchen. In stark contrast to all of the *Sister Act Series*, there seem to be much more intimacy and happiness portrayed in these paintings.

Sylvia's painting here described her own experiences. However, the visual imageries can be representing the countless other types of camaraderie between other fellow Nyonya throughout the ages. In a more traditional setting of the Peranakan, these conversations might have taken place in their courtyards (*Bringing to Life: The Peranakan Story*, 2009). Perhaps due to the Peranakan's strong enduring culture, one can derive only few differences from similar occurrences between the Nyonya in the past and in the present.

In addition, there seems to be an occurring reverence to the guest visiting the household (Figure 2, 3, 4). In all the paintings, Sylvia places Maimun—the 'guest' on the left side of the frame; aesthetically this seems to be more compositionally pleasing and dominant

to look at. This subtle notion suggests that Sylvia has exalted her guest over herself. In Figure 3; Maimun, already a dominant subject in the painting, as portrayed on the left, is made even more prominent on the 'narrative' of the image itself. Anurendra states, "...when there are more than one actor in the work, the situations the artist has created are derived from her own personal experience. Hence, the role of the narrative plays a large part in her works as well" (1998: 8). What we can draw from this observation, is the act of humility on Sylvia's part in this friendship.

This concept is also augmented in Figure 2, where Sylvia seems to have placed Maimun figuratively in the centre stage of her audience. Even in that particular painting, Sylvia decided to represent Maimun in the most pleasant angle and pose, while her self-portrait had her back against the viewers—as if she herself, is a participant alongside her viewers in the act of 'conserving' or 'marvelling' over Maimun.

The assortment of food presented on the table are Sylvia's nod to the Peranakan customs of sharing delicacies to a visiting guest. Anurendra reiterated this with "...she draws exclusively from her near obsession with the Baba Nyonya background—the altars, the objects, their setting, even the colourful sweets that the ladies indulge in; they all recall the traditions and practices and detail of a by-gone—recently revised era." (1998: 8). In Figure 4, the painting depicts a scene where one of them (either) visits the other bearing gifts of *kuih* and they aid each other in the effort of sorting them out to be feasted upon while they partake in their usual activity of casual conversation. The conversation here, however, can be argued to be secretive in nature, as seen in the posture of both women. The gift bearer herself is left ambiguous, supposedly on purpose by Sylvia, signifying that the exchange is mutual. This can also be seen in the activity of sorting out the array of *kuih*.

Curiously, Figure 4 can also be interpreted differently. The assortment of *kuih* on the table, with the scattered elaborate tiffin carriers, suggests that they were brought as gifts. The image could be depicting both of them gossiping over the 'official' events occurring over at the main hall—'Thia Besar' while they sort out the gifts given, and putting together a tray of *kuih* to be brought out back to serve the guest. Thus, this interpretation adds another layer of 'guest reverence,' of which the gifts are indeed being 'shared' with the presenter in a communal fashion. The guests are also regarded high enough to be presented with varieties of *kuih* on elaborative trays or plates.

It is notable that the assortment of *kuih* is pluralistic, both in quantity and variety, while in many other distinctive cultures there is not much emphasis being placed upon the

manner of the offerings being presented to guests, only in the act of it—case in point, the collective west’s offering of a cup of coffee or tea. The mere elaborative act of this notion; common among the Peranakan suggests that ‘sharing’ is a communal feature among them. There seems to be a lack of selfish ownership in the light of this, and also partially in the light of the Peranakan’s usual perceived wealth.

## CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that the painting of Figure 3 was removed from the updated *Woman Oh! Woman Series* in the 2015 publication. It is to be replaced with Figure 4 instead. Sylvia herself never really came out to explain why this replacement took place, yet we will provide a theory via our analysis of the comparison between Figure 3 and Figure 4. If we were to limit our scope of analysis using only Panofsky’s methodology stages of I to III, there seems to be repetitive notions between Figure 2 and Figure 3. Figure 4, *My Friend, My Sister!* by the very title itself, is indicative of another layer of interpretation that Sylvia intended to convey. This new addition seems to narrate a higher aspect of Sylvia’s perception of Maimun, whom she intended to immortalize as compared to the repetitive notions of Figure 2 and Figure 3. While it is arguable that Figure 3 has its own distinguishing characteristics from Figure 2, for no two paintings are ever the same, perhaps it does not carry enough weight of its own to be considered a stand-alone theme among the series.

Panofsky theorized his methodological framework of iconological and iconographical analysis for works of art, but yet he humbled himself by being the first to recognize its weaknesses of being a malleable tool with questionable results (Panofsky 1939: 9). We have endeavoured to minimize the margin for error by conducting intense research on the Peranakan and Sylvia herself.

On issues of candid-based analysis, we have presented in great depth the methodological framework to be applied onto Sylvia’s nostalgic paintings and have thus resurfaced with information regarding the philosophical nuances of a Peranakan household lifestyle. Even though we attempt to analyse this subject with as much scrutiny as possible when compared to scholarly published works on the Peranakan, we have found parallel occurrences that resonate well with many of their existing findings. Furthermore, those events as described in written accounts as well as orally; are depicted to an extent throughout Sylvia’s near-autobiographical works; “...she records the ‘minutest’ details because in them

are embedded the intricacies of a unique life style” (Ali 1998: 13). These outcomes can provide alternatives to or act as a visual guide when brought forward in comparison with oral narratives of the Peranakan intimate lifestyle. Sylvia herself hinted the essence of the Peranakan culture and her endeavours within a short statement addressing her 1998 published work.

“I was born into a culture that is rich, with mouth-watering cuisine, unique costumes, artistically designed jewellery, specially crafted furniture and crockery, perfumed gardens and an appreciation of all things beautiful. I paint what I see, feel, and experience around me, taking special note of meaningful moments and occasions. There should be communion and communication between the viewer and the painting.” (Lee 1998b: 15)

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## NOTES

1. For reasons for the decline of Peranakan culture see Lee 2008, pp. 166–168.
2. As can be seen and presented in the cover page of *Sylvia Lee Goh—Dulu dan Kini: Jiwa Abadi, Then and Now: The Enduring Heart* (2015).
3. It is her wish (during our interview) that we encapsulate her inclusion of that line in this writing. The resulting page of her ‘additions’ has been scanned and added in the appendix as Figure 5.

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## APPENDIX

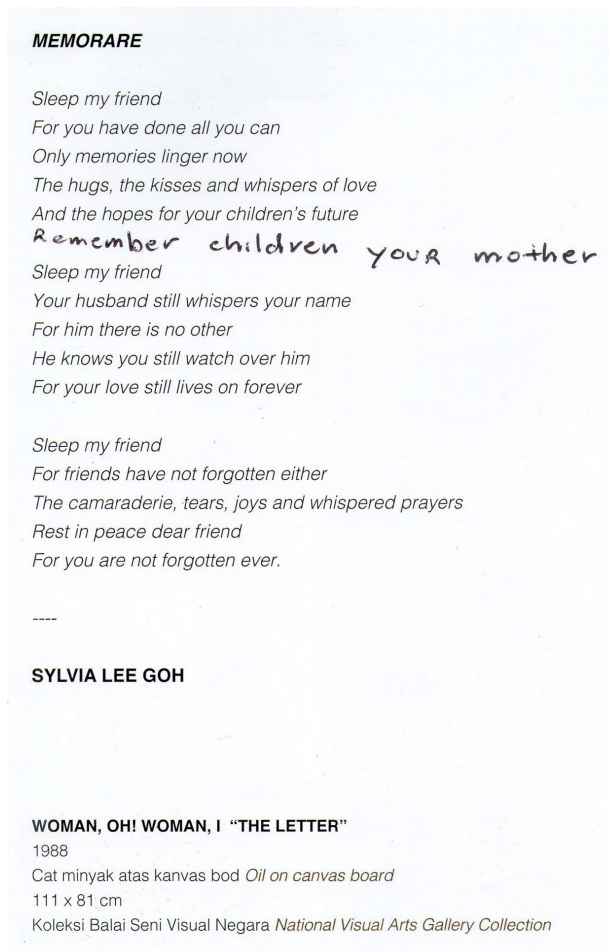


Figure 5

*Eddy Izuwan Musa and Sarena Abdullah*

*Do not fear  
Though the kiss of death is inevitable  
And the unknown blur  
For the generations before us  
And the histories we hold so dear  
And although we shake and quake with fear  
To abandon the loved ones we hold so dear  
It can't be all that bad  
Or living won't be worth it here  
Wasted would be  
All the restraints and self-denial  
To an end that justifies the fear  
And life would have no meaning here.*

**EPITAPH**

*Cover me with flowers where I lie  
Remember me with a smile  
Instead of a tear in your eye  
For are not all things transient  
Even you and I  
Destined to pass through  
The final portal of mortality  
To the waiting arms of eternity*

-----  
**SYLVIA LEE GOH**

**THE LIGHT AT THE END**

1997

Cat minyak atas kanvas bod Oil on canvas board  
91 x 122 cm

**Figure 6**



you have to care so much  
that there will always be a to-morrow

Sylvia Chelof

21.10.2016

**Figure 7**