

## *Fragments and Wholes: Layers of Memory in Wong Chee Meng's 'Rasa Sayang'*

By: Line Dalile

*Rasa sayang, hey!*  
*Rasa sayang sayang, hey!*  
*Hey, lihat nona jauh,*  
*Rasa sayang sayang, hey!*

Every once a while we catch the remnants of a melody that jolts us into a longing feeling of joy intertwined with nostalgia. These trailing melodic notes are often crystalized in childhood folk songs that sweep us into a pilgrimage towards the past in one verse, and then into a migratory turn towards the future in another verse. Upon hearing them, our senses are softened and our memory, sharpened. So is the case with *Rasa Sayang*, a melody engraved in the poetic memory of the Malaysian people. It is a popular Malaysian folk song that has been passed down orally from generation to generation and learned through enculturation. Lyrically, it evokes a warm feeling of love, togetherness, and community, and lends itself readily available as a reminder to what the nation of Malaysia stands for. In an attempt to delve deeper into this 'loving feeling', renowned contemporary Malaysian artist Wong Chee Meng places the folk song of '*Rasa Sayang*' as the emotional anchor to his latest body of work, which explores acculturation and the beauty found in collaboration. The exhibition presents five works, which together combine a myriad of cultural references into colorful layered compositions that pay homage to the abundant cultural diversity that has formed the nation of Malaysia. Beyond illuminating the connecting threads that are woven to form the tapestry of Malaysia's national identity, Wong Chee Meng's latest exhibition also subtly touches upon the significance of cultural preservation and the importance of developing a vibrant and inclusive national identity.

*Rasa Sayang* opens with *Together Towards Growth*, a vibrant piece hanging on the walls of the gallery that instantly arrests the viewers' attention. It features a boy and a girl standing side by side, their hands intertwined in a powerful gesture of solidarity. They hold a traditional flower bouquet, a celebratory offering that symbolizes the beauty and harmony that emerges when people unite towards a common goal. As an artist, Wong Chee Meng is not satisfied solely in portraying messages that celebrate diversity, he is also invested in using a nuanced artistic language that borrows cultural symbols and icons that are buried deep within our collective memories. For example, in this singular compositions, the artist incorporates elements found in Chinese culture, such as the Yansheng coin (厌胜钱), a decorative coin used for rituals in the traditional practice of Feng Shui to symbolize good fortune. In the background, large Malay words that read 'Bersatu Maju' appear to the viewer after a while. The popular slogan translates to "Together Towards Growth," and signifies a collective call to action, emphasizing that only through unity prosperous paths could be forged.

The narrative of unity and cultural diversity continues in *Enchanted Garden*, a composition that requires a double-take. The iconic skyline of Kuala Lumpur fades into the background as elements of an enchanted garden fade into view. The balanced composition acknowledges the development of the nation on one hand, as seen in the modern skyline and the presence of the abacus, an ancient tool of calculation; and on the other hand, it also emphasizes the beauty of the inherent nature found in Malaysia, which is a dimension that need not be sacrificed in pursuit of progress. The national flower of Malaysia, a large and vibrant 'Bunga Raya', or Hibiscus flower dominates the canvas, and represents courage and vitality, with each petal adhering to the principle of Rukun Negara.

There is a particular beauty to be found in Wong Chee Meng's artistic language. Symbolism from three different ethnicities collide, and so do words from three different languages. Yet, a Malaysian viewer feels the sentiment of each and every symbol and hears the emotional echo of every phrase not in isolation, but in relation to one another. Perhaps it takes an artist to remind the nation of the rich layers of its national identity, and Wong Chee Meng is an artist whose works contain these multitudes. Familiar and popular visual elements from folklore

appear in his work as a way to tap into the viewers' collective cultural memory and engage their affects. These visual symbols act as receptacles of cultural memory, providing an access to a community's shared knowledge and collective experience. Wherever they are found, they become anchor points of memory on which national identity is slowly built upon. Art and cultural historian Aby Warburg wrote that cultural memory can be transmitted across generations through affective visual symbols that act as "storehouses" of collective cultural memory (Hirsch 2012, 39). Wong Chee Meng follows this notion and taps into the collective imagination by employing objects and symbols that evoke deep-rooted memories and promote cultural continuity. He does so by harnessing the past (folklore, icons, epics, and symbolism) to make an emotional statement about the present and future.

In terms of technique, his work is formed out of an interplay of additive and subtractive processes that weave together a myriad stories that fade in and out of each other. In *Rasa Sayang*, the interplay of layers poses a more interactive dimension as they evolve into the realm of augmented reality, where each composition unpacks itself into animated layers that come to life when scanned from a mobile app by the viewer. This development invigorates the artwork with a sense of dynamism that immerses the viewer in another playful interaction, this time merging together the physical and virtual realms. For example, in *A New Day*, a singular canvas opens up, like the sliding doors of a metro reaching its stop, to let the viewer into the consecutive layers of the composition. And as the doors slide open, layers of vibrant colors intersect, an animated depiction of a tiger springs into view, and the large words of *Selamat pagi Malaysia* (Good morning, Malaysia) usher the viewer into an optimistic new day. This playful interaction with the audience has always been a key element in Wong Chee Meng's works, almost as if to prove that the act of looking is not a passive act, but an interactive one – an activity that requires presence and dialogue. Even before his recent entry into the world of augmented reality, the artist has always been a master in camouflaging multiple stories and hidden vistas into a single composition. His previous exhibition *Good Days Will Come* (2020), intertwined popular visual icons found in Chinese culture, from homophones, popular symbols found in fables of yore, to traditional charms, and placed them in layers to be slowly decoded by the viewer. In these previous works, he applied anaglyph 3D effect to his paintings, which encodes one image to one-colored filter resulting in a composition that reveals three different images depending on which filter it is viewed from: a red-tinted filter, a cyan-tinted filter, or without a filter.

These layered aesthetics, however, are not purely a stylistic choice, but also a decision that was influenced by a remarkable event in Wong Chee Meng's personal life. At 16, the artist's vision underwent a sudden change due to an accident that impaired his eyesight causing him to perceive the world in layers, blurred lines, and doubled images. Perhaps this physical change reflected its way onto his canvas and later became a perfect metaphor to depict the diverse layers found in Malaysian society. As with the languages spoken and the religions practiced, Malaysia unveils itself layer by layer to its inhabitants, sometimes in ways that overlap. For example, layers of memory and meaning overlap in *Love Song*, a composition that pays homage to the ancient Sanskrit epic of *Ramayana*. The oral epic depicting a love story between the main protagonist Rama and Sita became an important tale in the Hindu religion and served as a metaphor for the triumph of the righteous. This ancient folklore is overlaid with intricate details representing the architectural elements of a Chinese garden, which in turn is overlaid with the vibrant colors of the flora and fauna. This merging of contexts and meanings mirrors the multicultural setting of Malaysia, where tolerance is not only a virtue but a practice. This notion manifests itself in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and almost every city, where Hindu temples can be found neighboring Buddhist temples. As the Islamic call to prayer (*adhan*) echoes on one street, the Buddhist chants echo in another – just like that, lives intertwine on the daily in Malaysia.

*Rasa Sayang* closes with *Golden Flower*, a diptych that brings forth ancient wisdom from Chinese teachings through two well-known idioms. These idioms, or Chengyu (成語), are popular in vernacular Chinese writing and spoken language, and they contain the experiences, moral concepts, and admonishments of previous generations. The left panel '五谷丰登', is an auspicious expression that suggests good harvest, while the right panel '日进斗金' speaks of collecting wealth. Each Chengyu (成語), is compacted into a panel, which is layered by the figure of a deer, a symbol of longevity and abundance. In layers, literally, metaphorically, and textually, Wong Chee Meng's final work echoes again the core message of *Rasa Sayang*, which is a long and vibrant

multi-ethnic tale that highlights the richness and depth that emerge when people of various traditions and perspectives come together, contributing to the vibrant cultural tapestry of their nation.

**Reference list:**

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Post-memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.