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THE MALAYSIAN SOCIAL LANDSCAPE REFLECTED IN *LIU SU DI: THE WORLD OF MORTALS* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AREA STUDIES

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ABSTRACT
Liu Su Di: the World of Mortals, written by Malaysian Chinese writer Li Zishu, was published in 2020. It immediately attracted great attention from Chinese-language literary world. The story vividly depicted the ordinary people and mundane affairs in Ipoh in Malaysia, narrated by the blind woman Gu Xunxia. From the perspective of area studies, this paper analyzes the political system, economic transformation, historical trauma and multicultural interaction, and decodes the unique features of Malaysian society. It is a complex assemblage of interlocking relations among different races and classes, shaped by historical trauma and economic transformation within the framework of race-based political system.
KEY WORDS: *Malaysian society, Liu Su Di: the World of Mortals, area studies*

I. INTRODUCTION
Area studies is an interdisciplinary and comprehensive field of research which focuses on the deep and systematic study of a specific region or country, aiming to understand it's culture, society, politics, economics and history. Malaysia is one of the crucial countries in Southeast Asia and has a unique history, multiculture and complex developments of politics and economy. Literary works, as mirrors of social reality, provide significant texts for area studies in that they often encode abundant information of a particular society of a region or country. *Liu Su Di: a World of Mortals* is such a literary work, "in which the characters and scenes portrayed are familiar everyday landscapes to the local residents" (Li & Wu, 2025, p81).

Li Zishu depicted the ordinary people and mundane affairs in Ipoh, the "tin capital" of Malaysia in the novel, "Intending to restore the people, events, and historical encounters on this land, the work is regarded as a love letter Li Zishu wrote to her hometown" (Wu, 2025, p92). "The novel spans approximately 50 years, a half-century during which numerous events naturally occurred—events significant enough to transform Tin City, alter Malaysia, and even reshape the entire world" (Xu, 2024,p14). Through the narration of the blind woman Gu Yinxia, the story, involving Chinese, Malay, Indian and other communities, weaves the taxi industry, abundant tin-mining sites, and public housing estates together. "It portrays all living beings" (Liu, 2025, p. 158). This study aims to decode the unique Malaysian society from four aspects: economic transformation, political system, historical trauma, and multicultural interaction.

II. POLITICAL SYSTEM
Malaysia's political system has been formed based on ethnic differentiation. The superior position of the Malays was written into the Malaysia' Constitution since its independence in 1957. In 1970, The New Economic Policy was implemented which consolidated Malays' priority by granting them the preferential treatment in employment, education and land ownership, and marginalized ethnic Chinese, Indians and other minority communities. Such race-based politics doesn't only exist in constitutional and policy's texts, but also permeates the daily life, forming a network of overt policies intersecting with covert discrimination. Through the detailed description of social interactions and conversational taboos, *Liu Su Di: a World of Mortals* has presented the deep impact of race-based political system on subaltern people.

2.1 Political Taboos
Some taboos have been generated because of the race-based politics in Malaysia. Certain ethnic issues and political events become something that can't be spoken of and are muted in official narratives on purpose. In the novel, the most typical political event which is unspeakable is "May 13 incident". "On May 13, 1969, after the opposition forces in Malaysia narrowly won the general election and for the first time surpassed the ruling Alliance government, post-election clashes erupted. Ethnic Chinese became the principal victims. The incident involved not only political contestation among ethnic groups, but also long-standing disparities in economic status" (Wang, 2021, p. 006).
After "May 13 incident", the Rukun Negara (National Principles of Malaysia) was enacted by the Malaysian government, which emphasizes the special status of Malays in the society and describes the incident as an "ethnic unrest"

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rather than a consequence of systemic, institutionalized discrimination targeting non-Malay groups through official narrative. The status of ethnic Chinese was suppressed more severely. Accordingly, "May 13 incident" becomes a long-lasting pain of the ethnic Chinese memory, which can't be easily forgotten nor openly discussed. As a consequence, it evolves into a taboo, which is reflected by peoples' daily life in the novel. "Nearly twenty years had passed, yet people's faces still changed colours when the incident was mentioned" (Li, 2021, p. 17); "Da Hui wanted to ask, but held his tongue; his flickering gaze nonetheless betrayed his guilty conscience" (Li, 2021, pp. 17–18). The unspoken pact of silence is essentially the exertion of power to control public discourse: via the enforced silence, traumatic memories are suppressed into the subconsciousness, and a superficial harmony between different races is maintained.

2.2 Subaltern Predicaments

For the subaltern people in this literary works, politics is a pressure of passive endurance rather than a right of active participation. They are incapable of making or changing political policies, nor can they alter the reality of racial discrimination. They can only survive through endurance and tolerance, causing the sense of political powerlessness. Old Gu who is Gu Yinxia' s father has a correct perception of political reality, "The Malays have become shrewd; they know to strike at seven inches when they want to hit a snake. They are out to catch big fish, while all we have here are fish scales and shrimp fry" (Li, 2021, p.18). Such remarks illustrate that they are keenly aware of the inferior and marginalized status of ethnic Chinese community in the society but they are unable to change it.

In 2018, the Malaysian general election was held, in which the opposition coalition defeated the Barisan National that ruled Malaysia for a rather long period since Malaysia got its independence. Many ethnic minorities, especially low-class Chinese regarded it as an opportunity to reform the political system. Although Yinxia showed little concern for politics, she is deeply touched by the great joy of common people due to the election consequence which is described at the end of the novel: "For one instant—she did not even know what time it was—Yinxia suddenly heard, beneath the roof of one of the houses in town, someone letting out a shout of joy. The voice was high and fervent, filled with passion; it had a greater impact than the voice that sang 'A Cup Filled with Bitter Wine' in Beautiful Garden… even more stirring than the call to prayer broadcast simultaneously from all the mosques in town, so much so that the long roof covering that row of houses trembled slightly, as if some gigantic prehistoric reptile had suddenly awakened, flexing its stiffened spine" (Li, 2021, p. 459).

"The commentator on television was practically shouting, yet his narration was drowned out by the surging crowd noise and the strains of the national anthem in the background" (Li, 2021, p. 459).

Such carnivalesque scenario demonstrates the hope of subaltern Chinese who are eager to change the political system entrenched in long-term racial discrimination and ensure fairer chances in every aspect. "Even though the concrete impact of political change on the future of Chinese Malaysians remains to be seen, at the very least it lets out a long-suppressed breath" (Wang, 2021, p.007).

III. ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Malaysia's "tin capital" Ipoh has an unwritten history of economic restructuring. The abundant tin mining drew a large amount of immigrants from China who crossed the seas to make a fortune in Ipoh. The novel unfolds the life story of ordinary people and changes of the unban city under the tide of economic transformation.

3.1 Tin-Minging Prosperity Period

Ipoh in Malaysia ever experienced economical glory of tin-mining decades ago. Since mid-nineteenth century, tin-mining industry attracted numerous Chinese immigrants to earn a livelihood in the hill town. Although the novel doesn't narrate the mining industry's prosperity, its significant influence can be inferred from the demographic composition of the Kinta Flats: Malays, Chinese, and Indians live together, and later, Bangladeshi and Indonesian immigrants come along as well, which proves the population concentration driven by previous mining boom. In those days, Ipoh was the tin-mining center of Southeast Asia, which is full of mining sounds and vendors' cries, unfolding a vibrant and lively society.

The early economy order showed the resilience and pragmatism of an immigrant society. Many Chinese immigrants engaged in small-scale business. For example, Liang Jinmei initially made and sold "Cuye Ban" and "Pillow Zongzi", and later, she wove nylon net bags to package pomelos for merchants; Aunt Ma, the "lottery aunt", at first operated a vegetable stall at the Mishan New Village market, later turned to collecting four-digit lottery bets and speculating in stocks; Enzai drove a lorry to make his living; while Laogu supported his family as a taxi driver. All of these occupations were closely related to everyday needs, forming the basic economic substrate of Ipoh. The dried-seafood shops, teahouses, cloth stores, photo studios lined the streets in dense array; Old Town's white coffee houses and Mis Shan's bun stalls all enjoyed brisk business. In the modest pursuits of "clothing and food," a thriving ecosystem in which small-holder agriculture and petty commerce were interdependent.

3.2 Transitional Period

With time passing by, the tin resources were exhausted gradually, and the tin-mining industry declined. As a consequence, miners were forced to seek new occupations and the previous tin-mining prosperity disappeared. However, the grassroots economy didn't collapse; instead, it nurtured new vitality within the new economic landscape. New economic sectors emerged. In spite of her blindness, Yinxia found a job as a telephone operator in a radio-taxi company. Due to her brilliant memory and pleasant voice, she became a star of the city. The emergence of the occupation indicates the growing demand of urban transportation, and reflects the gradual shift from prior resource-dependent economy to service-oriented economy. Aunt Ma moved from lottery collection into stock speculation and made profits during the economic transitional period. After marriage, Lianzhu also engaged in service sector, and her husband, Datuk Fung, was involved in both business

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and politics, becoming a social notable, whose life demonstrates the integration of commercial capital and social resources. All the changes present the economic transformation at that time: the coexistence of petty commerce and emerging industries.

3.3 Iteration of Business Models

Technological advances and globalization are crucial driving factors on economic changes. As the number of private cars increases, the e-hailing apps become popular and the traditional taxi industry declines. Fewer and fewer people need to call a taxi through the dispatch center where Yinxia works; most taxi drivers are middle-aged or elderly, and their vehicles are out-of-dated. Once bustling scene becomes a thing of the past.

At the same time, the consumption places and commercial models experience dramatic changes. Large shopping malls come into being; air-conditioning and various retail outlets attract crowds who ever frequently went to the traditional markets. The standardized branded chains weaken the competitive power of small proprietors. Even though his convenience store can still survive, Xihui still needs to meet the customers' demand in terms of brand, service and price. The once bustling shops around Lou Shang Lou no longer enjoy their past prosperity.

Economic transformation in Ipoh is not a vigorous industrial revolution, but closely related to ordinary people's daily life. From the traditional resource-dependence tin-mining prosperity to a diversified economy, from the previous small-scale business to a digital economy, the changes never cease. Yet the common people in Ipoh still make their efforts to find survival niches at every stage of economic change, which also reflects the tenacity of Ipoh's economy and resilience of the ordinary people.

IV. HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Li Zishu sets Ipoh as a backdrop of the novel, and separates historical memory into fragments permeated in everyday life. It is concealed in the rumors of suicides at the Kinta Flats, and the silent aftermath of "May 13 Incident". These memories are different from the official narration, but more vivid and more piercing, showing the true reality of Chinese community in Malaysia.

4.1 Collective Trauma

In Ipoh' history, the "May 13 Incident" in 1969 is an unhealed scar and also a taboo as far as Chinese community is concerned. The author doesn't describe the bloody scene of the riot on that day in details, and instead, transforms the incident into Chinese collective trauma.

Old Gu tended to lower his voice suddenly at the mention of "bloodshed back then", his tone full of lingering fear when he talked with neighbours in the Kinta Flats. Likewise, women such as Mrs. Fang would fall silent instantly whenever the conversations were connected with the political topics, leaving only restless glances. Da Hui, who was too young to have experienced the incident, is blamed by elders for asking for the details: "What the hell do you know! When people were bleeding, you hadn't even been weaned" (Li, 2021, p. 18).

This traumatic memory has been passed down between generations through "silence", becoming a shadow in the collective subconscious of the Chinese ethnic. It develops their survival principles: cautious, enduring, and deliberate avoiding of political participation. Although sometimes he would complain about the political system, Old Gu firmly believed that "the mountains stand tall and the emperor is distant; chaos, if it comes, will not reach these shores" (p. 18). Encountering with social change, Mrs. Fang mainly concerned about whether it would negatively influence her family's livelihood. Only at the moment of 2018 Malaysian general election which turned over the present government, the long-suppressed emotions and accumulated anxiety broke out. At that moment, the collective memory ceased to be a silent scar and instead became an outlet for collective emotions.

4.2 Individual Trauma

Historical memory in *Liu Su Di: the World of Mortals* is always grounded in personal life histories. It is not a series of abstract dates and events but lies in individual experiences. As a child, Yinxia heard the story of "eyeless female ghost" who was always haunting the Kinta Flats, which is not only a ghost story, but the memory of a girl who made suicide after loving a wrong man. "People said that she asked everyone she met, 'Have you seen my eyes?'" (Li, 2021, p. 99). The existence of the story is an implicit reminding of a personal tragedy, especially a tragic fate of low-class women.

Xihui' memory is closely bound to his family's rising and declining. When he was little, his father died because the lorry driven fell off a cliff. At the funeral, Xihui felt himself like "a paper effigy or a wreath, manipulated at will within the mourning hall" (Li, 2021, p. 12). This trauma became the origin of his childhood fears. His elder brother Dahui disappeared after he made a series of mistaken judgements. Xihui's complex feelings toward his elder brother—awe, resentment, and concern—eventually turned into a helpless recognition of his family's tragic fate. Even Aunt Ma had a painful childhood memory. Because her family was so poor, she had to go to school dressed in the wet underwear, consequently gaining the nickname "wetpant Yan", which is not only a personal embarrassment, but also the reflection of the poverty and hardship of early Chinese immigrant families.

These individual memories were narrated in a charming and engaging way that grand narratives fail to encompass. Although they are fragmentary and limited to domestic sphere, they make up the crucial part of historical memory of the city—the struggles of the individuals to survive in migrant society.

V. MULTICULTURAL INTERACTION

The novel unfolds a picture of multi-ethnic coexistence. Ipoh is a city of Malays, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian and Bangladeshi immigrants, whose different cultural practice, religious beliefs and ways of life intersect and overlap. Cantonese mingles with Malay, and Hakka with Tamil in the local markets; the Chinese "Dabo Gong Festival" (celebrating the Earth God), the Malay "Hari Raya Haji" (Eid al-Adha), and the Indian "Deepavali" (Diwali) alternate on the calendar; Buddhist Guanyin statues, Hindu Ganesha idols, and Islamic mosques coexist along the

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streets and lanes. This novel recorded the multicultural interaction between different races in Ipoh.

5.1 Spatial Coexistence

The multiculturalism firstly shows itself in the shared spatial coexistence in Ipoh. More than three hundred families from diverse ethnic groups lived together in Kinta Flats which is the central setting of the novel. Malay sarongs, Chinese ancestral altars, and Indian sandalwood coexist under the same roof. The shops in the ground floor provide platforms for cultural interaction: in Baboo' barbershop, the Indian barber chats with customers in Tamil under a portrait of Ganesh hung on the wall, while a Chinese chess manual left by a customer lies on the table; In Lili's tailor shop, she sews qipao for Chinese customers, saris for Indian women and batik shirts for Malays. In Maggie's coffee shop, Chinese customers sip "white coffee", Malays eat nasi lemak, and Indians have roti cana— diversified dietary cultures converge. Chinese boy Xihui and the Indian boy Raju often played together in the parking lot downstairs from the housing estate since childhood; Yinxia was exposed to Hindu culture through Raju. This close spatial proximity has eliminated the physical barriers between ethnic groups, providing a natural foundation for cultural interaction.

5.2 Ritual Accommodations

Cultural identity is embodied in religion and festivals. In Ipoh, different religious practice of different races exists. Chinese families put Buddhist or Taoist icons and ancestral tablets on the altars; Mrs. Fang pays visit to the Temple of the Nine Heavens Mysterious Maiden for divination. Malays believe in Islam, and there are five daily calls to prayer from the mosques; during Hari Raya Haji, families killed goats and chickens for communal feasts. Indians worship Hindu deities; in Baboo's barbershop, sandalwood incense burns daily before a portrait of Ganesh, and during Deepavali, households light oil lamps and prepare sweets. At the beginning, different races are unfamiliar with or unable to understand the other's religious practices or rituals, and however, they gradually form a principle of non-interference and mutual respect.

Shared festivals can even offer more opportunities for exchange. The novel begins with a series of overlapping holidays in September: Malaysian Independence Day, the Chinese Zhongyuan Festival, and the Islamic New Year. Festivals of different ethnic communities were celebrated simultaneously: Chinese launched lanterns on the river, Malays prayed in mosques, and Indians prepared sweets at home—yet they also shared festival delicacies. Malay neighbors presented nasi lemak to Chinese households, while Chinese neighbors bestowed mooncakes upon Indian families. This practice of "festival commensality" has alleviated the alienation caused by cultural differences. Yinxia and Lianzhu once went to the temple fair celebrating the Dabo Gong Festival; as Yinxia listened to Cantonese opera under the temporary opera pavilion, an Indian family were seated next to her. Raju's mother brought Indian sweets during Chinese New Year, and Liang Jinmei returned with Nian Gao made by herself. These subtle details indicate that ethnic communities in Ipoh have not been hostile due to religious and festive disparities; on the contrary, instead, they have constructed a unique "pluralistic festival culture" built on inclusivity.

5.3 Interpersonal Relationships

Interactions across different ethnic groups ultimately manifests themselves in the entanglement of individual destinies. The impressive friendship between Yinxia, Xihui and Raju epitomizes cross-ethnic harmony—Yinxia is a Chinese blind woman, Xihui is a Chinese man, and Raju is an Indian man. They grew up together, studying and playing chess in Baba's barbershop. Raju taught Yinxia about the Hindu deity Ganesha, illustrating the legend that "the broken tooth symbolizes sacrifice"; Yinxia, in turn, related the stories to her own disability and spiritual fortitude; Xihui, affected by both, cultivated an open and inclusive attitude towards diverse cultures. This childhood friendship not only transcended ethnic boundaries but also rendered cultural integration an indispensable part of personal growth—Yinxia subsequently employed the legend of Ganasha as a key to comprehending life's imperfections, whereas, Xihui never avoided building connections with Indian neighbors.

The integration of different cultures can also be reflected from Aunt Ma's communications with her Indian and Malay neighbors. When Aunt Ma lived in Mishan New Village in her early years, she was capable of talking with Malay women in Malay and chat with Indians in Tamil. Later on, when she assisted Yinxia to contact a school for visually impaired students, she could communicate with the Malay supervisor. This cross-ethnic social ability originated from her acceptance and respect for other cultures—she was open to the religious practices of Malays, and she fully appreciated cultural traditions of Indians as well.

5.4 Constraints on Fusion

In spite of the coexistence of different cultures in Ipoh, cultural differences that may give rise to the latent conflicts can't be ignored. The most significant barrier lies in the inability to communicate because of language differences. Not all people possess the capability of speaking all the languages used by different ethnic groups, which may impede profound mutual understanding and misunderstanding and result in occasional misinterpretation during interaction. Besides language barriers, different cultural perceptions may also lead to conflicts: the Chinese attach great importance to family ties and ancestral worship; Malays value community order and religious rituals; Indians prioritize divine faith and family ethnics. Additionally, different economic and political status in the society of different races indirectly amplify cultural disparities in relations.

These cultural disparities haven't evolved into intense confrontation; instead, different ethnic communities coexist through the means of "adaption" and "compromise". This principle of "mutual accommodation" forms the core of sustaining the multicultural landscape of Ipoh.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on area studies, Malaysian social landscape in *Liu Su Di: the World of Mortals* leap off the page, which is the consequence of the interrelationship among race-based politics, economic transformation, historical trauma and multicultural interactions. Through the "limited perspective" of Gu Yinxia, the novel interprets the grand national issues into a

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microcosmic daily narrative. Li Zishu neither criticizes nor praises, but expresses her empathy. She reveals the contradictions and predicaments of Malaysian society but also captures the resilience and warmth of grassroots individuals. This narrative approach elevates *Liu Su Di: the World of Mortals* beyond the confines of Chinese-language literature to become a significant text for deeper and through understanding of the complex Malaysian society, confirming that literary works are not only artistic creations but also mirrors of the social reality. It is also the great significance of analyzing literary works from the perspective of area studies.

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