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The Peranakan Baba Nyonya Culture: Resurgence or Disappearance?

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ABSTRAK

Kacukan budaya boleh terjadi dalam banyak bentuk dan pilih atur, termasuk peminjaman kata-kata dan pengambilan amalan sosial dan kepercayaan dan juga penyesuaian pakaian dan makanan. Corak penghijrahan dan pengaliran kebudayaan di Asia Tenggara telah menjana perkembangan yang tersebut dan lain-lain pada masa dan di tempat yang berlainan. Di bawah keadaan yang tertentu, suatu kumpulan etnik yang baru atau yang dikesan sebagai yang berbeza daripada kumpulan etnik yang ada mungkin muncul. Kumpulan etnik yang dimaksudkan adalah Peranakan Baba Nyonya. Ia terjadi pada abad ke 15 ketika orang Cina tiba di Melaka dan berkahwin campur dengan wanita tempatan. Kebudayaan peranakan adalah gabungan unik antara kebudayaan Cina dan Melayu dengan campuran daripada penyintesisan unsur kebudayaan Java, Batak, Thai dan British, melambangkan faham pelbagai budaya dan pelakuran lama sebelum terciptanya istilah-istilah itu..Kini, dunia peranakan sudah menghilang.

Kata kunci: Peranakan, Baba, Nyonya, kebangkitan semula, keunikan

ABSTRACT

Hybridity of cultures can take many forms and permutations, including the borrowing of words and the adoption of social practices and beliefs, and the adaptation of dress and food. Patterns of migration and cultural flows in Southeast Asia have generated at different times and places all the above configurations and more. Under certain circumstances, what may emerge is a whole new ethnic group or at the very least, a very recognizably different subgroup of an existing ethnic category. One such group is the peranakan or the baba nyonya community (also known as the Straits Chinese). It evolved in the fifteenth century when the Chinese arrived in Malacca and intermarriage with local women took place. The peranakan culture is a unique blend of two cultures – Malay and Chinese – intermixed into a fascinating synthesis with elements of Javanese, Batak, Thai and British cultures, representing “multiculturalism” and “fusion”, long before the terms were invented. Today, the world of the peranakan is a disappearing one.

Key words: Peranakan, Baba, Nyonya, resurgence, uniqueness



ORIGIN OF THE PERANAKAN

The uniqueness of the Babas and Nyonyas has been much publicized in magazines, coffee table books, newspapers and tourism promotion materials. The more exotic features of the culture such as the old-fashioned wedding, the kebaya, Nyonya jewellery and beaded shoes, Peranakan pre-war houses and porcelain are often the focus. The Babas may be one of the most talked about communities in Malaysia, but it is also one of the most misunderstood (Tan 1988).

The evolution of this unique ethnic group dates as far back as 500 to 600 years when Chinese traders arrived in the Malay Peninsula, the nucleus of which was Malacca, the center of the Malacca Sultanate. These traders did not bring their womenfolk along, and many intermarried with local women. Inter-marriage between the Babas and the Malays eventually ceased, and for hundreds of years, the Babas married exclusively amongst their own, becoming an endogamous and elite group.

Today, they are found throughout Malaysia and Singapore with strongholds in Malacca, Singapore and Penang.

DEFINITIONS

Three terms are commonly used to describe this community: the Peranakan, the Straits Chinese, and the Babas and Nyonyas. The word Peranakan is derived from the Malay word 'anak' which means 'child'. The term refers to the local-born as well as the offspring of foreigner-native union. Frank Swettenham explained that the term Baba was used for Straits-born males, whether children of English, Chinese or Eurasian parents, and was of Hindustani origin (Tan 1988). Baba is the term for the male and Nyonya the female. The word Baba may have been derived from the word *bapa* which means father in Malay. Some historians think that it is an honorific and the equivalent for a *tuan* or a *towkay*. The word Nyonya is said to have originated from Java.

The Straits Chinese regarded the Straits Settlements as their homeland and while maintaining a basically Chinese identity, they gradually abandoned close links of kinship, sentiment, political allegiance and financial remittances to China so characteristic of the non-Baba Chinese (Clammer 1980). A clear distinction must be made between the Straits Chinese and the Straits-born Chinese. To be defined as a Straits Chinese, he or she had to adopt the exterior markers of a Baba or Nyonya, in language, customs, kinship, dress, food and even occupation.

PERANAKAN CULTURE

Peranakan culture is a “rare and beautiful blend” of two dominant cultures – Malay and Chinese – with some elements from Javanese, Batak, Siamese and European (specifically English) cultures. As Clammer (1980) puts it:

...the result of this blending is not simply a random mixture, a pot-pourri of bits and pieces, it is a genuine synthesis – something which not only incorporates but also transcends the component parts out of which it springs.

The culture then is a synthesis in terms of behaviour and the more obvious aspects of material culture, and is expressed through its own language.

LANGUAGE

The Baba language or Baba Malay is a patois of the Malay language, with many words borrowed from Chinese (especially Hokkien), Portuguese, Dutch, Tamil and English. It is the mother tongue of the Babas and Nyonyas, many of whom do not speak any Chinese dialect. It is a creole language for intra-group communication and was the lingua franca of the Straits Settlements. Baba Malay is fast dying today, and many of the young cannot speak it, having been brought up to concentrate on English, Malay and even Mandarin.

Some examples of Baba Malay:

Ini bakul gua punya. Apa pasal lu kasi dia?
Saya ini jam mau pigi paseh
Kasi gua balik, cepat. (Lee Su Kim 1978)

Here are some examples of Chinese words in Baba Malay:

<i>Of Chinese Origin</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Relationships	
<i>Gua</i>	I
<i>Lu</i>	You
<i>Nkong</i>	Grandfather
<i>Tachi (toa-chi)</i>	Elder Sister
<i>Mpek (Pek)</i>	Father's elder brother
<i>Nchek (Chek)</i>	Father's younger brother
Household affairs	
<i>Tia</i>	Front hall
<i>Chimchae</i>	Open courtyard
<i>Loteng</i>	Upper floor
<i>Pangkaeng</i>	Bedroom



<i>Teng, tanglong</i>	Lamp
<i>Chat</i>	Paint
<i>Kachuak</i>	Cockroach

Food

Tauyu, kiamchai, kuchai, chaipo, kueh chang, kueh tiau
(Shellbear 1913)

CUSTOMS

The Peranakan spoke Malay, ate a Malayanized cuisine, tended to dress in Malay costumes, and incorporated a good deal of Malay into their kinship terminology together with certain matrilineal tendencies (Clammer 1980). The customs practiced were however heavily Chinese in form and substance. Filial piety was very important and ancestral worship was at the core of their culture. In the past, an altar was commonly found in Peranakan homes for the worship and remembrance of ancestors.

Cheng Beng, when one pays respect to dead relatives, is still observed by many Baba families. Other festivals such as *Tang Chek* or the Winter Solstice Festival are still practiced in certain households, though this practice too is diminishing. This is the Thanksgiving festival observed on the eleventh moon. Tiny round balls of various colours and shapes are made from glutinous rice flour, and served in bowls of syrup. They are eaten after thanksgiving prayers have been sent to heaven. The *Wangkang* festival involving days of prayer and fasting is totally unobserved nowadays. The Chinese New Year is still a very important festival for the Babas and Nyonyas but again, many of the traditional customs associated with Chinese New Year have been forsaken in this era of speed and the high demands of modern living.

One of the most colourful and elaborate aspects of the Peranakan culture was the wedding. This involved a tremendous amount of preparation and great expense, and usually covered a time span of twelve days for all the intricate ceremonies. Tan Siok Choo describes it as “a physically, financially and gastronomically exhausting affair” (1982). The Baba wedding too is disappearing and there are not many left who are familiar with the rituals involved.

DRESS

The traditional Nyonya costume was the *Baju Panjang* which can be traced to Javanese origins. It consisted of a long loose calf-length top with long sleeves worn over a batik sarong. The collar is Chinese and the dress is fastened by a set of *kerosang* (brooches). They were initially made of cotton but by 1910, French and Swiss voile and organdie became the fashion.

By the end of the 1920s, young Nyonyas abandoned the old-fashioned austere *baju panjang* for the more modern *nyonya kebaya*. The word *kebaya* is derived from the Portuguese word *kobaya*. The short *kebaya* was more flattering, as it was figure-hugging and shapely, with intricate embroidery at the neckline, sleeves and hem. The use of lace on *kebayas* may have been an influence from Portuguese and Dutch women who wore blouses with lace trimmings during colonial times. The *kebaya sulam* with its elaborate embroidery used to take six months to make by hand in the past. The *kebaya* is worn with a *batik sarung*. Nyonyas preferred *Pekalungan batik* from Java because of its vibrant combination of colours, and motifs of flowers, birds, insects, and other animals (Pepin Van Roojen Productions 1993).

CUISINE

Peranakan food is a wonderful combination of Malay and Chinese cuisine with influences from Indonesia, Thailand, India, Holland, Portugal and England. Nyonya food is clearly unique and Malaysian/Singaporean in identity, according to Tan Chee Beng (1993). This cuisine is the original fusion food before the word was even invented. Using ingredients such as *galangal*, *serai*, chillis, tumeric, ginger, *tau cheow*, tamarind, lime juice, *belachan*, *buah keras*, *gula Melaka*, spices such as star anise, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg, leaves such as *daun kesum*, *daun kaduk*, *daun cekok*, *daun limau perut*, *pandan leaves*, the Nyonyas concocted a unique cuisine, with predominantly spicy and piquant flavours. A Nyonya's cooking ability could be assessed in the old days from the rhythm of the way she pounded the *rempah* to make *sambal belachan*.

Peranakan eat the way Malays do, with their fingers. Chopsticks are however used during elaborate festive celebrations and festivals.

Some well-known Peranakan dishes are:

Otak Otak
Ayam Pongteh
Assam Laksa
Roti Babi
Itik Tim
Buah Keluak
Perut Ikan
Achar
Sek Bak, Hong Bak
Cheng Chuan Hoo
Cincalok Omelette
Pork Liver Balls



RESURGENCE OR DISAPPEARANCE?

A culture is only alive for as long as it is practiced and observed. I would say that the Peranakan culture is gradually disappearing, and this is evidenced in the diminishing numbers of Peranakan today who actively observe or practice the culture. At the same time, there has been a great revival of interest and a resurgence of pride amongst the Peranakan in their cultural heritage and their Peranakan identity.

REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE PERANAKAN CULTURE

Some factors that led to the decline of Baba culture were the gradual geographical dispersion of the Babas, modernization and socialization with other groups. Dispersion from the traditional bastions of Peranakan culture led to diffusion of its cultural characteristics. It was in Malacca that Baba society had its deepest roots. From Malacca, the culture was exported to Penang and Singapore. The Babas gradually became more scattered throughout Malaya and the Southeast Asia region, and with socialization with other groups taking place, they soon lost much of their distinctiveness and exclusiveness. Khoo Kay Kim believes that the large-scale immigration of Chinese into Malaya in the late 19th century contributed to the disintegration of the Baba culture (Lee Su Kim 1978). Inter-marriage took place between Straits Chinese and non-Straits Chinese, leading to a dilution of Nyonya culture.

With modernization and the introduction of Western ideas, the clannishness of the Babas gradually eroded, and family ties became weak. During the zenith of Peranakan culture, it was not uncommon to find three generations living together under the same roof as one big extended family. Many customs and rituals were less practiced and even the language is transmitted less from one generation to the other under pressure from languages such as English and, with independence, Malay. Presently, some Peranakan families send their children to Mandarin primary schools to master Mandarin. This was something that would not have taken place in the past, since Straits Chinese tended to look down on the Chinese (collectively referred to as *Tjina* or *Tiong hua*). Vaughan observed this cleavage between the Straits Chinese and the *Sinkhek* (Chinese newcomers) in the late 19th century:

Strange to say that although the Babas adhere so loyally to the customs of their progenitors they despise the real Chinaman and are exclusive fellows indeed: nothing they rejoice in more than being British subjects. The writer has seen Babas on being asked if they were Chinamen bristle up and say in an offended tone, "I am not a Chinaman, I am a British subject", an *Orang putih* literally, a white man; this term is invariably applied to an Englishman.

(Vaughan 1971: 2-3)



The changing role of the Nyonyas has also contributed to the gradual decline of the culture. The Nyonya in the past was brought up solely to be a good daughter, wife and mother. Most of this writer's grand-aunts in Malacca were married off in arranged marriages to Babas. They received little education since it was feared that too much education would make them *bebas* (too free and wild). A good Nyonya was one who had excellent culinary skills, could sew and manage a household well and who would make a good wife and mother. She was expected to be virtuous, *senonoh* (gentle and ladylike in behaviour), respectful of her elders, and come from a good family.

My late grandmother Lee Chuan Neo told me:

At the age of twelve, I was stopped from attending school and at fourteen was married to my cousin who was twelve years older than me. My parents feared that too much education would make me *bebas* and independent and behave arrogantly to my future in-laws.

(Lee Su Kim 1978: 21)

With time, more Nyonyas received education in English-medium schools during the British colonial period. They eventually became more liberated from their former constrained lifestyles. This led to a situation where they no longer know how to observe much of their cultural heritage. Many modern Nyonyas do not know how to cook traditional Peranakan dishes, cannot pass on the language to their children, do not observe the demanding rituals and customs and prefer to wear modern clothes rather than the Nyonya costume, except on special occasions.

The depression of the 1930s and the Japanese Occupation delivered another blow to Peranakan culture. At their cultural apex, the Babas and Nyonyas were a very wealthy, powerful and elitist group, many wielded tremendous influence in commerce, economics and politics. Much of the material wealth and prestige of the Babas was lost during the Second World War, and the culture and lifestyles of the Babas went into serious and almost certainly irreversible decline after the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1942 (Lee Su Kim 1978).

The Babas and Nyonyas are a sociological phenomenon that occurred because of British colonization and cannot be understood outside of the context of the essentially urban and colonial society of the Straits Settlements. The political framework of the Straits Settlements enabled this remarkable culture to emerge, although of course they existed before colonization (Clammer 1980). Likewise, with the disappearance of this same supportive framework after the Second World War, the culture began to wither.

Lastly, with the passing of the colonial regime, the Babas were left feeling isolated, unable to represent themselves as fully Chinese for numerous cultural and linguistic reasons and yet, not able to be assimilated into Malay culture, since religion was a barrier. In the past, it was possible for Chinese to marry Malays without conversion to Islam, but in present day Malaysia, this is hardly possible. Furthermore, Islam is so linked to Malay ethnicity that the Baba



Chinese, whether Baba or non-Baba, regard it as being un-Chinese to embrace Islam (Tan 1988). Thus, as Clammer states, the Straits Chinese have been caught on the horns of their own cultural dilemma (1980). Since they feel more aligned to the Chinese ethnically, and in many respects socially and religiously, it is to the Chinese community of Malaysian society that the Babas and Nyonyas have had to look to for some sense of political and social shelter and belonging. In other words, some sort of “resinification” has taken place where the Babas have had to increasingly identify themselves with the larger Malaysian Chinese community.

RESURGENCE OF INTEREST IN PERANAKAN BABA NYONYA CULTURE

There is presently a resurgence of interest in the Peranakan culture. Artifacts such as Nyonya jewellery, silverware, beaded shoes or *kasut manik*, furniture and Straits Chinese porcelain are today very much sought after. Peranakan ceramic, especially, fetch high prices on the open market, and are now auctioned at London’s Sotheby’s. Peranakan pre-war houses can fetch millions of dollars in Singapore and many pre-war houses with Peranakan architectural features are being bought up by consortiums and private individuals. One feature of Peranakan culture which will certainly stay alive is Peranakan cuisine. Because of its unique flavours, recipe books as well as restaurants, claiming to be authentic Nyonya, continue to appear.

Great interest and appreciation of the beautiful *nyonya kebaya* was recently revived through the work of the late First Lady of Malaysia, Datin Seri Endon, who wrote a book on the Nyonya kebaya and staged several exhibitions, including several with her own stunning collection (Datin Seri Endon 2004). In February 2005, the Museum Negara staged an elaborate exhibition on ‘The World of the Peranakan: Baba and Nyonya Heritage of Southeast Asia’. Baba Nyonya associations continue to thrive in Singapore, Penang, Malacca and on the 1st of October 2005, a new association was born called the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur, the first of its kind to be formed outside of the traditional bastions of the former Straits Settlements.

Most of the writings on the Babas and Nyonyas are academic books, theses, articles and coffee table books. Not much writing has come out from within the Baba Nyonya community. *The Patriarch* by Yeap Joo Kim and Ruth Ho’s *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* were published in 1975, both are biographical accounts of Baba families in Penang and Malacca respectively. In 1984, the first Nyonya novel, *Twilight of the Nyonyas*, by Chin Kee Onn, was published. In 1992, Yeap Joo Kim wrote a novel entitled *Of Comb Powder and Rouge*. Two years later, this was followed by another book entitled *A Rose on My Pillow* by Betty Lim. Shirley Lim published a book on her life entitled *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*. Lee Su Kim’s book entitled *Malaysian Flavours*, a collection of essays based on observations of



Malaysian life, with a section containing stories from her Peranakan heritage was first published in 1996. The second edition of *Malaysian Flavours* was launched in 2004.

CONCLUSION

The Babas and Nyonyas are a unique sociological and cultural phenomenon that occurred in an era of momentous transition. They have significantly enriched the Malaysian and Singaporean cultural heritage, cuisine, fashion and the arts.

I conclude with a quote from the late First Lady, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood:

I am only too aware that many aspects of Malaysia's collective culture are being eroded and may disappear altogether if steps are not being taken to preserve them or to record them for posterity. I feel it is important that we do not lose our own. Already there are signs that we have lost some big part of this heritage.

(2004:10-11)

If Peranakan culture cannot survive, we can only hope that the legacy of this extraordinary culture – a culture which brought out the beauty, grace, passion, *joie de vivre*, industry, resilience and resourcefulness of two major groups of people, the Chinese and the Malays in an amazing synthesis, will remain with us for a long time.

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