

ECLECTIC CULTURES FOR ALL

The Development of the Peranakan Performing, Visual and Material Arts in Penang

The Peranakan culture of Penang, Malaysia, has a rich and fascinating history. Rooted in a place-based identity, it has drawn on Chinese, Malay and European traditions to create a unique community, constantly evolving and adapting to new influences in dynamic ways. This edited collection is the first in-depth study of the changes in Peranakan performing arts, visual arts and costumes from the late nineteenth century to the present, with a particular focus on women's voices. Making creative use of previously untapped sources – including press reports, cartoons, newspaper advertisements, photographs from private collections, paintings from artists and museums, music books and early recordings, and extensive interviews – *Eclectic Cultures for All* paints a vivid picture of under-researched facets of Peranakan life. With chapters written by experts on festivals, performances, cartoons, visual art and fashion, the book highlights not just culture as heritage but new and resourceful ways of projecting markers of identity. Beautifully designed and containing nearly 150 photographs, this volume will appeal to all those interested in history, culture and modernity in Malaysia and beyond.



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Edited by Tan Sooi Beng

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For the Baba and Nyonya of Penang

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Note to the Reader

The spelling conventions for the languages historically used by the Peranakan of Penang – notably Malay and Hokkien – have changed drastically from their earliest introduction in romanised text to the present. When citing materials from the first half of the twentieth century, especially newspapers, we reproduce verbatim the spellings of the source texts, including variants of the same word. For example, the word for ‘brooch’ is spelled both *kerosang* and *kerongsang*, while the spelling of the well-known Malay poetical form was rendered as both *pantun* and *panton*.

The names of places – both in Malaysia and elsewhere – have also undergone changes, sometimes to conform to orthographic reforms in national languages and sometimes to erase obvious colonial connotations. We have used the version of names of places most appropriate to the historical context in which they appear, with modern spellings in parentheses on first citation, hence Malacca and not Melaka, Siam and not Thailand, the Dutch East Indies and not Indonesia.

Preface and Acknowledgements

This edited volume focuses on the Peranakan performing, material and visual arts in Penang from the early twentieth century to the turn of the new millennium, with references to the shared cultures in Malacca (Melaka) and Singapore. The authors show that Peranakan culture is eclectic and has evolved and changed through time as the Peranakan adjusted to the changing sociopolitical conditions in the cities where they lived. This is in contrast to the images of an eclectic Nyonya heritage frozen in the bygone era of the early twentieth century that are promoted for the instrumental purposes of tourism and state politics. Analyses of performances, artworks and costumes within the context of British colonialism and the history of trade networks demonstrate that the Peranakan of Penang have always been inclusive of other peoples and their cultures in the northern littoral – including Phuket, Rangoon (Yangon) and Medan – for well over a century. This book also elucidates the multiple voices of Nyonya and their trajectories of modernity shown through their costumes, performing and visual arts.

Dealing with a topic that is little known or written about, the authors use untapped sources such as reports, cartoons and advertisements of performances in old newspapers, pre-war photographs from private collections, paintings from artists and museums, music books printed in the early twentieth century and 78 RPM recordings of Peranakan music from the 1910s to the 1930s. These sources are enlivened by oral interviews with veteran Baba and Nyonya as well as recordings of post-independence performances.

This book is the end product of a Universiti Sains Malaysia research grant, but the work for my chapters began when I was conducting PhD fieldwork on the Malay *bangsawan* theatre and *ronggeng* music in the 1980s. In order to understand the music, I learned to play *ronggeng* instruments and followed the troupe for performances among the Malay and Peranakan communities. Many of the people I interviewed have died or are now in their late eighties. This book is an effort to document their histories in print and video. Grace Choong's chapter on Peranakan costumes and accessories is based on her PhD thesis (2016) from Universiti Sains Malaysia, and conversations with her Baba and Nyonya family and the wider Peranakan community in Penang. Sarena

Abdullah analysed Peranakan artworks at the various galleries and museums in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore and interviewed the artists.

Many people and institutions have made this book possible. We are grateful to those Baba and Nyonya who gave us many hours of interviews and shared their photographs and knowledge with us. In particular, Nyonyas Tan Bian Kim, Susan Tan, Tye Siew Kee, Tan Kooi Eng, Lillian Tong, Jenny Chua and Cheong Mei Fong afforded hospitality and information regarding costumes and jewellery. Baba Michael Cheah communicated his vast experience of curating Baba and Nyonya weddings and information regarding Nyonya fashions. Baba Tan Lye Hoe contributed some old photographs. Special thanks are extended to the artists who granted interviews online and face-to-face and gave us permission to publish their artworks: Martin Loh, Sylvia Lee Goh, Tan Gaik Hoon, Kuen Stephanie and Carolyn Law.

I am grateful to Pak Mat Hashim, Pak Aziz and Pak Wan Pekak who accepted me as an *anak angkat* (adopted child) and apprentice in their *ronggeng* group. Che Puteh Saad, Che Ramlah and Cikgu Bahroodin shared many wonderful stories about their lives and how they started singing and dancing. Babas Poh Chin Hean, Tan Koon Hoy and June Loh Fuan Jong gave me vivid accounts of singing and musical parties of the past, while Johnny Chee shared his Baba Hokkien poems. Nyonyas Oon Suan See, Molly Mark and Annie Lim recalled their experiences in music and dance, and Quah Chooi Lean recited many Baba Hokkien rhymes for analysis. Babas William Gwee Thian Hock and William Tan helped me make sense of the shared Peranakan cultures in Singapore, Malacca and Penang. Their help and friendship are much appreciated.

We are indebted to several institutions and associations. Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, gave us a Research University Grant (1001/PSENI/816270) to conduct fieldwork in Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore, while the university library allowed us to look at the microfilms of old newspapers. We thank the State Chinese Penang (formerly Peranakan) Association for invitations to follow the *dondang sayang* parades and *ronggeng* sessions that they organised, and for permission to attend the Peranakan conventions and to look at the past issues of *Suara Baba*. The Dondang Sayang Club allowed us to sit in their bus and record the songs sung during the Chap Goh Meh

(fifteenth night of Chinese New Year) rides around town in the 1980s. We are also grateful to Pinang Peranakan Mansion for permission to photograph beaded slippers, costumes and the *dondang sayang* bullock cart. Thanks also to the archives of Penang Free School for permission to use a photo of a 1918 school performance.

We express our gratitude to several art galleries and museums for permission to photograph the artworks and costumes in their collections. They include: National Art Gallery and Petronas Gallery in Kuala Lumpur; Lembaga Muzium Negeri Pulau Pinang, Muzium dan Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, and the art collector Tan Chee Khuan's gallery in Penang. In Singapore, the National Gallery Singapore, National Library Board, Asian Civilisations Museum, National Museum of Singapore and National University of Singapore gave us consent to use the images of several artworks in their collections.

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We dedicate this book to all the Baba and Nyonya and Malay musicians.

Tan Sooi Beng
March 2019

Chapter 1

Introduction

Tan Sooi Beng

A Chinese woman wearing a multicoloured wrap-around cloth, beaded slippers, a gold necklace, sparkling diamond earrings and an elaborately embroidered long blouse fastened with a three-piece brooch glares at me from an old photograph in a glass frame. Her hair is tied up neatly in a bun and held together with fine pins and a flower tiara. Next to her stands a man clad in a Western suit, tie and hat. Taken at the turn of the twentieth century, this picture of a Nyonya and Baba who have adapted to both local Malay and European cultures is one of more than a thousand artefacts on display at the Peranakan Mansion in Penang. Consisting of both a museum and antique shop, the photograph is housed at the former residence of the nineteenth-century Chinese leader, Kapitan Cina Chung Keng Quee. The term Peranakan denotes 'locally born' and is used interchangeably with Baba (male) and Nyonya (female). The museum website welcomes visitors to see the eclectic Peranakan heritage of Penang that includes Chinese carved wood panels, Scottish ironwork, a large collection of antiques and collectibles, and is elaborately 'decorated with European-styled teak furniture' (Pinang Peranakan Mansion 2004).

The museum joins a small cultural revival of the Peranakan Chinese in Penang, Malacca (Melaka) and Singapore, which were formerly part of the Straits Settlements. In these cities, gastronomy books with traditional recipes and cooking tips line bookshop shelves alongside coffee-table books about Peranakan culture and jewellery. In Penang, tourism brochures call on visitors to experience the multicultural Peranakan heritage through Nyonya restaurants that offer traditional dishes such as *nasi ulam* (herbal rice) and