

# 'Peranakan Legacy' at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

The permanent exhibition *Peranakan Legacy*, which was launched at the Asian Civilisations Museum's main wing in 2000, has received an overwhelmingly positive response from visitors and overseas institutions keen to borrow the collection. Its appeal is largely due to interest in the unique fusion of Chinese, Malay, and other cultures in the former Straits Settlements of Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and other areas of the region during the colonial period. The exhibition adds an important dimension to the museum's mission of exploring Singapore's 'ancestral cultures' by demonstrating, in material culture terms, the value of such cross-cultural developments.

Report >  
General



1 Portrait of Mrs Tan Beng Wan. Tempera on wood, late nineteenth century.

By Heidi Tan

The term 'Peranakan' is usually taken to mean 'local born' and is thought to have been used by the settled communities of Chinese, particularly during the late nineteenth century, to distinguish themselves from the new immigrants, whom they referred to as *sinkeh* (new guest) or, in Indonesia, as *totok* (migrant). The gender-specific terms 'Baba' and 'Nonya' are honorific, suggesting the high status of the respective male and female Peranakans.

The origins and history of the Peranakan phenomena in Southeast Asia remain contentious. It is not clear when Peranakan Chinese began to settle in the region – the earliest Chinese records of Chinese settlements date to the mid-fourteenth century, and Chinese communities lived in areas such as Melaka long before the founding of the Straits Settlements in 1826 (Rudolf 1998:196).

The assimilation of Malay cultural markers (a Baba patois, rituals and customs, food and fashion accessories) distinguished the Peranakan Chinese. Their knowledge of local matters enabled them to act as brokers between local and colonial businesses, giving them a distinct economic advantage. Many eventually underwent an English education (or Dutch, in the case of Indonesian Peranakans) and took up positions in the colonial administration, earning themselves the title of 'King's Chinese'.

The ways in which cross-cultural transformations occurred also remain unclear – through intermarriage between Chinese traders and indigenous women, or cultural adaptation? There are good reasons to suppose that both may have happened. Chinese traders reliant on seasonal monsoons for travel would have stayed in the region for long periods and eventually have married local women. The Confucian tradition of looking after the ancestors required that Chinese women stay in China to fulfil this role, and it was not until the mid- to late nineteenth century that social unrest induced increasing numbers of Chinese women to emigrate to Southeast Asia.

The need to adopt local customs may have prevailed to a greater extent in certain areas, such as in Java, especially following ethnic conflicts such as the Batavia Massacre in the mid-eighteenth century, or in Siam and the Philippines, where the Chinese were more easily assimilated (Chin 1991:18).

That the adaptation of local Malay culture was transferred through the matriarch can be seen in early portraiture. These portraits were painted in the home of Mr and Mrs Tan Beng Wan during the late nineteenth century. They pose apparently surrounded by possessions suitably reflective of their social standing (photos 1 and 2). The educated upholder of Chinese culture and Confucian values, a role aspired to by the Babas, is apparent in Mr Tan's Chinese-style clothes, books, and porcelain

accessories. Mr Tan was appointed to the Chinese Advisory Board for Singapore in 1890 and was also Municipal Commissioner until his death the following year.

Mrs Tan's portrait reflects the Malay cultural influence. She wears the early style of Peranakan dress, the Malay long tunic (*baju panjang*) with batik patterns, fastened by three brooches or *kerosang* over a woven cotton sarong (*kain chaylay*), a batik handkerchief in one hand and hair tightly pulled back in a bun secured by three hairpins (*chabang tiga*), as was customary of the Melakan and Singapore *nonyas*. She wears slippers (*kasut tongkang*) – *nonyas* did not observe the Chinese custom of bound feet – that she probably decorated with European glass beads herself. Wealth and status are further reflected in her accessories, including a betel (*sireh*) set with silver receptacles and the required spittoon, in this case of the imported Chinese porcelain variety. Betel-chewing was an important Southeast Asian custom, thought to have originated in the Malay world, and a wealthy Peranakan home would have elaborate *sireh* sets which were presented to guests on their arrival as a sign of hospitality. Interestingly, betel-chewing remained a female habit, while men usually preferred to smoke tobacco.



4 Beadwork panel with a pair of phoenix, bats, and insects amongst plants. Glass beads, metallic-wrapped threads, velvet. Indonesia, late nineteenth–early twentieth century.

## Cross-cultural fertilization

The exhibition explores several themes with an underlying concern to unravel diverse sources of cultural influence. The displays are organized around themes and materials – social customs such as betel-chewing and weddings, the *nonyas'* own production of textile arts, stylistic developments in dress and jewellery fashions at the turn of the century, and the important legacies of silver and porcelain that were handed down as family heirlooms.

The cross-cultural fertilization of ideas, materials, and designs was often underpinned by the tastes of the *nonyas* who commissioned craftsmen from different ethnic groups. Although fashions changed, a distinct Peranakan aesthetic can be seen in their taste for elaborate designs executed with exquisite skill borne out of the Malay sense of refinement (*halus*). This is illustrated by nineteenth-century examples of the Malay-style brooch (*kerosang*) with Malay rose-cut diamonds (*intan*) and later examples with brilliant-cut diamonds (*berlian*) produced by Indian jewellers, whose new cutting and setting techniques improved their sparkling quality (photo 3).

Metalwork was another important aspect of material culture patronized by wealthy *nonyas*. They commissioned local Malay and Chinese silversmiths to produce a wide range of items, including pillow ends (*bantal*), ornamental vessels, tea sets for weddings, ritual water sprinklers, and hangings to decorate wedding beds. Perhaps some of the best examples demonstrate the blending of Malay metalworking techniques such as *repoussé* and filigree work, often stained a rich orange tone, with Chinese designs that include auspicious motifs such as the mythical *qilin* (signifying the birth of sons) and Buddhist emblems (photo 4).

Perhaps the best expressions of Peranakan taste are those that were produced by the *nonyas* themselves. Embroidery and beadwork using imported European glass beads were painstakingly undertaken by young unmarried *nonyas* to produce accessories for their wedding trousseau. These demonstrated the ideal feminine virtues of industriousness, patience,

and artistic skill, as well as how much time the maker had free for such labour, and were indicators of a family's social standing and a woman's marriageability.

## Contextualization and future developments

One of the curatorial challenges of the exhibition was to address the need for greater contextualization, despite limited collections. Small semi-contextual displays provide one solution. These include a display of an ancestral altar and a wedding bed, which, when fully dressed, becomes a focal point of the wedding chamber. Carved in *nam* wood in southern China, the ornate red-and-gold style bed with its embroidered silk curtains, canopy, cushions, and golden hanging flower baskets (*bakul bunga*), decorated profusely with every imaginable Chinese auspicious motif, is in effect a 'shrine to fertility and wealth' (Lee & Chen 1998:72).

Designs include Buddhist and Daoist motifs, cranes and peaches (emblems of longevity), plants in fruit (abundance), and the signature motif of the Peranakans, the phoenix and peony (symbols of beauty, wealth, and status). Continuation of the patriarchal family line through the birth of sons was of great concern. The ultimate rite to this end was the *ann ch'ng* ritual, in which a young boy rolled across the bed three times during preparations for the traditional twelve-day Chinese wedding. Anecdotal evidence informs us that the bed's owner travelled continuously over the course of her child-bearing years between Singapore and her first home in Penang (where the bed was kept), in the belief that this particular bed would ensure the safe births of her children.

Peranakan culture holds great nostalgia and significance for local communities and is an attraction for overseas visitors who wish to uncover unique Southeast Asian cultures. The success of the exhibition has inspired the museum to develop its collections and undertake further research on less well-documented Peranakan communities, such as the Indian Peranakans (or Chitty Melakans), the Dutch Eurasians in Java, and smaller communities in Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand. The documentation of oral histories and living traditions practised by Peranakans today will be given greater priority when the exhibition is revamped as part of ambitious plans for a dedicated Peranakan museum. ◀

## Agenda

The exhibition 'Peranakan Legacy' is on permanent display at the Museum's main wing in 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941.

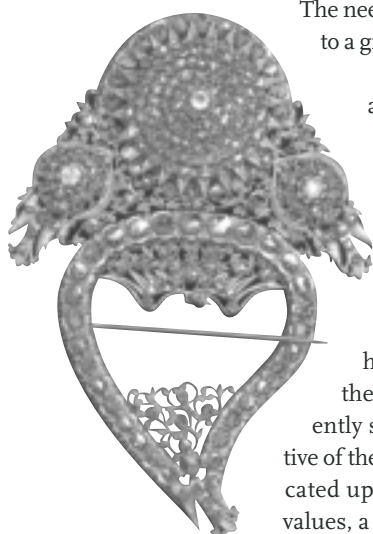
## References

- Chin, Edmond, *Gilding the Phoenix. The Straits Chinese and their Jewellery*, Singapore: The National Museum, (1991).
- Lee, Peter and Jennifer Chen, *Ruma Baba. Life in a Peranakan House*, Singapore: Singapore History Museum (1998).
- Rudolph, Jurgen, *Reconstructing Identities. A Social history of the Babas in Singapore*, Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing (1998).

Heidi Tan is Curator-in-Charge of the Southeast Asia curatorial unit at the Asian Civilisations Museum, which is working on a forthcoming publication of *Peranakan material culture*.  
heidi\_tan@nhb.gov.sg

The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore is part of the Asia-Europe Museum network. More information on ASEMUS: [www.asemus.org](http://www.asemus.org)

3 *Kerosang serong*. Gold, with rose- and brilliant-cut diamonds. Penang, nineteenth century.



2 Portrait of Mr Tan Beng Wan. Tempera on wood, late nineteenth century.



All photos: Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore