

The Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Singapore

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Introduction

Heritage is valued in a community for its cultural content whether all the inherited practices and rituals represented by it are being continued or otherwise. This is because the inherited *values* always remain with the community.

If you visit the *Images of Singapore* show at Sentosa, as the brochure you pick up quite truthfully claims, ‘life-sized figures come alive, and rare artifacts and state-of-the-art technology bring you realistic sights, sounds and smells.’ Among the treats offered to you is a full-scale *Peranakan* wedding ceremony! In the course of the realistic enactment of the traditions and celebrations ‘you can be part of’, the *Images* show offers you a real kaleidoscope of Tamil, Malay, Chinese and *Peranakan* practices. The Asian Civilisations Museum at Armenian Street has a permanent exhibition called *Peranakan Legacy*.

The Blue Ginger Restaurant in Singapore, which specialises in *Peranakan* cuisine, uses typical seasoning ingredients to enhance both the flavour and durability of its seafood, meat, poultry and vegetable preparations. Its masterly chefs of course make use of blue ginger (*galangal*; do you recall that its oil used to be an essential component of Tiger Balm?), shrimp paste (the Singapore variety, called *belachan* which is more a firm cake than a paste), chilies, lemongrass, tamarind, turmeric, coconut (the mainstay of Malay cooking; mostly used as coconut milk) and candlenuts (little round nuts that are ground and used for thickening). Has your mouth started watering already? When you visit Singapore next, see whether you can lay your hands on *poh piah* (pronounced *po-pee-ah*), the *Peranakan* version of a fresh spring roll, *nasi lemak* that is rice cooked in coconut milk and served with fried fish, peanuts, egg omelet and chili sauce, *laksa lemak*, a coconut curry noodle soup with chili sauce and herbs and finally, chili crab — crab on the shell stir-fried with fiery chili sauce.

The Blue Ginger also caresses your taste buds with other *Peranakan* delicacies such as *beef rendang* (beef cooked in coconut milk and spices), *udang kuah pedas nanas* (tiger prawns simmered in spicy pineapple gravy) and *durian chendol* (a dessert of red beans and jelly in coconut milk topped with durian puree). The daughter of one of the Blue Ginger chefs, it is claimed, works in Los Angeles, U.S.A., and makes a modified *laksa lemak* using shelled, de-veined prawns, rice vermicelli, chili paste and coconut milk, apart from cucumber, bean sprouts and spices. It is not as if you have to go only to the Blue Ginger Restaurant in Singapore if you feel like eating the *Peranakan* way. Connoisseurs also like the *Peranakan* treats made and served at the Empire Café of the

Raffles Hotel. The Peranakan Association will advise you to go and pamper your palates at Cheng Heng Restaurant, Guan Hoe Soon, Peranakan Inn, Nonya & Baba, Bibik's Place, Straits Café by the Park or the Coffee Rooms at Goodwood Park and Apollo Hotels. And the list is far from complete.

If Tamils came from India, Malays were native to Singapore and if the Chinese came from China, who are the Peranakans? *Peranakan* in Malay means 'local-born'. Therefore, theoretically, this term should describe all people other than first generation immigrants and passing visitors. In Singapore, however, when we say Peranakan, we are referring to the members of the 'Baba' community who are otherwise called *Peranakan Cina* or Chinese Peranakan. They are Chinese who speak a special dialect of Malay called Baba Malay as the home language although many have had a tradition of speaking in English as well. The Baba are more acculturated than first generation Chinese by the indigenous traditions of the archipelago to which Singapore still belongs geographically, though it is independent of Malaysia politically.

Historical

In the early 19th century, Chinese businessmen journeyed southwards to the various ports of the Straits of Malacca and the Malay archipelago. Their trade was in Chinese silk, porcelain and other goods in exchange for Asian spices — spices of the region as well as Indian spices brought by Muslim Gujarati businessmen from Cambay, India.

Many of these Chinese men stayed back in the Malay States and the British colonies of the Straits Settlements (present-day Penang and Melaka in Malaysia, and Singapore) and in parts of Thailand and Indonesia. They married indigenous women and their male descendants continued in the traditional trades or took to other businesses. As commerce in this part of the world grew in the 19th century, more Chinese migrated to the Straits, working, settling and marrying in the region. By then, their wives were usually the daughters of the earlier generations of Peranakans. These men and their male descendants came to be called Baba and their daughters, *Nonya* (also called *Nyonya*).

The term Baba is of historical interest too. In Hindi, Urdu and several languages and dialects of North India, whose culture has been partly Islamic since about the 13th century, the word *Baba* means 'father' or 'grandfather', or 'father figure' such as a religious leader, especially someone regarded with considerable veneration. For example, Kriya Baba Nagaraj or simply Babaji, is a saint believed to be living in the Himalayas since the beginning of the third century. He was born in Tamil Nadu and went away to the mountains at the age of sixteen. Since then devotees have experienced miraculous visitations in various Himalayan locations at regular intervals. A Muslim *fakir* who lived in Shirdi, Maharashtra and a Hindu spiritual leader who resides in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh are both called Sai Baba. A million devotees around the world, including the author and his family consider the Sai Babas as manifestations or *avatars* of God. Several other religious leaders and Masters in India are also given the respectful title *Baba*.

By a twist of linguistic usage, the term came also to be applied by servants in north Indian households for addressing the young children of their masters. J.D.Vaughan, in *The Manners and Customs of the Straits Settlements* (1879) noted that it was probably the Indian convicts of Penang who applied the label *Baba* for the first time to Chinese children. Some Indian shopkeepers in Penang still address all Chinese customers as *Baba*.

The term *Baba* is also used in friendly conversation even today by Indians to address any close relative or friend, and may have been imported into Southeast Asia by Gujarati Muslim traders in the 19th century. If one visits any part of North India, whether rural or urban, he or she will keep hearing the phrases, *Arey baba* and *Naa baba*. It is quite likely that Indians and Chinese got together as fellow traders and the former foisted the label *Baba* on to the latter. They would also have felt like using this affectionate form for addressing local children, when their own families were far away in distant Gujarat. However, whether the term *Baba* was earlier to the label *Peranakan* or not can only be a matter of conjecture.

While referring to the Baba of Singapore, it is correct to consider them along with the Baba of Melaka (Malacca) in Malaysia. Babas from Singapore are very similar to those from Melaka and they share the same language (Baba Malay) and many of the same cultural and social traditions.

There are also acculturated Chinese in the Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terengganu who do not call themselves either Baba or Peranakan. They say they are *Teng-lang* or Chinese, but the pure Chinese refer to them as Baba because they have a number of Malay cultural features. Further they speak the local Malay dialects among themselves in addition to their own version of *Hokkien*, which itself is full of Malay and Thai influences. The Kelantan local Malays call their acculturated Chinese brethren *Cina Kampung* (country Chinese). Since these Chinese have also absorbed Thai influences and can speak the local Thai dialect, the first generation Chinese in Kelantan refer to them as *Poaⁿ Teng Siam* (half Chinese, half Siamese). These can be described as Peranakan type Chinese, of course different from the Baba of Melaka or Singapore, who are called Peranakan Cina or Chinese Peranakan. Peranakan-type Chinese of the Kelantan variety are also found throughout Indonesia though it is not clear whether they interact socially as a Peranakan body with others of their kind.

The Penang Baba who speaks a particular type of Hokkien Chinese should perhaps be considered a third Peranakan type, as you do find one or two Baba cultural features among them. The long British colonialisation of the region had left a distinct British orientation in the Chinese Peranakan. As a result the Penang Baba have been described both as *sim Teng-lang*, *su-siong Ang-mo*, (at heart Chinese, in thoughts Western). Some Malay-speaking Chinese Peranakans from Sumatra and Melaka have also settled in Penang and these can be easily distinguished from the Penang Baba.

Material Culture:

Getting back to the Babas of Singapore who are Chinese Peranakan, let us examine aspects of their material culture, namely their dress, food and habitation.

Dress: The Nonya continues to wear and enjoy wearing *sarong* and *kebaya* though like other modern Singaporeans, they also sport western formal and casual wear. *Sarong* and *kebaya*, initially the dress of Eurasian women of the Dutch East Indies, have been handed down through a few generations, and the earlier *baju panjang* ('long blouse', whose origins are still obscure) has been worn not only in Malay but also Baba, Chitty and other households by local born women.

Nonyas wear jewellery to match. The rich ones would wear expensive *kerosang* or brooches for their *kebaya*. The practice of wearing the beautiful *sarong-kebaya-kerosang* ensemble happily continues even now on formal occasions. Unlike the Nonyas of old who knotted their long hair in a *sanggul* (chignon or bun) and held them in place with the *chuchuk sanggul* hairpins, most modern Nonyas wear their hair short and the hairpins have generally become antique objects.

The men wore Chinese style clothes in the 19th century, especially the *baju lok chuan*, consisting of a silk jacket and loose trousers, and have eventually shifted to western modes. The sarong was, and still is, worn in rural Malaysia by men but it is less popular in urban Malaysia and Singapore. What is significant is that by adopting the Malay style dress the Nonya and Baba have made it Malaysian/Singaporean and so it is no longer just an ethnic dress of the Malays. The *sarong* and *kebaya* have truly become interethnic. The proper *kebaya* of the Nonya is usually made from fine Swiss voile and its edges are trimmed with embroidery and lacework. Modern variations are being created by designers in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia and are featured in fashion magazines of the three countries.

Food: We have already introduced the reader to the excellence of the Peranakan fare available in the Blue Ginger restaurant. Nonya food has become such an intimate part and parcel of the national heritage in Singapore, that it is now also available in other restaurants. Even some supermarket food counters now stock Peranakan foods. Many recipe books are also available.

An example of the great variety in any dish cooked by a Nonya can be demonstrated by considering chicken preparations. Nonyas of course cook the chicken in curry by the common procedure; but they also cook the same in the famous Penang style *gulai*; it can also come out as *ayam masak buah keluak* (cooked with the bitter, black *keluak* nuts from Indonesia). *Ayam sio*, a chicken stew, is a very traditional Peranakan delicacy. If we take the case of confectionaries, there is a genre known as *kueh*. Nonya *kueh* have been influenced by Chinese cakes like *kueh bakul* (Hokkien: *tiⁿ kue*) and *kueh ku* (Hokkien: *ang ku kue*), Malay *kueh* like *kueh wajik*, *kueh dodol*, *kueh kochi*, etc., and Western pastries like pies and tarts.

The Peranakan are very knowledgeable about natural food colours, herbs and other plant additives. We have already referred to the spices and flavourings, which make the Peranakan fare available at Blue Ginger Restaurant memorable. The Babas use the *bunga telang* flower to get blue colour for their *kueh*. Pandan leaves provide green colour to food preparations. Powdered dried turmeric, while providing yellow colour, also adds its own flavour and increases the shelf life of several food preparations. Turmeric leaf is used to disguise the smell of fish. *Ramey* leaves (*daun ramai* in Malay) provide a black colour with which *kueh ku* is made for the Hungry Ghost festival or for death anniversaries. Like Hindus in India, the early Chinese Mahayana Buddhists believed that unless a dead person's spirit enters another new body (in rebirth) or attains total liberation (salvation), it lingers around and requires to be fed/entertained on the death anniversary and during the seventh month of the year. Peranakans who have inherited this belief from Chinese Buddhists believe that during this month hungry ghosts of all unliberated dead come up to the earth from the nether regions. Special food delicacies are provided for the spirits. Puppet shows, dance shows and other performances have been known to have been resolutely staged even in empty theatres. The corresponding Hindu practice in India is restricted to feeding guests who officiate for the spirits and offering sesame and water for the dead.

We must remember that what is now referred to as Peranakan cuisine is the handiwork of Nonyas of many generations who combined their intimate knowledge of Malay cuisine with piecemeal knowledge of Chinese cooking which they picked up from their husbands who reached the Straits at various times. An example of such additions was Penang Chinese food, which is highly popular in Singapore. Most of the island's food stalls now sell *lorba* (meat rolls) regularly. The Penang Chinese versions of *laksa* and *kerabu* are also readily available. The two main kinds of dumplings that the Chinese have for the fifth moon festival are called by two different sets of names by Baba and non Baba Chinese. The non Baba Hokkiens call them *bah chang* (salted meat type) and *kiⁿ chang* (plain type using lye solution). The Babas refer to the same two as *kueh chang asin* (salted dumpling) and *kueh chang abu* (dumplings for the ancestral altar) respectively.

Spices and pastes provide the foundation of so many Nonya dishes. Grinding blends to the right consistency is a skill of perfection, which is very much admired. There are stories to the effect that prospective mothers-in-law judged whether particular girls would make good wives for their sons by listening to how the girls ground spices in a mortar with a pestle.

Houses: The architecture of the Chinese Peranakan is another manifestation of cultural adjustment of dissimilar Chinese and colonial Dutch and British styles. The traditional terraced houses of the Peranakans have remained largely Chinese in its form and arrangement of spaces, especially with its series of courtyards. The typical Chinese character is also shown in the plaques, scroll paintings and embroideries, as well as in the carved door frames and screens of the house. Colonial architectural features and ornamental motifs can be found as well, such as classical pillars, Dutch-style beams, cornices, dados, shutters and doors. The front hall is often meant to accommodate the

altar of the household deity, which faces the main entrance directly. The bedrooms are on the upper levels while the kitchen is usually at the back of the house.

The later bungalow style houses conformed much more to colonial models, and Peranakan features were often included, sometimes rather awkwardly, into the architecture. For example, in Panglima Prang, the mansion of the tycoon and philanthropist Tan Jiak Kim, the ancestral altar, which would have been positioned in the second hall of a traditional terraced house, was placed in the dining hall.

In modern Singapore, however, houses and apartment blocks are now being built entirely in the western style, and you need to go inside the house to look for the Peranakan identity in some object of furniture or decorative piece.

Socio-cultural Features

Language: Scholars such as Shellabear (1913), Tan (1980), Lim (1981), Pakir (1986) and Gwee (1993) have written extensively and analytically about Baba Malay, the Malay spoken by the Peranakans. Although Baba Malay contains many Hokkien Chinese loanwords and other influences, it is basically a dialect of the Malay language. It is a unique language-blend, which has grown out of Chinese-Malay interaction. In its formation, the new Baba and the Nonya must have made continuously evolving contributions till recently. The Baba pronunciation of the Malay word *tapai* (delicacy of fermented rice) is *tapeh*. The present Baba word for upstairs is *loteng*, originally a Hokkien word. It is also freely used by Malays to indicate upstairs.

The Chinese used to address their deities by the term *gong*, which means grandfather. The Baba use the Malay loanword *datuk* for grandfather and also for deities, and these days Malays have also started referring to a shrine as *rumah datuk*. Thus the Baba, in addition to developing the unique dialect called Baba Malay, have also helped in promoting an interlingual exchange of loanwords.

In modern Singapore, there are some Baba families who still speak Baba Malay, although when compared to Melaka, there are more Babas in Singapore who speak only English.

Social Institutions: In the evolution of the Peranakan identity, the Chinese have adjusted to the forces of change while retaining many Chinese customs and traditions. The surname is passed down patrilineally, and the patrilineal principle is stressed in religious rites. Families who may have converted to Christianity are no exception to this rule. Till recently Peranakan men had sought the hands of Nonyas in marriage, ensuring greater and greater Malay influence in their growth. But the trends are changing. Baba men also marry non-Nonya Chinese women these days. The Peranakan families of Singapore are slowly getting out of a closely-knit loop and are becoming a comfortable part of the Chinese majority. Two directly opposite phenomena, both healthy, are operative currently:

1. In the context of ‘pure’ Chinese not normally speaking Malay among themselves, the Malay speaking Baba would stick out prominently. All Chinese including the Baba recognise the distinction. If the children from Baba families are able to speak Mandarin (which is now one of the four state languages) fluently and regularly, then it will become irrelevant to keep a separate Peranakan identity.
2. On the other hand there is now some interest among the younger Babas in Singapore to learn more Baba Malay. This could be due to a revival of general curiosity about things Baba, from food and antiques on the one hand to Baba drama and other Baba cultural performances on the other. Baba individuals and groups like the Gunong Sayang Association have been promoting activities like singing *dondang sayang* and *lagu asli* both of which belong as much to Baba as to Malay culture (these are traditional forms of music). Singapore Babas have produced such plays like *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* (Let Bygones be Bygones) 1985, *Zaman Sakarang* (Times have changed) 1987 and *Nasib* (Destiny) 1992. In 1993, Gwee Thian Hock published his extensive documentation of Baba Malay words and this notable work by a Baba on a Baba subject has given a real fillip to writing and publishing on Baba matters. Gwee Thian Hock’s book deals also with the nature of Hokkien loanwords in Baba Malay, the uniqueness of some Malay words used in Baba Malay as well as some Baba idioms. Lam Pin Foo’s article in *The Straits Times* dated August 3, 1998 is both thought provoking and optimistic with reference to its title, ‘Can the Baba Culture be revived?’

Things had not been this rosy around the end of World War II. Adoption of non-Chinese cultures and a pro-British outlook alienated the Baba in Chinese eyes. The British patronage of the Babas had ceased in 1942, but it continued to haunt the other Chinese for quite a while afterwards. During the *Sook Ching* operation by the Japanese, the Babas found that they had practically no friends. Hastily arranged marriages between Nonya and non Baba Chinese in some instances led to ‘re-Sinicisation’ of the Peranakans.

During the occupation and later, the Babas lost their fortunes and much of their cultural identity. Many festivals and ceremonies were found to be inconvenient, expensive and time consuming, or other excuses were found to discontinue them. Nonyas found themselves in large numbers in the labour force and did not get back to domestic work. The wartime presence of a common enemy had made the Baba recognise their Chinese identity once again.

The Straits Chinese British Association, which had been functioning since 1900, acted for a while in defense of the rights of all Chinese in the colonial Straits Settlements. The Association opened branches in Malacca and Penang respectively in 1900 and 1920 and these branches are still active. The SCBA in Singapore however became the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association on December 11, 1964 and The Peranakan Association on February 23, 1966. Both The Peranakan Association and Gunong Sayang Association have been scrupulously emphasising the value of inter-racial and intercultural harmony, religious tolerance and common national identity. In truth, precisely these values had led to the evolution of the Baba identity years back. There was therefore no hesitation on the

part of the local-born Chinese and the new Chinese to get together. Mr. T.W. Ong who served for a full forty-year term as Honorary Life President of the Association (1950-90), Dr. George Tay who served for the next six years and the present incumbent Mr. Lee Kip Lee have all worked for this togetherness as well as for the preservation of Peranakan values. The Peranakan Association takes an active part in the Baba Convention, which is being held by rotation in Penang, Malacca and Singapore since 1988.

The People's Action Party that included leading Baba lights like Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye and Goh Keng Swee, publicly described as English-educated Babas, worked tirelessly to remove the separate political identity of the Baba. Marriages between Baba men and non-Nonya girls are on the increase. Mandarin has been declared the mother tongue of Chinese. All Chinese children are learning Mandarin at school. Emphasis is being placed on Chinese identity as a merit.

Meanwhile some values of the Chinese Peranakan heritage especially cultural cooperation with Malay Singaporeans are being re-emphasised. The popularity of Nonya cuisine, the *dondang sayang* singing and intercultural theatre should maintain these values that the Chinese Peranakan introduced in the Straits region, of which Singapore has always remained an important part. Essentially it was the reconciliation with the reality of an initial Malay majority, which led to the evolution of the Peranakan from the visiting Chinese traders who stayed back. Similarly the reconciliation with the current reality of a Chinese majority in Singapore by the Baba has led to the 're-Sinicisation' of the Baba and the reduction of the gap between the Baba and the *sinkeh* (guests, a term given in the early post war days to new Chinese). Both phenomena reflect the same Chinese Peranakan heritage.

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