GATEWAY TO PERANAKAN CULTURE

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What is a Peranakan?

Babas, Nyonyas*, Bibiks, Straits Chinese, Straits-born Chinese... these terms are commonly used by many to refer to the Peranakan Chinese. Do these terms refer to the same group of people?

* Sometimes spelt as ‘Nonya’.
Let’s look at a typical impression of what a Peranakan couple would look like when dressed in their traditional attire:

In reality, this is not always true. A Peranakan can look like practically anyone, and be anyone. Why, some of your friends may be Peranakans, and you may not even be aware of it!

This book explores the world of the Peranakans, so that the richness of the culture and its people can be shared with anyone and everyone.

A Baba is a Peranakan, but are all Peranakans Babas?
Yes, but not always. ‘Peranakan’ is a Malay word that means ‘local-born’. Therefore, it would be more accurate to describe the children of Chinese immigrants as ‘Peranakan Chinese’, to differentiate them from the members of other locally-born races. However, Singaporeans generally use the term ‘Peranakan’ or ‘Baba’ to refer to the Peranakan Chinese.
In the early days, Bibiks* would indulge in their *cherki* sessions in the afternoons, while the Nyonyas** kept a strict eye on their daughters. Their husbands, on the other hand, made their presence known amongst the British rulers and indulged in western pursuits whenever they could.

* Older female Peranakans.
** Young female Peranakans.
**Childhood**

Boys and girls were allowed to play together so long as the girls were below 12. Their neighbourhood or *kampung* was their playground. They spent the day flying kites, and playing games like catch, hide-and-seek, marbles, *congkak*, *masak-masak*, etc. Girls were taught by their mother to make miniature furniture and coasters with used *cherki* cards.

Peranakan parents doted on their sons. In the early communities in Malacca, the boys were sent to schools to be educated. The girls, on the other hand, remained at their mother’s side. Even when the Peranakans migrated to Singapore, this practice had not changed.
Once a girl turned 12, her life of freedom ended. She would be barred from leaving the house, and be instructed on the finer points of her future role as a respectable wife in a Peranakan family. She would pick up essential lessons in proper behaviour, cooking, sewing, embroidery, beadwork, etc. If she came from a rich family, she would also learn how to manage a household, in preparation for her future role as a matriarch.

Where sewing was concerned, she would first learn to hem a sarong* before moving on to the baju panjang**. She was expected to speak to only the female and immediate male members of her family. Despite this, there is no doubt that Peranakan parents loved their daughters as much as they did their sons.

* Angle-length piece of cloth that is tied around the waist.
** Knee-length cotton blouse fastened with three kerosangs (brooches).
Before her marriage, she would have no further contact with the outside world, except perhaps through stolen glances behind almost-closed window shutters and curtains. On the second storey of a house, there would sometimes be a hole in the floor through which she could peep at male visitors to the home.

Mothers, when washing their daughters’ hair, would teach them about the birds and the bees*.

In more conservative homes, school was out of the question for the girls once they reached 12. A woman’s place was believed to be within the house. If the parents had any misgivings about this, they would engage a female tutor or teach their daughter themselves.

* The facts about sex and reproduction.
In the 1920s, wealthy families, and those headed by English-educated fathers, started sending their daughters to school, mostly up to the secondary school level. The girls were transported in a covered carriage — it was straight to school, and then straight back home.

The only time unmarried girls were allowed to venture outdoors was on *Chap Goh Meh* (see page 136). If they had to leave the house for a special reason, they would use a *redi*, or ‘modesty board’. First, they would sit on a *redi*, a large hessian sackcloth that hung from two poles carried by two Boyanese attendants. Then, the attendants would lift and bring the poles together, thereby shielding the lady from public view. Then, the group, accompanied by a female helper, would go on their merry way. The passenger would maintain her balance by holding onto the poles above her.
However, as history has shown time and again, teenagers can be pretty resourceful when it comes to affairs of the heart. From the 1920s, secret correspondences between teenage couples became more frequent. These were kept under wraps, assisted by friends and relatives who acted as couriers.
The Babas
To many, it looked as if the Peranakans attempted to live the British lifestyle as much as possible. They sought work in British-owned companies, reared pedigreed pets, collected grandiose (some say ostentatious) works of art, decorated their homes in the European style, formed jazz bands, and rode in Rolls-Royces or even horse-drawn carriages.
On weekends, they could be found at their beach bungalows, having a family picnic, or taking a leisurely drive or bicycle ride. Hobbies like photography and hunting were not unheard of. They even played polo, croquet, bowls and cricket.

In the evenings, they threw dinner or fancy-dress parties to which British guests were invited. This was not only seen as prestigious, but it was also a form of networking and establishing new contacts for their business. The ladies of the house would do their entertaining in the afternoons.

Joining a club or an association gave the Peranakans a certain standing. This is especially true in associations that restricted membership to certain individuals, say, those who could speak English. Usually, there would be a number of Babas serving on the committees.
In a tit-for-tat situation, while some of these clubs did not admit non-English-speaking people, there were local clubs that closed their doors to the non-Chinese (this sometimes included the Babas).

The activities within the recreational clubs included readings of western literature, billiards, rugby, cricket and tennis. It was only after the Second World War that other sports, like table tennis, basketball and volleyball, became popular. The wealthier Peranakans would be found at the Turf Club, where their racehorses competed with those owned by the Europeans.
True to their nature, the Peranakans loved to gamble. Those with money to spend would often be seen at the Singapore Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club, where many of its patrons included the Baba elite. Stakes were often high, sometimes going up to as much as $1,000. Houses might even change hands at one sitting.

Hey! It's only our first game!

I win!

I fold!

Playing in a minstrel group was another popular pastime, as was a trip to the cabaret or a bangsawan (Malay drama) performance. The cabaret was the favourite haunt of the younger Babas, much to the displeasure of their elders. The men would indulge in western ballroom dancing or tap dance amongst the bright lights and music that came from a gramophone.
There was also the practice of ‘taxi dancing’. Here, patrons obtained booklets of coupons that enabled them to ‘buy’ dances with their favourite dance hostesses (called joget girls). A dollar would get them three dances.

The older Babas preferred the parlours in which Pipa chai or sing-song girls could be found. Located along the areas of Neil Road, Keong Saik Road and Kreta Ayer Road, these establishments housed girls who played the pipa and flirted with the patrons.

Despite their desire to emulate the European lifestyle, the Babas retained many of the customs and traditions associated with the Chinese culture, most notably for weddings (perhaps it was the pomp and grand celebrations that appealed to them) and ancestral worship.
The Nyonyas
In contrast to her sheltered teenage years, the married Nyonya was given relatively more freedom. It was as if she had served her time, and was now qualified to manage a household and take care of herself.

Now that she was considered an adult, she could step out of the house and go shopping. If her family was wealthy, she might even spend her leisure playing tennis and croquet.

Still, chances were high that if you were to call upon a Nyonya in the middle of a lazy afternoon, she would be in the middle of a cherki session. This fashionable card game was so popular that Bibiks were known to have managed gambling dens specialising in this game. Some were even arrested.
Some husbands attempted to stop their wives from continuing with this habit by controlling their weekly allowance. However, neither rain nor shine, nor lack of pocket money could keep the Nyonyas and Bibiks from this game. If their source of income was cut off, they would simply pawn their jewellery. Other popular games of the Nyonyas and Bibiks were mahjong and *chap ji kee*.

Of course, having so many responsibilities suddenly thrust upon her, it is understandable if the Nyonya felt a little overwhelmed at first. Thankfully, the training she received was more than sufficient to help her cope with and assimilate into society.

* Pawnshop.
As she gained more confidence in her dealings with her neighbours, friends and counterparts, her role was likened to that of the strong-willed managing director of a corporation. She controlled almost everything that happened at home.

However, if she stayed at her mother-in-law’s place, she had the special ‘privilege’ of waiting on the older woman hand and foot. The idea of a woman entering the workforce only came into play in the 1930s, after the Great Depression. In a household, the first wife would hold sway and the subsequent wives had to serve her or show deference. In public, however, it was the husband who was seen to be the number one person.
This did not mean all that instruction on proper behaviour was wasted. Hardly. She still had to abide by the decorum expected of a respectable lady of a household as well as the customs of her time.

For instance, going out with her husband was fine, although she would politely decline the invitation if his male friends were to tag along.

A Baba is still partially Chinese, and the practice of having a few wives at the same time was not unheard of in the earlier days. However, if he were to pass away before his wife, it was the wife, and not the son, who would be given priority in the distribution of the family fortune.
Another activity enjoyed by the female Peranakans is the habit of *sireh*-chewing. It was more often indulged in by the Bibiks, rather than the Nyonyas. In fact, a Bibik would probably not feel at ease if she did not chew *sireh* at some point of the day. This was a popular pastime that was sometimes taken to extremes. Some Bibiks literally would not leave home without their *sireh* set.

Whenever aches threatened to plague the Nyonya or Bibik, she would call upon the expertise of a good Malay masseuse. Be it a headache, stomachache or backache, a good rubdown spiced with various balms and oils was all that was needed to get rid of it.

* Common Singaporean expression, denoting pleasure.
As a result of chewing *sireh*, their lips and teeth were stained red. Visitors partook in the chewing of the *sireh* as a sign of hospitality. The Babas never indulged in this habit.

Spittoons made of porcelain or enamel could be found in Peranakan homes. They complemented the practice of *sireh*-chewing, by being the receptacles into which the spent *sireh* was disposed.

*Sireh* sets are usually treasured items that are handed down to the next generation. An extensive range of *sireh* sets can be found at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.

*Portable sireh set. The top photo shows how easily it can be carried when it is closed. Photo courtesy of Katong Antique House.*
The Other People in the Peranakan’s Life
Wealthy Peranakan families often hired several domestic helpers to handle the household chores. They were mostly Cantonese and were industrious workers who periodically sent money home to their families in China. Over time, they were often able to converse in Baba Malay and handle the preparation of signature Peranakan dishes. Nannies were engaged to look after the children. In some families, a Hainanese chef and a boy assistant helped with the cooking.
Spending a day with a Peranakan family is the best way to learn about the culture. However, chances are that it will take much more than 24 hours to fully appreciate the richness and diversity of the Peranakan culture.
Keeping it within the Family
In the early days, the younger members of the community married among
themselves. This desire to remain within the community was so strong that it
was common for people to marry their relatives, even their cousins. The only
restriction imposed involved unions between paternal cousins.

Attire for Women
The attire of the Peranakans had their origins from both the Chinese and the
Malays. While fashion was an important issue, especially among the
young Nyonyas, their costumes remained, for the most part, practical.

The Nyonya’s dress originated from the Malay attire. Bibiks in the earlier
decades wore the baju panjang, with a sarong and three kerosangs (brooches).

Photo courtesy of Katong Antique House.
For formal occasions, a square batik or Chinese silk handkerchief is tucked into the right or left shoulder of the attire. Their hair would be tied up in a tight bun called a *sanggul nyonya*. Two long hairpins protruded from the bun, and with the third smaller hairpiece, completes the picture. Tying one’s hair in this way without assistance requires a lot of practice. At the base of the bun is a thin garland of jasmine flowers, called *bunga chot*.

The Bibik only let down her hair at night, before she went to bed. If she wanted to take a nap during the day, she would not let her hair down. Instead, she would use a block of wood or a porcelain pillow to support her neck.

The Bibik preferred colours that were conservative, with simple designs. In contrast, the Nyonya often sported brighter and more patterned attire.

*Photos courtesy of Katong Antique House.*
Initially, the *baju panjang* was made of cotton. Later, silk voile was used instead. The Bibik’s undergarment is called a *baju dalam*.

By the late 1910s and 1920s, the Nyonyas started wearing the *kebaya*, a fashion that started in the Dutch West Indies. This embroidered blouse is worn over batik sarongs with floral designs. It is shorter than the *baju panjang* and allows fashionable Nyonyas to cut a decidedly more elegant figure. Simpler designs were found on attire worn on normal days. The earlier *kebayas* were not embroidered, but had heavily laced edges.

*Photo courtesy of Amor Meus.*
Although different types of kerosangs may be used, they always come in threes. In relation to the baju panjang, the kerosang serong (angle) is often used. The kerosang serong consists of the kerosang hati-hati and two brooches. The kerosang hati-hati is larger and heart-shaped, and is worn with the pointed end directed towards the wearer’s left.

Occasionally, Nyonyas allowed themselves to be influenced by Chinese fashion, and they would then dress up in cheongsams and samfoos.

Over time, from the 1930s onwards, western attire edged its way into the Nyonya’s wardrobe. This was particularly true for those who had converted to Christianity. It was also seen as a status symbol, and was usually worn when associating with the British.
Attire for Men
As for the men, they would most probably be seen wearing the *baju lok chuan*. This attire consisted of a long-sleeved silk jacket and comfortable loose-fitting trousers. Later, they converted to a *baju tutup*. 
As early as the 19th century, the Babas wore western attire most of the time. This was particularly true in the workplace, where he would imitate the dress of his colonial employers and wear a white cotton shirt and tie. It came to a point when he would feel uneasy if he was outside the house without a shirt and tie. If he felt fashionable on that day, he might even don a sports jacket, a bow tie and a straw hat, and bring along a walking cane.

By the 1930s, the attire of the Baba became distinctively western, and he would seldom be seen wearing the Chinese garb of his ancestors. However, he might sometimes wear comfortable sarongs at home.
Pantang (Taboos) and Superstitions
Belief in the supernatural and astrology was rampant, especially among the older generation. You may find that many beliefs and superstitions held by the Chinese and the Malays were also held by the Peranakans. While there is no doubt the Peranakans are a superstitious lot, one should remember that they were no more superstitious than any other culture in those early times. This section lists just a few of these superstitions:

- Babies who giggled and smiled at thin air were amused by the antics of their guardian angels. Every baby was believed to have one.
- Children were advised to finish up every bit of rice on their plate so that they would not end up with a pock-faced spouse.
- Young boys would be treated to some chicken soup once they *percha suara* (their voices broke).
- Discarded fingernails and hair were carefully disposed of, so that they could not be used for witchcraft.
- If one wished to retain a full head of hair, one should never open an umbrella while indoors.
Religion
In the earlier days, most Peranakans practised Taoism and Buddhism. They would follow the rites and rituals of the Chinese traditions faithfully, engaging in daily prayer at the ancestral altar. On feast days or special occasions, they would *semayang* (offer sacrificial food) to their ancestors. The altar would be covered with a red cloth and food offerings would be placed on it, with candles lit and joss sticks burnt. In the kitchen, there would be an altar dedicated to the Kitchen God.

Whenever illness struck, the Peranakan family would turn to its collection of prescriptions for various illnesses. These folk medicinal cures normally used traditional herbs, spices and perhaps an obscure animal part or two. Every Peranakan family had their own unique list, handed down over the generations. Naturally, some cures were more effective, and these were jealously guarded, their contents revealed only to trusted and close family members.
At other times, a Chinese medium would be consulted. Prescription was in the form of a *hoo*, a rectangular piece of yellow paper on which the medium would inscribe Chinese characters while in a trance. This *hoo* would be burnt, and its ashes dropped in a glass of water, which would be drunk by the stricken person.

Over time, due to their increased contact with westerners, more Peranakans converted to Christianity and abandoned their Chinese traditions.

Apart from visiting the Tua Pek Kong Temple on Kusu Island, some Peranakans also worship at the Malay shrine on the same island. Of course, those who go to both places are careful that their offerings do not contain any pork or lard.
Once, there lived a young goatherd and his mother. It was the boy’s responsibility to take care of the goats while they were out grazing in the fields.

I hate doing this! I wish I could play with my friends!

Hello, son! I’ve brought you your lunch!

Why are you late? I’m starving!

Every day, without fail, his mother would faithfully cook lunch for him.

As the years passed, the boy became resentful. He grew over-critical and complained over every little thing. At times, his temper even caused him to strike his mother. All these the old woman bore without complaint.
One day, the old woman was so excited about the impending marriage that she forgot to prepare lunch for her son. So she hastily cooked the meal and rushed off to the field.

Through a matchmaker, a good wife was found.

When the boy came of age, his mother suggested that he get married so that his wife could tend the goats instead. The boy agreed.

One day, the old woman was so excited about the impending marriage that she forgot to prepare lunch for her son. So she hastily cooked the meal and rushed off to the field.

In the fields, the young man was tending the goats when something caught his eye.
A hungry kid was walking towards its mother.

Baaah...

The young man, seeing that the kid had to kneel to get at its mother’s milk, suddenly thought of his own mother.

Even an animal knows of filial piety. What does that make me?
I’ve treated my mother so badly in the past... I must tell her how sorry I am...

Mother! Come here!

Oh no!

Why is Mother running to the river?
Fearing for her life, the old woman jumped into the river and was swept away by the currents. The villagers spent days searching unsuccessfully for her body.

A piece of driftwood floated to shore. For the boy, this was a sign from his mother, telling him that she was all right. He took the driftwood home, placed it on an altar and faithfully worshipped it till his death.
**Baba Malay**

To say that Baba Malay is a mixture of English, Malay and Hokkien is too simplistic. What the Peranakans have done is to choose the specific aspects of each language that they have found palatable and moulded them into something new. Little consideration is paid to the elements of language like grammar and the sentence structure of Malay. Still, there is no doubt that within Baba Malay, a unique patois has emerged.

Peranakans tend to mispronounce certain vowels and syllables. Their unique patois has led to words and phrases that have become renowned as true-blue Peranakan linguistic fare.

Here are several examples extracted from *Mas Sepuloh* by William Gwee Thian Hock:

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Colourful Metaphors
Be warned that Peranakans have a way with words. Eavesdrop on two Nyonyas having an animated conversation, and you will be in for a linguistic experience that is hard to forget. Generally, it is enriching to sample the wide range of descriptive and imaginative ways that language can be shaped to cater to the whims of the Peranakan tongue. Here are a few examples:

*Takot mulot harimoh, masok mulot buaya.*
Someone who is afraid of the tiger’s mouth will end up in the crocodile’s mouth.

*Harimoh mati tinggal kan belang, manusia tinggal kan nama.*
The tiger leaves his stripes behind when it dies; a man’s reputation is all that remains when he dies.

*Buaya tak tolak bangkay.*
Crocodiles never refuse corpses.
Malays will generally have no problems understanding the Baba patois. However, if a Malay were to respond in pure Malay, chances are the Peranakan would be at a loss for words!

One very unique aspect of Baba Malay spoken by some Nyonyas is their treatment of the language when they do not want an outsider to understand what they are saying. They do this by changing the position of syllables of certain words.

For instance, “kernapa dia ini macham?” (why is he behaving like that?) would be changed to “pakerna dia nii chamma?”.

Look at the transformation, and you will notice the following:
- Words with a single syllable are left alone.
- Words with two syllables are switched.
- For words with three or more syllables, only the last syllable is brought to the front.

Such a manner of speaking requires lots of practice. However, it is not unknown to hear two Nyonyas in an animated conversation talking in this way, without a need to pause or repeat themselves.