

# **“Neither Fish nor Fowl”: Constructing Peranakan Identity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Singapore<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*This article traces the way in which political processes influence the creation and presentation of Peranakan ethnic identity during the colonial and post-colonial period in Singapore. Peranakan culture combines southern Chinese and Malay traditions and is unique to the nations of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Peranakan identity began to emerge in the seventeenth century and flourished under the British administration of the Straits Settlements and British Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Associated with the British colonial system, Peranakan identity was suppressed by early Singaporean nationalists. Aspects of Peranakan identity including women's costume and Peranakan material culture are currently celebrated by the Singaporean nation as emblems of its unique past, as individuals claiming to be Peranakan are encouraged to assimilate to majority Chinese culture.*

## **Introduction**

A few generations ago, a unique and distinct culture blossomed in Singapore and the other Straits Settlements of Malacca and Penang. Its people were called the Babas, but they were also known as the Peranakans - meaning 'local borns [sic].' Theirs was a community not only of wealth and influence, but also one rich in tradition and proud of its heritage (The Peranakan Association 2001).

In Singapore, the term *Peranakan* generally refers to individuals descended from early southern Chinese traders and local Malay women. These unions created a syncretic culture that drew from both southern Chinese and Malay traditions. Peranakan food, possessions, and images, particularly of Peranakan women, are evoked as symbolic of

the singular multicultural heritage of Singapore. Emblems of Peranakan identity, including recipes, furniture, women's clothing, and domestic goods, have become symbols of Singapore's historical grandeur. However, the people who produced these items and claim a Peranakan identity are spoken of as if they were an endangered species utterly doomed to cultural extinction and are encouraged to assimilate to "modern" life and disappear into a homogenized Chinese population.

Over the last twenty years many scholars have investigated how individuals as well as government agencies have sought to construct particular histories that reinforce their vision of the nation in post-colonial environments (Anderson 1983; Chatterjee 1993; Hardacre 1989; Hobsbawm 1983; Ivy 1995; Jing 1996; Nelson 2000; Pai 2000; Robertson 1998; Schein 2000; Vlastos 1998). These scholars recognized interpretations of the past, visions of the present, and projections of the future as key elements of identity construction. Drawing upon anthropological and folkloristic works that examine the power of representation and role of colonial and national governments in cultural construction, this article will investigate the problematic and paradoxical representation of Peranakan identity in the small Southeast Asian nation of Singapore.

Emblems of Peranakan identity are often displayed in the Singapore National Heritage Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore as a quintessential expression of a past Singaporean identity. However, Peranakan identity is not exclusive to Singapore; individuals in Malaysia and Indonesia as well as Singapore continue to identify themselves as Peranakan. I will begin by defining and problematizing what is currently understood by the term Peranakan before investigating how the construction and reconstruction of Peranakan identity in Southeast Asia has often been tied to external colonial and post-colonial political influence. Finally, I will demonstrate how the nationalist government of Singapore has sought to capitalize upon specific "colorful" and "exotic" aspects of Peranakan culture while promoting the assimilation of those who claim a Peranakan identity into the Chinese majority population.

### **What is in a name?: Peranakan versus Baba Nyonya, Straits Chinese and King's Chinese**

The term Peranakan is commonly used by many scholars when speaking of people of Chinese and Malay heritage who have lived or are living in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. However, it is only one of many labels that have been applied to the descendents of Chinese settlers in British Malaya who adopted Southeast Asian cultural practices and intermarried with Southeast Asians (Rafferty 1984; Lee and Chen 1998). As this article focuses upon identity construction and the power of representation, I will

briefly unpack the complex cultural and historical significance of these labels that have at different times been employed to describe people of Chinese and Malay ancestry living in Singapore.

Historically the term Peranakan was used to refer to a number of different ethnic and cultural groups in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. The word Peranakan comes from the Malay and Indonesian word *anak*, or child, and refers to locally born descendants of a Malay and non-Malay. A community of Chitty Peranakans, the descendants of Indian traders who intermarried with Malay women, exists on the Malaysian island of Penang. The term Peranakan was also used in the Dutch colonial period to refer to descendants of Europeans and indigenous Southeast Asians. Ellen Rafferty notes that in "Dutch colonial times [in the Dutch East Indies] the term was used to refer to anyone of mixed ancestry. Thus, there were Peranakan Dutch as well as Peranakan Chinese" (1984:274). Over time Peranakan has taken on a more specific meaning. The term Peranakan is currently employed in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia as a specific socio-cultural label that refers to the descendants of early Chinese settlers, predominantly from the region of Fujian, who intermarried with non-Muslim Malays, creating a syncretic culture that drew from both Chinese and Malay traditions (Rafferty 1984; Ahmad 1994).

Men who identify as Peranakan refer to themselves as Babas. Women who identify as Peranakan refer to themselves as Nyonyas. People who identify themselves as Peranakan as a term of collective representation often use the labels of Baba or Baba Nyonya in place of the word Peranakan (Rudolph 1998; Khoo 1998). The word Baba is used as a term of respect in northern India. Joo Ee Khoo claims that the honorific traveled to the Malay Peninsula when the English East India Company extended its trading influence from India to the Straits of Malacca (1998:24). In time, this Indian honorific came to refer to men who identified as Peranakan in Malacca, Singapore, and Penang.

The word Nyonya and its variants of Nyonyah, Nonya, and Nona are traditional Malay forms of address for non-Malay women of a high social status and, according to Khoo, can be traced to the Portuguese word for grandmother (1998:24). Unlike the word Baba, the honorific Nyonya was not used exclusively to refer to women identified as Peranakan who lived in the former Straits Settlements of Malacca, Singapore and Penang, but also the term was applied to Chinese-Malay women who lived in Sumatra and Java. Many Malaysians and Singaporeans who identify themselves as Peranakan choose to employ the terms of Peranakan, Baba, and Nyonya when representing themselves to the public (The Peranakan Association 2001).

The term Straits Chinese is also often used when referencing Peranakans and Peranakan culture in Singapore and Malaysia. Straits Chinese refers to the predominant

settlement pattern of Chinese-Malay families within the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore during the period of British colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> The use of the term Straits Chinese to describe people who currently claim a Peranakan identity is problematic for two reasons. The significance of the Straits Settlements as a politico-geographic area ended with the end of British colonial rule. Thus, using the term Straits Chinese to refer to a present Peranakan identity positions this identity solely in the past and associates those who claim to be Peranakan with the now defunct British Empire. Straits Chinese is also a problematic term because it fails to recognize the difference between a specific Peranakan identity and the large number of more recent Chinese immigrants who were encouraged by the British colonial government to immigrate to the Straits Settlements in the nineteenth century. Thus, the designation Straits Chinese not only evokes the era of British colonial rule but also homogenizes the multi-cultural identities of the people of Chinese ancestry who lived in Singapore, Malacca, and Penang during the British colonial period.

The use of the term King's Chinese to describe Peranakan is also problematic. The title of King's Chinese, proudly touted by many who claimed a Peranakan identity in Malaya during the British colonial period, references the position that many Peranakan held as middlemen in the colonial administration. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many wealthy trading families of Chinese ancestry sent their sons to England for schooling. While Malaya born Chinese had been the trading partners of the British since the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that an English education became one of the hallmarks of Peranakan identity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many Babas were employed as civil servants of the British colonial government and adopted English styles of dress and social habits and promoted an English education for their children. Thus, the title of the King's Chinese was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to distinguish wealthy, established, and locally oriented people of Chinese-Malay ancestry from the poorer newly arrived Chinese immigrants who still had strong loyalties to China. While the use of this term in a historical context may be appropriate, the use of the label King's Chinese to describe people who currently identify themselves as Peranakan associates Peranakan identity with British colonial rule and rhetorically positions this identity as belonging to a distant pre-national Singaporean past.

Peranakan, Baba Nyonya, Straits Chinese, and King's Chinese are all terms that have been used historically to describe the descendants of non-Muslim Malays and early Chinese traders. Peranakan is currently the most commonly used term to describe this ethnic group and their culture, but at one time the term Peranakan could refer to any individual born to a Malay and a non-Malay parent. Baba Nyonya is a term that has been adopted by many Peranakans in Singapore and Malaysia to describe themselves.

The title *Baba Nyonya* combines *Baba*, an honorific term for man from northern India, with *Nyonya*, an honorific term for woman in Malay adopted from the Portuguese word for grandmother.

The syncretic nature of the title *Baba Nyonya* illustrates the complex history of the settlement of Peranakans in Malaysia and Singapore and how members of this community have adopted aspects of various cultures to create their own unique culture. The terms of Straits Chinese and King's Chinese reference the British colonial period and the position that many Peranakan held as privileged middlemen within that society. These terms also imply that many who identified themselves as Peranakan looked to Victorian and Edwardian English culture as an index culture, adopting English language education, male English dress, and English trade goods to distinguish themselves from more recent Chinese immigrants.

### **Chinese Settlement in Southeast Asia and the Creation of Peranakan Identity**

Having unraveled some of the current complexities that go into the naming and referencing of the identities attributed to people of Chinese-Malay descent in Singapore and Malaysia, I will now outline how Chinese settlements came to be established in Southeast Asia. In this section I will demonstrate how Chinese and Dutch imperial policies impacted not only the immigration of people from China to Southeast Asia, but also the subsequent constructions and reconstructions of these Chinese settlers' ethnic and cultural identities.

The Javanese, Sumatran, Siamese, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese empires all left their mark in varied ways upon the Malay Peninsula and the islands that comprise modern day Indonesia and Singapore. Prior to the establishment of the rival European colonies of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies in the late eighteenth century, dynamic cultural interactions and material exchanges had been established between the Malay Peninsula, China, Siam, India, and the islands of what is now Indonesia. These cultural and material interactions occurred between people who belonged to various cultural, ethnic and religious groups. Many of these relationships and exchanges were founded and maintained in the region via trading routes, trading settlements, numerous imperial incursions and conquests of territory.

The Chinese influence in Southeast Asia dates back more than two thousand years. The Chinese Empire sent envoys to trade in an area known as Nanyang, or the southern seas, as early as the first century of the Common Era (Chin 1991:15). Southern Chinese merchants had actively engaged in trade in Southeast Asia since this early

period, yet the first permanent settlements in cities on the isle of Java and on the Malay Peninsula were not established until the thirteenth century.

The China-Nanyang trade was cyclical, leaving southern China on the winds of the northeast monsoons and returning with the winds of the southwest monsoon. A round trip could take over nine months from beginning to end, requiring a stop of six months in Southeast Asia. Thus, early Chinese settlements were often established in key port cities to support the ongoing trade. Although trade was an important factor in Chinese migration, its lucrative business was not the only reason for the early migration from southern China to Southeast Asia. Famines, floods, droughts, overpopulation, and political unrest also encouraged a large number of male migrants from the provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi to leave China permanently and seek their fortunes in Southeast Asia (Purcell 1948).

While there had been a long history of Chinese contact with and immigration to the Malay Peninsula, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia was increasingly discouraged by the Chinese government and the ruling powers of Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The emperors of the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) chose to follow an isolationist policy, which closed China's borders to foreign trade. The overthrow of the Ming dynasty in 1644 initially increased the flow of Ming loyalists out of the country, yet the Ming loyalists' animosity toward the Manchu government caused the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) to look at the Chinese population of Southeast Asia as a potential political threat (Chin 1991:17). The Qian Long Emperor finally banned emigration of Chinese citizens in the eighteenth century, and during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties the Chinese government neglected to provide military protection to Chinese settlers living in Southeast Asia (Chin 1991). There was considerable animosity felt toward the Chinese in Southeast Asia by local ruling powers, and tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia were killed in multiple massacres. Nine massacres of Chinese settlers, including those of 1603 and 1639, have been recorded in the Philippines. A particularly brutal massacre took place in Batavia in 1740 and was largely the work of Dutch colonists (Chin 1991; Purcell 1948). Dutch colonial officials generally discouraged Chinese settlement, as they desired to control the trade between Southeast Asia and China.

Peranakan identity began to form as male Chinese traders intermarried with local women and adopted Southeast Asian social practices and language. Isolated from their homeland by Chinese political policies and faced with hostile local rulers and colonial officials, many Chinese settlers chose to cultivate an identity that drew from both Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures. This process facilitated their survival in a hostile political environment. Early Peranakan identity often proved to be a transitional

identity as early Chinese settlers assimilated themselves into Southeast Asian culture through cultural adaptation and marriage.

### **Peranakan Identity Flourishes During the British Colonial Period**

The establishment of British control over territories in Southeast Asia in the late eighteenth century signaled a change in European colonial policy regarding Chinese migration to Southeast Asia. After Francis Light founded Penang in 1786, the British encouraged Chinese immigration for the development of their trading colony. Portuguese and Dutch colonizers of Southeast Asia viewed Chinese traders and settlers as obstacles to their attempts to control trade between Southeast Asia and China. British colonial authorities sought to capitalize on established trading relationships and encourage more Chinese immigration, "for the British realized that the industry of this people would create wealth for their territory" (Purcell 1948:39). The Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and the expanding British sphere of influence in China also encouraged Chinese immigration to British Malaya. Indeed, British colonial forces were so successful at recruiting new labor forces from China that between the years of 1850 and 1900 the Chinese population in Southeast Asia increased more than five times from under 200,000 to 1,000,000 (Chin 1991:21).

While Chinese migration to Southeast Asia had been occurring for thousands of years, the number of predominantly male migrants who arrived via the trading routes before the nineteenth century was few when compared with the number of Chinese male and female migrants who came to Malaya in the nineteenth century. The overwhelming majority of pre-nineteenth century male Chinese migrants came to Southeast Asia unaccompanied by Chinese women. This meant that during the early years of migration the Chinese traders tended to marry into Malay families and adopt certain customs particular to Southeast Asia. An unknown number of Chinese men were eventually culturally and ethnically assimilated into the dominant populations of the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia. Rafferty notes that prior to the nineteenth century, Peranakan culture could be used as a transitional identity, as individuals could pass through it before being totally assimilated into local Southeast Asian culture (1984:254). The rates of conversion from Chinese traditional religious practice to Islam increased substantially after the Batavian massacre of 1740 as Chinese and Chinese-Malay settlers sought to shelter themselves from further persecution by assimilating culturally and religiously into the local population (Rafferty 1984). However, with the changing political situation in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth-century, the local born Chinese population's interest in assimilation declined (Rafferty 1984:254).

Although Chinese-Malay settlers, particularly those living in the Dutch East Indies, had been encouraged for reasons of safety and personal security to assimilate into the local populations of Southeast Asia, this process was no longer imperative during the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Peranakan had come to be recognized as a distinct identity, and Peranakan culture came to be recognized as one that drew from both Malay and southern Chinese traditions (Khoo 1998).

The original unions between Malay women and southern Chinese traders had not only been marital, but cultural as well. Prior to the Chinese population explosion in the nineteenth century, many Chinese traders who arrived in Nanyang were incorporated into existing Southeast Asian Chinese-Malay households through their marriage to a daughter of the household. By the nineteenth century many Southeast Asian Chinese families had abandoned the strict use of a Chinese language in their daily affairs and instead spoke a Malay-Hokkien patois. The women of these families adopted Malay dress and cooking styles. While many emblems of nineteenth century Peranakan identity were associated with the adoption of Malay language, Malay women's costume, and Malay cooking styles, the influence of southern Chinese traditions upon Peranakan culture could most easily be discerned in the elaborate weddings, funerals, and ancestor rituals practiced by those who identified as Peranakan (Rudolph 1998; Khoo 1998).

While many localized Southeast Asian Chinese-Malay families seem to have absorbed the majority of the early male Chinese migrants to Malaya through intermarriage and adoption, the large influx of southern Chinese migrants to Malaya in the nineteenth century soon numerically overwhelmed the existent Southeast Asian Chinese population. The rapid increase of impoverished southern Chinese migrants in the nineteenth century encouraged established families of Chinese and Chinese-Malay heritage to distinguish themselves from the newer and poorer Chinese immigrants who streamed into the Straits Settlements of British Malaya (Rudolph 1998).

It was probably during this period of time that Peranakan as a specific socio-cultural identity was formed. People identified as Peranakan became known for their lavish displays of wealth, visible in their expensive home furnishings, jewel-bedecked women's costumes, and enormous houses. Isabella Bird, a travel writer who visited Malaya in 1883, observed that many wealthy Chinese families who were then coming to be known as Peranakan "have fashioned their dwellings upon the model of those in Canton, but whereas cogent reasons compel the rich Chinaman at home to conceal the evidences of his wealth, he [a Peranakan] glories in displaying it under the security of British rule" (Bird quoted in Lee and Chen 1998:23).



Language and religious practice were two emblems employed by those claiming a Peranakan identity to distinguish themselves from both the newer Chinese settlers and the Malay community. The adoption of Malay costume, Malay cuisine, the speaking of a Hokkien-Malay patios and the study of English became cultural markers that differentiated those who claimed to be Peranakan from the more recent Chinese immigrants. On the other hand, the preservation and elaboration of southern Chinese rituals was the primary means of setting those Peranakan apart both from the Malay community and from the newer Chinese arrivals.

With the British colonial establishment of the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore in the nineteenth century, large settlements of people who identified themselves as Peranakan developed and flourished. The British acquisition of the islands of Penang and Singapore as trading ports encouraged many Peranakan families from Malacca and other areas in Southeast Asia to move to these British controlled territories (Rudolph 1998). Established Chinese-Malay and localized Chinese traders were particularly useful in the facilitation of English trade as European traders were often unable or unwilling to cope with the trading practices of the multiple ethnic groups that resided in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many members of the Chinese-Malay and localized Chinese settlements in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore came to identify themselves as Peranakan or Babas. Many of these individuals flaunted the wealth that they had acquired as middlemen in the British colonial system through lavish lifestyles and extravagant ceremonies. Men known as Babas residing in Singapore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were further incorporated into the British colonial system as doctors, lawyers, and civil servants. During this period wealthy and influential families who accepted a Peranakan identity increasingly solidified their ties with England, often sending their sons to study at Oxford and Cambridge (Lee and Chen 1998). From the turn of the twentieth century onwards, English-educated and politically moderate leaders who claimed a Baba or Peranakan identity were legitimized by the British colonial government as Singapore's indigenous political elite (Rudolph 1998).

Although a Peranakan identity was advantageous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Peranakan or Baba culture would later come to be portrayed as a corrupt and doomed anti-modern identity weighed down by expensive tastes and archaic rituals. In order to understand this drastic shift in the representation of Peranakan culture in Singapore one needs to understand the impact of World War II upon the social and political environment of British Malaya.

## **“Neither Fish nor Fowl”: The Impact of World War II and Early Singaporean Nationalism on Peranakan Identity**

World War II was a pivotal event in the history of the Malay Peninsula. The image of the British protectorate and the infallibility of the British Empire were shattered by the Japanese invasion. Under Japanese imperial rule many Chinese and Peranakan families in Malaya were singled out as targets of Japanese colonial violence due to their monetary support of the Chinese resistance in mainland China and a continuing perception of a pan-Chinese identity in political culture. The Japanese Occupation during World War II was the turning point for the economic and political fortunes of many families who claimed a Peranakan identity. As William Gwee Thian Hock recalls:

change . . . arrived in the form of the Japanese Army conquest and occupation of Singapore. . . it came almost with a vengeance upon the hapless Babas whose soft and pampered living for several generations had left them unprepared for this sudden disastrous reversal of fortune. A high percentage of the 50,000 or so victims of the horrendous massacre of male Chinese slaughtered by the Japanese military during the early days of their Singapore conquest were heads of Baba households and young Babas in the flower of their manhood . . . With the return of the British colonial government in 1945, it was expected that everything would revert to normal. . . With the loss of their wealth the Babas lost their elite status which in turn totally eroded their own power and influential presence. (Gwee 1998:x, xi)

Although the British returned to Malaya in 1945, they soon put forth proposals to set up the Malayan Union as a new administrative structure under which decolonialization could begin (Lee and Heng: 2000). Thus, it was apparent that the British colonial rule in Malaysia and Singapore was coming to an end. In 1957, the states of Peninsular Malaysia were freed from British colonial rule and formed the Federation of Malaya. In 1963 the states of Sabah, Sarawak and the island of Singapore joined the states of the Federation of Malaya and created the country of Malaysia. In 1965, amidst much political turmoil and unrest, Singapore separated from Malaysia to form an independent and autonomous nation.

In the post-war period, the extravagant lifestyles that many people who identified as Peranakan enjoyed under British rule became a symbol of weakness to other ethnic groups residing in Singapore. Wealth was thought to have made those identified as Peranakan soft and incapable of recovering from the hardship that many people of

Chinese ancestry endured during the Second World War (Gwee 1998; Rudolph 1998). Indeed, post-war writers wrote in fatalistic tones about the impending doom facing Peranakan culture. Peranakan wealth was understood by many nationalists to have been a product of colonial collaboration. Many nationalists thought that most people who still identified themselves as Peranakan would like to reclaim and reconstruct their old positions of wealth and power along the British colonial model. Aspects of Peranakan culture that illustrated Malay or British influence were problematic to the new nationalists in the postwar period and were viewed as symbols of Peranakan weakness. Singaporean nationalists of Chinese ancestry who still felt strong cultural affiliations with China viewed the Malay and English influences upon Peranakan costume, language, and education as undermining an essentialized and racialized Chinese identity.

Many of these post-war and post-colonial critiques of Peranakan identity are illustrated in the following quotation, which appeared in the newspaper the Eastern Sun May 21, 1967:

The Babas have become a weak community, which may eventually be relegated to oblivion. Their leaders are self-centered persons who prefer to lead comfortable lives on the old pattern rather than adjust themselves to the new political order. . . The Peranakan Association ought to realise the fact that the majority of new citizens look down upon the Babas who they regard as neither fish nor fowl. The fact that the Singapore Cabinet is composed mainly of Peranakans does not change the opinion of those Singaporeans who are still proud of their indigenous cultures but contemptuous of Singaporean culture. (quoted in Rudolph 1998:192)

The author of the above quotation acknowledges that some people identified as Peranakan still may hold positions of power, but criticizes those who claim a Peranakan identity as trapped in the past and "neither fish nor fowl." The author also claims that other Singaporeans who feel a continued loyalty to the cultures of China, India, and Malaysia are contemptuous of the cultural amalgamation that has become a hallmark of Peranakan identity. It seems that this author would be happy to see Peranakan cultural identity obliterated or at least relegated to the distant past (Eastern Sun May 21 1967, quoted in Rudolph 1998:192).

## **Singaporean National Policy Attempts to Assimilate Peranakan Identity into a Racialized "Chinese" Identity**

After breaking away from Malaysia in 1965 Singapore adopted a nationalist policy that sought to reify the diverse ethnic groups that lived on the island into three categories: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This process notably left out many non-Asian people who had lived in Singapore since the nineteenth century including Europeans, Eurasians, Armenians, and Jews (Clammer 1998). As Chew Sock Foon notes: "Clearly the 'tripartite compartmentalization' . . . into Chinese, Malays, and Indians camouflages . . . the extent of ethnic diversity in Singapore" (1987:26). The Singapore government's attempts to racialize ethnic identity and to diminish ethnic plurality that exists within the three imposed identities of Malay, Chinese, and Indian have largely been successful. These "three broad 'communal' terms are very much a part of the structure of popular consciousness in contemporary Singapore" (Chew 1987:26).

Malay, Chinese, and Indian Singaporean citizens were subsequently assigned a corresponding "mother tongue" of Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, or Tamil that would be taught to children along with English in a bilingual education program (Clammer 1998). Often these assigned "mother tongues" were wholly unrelated to the languages actually spoken by the local populations. For instance, before the institution of the national language standardization program, the majority of people of Chinese ancestry residing in Singapore spoke Chinese or Chinese influenced languages that included Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Malay Hokkien patios. Only a few wealthy Chinese Singaporeans who had received a formal Chinese education could speak or read Mandarin, yet reformed Mandarin was the language chosen by the Singaporean government as the "mother tongue" for all children of Chinese ancestry. Thus, the assigning of mother tongues became a means by which the Singaporean government was able to exert some control over its complex multi-ethnic population.

Ultimately, the government of Singapore sought to undermine the ethnic affiliations of its population and replace it with a Singaporean national identity. Part of this process included attempting to assimilate those groups who did not clearly fall into the particular racialized categories of Chinese, Malay, and Indian. As Clammer notes "groups like the Peranakans who certainly provided the nucleus of a new ethnicity are formally assimilated into the Chinese category and their culture honored as something in the past, not as a model for a future Singaporean identity" (1998:169).

## **The Phoenix Rises: Singaporean Nostalgia for the Image of the Nyonya**

The popular suppression of Peranakan identity in the early Singaporean nationalist period began to be challenged in the mid 1970s. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s there was resurgence of Singaporean interest in Peranakan identity, and many books and newspaper articles were published that documented Peranakan material possessions and religious ceremonies.

The numerous plays, publications, and museum exhibits that contributed to the revival of interest in Peranakan culture during these decades did not investigate the problematic position of men who had identified as Peranakan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as colonial collaborators. Indeed, these materials seldom chose to speak about the public lives of men who had claimed a Peranakan identity at all. Instead these publications, plays, and displays emphasized the domestic aspects of Peranakan culture, focusing specifically upon the image of the Nyonya and her domestic possessions.

Nyonya cooking styles, "Nyonya ware" pottery, and particularly the items produced and worn by Nyonyas in order to clothe Nyonya bodies all became highly collectable items that began to fetch fantastic prices. Many books were produced as guides for the growing numbers of collectors of Peranakan material culture.<sup>3</sup> Museums also published volumes that catalogued and accompanied the increasingly popular displays of Nyonya costume.

Many of these displays and books focused on the sarong-kebaya. A sarong is a tubular garment that is secured at the waist and falls to the ankle. Traditionally both men and women in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia wore sarongs. Different types of cloth and tying methods of sarong distinguish an individual's gender, region, and ethnic group. Singaporean Peranakan women usually preferred fine pastel colored batiks from the town of Pekalongan on the Indonesian island of Java. The Peranakan style kebaya is a short jacket made of high quality European voile and often lavishly embroidered at the hem, neckline, and cuff. Although Nyonya had always worn sarongs, they only began to wear the kebaya at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The image of the Nyonya clad in a sarong-kebaya with beaded slippers upon her feet, jewels upon her body and her long hair tied back in a bun has become an evocative image of sartorial grandeur in Singapore. The Singaporean fashion industry has begun to reproduce and sell items of clothing specifically modeled after Nyonya attire to Singaporean women. Nyonya costume has also been incorporated into Singaporean tourist service industry uniforms. This last section of the article will investigate the social and political implications behind the appropriation of Nyonya costume for the uniforms of Singapore Airlines female flight attendants.

## **The Phoenix Takes Flight: “Singapore Girl, You’re a Great Way to Fly”**

Currently, feminist scholars realize that women have many ways of influencing and interacting with the state, and that gender relations within states are evolving, dialectic, and dynamic. Georgina Waylen notes that the state can be viewed as a forum of dynamic tension where gender, class, and racial inequalities are both embedded within and constituted by the state (1996). When discussing post-colonial impacts on gender relations, Fiona Wilson and Bodil Frederiksen find that major ruptures and social transformations are created “by conquest and colonisation, by the struggle for independence and institution of nation states, by the active formulation of discourses and policies of nationalism and modernisation, [and that these] have led states and local populations to recode and re-elaborate gender identities and relations” (1995:3). This process of recoding gender identities and relationships in post-colonial Singapore is most evident in the creation of the image of the icon of Singapore Airlines, the Singapore Girl.

The Singapore Girl, a Singapore Airline stewardess clad in the Nyonya costume of the sarong-kebaya, has become the modern day cultural ambassador of eastern exoticism to a Western audience.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, according to Daniel Chan, the Deputy head of the Republic of Singapore Airforce, Singapore Airlines’ “smiling willowy cabin attendant, outfitted in tight batik sarong kebaya designed by renowned fashion house Pierre Balmain, and marketed as the Singapore Girl is now a well-known international service icon” (Chan 2000). This image of the Singapore Girl was created in 1975, the year that Ho Wing Meng, a local researcher of Peranakan material culture, attributes as the turning point for the resurgence of interest in Peranakan culture (1987).

According to an anonymous Singaporean Airlines advertising manager, the Singapore Girl dressed in a tight version of the Peranakan sarong kebaya became Singapore Airlines “unique selling proposition” (Harvard Business School 1989). This advertising manager went on to explain:

SIA [Singapore Airlines] is an Asian airline, and Asia has a long tradition of gentle, courteous service. The Asian woman does not feel she is demeaning herself by fulfilling the role of the gracious, charming and helpful hostess. What we hope to do is translate that tradition of service into an in-flight reality. (1989)

Thus the author implies that young Singaporean women clad in a tight Peranakan sarong-kebaya enjoy their sexualized subservient status and are comfortable in fulfilling a traditional role in the author’s definition of “Asian” culture. The use of Peranakan

traditional costume by Singaporean Airlines stewardesses is coupled with their demure service oriented approach to evoke a sense of sexualized Eastern exoticism. While very few Singaporeans have seemed to question the sexist and Orientalist implications of the Singapore Girl's image, other Singaporeans openly voice their opinions that the Singapore Girl provides a selective, racialized representation of the city-state of Singapore.

Anton Patel, who identifies himself as an Indian Singaporean, questions Singapore Airlines' promotion of a Chinese girl wearing Nyonya costume as representative of all Singaporeans on the Dear Singaporean Website (2000). He explains that the selective representation of the Singaporean Girl as Chinese projects the image that Singapore is a nation whose population is composed of a monolithic Chinese ethnic group. He contrasts the image projected by Singaporean Airlines with the Malaysian tourist slogan and notes that the latter promotes a more inclusive "Asian" identity rather than a specific racialized Chinese identity:

Recently, Singapore Airlines (SIA) has aired a newer version of its "Singapore Girl, A Great Way to Fly" commercials on CNN. And it got me thinking, having seen SIA's Singapore Girl ads for the past 15 years or so, why is it always that an ethnic Chinese girl is used to promote the Airline? In the past 15 years or so of SIA commercials, I have yet to see a Malay, Eurasian or Indian girl dressed in the sarong kebaya appearing in their commercials. The ad reads "Singapore Girl, a great way to fly": not "Chinese girl a great way to fly". These ads are aired internationally and they have a tendency to give the impression that Singapore comprises of a monolithic ethnic group. . . Contrast this with Malaysia's tourism drive . . . their theme "Malaysia: Truly Asian". Their trailer goes something to this effect: . . . "a country of diversity, Malay, Chinese, and Indian: Malaysia, truly Asian." (Patel 2000)

Although Patel criticizes Singaporean Airlines' for its use of Chinese models as representatives of the state Singapore, he fails to question Singapore Airlines' appropriation of Peranakan costume and by extension Peranakan identity for the promotion of Singapore Airlines and the Singaporean nation. The Singapore Girl, in Nyonya costume, has been constructed by Singapore Airlines as the ultimate hostess, embodying the qualities of grace, beauty, and charm while fulfilling a "traditional" service role. Her image has been constructed not only to appeal to Western travelers seeking the exotic East, but also to Singaporeans traveling abroad as an evocation of home.

While the sarong-kebaya continues to be strongly associated with a Nyonya identity in museum displays and fashion shows, the Singaporean Airlines stewardess' use of sarong-kebaya has come to be affiliated in the minds of most Singaporeans less with a Peranakan identity and more with a Singaporean one. The uniform of the Singapore Girl, a modified costume of a marginalized Peranakan identity, has become a representation of the Singaporean nation for tourists as well as Singaporean nationals.

## **Conclusion**

The construction and re-construction of Peranakan identity in Southeast Asia has been tied to many colonial and post-colonial political agendas. Peranakan identity is one that was inherently tied to the colonization of the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia. Peranakan identity formed as male Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia intermarried with local women and integrated into local culture. In the early period, Peranakan culture often provided a transitional identity as individuals assimilated. Under British colonial rule Peranakan identity became a means of distinguishing established Southeast Asian Chinese families from newer and poorer Chinese immigrants.

During the British colonial period Peranakan identity often was associated with wealthy, refined, English educated individuals who held power as colonial middlemen. As political power shifted in post-colonial Singapore, Singaporean nationalists suppressed problematic aspects of Peranakan identity. People who defined themselves as Peranakan were encouraged to assimilate into a majority Chinese population as aspects of Peranakan domestic life were memorialized and glamorized. The image of the Nyonya, symbolized by the traditional costume of the sarong-kebaya, has been appropriated and redefined by Singapore Airlines. Their "Singapore Girl" represents the nation of Singapore to its citizens and to the world.

Race and ethnicity are often popularly perceived to be static, essentialized identities that define individuals. In examining the construction and reconstruction of Peranakan identity through the colonial, national, and post-colonial periods in Singapore, it becomes clear that like traditions, ethnic identities are dynamic entities that emerge, evolve, can be suppressed, and subsequently resurrected. Ethnic identities can be created and recreated by groups of individuals as they react to their changing social and political environments. However, ethnic identities can also be suppressed, deconstructed, and reinvented by national governments to suit their visions of the nation and its people. When national governments redefine ethnicity, romanticized images of women belonging to minority ethnic groups are often created. These



romanticized images become symbolic representations of the nation as these images are incorporated into tourism campaigns and national propaganda.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have been conducting research in Singapore since 1998. I lived in Singapore and Malaysia from 2003-2006 supported by a Fulbright fellowship while researching my dissertation on Mak Yong, a form of Malay dance drama. During this period of time I interviewed members of the Peranakan communities of Singapore, Penang and Malacca, read scholarly articles written by local academics about Peranakans, attended museum exhibitions, and attended Peranakan cultural events. The historical construction of Peranakan identity in the former Straits Settlements was of personal interest to me as members of my husband's family identify themselves as Peranakans.

<sup>2</sup> British rule in the Malay Peninsula began in 1786 with Sir Francis Light's acquisition of the island of Penang. The Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca became a crown colony in 1867, and British colonial rule continued in the Malay Peninsula until 1957 when the Federation of Malaya gained independence.

<sup>3</sup> Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery A Collectors Guide*. (Singapore: Times Books International, 1987).

Eng-Lee, Seok Chee, *Festive Expressions: Nonya Beadwork and Embroidery*. (Singapore: The National Museum of Singapore, 1989).

Chin, Edmond, *Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and Their Jewellery*. (Singapore: The National Museum of Singapore 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Singapore Airlines refers to its male and female flight attendants as stewards and stewardesses. Four sarong-kebaya colors represent the rank of the Singapore Girl. A blue uniform identifies a Flight Stewardess, a green uniform a Leading Stewardess, a red uniform a Chief Stewardess, and a brown uniform an In-Flight Supervisor.

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