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Domesticating Hybridity: Straits Chinese Cultural Heritage Projects in Malaysia and Singapore

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Abstract

This article examines the literal and figurative domestication of Straits Chinese, or Peranakan, history in selected heritage projects in late twentieth-century Malaysia and Singapore. These projects simultaneously foreground Straits Chinese history as a symbol of interracial harmony and marginalize it as a cultural artifact. Over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ethnoculturally hybrid Straits Chinese positioned themselves as “the King’s Chinese,” champions of a Confucian-values renaissance, and citizens of independent Malaysia and Singapore. Their adaptability helped them survive the upheaval of imperialism, decolonization, and nation building, but it was also controversial for its suggestion of political flexibility. Today, Southeast Asian governments and the Peranakan themselves depict the community as a uniquely local model of ethnic integration. Museums and historic homes emphasize portrayals and consumption of supposedly feminine aspects of Peranakan culture (e.g., fashion and cuisine), while downplaying purportedly masculine elements (e.g., the possession of multiple nationalities). By conflating femininity, tradition, and racial hybridity, this approach reifies stereotypes about gender and cultural identity, and replaces transgressive potential with politically anodyne nostalgia and commercialization. As anxieties about race, national history, and belonging continue to undergird the modern polity, transnationalism and transculturalism are acceptable as long as they are confined to the past.

Keywords: Peranakan, Straits Chinese, Singapore, Malaysia, cultural heritage, cultural preservation, museum, diaspora, transnational, hybrid, domestication, postcolonial

In November 2013, the Twenty-sixth Baba Nyonya International Convention gathered some six hundred attendees in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.¹ The history of the Baba Nyonya community stretches back to the fifteenth century, when male Chinese traders in Southeast Asia intermarried with local Malay women and formed an ethnically and culturally hybrid population of Peranakan peoples (the name being derived from the Malay word for “child,” *anak*).² Those who settled in what eventually became the British Straits Settlements of

Penang, Singapore, and Melaka were also known as Straits Chinese; their men were called Babas and women Nyonyas.³ Their cultural practices, from language to religion to architecture, fused Chinese, Malay, English, and local influences.

At the 2013 convention, themed “Beyond Borders, Across Oceans,” many of the planned activities emphasized domesticity, antiquarianism, and feminine aspects of Peranakan life.⁴ Conference events included seminars by professional academics and artists, on topics ranging from diasporic cyber connectivity to family portraiture. At the same time, there was a full complement of cultural activities, such as workshops on Peranakan cooking, embroidery, and paper cutting; group sessions on traditional song and dance; a display of artifacts, such as photographs and rare porcelain; and a marketplace, the “Baba-zaar,” with Peranakan women’s clothing and jewelry for sale. One of the seminar speakers, also the founding president of the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor and the convention’s main organizer, had recently published a book of short stories, titled *Kebaya Tales: Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers* (S. K. Lee 2010).

While striking in its focus on gender and material culture, the convention’s approach to history is hardly unusual. From the world expositions of the nineteenth century to the folklife festivals of the twentieth century, the selective and often commodified nature of cultural exhibitions has been a common sight.⁵ The exoticization or “museumification” of ethnic minorities by the nation-state is a well-documented phenomenon (see, e.g., Gladney 1994; Hitchcock and Stanley 2010; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; and Ooi 2010). However, in Malaysia and Singapore, the emphasis on the feminine in showcases of Straits Chinese or Peranakan heritage has given rise to a gendered antiquarianism that belies the high anxiety surrounding race, history, and national belonging in these modern polities.

This article examines the literal and figurative domestication of Straits Chinese heritage in certain museums and historic home exhibits in present-day Malaysia and Singapore. Although there are Peranakan populations throughout Southeast Asia, especially in neighboring Indonesia, the focus on these two countries allows for a comparison of how different demographic compositions and post-independence trajectories have led to disparate state valuations of Straits Chinese history. More so in majority-Chinese Singapore than in majority-Malay Malaysia, the untidy ambiguities of Peranakan history and culture are smoothed in this visual discourse into a rational and attractive form by nation-based nostalgia. By highlighting the seemingly

uncontroversial realm of the “woman’s world,” these projects direct the public’s gaze away from the intense debates over ethnocultural and political loyalties that marked the evolution of Straits Chinese identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Peranakan conservationists, this approach is a strategy for cultural survival and continued relevance that neutralizes the potential transgressiveness of their mixed-race origins and repeated reinventions of identity. For the state, this approach reinforces the message that transnationalism and transculturalism are acceptable as long as they are confined to the past and to the personal, rather than the political, sphere. For both parties, gender is a source of and solution to the problem of hybridity in the postcolonial nation, specifically through feminization and commercialization of Peranakan culture. Paradoxically, the lesser degree of government interest and intervention in Malaysia has enabled greater variety in memorializations of Straits Chinese history and identity formation.

Academics and informed commentators have long worked to explicate the multifaceted history of the Peranakan community in Malaysia and Singapore. Their research covers, among other things, the transnational intricacies of Straits Chinese business and political networks (Chua 2008; Frost 2005), literature and the arts (Bernards 2012; Khor 2008b), and sociopolitical endeavors such as education (Rudolph 1998). Experts have challenged received wisdom about the character of Peranakan identity, suggesting, for example, that it was neither as Anglicized nor as segregated from more recently arrived Chinese immigrants as earlier historians have theorized (Frost 2003). However, these nuances seldom appear in more widely consumed representations of Peranakan culture. Popular images of the Peranakan, especially the Nyonya, manifest in visual discourses—museum exhibits, heritage projects or events, and mass media productions—that elide complications and internal contradictions. The domestication of Peranakan culture is long running and widespread, but has not yet been extensively studied in relation to the nexus of gender, race, and cultural identity in the postcolonial nation. In postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore, state paternalism has included a conservative turn in views on gender roles—for example, with the Singaporean education ministry decreeing compulsory home economics in girls’ schools during the 1980s and 1990s, or politicians in both countries blaming unwanted declines in marriage and birth rates on higher rates of advanced education among women. In this environment, the idea that femininity and culture are somehow apolitical antidotes to the strains of multiracial nation building is a concept deserving of scrutiny. This article addresses this implicit connection in depth, thereby contributing a new analytical dimension to the scholarly

conversation. I focus on heritage projects in the late twentieth century, during which time both the historical subjects and present-day sponsors of Peranakan descent typically belonged to an elite class whose relevant publications were often in English. My analysis draws more heavily from images than from text, and more from English-language sources published over the past fifty years than from Chinese- or Malay-language sources from the more distant past.⁶ Given the nature of Straits Chinese cultural identity and practices that are more fully explicated below, these sources are essential for understanding the discursive processes and political implications involved in presenting the Peranakan to the contemporary viewer.

The Only Constant Is Change: Straits Chinese and Peranakan Identities

The freighted task of defining “Straits Chinese” and “Peranakan” is a political act in and of itself. In present-day Malaysia and Singapore, the broadest and most generally accepted definition is that they are descendants of Chinese (typically Fujianese) males and local (Malay) females, who resided primarily in the former Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore, and Melaka. Their culture integrated Chinese and Malay language, dress, and foodways. With the advent of British colonialism in the Malay world during the late eighteenth century, Straits Chinese culture took on an Anglicized dimension, embracing the English language and intellectual ideas, and adopting Western European dress and leisure activities. Over time, the category of Straits Chinese expanded to include the locally born descendants of Chinese who were born in China but migrated to the Straits Settlements, especially if they married into Straits Chinese families (Frost 2003). However, this relatively straightforward description is immediately complicated by the changing historical contexts in which the Straits Chinese lived, adapted, and identified themselves. The challenge of defining this group is a testament to the shifting political and cultural ground on which they stood, and points to the malleability of race and culture—categories that postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore have struggled to delineate and stabilize.

Experts on Peranakan history are careful to distinguish between the many labels applied to this community, as each has particular political and historical resonances. The term *Peranakan*, which generally denotes heritage from intermarriage between a non-local male and an indigenous female, can refer to many types of mixed-race populations in present-day Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Coppel 2012, 1–2; Suryadinata 2002,

70). One might think of the Chinese-Malay creole population as a subset of the greater Peranakan population, which encompasses, for example, Indian-Jawi unions. Some scholars have even sought to recast the term altogether—historian Anthony Reid proposes that all Indonesians of some Chinese heritage could be called Peranakan, thereby removing the potentially objectionable implication of political loyalty to China (Reid 2009).

In Malaysia and Singapore, the term *Peranakan* is sometimes used interchangeably with the term *Straits Chinese*. However, the latter term is also open to debate and criticism. Given its geographic association, it technically refers to place of birth rather than strictly to ethnocultural roots—so all Straits Chinese were locally born in the Straits Settlements, but not all locally born Chinese are necessarily Straits Chinese. Present-day scholars charge that the term seems to perpetuate racial categories that reflected the prejudices of the British imperial regime (Suryadinata 2002, 72–73; Hardwick 2008, 38–39). For example, colonial authorities included the category of “Straits-born Chinese” in the 1891, 1901, and 1911 censuses of the Straits Settlements, but omitted it thereafter (Hirschman 1987, 564). As such, the argument goes, it is best used in a strictly historical context, to refer to the group as it saw itself during the period when the Straits Settlements were still in existence.

Yet other variations in meaning further enrich and complicate the picture. The designations *Baba* (an honorific for men that originated in North India) and *Nyonya* (an honorific for women derived from Portuguese by way of Malay) are less bound to colonial time and place, and hence more commonly used today by members of the community to describe themselves. Like the term *Peranakan*, these descriptors can also apply to Chinese-Malay creoles in other Southeast Asian venues (Suryadinata 2002, 74; Hardwick 2008, 39–40). Furthermore, not all Straits Chinese groups were alike across each of the three Straits Settlements. The oldest population, located in Melaka, tended to speak more Malay with an admixture of some Fujianese dialect elements. In Penang, the reverse was true; their language was dominated by Fujianese with some Malay woven in (Suryadinata 2002, 78; Yoong and Zainab 2004, 180). Geography contributed yet more linguistic and cultural complexity—in the northern state of Kelantan, for example, Peranakan creole included elements of the Thai language (Tan 1982).

The constraints of this discussion allow no more than a cursory glance over the long history of the Straits Chinese, but even the briefest survey reveals a past that is at least as complex as the nomenclature surrounding them. The Peranakan were products of interracial

unions during a time when creolization and European anxieties about race proliferated across colonial Southeast Asia (Stoler 2010). In the Peranakan community, leadership was in the hands of merchant-entrepreneurs and intellectual literati, whom the British also relied upon to mediate relations with and among the more recently arrived immigrant Chinese (Heng 1998, 173; Frost 2005, 40–41). During the mid- to late nineteenth century, Peranakan elites became increasingly Western-oriented. Whether through their embrace of English language and culture, conversion to Christianity, or public pronouncements of a pro-Western nature, these “King’s Chinese” appeared to have closer ties with the British than other ethnic Chinese sojourners and settlers in the region. Yet it is important not to overstate the degree of their Anglicization. Many Straits Chinese had facility in multiple languages and cultural codes, switched back and forth between them depending on whether they were in private or public settings and who they were dealing with (British colonials, the Chinese state, or non-locally born Chinese), and were able to hold plural identities that grew out of their cosmopolitan existence (Frost 2003, 17; Lewis 2009).

In the 1890s, the Straits Chinese position of socioeconomic advantage began to erode, prompting a reformist drive. Several decades of new immigration from China had brought in waves of laborers and merchants with distinct notions of Chinese identity, and with new capital and leverage with which to negotiate directly with the British authorities. In 1891, approximately 50,000 Peranakan in the Straits Settlements were outnumbered by 175,000 newcomers from China, and by 1931, approximately 68 percent of ethnic Chinese in Peninsular Malaya were China-born (Kuhn 2008, 250). In response, from approximately 1895 to the late 1910s, the Straits Chinese male elite embarked on a Chinese cultural reform movement, sometimes also called a Confucianist revival, to elevate their community’s standing. Straits Chinese leaders promoted the study of Chinese language, classical literature, and Confucian moral philosophy (Doran 1997, 95). This movement was conservative in that it sought to preserve and resuscitate certain components of their Chinese identity. However, it was also coupled with a quest for Western modernization that would allow the Straits Chinese to reassert their sociocultural, economic, and moral strength. Community elites launched modernizing projects such as *The Straits Chinese Magazine: A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture*; organizations such as the Straits Chinese British Association, the Selangor Chinese Literary and Debating Society, and the Chinese Philomathic Association; and the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School, a pioneering effort to educate their Peranakan girls in English and Chinese.

It was at this time that the Straits Chinese began to distance themselves from the indigenous Malay component of their ethnocultural heritage. Although their origins were embedded in interracial marriages between Chinese men and local Malay women, the Straits Chinese now sought to downplay or remove the “Malay accretions” in their culture, especially through the education and modernization of their girls and women (Doran 1997, 98).⁷ Cultural practices that incorporated Malay elements such as creole language or hybridized clothing and foodways were permitted in the private, domestic sphere of the Nyonyas, but were not held up as representative of the new Straits Chinese identity as a whole. If anything, they were deemed overly traditional and backward. In public view, Babas—even the leaders of the Chinese cultural reform movement—wore Western dress and comported themselves as men of the modern age. This shift away from their Malay ethnocultural connections would have political significance in the decades to come, as certain groups began to challenge the national status and rights of immigrant Chinese in Malaya and Singapore. These Malay facets of the Nyonya world would be resuscitated and even lauded as key components of an authentic, original, and local cultural phenomenon in the latter part of the twentieth century (Stokes-Rees 2013, 46).

It is by now scholarly consensus that Peranakan, Straits Chinese, or Baba-Nyonya identity has always been subject to contestation and transformation. The community repeatedly adjusted its ethnocultural and political affiliations to changing circumstances, and did so most intensely from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In so doing, the Straits Chinese had to negotiate among themselves and with others—including British authorities, indigenous Malays, newly immigrant Chinese, other migrant populations, the Chinese state, and postcolonial governments—to secure their status. Yet even as the postcolonial nation-state celebrates the cultural hybridity of Straits Chinese identity, the political controversies around this malleability have faded from public view. To what extent is this once-prominent aspect of their identity related to the intersection of nation building with historical conservation? What implications does this disappearance have for conceptions of gender and race in Straits Chinese and postcolonial national histories? The following discussion explores these questions by looking at specific cases of postcolonial visual discourses in museum exhibits of Straits Chinese heritage, and shows how these projects have transformed the potential of the Peranakan to subvert ideas of clear ethnocultural and national borders into orthodox examples of state-sanctioned multiculturalism.

“Living Heritage”? Gender and Visual Representations of Straits Chinese Culture

After a quiescent period from the 1960s into the 1970s, Malaysian and Singaporean interest in Peranakan culture reawakened in the late 1970s. This renaissance did not dwell on the history of Straits Chinese identity politics. Rather, it focused on cultural preservation and social activities, often sponsored by Peranakan associations that were either newly formed in the late twentieth century or revivals of colonial-era Straits Chinese British associations. Books emerged in the popular press, focusing attention on Peranakan cuisine, jewelry, dress, and ceramics. Examples include Shermay Lee and Mrs. Lee Chin Koon’s *The New Mrs. Lee’s Cookbook Vol. 1: Nonya Cuisine* (2003) and *The New Mrs. Lee’s Cookbook Vol. 2: Straits Heritage Cuisine* (2004); Cheah Hwei-F’en’s *Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements* (2010); Ho Wing Meng’s *Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery: A Collector’s Guide* (2008); Datin Seri Endon Mahmood’s *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume* (2004); Kee Ming Yuet’s *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese* (2009); and Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen’s *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic Life and Traditions* (2007). These volumes are mostly hardcover “coffee table” books, replete with lavish color photographs (see, for example, figures 1 and 2). Many of these authors are associated with official authorities or institutions—the Lees who penned the cookbooks are close relatives of Singapore’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew; Cheah and Ho are affiliated with or published by their national universities; Endon Mahmood was the wife of former Malaysian prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi; and Lee and Chen are curators of Peranakan history exhibits in Singapore. This pattern does not necessarily suggest a coordinated agenda, but rather illustrates a prevailing trend in public discourse, and reflects the fact that claiming Peranakan heritage has become respectable—and even fashionable—once again.

Accompanying this renewed interest in Straits Chinese material culture was a fascination with the Peranakan woman—the Nyonya. Popular publications and social events such as Peranakan conventions displayed Nyonya cuisine, ceramics, and clothing, particularly the Malay-inflected *sarong kebaya*, a skirt of printed batik paired with an embroidered tunic. Nyonya adornments, such as jewelry, hair accessories, and shoes, became objects of desire and sought-after collectibles. Both Malaysian and Singaporean national airlines adopted a stylized *sarong kebaya* as the uniform for their female flight attendants, with the latter coining the now-notorious slogan “Singapore Girl, You’re a Great Way to Fly.”⁸ In 2008, a Singaporean

Mandarin-language soap opera series titled *The Little Nyonya* became a media sensation, attracting the largest television viewership in the country in fourteen years. This enthusiastic embrace of the Nyonya is at once ironic and logical. As the personification of tradition, even backwardness, at the turn of the twentieth century, she was an object of embarrassment and a target of modernizing reform efforts for Straits Chinese elites (Teoh 2014). By the turn of the twenty-first, she had become the most widely recognized and celebrated symbol of the modern Peranakan community—one that was presented to international tourists as well as domestic citizens for admiration and emulation. This about-face seems less abrupt when we consider that this figure of tradition was highly compatible with the postcolonial state’s construction of a national historical narrative, acknowledging its complex multiethnic past while keeping it safely contained within a diorama of domesticity.

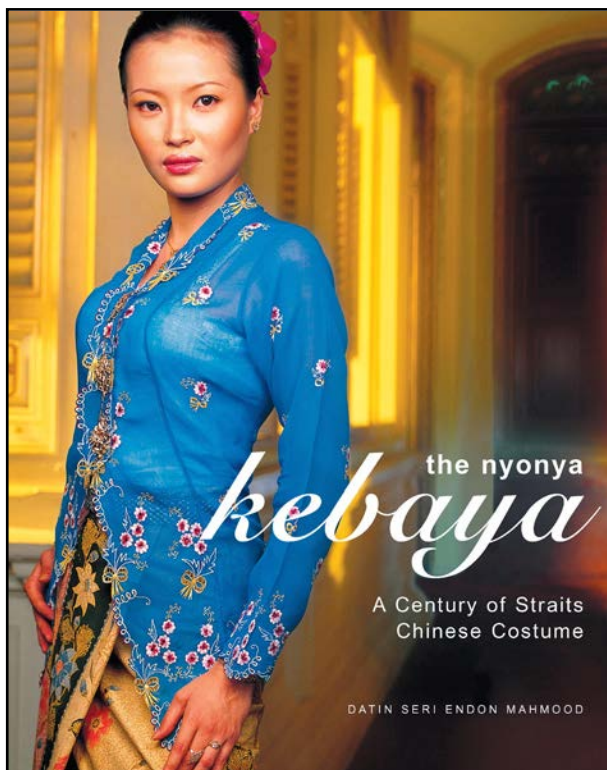


Figure 1 (left). Cover of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood’s *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume* (2004).

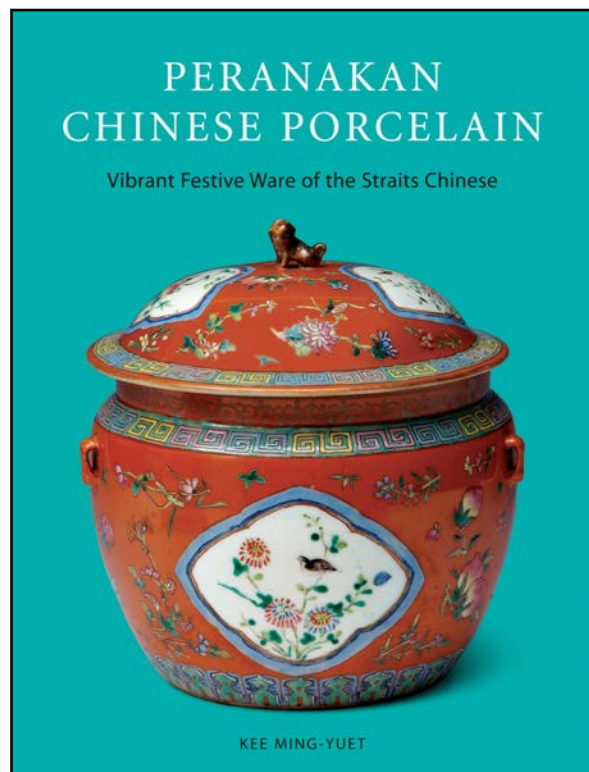


Figure 2 (right). Cover of Kee Ming Yuet’s *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese* (2009).

From the 1990s onward, Malaysian and Singaporean state authorities directed concerted strategies and significant monies toward cultural tourism, in particular rejuvenating their national museums. The 1995 Singapore Tourist Promotion Board and Ministry for Information and the Arts campaign to turn the island-state into a “Global City for the Arts” included the launch of three major museums that would present Singapore as a multicultural *mélange* of old and new, East and West (Ooi 2010, 90–91). Managed by the National Heritage Board (NHB), these three museums—the National Museum of Singapore, the Singapore Arts Museum, and the Asian Civilizations Museum—were important elements of this push to expand the “creative economy,” attracting foreign visitors while consolidating Singapore’s sense of national identity. As articulated by the chief executive officer of the NHB and the National Art Gallery, arts and culture would “contribute to the positioning of Singapore as a vibrant global city, . . . making it a great place to live, work, and play in, and a quality avenue for tourism expenditure and extended stay” (Koh 2010, 287). In Malaysia, the flagship National Museum was renovated and expanded in 2007, absorbing the exhibits of the smaller and more nuanced National History Museum (Thompson 2012, 57). Although the latter went further than the former in exploring regional ethnology and migrations—displaying artifacts and maps that illustrated the movement of prehistoric peoples throughout Southeast Asia, for example—both museums emphasized an ethnically Malay origin story, focusing heavily on the ancestry and migration of Malay peoples and the achievements of Malay sultanates, with marginal references to the other ethnic groups that compose almost half of modern Malaysia’s population (Thompson 2012, 62).

In both countries, state authorities demonstrated keen awareness of the museum as a useful device for controlling the narrative of past, present, and future, acting as what Benedict Anderson called an “institution of power” (Anderson 1991). The late modern European tradition of museums—the collection, taxonomy, and display of objects deemed curious or significant—was congruent with imperial ideologies of power, particularly in the effort to “know” and control the natural and human environment. In Southeast Asia, this colonial legacy, rather than dissipating with the rise of national independence, in fact dovetailed with the new impulse to uncover an indigenous history that would support a strong contemporary cultural and political identity (Henderson 2003 184). Of course, the potentially hegemonic nature of museum projects may well be, and often is, leavened by the important work of preserving, educating, and providing a space for civic sociability. Even so, state-sponsored museums and heritage projects

tend to present regional or international processes from a nation-centered perspective, constructing narratives that lead, teleologically, from eras of patchwork diversity to national integration and unity (Thompson 2012, 78). It was within this context that the conservation of Peranakan history shifted into museums, and into mainstream nationalist discourse.⁹

Currently, the most prominent museum on the Peranakan in Southeast Asia is in Singapore. The Peranakan Museum was founded in 2008, under the auspices of the National Heritage Board and in association with the abovementioned Asian Civilizations Museum. Symbolically, the institution is housed in the former campus of a Chinese school. In introducing the focus of its exhibits, the museum's literature states: "The Peranakan culture is a unique hybrid culture that is still part of Singapore's living heritage" (Peranakan Museum 2013 "About the Peranakans"). Of its ten permanent galleries, two are devoted to the community's historical origins and "public life"—i.e., commerce, politics, and social activities. The remaining eight are given over to cultural themes, such as arts and crafts, religion, and "Food and Feasting." One of these galleries focuses on women's dress, beadwork, and their role in preserving and transmitting Peranakan traditions (figure 3). Another walks the viewer through the elaborate rituals of a twelve-day-long Peranakan wedding, from gift exchanges to the Manchu-style dress of the bride and groom, and from the nuptial procession to a reproduction of a marital bedchamber (figure 4).

The curatorial choices in these galleries are revealing. The Peranakan Museum's exhibits depict Straits Chinese or Peranakan culture as a subset of twenty-first-century Singaporean national character. As a piece of its local "living heritage," this culture is both alive and trapped in a sort of narrative amber. The multivalence and fungibility of Peranakan identity construction, when it does show through, is presented as a thing of the past and not a process that might still be ongoing. Most museums and historical displays struggle with the challenge of depicting the motion and dynamism of life in a stationary format, let alone capturing the subtle nuances of complex cultures while appealing to a diverse audience. Nonetheless, the static nature of these objects in the Peranakan Museum is especially effective at supporting the notion of an already-fixed ethnocultural identity. Also, a heavy focus on the domestic (and, hence, female) realm as a more authentic source of Peranakan culture draws attention away from the more male-dominated public and political aspects of the community's history.



Figure 3. Exhibit of *Nyonya kebaya* in the Peranakan Museum of Singapore. *Source:* Choo Yut Shing (2012). Licensed under Creative Commons.



Figure 4. Exhibit of a wedding bed in the Peranakan Museum of Singapore. *Source:* Asian Civilizations Museum (2008).

This is especially apparent with the space given to Nyonya clothing: the sarong skirt and the *kebaya* tunic, fastened with intricate metalwork belts and pins, and augmented with jeweled hair accessories and hand-beaded slippers. Though never jettisoned as emblems of Peranakan culture, these garments were historically a means for women to integrate the more traditional and Malay aspects of their heritage into their private daily lives. These Malay aspects were publicly downplayed during Straits Chinese efforts to modernize and reform around the turn of the twentieth century, but are now foregrounded in these exhibits and elsewhere as defining features of the Peranakan. Hardly any exhibit space is granted to Baba clothing, perhaps for the very prosaic reason that, from the late nineteenth century on, many Babas typically wore Western clothing, which might not make for a very colorful display. However, this perspective also reinforces the idea that adoption of Western traits was not an authentic or representative feature of Peranakan life. In actuality, this practice was part of a deliberate Straits Chinese strategy to suggest a kind of modern hybridity, cultivated by male elites in the public eye and similar to the donning of Western attire by self-consciously modern men in China (Frost 2003, 27).

In 1899, as part of a modernizing reform movement, prominent Peranakan community leader Lim Boon Keng published a series of articles in the *Straits Chinese Magazine* that proposed some key changes in Baba appearance. Lim argued that Straits Chinese men should cut off their queues, because the “wearing of the tow-chang [queue] by British subjects is quite improper” (1899a, 25). He also suggested a syncretic but Western-oriented mode of dress for Babas, calling for them to don European-style shirt collars, ceremonial hats, and specially made “reform shoes” that retained a traditional Chinese look while being adapted for more practical use (1899b, 58). This fashion would be “a genuine product of the Straits Chinese,” he enthused, “a dress evolved out of our own ideas making free use of all articles European and Chinese,” but careful to omit what Lim considered to be “grotesque” or archaic Chinese elements of style (1899b, 58). In this same series of articles, Lim says virtually nothing about Nyonya dress and the Malay-Chinese *sarong kebaya*, ignoring the undeniable influence of Malay culture in Peranakan daily life. Clearly, neither Baba nor Nyonya attire were a neutral matter of aesthetics. Rather, this was a political arena in which the Straits Chinese made self-conscious and symbolic choices to project a certain image.

Efforts at social and cultural rejuvenation aside, the early decades of the twentieth century were turbulent ones for the Straits Chinese and their wish to stabilize their identity

affiliations. In the 1930s, fallout from the Great Depression provoked tensions between local Malays and non-Malay settlers, as the former bridled at the economic domination of the latter. For ethnic Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, nationality laws complicated matters by introducing the problem of political loyalties. In 1852 and 1867, British authorities conferred rights of naturalization and British subjecthood to select local-born or permanently resident Chinese (Frost 2005, 40). Since 1909, China has considered any progeny of a male Chinese citizen to be a Chinese citizen as well. Hence, Straits-born Chinese (Peranakan or otherwise) had the advantage and anxiety of possibly being both Chinese nationals and British subjects, compounding their dilemma of maintaining a distinct group identity while proving a commitment to their colonial rulers, their Chinese brethren, or the nascent Malayan nation. Their concern was not misplaced—for example, British authorities used dual nationality as a reason for denying Straits Chinese positions in the colonial civil service (Chua 2010, 149).

The events of World War II (1941–1945), the demise of British colonial rule, and the establishment of independent nationhood (1957 for Malaya, 1965 for Singapore) marked turning points in the fortunes of the Straits Chinese. In the postwar and postcolonial aftermath, Peranakan wealth and status came to be associated with colonial collaboration and a luxurious lifestyle that was out of step with the struggles of nation building and economic recovery. Criticisms included the accusation, published in a Singaporean newspaper in 1967, that Straits Chinese “leaders are self-centered persons who prefer to lead comfortable lives on the old pattern rather than adjust themselves to the new political order” (*Eastern Sun*, May 21, 1967, cited in Rudolph 1998, 192). Peranakan culture was “honored as something in the past, not as a model for a future Singaporean identity” (Clammer 1998, 169). Under these circumstances, it is understandable that most Peranakans may have chosen to allow their ethnocultural identity, or at least the most sensitive political aspects of it, to be quietly subsumed by new national categories until its resurgence in the late twentieth century.

The Peranakan Museum’s gendered emphasis on the private domain—household spaces, women’s clothing, cooking, handicrafts, and “women’s rituals” such as weddings—does more than separate culture and politics, or render dynamic culture as static art. It also resonates with the viewpoint adopted by many early twentieth-century Asian nationalist movements that women are the natural keepers of indigenous tradition and cultural memory, which gave men more latitude to pursue Western modernization (Chatterjee 1999, 238–239). For the Peranakan,

however, this was not an easy bargain. In the pages of the abovementioned *Straits Chinese Magazine*, for example, much ink would be spilled on the moral degeneracy and intellectual backwardness of the *kebaya*-clad Nyonya, whose illiteracy, superstition, and penchant for bad habits such as gambling were a hindrance to Peranakan advancement. As described earlier, Straits Chinese women embodied not only tradition but also the indigenous Malay elements in Peranakan culture, all of which had to be pushed further into the background to allow Baba elites to portray themselves as progressive and “deserving of the citizenship of the British Empire” (Lim 1899a, 23). This ambivalent relationship with the many cultural facets of the self is barely detectable in the Peranakan Museum’s displays of material culture.

In Singapore, a twenty-first-century postcolonial state whose stunning economic rise has been accompanied by struggles to blend Western modernization, Southeast Asian “cultural values,” and top-down policies for building national unity, the domestication of Straits Chinese history has useful applications. Directing attention to the feminine and domestic allows a complex ethnocultural history to become palatable and even laudable, to the extent that it does not upset the existing social order (Ooi 2003, 84). It also creates an opening for a group with ties to diasporic networks to assert an autochthonous connection during a postcolonial era in which fractious racial politics and hostility toward immigrant minorities have waxed rather than waned. The Peranakan are hence able to claim both cultural authenticity and local belonging in a non-threatening way, while supporting a positive national image of multiculturalism. Although there is an undeniable merit—even a pressing need—for social histories that highlight the quotidian activities of previously marginalized groups and spaces, such as women and the home, the approach described above remains in service of the nation and its political goals, and does not adequately capture the full spectrum of diversity and creativity in these individuals’ lived experiences (Yeoh 2003, 38). Non-domestic but historically significant dimensions of Nyonya life, such as formal education, professional accomplishments, and engagement or leadership in social and philanthropic organizations receive relatively scant attention.

State-sanctioned authorities’ nostalgia for Straits Chinese material culture has likely set the tone for historical preservation efforts by private groups and individuals. One example is a semi-private house museum in Singapore affiliated with the Peranakan Museum, known as The Intan (Malay for “gem”), which combines cultural-historical exhibition with commercial interests. The Intan is a private, non-historic residence, whose owner uses the space to showcase

his collection of Peranakan antiques and to offer paid tours incorporating catered teas or dinners serving Nyonya cuisine. The Intan is formally associated with and receives occasional funding from the National Heritage Board. It also rents the space for events and organizes sales of antiques. A news magazine profile of The Intan describes the owner's mission as "[keeping] the Peranakan heritage relevant and [showing] Singaporeans and tourists how to live with the beauty of the past in modern-day Singapore" (Nunis 2012). As in the case of the Peranakan Museum, The Intan finds popular acceptance and commercial viability by offering a domestic experience of Straits Chinese history, with opportunities to consume and purchase desirable objects from this history. Its combination of heritage tourism with capitalist modernity was prefigured by the restoration of historic buildings in the downtown "Peranakan Place" shopping district and the local Chinatown—both of which have been critiqued as inauthentic and commercially driven, but nonetheless became highly visible stopping points on most tourist itineraries (Rudolph 1998, 273–286; Henderson 2003, 41).

Unlike Singapore, present-day Malaysia does not have just one major state-sponsored museum or institute specifically dedicated to Peranakan history and culture. This fact reflects the larger size and diversity of the latter country, in which Peranakan descendants are more dispersed and show greater variation across different locales (Carstens 2005, 135). It also speaks to Malaysia's racial demographics, in which the Chinese population is in the minority and interethnic tensions simmer barely below the surface. In Melaka, for example, formerly one of the major centers of Peranakan economic and cultural life, government efforts have concentrated on promoting this historic site as the ancestral origin of the Malay state (Thompson 2012, 72). Such efforts simultaneously acknowledge and downplay the highly cosmopolitan nature of Melaka's early history, wherein Dutch, Portuguese, Indian, Chinese, Peranakan, and other Southeast Asian influences were integral parts of the trading port's character (Worden 2010, 130). Still, there are a number of private institutions showcasing Peranakan heritage. Although their mandate may not be government-dictated, many echo dominant national discourses and cater to popular tastes by concentrating on the domestic and material dimensions of the Peranakan past. This may well also be out of economic and political necessity. At the same time, others of these institutions offer a more nuanced picture of Straits Chinese life.



Figure 5. The exterior of the Pinang Peranakan Mansion, featuring European iron latticework. *Source:* Hajotthu (2010). Licensed under Creative Commons.

In the former Straits Settlements of Penang and Melaka, museums documenting Straits Chinese life preserve material elements of Peranakan culture and provide public education while also offering access to the more aesthetically glamorous aspects of the Peranakan past. For example, the privately operated Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Penang is a re-creation of “the typical home of a rich Baba,” intended to “offer a glimpse of [the Babas’] opulent lifestyle and of their many customs and traditions” (Pinang Peranakan Museum 2004, “About Us”). Although the original house did not belong to a Baba, the museum asserts that the Chinese-style courtyard house was “typical” of Baba architecture in its fusion of Chinese, Malay, and European elements, incorporating Chinese carved-wood panels, English floor tiles, and Scottish ironwork (figure 5). This historic home showcases decorative elements of the “Straits Eclectic” style, such as Victorian ceramic figurines, blackwood mother-of-pearl furniture, and cast-iron staircase balusters from Glasgow. A major showpiece in the entrance hall of the house is an intricately carved wooden screen that separates the public front parlor, for receiving guests, from the private

rear parlor, to which Peranakan women were confined, and from whence they could peer out at male non-relatives with whom they were not allowed to interact. Similarly, the Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum of Melaka offers visitors a chance to step into a re-creation of a Peranakan home, complete with historical architecture and furnishings that offer a backdrop to a substantial collection of Peranakan jewelry and clothing (figure 6).¹⁰ In 2013, this museum hosted a Miss Melaka Kebaya competition, the winner of which represented the state of Melaka in the national Miss Malaysia Kebaya pageant (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum 2013). Once again, to the extent that a “living heritage” is presented for public view, it is inhabited by the exoticized figure of the Nyonya and her domestic preoccupations.

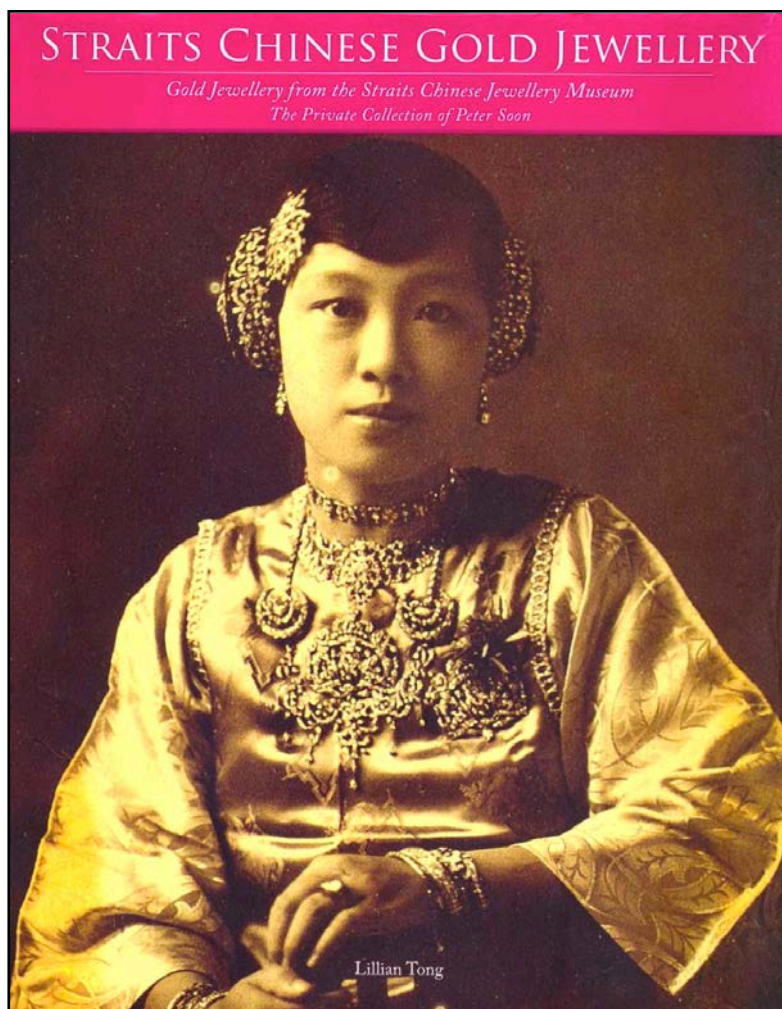


Figure 6. Cover of Lillian Tong’s *Straits Chinese Gold Jewellery: Gold Jewellery from the Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum—The Private Collection of Peter Soon* (2014).

Despite the seeming hegemony of state multiculturalism, there are still opportunities to depart from it in some depictions and interpretations of Peranakan material culture. One example is a privately run museum in Melaka, in which a Straits Chinese family has chosen to represent its own experience and identity in ways that contribute to but do not always neatly fit into the prevailing national narrative. The Baba and Nyonya House Museum, founded in 1985, is owned and operated by the descendants of a Straits Chinese family that has used the home continuously since 1861. The museum paints a detailed portrait of the family, including a profile of their patriarch in the late nineteenth century—Chan Cheng Siew (1865–1919), a wealthy plantation owner, justice of the peace, managing trustee of local Chinese temples and clan associations, and founding director of a major ice-manufacturing company (Baba and Nyonya House Museum 2013, “The Family”). Like the other house museums mentioned above, this one showcases the “Straits Eclectic” style of architecture and furnishings and the luxury that Straits Chinese wealth could afford. However, its collection places far less emphasis on the feminine and exotic, with as much attention given to the roles and activities of the Babas in the family as to those of the Nyonyas. Archival photographs from the family’s collection show Babas posing in Western clothing for formal portraits, at Rotary Club dinners, and in “tennis whites” at their athletic club. In some family photographs, Nyonya women are shown in Western clothing or in everyday versions of the traditional Chinese (Manchu) *qipao* dress, rather than in the stereotypical *sarong kebaya* (figure 7). The museum’s educational materials reference scholarly works, document the socioeconomic fall from grace that Peranakans experienced after World War II, and acknowledge that, in recent times, Peranakan have been denigrated in Malaysia as *orang Cina bukan Cina* (Malay for “Chinese people who aren’t Chinese”) (Baba and Nyonya House Museum 2013, “Who Are the Peranakans?”). While less well known and visited than national institutions such as Singapore’s Peranakan Museum, small-scale historical enterprises like this one offer alternative images and narratives at least a few steps removed from the mainstream discourse of national identity and citizenship.

Another example of a less ideological approach to gender and culture comes from the world of art history. Textile expert Hwei-Fe’n Cheah, whose book *Phoenix Rising* was mentioned above as part of the publication boom in Straits Chinese culture, offers a sophisticated analysis of Peranakan embroidery and beadwork. By tracing the manufacture and trade of materials used in Nyonya handicrafts and scrutinizing the origins and afterlife of specific

beadwork collections, Cheah shows that this stereotypically Peranakan handicraft was neither as domestic nor as localized as popular accounts suggest (Cheah 2007). Instead, portions or even entire pieces of Nyonya beadwork were likely imported from China. Locally, some of the embroidery was made and sold on a small scale by women performing individual commissions or piecework for haberdashers, providing them with a source of income despite society's disapproval of their working outside the home (Cheah 2007, 78). A corollary to this was that beadwork was not always the marker of domestic expertise that a Nyonya might wish to display in, say, her bridal trousseau for her wedding chamber. Rather, being able to purchase fine beadwork or employ servants to do the sewing was a stronger signal of the woman's wealth and status (Cheah 2007, 84). Through this fine-grained analysis of Nyonya decorative arts, Cheah overturns a number of assumptions about Peranakan domesticity and illuminates the patterns of trade circulation among China, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Hers would be a valuable perspective to add to existing museum displays of Peranakan handicrafts.



Figure 7. Family portrait photograph from the Baba and Nyonya House Museum in Melaka.
 Source: Baba and Nyonya House Museum.

Looking more broadly across the heritage tourism landscape, we can see that it is not only gender, but also socioeconomic class, that receives differential treatment. Disproportionate representation is granted to life in a world of wealth and privilege. Museums and historic homes have staged dioramas consisting of architecture, decorative artifacts, clothing, and other lifestyle accoutrements drawn from the realm of the well-to-do. On the one hand, this pattern reflects some practical realities of the museum industry—paying visitors want to see attractive and interesting things, and precious objects are more likely to enjoy protection and preservation over time. Also, many in the Straits Chinese community, including sponsors of modern preservation efforts, were and are socioeconomic elites. On the other hand, this pattern presents a skewed perspective. Many Straits Chinese, and much of the immigrant Chinese population as a whole, did not live in such comfortable circumstances. Insofar as these non-elites' history has been memorialized, it has been as part of a different narrative—that of the Chinese coolie or *amah* (domestic servant), whose labor and poverty were part of the colonial economy and whose stories are told through other dedicated museums, such as Singapore's Chinatown Heritage Center. This institution, which offers a walk-through reconstruction of early twentieth-century “shop-houses” and tenement houses, invites visitors to “experience a sense of nostalgia and sentimentality as you step into the pages of Chinatown's history,” via “the desperate hopefulness of the many *Sinkkeh* [new migrants]—risking life and limb to embark on an arduous journey... to the promised land of Singapore—to the raw, seedy and underground practices of gambling dens and secret societies” (Chinatown Heritage Center 2014, “About Us”). Women of this class are featured as certain archetypes: as prostitutes, *mui tsai* (bondmaids), *samsui* women (construction workers), and the abovementioned *amahs*. Once again, their style of dress is presented as iconic: the *samsui* women in distinctive red headgear that they wore for sun protection as they worked outdoors, the *amahs* in their uniform of white shirts and black trousers. Like the pig-tailed coolies in their drab shirts and pants, these characters in a national history narrative stand as synecdochal references to oppression, backwardness, and the hardscrabble, self-made, upward trajectory of immigrant Chinese. Yet, even as it offers the viewing public more in-depth encounters with different dimensions of the overseas Chinese world, this approach in the Singaporean Chinatown Heritage Center artificially compartmentalizes and simplifies the intricacies of Chinese migrant history.

One element of Peranakan heritage tourism that has not been well explored thus far is how projects in this area have fallen short in reflecting the erstwhile interconnections among various Peranakan communities in Singapore, Penang, Melaka, and elsewhere. The familial, political, and socioeconomic ties between these locales have been attenuated by time and geopolitics, and there may also now be a sense of competition over how museum projects are being conducted. In recent years, some advocates of cultural conservation in Penang have expressed frustration that they are well behind Singapore in funding and political will to promote their Peranakan heritage, and are even losing their artifacts to the latter as donors sell or bequeath their heirlooms across national borders to more high-profile institutions (Khor 2008a; Stokes-Rees 2013, 43). In this case, state-sponsored heritage projects have opened up nation-based divides within an originally transnational community.

Conclusion

For an extended period in British Malayan and Singaporean history, the Straits Chinese exerted an influence that was disproportionate to their small numbers, not least in undermining assumptions that “race, nationality, and political loyalty were coterminous” (Chua 2010, 150). They represent a time when the multifariousness of race, nationality, cultural choices, and political affiliations blended and overlapped in ways that challenged first the imperial order and then the hard, bright lines of the emerging nation. In the postcolonial era, this history was a discomfiting reminder to those who wished to create a new vision of an integrated state, especially in a region of the world where “history mocks the nation-state’s claims to ethnic and linguistic exclusiveness” (Harper 1997, 261). Nation-building strategies depended on discrete racial categories and the creation—or at least the appearance—of a harmonious multicultural state. In Malaysia and Singapore, the Straits Chinese embodiment of interracial marriage, transcultural sensibilities, and close identification with British imperial privilege marked them as a relic of the colonial age (Chua 2010). The problem of where to situate this population was compounded by the persistence of Malay-Chinese racial tensions in both countries, albeit with different dynamics in each country.

In this context, heritage and tourism projects—including museums and private preservation efforts—were useful instruments in fashioning new, unifying national histories and identities (Stokes-Rees 2013, 33). This task was especially pressing in the immediate

postcolonial era, when the need to realize the “imagined community” turned state attention to the use of historical, archaeological, and cultural legacies to present visions of accomplishment and resilience, from before and lasting through colonial occupation (Anderson 1991, 178–185). The selective inclusion of certain elements from Peranakan culture has become part of this effort, and has grown to bolster a sense of indigenous authenticity as a bulwark against increasing globalization and Westernization in the twenty-first century (Ooi 2003, 80). Especially in Singapore, state and state-sanctioned authorities have found a means to rehabilitate potentially subversive overseas Chinese identity practices, folding them neatly into the postcolonial national narrative (Hong and Huang 2008). While not necessarily representative of all efforts to preserve Straits Chinese history, these projects simultaneously foreground this culture as a symbol of a uniquely local heritage and marginalize it as a museum artifact in present-day Southeast Asia, co-opting the Straits Chinese experience in service of national unity and state-approved multiculturalism.

The combined effect of these public messages has, intentionally or otherwise, associated a complex, hybridized group with a static ethnocultural form, gendered images, and political harmlessness. Insofar as transnationalism enters the picture, it has been as a source of nationally based cultural authenticity, and a literal selling point in the tourist industry. A heavy focus on the more luxurious elements of Peranakan culture, such as wealthy women’s clothing and jewelry, exaggerates representation of a small and economically privileged segment of the Chinese population. Although Malaysia and Singapore have markedly different ethnic demographics and political histories, both countries have turned Straits Chinese history into a building block of national mythology and an object of nostalgic consumption.

The domestication of Straits Chinese history is a reminder that transnational and transcultural identities, often understood in both scholarly and popular views as flexible and open to reinvention, have always been vulnerable to political pressures. State-sanctioned efforts to exoticize and feminize Straits Chinese culture seek to inscribe that which was modernizing and transgressive in its own time within a limited framework of quaint and aestheticized nostalgia. For the Peranakan, this move is one more in a series of adaptations for cultural survival. These efforts are significant not only because of what they reflect about cultural preservation in postcolonial Southeast Asia, but also for their ongoing impact on public perceptions of a people and history that are as much “living” as “heritage.” After all, museums work both ways: “Not

only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but also the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 410). In these memory projects, the depiction of Straits Chinese and Peranakan heritage has all too often become at once traditional and fashionable, culturally meaningful and politically anodyne.

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Notes

- 1 Peninsular Malaya and Singapore were loosely united under British rule from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Malaya gained national independence in 1957 and was renamed Malaysia in 1963; Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965. In this discussion, I use the terms “Straits Chinese” and “Peranakan” interchangeably; both are accepted, if imperfect, terms of reference for the community in question.
- 2 Some scholars consider the Straits Chinese only to have come into being as a well-defined community in the seventeenth century, even though there is evidence of these intermarriages and their resulting cultural amalgamations from earlier times (Khoo 1998).
- 3 The British acquired control over Penang in 1786, Singapore in 1819, and Melaka in 1824, amalgamating the three into the Straits Settlements in 1826.
- 4 The description of this event was reported by S. K. Lee (2013).
- 5 See, for example, Karp and Lavine (1991).
- 6 Non-English sources in Straits Chinese culture are more thoroughly researched in other studies, especially in the field of literature—see, for example, Bernards (2012) and Yoong and Zainab (2004).
- 7 For more on female education and the Straits Chinese, see Teoh (2014).
- 8 For a closer analysis of the exoticization of the kebaya-clad Singapore Airlines flight attendants, and how the figure of the Nyonya is conflated with Singaporean national tourism and the service industry, see Hardwick (2008, 49–51).
- 9 My argument engages with the discussion started by Stokes-Rees in her study of two museums in Singapore, which theorizes that the Peranakan Museum’s presentation of a hybrid polity suggests “movement towards a more post-multicultural mindset in Singapore” (Stokes-Rees 2013, 35). This paper looks at a variety of museums and private historic homes in Singapore and Malaysia, interprets the Peranakan Museum’s approach as a means of taming a transnational past to suit a state-prescribed vision of multiculturalism, and places greater stress on gender as an analytical lens and a political issue in heritage projects.

- 10 This museum was founded by Peter Soon, antiques dealer and founder of the abovementioned Pinang Peranakan Museum; portions of the exhibit come from his private collection.

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