

Can *Peranakan* culture survive?

New Sunday Times - 2009/11/15

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EARLY globalisation was what gave the Peranakan its birth, but are these very same forces threatening the survival of the sarong kebaya, dondang sayang and Baba Malay? Members of the community tell CHAI MEI LING adaptability is essential for the revival of their unique legacy.

THE Babas and Nyonyas who came to the Straits Settlements centuries ago are no strangers to blowing storms.

But with the winds of change blowing fast, there are fears their unique culture may be gone with the wind.

Scholars, authors, bloggers and anthropologists have since characterised the Babas and Nyonyas as an endangered species.

Academician Associate Professor Dr Lee Su Kim, quoting author Felix Chia, said: "The Baba, a product of an accident of history, is a time traveller. He has come and he must go."

So, would this unique culture fade into oblivion?

"The prediction of many people is that it's just a matter of time," said Su Kim, who, however, was quick to add that she "would like to think that we can still survive". Su Kim is a Peranakan herself.

Their story, said Su Kim, "started a long, long time ago, way before America was founded, with the winds".

The Southwest and Northeast monsoon meant that there was a host of movements borne by trading and commerce. Malacca was a halfway house for Persian, Arab, Javanese, Sumatran, Burmese, Chinese and Indian traders since the 15th century.

"Because they wanted to wait for the winds to change, many had a sojourn of six months in Malacca," said Su Kim.

"They didn't bring their womenfolk along, so they married the locals, which eventually led to this endogamous group called the Babas and Nyonyas."



Peranakan

This unique culture was a mix of many cultured elements. Some experts contend that the term "Baba" for the male folk, has its roots in India, while "Nyonya" for the female, is a Portuguese word for "young lady".

"It's a cultural hybrid of the Chinese and Malay, Javanese, Balinese, Sumatran, Sundanese and Thai women in the region. Western conquest also meant that there were Portuguese, Dutch and British elements.

"It's a truly unique citizen of Southeast Asia."

Evidence of the amalgamation of cultures could be seen in the Peranakan dress, language, food, architecture, arts and crafts, customs, celebrations and festivals, which were all shaped by different elements.

Datuk Phua Jin Hock, president of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, in stressing the hybridity of the Chinese Peranakan, said: "We speak Malay from the day we were born.



The inaugural international Peranakan conference at Muzium Negara drew hundreds of Peranakan and non-Peranakan participants, including artists, scholars, documentary makers, designers, lawyers and publishers.

"Our food -- sambal belacan, cincalok, asam pedas -- is all Malay in origin.

"Our games -- congkak, gasing, layang-layang -- are Malay originated. Our songs, stories, pantuns and syairs are all in Malay."

For many years, the Peranakan culture commanded a strong presence and following among the Straits Chinese.

It reached its pinnacle during the late 19th and early 20th century, flourishing under an affluent and privileged background which many Baba and Nyonya families belonged to.

World War 2 marked the culture's decline as families lost their properties, money and in some cases, relatives, to the war. The decline continued after the war.

"People wanted to look forward to the future, rather than in the past, so Peranakan material culture became deeply unfashionable," said Dr Kenson Kwok, director of the Peranakan Museum in Singapore.

"In the 60s and 70s, there were dispersals of material from the Peranakan families."

In more recent eras, dominance of the culture gave way to modernisation, westernisation and nationalism.

Even though Peranakan associations, some established during British colonial rule, remained active, the worry is that they are generational.

The median age of the Penang association members is 60 and above, and Malacca, 50 and above, said Su Kim, founding president of the Kuala Lumpur & Selangor chapter.

It was this concern over their identity and future that hundreds of Peranakans packed the historical bastion, Muzium Negara, last Saturday for the inaugural international Peranakan conference.

Sponsored by the Institute of Ethnic Studies of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the Museums Department, the conference attempted to trace the community's roots, spell out current challenges and come up with a way forward.

The museum came alive with living heritage -- Nyonyas, immaculately coifed, made-up and dressed in the finest of sarong kebayas, and Babas, handsome in batik, transformed the antiquarian ground into a cultural showcase with the finesse of a fashion runway.

A deafening chatter of English and Baba Malay rising over a bazaar of all things Peranakan inexplicably lifted the veil of gloom on that rainy morning.

Beaded shoes, ceramic wares, exotic cuisine, and pantun recitals were stars in their own right in the cultural festivity.

The one-day event also saw the official launch of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor.

The basis for the discussion was that globalisation -- the thing which made the culture -- could today be the very thing that breaks it.

And the uniqueness in the culture, increasingly watered down by the homogeneity of the internationalising world, could be lost on the younger generation.

For some, like art consultant and curator Peter Lee from Singapore, there isn't a better time for a revival than now.

The Peranakan emerged from early globalisation, and its material culture, like the kebaya, had continuously been shaped by globalisation, he said.

"Paradoxically, today we say that globalisation threatens minority cultures. Why should the Peranakan community fear this when its very birth was caused by it?"

"It's actually a very dynamic time to express a new kind of Peranakan. We shouldn't pigeonhole ourselves, locking in to Peranakan as an identity of the day in the 20th century.

"We should continue to reinvent ourselves as our forefathers did," said Peter, whose presentation at the conference examined the "multi-culturalism" of Peranakan through the tracing of the sarong kebaya's history.

The fear that some Peranakans have regarding the dilution of their culture comes partly from a fear of change, and from having a concept of community or culture as something static, said Peter.

"World War 2 created in a certain generation a fear of losing so much when change happens so fast, like a rug pulled from under the feet.

"A lot of families went through huge changes economically and socially during the war.

"There was this panicked sense of siege, that it was under threat, so there's this desire, like among my father's generation, to cling on to their culture, or it will be forever lost."

By the same token that the Peranakan culture became unique through evolution and adaptations, Kwok did not think any changes to the culture would make the Peranakans "lose their identity".

"If you take a fixed position on the past, naturally everything will be watered down. But if you take a more dynamic view of the ways societies and cultures develop, it's fine - you're developing all the time.

"I think it has to adapt. No culture can remain frozen and survive."

The community's strength lies in its adaptability and resilience, said Su Kim.

"We're adaptable, we're able to work with diverse culture groups, we took from everybody and assimilated into the culture, we're open minded and resourceful.

"Despite all the predictions of doom, we are still around."

Indeed, the future isn't as bleak as that which has been painted by some quarters.

In ways unthought-of in earlier years, the Peranakan culture has actually seen a resurgence in the region. The turning point came in the 1980s, said Kwok, coinciding with increasing researches and publications on Peranakan material culture like the furniture, kebaya, and ceramics.

Peter Wee, vice-president of the Peranakan Association of Singapore, said in being "80 per cent custodians of Chinese customs and traditions", the Peranakan Chinese holds a link to a lost heritage.

These diasporic Chinese in Nanyang, having left and abandoned everything in their homeland to settle in another country, brought along traditions, rituals and practices which they somehow were unwilling to let go of.

Many Chinese from China, previously unaware of the Peranakans, have since visited temples in Malacca, Penang and Singapore to learn about their own culture, much of which was cleared during the Cultural Revolution.

In Indonesia, the richness of the Peranakan text is apparent. Peranakan literature -- some novels of over 1,000 pages -- have been republished.

There were also courses in Indonesian universities offering the study of Peranakan literature, said Professor Leo Suryadinata, director of the Chinese Heritage Centre in Singapore.

In Singapore, two world-class museums have been established -- the Peranakan Museum and the Baba House in 2008.

It was also last year when George Town and Malacca, home to the Straits Chinese, were made world heritage sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).

Popular adaptations of the culture, like television series Little Nyonya and Sayang Sayang, turned all things Peranakan -- food, jewellery, kebaya, beaded shoes -- into overnight sensations.

Next year, the Peranakan Museum will be exhibiting 500 cultural pieces in Paris, at the Musée du quai Branly.

The 12 days of wedding rituals

IT had all the elements of a true-blue Baba Nyonya wedding -- an unsmiling couple, traditional costumes, decorated bridal bed, tea ceremony, *dondang sayang* and a *joget* session.

The ceremony, so beautifully staged at the launch of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor in Muzium Negara, was a demonstration of how the 12th, also the last, day of the celebration would look like.

A classic Baba Nyonya wedding, steeped in custom and tradition, stretches across 12 days

with different rituals for each day, signalling the richness of the Peranakan culture.

"Back then, there weren't many holidays, so an occasion like a wedding was always celebrated extensively. It also involved a lot of manpower and preparation," said Cedric Tan, the association's assistant secretary.

"The long period was also to accommodate people travelling from afar."

Many Peranakan families were very rich and were proud to flaunt their wealth, said association president Dr Lee Su Kim.

"It was full of colours, rich traditions and largely Chinese in character and yet with quaint rituals such as the cheow tau ceremony," she said.

The cheow tau, or hair-combing ceremony for the bridal couple, takes place on the first day. This rite of passage signifies the couple's coming of age.

On the third day, the couple would pay respects to their ancestors.

Another significant event falls on the fifth night, when the groom would introduce his friends to the bride.

The friends would then try their hardest to tease and make the bride laugh through pantuns and jokes. A successful attempt would entitle them to a treat of dinner.

"In those days, the bride was not supposed to smile, because smiling shows that she's eager to get married," said Tan, who has more than 20 years of experience in the culture.

"She would be warned not to laugh and to always stay solemn and cool."

The final day of the wedding is also one of the most important. It involves the determination of the virginity of the bride, whereby the bride's family would present a pair of the bride's stained trousers to the groom's family as proof of her virginity.

A pair of rooster and hen would also be released under the bridal bed. If the rooster emerged first, the family could expect a male first-born, and a baby girl if the hen took the lead.