

Book Review

Eclectic Cultures For All: The Development of the Peranakan Performing, Visual and Material Arts in Penang + CD

Edited by Tan Sooi Beng. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2019. 312 p.

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Each of the eight chapters in this splendid book and the accompanying CD give a tantalising view into Peranakan performing arts, cartoons, attire, and visual arts in a highly readable manner. The first chapter written by Tan Sooi Beng serves as an introduction and well-prepares readers for the remainder of the book by framing the making of performative culture and cultural products as an ongoing process. While nostalgia is at times a driving sentiment in the propagation of performative and material culture, one of the underlying premises of the book within the time span covered from the early 20th century onward, is that local culture-makers have in the past and today continue to seek new influences, invite outsider talent, and use technologies of the times in creating and conveying Peranakan culture.

Secondly, while Tan quotes Suryadinata (2010) as saying, “The term Peranakan denotes local-born children of indigenous women with Chinese, Indians, Arabs or Europeans who traded in the Southeast Asian region,” this book foregrounds Peranakan as referring to “local-born descendants of the early Hokkien traders from Fujian province in southern China... from the 15th to the mid-19th centuries” (p. 6), who to this day reside in areas of Malaysia such as Penang and Melaka, and in Singapore. Particular to coastal accessible communities along the Straits of Melaka that runs along the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, Peranakan also refers to a cultural matrix inhabited and sustained by people of localised Chinese ethnicity who established settler communities and distinguished themselves from *sinkeh* (or newcomer Chinese) in the pre-World War II period. Also referred to as Straits-born Chinese or Straits Chinese the progenitors and current bearers of Peranakan culture have rooted themselves over the centuries into what became strongholds of Peranakan culture and cultivated cultural expressions and products consistent with community, religious, familial, and entertainment affinities and also as identity affirming projects.

Thirdly, as pointed out by Tan, “this collection also aims to add to the lack of women’s perspectives in the written history of the Peranakan” (p. 5), a lack revealed in the prevalence of male authorship of articles about women in the early part of the 20th century. Throughout the book each of the three female authors share the significant participation and many contributions to the sustaining of and changes to Peranakan culture by *nyonya* (Peranakan women) within the traditional patriarchy of Peranakan Chinese society.

Each of the chapters use cosmopolitanism as a framework for discussion. Authored by the book’s editor Tan, chapters two and three demonstrate the intertwinement of traditionalism and modernity, the welcoming of influences into the making of performative and material cultural products, the important place of English language education and sponsorship of performances by the well-to-do, establishing what Tan calls a “vernacular cosmopolitanism.” Examples of this cosmopolitanism are found in Tan’s discussions on festivals and performances found in Peranakan repertoire and that has gone through periods of high activity, decline, revival, and what Tan calls “transculturalism.” The scope of the discussion in the two chapters includes the decades prior to World War II, the interwar years, the decadal period following Malaysian independence in 1957 and up until the late 1980s and 1990s. Among many examples of prolific Peranakan performative culture, Tan highlights

the following: *Chap Goh Meh*, a festivity celebrated by Hokkien descendants marking the end of the Chinese New Year with prayers offered to various deities and formerly an occasion when young, unmarried women could be publicly seen whereby young men might catch glimpses of potential marriage partners; *Ronggeng*, a social dance accentuated with the exchange of poetic verses that structurally borrow from the Malay *pantun*, performed between couples accompanied by the *rebab* (violin) and gong; Anglo-American popular tunes and vaudeville elements; *Wayang Peranakan* that was originally staged for charitable purposes and that derived from the Malay theatrical form *Bangsawan* and that continues to be performed in *Baba Malay* language with themes typically about family; *Kronchong* music thought to originate from Batavia (the former Dutch colonial capital that became what is known as Jakarta); *Dondang Sayang* love ballads influenced by Portuguese folk music; and European ballroom dances. Performers included members of Peranakan communities; Malay music and dance artists; musicians from the Philippines and Indonesia; and other participants from China and Europe. As such, the performances were not exclusivist by ethnicity or nationality but instead invited and welcomed competent performers in the making of Peranakan performative culture.

The fourth chapter also written by Tan Sooi Beng looks at the prevalence of English-language newspapers during the 1930s, particularly cartoons that served as visual commentary on society under British colonialism, and on the world at large. By casting a critical and humorous eye at topics of the day, well-regarded cartoon artists such as Yan Kee Leong created a space for local views. As the newspapers and captions of cartoon illustrations were printed in the English language, colonists and Malaysians who could read English were the likely target audience members in the decade before the British empire's collapse in Southeast Asia. Among the different cartoon themes presented in this chapter, one example depicts smaller-figure Malaysians transporting a larger figure colonial government worker identified as a public servant seated in a two-wheeled rickshaw while smoking a cigar with a caption that reads, "The Government Of The People For The People And By The People!" (p. 145). Rather than publicly shying away from social, economic, and political matters, the making and printing of cartoons served as performative commentaries on issues that concerned members of the Peranakan community.

The fifth chapter written by Grace Choong Ai May is filled with fascinating photographs that accompany an engaging discussion about Peranakan attire and jewelry and sociocultural changes that influenced designs, preferences, and modes of dressing. While the chapter provides an overview of different *nyonya* (female) and *baba* (male) dress and accessories and hairstyles from the 1900s to the 1960s, one item that is given extended attention is the *kebaya* (blouse): *kebaya renda*, *kebaya biku*, *kebaya sulam*, and *kebaya bandung* as examples of shifts in tastes and conscious changes to *kebaya* design, pattern, and colours.

The sixth and seventh chapters are delightfully rendered by Sarena Abdullah with a look at selected Straits Chinese visual artists, particularly painters and their contributions to the making of modern art during the 1930s to the 1950s and Peranakan imageries in Malaysian and Singaporean art during the 1980s to 2017. Local sensibilities, personages and objects, diasporic exchange, artists' residencies in other countries, attending formal arts schools, gaining skills through informal education and Chinese and European influences such as the works of Gauguin, all contribute to honouring as well as challenging tradition, modernity, and ideas of identity by selected artists who exemplify a cosmopolitan outlook.

In closing, "Eclectic Cultures for All" demonstrates that cultural motifs and signifiers are appropriative in the most positive sense of the word. Eclecticism is shown in local and international influences that music, dance and theatre groups, cartoonists, garment makers, painters, and craftspeople drew from and by which the performing, material, and visual arts thrived and continue to stir creativity and 21st century expressions of Peranakan.