

PHOENIX RISING
NARRATIVES IN NONYA BEADWORK FROM THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS,
1870 TO THE PRESENT

Two Volumes

By

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ABSTRACT

Until the first half of the twentieth century, Nonya beadwork and embroidery were important means of textile decoration for the Peranakans, the acculturated Chinese settlers in the Straits Settlements and the Netherlands Indies. Intricate and visually distinctive, Nonya beadwork is now regarded as a visual marker of a quaint Peranakan past. Its amalgamation of local, Chinese, and European influences is seen as a testimony to the celebrated hybridity of the Peranakan heritage. Yet despite the wealth of research on Southeast Asian textiles and the current intensification of interest in Peranakan material culture, no rigorous art historical study on Nonya beadwork has thus far been undertaken. This study contributes to the scholarship of Southeast Asian textile history by focusing on the relatively neglected area of needlework, demonstrating its potential as a source of cultural and historical information. This thesis also expands the perspectives on Peranakan Chinese decorative art by focusing on the historicity of Nonya beadwork, both as object and activity, such that beadwork becomes a tool with which to probe the social and symbolic world of the Peranakans.

As an activity, beadwork was considered to be an important part of a Peranakan girl's set of skills. As an object, carefully crafted Nonya beadwork was used as ornamentation for weddings, as part of the gift exchange from a bride to a groom and his family, and as dress accessories for Chinese New Year and important celebratory occasions. Even though beadwork was a gendered activity, the beaded object entered the lives of Peranakan men and women, young and old. In this way, Nonya beadwork was entwined within the wider relationships between gender, generation, and social hierarchy in Peranakan society. As a secular item, neither the creation nor the use of Nonya beadwork faced the strict constraints of spiritual beliefs and cosmological world views that regulated the production of religious artefacts or other Southeast Asian ceremonial and ritual textiles. The Peranakans could therefore incorporate styles and motifs into their beadwork that reflected their changing ideals, aspirations, and lifestyles. Inscribed into the history of Nonya beadwork is a narrative of the Peranakan community's cultural transformations.

Whereas Nonya beadwork is now considered traditional, this thesis argues that the meanings imbued in beadwork have always been shaped by the Peranakans' concerns about the social and political milieux of the times in which they were created and used.

For a migrant community located at the busy crossroads of the East-West trade, its negotiation of a precious but distant Chinese heritage and its ties to an adopted land were inextricably bound up with its encounters with the flow of ideas from East and West and the ways in which it confronted modernity. By unravelling the history of the Nonya beadwork through an analysis of the changes in the Peranakans' attitudes towards beading and the modifications of techniques, designs, and styles in beadwork, this thesis reveals the shifting expressions of Peranakan culture and identity in the Straits Settlements as the Peranakan community engaged with modernity, gendered norms, and an ancestral heritage in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, expressions from which Peranakan culture is conceived in the present.

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GLOSSARY

This Glossary is divided into three sections: Selected Non-English Terms used by the Peranakans, Other Non-English Terms, and Needlework and Beadwork Terms.

Selected Non-English Terms used by the Peranakans

There is, as yet, no standardised romanization for Peranakan terminology in the Straits Settlements, which includes many loan words or derivations from Malay and Hokkien (a southern Chinese dialect). “Bead,” for instance, can be spelt as *manek* or *manik* and both are used in the literature on Peranakan culture. The spellings used in this thesis will therefore conform as far as possible with that used in Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen’s *Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore History Museum, 1998) in the first instance; Gwee Thian Hock’s *Mas Sepuloh: Baba Conversational Gems* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1993); and Eng-Lee Seok Chee’s *Festive Expressions: Nonya Beadwork and Embroidery* (Singapore: National Museum, 1989).

<i>adat</i> (Malay)	correct behaviour as specified by custom
<i>an chng</i> (Hokkien)	cleansing ceremony for the bridal chamber, undertaken before the wedding day
<i>anak dara</i> (Malay)	virgins – unmarried daughters of marriageable age
<i>anak-anak</i> (Malay)	children; also the name for a beadwork pattern of motifs set within a grid format
<i>ang pow</i> (Hokkien)	envelope for gifts of money; literally translated as “red packet”
<i>atas timbul</i> (Malay)	relief embroidery done by couching metallic thread over bamboo sticks or large needles which were pulled out as the couching was completed, creating a raised effect; sometimes used to create a basket-weave pattern
<i>baju panjang</i> (Malay)	long-sleeved long blouse with a front opening, reaching below the knees
<i>baju tutup</i> (Malay)	man’s front-buttoning tunic with a high collar
<i>bangsawan</i> (Malay)	modernised Malay opera
<i>belacan</i> (Malay)	spicy shrimp paste

<i>benang mas</i> (Malay)	gold or gold-wrapped thread
<i>bibik</i> (Baba Malay)	elderly Nonya
<i>biru manis</i> (Malay)	light blue or “sweet blue”
<i>biru tua</i> (Malay)	dark blue or “old blue”
<i>bukitan</i> (colloquial)	from <i>buket tanah</i> meaning beribboned bouquet motif, <i>buket</i> meaning bouquet; from the term used in the Netherlands Indies
<i>chap-ji-por</i> (Hokkien)	see entry under <i>kain urat</i>
<i>chap goh meh</i> (Hokkien)	fifteenth (and last) day of the Lunar New Year
<i>cherki</i> (Hokkien)	card game popular with the Nonyas
<i>cheng beng</i> (Hokkien)	day of remembrance for the souls of the deceased
<i>cheongsam</i> (Cantonese)	Chinese dress with mandarin collar and slits at either side up the length of the thigh; can be loose or fitting
<i>cincalok</i> (Hokkien)	spicy marinated shrimp
Datok Dapoh (Malay)	Kitchen God
<i>daun nipah</i> (Malay)	leaf of the nipa palm (genus <i>nypa fruticans</i>), dried and used for making hand-rolled cigarettes
<i>dondang sayang</i> (Malay)	Malay verses set to music
Kuan-The-Yah (Hokkien)	Goddess of Mercy, known in Mandarin as Guanyin
<i>halus</i> (Malay)	refined
<i>hantar sireh</i> (Malay)	presentation of a quid of betel, usually as a wedding invitation to female guests
<i>hay</i> (Hokkien)	prawn
Hock Lok Siu (Hokkien)	Chinese Gods of happiness (<i>hock</i>), prosperity (<i>lok</i>), and longevity (<i>siu</i>); commonly known in Mandarin as Fu Lu Shou
<i>hu</i> (Hokkien)	fish
<i>jiho</i> (Hokkien)	wooden plaque above the front door of a Peranakan home, usually inscribed with auspicious characters

<i>kain urat</i> (Malay)	double thread loose-weave canvas specially created for counted thread embroidery, known in the English-speaking world as Penelope canvas; also known to the Peranakans as <i>chap-ji-por</i>
<i>kain chaylay</i>	checked cotton worn by Nonyas, mostly in sombre reds and browns
<i>kasut</i> (Malay)	shoe; in the context of beadwork, it generally refers to sandals or slippers
<i>kasut cakiak</i> (Baba Malay)	open toe slipper where the upper is made of a single piece of material; <i>cakiak</i> is a Hokkien term that describes open-toe clogs with wooden soles
<i>kasut kodok</i> (Malay)	frog-nose-shaped slippers where the slipper face is cut in two pieces – an upper piece and a small semi-circular piece which is placed to form the flat tip at the toe of the slipper; also known as <i>kasut beridong</i> or <i>kasut tongkang</i> in Singapore and Melaka, and as <i>chun eh</i> in Penang
<i>kasut manek</i> (Malay)	beaded slippers
<i>kasut pintal</i> (Malay)	open-toe slippers with an upper made from two V-shaped pieces of material looped together
<i>kasut seret</i> (Malay)	generic term for slippers; literally translates as “dragged slippers”
<i>kayu kilingan</i> (Malay)	set of four wooden rollers used to stretch embroidery across a <i>pidangan</i> frame
<i>kebaya</i> (Malay)	long-sleeved hip-length blouse with a front opening
<i>kebaya renda</i> (Malay)	<i>kebaya</i> edged or decorated with lace
<i>keladi</i> (Malay)	yam
<i>kemunchak</i> (Malay)	ornamental pins, usually placed on the altar table
<i>keramat</i> (Malay)	Malay shrine
<i>kerosang</i> (Malay)	a set of three brooches used to fasten the <i>kebaya</i>
<i>kerosang ibu</i> (Malay)	the largest of the set of three brooches worn at the top
<i>kim</i> (Hokkien)	crab
<i>kim suah</i> (Hokkien)	gold or gold-wrapped thread

<i>klentong man</i> (colloquial)	itinerant haberdasher who announced his presence by ringing a bell that made a sound like “klentong” (also known as the <i>jarom</i> (needle) man in Malay)
<i>koon sah</i> (Hokkien)	Chinese style skirt and blouse with front or side fastening; also known as the <i>baju Shanghai</i> in Baba Malay
<i>kuning ayer</i> (Malay)	colour of “watery” yellow
<i>kum cheng</i> (Hokkien)	lidded oviform jar with cover, used as a soup-tureen
<i>lap chye</i> (Hokkien)	ceremonial exchange of gifts at a Peranakan wedding
<i>manek</i> (Malay)	bead
<i>manek kacha</i> (Malay)	glass bead, usually referring specifically to “rougher” glass seed beads larger than about 2 millimetres diameter
<i>manek pirigu</i> (Malay)	metallic seed bead
<i>manek potong</i> (Malay)	literally translates as “cut bead,” referring to small glass seed bead
<i>muka bantal</i> (Malay)	pillow or bolster end
<i>ong lai</i> (Hokkien)	pineapple; homonym for “arrival of the king”
<i>pak chindek</i> (Malay)	master-of-ceremonies at a Peranakan wedding
<i>pantun</i> (Malay)	rhymed verses in Malay or Baba Malay
<i>pantang</i> (Malay)	bad luck
<i>paru-paru</i> (Malay)	pink or “lung-coloured”
<i>pidangan</i> (Malay)	embroidery frame; similar to the frames used by the Peninsular and Sumatran Malays, for whom it is also known as the <i>pamedangan</i> or <i>pemidang</i>
<i>pintu pagar</i> (Malay)	fence door
<i>pisang raja</i> (Malay)	“king” bananas
<i>pua th'ng tay</i> (Hokkien)	term used in Penang to refer to the <i>kebaya</i> ; literally translates as “half-long half-short” blouse
<i>ranjang kahwin</i> (Malay)	wedding bed, also known as <i>ranjang loksan</i>
<i>redi</i> (Malay)	portable hammock that was shielded with a cloth, with a carrying pole across the top

<i>Sam Kok</i> (Hokkien)	Chinese classic, <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
<i>Sam Pek Eng Tai</i>	The tragic love-story of Sam Pek and Eng Tai, also known as <i>Butterfly Lovers</i>
<i>sang kheh umm</i> (Hokkien)	mistress-of-ceremonies at a Peranakan wedding
<i>samfoo</i> (Cantonese)	Chinese style blouse and trousers
<i>sanggul</i> (Malay)	chignon worn by Nonyas; generally worn high on the crown of the head
<i>sangkut bahu</i> (Malay)	ceremonial shoulder-piece comprising an arrowhead-shaped panel and a rectangular panel
<i>sapu tangan</i> (Malay)	ornamental ceremonial handkerchief with a metal ring attached to it; worn from a woman's finger
<i>sarong</i> (Malay)	tubular piece of fabric wrapped around the lower half of the body like a long skirt
<i>serai</i> (Malay)	lemon grass
<i>sinchew</i> (Hokkien)	spiritual head of the house or family
<i>sinkeh</i> (Hokkien)	newly-arrived Chinese migrant to the Straits Settlements
<i>sireh</i> (Malay)	betel-nut
<i>syair</i> (Malay)	narrative verses or fables
<i>tali ayer</i> (Malay)	border pattern of interlocking triangles
<i>tang chek</i> (Hokkien)	winter solstice
<i>tempat surat</i> (Malay)	document case for the marriage agreement
<i>th'ng sah</i> (Hokkien)	term used in Penang for <i>baju panjang</i>
Ti Kong (Hokkien)	Daoist Jade Emperor of Heaven
<i>Tong Soo</i> (Hokkien)	Chinese <i>Book of Fate</i>
<i>tudong saji</i> (Malay)	semi-circular food cover, usually made of pandanus leaves
<i>wang belanja</i> (Malay)	cash gift presented by the groom to the bride's family
<i>wang tetek</i> (Malay)	money given by the groom to the bride's parents as compensation for bringing her up; literally translates as "weaning money"

<i>wayang</i> (Malay)	Chinese-style opera
<i>wayang Peranakan</i> (Baba Malay)	Peranakan opera derived from Chinese-style <i>wayang</i>

Other Non-English Terms

Baxian (Mandarin)	Eight Immortals of Daoism
<i>bunga raya</i> (Malay)	hibiscus
<i>endek</i> (Indonesian)	<i>ikat</i> from Bali
<i>fu ru dong hai</i> (Chinese)	wealth as abundant as the eastern sea
<i>ikat</i> (Indonesian)	textile where designs are formed by resist-dyeing the yarns before weaving commences
<i>lingzhi</i> (Chinese)	fungus of immortality
<i>lu</i> (Chinese)	deer; also a homonym for high income
<i>plangi</i> (Indonesian)	textile where designs are created by resist-dyeing after weaving
<i>piña</i> (Filipino)	fine fabric woven from pineapple fibre in the Philippines
<i>qilin</i> (Chinese)	mythical creatures, often translated as unicorns
<i>qiyun shendong</i> (Chinese)	term referring to art, meaning the infusion of movement in the artwork through spirit consonance
<i>ronggeng</i> (Indonesian)	Javanese-style of dance
<i>selendang</i> (Indonesian)	shoulder-cloth
<i>songket</i> (Malay)	fabric woven with gold thread
<i>sulaman</i> (Malay)	embroideries
<i>tampan</i> (Indonesian)	ceremonial cloth from South Sumatra with ship design, also referred to as ship-cloth
<i>tekat</i> (Malay)	embroidery, generally of couched metallic thread

Needlework and Beadwork Terms

Aida canvas	even-weave fabric used for counted cross-stitch; the fabric count (usually between 8 and 22) refers to the number of holes per inch – the larger the count, the finer the weave
bead couching	technique of attaching beads to fabric by passing a first thread through a row of beads and couching the first thread with a second thread; also known as spot stitch, appliqué, or overlay-stitch
canvaswork	embroidery technique based on a half-cross stitch over a counted-thread canvas base; also known as needlepoint or Berlin woolwork, the latter referring to the wool-on-canvas embroidery style that originated in Berlin in the early 1800s
charlotte	glass seed bead with one or more flat faces or facets
colour-lined bead	glass seed bead whose hole is lined with a colour that is generally different from the colour of the glass
couching	embroidery technique of applying one thread (usually decorative, like gold or silver thread) to the surface of a fabric base by attaching it with a second thread; also known as laid-work
gros-point stitch	cross-stitch formed of a two crossed diagonal stitches
hex-cut bead	glass seed bead with a hexagonal cross-section
knot stitch	stitch formed of a small knot made by looping the sewing thread once or twice around the needle before passing the latter through the fabric; the French knot and the Peking knot are variants of the knot stitch
lane stitch	a single stitch on which multiple beads (usually more than two) were attached to a fabric or other base material to form a stitched row of beads; also known as lazy stitch
needle-weaving	weaving using a needle to pass the weft threads through already formed warp threads
netting	technique of passing threads through beads to form a net-like mesh
Penelope canvas	fabric for needlepoint or counted thread embroidery, with warp and weft threads laid two-by-two
petit-point stitch	half-cross stitch worked diagonally over the intersection of one set of warp and weft threads on counted thread canvas; also known as tent stitch

purl	metallic thread made by coiling metallic wire to form a tube-like thread
perle thread	lustrous twisted yarn
rocaille	rounded seed glass bead
satin stitch	stitches placed parallel and abutting each other lengthwise; long-and-short satin stitch is where satin stitches are of alternating long and short lengths, usually used where the merging of colours is sought
seed bead	small bead, generally of less than 5 millimetres in diameter
seed stitch	small, evenly-sized stitches separated from each other and placed in random directions
threading	technique of creating a net-like mesh by passing threads through beads to link the beads together, akin to netting or macramé with beads, without the use of a base support such as a textile
tubular bead	seed bead whose length is greater than its diameter

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the long established traditions of textile creation in Southeast Asia, Nonya beadwork can be seen as a relatively recent phenomenon, with a significant history that appears to reach back not more than 150 years or so. Yet in the course of its relatively short life, Nonya beadwork has come to play a significant role in the cultural imaginary of the Peranakan Chinese, the acculturated descendants of Chinese migrants to the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago. Crafted with tiny glass and metallic beads, each of less than 2 millimetres in diameter, Nonya beadwork drew selectively from Chinese, European, and to a lesser extent, local influences to create a distinctive art form.

The Peranakan Chinese (or Babas, as they were otherwise known) retained many of their forefathers' Chinese customs and beliefs. At the same time, through intermarriage and interaction with indigenous communities, they acquired modes of speech, cuisine, dress, and customs which reflected their adoption and adaptation of Malay and other indigenous Indonesian ways of life. Located at the bustling crossroads of the East-West trade, the Peranakan Chinese were immersed in an environment where different cultures and ethnicities encountered one another on a regular basis. The Peranakan Chinese populations were largely concentrated in urban centres of the Straits Settlements – Penang, Melaka (Malacca), and Singapore – and the Netherlands Indies such as Jakarta (Batavia), Semarang, Cirebon, and Palembang. Towns such as Melaka and Palembang were flourishing historical trading centres, attracting Chinese merchants and artisans from the fifteenth century onwards. Penang, founded by Francis Light in 1786, and Singapore, established by Stamford Raffles in 1819, emerged out of English competition with their European rivals for secure trade routes to China. As the region came increasingly under colonial rule by the English in the Straits Settlements and the Dutch in the Netherlands Indies, the Peranakan Chinese communities were shaped not only by the trade milieu but also by European ideas and ideals.

The Nonya are the womenfolk of the Peranakan Chinese community. They were taught from a young age to sew, and beadwork and embroidery formed an important, albeit not always essential, part of their set of skills. Colourful beaded slippers (*kasut manek*), wallets, purses, belts, children's shoes, headdresses, collars, ceremonial handkerchiefs (*sapu tangan*) and shoulder-pieces (*sangkut bahu*), mattress panels,

table-covers, and decorative hangings were either the product of Nonya workmanship, or were purchased for use by the Peranakan Chinese community (figs. 1–12). A few of these items may have been made for mundane use, but the decorativeness of beadwork made it suitable as part of the gift exchange from bride to groom, as ornamentation for weddings, and as dress accessories for Chinese New Year and other celebratory occasions.

Beadwork and embroidery were (and to a large extent, still are) gendered activities. Beaded and embroidered objects nevertheless touched the lives of those who used them, those who presented them and those who received them, those who displayed them and those who viewed them. Beadwork was seen by men and women, young and old. In this sense, it was entwined within the wider relationships between gender, generation, and social hierarchy in Peranakan society. Having been crafted at different points in time, Nonya beadwork provides snapshots of the changes in society and culture as the ideas, attitudes, and aspirations of the producers and consumers of beadwork were distilled into these intricately worked items.

Although embroidery has generally been considered under the rubric of craft, scholars argue that needlework can and should be considered as art. Chung Young Yang notes that in China, embroidery, painting, sculpture, and ceramics were all considered as artistic creations that fulfilled the Chinese criterion of *qiyun shengdong*, the infusion of movement through spirit consonance.¹ European needlework historians also perceive embroidery as art on the basis that it involves iconography and style, has a social function, and is creative.² Nonya beadwork may be regarded as an art form through which the aesthetic, social, and even the philosophical or intellectual concerns of its makers and users were expressed. However, instead of re-categorizing embroidery as art, I will retain the term “craft” to reinforce the emphasis by Peranakan Chinese society on the handmade and tangible nature of beadwork as an object and an activity.³

¹ Chung Young Yang, *The Origins and Historical Development of the Embroidery of China, Japan, and Korea* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1976), pp. 1, 270–274. For an explanation of *qiyun shengdong* in Chinese painting, see James Cahill, “The Six Laws and How to Read Them,” *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961), p. 380.

² Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, rev. ed. (London: Women’s Press, 1996), pp. 5–6; and Cheryl Lea Patterson, “Considering Needlework as Art rather than Craft” (M.A. thesis, California State University Dominguez Hills, 2001).

³ In doing so, I implicitly reject the hierarchical burden associated with (high) art and (lowly) craft in the West. On the materiality of craft as tangible object and as a process of representation, see Bruce Metcalf, “Craft and Art, Culture and Biology,” in *The Culture of Craft*, ed. Peter Dormer (Manchester:

This study of Nonya beadwork has two aims. The first is to contribute to the study of Southeast Asian textile history by focusing on the relatively neglected area of embroidery. The second is to complement existing research on Peranakan Chinese decorative arts and cultural history by investigating the ways in which the Peranakan Chinese community in the Straits Settlements articulated its culture and identity through selective adoptions, translations, and transformations of Chinese, Southeast Asian, and European embroidery techniques, designs, and styles in beadwork.

As a product of their cultural milieux and their times, embroideries register the concerns and motivations of the society in which they were made or used. By their very nature as man-made objects, the stitched article can supplement, sometimes even challenge, written records. Even uninscribed needlework can be a potential source of information, particularly where the textual records are sparse or unavailable, giving voice to those who did not or could not write.⁴ The study of needlework as a matrix of functional, technical, and aesthetic concerns sited within its particular contexts of production, reception, and consumption can provide keys to ways of thinking about society and history.

Although an extensive literature exists on the batiks, brocades, and tie-dyed textiles of Southeast Asia, scholarship on the decorative needlework of insular Southeast Asia is marginal. This is clearly illustrated by Indonesian art scholar Joseph Fischer's astonishment in 1994 when he came across a cache of Balinese narrative embroideries (*sulaman*) which had previously received almost no scholarly attention.⁵ In fact, since the late nineteenth century, there have been few in-depth studies of Southeast Asian embroidery in comparison to the availability of research on batik, *plangi*, and *ikat*.⁶

Although metallic thread embroidery is arguably one of the most important and widely

Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 69–71; and Sue Rowley, "Introduction," in *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, ed. Sue Rowley (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. xxv.

⁴ Ethnologist Henry Glassie highlights discusses the potential of "uninscribed artefacts" as documents. See Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 31.

⁵ Fischer reviewed 60 books on Indonesian textiles that had been published in the past 35 years and found only three instances of its documentation. Joseph Fischer, "Balinese Embroideries: The Birth, Life and Demise of an Extraordinary Textile Tradition," *Jurnal Seni* 3, no. 3 (2001), pp. 333–348.

⁶ Compare, for example, the entries for batik, weaving, and embroidery in J. E. Jasper and Mas Pirngadie, *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie*, vol. 2, *De Weefskunst* (The Hague: Mouton, 1912); and vol. 3, *De Batikkunst* (The Hague: Mouton, 1916). Lace-making, drawn-thread embroidery, and beadwork are classified under textile decoration techniques in their chapter "Andere, Aanverwante Technieken van Inlandsche Weefskunst," in vol. 2, *De Weefskunst*, pp. 301–316. Designs on *plangi* are created by resist-dyeing woven fabric; designs on *ikat* are formed by dyeing the yarns before weaving.

practised forms of decorative needlework in the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago, it has remained a relatively unexplored field. Only a handful of contemporary studies have focussed on it as a topic for investigation.⁷ Through an exploration of the modifications in the functions, forms, and styles of Nonya beadwork as narratives of cultural change, this thesis demonstrates the potential for in-depth research on embroidery in a Southeast Asian context, not only as a significant craft form, but also as a category of historical artefacts that can shed light on the societies in which they were made and used.

In the context of Peranakan Chinese cultural history, the potential of Nonya beadwork to serve as a document that can complement oral and archival sources is significant. Although textual records which deal with Peranakan Chinese society exist, many of these offer a partial or biased picture. Colonial descriptions of Peranakan Chinese society are wide-ranging overviews of social customs of the nineteenth century. However, as Edmond Chin remarks, they lacked knowledge of the more “intimate” aspects of its society.⁸ Some accounts, such as J.D. Vaughan’s, are constrained by their limited access to the domestic Peranakan Chinese sphere.⁹ Others, such as Isabella Bird’s travelogue, provide only brief glimpses of their customs.¹⁰ A well-known article on the Chinese in Singapore written in 1847 by Seah Eu Chin, a migrant from China who was also fluent in English, deals primarily with the occupations of the migrant and locally-born Chinese in Singapore.¹¹

Geoff Wade points to the importance of the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*, Penang’s first newspaper which was published between 1806 and the early 1830s, as an

⁷ Sativa Sutan Aswar, *Antakesuma Embroidery in the Minangkabau Adat* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1999); Siti Zainon Ismail, “Seni Tekat,” in *Rekabentuk Kraftangan Melayu Tradisi* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1986), pp. 237–268; and Barbara Leigh, “Gold Thread Embroidery,” in *Tangan-Tangan Trampil: Seni Kerajinan Aceh (Hands of Time: The Crafts of Aceh)* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1989), pp. 24–39. Barbara Leigh’s discussion of beadwork and gold thread embroidery in *The Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts: Identity, Industry and Ingenuity* (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 29–43 is a brief but particularly significant effort to recognize the role of local needlecraft in the constitution of Malaysian identities.

⁸ Edmond Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and their Jewellery* (Singapore: National Museum, 1991), p. 193.

⁹ J.D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements*, (1879; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (London: J. Murray, 1883), pp. 132–133, 144–147.

¹¹ Seah Eu Chin, “The Chinese in Singapore: General Sketch of the Numbers, Tribes and Advocations of the Chinese in Singapore,” *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 2 (1848), pp. 283–290.

historical source.¹² Certainly, literate Peranakan Chinese merchants may have subscribed to these early newspapers, but as Wade himself notes, its content of commodity prices, auction notices, notices of ship arrivals and departures, and foreign political news reflects its majority readership of a European mercantile community.¹³

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Peranakan Chinese had begun to publish newspapers, magazines, and books. The first newspaper for Peranakan Chinese in romanized Malay, *Bintang Timor*, was established in 1894 and edited by Song Ong Siang but was closed after a year.¹⁴ The *Straits Chinese Magazine*, published between 1897 and 1907, was more successful and is a particularly informative source for the study of the social reforms taking place at the turn of the century. However, as will be explained in Chapter One, its writers were mainly drawn from a small clique of literate and wealthy locally-born Chinese. Similarly, published biographies tend to focus on the privileged and educated extreme of Peranakan Chinese society. Several forms of material culture such as furniture, buildings, and jewellery also reflect the lifestyles of the privileged.

Other historical sources must also be viewed in their political and ideological contexts. As Mark Frost points out, Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* was published to commemorate the centenary of the founding of Singapore, and Song's effort to highlight the locally-born Chinese as loyal British subjects underplays their cultural and political allegiance to China.¹⁵ In addition, to emphasize their contributions, Song focussed on the literate and influential, many of whom were Peranakan Chinese.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, given that the less successful were hardly mentioned in historical records, the dominant perception of Peranakan Chinese

¹² Geoff Wade, "New Ways of Knowing: The *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* – Penang's First Newspaper" (paper presented at The Penang Story: International Conference, Penang, 18–21 April 2002).

¹³ Wade, "New Ways of Knowing," pp. 6, 32. Wade points out that notices in Jawi, however, indicate that the newspaper did reach a wider readership.

¹⁴ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1923; Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967), p. 245.

¹⁵ Mark Ravinder Frost, "Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918," Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series, no. 10 (Singapore, 2003), p. 34.

¹⁶ Tan Chee Beng, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1988), n. 32, p. 66.

is that they were generally what the historian Victor Purcell has termed “a sort of local aristocracy.”¹⁷

The *syair* and *pantun* (verses and rhymed verses or poems) in creolized Baba Malay spoken by the Peranakan Chinese in Melaka, Singapore, and the Netherlands Indies were enjoyed by a wider group of Peranakan Chinese. Claudine Salmon has surveyed the Malay-language literature by the Chinese in Indonesia to explore the transformations in Peranakan Chinese society and their opinions regarding issues such as marriage and Westernization.¹⁸ Her close examination of a specific example of a Peranakan Chinese *syair* that is critical of the competition between the elite Peranakan opium farmers reveals the attitudes of its educated middle-class author and indicates the tensions within different classes of Peranakan Chinese society.¹⁹ Through his surveys of newspapers, poetry, and translations in Baba Malay, Tan Chee Beng likewise draws attention to the potential of Peranakan Chinese literature in Baba Malay from the Straits Settlements as a rich vein of information.²⁰ However, their *syair* and *pantun* still remain a little studied field.

Although oral histories are drawn from a wider segment of the Peranakan Chinese population, their coverage relates primarily to the period after 1920. In his research on Peranakan Chinese jewellery, Chin comments on this limitation.²¹ Subsequent studies such as Rudolph’s detailed examination of Peranakan Chinese identity in Singapore have also necessarily been limited by the age of his informants.²² As time and mortality take their toll, this is an inadequacy that cannot be surmounted simply by expanding the collection of oral histories.

¹⁷ Victor Purcell, *Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 248.

¹⁸ Claudine Salmon, *Literature in Malay by the Chinese in Indonesia: A Provisional Annotated Bibliography*, Etudes Insulindiennes – Archipel no. 3 (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1981).

¹⁹ Claudine Salmon, “A Critical View of the Opium Farmers as Reflected in a *Syair* by Boen Sing Hoo (Semarang, 1889),” *Indonesia* (1991), pp. 25–52. I am grateful to Neil Khor for bringing this article to my attention.

²⁰ Tan Chee Beng, “Baba Chinese Publication in Romanized Malay,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, no. 22 (1981), pp. 158–193; and Tan Chee Beng, “Baba Malay Poetry Publications and Babas’ Contribution to Malay World Studies,” in *Chinese Studies of the Malay World: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Ding Choo Ming and Ooi Kee Beng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), pp. 97–139.

²¹ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 193.

²² Jürgen Rudolph’s *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998) was based on fieldwork for his Ph.D. dissertation submitted in 1994.

We know little of the the silent majority of Peranakan Chinese – those who did not leave a written legacy and whose descendants remember only what time and human memory have permitted to persist. Nonya beadwork was the product of an activity which was practised across different classes of Peranakan Chinese society. Although the finished item of Nonya beadwork may have been costly, materials for beading were relatively inexpensive. Beadwork was thus accessible to the less privileged if they could craft it themselves, and it cuts across a swathe of society, providing a window into Peranakan culture across class distinctions. Its motifs and designs were stitched or selected by Nonyas, many of whom did not write. The study of Nonya beadwork thus presents an avenue for the exploration of those unwritten histories, and this thesis complements ongoing scholarship in posing questions and proposing answers on the culture and identity of Peranakan Chinese society.

The Peranakan Chinese decorative arts received little attention until the 1970s. However, in the past 25 years in Malaysia and Singapore, public awareness of Peranakan Chinese culture has been enhanced through exhibitions, plays, and numerous publications on Peranakan Chinese silverware, furniture, jewellery, beadwork and embroidery, porcelain, and dress.²³ The appeal of Peranakan Chinese artefacts as collectables has grown in tandem with this increase in interest. Since the 1990s, these decorative arts have also been acknowledged as repositories of cultural history, and scholars such as the anthropologist Jürgen Rudolph draw on it to illustrate that Peranakan Chinese identity was not static.²⁴

However, despite the growing body of literature on Peranakan Chinese culture and history, there have been almost no rigorous and sustained art historical studies on their decorative arts to date. Ho Wing Meng's series of collector's guides to Peranakan Chinese silver, porcelain, beadwork and embroidery, and furniture was a pioneering effort to place them within a cultural and historical context.²⁵ Yet, because of his intention to arouse the reader's "interest and imagination," Ho, a former lecturer in

²³ See Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 275 for a partial list of the publications (including fiction) on the Peranakan Chinese published between 1962 and 1998.

²⁴ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 206–244, 271–286. Rudolph attempts to correlate changes in Peranakan Chinese material culture with social history.

²⁵ Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Silver: A Collector's Guide* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1984); Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Porcelain: A Collector's Guide* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1983); Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery: A Collector's Guide* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1987); and Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Furniture: A Collector's Guide* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1994).

Philosophy at the National University of Singapore and collector of Peranakan Chinese artefacts, included “fiction and conjectures” in his work on beadwork and embroidery for example, and often omitted to cite his sources, limiting its reliability as a reference.²⁶ Nevertheless, his series is commendable given the lacuna in published information then available on Peranakan Chinese history and culture. It provided a taxonomy of decorative objects and types and fulfilled a need for documentation of basic information. Together with the essays by William Willets and Lim Suan Poh on porcelain in *Kitchen Ch'ing and Nonya Ware* and Eng-Lee Seok Chee's *Festive Expressions*, a slender but well-illustrated catalogue of the beadwork and embroidery collection of the National Museum in Singapore, Ho's collector's guides represent the first major efforts to evaluate the Peranakan Chinese decorative arts as a culturally meaningful group of artefacts.²⁷

Subsequent writings have significantly expanded the archive of resources on Peranakan Chinese material culture, collating examples of artefacts and photographs of domestic interiors and dress that are scattered in private collections. However, the descriptive emphasis of most of these publications reveals both the need for more primary documentation of Peranakan Chinese material culture as well as the immaturity of Peranakan Chinese decorative arts as a field of study. Written as an accompaniment to a major exhibition of Peranakan Chinese jewellery, Edmond Chin's *Gilding the Phoenix* is the most notable attempt to evaluate the variations in the styles of jewellery within a temporal and regional framework of socio-historical developments and multiple cultural influences.²⁸ Despite its brevity, Chin's assessment indicates the potential of material culture to illustrate the ways in which cross-cultural influences were appropriated and adapted.

This thesis expands the perspectives on Peranakan Chinese decorative art by focusing on the historicity of Nonya beadwork, both as object and practice, such that beadwork becomes a tool with which to probe the social and symbolic world of the Peranakan Chinese. The florescence of Nonya beadwork between 1870 and 1920 coincides with

²⁶ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. ix.

²⁷ William Willets, “Introduction,” in *Nonya Ware and Kitchen Ch'ing: Ceremonial and Domestic Pottery of the Nineteenth – Twentieth Centuries Commonly found in Malaysia*, by the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, West Malaysia Chapter (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, West Malaysia Chapter, 1981); Lim Suan Poh, “Nonya Ware,” in *Nonya Ware and Kitchen Ch'ing*; by the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society; and Eng-Lee Seok Chee, *Festive Expressions: Nonya Beadwork and Embroidery* (Singapore: National Museum, 1989).

²⁸ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*.

the “golden age” of Peranakan Chinese society.²⁹ This was a period in which urbanization, technological progress, and the application of scientific methods to industry had a significant economic and social impact in the East and the West. It was also a period in which colonialism had largely consolidated its grip – the British over most of the Malay peninsula and the Dutch in much of the Indonesian archipelago. Thus, a fundamental thread through this thesis is the interrogation of modernity and tradition, a concern central to any study of Peranakan Chinese cultural history.

Nonya beadwork was used by Peranakan Chinese communities in the Malay peninsula, southern Thailand, Sumatra, and probably Java. Although this research focuses on beadwork from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore, delimited by the unifying feature of British colonial rule until 1957, some references will be made throughout this thesis to Nonya beadwork from Sumatra to provide comparisons that may sharpen our understanding of beadwork from the Straits Settlements.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

The historicity of Nonya beadwork is revealed through a diachronic approach. Chapter One explains the motivation and methodology for such an approach, and its departure from conventional approaches to Southeast Asian textiles that have concentrated primarily on their ethnographic and regional aspects. It also addresses the complexities involved in examining Nonya beadwork from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore as a group, interpreting the cross-cultural appropriations and regionally specific characteristics of beadwork within a broader temporal framework.

Chapters Two to Seven are organized as three interlocking parts, each of which examines one significant aspect of Nonya beadwork. I refer to these as narratives to acknowledge that each is a partial and reconstructed history of Nonya beadwork retold through a particular lens of its social role, its development through time and space, or its significance in the present. As each narrative relates to a different aspect of

²⁹ There is a general consensus that this “golden age” occurred around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although different writers have selected slightly different periods. For instance, William Skinner regards this as the period 1880 to 1900 for Peranakan Chinese in the Malay peninsula and 1890 to 1910 for those in Java, whereas Felix Chia, a Singapore Peranakan, has designated a wider period from 1830 to 1920 as time of increasing prosperity and prominence and the zealous practice of Peranakan customs. G. William Skinner, “Creolized Chinese Societies in Southeast Asia,” in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid (St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 59; and Felix Chia, *The Babas Revisited* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1994), pp. 104–105.

beadwork, a short preface introduces the key conceptual considerations that underlie each part.

Part One, which comprises Chapters Two and Three, examines the social role of beadwork in relation to its historical context. Chapter Two reviews how the basis of a diasporic society, the free trade policies in the Straits Settlements, colonial rule, and continued Chinese migration in the nineteenth century generated a specific set of opportunities and pressures for the Peranakan Chinese community in the Straits Settlements which changed over time. The bearing that these factors had on the ways in which the beadwork was created, practised, manipulated, and interpreted is discussed in Chapter Three.

Part Two, comprising Chapters Four, Five, and Six, assesses the articulation of Nonya cultural identity between 1870 and 1970 by examining the changes in the forms, imagery, and styles of beaded objects within a temporal framework. Until recently, research on Nonya beadwork chronology has been limited by the lack of reliably provenanced pieces. Scientific methods of dating artefacts have been of limited use because the margin for error is too wide for the 150-year period under investigation, particularly since Nonya beadwork relates to a relatively recent past. However, in Chapter Four, I argue that it is possible to analyse the development of beadwork through a study of the techniques used on a handful of dated and partially-dated pieces. The chronology that is constructed from this technical analysis indicates that beadwork changed as it passed through a number of different phases.

The identification of these phases suggests that beadwork responded to and registered the changes wrought within Peranakan Chinese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period in which progress was a catchword of social transformation. Questioning the changes in Nonya beadwork thus becomes a means of examining how modernity and tradition were perceived, confronted, and translated, intersecting with the constructions of Peranakan Chinese identity. Chapter Five addresses the expression of cultural identity from 1870 to 1900 through a close examination of the imagery and styles of Nonya beadwork. It compares this with imagery used on other forms of Peranakan Chinese decorative arts and with beadwork from Sumatra to provide insights into the accommodations of locally specific realities and the adaptations of an inherited but distant Chinese culture.

By the turn of the twentieth century, there was a sense amongst some Peranakan Chinese that they could actively construct their identity by combining the best of heritage and circumstance. Within Peranakan Chinese society, reactions to customary practices that drew from a number of different cultures was varied, as was their sense of being “Chinese,” giving rise to an animated discourse on the appropriateness of their cultural mix. Through an analysis of the modifications in the styles, motifs, and forms of Nonya beadwork, Chapter Six explores cross-currents of culture, gender, and modernity in the changing consciousness of the Nonya from 1900 to the 1970s.

Against the backdrop of the recent revival of interest in Peranakan Chinese history and the concerns about the demise of this culture, Part Three explores the ways in which the accumulated meanings in Nonya beadwork are interpreted and communicated, and how the Peranakan Chinese past is given resonance in our imagination today. Chapter Seven examines the relationship between cultural loss, preservation, continuity, and change, and the ways in which contemporary perceptions of Nonya beadwork reflect and interact with cultural renewal. Paradoxically, the sense of loss and urgency for preservation risks stultifying the process of cultural transformation that had characterized the dynamics of Peranakan Chinese social formation in the past. In showcasing Nonya beadwork as historical artefact, contemporary activity, and commercialized fashion item, the Peranakan Chinese community has had to confront this paradox.

As will become apparent, many questions raised during the course of this research remain unanswered. Some will require many more years of painstaking collection and investigation of material as well as collaboration with researchers in other areas of embroidery and Peranakan Chinese culture before answers can confidently be asserted. This study provides a bridge between the extensive research on Southeast Asian textiles and the embryonic field of Southeast Asian embroidery as well as an extension of the ongoing dialogue on Peranakan Chinese artefacts and culture. Through an analysis of context, style, and imagery, the three parts of this thesis aim to disentangle the ideas and social, cultural, and historical relationships embodied in Nonya beadwork. Woven together, they show that Nonya beadwork can be seen as a multi-faceted and richly coloured narrative which, through its very tangible existence, accumulates meaning and connects the present with the past.

A Note on Terminology

The terms Peranakan Chinese, Baba, Straits Chinese, and Straits-born Chinese have been used synonymously in the past, but they also carry varying connotations.

Although these terms will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, the following section provides a brief clarification of their meanings as used in this thesis.

Peranakan

The term “Peranakan” has acquired both ethnic and cultural connotations. In Malay, *peranakan* means “locally-born” and Peranakan can therefore refer to descendents of indigenous women and Chinese, Indian Muslim (Peranakan Jawi), Arab, and Jewish men born in the Malay-speaking world. Leo Suryadinata points out that the use of the term “Peranakan” from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards is generally an abbreviation of “*peranakan Cina*.”³⁰ With reference to the Chinese, the term Peranakan has been used to describe the acculturated population who display certain external markers in terms of a preference for spicy food, adoption of Malay or other indigenous Indonesian languages or a generous number of loan words, adaptations of local forms of dress in the *sarong* and *baju panjang* or *kebaya*, and some local customs such as the chewing of *sireh* (betel).³¹

Because these cultural markers have become an important descriptor of the Peranakan Chinese in the Straits Settlements, mixed ethnicity is not a necessary criterion. Tan defines the present-day Peranakan Chinese as “linguistically Malay acculturated Chinese but not necessarily of mixed-blood descent.”³² Since this thesis focuses on Peranakan Chinese, for the sake of brevity, the term “Peranakan” will be used to refer to Peranakan Chinese. Peranakan encompasses those of Chinese descent, whether of mixed birth or not, who identify themselves as Peranakan, who have ancestors who displayed acculturated external markers, or who themselves display acculturated external markers.

³⁰ Leo Suryadinata, “Peranakan Chinese Identities in Malaysia and Singapore” (paper presented at the Symposium of The World of Peranakan: Baba and Nyonya Heritage of Southeast Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 3 February 2005).

³¹ The *sarong* is a tubular piece of fabric wrapped around the lower half of the body like a long skirt; the *baju panjang* is a long-sleeved calf-length blouse with a front opening, reaching below the knees, and the *kebaya* is a long-sleeved hip-length blouse with a front opening. The latter two are fastened by the use of brooches (*kerosang*).

³² Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 45.

For the Peranakan descendants of migrants who came mainly from the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian, filial piety and a southern Chinese heritage featured prominently in their cultural and belief systems in the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies. Since many of the local practices which the Peranakans in both regions adopted were similar, they can be considered a community in a cultural sense, and will generally be referred to in the singular as the Peranakan community. However, it was not a homogenous society, and where cultural or other differences are instructive, I will refer to Peranakan communities (in the plural) to emphasize their heterogenous characteristics.

Although Malay- and Thai-acculturated Chinese in Kelantan and Terengganu in the Malay peninsula can be classified as Peranakan following cultural criteria, these Chinese do not identify themselves as Peranakan and will not be considered in this thesis.³³

Baba, Straits Chinese, and Straits-born Chinese

The terms “Baba,” “Straits Chinese,” and “Straits-born Chinese” have all been used interchangeably with “Peranakan.” Some authors have differentiated between the acculturated Chinese in different geographical regions, using “Peranakan” to denote those from Indonesia and “Baba” to refer to those from Malaysia and Singapore.³⁴ “Baba” is also a gendered term, referring to Peranakan men. Because of this double use, the term “Baba” will only be employed in relation to quotations following the original texts and, unless otherwise specified, may be understood as referring to the Peranakans in the Straits Settlements.

The term “Straits Chinese” has been used in two senses: to refer to all Chinese who were born in the Straits Settlements, or only to Peranakan Chinese born in the Straits Settlements. In this study, the term “Straits Chinese” will be used in the wider sense of locally-born and naturalized Chinese in the Straits Settlements, of which the Peranakans are a cultural subset.

³³ Tan Chee Beng, “Socio-Cultural Diversities and Identities” in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, ed. Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee Beng (Selangor Darul Ehsan: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 48.

³⁴ See, for instance, Skinner, “Creolized Chinese”; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*. According to Tan, the acculturated Chinese in Indonesia preferred to describe themselves as Peranakan. See Tan Chee Beng, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1993), p. ix.

The terms “Nonya” and “Nyonya” are used in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia to refer to locally-born women, including those of Indian Muslim and Arab descent, and are not exclusive to Peranakan Chinese. Indo-European women with European names also addressed themselves as “Njonja” (the Dutch colonial equivalent of “Nyonya”), generally to indicate a married woman. Here, “Nonya” will refer specifically to Peranakan Chinese women only, irrespective of marital status. For quotations and citations, the spelling of the original text will be adhered to.

Nonya Beadwork and the Disputed Borders of Peranakan Decorative Arts

“Nonya beadwork,” “Straits Chinese beadwork,” and “Peranakan beadwork” have all been used in the literature pertaining to Peranakan culture. I have selected “Nonya beadwork” to describe the beadwork used by the Peranakan community for two reasons. First, beadwork was practised and used both in the Straits Settlements and parts of the Netherlands Indies and the term “Nonya” encompasses Peranakan women in both these areas. Secondly, the term reflects the gendered nature of beadwork as an activity.

The boundary of what can properly be considered to constitute Peranakan material culture is somewhat ambiguous and is reflected in the inconsistency of definitions across different media. The ambiguity has so far been related to decorative art not worked by the Peranakans themselves, namely silverware, porcelain, and furniture. However, a brief outline of the classification of porcelain and silverware is helpful in highlighting the considerations faced in delimiting the boundaries of Nonya beadwork.

In terms of porcelain, William Willets refers to blue and white Chinese export porcelain used by the Peranakans as “kitchen ch’ing” and differentiates this from polychrome overglaze enamel porcelains made in China specifically for the Peranakan market, which Lim Suan Poh refers to as “Nonya ware.”³⁵ This nomenclature explicitly demarcates a style of porcelain that developed exclusively to suit Peranakan requirements. On the other hand, Ho Wing Meng develops a broader category of “Straits Chinese porcelain” which includes certain types of blue and white porcelains

³⁵ Willets, “Introduction”; and Lim, “Nonya Ware.”

found primarily in Peranakan homes, polychrome overglaze enamel porcelain, and other types of porcelain he considered were made to Peranakan taste.³⁶

With reference to Peranakan silverware, Ho considers only items made in the Straits Settlements for a Peranakan market.³⁷ However, some collectors argue that this is overly narrow since silverware was made for a Peranakan market outside of the Straits Settlements as well.³⁸ Furthermore, they argue that although ownership of the artefacts by Peranakans is a primary concern, provenance is generally an insufficient single criterion to ascertain such an attribution since this can be difficult to determine. Hence, they propose a scheme of attribution based on decoration and forms. First, Peranakan cultural characteristics – for example, Chinese rituals and customs and the adoption of local habits such as *sireh* chewing and the sprinkling of rosewater – determine certain forms of silverware. Second, since the Peranakans patronized Chinese, Indian, and Ceylonese silversmiths who had migrated to the Straits Settlements, non-Chinese decorations are apparent on pieces commissioned by the Peranakans. Thus, they argue that silverware with Chinese-inspired decorations on Chinese, Malay, and Thai forms, Indian decorations in Chinese forms, and those with Chinese decorations on Chinese and Western forms that have a Peranakan provenance may be classified as Peranakan.

Each of these definitions attempts to categorize an aesthetically distinct group of objects that developed out of the demands of Peranakan society and culture. However, only the last of these directly addresses the source of the difficulty – the lack of a sufficient number of provenanced examples on which categorization or attribution as Peranakan may be based. Even though the attribution based on culturally-determined styles is particularly useful in that it provides a clear basis for formal characteristics of Peranakan decorative arts, it leaves open the problem that some pieces attributed as Peranakan may not, in fact, have been used by the Peranakans.

The classification of Nonya beadwork has not surfaced as a fraught issue. Nevertheless, in considering the parameters of this research, it is necessary to keep in mind that not all examples of beadwork in what may be considered a Nonya aesthetic

³⁶ Ho, *Straits Chinese Porcelain*.

³⁷ Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*.

³⁸ Les Page, Daniel Lea, and Steve Potash, "A Century of Straits Chinese Silver (1835–1935), *Silver Magazine* 36, no. 4 (2004), pp. 24–34.

can unproblematically be identified as being of Peranakan provenance. For instance, the Melaka Chitty (acculturated Hindu Indian) population also used beaded slippers with designs similar to those used by the Peranakans.³⁹ As this thesis investigates Peranakan cultural identity, Nonya beadwork (as opposed to Nonya-style beadwork) will thus refer to beadwork that can be considered to have been made by Peranakans or for Peranakan use in techniques that are commonly employed on other examples of Nonya beadwork. In addition, since Nonya beadwork has become a popular pastime and Nonya beaded items have become fashionable in the past 10 years, more non-Peranakans have taken up Nonya beadwork as an activity. With regard to contemporary beadwork, Nonya beadwork will refer to beadwork made by Peranakans, and made with the conscious intention of being similar to older examples of Nonya beadwork, or as extensions of Nonya beading in terms of techniques, styles, forms, or designs. This criterion of intentionality is to capture the reflexivity of contemporary beadwork activity.

As a subset of embroidery, beadwork will be examined in conjunction with embroidery, and references to Nonya embroidery in this thesis should be understood to include Nonya beadwork.

Place Names

Several changes have occurred in place names over the past 150 years as political control shifted and territorial borders were re-drawn. The Straits Settlements was formed in 1826 from the historical grouping of Penang (also known as Pulau Pinang, previously known as Prince of Wales Island), Province Wellesley (on the mainland of the Malay peninsula, opposite Penang), Melaka (also known as Malacca), and Singapore. The Straits Settlements included the Dindings from 1874 to 1935 when it was transferred to Perak, Christmas Islands from 1900, Cocos Islands from 1903, and Labuan which was transferred from North Borneo to the Straits Settlements in 1905. In this thesis, references to the Straits Settlements conform to the common usage, meaning Penang, Melaka, and Singapore.

The Netherlands Indies refers to islands in the Indonesian archipelago governed by the Dutch until 1949. Because of the expansion of colonial control, what comprised the Netherlands Indies changed over time. However, as this thesis concentrates on the

³⁹ Kamachee Pillay, personal communication, February 2004.

period after 1870, when all of Java and all but the northern part of Sumatra (Aceh, Gayo and Alas, and parts of Batak territory) had been brought under Dutch control, Netherlands Indies can be taken to include Java and Sumatra generally.⁴⁰

Where reference is made to regions in a contemporary context, present-day place names – Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia – will be used. Until the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the grouping of Malaysian states that included the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States (Negri Sembilan, Selangor, Pahang, and Perak) and Unfederated Malay States (Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu) were collectively known as Malaya. To refer to geographical zones, the terms Malay peninsula, encompassing the peninsula south of the Kra isthmus and including Singapore, and the Indonesian archipelago, including Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and Sulawesi, will be used.

⁴⁰ See Robert Cribb, *Historical Atlas of Indonesia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), figs. 4.3–4.4, pp. 115–116 for maps showing the expansion of Dutch control in Sumatra.

Beading was one of the main means of textile decoration of the Peranakans in the Straits Settlements and Sumatra. Nonya beadwork was practised and widely used in Penang, Melaka, and Singapore where there were small but significant populations of Peranakans.¹ In Sumatra, the largest quantity of Nonya beadwork has been obtained in Palembang on the south-eastern coast and Padang on the west coast, the main areas of Peranakan population in Sumatra.² Beadwork was also made in other centres in Sumatra – in Medan, for example – where there were smaller Peranakan populations.

Nonya beadwork has also been obtained in Java, the other islands of the Indonesian archipelago, and Phuket in southern Thailand where there is a small Peranakan community. The relatively small number of Nonya beadwork objects from Java may reflect the lesser importance of beadwork compared to other forms of textile arts such as batik. The Peranakans in Phuket are said to have obtained their beadwork from Penang and Singapore.³ Examples of beadwork that may be considered Nonya in style have even been encountered as far afield as southern Vietnam and Burma.⁴ In this sense, Nonya beadwork crosses geographical and political boundaries, in parallel with Malay textile traditions of the Malay peninsula and Sumatra which also straddle geopolitical borders.

¹ There are no official estimates for the Peranakan population in the Straits Settlements as they were classified as Straits Chinese for the purpose of population censuses. Skinner estimates that the Peranakan population in the Straits Settlements in 1890 was about 45,000 to 50,000, accounting for 9 to 10% of the total population. Skinner, "Creolized Chinese," p. 58. In Melaka, Chia estimates that there were only about 700 Peranakan families or 7,000 Peranakans in the 1860s, a figure that Skinner corroborates for the 1880s. Felix Chia, *Ala Sayang!* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1983), pp. 6–7.

² Charles Coppel estimates that there were approximately 6,300 Peranakans (1,219 Malay speakers, 5,986 Minangkabau speakers) in Padang and 4,081 in Palembang in 1920. He defines the Peranakan population as those speaking indigenous languages. Charles Coppel, "Mapping the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia," in *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2002), table 2, pp. 118–119. Mary Somers Heidhues estimates that there were 3,600 Peranakan Chinese in Padang in 1930, based on a definition of Peranakans as being of Chinese descent, born in the Netherlands Indies, and having locally-born fathers. Mary Somers Heidhues, "Peranakan Chinese Politics in Indonesia" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1965), p. 35. Robert Cribb shows Dutch-appointed Chinese community leaders (at the rank of *Kapitein*) in 1867 in Siak, Padang, Bengkulu, and Palembang – presumably this indicates the main centres of Peranakan populations in Sumatra at that time. Cribb, *Historical Atlas of Indonesia*, fig. 4.40, p. 132.

³ Pranee Sakulpipatana, personal communication, April 2005.

⁴ For example, a pair of bead-embroidered velvet ladies' slippers with floral motifs from southern Vietnam was deposited in 1922 in the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago (object no. 151965).

Conventional approaches to Southeast Asian textile histories focus on regions of production, technologies of production, symbolic meanings, and cultural influences. Compared to Western textile histories, these studies are largely ahistorical to the extent that they do not give close consideration to the temporal development of textiles. Whilst this is defensible and necessary for textile traditions where precedent or beliefs govern their production and consumption, it is less so for objects such as Nonya beadwork that emerged out of a climate of innovation and were made to be used in a rapidly changing world.

The first section of this chapter argues that Nonya beadwork is unlikely to have been practised to any significant extent prior to the mid-nineteenth century because of the specific types of beads used. Available trade statistics for bead imports into the Straits Settlements support a view that beadwork gradually increased in popularity from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards, at a time when modernity was a central concern. The following section introduces an alternative approach to beadwork history that takes account of its temporal dimension in which modernity, discussed in the concluding section, acts as a conceptual foil.

Imported Glass Beads: Constituting a Genre

There is a long history of glass bead imports to Southeast Asia. Small drawn-glass beads were imported from Western Asia and India and glass beads, probably made at Arikamedu in eastern India, have been found at archaeological sites in the Indonesian archipelago that date to between the second century BCE and the third century CE.⁵ Indian glass bead-making technology also spread to Southeast Asia, where what Peter Francis Jr. terms Indo-Pacific glass beads were made.⁶ From the thirteenth century, Chinese coiled-glass beads appear to have displaced imported Indian and Western Asian beads as well as locally-made Indo-Pacific beads.⁷ Coloured beads from China were exchanged for spices and forest products from the Indonesian archipelago and in

⁵ See Sumarah Adhyatman, "Indonesian Beads," in *Magical Ancient Beads: From the Collection of Ulrich Beck*, by Jamey D. Allen (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), p. 87; Peter Francis Jr., *Beads and the Bead Trade in Southeast Asia*, Contributions of the Centre for Bead Research, no. 4 (Lake Placid, New York, 1989); and Peter Francis Jr., *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade, 300 B.C. to the Present* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), pp. 44–46.

⁶ Indo-Pacific beads refer to Indo-Pacific monochrome drawn-glass beads. Apart from Arikamedu in India, Southeast Asian centres of Indo-Pacific bead-making included Palembang in Sumatra, Takua Pa in south-western Thailand, and the area around Sungei Mas in Kedah, Malaysia. Francis, *Beads and the Bead Trade in Southeast Asia*, pp. 4–7; and Francis, *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade*, pp. 27–41.

⁷ Francis, *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade*, pp. 72–84.

fifteenth-century Melaka, traders bought imported coloured glass and carnelian beads to exchange for gold dust in Borneo.⁸ The fifteenth-century Chinese traveller Ma Huan wrote of Java, “the people of the country are very fond of the blue patterned porcelain-ware of the Central Country [China], also of such things as musk, gold-flecked hemp-silks, and beads. They buy these things in exchange for copper coins.”⁹

Outside of Southeast Asia, as European missionary activity developed and European trade intensified from the sixteenth century onwards, European-made glass beads were exchanged for fur in the Americas and slaves, gold, ivory, and palm oil in Africa.¹⁰ Because they could also be made in standardized sizes and were relatively durable and portable, beads were a convenient medium of exchange and an ideal trade commodity.¹¹ European glass beads had probably been introduced to Southeast Asia by Muslim traders based in Aden, but the bead trade in the region expanded as a result of European incursions through exploration, commerce, and later, colonization.¹² Venetian-made glass beads were traded at Melaka in the fifteenth century.¹³ The Dutch also exported beads, including Dutch and German ones, to their colonies.¹⁴ Brass beads, as well as globular and faceted wound-glass beads, which may have been made in Europe, were found in the wreck of *De Liefde*, the Dutch ship that sank on its

⁸ M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesia Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1962), pp. 85, 100. Fei Xin’s account of 1436 also mentions “melted beads of all colours” amongst the items traded in Melaka by the Chinese. Fei Xin, *Hsing-ch’a Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, trans. J. V. G. Mills, revised, annotated, and ed. Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), p. 55.

⁹ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores* [1433], trans. J. V. G. Mills from the Chinese text ed. Feng Ch’eng-Chün (Cambridge: University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1970), p. 97.

¹⁰ Lois Sherr Dubin, *The History of Beads: From 30,000 BC to the Present* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1987), pp. 106, 109. The development of the bead trade is described as occurring in three successive “waves,” the third being the result of European expansion, in Valerie Hector, *The Art of Beadwork: Historic Inspiration, Contemporary Design* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2005), pp. 14–15. A diagrammatic overview of the reach of European glass beads is provided in Caroline Crabtree and Pam Stallebrass, *Beadwork: A World Guide* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 14.

¹¹ Victoria Z. Rivers, *The Shining Cloth: Dress and Adornment that Glitters* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 70; and Dubin, *History of Beads*, pp. 30, 106. Dubin describes this occurring as early as 6500 BCE. She also reports the return on investment on European glass beads in 1632 to be 1,000% (presumably from trade), a significant margin for a non-perishable commodity.

¹² Sumarah Adhyatman and Redjeki Arifin, *Manik-Manik di Indonesia (Beads of Indonesia)* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1996), p. 88; and Francis, *Asia’s Maritime Bead Trade*, p. 171.

¹³ Francis, *Asia’s Maritime Bead Trade*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Kenneth Kidd, *Glass Bead-Making from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Quebec, Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, Environment Canada, 1979), p. 34. The Dutch were producing beads that copied Venetian ones in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities by the fifteenth century. Peter Francis Jr., *Beads of the World* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1994), p. 65. Dutch imitations of Venetian chevron beads found on Java are illustrated in Adhyatman and Arifin, *Manik-Manik di Indonesia*, plate 84, p. 94.

way from Amsterdam to Java in 1711.¹⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, European beads were exported to the English and Dutch colonies through London, Liverpool, Hamburg, and Amsterdam.¹⁶ Small glass seed beads measuring less than 2 or 3 millimetres in diameter must have been amongst the European bead exports to Southeast Asia for these are found in abundance in beadwork from the Malay peninsula, Borneo, and other islands of the Indonesian archipelago where they were applied to garments and used to decorate a wide variety of objects (figs. 13–19).¹⁷

Beads of shell, stone, or glass, both locally-made and imported, can be found in the decorative and ritual arts of insular Southeast Asia. They were crafted into necklaces, woven into fabrics, and strung into dance aprons, baby carriers, cigarette holders, and numerous other objects. Beads were treasured as heirlooms and handed down the generations, used as markers of status and wealth, or in ceremonies and as talismans, sometimes valued for their supposed magical properties and as symbols of fertility.¹⁸ For example, the Kelabit of central Sarawak regarded some types of beads as being imbued with a mystical quality and two of these would be placed in rice fields prior to harvesting to ensure a good crop.¹⁹ For the Selakaus in western Sarawak, mothers who were suckling their babies wore blue beads as they believed that seeing and touching them strengthened the babies' soul.²⁰ Perhaps, as Dubin speculates was the case in Southeast Asia, where organic materials rapidly decayed in the tropical climate, the intrinsic durability of stone and glass beads was representative of strength and

¹⁵ Karlis Karklins, "Beads from the Wreck of the Dutch East Indiaman *De Liefde* (1711)," *Bead Forum*, no. 12 (1988), pp. 11–17; and Karlis Karklins and Carmel Schrire, "The Beads from Oudepost I, A Dutch East India Company Outpost, Cape, South Africa," *Beads* 3 (1991), pp. 64–67.

¹⁶ Karlis Karklins and Carol F. Adams, "Dominique Bussolin on the Glass Bead Industry of Murano and Venice (1847)," *Beads* 2 (1990), p. 75. A bead sample card of the Società Veneziana Conterie for Africa, labelled "Elephant Trading," is shown in Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Seed beads are small beads that are generally less than 5 millimetres in diameter, although there is no standard dimension for defining when a bead would be classified as a "seed bead." See Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 16.

¹⁸ See Margret Carey, "Beadwork, History and Uses: Ceremonial and Talismanic Uses," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, updated 2002), <<http://www.groveart.com/>> [accessed 8 Nov 2002]; Peter Francis Jr., *Heirloom and Ethnographically Collected Beads in Southeast Asia*, Contributions of the Centre for Bead Research, no. 6 (Lake Placid, New York, 1989), pp. 25–29; Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation*, rev. ed. (Hongkong: Periplus, 2003), pp. 58–66; Adelheid Munan-Oettli, "Blue Beads to Trade with the Natives," *Arts of Asia* 17, no. 2 (1987), pp. 88–95; Ann Richter, "Bead Magic in Indonesia," *Magical Ancient Beads*, by Jamey D. Allen, pp. 92–95; and Sarawak Museum, *Beads*, Sarawak Museum Occasional Paper, no. 2 (Kuching, 1984), p. 1. See also Rivers, *Shining Cloth*, pp. 68–72 for a general overview of the significance of beads in ancient societies.

¹⁹ Sarawak Museum, *Beads*, p. 1. The multiplicity of beads could also symbolize a fruitful harvest. See Allen, *Magical Ancient Beads*, p. 95.

²⁰ Munan-Oettli, "Blue Beads to Trade with the Natives," p. 88.

longevity.²¹ For the Dayaks of Borneo, beads were placed under the eyelids of a corpse for the spirit to use in its passage across the river of death whilst in Sumba, beaded belts and accessories are used as funerary gifts.²²

To the Peranakans, glass beads were merely attractive ornamentation without any symbolic value or intrinsic mystical connotation. Although many varieties of European beads such as polychrome Venetian lamp-wound beads and millefiore beads were imported into Southeast Asia,²³ Nonya beadwork was based almost exclusively on the smallest of the monochrome glass and metallic seed beads and sequins, typically measuring between 1 and 2 millimetres in diameter. The preference for the delicate beads that were neither symbolic nor precious in their own right reflects a distinct aesthetic sensibility which valued refinement and detail, giving Nonya beadwork its reputation as fine or *halus* handwork.

European glass seed beads had been mass-produced since the late fifteenth century for use in European needlework.²⁴ Glass seed beads were used to decorate baskets, jewel caskets, needle-cases, slippers, reticules, and purses. By the mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of glass seed beads for needlework was reflected in the wide range of beaded objects made – slipper tops, fire-screens, tea-cosies, cushions, seat covers, pin-cushions, watch-cases, spectacle-cases, wall-tidies, purses, trays, bell-pulls, shelf-covers, belts, brooches, and bags.²⁵ The instructions for beadwork were often published in women's magazines.²⁶ Beadwork techniques were varied and included

²¹ Dubin, *History of Beads*, p. 229.

²² Sarawak Museum, *Beads*, p. 3; and Allen, *Magical Ancient Beads*, p. 94.

²³ See Adhyatman and Arifin, *Manik-Manik di Indonesia* for the types of European beads found in Indonesia.

²⁴ Peter Francis Jr., "A Short History of Beadwork," *The Margaretologist* 10, no. 2, issue 24 (1997), p. 5.

²⁵ There is an extensive literature on European beadwork. Examples are discussed in Pamela Claburn, *Beadwork* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 2001), pp. 6–18; Vanda Foster, *Bags and Purses* (London: Batsford, 1982), fig. 13, p. 22, pp. 36–37, 45, 49, colour plates 3–4; Therle Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), pp. 180–186; and Jeffrey Simpson, "Antiques: European Beadwork, the Gleaming Intricacy of an Age-Old Craft," *Architectural Digest* 51 (1994): pp. 192–197, 238–239.

²⁶ An interesting list of instructions for beadwork published between 1846 and 1866 in English and North American magazines is provided in Joan Edwards, *Bead Embroidery* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1996), pp. 109–110.

bead weaving (using a loom), bead crochet and knitting, couching, and beading over a mould.²⁷

According to Hughes, from about 1760, the production of smaller beads and more brilliant colours was made possible by technical improvements in glass-making.²⁸

From the early nineteenth century glass seed beads were made in large quantities and in colours such as opal, turquoise, amber, and ruby; the colour range broadened further by the 1840s.²⁹ The production of glass seed beads was initially dominated by Venice, and beads of between 0.8 and 1 millimetre in diameter had already been produced in Venice before 1818.³⁰ Bohemia was also producing seed beads at this time, the first bead factory having opened in Jablonec in 1787.³¹ French firms which were connected to Venetian bead producers were making seed beads around Lyons in the south of France in the first half of the twentieth century.³²

Denis Diderot described and illustrated the production of drawn-glass beads in his *Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers* of 1751-1772.³³ Two comparable accounts were produced, one by G. Altmüller in 1841 and one by Dominique Bussolin in 1847.³⁴ According to Bussolin, a Venetian glassmaker, the production of hollow glass tubes was undertaken by a skilled master-worker and his assistants.³⁵ Taking a lump of molten coloured glass with a small iron bar, the workers formed it into a cylindrical shape, using pincers to create a hole at the centre of the cylinder. The cylinder (now a short tube) was reheated to make it pliable, taking care to retain the hole. Another iron bar was quickly attached to the free end of the glass tube which the workers stretched into a long, narrow tube by pulling the two bars

²⁷ See Clabburn, *Beadwork* for a concise overview.

²⁸ Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework*, p. 183.

²⁹ Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework*, pp. 183, 185.

³⁰ Waltraud Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz: Historismus, Jugendstil (Beads from Gablonz: Historicism, Art Nouveau)* (Vienna: Dr. Waltraud Neuwirth, 1994), p. 163.

³¹ Francis, *Beads of the World*, p. 66.

³² Francis, *Beads of the World*, p. 72; and Marie-Jose Oppé and Howard Oppé "French Beadmaking: An Historical Perspective Emphasizing the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Beads* 3 (1991), pp. 48, 50. According to Oppé and Oppé, glass beads were also made in Normandy.

³³ Cited in Edwards, *Bead Embroidery*, pp. 76-77.

³⁴ G. Altmüller, "Perlen," in *Technologische Encyklopadie* 11 (Stuttgart: Joh. Jos. Prechtel, 1841) and Dominique Bussolin, *Les Célèbres Verreries de Venise et de Murano* (Venice: H. F. Munster, 1847) are cited in Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 150.

³⁵ The description that follows of the bead production process is from Karklins and Adams, "Dominique Bussolin on the Glass-Bead Industry."

as they ran in opposite directions. Thus formed, the long glass tube was laid to cool. The cross-sectional diameter of the tube, which determined the diameter of the beads, depended on the speed at which the workers ran.

According to Bussolin, the various tubes were sorted according to their diameters. Each tube was then sliced into small uniform pieces either manually or, after about 1822, using a mechanized multiple chisel. This created sharp edges which were rounded off by placing all the pieces of glass into a concoction of finely-powdered lime and charcoal moistened with a little water. The resulting mix was tumbled in sand in a metal tube placed over heat. The rounded beads were then passed through a screen and separated from the sand, and then shaken in a bag to remove the lime and charcoal. The beads were graded according to size and strung into hanks of 120 strings of 5 *pouces* (5 inches or 12.7 centimetres) long for commercial delivery. Most of the unused glass seed bead strands found in old needle-boxes of Peranakan households during my fieldwork consisted of strings of beads that were between 7 to 12 centimetres long (figs. 20–21).

The process described above was used to produce *rocailles* – rounded seed beads with no flat sides.³⁶ Some glass seed beads had one or more flat sides – these were known as “charlottes” or “cut beads” (figs. 21b, 22). Both terms can be confusing.

“Charlotte” has been defined by Francis as a small seed bead with flat sides but Altmuller refers to “*charlotte tailles*” to designate the smallest size of beads.³⁷ In regards to the term “cut beads,” European-made glass seed beads are technically chopped or cut from long drawn-glass tubes (as opposed to being coiled or wound from molten glass). In addition, cut seed beads are also sometimes referred to as faceted seed beads. Strictly speaking, faceted beads are beads made with glass canes that have first been paddled into geometric cross-sections and then drawn, so that faceting is a feature of the original glass cane, whereas cut beads have sides that are ground flat after they have been chopped and rounded in the sand drum.³⁸ Cut beads are not the same as two-cut and three-cut beads. Two-cut beads are chopped from

³⁶ This definition of “rocaille” to mean a small, rounded seed bead follows Peter Francis Jr., “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” *The Margaretologist* 10, no. 2, issue 24 (1997), pp. 9–10. Elsewhere, *rocaille* is defined much more widely to include bugle, seed, pony, and crow beads of between 1.5 and 7 millimetres. See Oppen and Oppen, “French Beadmaking,” p. 50.

³⁷ Francis, “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” p. 10; and Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 213.

³⁸ I am grateful to Jamey Allen (personal communication, April 2003) for clarifying the distinction between cut and faceted beads.

tubes with a hexagonal cross-section and are also known as hex-cut beads; three-cut beads are two-cut beads that have had their sharp edges polished or rounded off by grinding.³⁹ To avoid confusion, the term “charlotte,” following Francis’ definition, will therefore be used in preference to “faceted” or “cut” beads to describe beads where one or more flat sides were deliberately ground and to distinguish them from rocaille beads.

To produce charlottes, it was necessary to put the rocaille beads through one more step. Bussolin compared this to the cutting and polishing of gemstones that produced beads with “more shine and a more pleasant appearance” to create the “most beautiful effect when used on fabrics and in embroidery.”⁴⁰ Beads may have been cut in Venice, but were also sent to Bohemia where the price for cutting was “very reasonable.”⁴¹ Petr Nový mentions that, after 1887, beads were strung onto wire and polished using a steam-powered machine, which gave the beads a “strange durable gloss.”⁴² This latter procedure was also described by Altmüller in 1841.⁴³ The more flat sides a bead had, the more expensive it would have been since the process of cutting involved intensive handwork. According to Altmüller, charlottes were apparently the smallest and most expensive beads (probably amongst glass seed beads).⁴⁴

The two main types of beads used in Nonya beadwork were rocailles and charlottes with one or more flat sides, and both types were sometimes used on the same piece or by a single beader. The Nonyas appear to have referred to both these types as *manek potong*, literally meaning “cut beads,” although in contemporary usage, *manek potong* tends to refer only to charlottes (fig. 22). *Manek potong* also referred to smaller glass seed beads, as distinct from larger ones that were over approximately 2 millimetres, which Nonyas termed *manek kacha* or glass beads. According to Ho Wing Meng, the flat sides of the *manek potong* were defects caused by the “accidental effects of the polishing [tumbling],” and it was the random scattering of these beads that gave Nonya

³⁹ Francis, “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” pp. 10-11.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Karklins and Adams, “Dominique Bussolin on the Glass-Bead Industry,” p. 73.

⁴¹ Karklins and Adams, “Dominique Bussolin on the Glass-Bead Industry,” p. 73.

⁴² Petr Nový, “Kapitoly z Historie Výroby Jablonecké Bižuterie (Od Počátků do Roku 1918), III: Skleněné Perle a Perličky Sekané Perle (Perličky) (Chapters from the History of the Jablonec Costume Jewellery [Industry], From the Production Beginning till 1918, III: Glass Beads, Seed Beads),” *Sklář a Keramik*, no. 52 (2002), p. 214.

⁴³ Francis, “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” p. 10.

⁴⁴ Francis, “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” p. 10; and Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 213.

beadwork its “characteristic glitter and sparkle.”⁴⁵ However, from the accounts of beadmakers, it is apparent that charlottes were deliberately produced to obtain this effect, and the Nonyas learned to value and exploit this characteristic in their beadwork.⁴⁶ According to one Nonya, she was taught to use the needle to nudge each bead as she sewed so that its flat side faced upwards.⁴⁷

Beads were made from coloured glass rods so that each bead was tinted throughout. Sometimes two separate colours could be used to produce a single glass tube and the colours can be seen in the cross section of the bead. In these cases, a lighter core could be used to enhance the colour of the beads, and was used to produce red-coloured beads more cheaply (fig. 23).⁴⁸ Alternatively, beads could be stained after they were rounded in the rotating drum by adding powdered coloured enamel with some borax to the drum and melting it.⁴⁹ The melted enamel would then adhere to the surface of the beads.

More than 150 colours of glass seed beads were available by the 1840s, including “brilliant red, pink, ruby, dark and pale blue, turquoise, opal and alabaster, porcelain and chalk white, violet, yellow, green, aquamarine, brown, milk-white, brick red, Nanking coloured, crystal black...in many shades.”⁵⁰ Dominique Bussolin exhibited 186 colours of rocaille beads of approximately 1 millimetre diameter in 1842 (fig. 24). By the 1850s, the Bohemian bead manufacturer Ferdinand Unger & Co. was making beads in 19 sizes and 200 colours.⁵¹ The colour of much of Nonya beadwork is richly toned compared to other types of Southeast Asian beadwork, such as the beadwork of the Malay and Minangkabau people, which are dominated by single shades of red, blue, green, yellow, and black beads (compare figs. 1–4 with 16–19). The conscious use of three or four different shades of red, green, and blue can often be detected on many pieces of Nonya beadwork (figs. 1, 3, 5, 6). Glass tubes could also be lined with

⁴⁵ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 45–46.

⁴⁶ The advice of Alice Scherer (personal communication, April 2003) that these were not defective beads is gratefully acknowledged.

⁴⁷ Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2002.

⁴⁸ Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 150. “White-heart” red, blue, and purple beads can be found in Nonya beadwork.

⁴⁹ Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 206.

⁵¹ Nový, “Kapitoly z Historie Výroby Jablonecké Bižuterie,” p. 213. A colour chart used by Unger now in the Technical Museum in Vienna (TH 34341) is referred to in Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 55.

colour, and by the mid-nineteenth century, both reflective coatings and silver were used to line the insides of glass tubes, producing “mirror” and “silver-lined” beads.⁵² Colour-lined and hex-cut beads were used in Nonya beadwork but appear less frequently than solidly-coloured rocailles and charlottes (figs. 25, 26).

The practical advice given by the *Godey's Lady's Book* to its American readers in 1855 that “enough beads for the work to be undertaken, should be purchased at once, as it is seldom that they can be accurately matched, either as regards shade, hue, size or pattern” suggests that colours of different batches of the same type of seed beads were not always uniform in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵³ However, it is difficult to judge from extant examples of Nonya beadwork whether the consistency of bead colours was regarded as a problem.

Nonya beadwork also employed metallic seed beads (*manek pirigu*). Their glimmering surfaces fitted well with the Nonya textile aesthetic. Metallic seed beads were produced in France and were made in a range of types and sizes. The Nonyas favoured two types – the tiny metallic seed beads of just under 1 millimetre in diameter and with numerous flat sides, and rounded, gold-coloured metallic beads of approximately 2 millimetres in diameter with striations down the length of the beads (figs. 2, 8, 12). The former were available in a number of different colours – purple, ruby, fuchsia pink, orange, gold, white, sky blue, royal blue, lime green, emerald green, and charcoal, although the range was far more limited than for glass seed beads. Metallic beads usually came in hanks of six strands each, although some hanks found in Nonya homes were made of eight strands with approximately 120 beads per strand (figs. 27, 28).⁵⁴ The striated gold-coloured beads appear to have been used mostly for fringes and borders (figs. 12, 29).

As Eng-Lee reasons, since Peranakan populations were concentrated in or near port cities and towns, the Nonya would have had little difficulty in obtaining supplies of imported beads.⁵⁵ It should, however, be noted that the beads used in Nonya beadwork were not necessarily always of the same types as those that were imported for trade with other communities in Southeast Asia. In the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian

⁵² Francis, “A Vocabulary of Seed Beads,” p. 11; and Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, pp. 63-66.

⁵³ Quoted in Edwards, *Bead Embroidery*, p. 54.

⁵⁴ Oppen and Oppen, “French Beadmaking,” pp. 52-53.

⁵⁵ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 26.

archipelago, *manek pirigu* seem to be largely confined to Nonya beadwork. By contrast, Malay beadwork from Perak used mainly glass seed beads (figs. 17–19). Some types of seed beads may have been imported specifically to meet Nonya preferences.

Although some of the beadwork objects used by the Nonyas may have been imported from China, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, the Nonyas certainly practised beadwork themselves, as is attested by the personal accounts of Nonyas and the patterns pieces found in the Straits Settlements. Various writers have suggested that Nonya beadwork was derivative. Eng-Lee and Khoo both associate Nonya beadwork with European beadwork whereas Ho considers the Peranakans' use of beaded ornaments for weddings to have been influenced by Minangkabau culture of Sumatra.⁵⁶ Although the Minangkabau did use beadwork, mica and metal foil inserts were traditionally a more common addition to their embroideries than beads (fig. 16, 30, 31).⁵⁷

European beadwork and embroidery patterns and materials were employed in Nonya beadwork. These had an important influence on beaded designs but it is difficult to establish whether the emergence of Nonya beadwork as a distinct genre was the direct result of European influence. A common channel through which European needlework techniques were transmitted in the nineteenth century was through the schools set up by Christian missionaries. Missionaries do appear to have encouraged beadwork in India and possibly in southern Africa. For instance, included in the exhibits sent by The Society for Promoting Female Education in the East to the Paris International Exhibition of 1867 were a pair of beaded mats, a beaded purse, and a "very fine" bead-work platter made by the Hindu girls in Indian zenanas.⁵⁸ Girls were taught to sew at the St Marks' Mission in Kaffirland in southern Africa, and they may have been involved in creating a beaded plaque, dated to before 1884, with a design of the Lion of St. Mark from Kaffirland.⁵⁹ However, there is insufficient evidence that

⁵⁶ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 26; Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1996), pp. 200, 202; and Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁷ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 199.

⁵⁸ "Articles Forwarded by the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East," *Female Missionary Intelligencer (FMI)* 10 (1867), pp. 67–72. Zenana activity refers to the visits made by Christian missionary women to Hindu women in their homes.

⁵⁹ The plaque is now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (accession no. 1884.117.102, records accessible at Pitt Rivers Museum online database <<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/databases.html>> [accessed

missionaries played any early role in popularising beadwork in the Straits Settlements.⁶⁰

Whilst it has not been possible during the course of this research to pinpoint the original impetus for Nonya beadwork, it is likely that attractively glimmering seed beads were gradually incorporated into an already established Nonya embroidery tradition. The efflorescence of Nonya beadwork probably took place from the mid-nineteenth century, when the Nonya embroiderer had a potentially wide range of colours and types of beads to choose from, although there is no certainty that the entire range was available in the Straits Settlements or the Netherlands Indies.

Wouter Schouten, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, observed that Chinese (probably Peranakan) girls in Java were taught to sew, embroider, knit, ply the distaff, and to trade, although what their embroidery comprised then is moot.⁶¹ Embroidery was clearly a part of Nonya life by the mid-nineteenth century. Sophia Cooke, head of the Chinese Girls' School in Singapore, requested small scraps of velvet for her girls' needlework in the 1850s.⁶² These may have been used to form decorative multi-coloured velvet foundations for gold and silk thread and bead embroidery (figs. 2, 7b, 8). J.D. Vaughan, who lived in Penang and Singapore between 1851 and 1891, commented that

[i]n their leisure hours the [Melaka Peranakan] women amuse themselves by making purses, ornaments for bed hangings, children's caps, and other fancy articles. Their fancy work is exceedingly pretty and some of the commonest women display great ingenuity, skill and originality in the patterns they invent.⁶³

12 December 2004]). See illustration and discussion in Margret Carey, *Beads and Beadwork of East and South Africa* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 1986), p. 60.

⁶⁰ See Hwei-Fe'n Cheah, "Christian Missionary Activities and the Transmission of Needlework Techniques," *Bead Study Trust Newsletter*, no. 45 (2005), pp. 3–8 for a more detailed discussion of the role of missionaries and the dissemination of beadwork techniques.

⁶¹ Wouter Schouten, *Voyage de Gautier Schouten aux Indes Orientales Commencé l'an 1658 et Fini l'an 1665* (Rouen: Jean-Baptiste Machuel, 1725), pp. i, 35, quoted in Purcell, *Chinese in Southeast Asia*, pp. 399–400. Schouten was probably referring to Peranakan women since Chinese women did not emigrate in any significant numbers until the nineteenth century, as will be discussed briefly in Chapter Two.

⁶² Sophia Cooke, letter dated 17 October 1856, extract reproduced in *FMI* 4 (1857), p. 25. The identity of the intended recipient of the letters is not stated but the contents indicate it was meant for the readers of the *FMI*.

⁶³ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, pp 38–39. "Fancy work" was the term popularly used in England to describe embroidery, beadwork, and other needlework which was not the "plain sewing" of hems, seams and other utilitarian stitches.

Certainly, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, beads appear to have become a standard constituent of Nonya needlework, applied on items such as “the pretty worked slippers” of the Peranakans that Vaughan observed.⁶⁴ *A Manual of the Malay Colloquial*, a handbook of the Baba Malay vernacular written in 1887, listed “*maneh maneh*,” the term for beads, together with other words pertaining to dress accessories and sewing such as “*kasot seret*” (slippers) and “*engine jaet baju*” (sewing machine).⁶⁵

The bead trade in the Straits Settlements was dynamic, influenced by their trading networks with the hinterland and by regional demand. Based on available statistics on the imports and exports of beads, it is possible to construct a picture of the growing demand for beads in the Straits Settlements.⁶⁶ Gold thread import prices were quoted in 1835 in the *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, a newspaper published for the European mercantile community in Singapore, and its traded volumes were sufficiently significant to warrant an entry in the commercial statistics in 1835–6.⁶⁷ In contrast, the sporadic reports of bead imports into the Straits Settlements from shipping lists suggest that the value of beads traded was relatively unimportant. In the late 1820s and 1830s, ambiguously termed “China beads” were imported from Macau and Madras to Penang, and Singapore received bead imports from Europe, India, and also Jeddah.⁶⁸ In this period, at least part of the European bead imports were re-exported to the neighbouring islands, probably for the indigenous bead-using groups such as the Dayaks in Borneo and the Malay peoples in Sumatra. Small and irregular amounts of beads appear to have been traded between India and the Straits Settlements between the 1850s and 1870s.⁶⁹

The Straits Settlements *Blue Books* for 1870 to 1937 and the *Return of Foreign Imports and Exports* for Malaya for 1924 to 1937 provide a detailed breakdown by

⁶⁴ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 11.

⁶⁵ Lim Hong Seng, *A Manual of the Malay Colloquial* (Singapore: Koh Yew Hean Press, 1887), vol. 1, pp. 69–70.

⁶⁶ The discussion that follows is a summary of the analysis of the bead trade in the Straits Settlements between 1827 and 1937 in Appendix A. Chart A1 from Appendix A has been reproduced here for ease of reference.

⁶⁷ Import volumes for 1835–6, extracted from the *Singapore Free Press*, are given in T.J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, (1839; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 298, 321, 346, 348.

⁶⁸ *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, 6 January 1831 – 21 November 1835; and *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1 September 1838 – 9 February 1839. See Appendix A, table A1.

⁶⁹ *Statistical Tables Relating to British Self-Governing Dominions, Crown Colonies, Possessions, and Protectorates*, CO 442/28–38 (London: Colonial Office, 1855–1866). See also Appendix A, table A2.

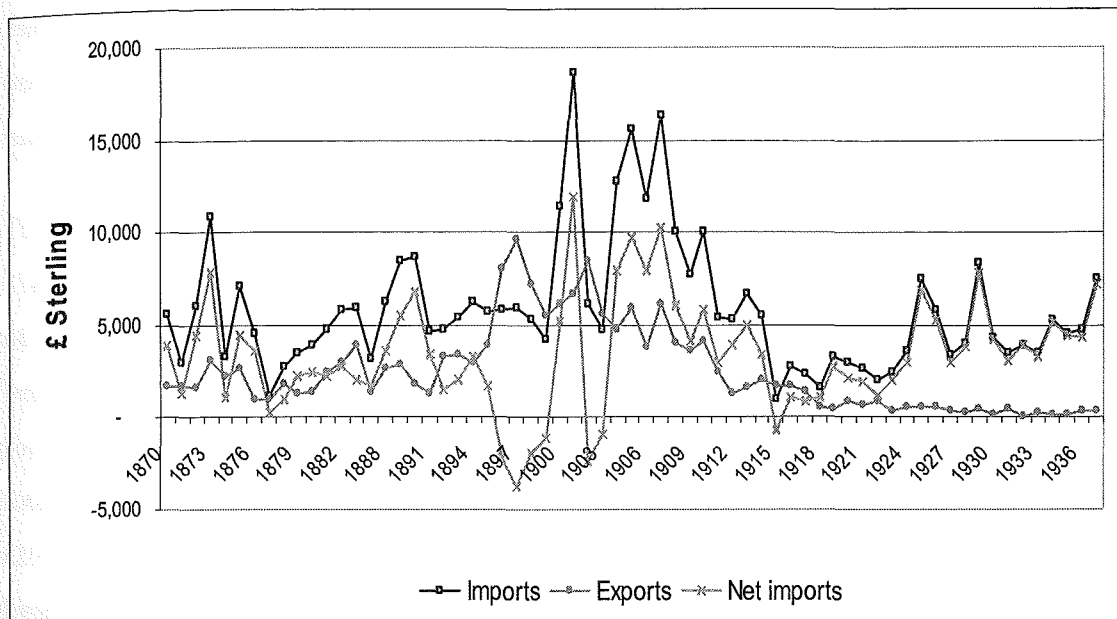
country of the annual value of bead imports and exports. Between 1870 and 1899, more than three-quarters of the beads imported into Singapore were from European countries – Italy (40%), Austria (12%), Germany (12%), and Britain (12%).⁷⁰ For Penang, for which separate data is available between 1881 and 1899, beads were mostly from Germany (34%) and British India (43%). Although there is no breakdown of the types of European beads imported, Italy, Germany, and Austria were major glass bead manufacturers and they also produced glass seed beads. Some part of the European bead imports to the Straits Settlements would have comprised glass seed beads of the type used in embroideries. Due to technological advances in bead production, particularly of machines used to slice glass tubes, the prices of beads fell dramatically. In Bohemia, the price of ten bundles of “three cut rocailles” (either a charlotte or three-cut bead) halved between 1875 and 1885 and fell tenfold between 1892 and 1900.⁷¹ The published values are therefore likely to be a considerable underestimation of the growth in volume of the domestic demand for beads.

Between 1870 and 1899, nearly 70% of the bead imports to the Straits Settlements were re-exported. Most of this went to the surrounding areas – Borneo and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, and mainland Southeast Asia. The high proportion of re-exports reflects the foreign demand for beads imported through the Straits Settlements at this time. Some part of the bead imports would also have been for domestic consumption, as indicated by the consistent surplus of imports over exports (net imports) between 1881 and 1896 (see chart 1 below). Although fairly volatile, there was a trend increase in the value of net imports of beads, which would have been higher in volume terms if accompanied by a fall in the price of beads, as had happened in Europe. From 1896 to 1899, the value of exports exceeded that of imports, resulting in a shortfall in net imports. It is unclear if this was due to a fall in imported bead prices that was not reflected in the price of re-exports of beads, as volume data are not available for this period.

⁷⁰ See Appendix A, table A3.

⁷¹ Neuwirth, *Perlen aus Gablonz*, p. 108. Between 1892 and 1900, the price of beads fell from 60-80 krejcarů to 6 ½ to 8 ½ krejcarů. According to Novy, manual slicing of seed beads in Bohemia ceased after 1886, as labour was replaced by new machinery. Each machine produced output equivalent to 60 to 80 workers, and the hourly output per machine was 225,000 beads compared to 4,000 per worker. This led to a sharp fall in bead-workers' wages, culminating in riots in the bead-producing centre of Lučanská in 1890. Novy, “Kapitoly z Historie Výroby Jablonecké Bižuterie,” pp. 214–215.

Chart 1. Bead Trade in the Straits Settlements (values restated in £ Sterling to eliminate the effect of currency readjustments), 1870–1937.



Sources: *Blue Book* (Straits Settlements: Statistical Office, 1870–1925); and *Return of Foreign Imports and Exports* (Malaya, 1924–1937).

The import of beads fluctuated sharply between 1900 and 1903, an anomaly that may reflect the uncertainty of traders to changing demand conditions that resulted from the growth in demand for beads from the region. In fact, this coincides with a period in which bead exports to Sumatra, a distribution business in which Penang and Singapore were both involved, more than doubled. From 1904 onwards, the exports of beads from the Straits Settlements to the surrounding regions gradually declined. This may have been a consequence of bead exporters developing or expanding direct marketing channels with the Netherlands Indies and other parts of Southeast Asia. Between 1904 and 1914, bead imports exceeded re-exports by a significant amount, and over 60% of the total imports were consumed domestically. The growth in domestic demand was interrupted by the First World War, but picked up gradually after the 1920s, even though it did not return to its former levels of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Statistics for the bead trade for the Netherlands Indies between 1909 and 1912 show that the bulk of glass bead imports were to Java (Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya).⁷² The main bead-using cultures in the Indonesian archipelago were located in the outer islands of the Netherlands Indies – for instance, on Borneo, Bali, and Sulawesi (the

⁷² *Statistiek van den Handel en de In- en Uitvoerrechten in Nederlandsch-Indië*, vols. 2A, 2B, 3 (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1909–1912), entries under “koralen, glazen.”

Celebes). It is possible that some part of the beads imported to Java was re-distributed to the outer islands but was not captured by the available statistics. The main ports that received glass beads imports in Sumatra were Padang, Palembang, and Belawan (a port serving Medan) which jointly accounted for 50% of the island's glass bead imports.

The destination of beads re-exported from the Straits Settlements reflects two factors. The first is the historically strong commercial ties of Singapore with the southern half of Sumatra, Java, and other islands of the Indonesian archipelago, and the trade links between Penang and the northern half of Sumatra. The second is that the destinations for the largest volumes of re-exports from the Straits Settlements – Borneo (21% of total bead exports by value between 1870 and 1937), Sumatra, particularly after 1890 (20%), and mainland Southeast Asia (14%) – correspond to the locations of the major bead-using cultures in Southeast Asia. Sulawesi was also a destination for bead exports (3%), where they would have been used on ceremonial objects by the Toraja, as was the Philippines (2%) where they were used by groups such as the Bilaan and Bagobo of Mindanao.⁷³

In Sumatra, glass beads were used in embroideries by the Minangkabau. For instance, the catalogue of a Dutch expedition to West Sumatra illustrates octagonal and rectangular pillow ends from Supayang (Soepajang) embroidered with yellow, blue, white, red, and green beads on red flannel.⁷⁴ The Malay peoples also used glass seed beads for items such as ceremonial valances, covers, and pillow ends. A proportion of the bead re-exports to Sumatra from Penang was to Aceh, reflecting the strong trade links between Penang and the northern part of Sumatra. In addition, part of the bead exports must have been absorbed in Nonya beadwork which employed a profusion of glass seed beads (figs. 3, 32–35).

Only small amounts of beads appear to have been re-exported from the Straits Settlements to Perak (mostly via Penang), Pahang, and Selangor in the Malay peninsula. These probably included European glass seed beads which were used in Malay embroidery. Perak was well known for its gold thread embroideries and the

⁷³ See, for example, the beaded *kandaure*, used as a ceremonial hanging and a shawl by the Toraja, beaded shirts of the Bilaan, and a photograph of Bagobo women beading, illustrated in Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, fig. 79, p. 60, figs. 84–86, pp. 62–63.

⁷⁴ P. J. Veth, *Ethnographische Atlas van Midden-Sumatra: Reizen en Onderzoekingen der Sumatra-Expeditie* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1881), plate 8 and p. 5. Supayang lies 135 kilometres south of Padang.

second wife of the Sultan of Perak was reputed for her needlework.⁷⁵ Needle-workers in Perak also produced high quality beadwork where beads were embroidered around the edges of raised decorative motifs and used to fill leaves and petals in gold thread embroideries (*tekat*) or strung together to form net-like meshes of beads for door valances and hangings to decorate the dais erected for wedding ceremonies (figs. 17–19).⁷⁶

It is surprising that the net bead imports into Penang from the end of the nineteenth century were insignificant relative to that for Singapore since Penang was known for its Nonya beadwork and maintained close commercial ties with Perak. What is likely is that Singapore was the main channel through which beads were imported, and these were transported to Melaka, Penang, and other parts of the Malay peninsula. The statistics record a small amount of beads imported into Penang via Singapore but this probably does not capture the true value of beads sent from Singapore into Penang.⁷⁷

From the information available, it is not possible to determine the extent to which the changes in the net imports of beads to the Straits Settlements reflected changes in taste.⁷⁸ However, it is possible to deduce from the pattern of trade and distribution of bead imports that there was a period of activity in local beadwork in the third quarter of the nineteenth century across Sumatra and the Straits Settlements which continued into the twentieth century. As the volume of net imports of beads to the Straits Settlements expanded, seed beads may have been applied more liberally on Nonya embroideries, their glimmer and range of colours according well with the Nonyas' penchant for jewel-like surfaces. The florescence of Nonya beadwork as an independent genre of textile decoration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁷⁵ She presented a set of padded gold thread embroidered mats and pillow ends to the Prince of Wales in 1901. Leonard Wray, "Native Arts and Handicrafts," in *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, ed. Arnold Wright (1908; abridged ed., Singapore: Graham Brash, 1989), pp. 146, 149.

⁷⁶ On *tekat*, see Ismail, "Seni Tekat"; Siti Zainon Ismail, "The Art of Embroidery," in *The Crafts of Malaysia*, ed. Shamira Bhanu (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 1994), pp. 139–147; and Ghulam Sarwar-Yousof, *Ceremonial and Decorative Crafts of Penang* (Penang: Penang Museum, Folk Arts Sub-Committee of the International Special Features Committee, 1986), pp. 75–76.

⁷⁷ See Appendix A, especially chart A4.

⁷⁸ Changes in the price and quantity exchanged could be due to a shift in the demand curve, the supply curve, or both. Apart from data on the price and quantity of a good, additional information on the factors affecting its demand and supply (for example, consumer income, tastes, and production costs) would be required to ascertain their impact on the demand for the good. I am grateful to Amy Liu for her advice on this.

centuries, the “golden years” of Peranakan culture, corresponds to this period of growth in domestic bead consumption in the Straits Settlements.

Nonya Beadwork and Southeast Asian Textile History

The historical importance of textiles in Southeast Asian culture and trade is well recognized. Anthony Reid comments on the proclivity of Southeast Asians to spend on textiles such that it became known as a consumer rather than a producer of cloth, even though cloth was a leading item of manufacture in Southeast Asia.⁷⁹ Lavish expenditures on textile imports were supplemented, and later, substituted by locally made fabrics, and local centres of production in Java became suppliers to their Southeast Asian neighbours.⁸⁰ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, domestically produced textiles were conspicuous in the ceremonial and ritual costumes of the local populations in the Malay peninsula and Indonesian archipelago, attracting the attention of researchers. Notable early twentieth century descriptions concentrated on documenting and developing typologies of cloth based on their techniques, functions, and decorative motifs, focussing on indigenous craftsmanship and valorising textiles as exotic objects of ethnographic interest.⁸¹

Although later studies emphasize textiles as art, approaches to Southeast Asian textiles retained a strongly ethnographic focus, elucidating the processes of production, meanings of motifs, and the largely symbolic functions of textiles in terms of their cultural and ceremonial significance.⁸² Laurens Langewis and Frits Wagner stress the

⁷⁹ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680*, vol. 1, *The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 90–91.

⁸⁰ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. 2, *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 301–302; and Ruurdje Laarhoven, “The Power of Cloth: The Textile Trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1600–1780” (Ph.D. diss., Australian National University, 1994).

⁸¹ Early twentieth century Dutch studies of textile traditions in the Netherlands Indies are a good example. See, for instance, T.J. Bezemer, *Indonesische Kunstnijverheid* (Amsterdam: Koloniaal Instituut, 1936); B.M. Goslings, “Het Primitiefste der Primitieve Indonesische Weefgetouwen,” *Nederlandsche Indië Oud en Nieuw* 13 (1927–28), pp. 85–96, 112–125; Jasper and Pirngadie, *De Weefkunst* and *De Batikkunst*; and J.A. Loebèr Jr., *Textiele Versieringen in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam: Koloniaal Instituut, 1914). Both Jasper and Pirngadie and Loebèr included brief sections on bobbin-lace and metallic thread embroidery. As Fiona Kerlogue points out, Dutch anthropologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries preferred to research cultures which were different from their own and “more resistant to the Dutch presence.” Fiona Kerlogue, “Interpreting Textiles as a Medium of Communication: Cloth and Community in Malay Sumatra,” *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2000), p. 336.

⁸² As Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, a textile scholar and dealer and former curator, notes in relation to Indonesian textiles, they have “always been thought of as ‘ethnographic’ material, the product of living cultures.” Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, “The Possessions of the Ancestors,” *Hali*, no. 131 (2003), pp. 83–87.

ornamentation and aesthetic qualities of Indonesian textiles, organising their survey by decorative techniques rather than region or function to achieve this.⁸³ Nevertheless, in examining the forms of textile decoration, they focus on ritual and symbolic meanings. Mattiebelle Gittinger's study of the previously poorly documented *tampan* (ceremonial cloth) from South Sumatra is an important contribution that highlights the social and symbolic functions of this cloth, a reflection of the beliefs of the society that used it.⁸⁴ The importance of an ethnographic focus is implicit in Fiona Kerlogue's study of Malay textiles as she explores the meaning of contemporary textile use in Jambi in Sumatra.⁸⁵ Kerlogue argues that the motifs and their arrangements are less significant than the ways in which the cloths are used, but the meanings attached to their usage can be ambiguous and open as the users' connotations of culture and tradition are manipulated and reformulated.

Other publications provide surveys and classifications of textile techniques, types, functions, and motifs, useful given the diversity of textile types in Southeast Asia. By way of brief examples, Grace Selvanayagam examines the techniques and designs of Malaysian *songket* (fabric woven with gold thread), adding to the scholarship on a very visible but surprisingly neglected textile type.⁸⁶ Using techniques as the organising principle in *Textiles in Bali*, its authors examine different types of textiles as semiotic signs and note that their functions as indicators of status and world views have blurred and given way to their role as a marker of the divide between the mundane and the sacred.⁸⁷ They relate these to socio-cultural changes but provide only brief discussions of the modifications in the design and production of *endek* (*ikat*) and *songket* in the twentieth century.

Sylvia Fraser-Lu's *Handwoven Textiles of Southeast Asia* provides a regional description of weaving traditions, allowing for a comparison of their similarities and

⁸³ Laurens Langewis and Frits A. Wagner, *Decorative Art in Indonesian Textiles* (Amsterdam: C.P.J. van Der Peet, 1964).

⁸⁴ Mattiebelle Gittinger, "A Study of the Ship Cloths of South Sumatra: Their Design and Usage" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972).

⁸⁵ Kerlogue, "Interpreting Textiles as a Medium of Communication."

⁸⁶ Grace Selvanayagam, *Songket: Malaysia's Woven Treasure* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁸⁷ Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff, and Urs Ramseyer, *Textiles in Bali* (Berkeley and Singapore: Periplus, 1991).

differences across space.⁸⁸ Gittinger's *Splendid Symbols*, too, is organized by geographic distinctions and informed by the social and cultural significance of textiles.⁸⁹ Maxwell, on the other hand, takes a thematic approach that investigates the different cultural and religious influences across a wide spectrum of textiles from Southeast Asia as a whole, illustrating their commonalities and the local responses to external influences that resulted from commerce, religion, and colonization.⁹⁰ This approach offers an insight into the material transformations which wove together local traditions with cultural exchanges sustained by Southeast Asia's historical position as a node for international trade.

Whilst these studies have documented and productively assessed important technical, gendered, cultural, cosmological, social, symbolic, and political dimensions of textiles and recognized the significance of textiles as art and culture, far less attention has been paid to the temporality of textiles. In part, this is because Southeast Asian textiles are notoriously difficult to date with any accuracy. Documentation on production can be scarce. As Maxwell notes, change in techniques, materials, and patterns were often not recorded.⁹¹ In fact, Fischer and Cooper remark on the difficulty they had in obtaining information on the history and possible dating of a group of embroideries from Bali which feature narrative scenes because these had been little documented and, despite their high quality, were not collected.⁹²

Where textiles were collected, the examples in ethnographic museums such as the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde and the Tropenmuseum in the Netherlands may provide an approximate guide for the chronological assessment of later Southeast Asian textiles. This is largely limited to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

⁸⁸ Sylvia Fraser-Lu, *Handwoven Textiles of Southeast Asia* (Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸⁹ Mattiebelle Gittinger, *Splendid Symbols: Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia* (1979; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁹⁰ Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*.

⁹¹ Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, p. 29.

⁹² Joseph Fischer and Thomas Cooper, *The Folk Art of Bali: The Narrative Tradition* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 62–64. They note that this lack of interest may have been because the embroidery tradition in Bali was perceived as having a lower status than other forms of textile decoration.

the period in which many pieces in colonial collections were acquired, and by the extent and accuracy of the museums' records.⁹³

In addition, the perishability of organic materials such as wood and textiles in the tropical humidity of Southeast Asia has meant that surviving artefacts may provide only a truncated and partial view of how an art form developed. Gillian Green's research on Cambodian textiles illustrates these difficulties, and she turns to sculpture to provide a broad historical overview of the social and ritual functions of textiles as dress and furnishings in Cambodia from the eighth to thirteenth centuries.⁹⁴ Yet, even though Green documents the many varieties of ship motifs which may be associated with historical changes, implicit in her categorization of the motifs as "archaic ships," "sailing ships," and "symbolic ships," she emphasizes the continuity of tradition embodied in Cambodian textiles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the repetition of textile patterns.⁹⁵ Her silence on the relationship between the variations in motifs and historical change is perhaps a reflection of the difficulties of a temporal approach to Southeast Asian textile decoration.

Robert Holmgren and Anita Spertus, on the other hand, harness the phenomenon of persistence in designs on the nineteenth century *tampan* from Lampung in South Sumatra as a window into its more distant past. They argue that *tampan* are not only a record of the cosmological and religious beliefs but also act as pictorial documents whose motifs bear the imprint of a culture and historical experiences erased from memory by Islamization and not otherwise noted in primary sources.⁹⁶ From the commonalities on *tampan* in the details of the ship imagery, such as double external rudders, with ship designs depicted at sites such as Ajanta in India (sixth century) and Borobodur in Java (ninth century), they speculate that Lampung had been part of a larger international coastal society between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

Mattiebelle Gittinger also hypothesizes that the similarities of technical structure,

⁹³ Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, p. 30. The relatively late collection dates, however, are not an issue for this study which deals with material of the late nineteenth century and after.

⁹⁴ Gillian Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia: Cultural Threads and Material Heritage* (Bangkok: River Books, 2003), especially pp. 27–41.

⁹⁵ Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia*, pp. 270–302. Green does not investigate why the different variations in the motifs may have been adopted, but examines their possible meanings by comparing them with ship cloths from other areas in Southeast Asia.

⁹⁶ Robert J. Holmgren and Anita Spertus, "Tampan Pasisir: Pictorial Documents of an Ancient Indonesian Coastal Culture," in *Indonesian Textiles*, ed. Mattiebelle Gittinger (Washington D.C.: Textile Museum, 1980), pp. 157–198.

design, and function of *tampan* with certain textiles made by the T'ai people in central Thailand is evidence of a shared Buddhist past.⁹⁷ Such studies indicate the potential for using textiles as texts where written or oral sources for history are non-existent or incomplete. Yet, their persuasiveness in revealing the historical processes of continuity and change and their value as historical documents are ultimately limited, so long as the ways in which modifications in textile designs may have taken place through time are not well understood. This remains a thorny problem where surviving examples of textiles are difficult to date.

Scientific methods such as radiocarbon-14 dating can produce significant results where dates are measured in terms of centuries rather than decades, as in the example of the controversial Turin Shroud, dated by laboratories in Arizona, Oxford, and Zurich to the thirteenth or fourteenth century.⁹⁸ However, as Norman Indictor notes, since it is difficult to obtain reasonably certain dates for cloth made after the mid-seventeenth century and Indonesian textiles made before this date were thought not to have survived, radiocarbon-14 analysis had not been considered useful for the analysis of Indonesian textiles.⁹⁹ Recently, however, radiocarbon-14 dating has confirmed that well preserved examples of Indian textiles collected in Indonesia, previously thought to be from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, actually date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰⁰ Such findings provide important evidence that the floral and figural motifs on imported textiles used in Indonesia were contemporary with Indian painting styles of the same period.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Mattiabelle Gittinger, "A Reassessment of the *Tampan* of South Sumatra: Function and Design System," in *To Speak with Cloth: Studies in Indonesian Textiles*, ed. Mattiabelle Gittinger (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1989), pp. 225–239.

⁹⁸ In fact, controversy still rages over the validity of the radiocarbon dating results. Recent research argues that the samples used in the radiocarbon tests were from a re-woven area of the shroud, not the original cloth of which it was made, and the test results are thus not valid. See Raymond N. Rogers, "Studies on the Radiocarbon Sample from the Shroud of Turin," *Thermochimica Acta* 425, nos. 1–2 (2005), pp. 189–194.

⁹⁹ Norman Indictor, "Metallic Thread in Minangkabau Textiles," in *Walk in Splendor: Ceremonial Dress and the Minangkabau*, ed. Anne and John Summerfield (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999), p. 225.

¹⁰⁰ John Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), pp. 98, 104, 112; and Robyn Maxwell, *Sari to Sarong: Five Hundred Years of Indian and Indonesian Textile Exchange* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2003), pp. 3, 114. A late fifteenth/early sixteenth century Indian textile was dated from an inscription, whilst two other fourteenth century examples were radiocarbon dated.

¹⁰¹ Maxwell, *Sari to Sarong*, p. 114.

Furthermore, they have prompted a re-appraisal of the eighteenth and nineteenth century dates ascribed to locally-made Indonesian textiles, and radiocarbon-14 analysis has yielded significant results for three examples of Indonesian textiles, placing them between the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.¹⁰² These results point to new possibilities for investigation into the pre-eighteenth century textile traditions of Southeast Asia, and the full potential of such findings to enhance our understanding of the meanings, techniques, and aesthetic responses embedded in the development of this major Southeast Asian art form is yet to be seen.

In Southeast Asian art, the past may provide a model for replication in the present. For example in religious sculptures from mainland Southeast Asia, certain items used in ritual may have to conform to rigid technical, chromatic, and decorative requirements. Some art historians have thus questioned the usefulness of applying a linear chronology and the concept of an artistic evolution to the study of Southeast Asian art as a whole.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, Southeast Asian religious sculpture, such as Khmer and Thai sculpture, is commonly distinguished by dynastic and period styles, enabling the study of such art to be informed by its historical and political as well as religious and social contexts.

A temporal perspective of Southeast Asian textiles can be informative in certain instances, particularly where textile use intersects with fashion. Interestingly, where such issues are addressed, they are related to material made for a European or mestizo market. Of the numerous publications on Indonesian batik, for example, only a handful which focus on Indo-European batiks explicitly discuss the evolution of batik styles.¹⁰⁴ Lourdes Montinola surveys the history of *piña*, a fabric woven from pineapple fibre, which has been used for fine clothing and accessories in the Philippines, favoured by the wealthy, and made for export.¹⁰⁵ Although she addresses

¹⁰² Kahlenberg, "The Possessions of the Ancestors." Two textiles have been dated to the fifteenth century whilst one has been dated to the thirteenth century. Kahlenberg argues that the smoke from the hearths above which these heirloom textiles were stored in parts of Sulawesi helped to minimize damage caused by insects.

¹⁰³ Scepticism regarding a chronological examination of Southeast Asian art has been raised even in the most basic of art history texts. See, for instance, Fiona Kerlogue, *The Art of Southeast Asia*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Harmen Veldhuisen, "European Influence on Javanese Commercial Batik," in *Indonesian Textiles Symposium 1985*, ed. Gisela Völger and Karin v. Welck (Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, 1991), pp. 164–173; and Harmen Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda 1840–1940: Dutch influence in Batik from Java, History and Stories* (Jakarta: Gaya Favorit Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁵ Lourdes R. Montinola, *Piña* (Manila: Amon Foundation, 1991).

its chronological development only superficially, unravelling the meanings of *piña* in relation to European fashion, missionary activity, and American administration sets it within a specific temporal, socio-historical, and political context.

Other scholars have taken a more indirect approach, investigating the early discourse on collections of textiles as a mirror of collectors' attitudes. Susan Legêne and Berteke Waaldjik examine the Dutch fascination with batik and what it reveals of Dutch discourse on colonialism and the Dutch civilizing mission to the East.¹⁰⁶ Itie van Hout formulates a view of the batik examples in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, collected over a period of 150 years, as the "documents of the times in which they were made, used, and collected."¹⁰⁷ In doing so, she historicizes a group of objects previously regarded as a-historical, and presents batik as a reminder of the historical encounters between Indonesia and the Netherlands. These studies are in contrast to the ethnographic portrayal of textiles in which cosmological and ritual symbolism is emphasized, placing cultural interaction or the movement of ideas and external influences as a significant element of their analyses.

Peranakan society was urban and mercantile. As active participants located at the nexus of international trade, the Peranakans encountered an interchange of ideas and an experience of diversity which presented them with a world in which change and movement were constant and inevitable. The florescence of Nonya beadwork in the late nineteenth century coincided with a period of rapid technological development. It thus becomes necessary to view Nonya beadwork within the context of modernity, in which progress and development were dominant elements of social and political consciousness. For the Peranakans, beads were attractive surface decoration but held no mystical or religious significance. By the same token, although embroidery was an important part of a Nonya's domestic life and embroideries were lavishly used for ceremonies, the rituals and cosmological beliefs that governed the creation of sacred textiles in Southeast Asia did not apply to the creation of Nonya beadwork. Nonya beadwork and embroidery were not timeless and static distillations of a venerated ancestral culture but had the potential to actively register change.

¹⁰⁶ Susan Legêne and Berteke Waaldjik, "Reverse Images – Patterns of Absence: Batik and the Representation of Colonialism in the Netherlands," in *Batik: Drawn in Wax: 200 Years of Batik from Indonesia in Tropenmuseum Collection*, ed. Itie van Hout (Amsterdam, Royal Tropical Institute, 2001), pp. 34–65.

¹⁰⁷ Itie C. van Hout, "Of Love and Passion: Biographical Notes on the Batik Collection in the Tropenmuseum," in *Batik, Drawn in Wax*, ed. Itie van Hout, pp. 13–33.

This research thus departs from conventional approaches to Southeast Asian textile history through its explicit engagement with the temporal aspect of Nonya beadwork. In this sense, it draws from approaches to textile and embroidery histories, such as Rozsika Parker's, which have sought to trace the relationship of textiles with social, economic, and political developments through time. Parker's landmark study of European needlework from the Middle Ages to the present day examines the historical processes through which needlework acquired meaning as a signifier of femininity.¹⁰⁸ Parker shows that embroidery became, at different times and in different contexts, a tool for the inculcation of femininity, a signifier of conformity to a womanly ideal, and an expression of resistance to the dominant ideology of the feminine. Although a less detailed study than Parker's, Judy Frater's work argues that the combinations of stitching, designs, and colours in Western Indian embroidery encapsulate the historical experiences of its makers and users.¹⁰⁹ She argues that the variants in embroidery styles and motifs can be associated with social mobility and ethnic identity, and the evolution of regional styles and the changes in the distributions of these styles are an indication of the cross-cultural contact between the local embroiderers and peoples of other cultural groups.

A temporal perspective of Nonya beadwork presents a considerable challenge. Nonya beadwork, and for that matter other Nonya decorative arts, has largely not been rigorously dated.¹¹⁰ It is conventional to attribute a date of "late nineteenth / early twentieth" centuries for many examples of Southeast Asian textiles. However, with Nonya beadwork, this is unsatisfactory for a period in which the pace of change was accelerated. Chapter Four outlines various methods that I have developed to derive a narrower range of dates for examples of Nonya beadwork.

Whilst the activity of Nonya beading is indubitably the work of women and inequalities in gender are important to an understanding of the role of beadwork, I have deliberately eschewed a solely gendered or feminist perspective. Peranakan women were by no means a coherent or unified group, being divided by age, education, and

¹⁰⁸ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*.

¹⁰⁹ Judy Frater, "Elements of Style: The Artisan Reflected in Embroideries of Western India," in *Mud, Mirror and Thread: Folk Traditions of Rural India*, ed. Nora Fischer (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1993), pp. 66–109.

¹¹⁰ The singular exception is Edmond Chin's estimates of dates for Peranakan jewellery and silverware, based on comparisons with old photographs and oral information. Chin also provides biographical notes on a few owners that indicate the provenance of some pieces. See a brief discussion of his dating methods in Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 193–194.

social status, and an exclusively gender-based analysis would not do justice to the Nonyas or to Nonya beadwork. Generational hierarchy and the Peranakan concepts of respect and filial piety were tightly woven into the structures of Peranakan society. As will be discussed further in Part One, social tensions were fuelled not only by the perceived gender inequalities but also by generational gaps. The analysis that follows therefore seeks, as far as primary sources and secondary research permit, to stitch together issues related to generation, gender, and cultural identity.

Sources for this Study

The results of any empirical exercise are, to a large extent, dictated by the availability of textual and artefactual sources. In her study of European embroidery, Parker draws extensively on needlework histories, dedications and introductions found in pattern books, letters and household accounts, diaries, magazines, women's literature, paintings of women embroidering, and even tombstones to show how conceptions of femininity were intimately bound up with embroidered imagery and embroidery practice.¹¹¹ She shows that the form and content of embroideries reflected the changing ideals from the female as procreative power to the feminine as obedient and submissive, and later, to the woman's role as nurturer. At the same time, she demonstrates how the vocabulary of embroidery gave women a way of expressing their resistance to such constructions of femininity, exposing the dual potential of embroidery as the symbol of an idealized femininity and a practice that could undermine this stereotype. Verses on a seventeenth century sampler, for example, reveal its maker's ambivalence towards authority, simultaneously submitting to it and yet inscribing her resentment that "...I must bow/ And bend unto another's will/ That I might learn both art and skill."¹¹² Parker also reveals how attitudes toward embroidery were moulded by examining the way in which the history of embroidery was written about in the nineteenth century.¹¹³ For instance, various nineteenth century writers attributed the famous Bayeux Tapestry, probably made in the eleventh century, to Queen Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror, associating needlework with aristocratic femininity and validating its respectability and worth.¹¹⁴ Examples of

¹¹¹ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*.

¹¹² Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 89.

¹¹³ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, pp. 17–39.

¹¹⁴ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, pp. 26–27. The identity of the needle-worker(s) is not certain.

needlework complemented by textual materials provide Parker with rich sources for insights into the way femininity was constructed, inculcated, interrogated, and resisted.

Comparable sources for the study of Southeast Asian embroidery are limited. Pattern books and instructions specific to Southeast Asian designs, let alone Nonya needlework, were rarely, if ever, printed for circulation or sale prior to the 1940s. This is particularly so in the case of Nonya beadwork where skills were passed down from one generation to the next through learning-by-doing. During my fieldwork, I was able to locate only one pattern book and one exercise book with the miscellaneous handwritten notes of a Nonya. A low level of literacy amongst the Nonyas further limits the availability of primary textual accounts, above all those that relate to the private lives of Peranakan women. The study of Nonya beadwork is therefore constrained by a dearth of diaries, letters, novels by Peranakans, and even collections of writings that may have belonged to Peranakans, especially before the 1920s when schooling for women not widely encouraged. Few observations of foreigners refer to Nonya needlework since the Peranakans, unlike native ethnic groups such as the Malays, were not popular as ethnographic subjects.¹¹⁵ Newspapers such as the *Pinang Gazette and Chronicle*, *Bintang Timor*, and *Surat Khabar Peranakan*, published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also pale in usefulness. These newspapers were targeted mainly at a male audience and carried a handful of advertisements for haberdashery and furniture. Needlework, being women's work, was not considered newsworthy and received no coverage. In the early 1930s, there were sections in newspapers such as the *Malaya Tribune* dedicated to women and girls.¹¹⁶ Although

¹¹⁵ See, for instance, Jacobus Anne van der Chijs, *Catalogus der Ethnographische Verzameling* (Batavia: Albrecht & Rusche, 1894); J.P. Duyvendak, *Inleiding tot de Ethnologie van de Indische Archipel* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1940); Jan Petrus Josselin de Jong, *De Maleische Archipels als Ethnologisch Studieveld* (Leiden: J. Ginsberg, 1935); W.W. Skeat and C.C. Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Macmillan, 1906); and Alfred Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (London, Macmillan, 1874). These relate to ethnographic studies of the native groups in the Malay peninsula and the Netherlands Indies but do not deal with Peranakans. Only one comparable account was written by J.D. Vaughan on the Chinese in the Straits Settlements, but he did not consistently differentiate between the locally-born Chinese and other Chinese. See Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*. Others commented on Chinese society in the Straits Settlements, but did not discuss their arts and crafts. See, for instance, George Windsor Earl, *The Eastern Seas, or, Voyages and Adventures in the Indian Archipelago in 1832-33-34* (London: W.H. Allen, 1837); John Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China, and China* (New York: Harper, 1875); and Bird, *Golden Chersonese*. Some detailed information on the Peranakans can be found in Wright, ed., *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*; and Arnold Wright, ed., *Twentieth Century Impressions of Netherlands India: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd's, 1909). However, these deal mainly with their commercial activities.

¹¹⁶ Chua Ai Lin, "Negotiating National Identity: The English-Speaking Domiciled Communities in Singapore, 1930-1941" (M.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 2001), p. 42.

these occasionally provided recipes, they did not include needlework instructions or discussions of prevailing embroidery trends.

However, a few other written sources, whilst not directly related to Nonya embroidery, do provide useful sources for understanding attitudes to needlework. Two major publications were consulted. The *Straits Chinese Magazine (SCM)*, published in Singapore between 1897 and 1907, featured articles by Straits Chinese writers discussing a range of current political, social, and cultural issues; it also included short fiction. The polemic on Peranakan women's status and women's education was reflected in some of these articles, and since embroidery was a common activity for the Nonyas, these articles offer a perspective on Nonya embroidery practice. That the articles privilege the view of their authors, mainly wealthy, English-educated intelligentsia, needs to be borne in mind. The editors of the *SCM* – Song Ong Siang, Lim Boon Keng, P.V. Locke, and Wu Lien-teh – were English-educated Queen's scholars. Although contributors such as Song himself and Tan Teck Soon were not from ostensibly wealthy families, their educational qualifications enabled them to attain highly respected professional and social positions.¹¹⁷ However, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, they were the main instigators of reform within the Straits Chinese community. Their views are therefore crucial to understanding the developments that take place in Nonya beadwork from the 1900s.

The *Female Missionary Intelligencer (FMI)* was a regular newsletter issued between 1853 and 1899 by the Society for Promoting Female Education in China, India and the East. It contains brief accounts relating to needlework taught by missionaries not just in the Straits Settlements but also elsewhere in the East, yielding information on embroidery activities before 1900. Since missionary activities in the Straits Settlements mainly involved the poor and the orphaned, some of whom were Peranakan, reports in the *FMI* are not only useful in redressing the class bias of the biographical material, as will be explained below, but also provide invaluable, albeit brief, glimpses into Peranakan needlework activities in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Tan Teck Soon won a Guthrie scholarship in Singapore in 1873 and later completed his education in Amoy in China. Song Ong Siang was a Cambridge-educated lawyer. For their biographies, see Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 78–79, 94, 242–243.

¹¹⁸ Although there are no explicit statements in the *FMI* that the orphans were Peranakan, their Chinese names and their presence in the Straits Settlements before any significant influx of Chinese women (and

In addition, since Nonya beadwork only gained popularity as recently as the second half of the nineteenth century, it is possible to reconstruct an impression of the practice of beadwork from oral and biographical accounts even if these relate largely to the twentieth century. A number of biographies of Nonyas and their families were written in the 1980s which describe domestic life. Despite the romanticized views these may present, they nevertheless provide incidental factual information that serves as useful points of departure for research. One major limitation of such biographies is that they relate mainly to the upper echelons of Peranakan society. Nonya writers such as Queeny Chang, Alice Scott-Ross, and Yeap Joo Kim were from privileged backgrounds.¹¹⁹ Although the Peranakans were regarded as elite, the Peranakan community was by no means homogenously wealthy or educated and such accounts represent only a partial view of their society. Other writers such as Ruth Ho, Gwee Thian Hock, and Betty Lim who wrote about the period from about 1925 to 1950, came from families which were financially secure and had access to education.¹²⁰

For this research, biographical accounts have therefore been supplemented by personal communications with elderly Nonyas from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore between 2002 and 2004. Although these recollections are sometimes obfuscated by a lack of clarity, carefully sifting through accounts and comparing them to eliminate or highlight inconsistencies reduces the margin of error. Interviews conducted in the 1980s by the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore and a few interviews with Nonyas published in magazines and newspapers provide further revealing accounts of social practices and needlework activities. However, such accounts span a maximum of 85 years of history as those who were interviewed were born around the 1920s or later.

hence the establishment of non-Peranakan nuclear families) suggest they may have been Peranakan. An engraving of Kim, a Chinese girl of the Chinese Girls' School in Singapore shows her wearing *baju panjang* and *sarong*, reinforcing the impression that Peranakan girls were amongst the pupils of the missionaries. See illustration in *FMI* 15 (1873), p. 99.

¹¹⁹ Chang was the daughter of a wealthy Chinese community leader in Medan. Scott-Ross wrote a memoir of her father, Tan Cheng Lock, a statesman from Melaka. Yeap wrote an account of her grandfather Khoo Sian Ewe, a prominent leader of the Penang Chinese community. Queeny Chang, *Memories of a Nonya* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1981); Alice Scott-Ross, *Tun Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan, S.M.N., D.P.M.J., K.B.E., J.P.: A Personal Profile* (Singapore: A. Scott-Ross, 1990); and Yeap Joo Kim, *The Patriarch* (Singapore: distributed by MPH, 1976).

¹²⁰ Ho's father was a well-known Methodist minister; Gwee's mother, around whom the biography revolves, was from a financially comfortable family as was Lim, whose maternal ancestor was Tan Tock Seng, a wealthy philanthropist. Ruth Ho, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1975); Gwee Thian Hock, *A Nonya Mosaic* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1985); and Betty Lim, *A Rose on My Pillow* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994).

The wide range of historical sources drawn upon in this thesis reflects an attempt to redress the Singapore bias of a number of sources relevant to this research. The two rare documents belonging to Nonyas – the notebook and the embroidery pattern book – were located in Singapore. Oral history recordings again focus exclusively on Singapore. The *SCM* was published in Singapore and its contributors were mainly domiciled there. However, the *SCM* did have a Penang editor, P.V. Locke, and tried to make itself an “organ for expression of the progressive views not merely of Singaporeans but of the Straits-born peoples and particularly the Straits Chinese,” with regular sections for news and correspondence from Penang and Melaka.¹²¹ Personal recollections and biographical material of the Peranakans in Melaka and Penang compensate to some extent for this geographical bias.

In addition, given that Singapore was the administrative capital of the Straits Settlements, taking over that position from Penang in 1832, and the Straits Settlements was administered as a single entity, it may be argued that the developments in women’s education, an important factor affecting attitudes to needlework, were not significantly different in Singapore, Penang, and Melaka for extended periods of time. The case of Singapore may be taken as a more general indicator of movements in women’s education in the Straits Settlements. Surprisingly, there are few secondary sources on the history of women’s education, reflecting perhaps the scarcity of information which hinders the study of women’s activities in the Straits Settlements in general, and points to the need for further research in this area.

Nonya beadwork was, until the late 1970s, not considered a collectable item. Many objects therefore lie in private homes and can be difficult to access. In addition, many Peranakan families have simply disposed of beadwork which had become worn or old. Every effort has been made to obtain as comprehensive a set of data as has been possible within the three-and-a-half year time-frame of my research. Even so, omissions are inevitable. Nevertheless, despite their generality, the available textual, oral, and material sources taken collectively have made it possible to explore in detail the manifold meanings of Nonya beadwork to shed some light on the constructions of Peranakan identity.

¹²¹ News and Notes, *SCM* 2, no. 7 (1898), p. 122.

In treating beadwork from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore together, the approach of this thesis acknowledges the shared cultural, political, and economic interests that bound Peranakan societies together, interests that were supported by the family and commercial networks through which inter-regional and inter-personal exchanges and cultural diffusion took place. Adam McKeown's informed study of the Chinese diaspora between 1900 and 1936 shows that the networks of the Chinese emigrants to three places as disparate and distant as Peru, Chicago, and Hawai'i, based on lineal, commercial, and native place associations, facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges and the formation of migrant identities and histories that straddled national and territorial boundaries.¹²² Geographically less spread out than the Chinese migrant communities which McKeown analysed, personal contacts, social relationships, and business and familial networks were nevertheless crucial to the functioning of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Peranakan world since trade, business expansion, and capital formation were based in large part on trust and reputation.¹²³

Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese*, first published in 1923, enumerated the marriages, social networks, and economic alliances formed by prominent Straits Chinese in Singapore and across the Straits Settlements.¹²⁴ Scholarly research also illustrates the specific instances where Chinese and Straits Chinese businesses fostered and made use of their networks. Jennifer Cushman argued that the Khaw family's flexibility in choosing marriage partners from both Thai and Penang Chinese society furthered their commercial opportunities at the same time that their tightly-knit family structure was a central part of their business success.¹²⁵ In his study of Penang-based Lim Leng Cheak who had interests in regional rice distribution,

¹²² Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawai'i, 1900–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹²³ Barbara Watson Andaya, however, argues that the Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia did not rely solely on kinship ties but also made use of written contracts in their business dealings. Barbara Watson Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), p. 54.

¹²⁴ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*.

¹²⁵ Jennifer Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin Mining Dynasty 1797–1932* (Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

shipping, and plantations, Wu Xiao An shows how social networks could be harnessed to business ends.¹²⁶

The policies of the British colonial government encouraged Chinese capital mobility and regional economic integration that transgressed political boundaries. Carl Trocki points out that money from the Straits Settlements financed in part the plantations being developed in the southern half of Sumatra, and Chinese from Penang and Singapore invested in tin-mining enterprises and opium farms in Siam, Sumatra, and the adjacent Malay States.¹²⁷ In some instances, business groups were locally based and competed across borders, as in the case of two rival opium farming syndicates competing for dominance in the late 1870s, one led by Singapore-based Cheang Hong Lim and Tan Seng Poh, and the other by Penang-based Koh Seang Tat.¹²⁸ At other times, collaboration occurred across geographical and political territories, as in the case of Penang-based Chang Pi-Shih and his cousin, Chang Yu-Nan, a local leader of the Chinese in Medan.¹²⁹

Regional ties can also be traced in the biographies of individuals such as Chan Kim Boon and Khoo Sian Ewe. Chan's father was a trader from Padang in Sumatra, but Chan was born in Penang in 1851 and educated at the Penang Free School.¹³⁰ In 1872, after higher education and a brief career teaching mathematics in China, Chan returned to the Straits Settlements, taking up a position as book-keeper with a law firm in Singapore.¹³¹ However, Chan, who was best known as the translator of the Chinese classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (known to the Peranakans as *Sam Kok* in

¹²⁶ Wu Xiao An, "Chinese-Malay Socio-Economic Networks in the Penang-Kedah-North Sumatra Triangle 1880-1909: A Study of the Entrepreneur Lim Leng Cheak," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 70, part 2, no. 273 (1997), pp. 24-47.

¹²⁷ Carl Trocki, "Boundaries and Transgressions: Chinese Enterprise in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Southeast Asia," in *Ungrounded Empire: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially pp. 73-74.

¹²⁸ Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 162-178; and Trocki, "Boundaries and Transgressions." In the late 1870s, the colonial government invited bids for the Singapore opium farms from Koh Seang Tat's syndicate to encourage competition with the local syndicate. Koh Seang Tat was the great-grandson of Koh Lay Huan, the first leader of the Chinese in Penang. In 1883, the Singapore opium farms were taken over by another group led by Chiu Sin Yong from Penang.

¹²⁹ Neither Chang Pi-Shih nor Chang Yu-Nan were Peranakan, but Chang Yu-Nan's marriage to a Nonya from the east coast of Sumatra linked him to the Peranakan world, and his daughter Queeny Chang considered herself a Nonya, as is indicated by the title of her autobiography, *Memories of a Nonya*.

¹³⁰ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 166-167.

¹³¹ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 166-167.

Hokkien), chose as his pseudonym Batu Gantong, the Malay name of a cemetery in Penang, on the basis that he would eventually rest there.¹³² The ancestry of the Penang Peranakan family of Khoo Sian Ewe can be traced to Sumatra, Melaka, and Penang. Khoo's father, Khoo Cheow Teong, was a locally-born Chinese who became a leader of the Chinese community in Asahan, near Medan.¹³³ He had business ties in the Straits Settlements and married a Nonya from Melaka in 1876. His son, Khoo Sian Ewe, spent a few childhood years in Asahan before moving to Melaka and then to Penang where Khoo Cheow Teong retired. Khoo Sian Ewe married a Penang Nonya in 1905. Inter-regional marriages, migration, and commercial alliances thus created interlocking networks that supported the sense of a collective identity. The cross-border commercial, kinship, and social networks (in which Peranakans played an active part) depended upon and were mutually sustained by each other.

Culturally, the Peranakans in Sumatra and the Straits Settlements shared many traits, both ancestral and adopted. Apart from Chinese cosmological beliefs and rituals, common characteristics can be traced through their habits, such as *sireh* chewing, and dress, such as the *baju panjang*. Many techniques and styles of embroidery were common to the Peranakans across different regions. Gold thread embroidery was widely practised by the Nonyas and their embroidery often featured overstitched metallic thread couching and *atas timbul*, where metallic thread was stitched in a raised basket-work pattern (figs. 7a–b, 32, 36–38).¹³⁴

Yet, even as dynamic interactions brought Peranakan communities together, it is nevertheless also necessary to recognize that local responses within the Peranakan community could differ. The diversity of the Peranakan communities was noticeable through variations in dress, speech and material culture. The outfits worn by the Peranakan bride and groom differed between Penang, Singapore-Melaka, and Java. The Penang bride wore a crown with pom-poms and dangling beaded tassels; the Melaka bride wore a headband and up to twelve-dozen hairpins; the bride from the Netherlands Indies also had a headband and hairpins, but these were held further above

¹³² Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 260.

¹³³ The account of Khoo's family is from Yeap, *Patriarch*, pp. 7–12. See also Historical Personalities of Penang Committee, *Historical Personalities of Penang* (Penang: The Historical Personalities of Penang Committee, 1986), p. 79.

¹³⁴ See Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 34 for a diagrammatic illustration of *atas timbul*.

the hair.¹³⁵ Colourful Nonya ware, typically associated with Peranakan culture, was imported from China for use in important Peranakan ceremonies like weddings and birthdays. These were owned by Singapore, Melaka, and Penang Peranakan households but, according to Lim Suan Poh, no sizeable quantities of Nonya ware have been found in the Netherlands Indies.¹³⁶

Within the Straits Settlements itself, the Penang Peranakans were considered to be more “Chinese” than their southern cousins in Melaka and Singapore. One news article in the *SCM* in 1898 relating to the demand for a Penang member to be appointed to the Legislative Council emphasized that “our Penang friends form almost a distinct community, differing in speech, customs and manners from the Chinese in Singapore.”¹³⁷ The Melaka and Singapore Peranakans spoke Baba Malay whereas most Penang Peranakans (apart from those who migrated to Penang from Melaka) spoke Baba Hokkien even though they took an interest in Malay *pantun* and music.¹³⁸

The regional diversity also reflected the differences in indigenous customs and preferences. For instance, there is a marked Thai influence in Nonya cuisine from Penang.¹³⁹ Javanese Peranakans were influenced by Javanese ways and Peranakans in Padang in Sumatra were influenced by Minangkabau customs.¹⁴⁰ Regional stylistic variations in Peranakan jewellery, too, have been attributed to local influences. The *kerosang* came in sets of three and were used to fasten the *baju panjang* and *kebaya*. According to Chin, the large paisley-shaped top brooch (*kerosang ibu*) crowned with a sunburst motif was more popular amongst Penang Nonyas than in Singapore and Melaka.¹⁴¹ However, as Chin remarked, distinctions in regional styles were not absolute and the paisley-shaped *kerosang ibu* was also sometimes worn by Nonyas

¹³⁵ The differences are clearly illustrated in Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 148–153.

¹³⁶ Lim, “Nonya Ware,” p. 20.

¹³⁷ “The Latest Penang Grievance,” *SCM* 2, no. 7 (1898), p. 120.

¹³⁸ Chia Cheng Sit describes the Penang Peranakans as able to read and speak Chinese, unlike the Melaka Babas. Chia Cheng Sit, “The Language of the Babas,” *SCM* 3, no. 9 (1899), p. 11. Tan Chee Beng mentions their affection for *pantun* and *dondang sayang* (Malay verses set to music). Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 15–16. Felix Chia posits a somewhat unsatisfactory explanation that the Penang Peranakans were more strongly influenced by their Chinese fathers than were their Melaka counterparts. Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 10.

¹³⁹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ Heidhues, “Peranakan Chinese Politics in Indonesia,” p. 35.

¹⁴¹ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 120–121, 184–186.

from Melaka and Singapore.¹⁴² In addition, with intermarriage, objects moved from one location to another.¹⁴³ Thus whilst certain styles may have been more dominant in one region than another, it does not mean that these were exclusive, but can be more productively understood as the result of shifting preferences in which both local and wider regional impulses had a part to play.

With handwork, individual and regional idiosyncrasies in styles, forms, and techniques contributed to its diversity and complexity. By recognising such complexities, we can gain a more thorough appreciation of its meanings. I have therefore sought to balance the general with specific illustrations that suggest local and personal responses. In some instances, these may challenge the broader arguments about the overall patterns of change or raise questions that may be beyond the scope of this thesis to answer. However, viewed as a whole, they suggest that Peranakan culture should be conceived as a broad spectrum of possibilities within which a Peranakan's cultural positioning depended on both circumstance and choice.

Locating Peranakan History in the Modern World

Modernity is a fraught term with a troubled past. For the purposes of this thesis, this discussion provides a brief clarification of the concept of modernity as it relates to Peranakan history. In its simplest sense, modernity refers to a state of being in the present and the newness of the present. As a socio-cultural configuration, modernity is characterized by industrial production systems, self-interest (which Adam Smith had identified as the driving force of the “invisible hand” and the market economy in 1776), rationality, the primacy of the individual, the commodification of labour, social legitimization as a necessary condition for the role of the state, and the relativity of values such as truth, beauty, and morality.¹⁴⁴ As such, modernity is defined in

¹⁴² Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 186. There are a number of photographs of Nonyas wearing the paisley-shaped *kerasang ibu* taken in Singapore. See, for example, John Falconer, *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya: The Photographs of G.R. Lambert & Co., 1880–1910* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1987), plate 114, p. 136, plate 126, p. 144 of Nonyas, and plate 167, p. 164 of the Sultana of Johore, taken around 1900; and Gretchen Liu, *From the Family Album: Portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore, 1910–1925* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1995), pp. 51, 58, 78, 92, 99. However, as many of the individuals photographed are not identified, it is difficult to determine whether they were from Penang.

¹⁴³ See Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 108. Chin gives the example of a Melaka family that owns every style of jewellery

¹⁴⁴ Malcolm Waters, “General Commentary: The Meaning of Modernity,” in *Modernity: Critical Concepts*, ed. Malcolm Waters (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. xii–xxiii. Adam Smith's famous argument underpins market economics where individual optimization of utility in consumption and

opposition to traditional modes of thinking that are legitimized by their existence in the past and social structures in which the individual is considered to function as an integral part of a whole.

The connotations of “modern” and its associated terms, used to describe both an epoch and an ethos, have multiplied. The starting date of modernity as a historical period is much debated, a reflection of the different nuances of the term. Some scholars pinpoint the rise of mercantile capitalism of the sixteenth century, others the Industrial Revolution in the West, as marking the beginning of the modernity. Both are premised on the course of social and economic developments in the West. Others contest modernity as a historical period on the basis that history is a “seamless continuum” in which the seeds of modernity can be traced back to the infinite past.¹⁴⁵

Applied to culture, society, and political, economic, and belief systems, “modernity” has taken on non-neutral overtones. Associated with European Enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress, modernity – as innovation, and technological and scientific advancement – seemed to offer prospects for economic betterment, acquiring positive connotations of improvement.¹⁴⁶ However, the negative consequences of modernity – for instance, the conflicts between owners of capital and providers of labour, the socially repressive effects of rational organization, and the debilitating impact of modern culture – have also been discussed. Karl Marx focussed on the conflicts arising from the division between the ownership of labour and capital that would lead to the exploitation of the working classes and, ultimately, to large scale social unrest.¹⁴⁷ For Max Weber, modernity, as the rationalization of society through large scale organizations, resulted in a stifling “iron cage” of bureaucracy.¹⁴⁸

production would lead to an efficient allocation of resources. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

¹⁴⁵ See a brief overview of the debate in Waters, “General Commentary: The Meaning of Modernity,” pp. xiii–xviii. Waters implies that the divide is partly one of discipline – historians associate modernity with mercantile capitalism, constitutionalization of monarchies, and the autonomy of the individual; sociologists associate it with industrial society.

¹⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1984), cited in Anthony D. King, “The Times and Spaces of Modernity (Or Who Needs Postmodernism?)” in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 108–109.

¹⁴⁷ For an overview, see D. McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Lewis Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 43–57.

¹⁴⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin University Books, 1965), pp. 180–82. See also Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought*, pp. 230–233.

Irrespective of these debates, the overarching definition of modernity remains rooted in the notion of modernity as a progressive replacement of the old with the new. In the last decade, scholarship has become increasingly critical of this and studies of Southeast Asian societies argue for more flexible and locally-specific understandings of modernity. Suzanne Brenner challenges the conception of modernity as a linear, evolutionary progression through her example of Laweyan, a batik-producing community in Java.¹⁴⁹ In the early twentieth century, Laweyan society was entrepreneurial, producing batik for the mass market, and was “in constant contact with the outside world, in both a local and global sense.”¹⁵⁰ Brenner argues that it actively engaged with modernity – making use of innovations in transport and the market economy – and was integrated into the plural Netherlands Indies world. Its embrace of modernity was reflected in its selective appropriation of Western architecture and interiors. However, Brenner finds that as the century progressed, this gave way to a reversal to the “unmodern” in its contemporary emphasis on traditional values of hierarchy, status, and respect for elders.

Despite Brenner’s criticism of the assumption that modernization and development proceed in only one direction, she implicitly retains the tradition-modernity binary in her characterization of contemporary Laweyan as the “unmodern.” Other researchers have instead sought to highlight the interweaving of tradition in local constructions of modernity. Joel Kahn, for instance, argues that what is today considered to be traditional Minangkabau culture (the peasant household, in particular) in fact arose out of a period of Dutch colonialism and Islamic modernity as well as economic modernization in West Sumatra.¹⁵¹ In doing so, he undermines the dichotomy between tradition and modernity by revealing the complex processes through which modernity, in its various guises, takes effect and is locally interpreted and transformed.

As Goh Beng Lan comments, the notion of modernity which is rooted in Western experiences does not necessarily conform to experiences in the modern world.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Suzanne April Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁰ Brenner, *Domestication of Desire*, p. 44.

¹⁵¹ Joel Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia* (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1993).

¹⁵² Goh Beng Lan, “Re-drawing Centre-Periphery Relations: Theoretical Challenges in the Study of Southeast Asian Modernity,” in *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia*, ed. Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Goh Beng-Lan (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Netherlands: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004), p. 79.

Anthony King, too, criticizes the “Eurocentric” conceptualization of contemporary modernity that privileges Western notions of industrialization and urbanization and locates modern cities in the West.¹⁵³ He offers an alternative definition that highlights the “interconnectedness of a single world economy” and the economic, social, cultural, and material flows which link local cultures to each other.¹⁵⁴ Although King refers to a present-day world of integrated economic systems and global flows of capital and labour, the notions of interconnectedness and cultural flows are similarly applicable to an historical modernity.

The contact across cultural groups and the connections that these linkages effected are implicit in the analyses of both Brenner and Kahn. More explicitly, Antonia Finnane describes modernity as mobility – the movement of people, goods, and ideas in space – resulting in inter-cultural contact and “the imagination of what such movement entails.”¹⁵⁵ Through an assessment of the changes in Chinese clothing, she argues that the early nineteenth century Chinese society of Yangzhou was modern, consciousness of, and actively engaging with, the wider world. Modernity, independently of its Western manifestation, can thus be conceived of as the encounters and, more crucially, engagement with ideas, cultures, and technologies from different sources, stimulating change. A consequence of this is the experience of “flux” or constant movement that Marshall Berman describes, one that is dynamic and potentially unsettling.¹⁵⁶

The Peranakan encountered modernity in multiple forms. In regard to modernity as a periodizing concept, Reid has pointed out that historians have generally regarded either 1800, when British naval and commercial power became dominant, or 1870, after the opening of the Suez Canal, as the beginning of a modern period in Southeast Asian history.¹⁵⁷ Nicholas Tarling also notes that the 1870s are generally regarded as the time when Southeast Asia shifted from being a producer of forest and marine products

¹⁵³ King, “The Times and Spaces of Modernity,” pp. 118–119.

¹⁵⁴ King, “The Times and Spaces of Modernity,” p. 119. Anthony Giddens also refers to the social interconnections that span the globe as a characteristic of contemporary modernity such that local events are shaped by those occurring in distant places. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

¹⁵⁵ Antonia Finnane, “‘Yangzhou’s ‘Modernity’: Fashion and Consumption in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Positions* 11, no. 2 (2003), p. 414.

¹⁵⁶ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁵⁷ Anthony Reid, “Introduction,” in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Anthony Reid (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 10.

for Asian markets towards becoming a supplier of minerals and raw materials for a world market.¹⁵⁸ However, Reid argues that Southeast Asian modernity emerged from the pressures of commercialization, demographic growth, and the changing elite and power structure in the region between 1750 and 1780, the rapid pace of economic growth in 1760 to 1850 exceeding that of the period of colonial capitalism from 1870 to 1929.¹⁵⁹ With growth came the “new signs of urban culture and cosmopolitan modernity in the societies where this growth was centered.”¹⁶⁰

The Straits Settlements, which developed as nodes for inter-regional and international trade, were witness to the tangible impact of industrial and technological modernization, urbanization, market-driven economic expansion, and improvements in transport and communications infrastructure.¹⁶¹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, as agriculture and the resource industries were opened up in insular Southeast Asia, the need for labour accelerated. Penang and Singapore were arrival points for migrant workers from China and India, including those who left for tin mines and rubber plantations of the Malay peninsula and Sumatra. These developments had a direct impact on Peranakan life. With their strong mercantile orientation and their location at an important juncture of trade between the East and West, the consciousness of the wider world was an underlying feature of the Peranakans’ reality in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the Western ethos of modernity – the triumph of rationality over superstition, individual autonomy, the benefits of technological innovation, and the embrace of progress – had a profound influence on the highly urban Peranakan community. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, modernity stimulated tensions and mixed reactions within a dynamic Peranakan world, presenting a rationale for transformation and a challenge to the construction of Peranakan identity.

¹⁵⁸ Nicholas Tarling, preface to *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 2, part 1, *From 1800 to the 1930s*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xiv.

¹⁵⁹ Anthony Reid, “A New Phase in Commercial Expansion in Southeast Asia 1760–1850,” in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*, ed. Anthony Reid, pp. 57–81.

¹⁶⁰ Reid, “A New Phase in Commercial Expansion in Southeast Asia,” p. 78.

¹⁶¹ In fact, it can be argued that Penang, founded in 1786 by Francis Light, and Singapore, founded in 1819 by Stamford Raffles, were the direct products of a Southeast Asian modernity as described by Reid, “A New Phase in Commercial Expansion.”

The uses of *Nonya* beadwork determine the contexts in which they were placed and viewed. These contexts – social and cultural – impinged on the attitudes towards production, consumption, and reception of beadwork. In the following two chapters, the social role of Nonya beadwork is explored through an assessment of the times and spaces in which they were used.

The principal function of Nonya beadwork and embroidery as paraphernalia for weddings and, less importantly, for birthday and Chinese New Year celebrations is well established.¹ The wedding was a key life-cycle event in Peranakan culture and was accompanied by elaborate and extensive celebrations to which friends and family were invited. Carefully negotiated, marriage carried with it wider economic and social rights and obligations that accompanied kinship ties. Birthday and Chinese New Year festivities were other occasions where Peranakan kinship ties were made evident.

The use of Nonya beadwork at such significant events in the social life of the Peranakan community inserts it into a particular socio-cultural framework – one that traversed the private spaces of the family and extended into the social sphere of the wider Peranakan world. This gave beadwork characteristics that set it apart from other types of domestic craft such as crochet and patchwork which Nonyas are also known to have done. Colourful and conspicuously arranged, the highly visible displays of Nonya beadwork were not only decorative but also social objects and carriers of meaning. Made to be seen, beadwork reflected the preoccupations of its users as well as their reactions to the concerns of its viewers. Understood in this way, the conditions of production, consumption, and reception can be seen to have played a significant role in the creation of beadwork's social meanings.

The criticism raised by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson of the discussions of context in art historical methodology is pertinent here.² They argue that framing an explanation of artworks through an understanding of their context becomes a circular process when the choice of context is conditioned by the works themselves.³ For instance, an art

¹ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 16–19; Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 30–31; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, pp. 203–206.

² Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (1991), pp. 174–208.

³ Bal and Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," pp. 178–179.

historical analysis of their example of a mid-Victorian painting of a railway station would see the painting as generated out of its context of the rail construction boom, advances in rolling stock technology, flurry of railroad financing schemes, railway workers' union activities, and so on. But because the choice of context is derived from the painting itself, Bal and Bryson maintain that this not only renders such an explanation limited, but also any claim that the context is verified by the work as merely tautological. Inserting Nonya beadwork into a specific context by first looking at the occasions at which it was used risks opening up this sort of circularity. However, by acknowledging that beadwork and its social framework could be endogenously and simultaneously determined highlights a useful concept – the mutually constructed nature of object and context.⁴ Their historicity places them side-by-side.

A second and related issue in considering the contextualization of any art form is that its meanings are indeterminate and the interpretations potentially unlimited so long as it can be placed in different contexts or conditions of reception. But as Janet Wolff points out, the history of the reception of a work limits its polysemy in some way.⁵ The indeterminacy of meanings in beadwork is arrested, at any specific point in time, by the historical situatedness of those who use it and an audience who observe it being used, whilst still leaving room for the possibility of multiple meanings that change through time.

Chapter Two reviews the historical setting in which Nonya beadwork was used, in particular, the political and cultural context of the Peranakan world. Chapter Three considers how the social and cultural fabric of the Peranakan world from 1870 to 1940 endowed beadwork with a role as a signifier of taste, moral character, social standing, and cultural authority through the interaction between its users and audience.

⁴ This may be explained by a simple analogy of simultaneous equations in mathematics: as long as there are as many equations as there are unknown variables, the system of equations is said to be fully determined, hence, solvable. I am grateful to Amy Liu for the analogy.

⁵ Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 2d ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 108–116, 152.

This chapter presents an overview of Peranakan social history in the Straits Settlements as the background for the discussion of beadwork in the following chapters. Colonial rule, free trade policies, influxes of Chinese migrants, and ideological developments outside of the Straits Settlements all shaped the Peranakans' notions of their own culture and responses to their surroundings. In doing so, these developments generated a specific set of circumstances which influenced the conditions of production and reception of beadwork.

What constitutes Peranakan society is not easy to define. Earlier definitions of the Peranakans were based on cultural criteria applied to contemporary Peranakan society, revolving around observed characteristics such as the adoption of indigenous elements in clothing, food, and speech; these could also include the criterion of self-identification as Peranakan.¹ Scholars of Peranakan society as well as Peranakans themselves emphasize one or another, or a mix, of these characteristics and include kinship, customs, religion, and mixed ethnicity in their definitions.²

There are several problems with extending a contemporary cultural definition to an historical study of Peranakan material culture. Firstly, a complication arises from the synonymous use in the Straits Settlements of the terms "Straits Chinese," "Straits-born Chinese," "Baba," and "Peranakan." The intention here is not to repeat the discussion of each of the terms as they have already been set out in some detail by others but to illustrate the context of their usage in the literature.³ The term "Peranakan" has currency in both the Straits Settlements and Indonesia. Until the nineteenth century, "Peranakan" in the Netherlands Indies referred to locally-born Chinese who had converted to Islam, but it was later used by the Dutch to refer to locally-born Chinese more generally.⁴ In the Straits Settlements, it commonly related to locally-born

¹ One of the first to formalize this definition was Rosie Tan Kim Neo, "The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A Study of the Straits Chinese Way of Life" (B.A. thesis, University of Singapore, 1958).

² See, for example, Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 12-81; John Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society: Studies in the Sociology of the Baba Communities of Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980), pp. 3, 5-11; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, especially pp. 16-17, 43, 46;. A synthesis of these definitions is provided in Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 25-30.

³ For scholarly reviews of the terms in the Straits Settlements, see Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society*, pp. 2-5; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 38-44. For a Peranakan insight, see Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 7-11.

⁴ The Dutch used the term Peranakan to refer to "persons born of Javanese mothers and Chinese-origin fathers who were also Muslim." Mason C. Hoadley, "Javanese, Peranakan, and Chinese Elites in

acculturated Chinese, particularly those who spoke Malay. It was defined by Lim Boon Keng as “local-born men” and by Crawford as “Chinese of the womb” or “Chinese by native mothers.”⁵ “Baba” was originally a term of respect that gradually became associated exclusively with the Malay-speaking Peranakans.⁶ J.D. Vaughan explained that the term “Baba” was used to describe those Chinese born in the Straits who were British subjects, whether or not of mixed-ancestry.⁷ In current usage, it is generally restricted to describing acculturated Chinese in the former Straits Settlements only, but has been used in the past to refer to Peranakans in Indonesia as well, making its geographical reference imprecise.⁸ Locally-born acculturated Chinese in Penang did not generally refer to themselves as Peranakan, preferring the terms “Straits-Chinese” or “Baba.”⁹ However, the term “Peranakan” is now used in Penang, most clearly indicated by the adoption of the name, Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang, by the representative association of the Peranakans in Penang.¹⁰

Cirebon: Changing Ethnic Boundaries,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (1988), p. 504. See also Mona Lohanda, *The Kapitan Cina of Batavia 1837–1942: A History of Chinese Establishment in Colonial Society* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1996), p. 6; and Mary Somers Heidhues “Indonesia,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Singapore: Archipelago Press and Landmark Books, 1998), p. 153. Charles Coppel discusses their language markers in “Mapping the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia,” p. 107.

⁵ Lim Boon Keng, “The Chinese in Malaya” in *Present Day Impressions of the Far East and Prominent and Progressive Chinese at Home and Abroad*, ed. W. Feldwick (London: Globe Encyclopedia, 1917), pp. 876–877, quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 4; and John Crawford, *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands and Adjacent Countries* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1856), p. 96.

⁶ The origin and uses of the word “Baba” is discussed further in Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 7–11; Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 38–40, 52–56; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 9–16, 43–45.

⁷ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 2. See also Png Poh-Seng, “The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A Case of Local Identity and Socio-Cultural Accommodation,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 1 (1969), pp. 96–98.

⁸ As an example, Kwee Hing Tjiat, an Indonesian Peranakan, wrote in 1934, “the Baba must take their place as sons of Indonesia...” and “...in Baba blood there is still a drop of Diponegoro’s blood and another of Genghis Khan’s...” Quoted in Leo Suryadinata, *Peranakan’s Search for National Identity: Biographical Studies* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993), pp. 24, 27. In north Sumatra and west Java, the term “Baba,” was also used by the non-Chinese indigenous population. Suryadinata, “Peranakan Chinese Identities in Malaysia and Singapore,” p. 3.

⁹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, pp. 2, 26–27, 31. Some Penang Peranakans are not familiar with the term “Peranakan.” During my fieldwork, I asked a Penang woman if she was Peranakan. My question was met with a puzzled silence. As it turned out, she belonged to an established Straits Chinese family and her grandmother was locally-born and displayed the outward markers of local costume, speech patterns, and food preferences. Her mother owns an impressive piece of Nonya beadwork which was an heirloom handed down three generations (fig. 11).

¹⁰ See for instance Khoo Keat Siew, “Message from Khoo Keat Siew, President, Persatuan Peranakan Cina,” *Suara Baba*, no. 11 (2002), p. 2. In Singapore, the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) changed its name to Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association in 1964, in effect distancing itself from its more politically oriented (pro-British) predecessor. In Melaka, the SCBA changed its name to Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Melaka Peranakan Chinese Association) in 1981. The Penang branch of the SCBA re-named itself the State Chinese (Penang) Association in 1964, and has only now modified this to Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang (Penang Peranakan Chinese Association) in

Peranakan society was not homogenous, but displayed observable differences between regions and dialect groups. According to Seah Eu Chin, who wrote one of the first accounts of the Chinese in Singapore, different dialect groups tended to congregate in different occupations. The Hokkiens were mostly merchants, the Teochews planters.¹¹ The dialect groups did mix, but even though one anonymous reporter observed that the “Kwantung Babas, i.e., those of Teochew, Hak-ka, Canton and Hainan parentage, readily assimilate and fraternize with those of Hokien: and thus there is formed a compact and homogenous community with all interests and aspirations in common,” the groups remained segregated by vernacular and clan associations.¹² Each dialect group also had its own temple. For instance, in Singapore, there was a Teochew temple on Phillip Street and a Hokkien temple (Thien Hok Keng) on Telok Ayer Street.¹³ Opium farm syndicates were also dominated either by Hokkien or Teochew groupings.¹⁴ Within dialect groups, different clan or kinship groupings distinguished by surname had their own mutual aid association. In Penang, for example, locally-born Chinese could be members of the Khoo Kongsi, Cheah Kongsi, or various other clan associations.

Peranakans were also sometimes referred to as “Straits Chinese,” or “Straits-born Chinese.” From 1852, the legal meaning of “Straits Chinese” was those Chinese born in the Straits Settlements who were British subjects.¹⁵ Whereas the small numbers of earlier arrivals of Chinese men in the Straits were probably absorbed into an acculturated Chinese society through marriage and business ties, the increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants (*sinkeh*) from the mid-nineteenth century permitted the emergence of a permanently sustainable non-acculturated Chinese community. Some of these became naturalized British subjects, falling under the legal designation of “Straits Chinese.”¹⁶ However, they were not necessarily Peranakan or

line with its brethren. See Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 190–191; and Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, pp. 28–29, 31 for a brief discussion of the name changes.

¹¹ Seah, “The Chinese in Singapore,” p. 290.

¹² “The Straits-Born Chinese: Character and Tendencies,” *Straits Times*, 5 February 1914.

¹³ “Local Chinese Social Organizations,” *SCM* 3, no. 9 (1899), pp. 43–44.

¹⁴ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” p. 83.

¹⁵ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 43, 131.

¹⁶ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 131. British subject status was valuable in so far as it gave consular protection to subjects while abroad, for example, to Straits Chinese travelling to China on business so long as they discarded Chinese dress whilst in China. See Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 301.

acculturated.¹⁷ Tan Chee Beng in fact describes the Straits-born Chinese as comprising four groups – the Peranakans (speaking Baba Malay), the Chinese-speaking Chinese born in the Straits, the English-speaking Chinese born in the Straits, and some immigrant Chinese who had become naturalized British subjects in the Straits.¹⁸ Such definitions of Straits Chinese which recognize their political affiliations mean that references to Straits Chinese crossed cultural categories. Furthermore, the boundaries between Peranakans and non-acculturated Straits Chinese were porous as intermarriage between these groups occurred.

Finally, the Peranakan identity changed over time. The Melaka Peranakans' identity in the nineteenth century was based on a mix of territorial, cultural, and political alliances but has gradually become increasingly cultural, privileging the knowledge of Baba Malay as its main discriminating factor.¹⁹ A static, culturally-oriented definition is therefore misleading given its continuously evolving and historically constructed nature. A similar contention has been put forward by Rudolph who argues that cultural formation is dynamic; hence Peranakan identity in Singapore can be more profitably understood as a “discursive fact” and a “societal experience.”²⁰ Based on textual research and interviews with present-day Peranakans of their perceptions of Peranakan society, Rudolph finds that Chinese descent rather than a particular cultural practice is possibly the only common characteristic among those who define themselves as Baba (Peranakan).²¹ He argues that prior to the Japanese occupation of 1942 to 1945 the definitions of Baba and Straits Chinese were synonymous and involved a political self-identification as loyal British subjects. However, after Singapore gained self-rule in 1959, the decreasing political significance of the Babas gave rise to a cultural identification.

Such shifting definitions suggest not only that the demarcation between the cultural and political spheres was not clear-cut, but also that cultural and political affinities were mutually constructed and cannot be viewed in isolation. The changing definition presents a challenge for the investigation of Peranakan material culture since the boundaries of study are ill-defined. This chapter therefore explores the emergence of a

¹⁷ Suryadinata, “Peranakan Chinese Identities in Malaysia and Singapore,” p. 3.

¹⁸ See Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 46. These groups were not necessarily exclusive even in the mid-nineteenth century, and many English-educated Peranakans spoke both English and Baba Malay.

¹⁹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, pp. 19–36.

²⁰ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 65.

²¹ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 31.

diasporic society and the development of a Peranakan cultural and political identity in the Straits Settlements in some detail, focusing on the ways in which political and historical developments intersected with the shifting boundaries of the Peranakan cultural world.

In describing civil society, the wider term “Straits Chinese” is used. However, in discussing both Nonya beadwork and Chinese society in the Straits before the mid-nineteenth century, the term “Peranakan” will be used for two reasons. The term carries with it a cultural connotation associated with mixed ethnicity that local-birth implied. In addition, Nonya beadwork still continues to be carried out but, as Suryadinata notes, “Straits Chinese” is a historical and political term, associated with the existence of the Straits Settlements which no longer exists.²² Although it departs from the majority of contemporary scholarly writings, where “Baba” has been used to refer to the acculturated Chinese in the Straits Settlements, the use of the term “Peranakan” in this thesis facilitates the discussion of Nonya beadwork which traversed politically drawn boundaries.

Trade and Early Chinese Migration

Chinese contact with the Indonesian archipelago was established as early as the second century CE. It was based on trade, initially in western Asian luxuries and later expanding to include locally-obtained jungle products.²³ When private trade was prohibited, continuous commercial contact with the Nanyang was maintained through state-sponsored tribute missions. Amongst the items of exchange were highly-desired Chinese luxury textiles. Early fifteenth century state-sponsored trading missions regularly included gifts such as “silk woven with golden flowers [and] curtains adorned with gold” for the ruler of Melaka.²⁴ According to Reid, these fifteenth-century trading missions ushered in Southeast Asia’s “age of commerce,” making

²² Suryadinata, “Peranakan Chinese Identities in Malaysia and Singapore,” p. 4.

²³ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2d ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 18–21. Religious travel to the Nanyang seems to have been concentrated between the fifth and eighth centuries, when Buddhist travellers such as Faxien (fifth century) and Yiqing (seventh century) visited Sumatra, the latter studying Buddhism at Srivijaya, then a notable centre for Buddhist scholarship.

²⁴ From *Ming Shi* (History of the Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644), Book 325, excerpted in W. P. Groeneveldt, *Historical Notes on Indonesia and Malaya: Compiled from Chinese Sources* (Jakarta: C.V. Brhatara, 1960), p. 129.

China the most important market for goods from Southeast Asia before the seventeenth century.²⁵

Trade must have been sufficiently lucrative for Chinese to relocate in the Indonesian archipelago. By the fifteenth century there were concentrations of Chinese living in Java, some of whom had adopted local customs and religion.²⁶ This group of Chinese was, however, unlikely to have formed the basis for a distinct Peranakan society which retained Chinese religious beliefs and behaviour.

The ambiguity of the references to Chinese presence in Melaka from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries means that it is difficult to pinpoint the earliest date of permanent Chinese settlement there. The *Hai Yü*, written in the sixteenth century, mentions pork-eating Chinese in Melaka who were probably not Muslim, although it is not clear if they were permanent settlers or peripatetic traders.²⁷ Using similar sources, Tan Chee Beng and Kernial Singh Sandhu both conclude that permanent Chinese settlement in Melaka can be dated indisputably only to the seventeenth century.²⁸ Neither Malay nor Portuguese sources mention the existence of a local Chinese community at the time of the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511, but there was already a community of Chinese traders, petty merchants and artisans when the Dutch captured Melaka in the mid-seventeenth century.²⁹

The date of Chinese settlement in Penang is much more self-evident, stemming from migration from China as well as its surrounding regions immediately after it was founded in 1786. Singapore was established as a free port some 40 years later, attracting a number of Melaka Chinese who became the core of a Peranakan society in Singapore.³⁰

²⁵ Reid, *Expansion and Crisis*, p. 12.

²⁶ Ma, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 93. According to Ma Huan, they were from Guangdong, Zhangzhou, and Zhuangzhou in southern China.

²⁷ Hwang Chung, *Hai Yü (Words about the Sea)* first published 1537, excerpted in Groeneveldt, *Historical Notes*, p. 127.

²⁸ Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 28-32; and Kernial Singh Sandhu, "Chinese Colonization of Malacca. A Study of Population Change, 1500 to 1957 A.D.," *Journal of Tropical Geography* 15 (1961), pp. 2-5. See Rudolf, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 76-83 for a summary of these arguments.

²⁹ Sandhu, "Chinese Colonization," p. 6

³⁰ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 94-95.

Intermarriage, Colonial Rule, and the Emergence of Peranakan Society

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese women did not migrate to the Straits Settlements in any significant numbers.³¹ Lim Joo Hock explains that women were expected to remain in China to look after the household and to carry out acts of ancestral worship.³² Furthermore, as the Qing government formally banned female emigration until 1894, Chinese women migrated in significant numbers only when economic and political turmoil in the 1850s in China led to severe hardship, forcing them to look abroad for survival.³³ In their absence, intermarriage between Chinese men and Malay, Balinese, and other indigenous women is generally accepted to have taken place and is supported by anecdotal evidence.³⁴ Whilst this probably occurred before the mid-nineteenth century, there is evidence from the late nineteenth century that some Chinese migrants maintained a primary wife and family in China and a parallel family (or families) with a locally-born secondary wife (or wives) in the Straits Settlements or the Netherlands Indies.³⁵

Intermarriage, as Tan emphasizes, was a significant factor in encouraging acculturation, effecting a transfer of local cultural norms to immigrant settlers and their offspring.³⁶ However, intermarriage between Chinese migrants and local women was not, in itself, a sufficient condition for the emergence of an acculturated Peranakan society that was distinct from both Chinese and indigenous society. Chinese migrants and their offspring of mixed ethnicity could easily have been assimilated into local society and this was not uncommon in parts of Southeast Asia.

³¹ Lim Joo Hock, "Chinese Female Immigration into the Straits Settlements, 1860–1901," *Journal of the South Seas Society* 22 (1967), pp. 63–66.

³² Lim "Chinese Female Immigration."

³³ Lim "Chinese Female Immigration."

³⁴ See Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 36–42; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 83–85. See also the brief discussion of intermarriage between the Chinese and non-Islamic native women in Indonesia in Mary Somers Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Longman, 1974), pp. 36–37. It is, however, difficult to find details of the marriages between indigenous women and Chinese men since these women could have adopted Chinese names, erasing an indicator of their ethnicity.

³⁵ For example, in the late nineteenth century, Queeny Chang's father already had a wife and family in China when he married a Nonya. Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 14. Chan Kang Swi, a migrant from Fujian province, married a Nonya second wife (and later a Chinese third wife) in Melaka whilst his first wife and two children from that marriage remained in China. J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003. McKeown briefly discusses the second marriages of nineteenth century male Chinese migrants in more general terms. See Adam McKeown "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999), p. 318.

³⁶ Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 42.

John Clammer argues that these intermarriages took place only in the very distant past and fail to explain the extent of the acculturation. Clammer asserts that European colonization was crucial for the development of a distinct Peranakan society in the Straits Settlements – the Peranakans’ preference to be known as Straits Chinese was evidence that the origins of their community coincided with the formation of the Straits Settlements as a distinct political unit.³⁷ Although this does not adequately explain the motivation for acculturation, Clammer’s argument highlights the importance of colonial rule in shaping the development of an acculturated Peranakan community in the Straits Settlements.

William Skinner contrasts the partial assimilation of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies with their rapid and complete assimilation into Thai and Cambodian societies.³⁸ In particular, assimilation was resisted if it was equated with downward mobility.³⁹ Colonial rule dissociated wealth, power, and status from the indigenous population; it became less attractive for the Chinese migrant population to merge into the local majority. Furthermore, colonial policies to segregate the immigrant and local populations and legal systems that developed to classify the migrant populations by ethnic group imposed requirements and restrictions, such as dress codes, that governed their behaviour, even though the extent to which these prevented full assimilation is difficult to ascertain.⁴⁰ These populations formed acculturated Chinese communities which absorbed new arrivals from China through marriage.

Mason Hoadley provides an example which suggests that the degree of Chinese assimilation into Javanese society in Cirebon was associated with career choice and Dutch policy.⁴¹ Hoadley shows that between 1680 and 1730, those Chinese who were involved in Javanese court politics assimilated into local society and took on Javanese names whilst those who were engaged in commerce tended to retain their Chinese names. However, he argues that the deliberate policy of the Dutch to prevent the Chinese from holding high positions in Javanese courts decreased the attractiveness of assimilation after 1731.

³⁷ Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society*, pp. 21, 46, 100–102.

³⁸ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese.”

³⁹ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” pp. 65–66.

⁴⁰ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” 67–71.

⁴¹ Hoadley, “Javanese, Peranakan, and Chinese Elites in Cirebon.”

Resistance to religious conversion could also prevent complete assimilation into indigenous society, but depended on the particular characteristics of the religion practiced by the indigenous population.⁴² Skinner suggests that colonial policies in the Straits Settlements which subtly associated Islam with indigeneity may have encouraged the Peranakans to regard Chinese religion as an essential characteristic of their identity, thereby discouraging their full assimilation into local society.⁴³ Thus, intermarriage, colonial rule, and the maintenance of a Chinese religious identity interacted to provide an environment conducive to the flourishing of an acculturated Peranakan society in the Straits Settlements.

Regional Trade

The growth of regional trade from the nineteenth century provided a specific direction for the development of the Peranakan society in the Straits Settlements as an urbanized, mercantile community. Penang and Singapore were both founded to protect British trade with China.⁴⁴ Singapore was established as a free port in 1819. Melaka, obtained from the Dutch in exchange for Bengkulu (Bencoolen) in Sumatra in 1824, and Penang were conferred free port status by 1826 when they were amalgamated with Singapore into the Straits Settlements. Their position on the trade route naturally encouraged to the establishment of communities of traders.

The success of the Straits Settlements, particularly Singapore, as entrepôts has been explained by their orderliness, free port status, and strategic geographical location, the same qualities which attracted Chinese traders to base themselves there.⁴⁵ The relationship between European and Chinese (including Peranakan) merchants can be said to have been one of mutual reliance rather than competition.⁴⁶ Chinese traders depended on European merchants for credit facilities; Europeans relied on the local knowledge and distributional capabilities of the Chinese to exchange imported manufactures for raw materials from the resource-rich hinterland. These Chinese, who

⁴² Skinner, "Creolized Chinese," pp. 71–77.

⁴³ Skinner, "Creolized Chinese," p. 71.

⁴⁴ Constance M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements, 1826–67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (London: Athlone Press, 1972), pp. 1–2.

⁴⁵ Chiang Hai Ding, *A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade 1870–1915* (Singapore: National Museum, 1978, pp. 3–6; and Constance M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–1988* (Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ See Chiang, *Straits Settlements Foreign Trade*, pp. 51–58 for a more thorough discussion of the role of the locally-born Chinese in regional trade.

had familiarized themselves with both native and European customs, were necessary intermediaries in the East-West trade.

Peranakans were well placed to take part as middlemen in this burgeoning trade. European trading firms typically extended credit facilities to intermediaries and generally preferred to deal with those traders who lived permanently in the Straits Settlements.⁴⁷ Debt recovery could be difficult or impossible if a Chinese merchant who defaulted on his obligations chose to send his assets in secret to China to avoid having them seized. This difficulty was compounded by the Europeans' inability to understand the accounts of the Chinese merchants if they were not prepared in English.⁴⁸ As it was far easier to seize onshore assets in the event of a default, Europeans naturally preferred transacting with Peranakans who were permanently settled in the Straits and had invested their assets locally.⁴⁹

The Peranakans' business dealings with Westerners were facilitated by their language abilities.⁵⁰ They could speak a mixture of English, bazaar Malay, and Hokkien which assisted them in the exchange of imported manufactures for local raw materials. Baba Malay, which incorporates words of Chinese dialect, and Baba Hokkien, which incorporates words of Malay, may well be a linguistic reflection of the exigencies of regional trade. Singapore traded with the north coast of Java where Malay was the language of commerce. Penang traded with Phuket and Medan where Chinese traders tended to speak Hokkien instead.⁵¹

One Western observer noted in 1837 that the Peranakans' familiarity with European habits oiled the cogs of business relationships and supplemented their language abilities:

⁴⁷ Chiang, *Straits Settlements Foreign Trade*, pp. 51–58.

⁴⁸ Chiang, *Straits Settlements Foreign Trade*, pp. 53–58. Chiang notes that in 1905, a proposal for registering businesses to enable European firms to check the credit worthiness of partners of local businesses before entering into commercial relationships was tabled. Interestingly, it was rejected by the more established European trading companies, which had more experience and better local knowledge, to protect their local advantage vis-à-vis newer European traders.

⁴⁹ Lee Poh Ping, *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 19–21.

⁵⁰ See Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 51–52; and Yen Ching Hwang, "Historical Background," in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, ed. Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng, pp. 6–7.

⁵¹ Skinner, "Creolized Chinese," n. 18, pp. 57–58.

The Malacca-born Chinese hold more direct intercourse with European merchants than the others. Many of these are born of Malay mothers, but, as they always adopt the manners and mode of dress of their fathers, they are scarcely to be distinguished from the actual natives of China, and although they are probably less active and energetic than the latter, they are more enlightened, and make better merchants. Many of this class who have been educated at the Malacca college speak English tolerably well, and, from their constant communication with Europeans, they have acquired in some measure their general habits and mode of transacting business, which renders them more agreeable to the latter than those who have not enjoyed similar advantages. They are all employed in commerce, many as independent merchants, and some are engaged as cashiers and under-clerks in the offices of Europeans. ...The Malacca Chinese are always remarkably clean and well dressed, and few are obliged to resort to manual labour.⁵²

Wealthy Peranakans such as Melaka-born Choa Chong Long and Tan Kim Seng entertained Europeans, occasionally in “the European style.”⁵³ Sometimes, this was not without a comic element, as this amusing report of an elaborate multi-racial ball thrown by Tan Kim Seng demonstrates:

A young lady from Calcutta, dressed after the most elaborate fashion of the city of palaces, got fearfully entangled in a Schottische with a Chinese mandarin, whose large, jet-black tail [queue] descended considerably below his waist. As he hopped and frisked the tail flew about in the most dangerous manner. No doubt could be entertained, however, that the gentleman had been taking lessons for a fortnight or three weeks, because he really went through the business of the dance very respectably. At length, as ill luck would have it, one of his red slippers came off. A burst of laughter, which was impossible to restrain, shook the fat sides of his host [Tan Kim Seng] at this disaster, while the unhappy How Guim Foo quitted his partner and rushed, with his long tail like a comet, to regain his shoe – for to be shoeless is to be disgraced in Celestial eyes.⁵⁴

The accounts of Western writers effectively reinforce the impression that the Peranakans were, as a group, more civilized and ahead in the commercial race in comparison to other Chinese, even though familiarity with Western habits and language was not the prerogative of the Peranakans alone. Hoo Ah Kay who migrated to Singapore from Canton in 1830 spoke English, worked in partnership with Gilbert Angus and other Europeans, and socialized with the European business community.⁵⁵

⁵² Earl, *Eastern Seas*, pp. 363–364.

⁵³ Earl, *Eastern Seas*, p. 364; and Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 30, 49–50.

⁵⁴ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 47–48.

⁵⁵ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, 51–55. Hoo was more commonly known as Whampoa, after the place where he was born.

The Peranakans' position as incumbents, however, gave them a first-mover advantage. J.R. Logan, editor of the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, commented:

Having been born and educated for several generations under European governments, this class of [Peranakan] men, free from all prejudice and alien feeling, enjoy great advantages in the race of competition. Devoting themselves almost exclusively to trade, they have hitherto had a monopoly against their less fortunate countrymen from China who, as before said, are of an inferior class, and not qualified by the possession of capital or knowledge of business to compete with men born among traders, in all the advantages of better education and previous establishment.⁵⁶

Although Peranakan society is unlikely to have been uniformly wealthy, until the 1870s many of the successful early Chinese merchants who traded with the Europeans in Singapore are likely to have been Melaka-born, and very probably Peranakan, or if not, had partnered or married a locally-born person.⁵⁷ Notable Chinese companies that were active in entrepot trade and had ties to leading European firms, such as Kim Seng and Company and Lee Cheng Yan and Company, were owned or established by Peranakan businessmen.⁵⁸

Small infusions of new Chinese migrants added to the pool of eligible Chinese sons-in-law for Peranakan daughters and were welcomed in the mid- nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Ong Tae-Hae, a traveller from China, observed when he was in Semarang on the north coast of Java that "those who come originally from China are preferred as sons-in-law, while those born in the country are not esteemed."⁶⁰ The wealthier members of the Peranakan community also maintained their ties to China by sending their sons back to China for their education if they could afford it.⁶¹

⁵⁶ J.R. Logan, "Notes on the Chinese in the Straits," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 9 (1855), p. 115.

⁵⁷ The names of Chinese merchants listed in the *Straits Directory* of 1846–1872, the *Colonial Directory* of 1873, and the *Singapore Free Press* of 23 December 1841 and 27 October 1877 is provided in Lee, *Chinese Society*, pp. 21–24

⁵⁸ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 49–50, 91–92, 110; and Yen, "Historical Background," p. 7.

⁵⁹ Lim Boon Keng, "The Chinese in Malaya," p. 876, quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 4; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 46–47.

⁶⁰ Ong Tae-Hae, *The Chinaman Abroad: An Account of the Malayan Archipelago, particularly of Java*, trans. Walter Medhurst (London: J. Snow, 1850), p. 9.

⁶¹ Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 37. This appears to have been the case for the Teochews rather than the Hokkiens, at least from the late nineteenth century. J.D. Vaughan noted that the "Hokien *Baba* speaks

A crucial feature of Peranakan society was their retention of Chinese beliefs and ancestral worship. Earlier Chinese migrants tended to be merchants, not mandarin literati, bringing with them Daoist and Buddhist values rather than strictly Confucian ones.⁶² Like most overseas Chinese, the Peranakans believed that gods and ghosts possessed the power to intervene in human affairs, and that fate and luck were key determinants.⁶³ Appeasing gods and asking for divine intervention played an important part in their belief system. A large pantheon of Daoist and Buddhist deities, including the Daoist Jade Emperor of Heaven (Ti Kong), the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin or Kuan-The-Yah), and the Kitchen God (Datok Dapoh), was worshipped by the Peranakans.⁶⁴ Chinese festivals – Lunar New Year, the remembrance day for deceased souls (*cheng beng*), the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, and the winter solstice (*tang chek*) – were marked by making offerings to deities and ancestors.⁶⁵

The importance of ancestor worship, bound up with the Confucian precept of filial piety, was clearly demonstrated in the organization of the domestic altars. The shrine to the household deity was placed in the main hall of a Peranakan house, facing the main entrance to protect the home from evil spirits.⁶⁶ Ancestral tablets were preserved in a hall behind the formal reception room and ancestral portraits were hung above the altar.⁶⁷ Funeral preparations tended to be elaborate and the death anniversaries of ancestors were strictly observed. Observance of ancestral (*sinchew*) rites at their burial grounds was so crucial that those Peranakans who could afford it left instructions, accompanied by large sums of money, in their wills for this specific purpose.⁶⁸ But as

with great disparagement of the Tay Chew *Baba* educated in China; he says the Tay Chew comes back a great *bodoh*, or simpleton, as his father and knows nothing.” Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 15.

⁶² Jamie Mackie, “Introduction,” in *Sojourners and Settlers*, ed. Anthony Reid, p. xix; and Wang Gungwu, “Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia,” in *Sojourners and Settlers*, ed. Anthony Reid, pp. 4–5.

⁶³ On the religious practices of overseas Chinese, see Vivienne Wee and Gloria Davies, “Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan, pp. 80–83.

⁶⁴ See Cheo Kim Ban and Muriel Speeden, *Baba Folk Beliefs and Superstitions* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1988); and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 144–160 for discussions of some of the common deities worshipped in Peranakan households in Melaka.

⁶⁵ Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 154–161.

⁶⁶ Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House* (Singapore: Singapore History Museum, National Heritage Board, 1998), pp. 44–46.

⁶⁷ Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, pp. 46, 112; see also pp. 57–58, 61–63 for photographs of the ancestral altars in Tan Cheng Lock’s and Wee Bin’s ancestral homes in Melaka and Singapore respectively.

⁶⁸ See Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, pp. 26–27. Song mentions the case of the Peranakan Choa Chong Long’s will where an amount was left in perpetuity for the observance of *sinchew* rites but was voided by the courts. Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 30.

Skinner points out, the kinship system had been modified from an essentially Hokkien patrilineal and virilocal system to one that was bilateral and inclusive of worship of the maternal lineage as well.⁶⁹ The importance accorded to the matriarch is evidenced by the portraits of many female ancestors hanging above the family altars of Peranakan ancestral homes.⁷⁰

Peranakan men retained the visible vestimentary characteristics of the Chinese. Even though they were far removed from the centres of Qing control, Peranakan men wore their hair in a queue, a style imposed by the Qing government to distinguish Han Chinese from the Manchus. To observers like Vaughan, their Chinese appearance presented a peculiar contrast to their appropriation of European ways and disparagement of their fellow Chinese:

[The Peranakans] have social clubs of their own to which they will admit no native of China. At these clubs they play at billiards, bowls, and other European games, and drink brandy and soda *ad libitum*; yet they adhere strictly to the Chinese costume – the queue, thick soled shoes, mandarin dresses, and conical hats on state occasions, and the manners and customs of those people who otherwise they have no sympathies with.⁷¹

As Vaughan suggests, despite their outward similarity, there was a palpable sense of tension between the Peranakans and *sinkeh*. This appears to have been brewing well before the population of *sinkeh* swelled after the mid-nineteenth century. An early commentary in an 1831 edition of the *Singapore Chronicle* illustrates one side of this tension:

We must have observed that the descendants of Chinese or those not born in China are never permitted to become members [of the Chinese secret society], either because the Chinese consider them an inferior race, or they are unwilling to entrust them with secrets, lest in some crucial instances their natural connection with the country they reside in should produce a betrayal.⁷²

⁶⁹ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” pp. 62–63.

⁷⁰ See photographs of ancestral altars in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, p. 61; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 157.

⁷¹ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 3.

⁷² “The Chinese Brotherhood,” *Singapore Chronicle*, 2 June 1831, quoted in Lee, *Chinese Society*, p. 53. Lee also notes that when the government began to deport their members, the secret societies began to admit local Chinese (n. 62, p. 62).

Even though a few prominent Peranakans may have been members of secret societies, the distinction between the locally-born Chinese and the *sinkeh* was being drawn.⁷³ It is notable that the article couched *sinkeh* suspicion of the Peranakans not in terms of their cultural hybridity but their loyalty to their place of birth.

By the mid-nineteenth century, even as promising young *sinkeh* continued to be assimilated into the dominant Peranakan fold through marriage, mutual disdain was marked. British administrators in Melaka noticed that “Chinese families whose ancestors, for many generations know no other home...will only give their daughters in marriage to men, who like themselves, are natives of Malacca.”⁷⁴ Isabella Bird, an English traveller, commented that the *sinkeh* “are much despised by the *Babas*.”⁷⁵ A Peranakan explains that the disapproval of *sinkeh* sons-in-law was due to their ignorance of custom or *adat*, a concept of proper behaviour that is important in Malay social practice, highlighting their cultural differences even further.⁷⁶

Whilst Peranakan men were visually indistinguishable from their *sinkeh* counterparts, Peranakan women were noticeably unlike non-acculturated Chinese women in dress and habits:

Women from China wear the *baju* [blouse] and drawers also, and dress the hair in most fantastic devices, and paint the face white and red. The Straits Chinese women wear the Malay *Cabayah* and *Sarong*, the former fastened with brooches of various shapes often set with precious stones [the *kerosang*]. The hair is tied in a knot at the back of the head held together by hairpins of silver and gold, richly ornamented. ...The women from China usually wear thick wooden clogs; but *Babas* indulge in pretty worked slippers and the ordinary shaped European leather shoes.⁷⁷

⁷³ Secret societies were not, in fact, illegal in the Straits Settlements until 1890. According to Turnbull one such organization, the Toh Peh Kong, was dominated by Peranakans, and the wealthy Peranakan, Tan Kim Ching, was a member of another secret society. See Turnbull, *Straits Settlements*, pp. 117, 125.

⁷⁴ “Report of the Administration of the Straits Settlements, 1855–56,” *Singapore Free Press*, 25 June 1857, quoted in Lim, “Chinese Female Immigration,” p. 60.

⁷⁵ Bird, *Golden Chersonese*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Cheo Kim Ban, *A Baba Wedding* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1983), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 11. The *cabaya* described by Vaughan was probably a below-knee collarless blouse with a front opening. This was shortened from the 1910s into a lace or embroidery decorated blouse known as the *kebaya*. See Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 22–26 for a more detailed description of Nonya fashion. Even though the *sarong-baju panjang* ensemble is generally regarded as a derivation of the Malay style tunic (*baju kurong*) and *sarong*, Chin has pointed out some formal similarities of the *baju panjang* and the Chinese long robe. Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 164–165.

Sireh chewing, another local custom, had become an important part of Peranakan domestic and social life. Peranakan *adat* dictated that a host was expected to offer *sireh* to guests, and wedding invitations to female relatives took the form of the presentation of a quid of betel (*hantar sireh*).⁷⁸ Food was another characteristic that distinguished Peranakans from the *sinkeh*. Peranakan cuisine combined local spices and ingredients such as tamarind, coconut milk, *belacan* (a spicy shrimp paste) and *cincalok* (marinated shrimp) with Chinese staples such as five spice powder, fish maw, and minced pork.⁷⁹

At the same time, Peranakans participated in non-Daoist and non-Buddhist religious practices, scrupulously observing the taboos of other religions whenever they did so. For instance, Nonyas would abstain from eating pork for a few days before visiting Malay shrines (*keramat*).⁸⁰ Some also visited Hindu temples. Worship and superstition melded in a collage of foreign elements onto a primarily Chinese belief system. Yet other Peranakans converted or were sympathetic to the Christian religion.

Arriving in ever increasing numbers from the mid-nineteenth century, the *sinkeh* rapidly dominated the Peranakans numerically, outstripping the ability of the latter to absorb the *sinkeh* through marital ties. The immigration of Chinese women from this date also reduced the incentive for the *sinkeh* to assimilate. The result was a largely self-contained community of non-aculturated Chinese. The Peranakans saw themselves as fundamentally Chinese but were clearly conscious of their difference from the *sinkeh*:

Though these Chinese *peranakans* (or local-born men), as the Malays call them, are to all intents and purposes Chinese, from a superficial acquaintance with them and their mode of life, they have developed such distinct social qualities and have shown so many characteristic ethnic and anthropological aspects that they constitute a class by themselves. Since the British

⁷⁸ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ See also Mrs Lee Chin Koon, *Mrs. Lee's Cookbook: Nonya Recipes and Other Favourite Recipes* (Singapore, Eurasia Press, 1974); Violet Oon, *Her World Peranakan Cooking* (Singapore: Times Periodicals, 1978); Cecilia Tan, *Penang Nyonya Cooking: Foods of My Childhood* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1985); and Terry Tan, *Terry Tan's Straits Chinese Cookbook* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1981).

⁸⁰ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 8; and Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 30. In relation to present-day Peranakans in Melaka, see Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 161–163.

occupation, through the influence of English education, the line of cleavage has become more evident.⁸¹

Sinkeh society acted as a foil to Peranakan perceptions of themselves as ethnically and culturally Chinese. Yet, the same commentator also stressed that “[t]he characteristics of this people – whether in Netherlands India or in British Malaya – are identical, showing that the fundamental qualities of the parental races have been preserved.”⁸² Peranakan society was consciously negotiating an increasingly apparent distance between its own translations of being Chinese and *sinkeh* notions of being Chinese whilst simultaneously acknowledging their ancestry.

Sinkeh Migration

The influx of Chinese migrants from the 1850s to the early twentieth century is generally attributed to a combination of demand-pull and supply-push factors. In the second half of the nineteenth century, exploitation of resources such as tin and the cultivation of cash crops (gambier, pepper, tapioca, and later, rubber) generated an almost insatiable appetite for labour in the Nanyang. The Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) and agrarian problems in southern China, exacerbated by population growth, pushed the population to search for alternative means of livelihood.⁸³ Impoverished Chinese left for Australia, America, and the Nanyang in search of a means of survival. Between 1850 and 1881, the Chinese population in Penang, Melaka, and Singapore almost tripled from 62,784 to 173,861.⁸⁴

The “coolie trade” as it was known facilitated Chinese migration to the Straits Settlements and the Netherlands Indies. The majority of *sinkeh* found their way there through the credit ticket system whereby immigrants were provided with passage to the Nanyang by labour brokers or agents. Once they arrived at their destination, they

⁸¹ Lim, “The Chinese in Malaya,” p. 876, quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 4.

⁸² Lim, “The Chinese in Malaya,” p. 876, quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 4.

⁸³ Yen, “Historical Background,” p. 1. Adam McKeown, however, has challenged the importance of the supply-push/demand-pull explanation, particularly in the case of Canton. He attributes the massive outflow of labour largely to emigration as a family strategy, based on the precedent set by earlier emigration and on the opportunity for doing so. McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*, pp. 66–67. It is not clear what proportion of the growing numbers of coolie workers who moved to the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago were induced to do so as a family strategy, but after the Chinese government lifted restrictions on emigration in 1893, the number of immigrants into the Malay states who were sponsored by family and friends increased and contributed to a second wave of *sinkeh* migration. See Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, p. 178.

⁸⁴ Purcell, *Chinese in Southeast Asia*, pp. 232, 234.

were contracted to employers to work on mines and plantations.⁸⁵ Employers repaid the labour brokers the coolies' passage and recouped this as a debt from the labourers under a contract to work for the employer until their passage was fully repaid.⁸⁶ Conditions were harsh and employers tried to retain their workers by allowing them to become dependent on opium and gambling.⁸⁷ Some *sinkeh* made good but many others were condemned to an existence of poverty and backbreaking work.

Compared to the struggling, opium-addicted coolie, it is easy to imagine that well-established Peranakan merchants and planters saw themselves as a world apart. However, Tan Liok Ee notes that the boundaries between Straits Chinese and *sinkeh* society were, in fact, porous.⁸⁸ Locally-born Chinese and *sinkeh* did interact at various levels of Chinese society. Peranakans and *sinkeh* co-operated in business ventures and circulated in the same social circles. For example, Tan Cheng Lock, a Melaka Peranakan, had a commercial partnership with Chan Kang Swi, a wealthy *sinkeh* businessman, and his eldest daughter was married to one of Chan Kang Swi's sons.⁸⁹

In 1889, a Chinese Advisory Board was formed to provide a link between the colonial administration and the Chinese population, and its members represented their respective dialect groups.⁹⁰ Prominent Peranakans such as Tan Kim Ching, Lee Cheng Yan, and Tan Jiak Kim were regarded as leaders of the local Chinese community. Some of them held official positions as members of the Chinese Advisory Board,

⁸⁵ Yen, "Historical Background," pp. 1–2.

⁸⁶ Yen, "Historical Background," pp. 1–2.

⁸⁷ Yen Ching Hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5; and Yen, "Historical Background," p. 2.

⁸⁸ Tan Liok Ee, "Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History," in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee (Singapore: Singapore University Press; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 358.

⁸⁹ The confusion over Chan Kang Swi's cultural identity can be seen as an illustration of blurred boundaries. As mentioned in n. 35 of this chapter, Chan Kang Swi's first wife was Chinese from mainland China; his second wife was a Nonya. Although Chan was the longest-serving president of the Straits Chinese British Association in Melaka from 1904–1928 and Cheo Kim Ban and Muriel Speeden describe him as a Peranakan, Chan spoke Hokkien (not Baba Malay) and his Peranakan grandchildren consider him to be a *sinkeh*. Like many other patriotic overseas Chinese, Chan repatriated funds to China in support of the war effort in the 1940s. He fled the Japanese occupation in Malaya by returning to China. J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003; and Cheo and Speeden, *Baba Folk Beliefs*, p. 145. See also Tan Liok Ee, "Descent and Identity: The Different Paths of Tan Cheng Lock, Tan Kah Kee and Lim Lian Geok," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 68, no. 268 (1995), n. 17, p. 24.

⁹⁰ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 87.

serving alongside *sinkeh* members such as Boey Ah Sam.⁹¹ However, the Peranakan leaders' position may have derived not from uncontested authority over the Chinese community as a whole but from their close relationship with colonial power.⁹² Even so, these Peranakans cannot have failed to become aware of the political and intellectual currents coursing through a growing overseas Chinese population through their official roles as spokesmen for the wider Chinese society. Several Straits Chinese, such as Lee Cheng Yan and Tan Kim Ching, also purchased Qing honorary titles for social prestige and to confirm their status as leaders in the Chinese community.⁹³

The establishment of Chinese consulates in the Straits Settlements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by the Qing government was primarily to elicit support for imperial China and to tap a rich seam of financial resources held by the overseas Chinese.⁹⁴ At the same time, the consuls attempted to nurture national consciousness and political loyalty amongst overseas Chinese by promoting the study of Chinese literature and Chinese cultural events. The Hui Xian She (The Society for the Meeting of Literary Excellence) was started to encourage Chinese literary activities through poetry and essay competitions; celebrations for wealthy merchants were organized to commemorate important imperial events such as the Emperor's birthday; the Celestial Reasoning Club held debates in English in order to attract the attention of English-speaking Chinese, several of whom were likely to have been of Peranakan origin.⁹⁵ In addition, Chinese-educated merchants and intellectuals sponsored activities such as the Luo Shan She lectures in 1881 to inculcate filial piety, clan loyalty and propriety, thrift, and other Confucian values.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Lee, *Chinese Society*, pp. 24, 54; and Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 259–260. All of the initial Hokkien representatives were locally-born.

⁹² Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, pp. 100–101. Turnbull supports this by observing that they refused to agree to elections for membership of the Chinese Advisory Board as well as the Legislative Council and Municipal Commission. Lee Poh Ping also argues that the Peranakans lacked direct control of Chinese society in Singapore. Lee, *Chinese Society*, pp. 53–54.

⁹³ Yen Ching Hwang, "Ch'ing's Sale of Honours and the Chinese Leadership in Singapore and Malaya, 1877–1912," in *Community and Politics: The Chinese in Colonial Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), pp. 182, 184–187.

⁹⁴ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, pp. 105–106.

⁹⁵ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 106; Yen, "Historical Background," p. 13; and Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya*, pp. 288–289.

⁹⁶ Yen, "Historical Background," pp. 12–13.

A second effect of the growing Chinese population in the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies was to draw the attention of Chinese political reformers. In fact, as Kwok Kian Woon points out, even though most of the overseas Chinese can be considered to have been “outside” the Chinese revolution on the mainland, it is not possible to understand the overseas Chinese’ experience of modernity without referring to what it meant in mainland China at this time.⁹⁷ In the last years of the nineteenth century, Chinese nationalists had begun to agitate for modernization through the application of Western science and technology and the implementation of reforms to the imperial bureaucracy. Although they supported the imperial order, the reformers’ proposals were harshly suppressed by the Empress Cixi and reformers were executed or exiled. The exiled reformist leader Kang Youwei stayed in Malaya and the Netherlands Indies between 1900 and 1902, further disseminating nationalist ideas and promoting the establishment of Chinese schools based on a modern curriculum. Kang himself became involved in setting up a school for girls in Singapore and a teacher training facility in Penang.⁹⁸

The Chinese revolutionary movement, dedicated to the overthrow of the Qing emperor and the formation of a Chinese republic, also sought support from the overseas Chinese. Sun Yat Sen, the revolutionary leader, established the Tongmenghui in the Straits Settlements during his visit in 1906 to raise funds. They started reading groups, night schools, and drama troupes to disseminate their political messages. Diametrically opposed in terms of their support for the emperor, the Chinese nationalist and revolutionary movements nevertheless heightened overseas Chinese political consciousness, introducing ideas of altruism, dedication, equality, freedom, unity, and democracy.⁹⁹

These movements also intensified Peranakan society’s exposure to ideas about Chinese culture and the nation, either through their direct participation or, more indirectly, through the reports in the press as well as the overlapping social worlds of the non-acculturated Chinese and the Peranakans. For instance, Tan Chay Yan, the wealthy Peranakan rubber planter, was a member of the Guomindang, the Chinese

⁹⁷ Kwok Kian Woon, “Being Chinese in the Modern World,” in *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan, p. 121.

⁹⁸ Yen, “Historical Background,” p. 14.

⁹⁹ Yen, “Historical Background,” p. 17.

revolutionary organization.¹⁰⁰ Tan Beng Swee, whose father and grandfather were both born in Melaka, assisted the Chinese Consulate in its fund-raising activities.¹⁰¹ For the overseas Chinese, China could be viewed as more than simply an ancestral homeland to which Peranakans were tied by links of the past; it could also be a source of inspiration for modernization and change.

King's Chinese – Straits Chinese Identity at the Crossroads

The social developments within the Peranakan community from the last quarter of the nineteenth century need to be understood within the framework of the wider Straits Chinese society. As discussed earlier, the distinction between the acculturated Peranakan and non-acculturated Straits Chinese was often unclear, not least because boundaries between the two communities were porous. Furthermore, the changing consciousness of the Straits Chinese was shared by the Peranakan community. No longer sojourners but settlers, the Straits Chinese cohered as a group through their comprehension of the Straits Settlements as their permanent home.

Isabella Bird's remark in 1883 that the Peranakans "glory specially in being British-born subjects" may be somewhat excessive but it does encapsulate the perception of the Peranakan community's political allegiance.¹⁰² Even though it was coined in the early twentieth century, the term "King's Chinese" probably best captures the sense of how the Straits Chinese wished to present themselves at this time. As settlers in the Straits, they proclaimed their loyalty as British subjects. Living under colonial rule, many of the wealthier Straits Chinese had also chosen to provide their children with an English education. They appear to have enthusiastically embraced European modes of living – setting up social, sports, and music clubs along European lines, playing billiards, cricket, and tennis, attending the races, hiring Western architects, purchasing European furniture, and entertaining in European style.¹⁰³ This trend appears to have extended to Straits Chinese material culture, which is said to have moved from a Sinic aesthetic to an increasingly Westernized style in the first few decades of the twentieth

¹⁰⁰ Frost, "Transcultural Diaspora," p. 32.

¹⁰¹ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 46, 90–91; and Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 106.

¹⁰² Bird, *Golden Chersonese*, p. 17.

¹⁰³ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 127.

century.¹⁰⁴ In one prominent Straits Chinese' words, the Straits Chinese "[o]ut-English the English [p]eople."¹⁰⁵

At the same time, they were ethnically Chinese, tied to a culture inherited at birth, their ancestry reinforced through the Chinese conception of filial piety. One anonymous writer commented in 1914 that, despite their differences in "habitation and dress" and other "superficialities" of behaviour, the Straits Chinese were fundamentally Chinese, displaying "the same democratic spirit of fraternal comradeship, the same respect for seniority and learning, the same obedience to the calls of duty and to the requirements of the rites and ceremonies of Chinese ancestral worship."¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, he added that "it must not be forgotten that the soul of Chinese morality and piety is inextricably and inseparably identified with the claims of culture... More prominent than the knowledge it imparts, is its affirmation that the moral laws are eternal and divine."¹⁰⁷

From the last decade of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration also appears to have considered the Straits Chinese as simply "Chinese." The official population censuses for the Straits Settlements subsumed the category of "Straits-Born" Chinese under a general classification of "Chinese," laying the emphasis on race as the overriding characteristic.¹⁰⁸

In terms of political allegiance, however, the Straits Chinese felt impelled to demonstrate their loyalty to the British Empire, emphasizing their difference in political outlook from the China-oriented *sinkeh*. The increasing politicization of the *sinkeh* towards China was a concern to the British. Colonial government officials such as G.T. Hare therefore saw fit to warn the Straits Chinese not to be unduly influenced by the Chinese view of government, reminding them where their loyalties ought to lie.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Lim Boon Keng, "The So-Called Clash of Races in Malaya," *Straits Chinese Annual*, 1930, p. 8, quoted in Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 127.

¹⁰⁶ "The Straits-Born Chinese: Character and Tendencies."

¹⁰⁷ "The Straits-Born Chinese: Character and Tendencies."

¹⁰⁸ Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987), p. 569.

¹⁰⁹ G.T. Hare, "The Straits-Born Chinese," *SCM* 1, no. 1 (1897), pp. 3-4.

The formation of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) in 1900 represented a conscientious and public display by the Straits Chinese intelligentsia of their loyalty to Britain.¹¹⁰ In a patriotic gesture, some Straits Chinese leaders proposed to send volunteers to assist British efforts in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion, and the SCBA supported the formation of a Straits Chinese Volunteer Infantry for local defence in 1901.¹¹¹ Throughout the First World War the Straits Chinese demonstrated their support for British colonists. They formed volunteer fighting corps, campaigned actively to raise funds for a National War Loan, made generous donations of aeroplanes, and supported the war levy.¹¹² Tan Jiak Kim led the call to support the Prince of Wales Relief Fund (relief for unemployment and hardship in Singapore caused by World War One) by giving a donation of \$18,000 (Straits dollars).¹¹³

In Clive Christie's view, Straits Chinese identity was constructed foremost around their loyalty to the British Empire.¹¹⁴ Their ideological goal was to secure equal political representation regardless of race, based on the principle of loyalty to the Crown rather than Chinese ethnicity. On the other hand, Straits Chinese' interest, particularly amongst the literate, in Chinese culture and civilization represented a "revolution of cultural awareness."¹¹⁵ This was perhaps best exemplified by the discussions of Confucianism, Chinese language, and literature.

The Confucian revival movement in the last years of the nineteenth century was spearheaded by two prominent Straits Chinese – Lim Boon Keng and Khoo Seok Wan. Lim was a Queen's scholar who qualified as a medical doctor at Edinburgh University. As a student in England, he was so ashamed by his inability to understand Chinese that he later took up the study of Chinese language and literature.¹¹⁶ His mother and grandmother were both Nonya, one from Penang and the other from Melaka.¹¹⁷ Khoo

¹¹⁰ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 112; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 54–55.

¹¹¹ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 327–328, 358–359; and Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 56.

¹¹² Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 507–510, 518–519; and Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 129.

¹¹³ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 509–510.

¹¹⁴ Clive Christie, "Stranded by the Tide: the Straits Chinese of Penang," in *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), pp. 28–51.

¹¹⁵ Christie, "Stranded by the Tide," pp. 31–34.

¹¹⁶ Kwok Kian Woon, "Lim Boon Keng," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan, p. 203; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 382.

¹¹⁷ Kwok, "Lim Boon Keng," p. 203.

Seok Wan was born in Singapore, educated in China, and apparently proud of his *sinkeh* roots.¹¹⁸ McKeown highlights that, although the Confucian reform movement was not a political movement, it shared with Chinese nationalist reform movements abroad a conviction that European respect for the status of the Chinese was contingent on their regard for Chinese civilization and its capacity for modern cosmopolitanism.¹¹⁹ Although their reforms were not directed solely at the Straits Chinese, proposals rooted in Confucianism were also broadcast to the Straits Chinese community, becoming part of a Straits Chinese reform movement that was critical of the decadence and backwardness of Peranakan society. Gambling, philandering, superstitions, lack of education, and even women's dress codes came under fire.

As Christie notes, the Straits Chinese were caught on a knife edge, balancing their "Chinese origins on one side, and the commitment to citizenship within the British Empire on the other."¹²⁰ For the culturally hybrid Peranakans, this dualism was complicated by a third factor – their localized linguistic, vestimentary, and religious behaviour. With the expansion of *sinkeh* society, these habits were even more obviously not authentically Chinese. The "counter-pull of three different cultural loyalties" is said to have threatened a "crisis of identity" among the younger Straits Chinese.¹²¹

The conflicts these forces caused have been analysed as a tension between opposing forces of Westernization and Sinicization. Rudolph describes a "bifurcated process of simultaneous *options* of 'westernization' and 'sinicization'" that led to some Straits Chinese becoming more Westernized while others became more sinicized.¹²² In his assessment, the apparent contradictions may be reconciled by recognising that Straits Chinese society was heterogenous.¹²³ Although his approach allows individual agency to contribute to the dynamics of identity formation, recourse to the heterogeneous

¹¹⁸ Li Yuanjin, *Dong Xi Wenhua de Zhuangji yu Xin Hua Zhishi Fenzi de San Zhong Huiying* (*Responding to Eastern and Western Cultures in Singapore: A Comparative Study of Khoo Seok Wan, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang*) (Singapore: Xinjiapo Guoli Daxue Zhongwen Xi, 1991), pp. 376–377. There was some tension between Khoo and Song which increased in the 1930s, even though they continued to co-operate.

¹¹⁹ McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas," pp. 324, 326.

¹²⁰ Christie, "Stranded by the Tide," p. 33.

¹²¹ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 101.

¹²² Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 127–130, 133–134. The quote is from p. 134.

¹²³ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 133–134.

nature of Straits Chinese society in fact deflects from an appreciation of the inherent plurality that is fundamental to its identity.

One example suffices as an illustration. Mrs Lee Choon Guan, otherwise known as the “Diamond Queen,” grew up in a Peranakan family. Her wealthy father, Tan Keong Saik, engaged the missionary Sophie Blackmore to provide her with an English education.¹²⁴ She enjoyed Western music, threw lavish European-style dinners at her mansion, Mandalay Villa, sprinkled talcum powder on her Italian-tile floor for ballroom dancing parties, attended the races, and travelled to Europe.¹²⁵ At the same time, she organized fund-raising activities for the China Relief famine, for war efforts, helped to found the Chinese Women’s Association in Singapore, had the *ronggeng* (a Javanese style of dancing) performed at her birthday parties, provided her daughter with a Peranakan wedding, played Chinese dominoes and *cherki* (a card game popular with the Nonyas), donned Chinese-style costume, and celebrated Chinese New Year festivities with an assortment of Nonya cakes, legs of ham, tea, and champagne.¹²⁶ The same person or a single family or social unit could display several characteristics at once.

G.T. Hare painted the Straits Chinese as “men with two faces and two natures, ...[presenting] one face to the European and one face to the China-born Chinaman” and as “half-way between East and West.”¹²⁷ Here was someone who was both Western and Eastern, and able to slide between the two as need or circumstance dictated. Hence, rather than framing the appeal of Sinicization or Westernization as conflicting choices that could be resolved only with a decisive turn in one direction or another, they can more profitably be seen as dynamically complementary. This latter perspective offers a better insight into the motivation underlying the apparently paradoxical cultural paths taken by the Straits Chinese at the beginning of the twentieth century. The embrace of English education, emulation of European social habits, and declarations of loyalty as King’s Chinese were not incompatible with an interest in Chinese culture, Chinese nationalism, Confucianism, and support for Chinese

¹²⁴ Herbie Lim Eng Kwan, “Mandalay Villa: Memories of a Peranakan Mansion,” in *Rumah Baba*, by Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, pp. 24–31. A photo of Mrs Lee (nee Tan Teck Neo) as a child and her siblings at the home of Tan Keong Saik, seated in two rows, with open books in their hands is shown in Peter Lee, “A Glimpse into the Past,” *The Peranakan* (October–December 1999), p. 13.

¹²⁵ Lim “Mandalay Villa.”

¹²⁶ Lim, “Mandalay Villa”; and Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, pp. 541–542.

¹²⁷ Hare, “The Straits-Born Chinese,” pp. 3, 6.

vernacular education. Yet, if this was the case, in what sense can this duality be seen as coherent for the Straits Chinese themselves?

Yao Souchou argues that the Straits Chinese' retention of Chinese customs and habits was in truth a deliberate strategy to recommend them as favoured recipients of colonial patronage.¹²⁸ For the colonizer, the Chinese were at once necessary as suppliers of labour and consumers of colonial products and repulsive as immoral opium addicts, leading to "conflictual impulses of power and dependence, outward omnipotence and secret vulnerability" in the colonizer.¹²⁹ The Straits Chinese by contrast combined economic capability and social respectability with cultural authenticity by making visible their Chinese cultural heritage, allowing conflicting colonial desires to be resolved.¹³⁰ Whilst Yao's argument highlights the mutually constructed nature of colonial and local identities, it overdraws the divisions between *sinkeh* and Straits Chinese.

Frost explains the Singapore Straits Chinese' capacity for holding dual cultural alliances in the first two decades of the twentieth century as being facilitated by the colonial government's tolerance (even encouragement) for their interest in their mother culture.¹³¹ More significantly, he argues that the Straits Chinese at this time, rather than seeking to distance themselves from the impoverished *sinkeh*, consciously constructed their public activities around a conception of themselves as members of a wider, international, and progressive Chinese community to negotiate their multiple ties to ancestral home, adopted home, and colonial master.¹³² Once such a conception of Chinese heritage is appreciated, the positioning of the Straits Chinese between East

¹²⁸ Yao Souchou, "Social Virtues as Cultural Text: Colonial Desire and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Singapore," in *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, ed. Phyllis Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999), pp. 99–122.

¹²⁹ Yao, "Social Virtues as Cultural Text," pp. 103, 111.

¹³⁰ Yao, "Social Virtues as Cultural Text," pp. 111–117.

¹³¹ Frost, *Transcultural Diaspora*, pp. 32–33.

¹³² Frost, *Transcultural Diaspora*. Elsewhere, Frost argues that the Straits Chinese conceived of their cultural and political pluralism as enhancing their opportunity for involvement in the development of China. See Mark Ravinder Frost, "Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005), pp. 29–66.

and West can be recognized as a deliberate manipulation of boundaries that were in any case porous and subject to constant re-definition.¹³³

The Straits Chinese consciously articulated an appeal both to reason and cultural pride to reconcile a primarily non-Western cultural and philosophical identification with political support for British sovereignty. Underlying their efforts was the search for modernity – economic progress, technological and scientific advancement, rationality, and the ideals of liberty and equality. At the crossroads of East-West trade, the Peranakan community was inevitably caught up in a web of modernization. Crucially, the way in which it conceptualized modernity influenced how the multiple cultural affiliations of Peranakan society were interpreted and reformulated as part of a dynamic Peranakan identity.

Modernising Straits Chinese Society

The period from 1875 coincides with an era of rapid technological development, industrialization, and economic expansion in the West which flowed through to the Straits Settlements in the form of improvements in infrastructure. Direct telegraphic communications were established between Singapore and Europe by 1871 and new port facilities were put in place.¹³⁴ The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, greatly reduced travel times between Southeast Asia and the West.

Technological shifts and scientific advances created new opportunities for the Straits Chinese at the same time as they produced a harsher, more competitive economic environment. European investments in technologically advanced capital equipment increased the productivity of Western enterprises significantly.¹³⁵ Modern innovations adopted by European tin mining firms made them more competitive than the Chinese companies in Malaya which had not yet adopted the new and capital-intensive technology.¹³⁶ Wealth formation and capital accumulation were gradually being

¹³³ In Chapter Six, I posit that the earlier abandonment of certain conventional Chinese imagery in beadwork in the early twentieth century by the Penang Nonyas ahead of their Singapore and Melaka counterparts may have been because the former were perceived to be more authentically “Chinese.”

¹³⁴ W.G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 44.

¹³⁵ For example, the mechanization of large scale tin dredging. See G.C. Allen and Audrey G. Donnithorne, *Western Enterprise in Indonesia and Malaya: A Study in Economic Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. 149–167.

¹³⁶ See Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 214–215; and Trocki, “Boundaries and Transgressions,” p. 77.

dominated by European businesses. In agriculture this trend was most apparent in the early twentieth century rubber industry where two agency houses, Guthries and Harrisons and Crosfield, channelled Western capital into European-run Malayan plantations, thereby ensuring European dominance in rubber production.¹³⁷

In the late nineteenth century, Western industrial capitalism was a significant driver of economic progress. Then, the expansion of the United States as a major market for rubber reinforced a sense of the West's economic hegemony. The proportion of the Straits Settlements' exports destined for the West (including the United States) increased from 38% in 1870 to 53% in 1915.¹³⁸ Wealthy Tan Chay Yan was one of the first to take advantage of commercial rubber planting, urged on by H.N. Ridley, the British scientific director of the Botanic Gardens in Singapore, with whom Tan had become acquainted whilst studying in England.¹³⁹ Tan's success inspired similar ventures.

In an increasingly competitive environment, English education provided one channel for Straits Chinese men to secure the basis of their income through employment as clerks in European firms. Until the depression of 1929, the English-educated did not have difficulty finding employment.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, education in English provided a means of acquiring higher status through access to people in positions of power in the colonial state or of acceding to public office as Justices of the Peace, legislative councillors, and municipal councillors.¹⁴¹ As a by-product, English education introduced the notion of rationality and ideals of equality and liberty. At the same time, Straits Chinese interest in the principles of scientific rationality were accorded further legitimacy in the intellectual sphere by Kang Youwei's embrace of Western-style modernization through education, science, and technology.

The reverberation of modernization from East and West stimulated the Straits Chinese' debates on their own social and economic advancement. Lim Boon Keng and Song

¹³⁷ James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786–1921* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), pp. 244–245.

¹³⁸ Chiang, *Straits Settlements Foreign Trade*, table 19, p. 85. Presumably, this is based on the value, not volume of imports.

¹³⁹ Vanitha Nadaraj, "The Man who Gave Us Rubber and Wealth," *The Star*, 18 March 2002.

¹⁴⁰ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 140.

¹⁴¹ Turnbull cites the example of Tan Beng Swee who declined a position as legislative councillor because of his lack of fluency in English. However, Tan Jiak Kim, his English-educated son, was later appointed to the Legislative Council. Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 100.

Ong Siang launched the *SCM* in 1897 “to promote intellectual activity amongst the Straits-born people, and to guide the present chaotic state of public opinion among them to some definite end.”¹⁴² The magazine featured a Confucian saying, “If you have faults, do not fear to abandon them” on its front page, underlining its commitment to improvement. Although the *SCM* also published articles and short stories in English on a number of other topics, its content was dominated by proposals for the reform of Straits Chinese society, and articles concerned with science, ethics, religion, history, current affairs, and morals tended to be supportive of the reformers’ proposals.

Reformist messages were also publicized at the lectures of the Chinese Philomathic Society in Singapore. Again, its formation in March 1896 involved Lim Boon Keng, supported by wealthy Peranakan merchants and professionals including Lee Choon Guan, Song Ong Siang, Tan Jiak Kim, and Tan Keong Saik.¹⁴³ Similarly, clubs and associations were set up in Penang in the 1890s – for example, the Chinese Recreation Club, Chinese Cycling Club, Young Men’s Association, and Penang Literary Association.¹⁴⁴ The Penang Young Men’s Association aimed to cultivate the “moral, intellectual and physical culture of young men” by providing a space for classes for the study of edifying subjects, debating, lectures, reading, and games (billiards, cricket, chess, and cycling, for example).¹⁴⁵ The concern with reform spread to the Straits Chinese living outside of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. In Kuala Lumpur, the Selangor Literary and Debating Society was formed in 1904 to stimulate the study of English and to cultivate a “better knowledge of, and sympathy between, eastern and

¹⁴² “Our Programme,” *SCM* 1 no. 1 (1897), p. 2.

¹⁴³ These were Song Ong Siang (the Vice President), Lee Choon Guan (Treasurer), Ong Soon Tee (Secretary), Chan Kim Boon (Committee Member), Wee Cheng Watt (Committee Member), Tan Boo Liat (Committee Member), Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang Seah, Tan Keong Saik, Tan Hup Seng, Seet Ewe Lay, Tan Cheng Tuan, Lee Keng Kiat, Chia Keng Chin, and Ong Kim Cheow. See “Chinese Philomathic Society,” *SCM* 1 no. 1 (1897), p. 32. Many of these individuals were Peranakan.

¹⁴⁴ Ho Eng Seng, “Gangsters into Gentlemen: The Breakup of Multiethnic Conglomerates and the Rise of a Straits Chinese Identity in Penang” (paper presented at the The Penang Story – International Conference, Penang, 18–21 April 2002), p. 3. Ho traces the transition of Straits Chinese membership in local secret societies to their formation of literary, sports, and school clubs to British support for the Straits Chinese elite whilst legally restricting their involvement with secret societies.

¹⁴⁵ Reverend W. Murray, “Penang Young Men’s Association,” *SCM* 1, no. 1 (1897), p. 11–12. Although it was organized on similar lines to Young Men’s Christian Associations elsewhere, the Penang Young Men’s Association was a secular organization because there were not enough Christianized Peranakan men to support it.

western civilizations.”¹⁴⁶ They held animated debates on the cutting of the queue, Chinese marriage ceremonies, and the duties of the Straits Chinese.¹⁴⁷

Calls for reform were impelled by a desire to embrace progress, for which the attitudes of the Straits Chinese themselves were fundamentally in need of modification. This is clear from the rhetoric of reform-minded Lim Boon Keng’s questions, “Who stands in the way of Chinese progress? ...Who keeps back from the philosophies and sciences which have lifted European nations from barbarism to the highest civilization? ...Who is the real culprit at the bottom of all Chinese want of success?” to which he answered, “our worst enemies are our own selves.”¹⁴⁸

The various proposals for reform were dominated by two separate ideologies – Confucianism and Christianity. The Confucian reform movement numbered prominent Peranakans such as Lee Choon Guan amongst its committee members; others such as Tan Jiak Kim and Song Ong Siang were not part of this movement.¹⁴⁹ Song was nevertheless an active proponent of similar reforms from a staunchly Christian standpoint. Song’s father, Song Hoot Kiam, was born in Melaka in 1830 and had spent a few years in England during which time he was baptized; Song’s mother, a Chinese (probably Peranakan) Christian from Penang, taught her son to read and write Malay.¹⁵⁰ Song studied law in England and, like Lim Boon Keng, was a Queen’s Scholar. One issue in common for which Lim and Song both argued was the education of women. For Song, this was a way to impart ethical values and a panacea for a multitude of evils such as ignorance, superstitions, and gambling.¹⁵¹ As will be discussed in Chapter Three, education had significant consequences for the practice and significance of Nonya beadwork.

For Lim, discarding the queue was a symbolic stand for modernization and represented the struggle between a progressive faction and a dated, conservative camp. Even

¹⁴⁶ Wu Lien-teh, *Plague Fighter: The Autobiography of a Modern Chinese Physician* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1959), p. 227.

¹⁴⁷ Wu, *Plague Fighter*, p. 230.

¹⁴⁸ Lim Boon Keng, “Our Enemies,” *SCM* 1, no. 2 (1897), p. 53.

¹⁴⁹ Yen Ching Hwang, “The Confucian Revival Movement in Singapore and Malaya, 1899–1911,” in *Community and Politics*, p. 245. Yen argues that the Straits Chinese were not strongly associated with the Confucian reform movement, since only four of the 34 involved in establishing Confucian temples and schools in Singapore were Straits-born.

¹⁵⁰ Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, pp. 76–79, 242–248.

¹⁵¹ Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, pp. 110–111.

though he admitted that the queue was merely a mode of dressing hair, and that “[t]here is no reason why those who like to plait their hair into a long queue should not do so,” it was a “practice which is troublesome, inconvenient and absolutely without benefit” and was to be discarded.¹⁵² The proposition provoked heated debate – conservative Straits Chinese objecting vehemently to losing a visible mark of their Chinese ways. Tan Jiak Kim referred to the reformers as “young men who had been misled or were not of an age to judge the wisdom of the proposed innovation [of the cutting of the queue].”¹⁵³ In Chinese society where age was equated with sagacity, this debate represented more than just a clash of opinions. At its heart was not just the expression of Chinese roots and Chinese heritage, but what modernity implied for the authority of precedent, hierarchy, and the meaning of being Chinese.

Appealing to Confucianism was one means of making modernising reforms palatable. Confucian principles were undisputedly respected by all quarters of Chinese society. Filial piety, one of the central tenets of the Straits Chinese familial structure, was enshrined in the sage’s teachings. Embracing Confucianism bound the Straits Chinese community firmly to a mainstream Chinese tradition. Ritualistic practices pertaining to superstitions, wedding customs, and funeral rites could therefore be decried as illogical and irrelevant without the danger of the reformers being considered irreverent. Confucianism reconciled being modern and forward-looking with being Chinese. Furthermore, the moral authority of Confucianism may have been seen as an appropriate counterpoint to the hedonistic lifestyle and degeneracy of the Straits Chinese that had resulted from exposure to colonial education and protection.¹⁵⁴ Others invoked scientific logic as a support for reforms. One such was Tan Teck Soon who discussed the reform of Straits Chinese burial practices, urging cremation as more hygienic but no less filial an act than burial in a heavy wooden coffin.¹⁵⁵

The reformers argued that their proposals did not imply discarding one’s Chinese heritage or culture. Lim Boon Keng advocated a form of eclectic menswear which borrowed European features but which could also incorporate Chinese characteristics:

¹⁵² Lim Boon Keng, “Straits Chinese Reform – I: The Queue Question” *SCM* 3, no. 9 (1899), p. 24.

¹⁵³ From an unspecified article in the *Straits Times*, 27 January 1898, quoted in Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 139–140.

¹⁵⁴ Tim Harper, “Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore,” *Sojourn* 12, no. 2 (1997), p. 278.

¹⁵⁵ Tan Teck Soon, “The Chinese View of Cremation,” *SCM* 2, no. 7 (1898), pp. 81–84.

Let us have a genuine product of the Straits Chinese – a dress evolved out of our own ideas making free use of all articles European or Chinese, which are now in use, or else we should have a Chinese costume proper or the entire European dress such as the Japanese have taken to...¹⁵⁶

Implicit in Lim's comment was a sense that the Straits Chinese were in the position to *create* their identity by combining the best of heritage and circumstance. Despite this, his support for cross-cultural adaptation was not unequivocal. Although Lim approved of "sensible eclectics" in Peranakan menswear, he was critical of the "regrettable" form of Nonya dress because it was equivalent to Malay dress.¹⁵⁷ Another contributor to the *SCM* regarded the confinement of young Nonyas to their homes from puberty until marriage as an inheritance from the "Malay ancestors of many homes," even though it is difficult to support the accuracy of his assertion.¹⁵⁸ The Malay customs that the Peranakans had acquired were devalued, but not because they were indigenous. Peranakans, like Chia Cheng Sit, who were open to the idea of retaining an indigenous bond urged the Straits Chinese to learn proper Malay spoken by the educated Malays as an improvement upon their creolized and "corrupted" Malay.¹⁵⁹ It was the corruption of cultural practice associated with a lack of education which was denigrated as distasteful.

To an extent, Straits Chinese interest in reform was economically motivated, perhaps prompted by *sinkeh* successes.¹⁶⁰ In the Straits Settlements, by the end of the nineteenth century, the *sinkeh* were numerically dominant over the Peranakans. Furthermore, the loss of opium farm concessions and the introduction of the tin dredge in the first decade of the twentieth century exacerbated the decline of Peranakan commercial leadership.¹⁶¹ The Straits Chinese commercial future lay in their being able to retain a competitive edge. Debating societies even organized two debates with the propositions, "That Straits Chinese youths be trained and encouraged to go in for other kinds of employment than clerical" and "That the prospects of the Straits Chinese

¹⁵⁶ Lim Boon Keng, "Straits Chinese Reform: II – Dress and Costume," *SCM* 3, no. 10 (1899), p. 58.

¹⁵⁷ Lim, "Our Enemies," p. 56.

¹⁵⁸ A Baba [pseud.], "Our Nonyas," *SCM* 7, no. 4 (1903), p. 129.

¹⁵⁹ Chia, "The Language of the Babas."

¹⁶⁰ Kaori Shinozaki, "Re-Examination of the 'Chinese Nationalism' and Categorization of the Chinese in Malaya: The Case of the Chinese in Penang, 1890s–1910s" (paper presented at the The Penang Story – International Conference, Penang, 18–21 April 2002).

¹⁶¹ Skinner, "Creolized Chinese," p. 88.

in business are bright and hopeful.”¹⁶² Proper education was one vital facet of competitiveness, and language skills – Chinese and English – were part of this. Whilst reformers acknowledged that education in English was the best for Straits Chinese children, they also advocated courses in Chinese studies and language.¹⁶³ The Chinese consul urged the Straits Chinese to learn Chinese so that they could find lucrative employment in newly industrialising China.¹⁶⁴

The anxiety and atmosphere of competition can aptly be summed up in a comment by Lim Boon Keng that “the Chinese system of thought and social polity must be changed or adapted to the newer needs of *international intercourse*, or else we Chinese must forfeit all the advantages which we otherwise enjoy, and must be content with only a secondary place in the social and commercial struggles of the nation [emphasis added].”¹⁶⁵ The need for change was driven by the need to compete and survive. Lim’s comment also draws attention to another crucial aspect of modernity – the growing consciousness of the connectedness of East and West. Interpreted in this way, Straits Chinese society can be seen as self-consciously modern. Its economic survival depended on just such an interconnectedness and the Straits Chinese ability to be “two-faced.”

As Jean DeBernardi stresses, rather than being a crisis of identity, the reformatory efforts of Lim Boon Keng represented an “integrative cosmopolitanism” that aimed to synthesize scientific rationality and modernity with Chinese identity and ethical values.¹⁶⁶ Modernization did not put at risk the strength of Straits Chinese identification as Chinese; rather it pointed to a path of being Chinese and being adaptable as modern Straits Chinese. Self-respecting Straits Chinese could continue to send their children to English-medium schools, ensuring better job prospects and at the same time feel that they were embracing progress in a culturally acceptable way. Moreover, the global networks of migration, commerce, and print from the nineteenth

¹⁶² “Chinese Christian Association,” *SCM* 1, no. 4 (1897): p. 158; and “Chinese Philomathic Society,” *SCM* 2, no. 8 (1898), p. 192.

¹⁶³ Lim, “Our Enemies,” pp. 54–55.

¹⁶⁴ “China – A New Field for Straits Chinese Enterprise: An Interview with Mr Lew Yuk Lin, Acting Consul for China at Singapore,” *SCM* 2, no. 7 (1898), pp. 103–104.

¹⁶⁵ Lim, “Straits Chinese Reform – I: The Queue Question,” p. 23.

¹⁶⁶ Jean DeBernardi, “Lim Boon Keng and the Invention of Cosmopolitanism in the Straits Settlements,” in *Managing Change in Southeast Asia: Local Identities, Global Cultures*, ed. Jean DeBernardi, Gregory Forth, and Sandra Niessen (Montreal: Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 173–187.

to the early twentieth centuries meant that literate Straits-Chinese were increasingly exposed to wider notions of Chinese identity.¹⁶⁷

The concurrent attitudes to reform and modernization of the Peranakans in the Netherlands Indies provide an interesting comparison and illustrate the extent of the concern with modernity and Chinese culture amongst the Peranakans more generally. Access to Dutch education for Peranakan children before the end of the nineteenth century had been mainly through schools set up by Dutch missionaries, where the syllabus included bible study, Malay, writing, arithmetic, drawing, and perhaps some Dutch; a few children from wealthier Peranakan families could also have been sent to privately-run Dutch schools from the late nineteenth century after a ban on indigenous and Chinese enrolment was lifted in 1864.¹⁶⁸ However, the Dutch government generally neglected to provide education for Chinese children. In 1901, Peranakans in Java formed the Tiong Hwa Hwee Koan to promote Confucianism and Chinese culture, and to redress the problem of education for Chinese children.¹⁶⁹

Like the reform movement in the Straits Settlements, the Tiong Hwa Hwee Koan promoted the streamlining of Chinese rituals, particularly those which it felt were riddled by superstition or overly expensive. For instance, it recommended that mourners should not “wail...and make those who hear the wailing uncomfortable” at funerals.¹⁷⁰ The establishment by Tjoa Tjoe Koan from Java in 1904 of the *Ik Po*, a weekly periodical with text in Malay and Chinese, was to “resinify” the Peranakans and to keep them informed of modern developments.¹⁷¹ Peranakan society was, however, divided. Reformers were attracted to the conservative appeal of Confucianism as a countermeasure for outmoded cultural and social practices.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Frost, *Transcultural Diaspora*, especially pp. 18–22.

¹⁶⁸ Leo Suryadinata, *The Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1997), p. 80.

¹⁶⁹ Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority*, pp. 81, 128–129.

¹⁷⁰ Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority*, p. 130.

¹⁷¹ Claudine Salmon, “L’édition Chinoise dans le Monde Insulindien (fin du XIX^e s. – début du XX^e s.),” *Archipel* 32 (1986), p. 130. Elsewhere, Salmon argues that resinification of an “invisible” element of Peranakan society in Java and Makassar that was being gradually absorbed into local society. She contends that this occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, well before the establishment of the Tiong Hwa Hwee Koan. Claudine Salmon, “Ancestral Halls, Funeral Associations, and Attempts at Resinicization in Nineteenth Century Netherlands India,” in *Sojourners and Settlers*, ed. Anthony Reid, pp. 183–214.

¹⁷² Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia*, pp. 81–82, 128–129.

Others criticized the method of promoting Confucianism as being discordant with the Chinese nationalist spirit.¹⁷³

The educational initiatives of the Tiong Hwa Hwee Koan were initially well received, its number of schools expanding from one in 1901 to 54 in 1908.¹⁷⁴ In response to this growth of privately-financed Chinese language schooling, the Dutch government established Dutch-Chinese Schools in 1908 in an attempt to regain control over the education of the Chinese population.¹⁷⁵ As a result of more accessible Dutch-medium education and because of wider employment opportunities provided by a Dutch education, many Peranakans transferred their children out of Chinese schools to Dutch schools.¹⁷⁶ Again, pragmatic concerns affected the pathways and, consequently, the culture of the Peranakans.

In the Straits Settlements, although some of the reformist proposals relating to dress did have moderate success amongst younger, wealthy Chinese, other modernising reforms do not appear to have made significant inroads into wider Straits Chinese society in the short term. For instance, the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, founded in 1900 to promote women's education, suffered from a chronic shortage of funds.¹⁷⁷ Wedding decorations, some of which Lim Boon Keng criticized as being "horrid" and excessive, do not appear to have been vastly modified in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁸ Part of the reason for the sluggishness of change may have been that the reformists were a minority within the Straits Chinese population – a small clique of educated and wealthy elite – who relied overly on persuasion, reasoning, and example which were not effective, and who lacked a promotional arm to push the reforms ahead.¹⁷⁹

The reformers also faced inherent intergenerational resistance to change, revealed in photographs of the 1910s. The photograph of a Peranakan family in figure 39 shows

¹⁷³ Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁷⁴ Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority*, pp. 81–82.

¹⁷⁵ Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁶ Suryadinata, *Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia*, pp. 84–85.

¹⁷⁷ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 306. Some care must be taken in interpreting this. In itself, the low level of support is not a sufficient indicator that wealthy Straits Chinese were unwilling to support education for women in general since alternatives such as private governesses were available.

¹⁷⁸ Lim, "Our Enemies," p. 56.

¹⁷⁹ Lysa Hong, "The Intellectual Awakening and Social Reforms of the Chinese in Singapore (1894–1910)" (B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 1975), p. 44.

three generations, all wearing different dress. The matriarch is dressed in a striped cotton *baju panjang*. The next generation of women is dressed in European voile *baju panjang*. Younger Nonyas wear the *kebaya*, a shortened version of the *baju panjang*, and the youngest girls are clad in Chinese *samfoo* (blouse and trousers). But in spite of the lack of immediate results, the long-term contribution of the reform movement sowed a conviction amongst the Straits Chinese of the usefulness of education, intellect, and reason, and of the need for change as a means to progress. Moreover, out of Lim Boon Keng's endorsement of "eclecticism" arose a subtle sense that the Straits Chinese cultural identity was flexible, capable of adapting to the changes and challenges of a modern world.

Straits Chinese in the Inter-war Years

The mix of events in China, moves in India and Sri Lanka towards enfranchisement, the patriotism of Straits-born as British subjects during the First World War, and the education that exposed literate Straits Chinese to modern ideals helped to shape Straits Chinese political attitudes in the inter-war years. British imperial history, taught as part of the English education curriculum, imparted the ideal of democracy through the schools' debating societies.¹⁸⁰ During this time, the educated Straits Chinese focussed their attention on obtaining political rights as members of a British-ruled polity.

The Straits Chinese, as well as immigrants of other ethnic groups who had settled in the Straits, now called for greater political representation based on equal treatment not simply as British subjects but as citizens with full political rights.¹⁸¹ One vocal critic of the British administration's treatment of non-Europeans was Tan Cheng Lock, a Melaka Peranakan who began his working life as a schoolteacher. He criticized the British administration for not allowing locally-born Asians (Malays, Indians, and Chinese), who were "sons of the soil" and "part and parcel of [an] Empire...founded on the principle of liberty," to enter the civil service or to participate in higher legislative bodies such as the Straits Settlements Executive Council.¹⁸² In 1926, he was the first to voice the idea of a united multi-racial Malaya based on a "true Malayan

¹⁸⁰ Chua, *Negotiating National Identity*, pp. 115–116.

¹⁸¹ Chua, *Negotiating National Identity*, pp. 115–118. Chua's study, based on opinions expressed in the *Malaya Tribune* newspaper by the Straits Chinese and other English-speaking Straits-born non-Malays, was not restricted to the Straits Chinese alone.

¹⁸² Quoted in K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979), pp. 28–29.

spirit and consciousness amongst its people to the complete elimination of the racial or communal feeling.”¹⁸³

The idea of a political identity defined by a sense of belonging to Malaya as a place of birth was echoed by a number of other Straits Chinese. Chua Ai Lin argues that this drew them, as well as the Straits-born of other races, to engage in the discourse of a united Malaya and a Malayan identity that crossed the racial divide.¹⁸⁴ However, she finds that the British administration’s ideas of according the ethnic Malays greater political status differed markedly from Straits-born peoples’ ideals of racial equality. Its divisiveness was further exacerbated by the attempts of the Malay community to deny that non-Malays could have a fundamental connection to Malaya.¹⁸⁵ As a result, the issue of political equality for all races was left unresolved and in the second half of the 1930s, the focus of the Straits-born communities’ political agitation shifted from equal status as Malaysians to citizenship in a British polity.¹⁸⁶

Within this context, it becomes easier to understand how many within the Peranakan community could see themselves as part of larger unity with a common goal, whether in terms of multi-racial equality or simply for greater political representation. Along with his promotion of a common Malayan identity, Tan Cheng Lock spoke against a homogeneous society dominated by Malay characteristics.¹⁸⁷ The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 caused an outcry amongst overseas Chinese. Some Straits Chinese were critical of sympathy with Chinese causes, seeing this as inconsistent with the commitment to Malaya. One writer questioned, “How can one remain loyal to Malaya and China at the same time?”¹⁸⁸ Others such as Mrs Lee Choon Guan, Tay Lian Teck and Lim Boon Keng organized events, including a Peranakan-style *bangsawan* (modernized Malay opera), to raise funds for the China Relief Fund.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ In a speech made in 1926. Quoted in Tan, “Descent and Identity,” p. 9.

¹⁸⁴ Chua, *Negotiating National Identity*, pp. 79–80.

¹⁸⁵ Chua, *Negotiating National Identity*, pp. 81, 137. See also Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 247–252.

¹⁸⁶ Chua, *Negotiating National Identity*.

¹⁸⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, p. 231.

¹⁸⁸ From an unspecified article in the *Singapore Free Press*, 27 September 1937, quoted in Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 147.

¹⁸⁹ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 147.

Many Straits Chinese also supported Chinese vernacular education. English-educated Straits Chinese, such as Penang-born Lim Cheng Ean, were outspoken critics of the colonial administration's lack of provision for vernacular education as well as the increased school fees for English-medium education.¹⁹⁰ Tan Cheng Lock lobbied the British to provide universal education in English "to inculcate civic virtues appropriate to the British Empire" and as a foundation for the civic development of the populace, but also firmly supported the teaching of Mandarin in English schools "so that [the Chinese] may never lose touch with their own mother tongue, and never lose sight of the noblest ideals of their race..."¹⁹¹ He sent his own children for basic Mandarin lessons even though he himself could not read Chinese and spoke to them in English.¹⁹²

Those who regarded an interest in China and the Chinese language as a manifestation of disloyalty appear to have been concerned mainly with the subversive potential of Chinese education:

The fact that there are aliens in our midst who speak Chinese is no reason why we should learn it, even if we are of Chinese blood... We believe that they (i.e., Chinese schools) should be discouraged if not suppressed by the government because they do not make for the betterment of the government... It should be remembered that these Chinese vernacular schools teach not only Chinese dialects but they also teach Chinese customs and fidelity to a foreign flag and land.¹⁹³

To some extent, this echoes the colonial authority's earlier concerns that Chinese schools were breeding grounds for Chinese nationalism and political subversion. In an attempt to curb the spread of Chinese revolutionary or nationalist propaganda, the colonial administration had earlier required Chinese schools which applied for

¹⁹⁰ Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 230–231; and P.G. Lim, "Lim Cheng Ean's Farewell," *The Penang File*, issue 31 (2003), <<http://thepenangfile.bravepages.com/nov-2003/histr314.htm>> [accessed 29 May 2004]. In 1933, Lim caused a stir when he walked out of the Legislative Council chamber in protest at the government's refusal to provide free vernacular education in Chinese and Tamil.

¹⁹¹ Tjoa Hock Guan, "The Social and Political Ideas of Tun Datuk Sir Cheng Lock Tan," in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital, c. 1400–1980*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 309–310; and Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock," p. 34.

¹⁹² Agnes Tan, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁹³ Reply from the editor of the *Malacca Guardian* in May 1929 to a Straits Chinese reader, quoted in Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, pp. 62–63. Tan adds that this reflects the views of some Straits Chinese.

government funding to teach in vernacular instead of Mandarin.¹⁹⁴ In stressing their Chinese heritage, the Straits Chinese (including the Peranakans) were deliberately nurturing an identity that invoked a Chinese lineage, not by resinicization, but by preserving elements of their culture which they regarded as important.

Flux and the Modern Peranakan

The discourse about Malayan identity and greater political representation for all inserted the Straits Chinese, and therefore the Peranakans, into an environment where there was a sense, albeit fleeting and unrealized, of the potential for cultural plurality to be knitted into a coherent whole. Added to this, the continued interaction between the Peranakans and non-acculturated Straits Chinese and *sinkeh* facilitated the Peranakans' cultural mobility between purely Chinese and acculturated Chinese ways.

Visible statements of this found expression in the choice of vestments. Peranakan women adopted the fashionable *cheongsam* with alacrity (figs. 40, 41). Betty Lim recollects:

Amy and I wore *cheongsams* to the party and caused quite a stir because in those days most women wore *sarung kebayas* or skirts and blouses. ...For this particular party, we wore three-quarter length *cheongsams* which had short slits. They were very fashionable....Amy had her hair in a traditional *sanggul* [hair tied in a chignon typical of the Nonya] but I had my hair in the style of a straight bob with a fringe...¹⁹⁵

Whilst her sister Amy's combination of the *sanggul* with the *cheongsam* may simply have reflected the uneven pace of adopting new hair- and dress-styles, Betty Lim's own interest in Peranakan food and awareness of her cultural heritage as both Chinese

¹⁹⁴ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, pp. 130–133; and Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 230–231. The colonial government was concerned with schools teaching *guoyu* (Mandarin), particularly after the anti-Japanese riots of 1919 and, in 1923, required Chinese schools to teach in vernacular. However, such mechanisms were found to be ineffectual. In the mid-1930s measures were instituted to “Malayanise” the curriculum in Chinese schools instead and revert again to Mandarin as a medium of instruction.

¹⁹⁵ Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, p. 17. It is interesting to note that the figure-hugging *cheongsam*, which was fashionable in Shanghai at this time, was itself a product of modernity, and differed from the looser Chinese jackets worn in the first decade of the twentieth century. See Hazel Clark, “The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity,” in *China Chic: East Meets West*, by Valerie Steele and John S. Major (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 157–158. Valerie Steele and John S. Major further suggest that the adoption of the *cheongsam* in the 1920s, which may have been derived from a Chinese man's robe, may have represented a “vestimentary androgyny” on the part of women in China. Valerie Steele and John S. Major, “From Foot Binding to Modern Fashion,” in *China Chic: East Meets West*, p. 48.

and Peranakan relates to a cultural identity that was flexible but also reflexive of its past.¹⁹⁶

Cultural alliances, conditioned in part by birth and upbringing, were also mutable by choice and according to circumstance. In the rapidly developing Straits Settlements, where new ideologies and influences were flowing through society, the calls for modernization imparted a new challenge – to absorb or discard and, above all, to experiment with and transform the heterogenous influences they faced. The cultural consciousness of the Peranakan was confronted, not so much by the oppositional tensions of East, West, and even the local, but by the need to weld together a melange of modern ideas and influences without abandoning traditional reference points. The already mixed heritage of the Peranakan was a virtue, giving them the flexibility to criticize and modify their own cultural identity. In the first half of the twentieth century, Peranakan culture was culture in formation, in continual flux, appropriating, adapting, and transforming external influences as its way of negotiating past, present, and future.

¹⁹⁶ Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, pp. 25–26.

CHAPTER THREE DOMESTICATED DAUGHTERS, DUTIFUL WIVES: THE SOCIAL ROLE OF NONYA BEADWORK

From the late nineteenth to the first quarter of the twentieth century, Nonya beadwork was used as highly visible decorations, gifts, and dress accessories. Beaded hats, collars, and slippers were worn by children at festivities. Beaded belts, slippers, and purses were presented by a bride to her prospective groom and his family, and worn by Peranakan men and women on formal occasions such as birthdays and Chinese New Year celebrations. Beaded ornaments were used to decorate the wedding chamber. The social and visible nature of such events inserted beadwork into a sphere where appearance, conformity, and the hierarchy of relationships were particularly important. Aside from those who used beadwork and those who produced it, beadwork was seen by guests at Peranakan festivities and the social circle within which those who used beadwork circulated. In this way, although Nonya beadwork was made mainly by women, the wider Peranakan community encountered Nonya beadwork. The meanings encoded in beadwork thus intersected with the interaction between those who practised beading, those who purchased it and used it, and those who observed it being used.

It is popular perception, both within and outside the Peranakan community, that beadwork and embroidery “demonstrated the ideal feminine virtues of industriousness, patience, and artistic skill, as well as how much time the maker had free for such labour, and were indicators of a family’s social standing and a woman’s marriageability.”¹ This chapter explores the ways in which Nonya beadwork functioned as a signifier of meaning. The historical processes through which beadwork acquired its significance are examined to reveal how the shifting ideologies and values of Peranakan society, as well as the changing social relationships, were articulated in material terms. The social reforms proposed for Peranakan society in the first quarter of the twentieth century subtly altered how beadwork was regarded, and this rendered the meanings of beadwork unstable and dynamic. Investigating the ways in which the social roles of Nonya beadwork were conceived, communicated, and transformed illustrates that beadwork was not simply a passive indicator of wealth and feminine virtues.

¹ Heidi Tan, “‘Peranakan Legacy’ at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore,” *IIAS Newsletter*, no. 31 (July 2003), p. 50.

Peranakan Celebrations

Two of the most important festive occasions celebrated by the Peranakan community were the wedding and Chinese New Year. Apart from their ritual significance, their visibility reinforced the dominant hierarchy within Peranakan society.

The Wedding

Felix Chia's play, *Pileh Menantu (Choosing a Daughter-in-Law)*, parodies the trials and tribulations of a Peranakan family in the 1930s as they search for a suitable daughter-in-law.² It focuses on Nonya Molek, a matchmaker whose machinations, particularly her calculation of horoscopes, ensure an appropriate match. The factors that motivate the match are explained by Nonya Bulat, a family friend of the protagonist, in the final scene, "...Bah Hoe Kiah's [father of the prospective groom] got a good name, and he is rich! It's an honour to be connected with his descendants!"³

The play encapsulates memories of the considerable importance of lineage, wealth, and social status as determinants of marriage. For the migrant Chinese society of the Straits Settlements, friendship and business often went together. As Tan Liok Ee emphasizes, kinship ties formed out of marital bonds cemented alliances and strengthened networks of power and business partnerships.⁴ Examples of friends and business partners whose offspring were match-made to each other are numerous, especially amongst the wealthy. Where it was particularly important to maintain family ties, widowers sometimes married the sister of their deceased wife.⁵

At the same time, beliefs also played a decisive role in marriage negotiations. Before a marriage could proceed, the astrological compatibility of the potential bride and groom had to be ascertained. This was achieved by consulting a deity or referring to the Chinese reference *Book of Fate (Tong Soo)*.⁶ If the pair was deemed compatible, an

² Felix Chia, *Pileh Menantu (Choosing a Daughter-in-Law)* (Singapore: Magro International, 1984). Felix Chia's father was a third generation Peranakan, and his mother a sixth generation Peranakan. See Felix Chia "Emerald Hill Revisited," in *Rumah Baba*, by Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, p. 33.

³ Chia, *Pileh Menantu*, p. 100.

⁴ Tan, "Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History," p. 365. See also the discussion in Chapter One on Peranakan social and kinship networks.

⁵ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 18; and Tan, "Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History," p. 366.

⁶ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 20; and Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 119–120.

auspicious date for the wedding was then chosen by scholars or priests.⁷ The proper performance of rituals ensured their efficacy and the observance of prohibitions, such as looking at the wedding couple while the bride was unveiled, was thought to help the couple avoid bad luck (*pantang*).⁸

Before the wedding ceremony proper, certain customary procedures had to be followed. Two Chinese copper coins placed onto twelve sheets of gold-plated joss paper, which Gwee suggests was an offering to the guardian spirit of the bed, were to be placed under each bed post.⁹ Items that symbolized wealth, longevity, and fertility – a comb of “king” bananas (*pisang raja*), lemon grass (*serai*), and yam (*keladi*) – and three lighted joss sticks were placed under the bed as prayers for good fortune.¹⁰ The cleansing (*an chng*) ceremony to purify the bridal bed had to be carried out by a small boy whose horoscope did not clash with the time of the ceremony and whose parents were preferably alive.¹¹ Those who wished for extra protection in keeping the bridal chamber free of “evil influences” could place paper charms obtained from the temple in the room.¹²

Peranakan girls were generally married in their teens and matches were decided by the heads of families (figs. 42, 43). The potential bride and groom were not expected to meet or to take part in the marriage negotiations. An account written in 1913 by Lee Choo Neo, a Nonya who was to become the first locally-qualified Straits Chinese woman doctor in Singapore, depicted the Peranakan bride as a helpless pawn:

It is the parents who bring about the matches and make all the arrangements. In most cases the marriage takes place between people who are total strangers to one another. The girl is so completely under the control of her parents that her wishes are not consulted at all...she is not informed of the identity, position, age, appearance, etc., of her future husband...¹³

If the groom was already an established businessman, he could exercise some choice over the bride. Otherwise, the groom too,

⁷ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 20; and Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 119–120

⁸ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, pp. 65, 70.

⁹ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 30; and Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 58.

¹⁰ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 30.

¹¹ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 32.

¹² Cheo, *Baba Wedding*.

¹³ Lee Choo Neo, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” *The Queen, The Lady’s Newspaper*, 27 September 1913, p. 562. On Lee Choo Neo, see Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, pp. 352–353.

...is to be one of the principal figures at the marriage ceremony, and yet he has no voice, and no opinion in the preliminary arrangements. He has no part in the selection of his future wife. He does not actually see her until the wedding has become a *fait accompli*, when retractation is impossible.¹⁴

The Peranakan wedding ceremony is said to have been based primarily on the customs of the southern Chinese to which most Peranakans trace their ancestry.¹⁵ Although little formal research has been done into the parallels between the southern Chinese wedding and the Peranakan wedding, this can certainly be supported by the descriptions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century wedding celebrations in southern China. In southern China, on the wedding day itself, the bride was conveyed to the groom's home in a sedan chair, accompanied by gong-beaters and musicians blowing pipes.¹⁶ Bride and groom then paid respects, first at the altar to heaven and then at the family altar. After the unveiling of the bride, the bride was teased by the guests, but was supposed to remain mute and serious. The first symbolic meal of the bride and groom was followed by a banquet for guests. Although it differed in details, the procedure of the Peranakan wedding was comparable and, until the early twentieth century, the Peranakan wedding costumes for the bride and groom were based on Chinese models. The main difference was the matrilocal nature of the Peranakan wedding, with the wedding conducted at the bride's home, and its much longer duration of twelve days rather than two or three as appears to have been customary in southern China.

At the Peranakan wedding, a mistress-of-ceremonies (*sang kheh umm*) was hired to instruct the bride on manners and deportment, and a master-of-ceremonies (*pak chindek*) guided the groom. One of the main duties of the *sang kheh umm* was to ensure the bride adopted the correct posture, maintained a serious and unemotional countenance, and walked with a swaying gait.¹⁷ Every movement of the wedding couple was scrutinized by family and friends and the correct performance of these movements had social implications. The deportment of the bride reflected her grace and dignity to a community which valued refinement. More subtly, under the strain of

¹⁴ Lew See Fah [pseud.], "Letter to the Editors. Straits Chinese Fathers," *SCM* 5, no. 18 (1901), p. 48.

¹⁵ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 1; and Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 30.

¹⁶ The following description of the southern Chinese wedding is from Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese: A Daguerreotype of Daily Life in China* (London: Sampson, Low, Son & Marston, 1868), pp. 45–65. See also Chiang Yee, *A Chinese Childhood* (London: Methuen, 1940), pp. 96–102, 137–139.

¹⁷ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 125.

heavy costume and jewellery,¹⁸ her controlled movements may have indicated her healthy physical constitution, and by implication, her child-bearing capability.

Bearing sons was particularly important. It was an extension of the family name and ensured a future generation to carry on the family business. For Peranakans, the performance of rites for the *sinchew* was crucial to the wellbeing of deceased ancestors. These rites could only be carried out by male descendants or, in the absence of sons, the nearest male relative.¹⁹

To seal the agreement of marriage, gifts had to be exchanged (*lap chye*).²⁰ Custom dictated which gifts were to be accepted by the bride's family and what items had to be given to the groom in return. Amongst the items presented by the groom to the bride's family was money in red envelopes. One envelope contained money for the bride's parents as compensation for bringing her up (*wang tetek* or "weaning money") which the parents were expected to accept.²¹ Apart from the obvious connotation of the financial status of the giver, the gift exchange symbolized the reciprocity of the marriage arrangement. It is revealing that the bride's family was not expected to accept a second red envelope bearing cash as a pure gift (*wang belanja*) since that indicated the bride was being "sold" for monetary reward.²² Instead, the marriage can be interpreted as one that carried more lasting mutual obligations.

The tea ceremony, generally performed on the third day of a twelve-day wedding ceremony, formalized the relationship of the bride and groom to their respective families and their lineage. The performance involved kneeling and offering tea, an act of obeisance, to relatives in order of seniority and to the souls of deceased ancestors.²³ Equally, the ceremony established the place of the bride and groom within the family hierarchy.

¹⁸ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 128.

¹⁹ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, pp. 26-27. See also n. 68 of Chapter Two.

²⁰ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 12; and Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 55.

²¹ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 35; and Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 55.

²² Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 55.

²³ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 127.

Chinese New Year had both secular and religious significance. It was considered a universal birthday – a celebration of having lived another year.²⁴ It was also an occasion to revere and seek blessings from deities and to exchange good wishes.²⁵ During the first few days of New Year, it was customary to visit relatives, friends, and business acquaintances to pay respects. This was observed across ethnic boundaries. J.D. Vaughan commented that

Europeans make it a point to visit their Chinese acquaintances and are always hospitably received, and presented with cups of tea and other refreshments. The master of the house has to stay at home to receive visitors whilst the junior members of the family and the females pay the visits. This task must be exceedingly wearisome to a person holding a high position although gratifying to his pride...²⁶

Within the Peranakan community, visits made on the first day of Chinese New Year were particularly important, when junior family members were expected to pay their respects to their elders.²⁷ Effectively, these visits expressed how each family within the community perceived and participated in the familial and social hierarchy. Among Peranakan and other Chinese families, the most senior surviving family members were visited first, seniority defined by age and the closeness of lineal connection (for example, paternal grandmother, maternal grandmother, then perhaps paternal granduncle). These would be followed by visits to seniors related by marriage (for example, grandmother of maternal cousin), other lineal relatives, business associates, and friends. However, visits to very close business associates may have taken precedence over those to more distant relatives.²⁸ Spread over several days, the sequence of visits distinguished the order of importance of each set of relationships, separating kin from friends and acquaintances.

Weddings and New Year celebrations did not simply mark the cycles of time and transition to new stages of life. They were crucial occasions at which Peranakan society assembled and exchanged gossip as a way of transmitting information. These

²⁴ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 132.

²⁵ See descriptions in Chia, *Babas Revisited*, pp. 140–146; and Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, pp. 143–54.

²⁶ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 45.

²⁷ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 143.

²⁸ J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003.

were also instances when Peranakan families' eligible daughters (*anak dara*) could be respectably introduced to a wider society.²⁹ Family hierarchy and lineage were reinforced through performances of obeisance and gift-giving observed by friends and family. At New Year, the social hierarchy was made visible and validated through strictly-ordered formalized visits.

Beadwork Displays and Conspicuous Consumption

The foremost association of beadwork was with the Peranakan wedding. Lavish displays of embroideries glittered against the wooden furniture and lent the wedding chamber an air of opulence (fig. 44). Catching and reflecting light, glass and metallic beads added to the richness of the furnishings, complementing the silk drapes and curtains. The wedding procession of the groom to the bride's home was equally grand. A retinue of colourfully dressed lantern, umbrella and banner bearers, gong beaters, and musicians accompanied the groom, reminiscent of royal Malay ceremonial processions.³⁰

It appears that some Nonyas believed that stylish weddings, which included elaborate displays of hangings for the wedding bed (*ranjang kahwin*), augured a happy wedded life.³¹ Edmond Chin has further interpreted the Peranakans' ostentatious displays of wealth as a strategy for status and distinction in Southeast Asia and to impress the *sinkeh*.³² Lavish wedding displays were indicative of wealth. Advertising one's affluence was practically motivated, for it was both a means for upward social mobility and a consequence of it. As Constance Turnbull points out, "[w]ealth remained the sole key to social standing among the Singapore Chinese until the emergence of a new

²⁹ Betty Lim comments that prospective mothers-in-law would observe the young unmarried Nonyas who were assigned to serve water at the wedding luncheon, making a note of their behaviour, looks, and poise to discern those whom they thought would make good daughters-in-law. Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, p. 30. Gwee observes that the unmarried women guests at weddings were more elaborately dressed than the married ones. Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 60. In Penang, another occasion at which unmarried Chinese girls were allowed to be seen outside of a restricted family circle was on *chap goh meh*, the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year. See Margaret Khor, "The Nyonya Then and Now," *Pulau Pinang* 2, no. 6 (1990), p. 16; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 106. However, this does not appear to have been the case in Melaka and Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s. Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 146.

³⁰ Photographs of a traditional Peranakan wedding procession conducted in Melaka in 1981 are shown in Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, pp. 70–71, 79.

³¹ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 138.

³² Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 24–25. Ho Wing Meng regards beadwork as an ostentatious display of wealth. See Violet Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," *The Straits Times Annual*, 1981, p. 103.

university-trained professional class at the end of the [nineteenth] century.”³³ It was likewise for the Chinese in Penang and Melaka who were under the same colonial administration. For the Peranakans, whose early prosperity was derived through trade, tax concessions and, to a lesser extent, agriculture, it helped to have access to capital which an astute marriage could enhance.

However, Chin’s suggestion that lavish weddings may have been to impress or differentiate the Peranakans from *sinkeh* society is less convincing. In fact, available evidence suggests that the competition for distinction took place within Peranakan society itself, especially as many facets of the wedding were visible only to invited guests. The Peranakan population in the Straits Settlements, estimated at between 45,000 and 50,000, was small relative to the rest of the Chinese population, which numbered almost 180,000 in 1891.³⁴ The comparatively small size of the Peranakan community in the Straits meant that Peranakan society was relatively closely-knit, particularly amongst its elite, inevitably leading to comparisons of status between families. The wedding chamber thus became a space for the contest of distinction and decoration of the wedding chamber was careful planned:

[G]randma took great pains to make sure that nothing was left wanting in its [the wedding chamber’s] decoration...when grandma sent her two granddaughters-in-law over as helpers [for the preparation of the wedding of some acquaintances], she instructed them to study the bridal room decorations closely so that when the time came for cousin Swee Neo’s wedding, grandma could decorate the bridal room better than theirs. Both sisters-in-law were repeatedly reminded that they should not miss any detail of the designs on the bed curtains because grandma did not want to repeat the same pattern for cousin Swee Neo. *In order to compete with others grandma bought nothing but the best for her* [emphasis added].³⁵

As a centre of attention, the *ranjang kahwin* was often a specially ordered Chinese-style bed lacquered in red and gilded to accentuate the carvings (fig. 44). The canopy of the bed was draped with embroidered ornamental curtains. In Penang, the curtains were edged with rabbit fur, in a style similar to the bridal *baju panjang* used on the third day of the wedding. As fashions changed towards the 1920s, the Chinese

³³ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 101.

³⁴ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” p. 58, n. 84, p. 82. See also n. 1 of Chapter One.

³⁵ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 51.

wooden bed was substituted with a gleaming European brass bed (fig. 45). Lace curtains gradually replaced the heavier silk drapes.³⁶

Embroidered and beaded mattress panels, curtain ties, necktie-shaped hangings, cut-work ornaments, and gewgaws adorned the bed, whilst pillow ends (*muka bantal*) and mats added an impression of luxuriance. These embroideries were often intricately worked in bright silk thread and minute glass beads and sometimes edged in gold thread (compare figs. 44–46 with 29, 47–49). From a distance, they would appear no less than sparkling objects vying with each other for the onlooker's attention. Silk and bead embroidered padded and three-dimensional forms that ranged from fan-, gourd-, cloud-, and vegetal-shapes, to circular discs decorated with monkeys, deer, birds, and even vegetables were hung as decorative charms (figs. 9, 10, 50, 51). Other beaded and embroidered objects such as comb and hairpin cases, vases, decorative mats, and table-covers, particularly popular in Penang, provided additional colour (figs. 11, 52–56).

Occasionally, tea-cosies, covers for lidded jars (*kum cheng*) used as soup-tureens, and food covers (*tudong saji*) embellished with beadwork would be used during the wedding meal, a symbolic affair where the bride and groom shared their first meal together (figs. 57–60).³⁷ Some items such as the *kum cheng* covers were decoratively and functionally superfluous, since the *kum cheng* were, in any case, heavily ornamented and the covers did not function as insulation. More likely, they provided an added dimension of auspicious symbolism and another opportunity to display visibly refined handwork.³⁸ Judging by their small representation in private and public collections, such objects appear to have been less common. Other types of beadwork, found mostly in Penang, include a miniature beaded tablecloth and hangings that were part of the furnishings for a small-scale replica of a Peranakan house, replete with models of the bride and groom, probably made to commemorate a marriage.³⁹

³⁶ See, for example, the brass nuptial bed of Lee Poh Neo, daughter of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, with lace drapes and ornamental hangings illustrated in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, p. 72. Lee Poh Neo was married in Singapore in 1924.

³⁷ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 126. For an illustration of a *kum cheng* with a beaded cover, see Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 100.

³⁸ The symbolic intent of the decoration is discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

³⁹ I am grateful to Ken Yap for drawing my attention to this object. I was unable to examine the beadwork but did view a digital image of the house, courtesy of C.H. Lim of Oriental Arts and Antiques, Penang, January 2003.

The use of rich furnishings at Peranakan weddings can be compared to those used at Malay and Sumatran weddings. Many items of embroidery such as the cushion covers, *muka bantal*, and necktie-shaped hangings shared the same forms as those used at Sumatran weddings.⁴⁰ At the same time, hanging ornaments also shared common forms and designs with those used by the Chinese, and these appear to have been a standard element in the bridal chamber of the Chinese in the Nanyang by the early nineteenth century.⁴¹ Figure 61 shows a drawing of a nuptial chamber in Ambon (Maluku) published in 1833. Although the relative simplicity of the chamber contrasts with the opulence of the Peranakan wedding decorations, similar forms of gewgaws were present in both.

The major outlays for a Peranakan wedding focussed on large items such as the *ranjang kahwin*. The quality of these items was most probably judged by their refined workmanship. An advertisement in an 1894 edition of the *Bintang Timor* for imported beds and other furniture stressed their “extremely refined” quality and “suitability for wedding use.”⁴² Wealthy families also used gold and silver curtain hooks, *muka bantal*, and gewgaws. Chased and repoussé silver panels of Chinese, local, and Thai workmanship were commonly appliquéd on headdresses, wedding belt purses, *sapu tangan*, slipper tops, curtain ties, and even *tudong saji*. Occasionally, beadwork or metallic thread embroidery and appliqués made of silver were combined in a single piece of needlework for slipper tops, belt purses, and even decorative panels used for the wedding.⁴³

It was customary for the bride’s family to present the groom with a belt, preferably of gold or silver.⁴⁴ Beaded belts with buckles of silver or gold may also have been part of the array of gifts (figs. 62–64). Although it is possible that gold and silver items may

⁴⁰ See Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, especially figs. 453, 454, pp. 317–318.

⁴¹ See also Eng-Lee Seok Chee, “The Straits Chinese Bridal Chamber,” *Arts of Asia* 17, no. 3 (1987), p. 110.

⁴² Untitled advertisement, *Bintang Timor*, 16 August 1894. The advertisement reads, “Tan Kim Tian punya chinchew bahru bawak deri Semarang di kapal api Kim Tok Seng, macham macham punya TIKAR, RANJANG, dan TIKAR LOKSAN/ Yang Halus Skali/ Orang Kawen Punya Pakai” which translates as “Tan Kim Tian’s cargo clerk has recently imported from Semarang [Java] by the steamer Kim Tok Seng, various mattresses, beds, wedding mattresses/ Extremely refined/ Used for Weddings.” Tan Kim Tian may have been the wealthy shipowner whose steamers sailed between the Malay peninsula and the Netherlands Indies. See Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 350.

⁴³ See Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, fig. 22, p. 48, fig. 43, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 36; and Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2002.

have been costlier than beaded items,⁴⁵ beadwork and embroidery were nevertheless of fairly significant monetary and social value and were used alongside gold and silver decorations at the weddings of wealthy Nonyas. For instance, Lee Siok Ten who married a wealthy Melaka businessman owned a beaded *tudong saji* and the rubber magnate Tan Chay Yan's daughters used beaded mattress panels for their weddings (figs. 58b, 65).⁴⁶ Some of the items such as the beaded mattress panels were not new but associated the user with a lineage that had access to such objects.

It is difficult to obtain an idea of the absolute price levels of gold and silver items. However, a sense of relative prices can be obtained from a catalogue of around 1910 for the John Little's department store in Singapore.⁴⁷ It advertised brass double beds at \$115 (Straits dollars) and linen embroidery floss for \$0.08 per skein. In comparison, a "shophouse" (a two storey terrace house used for commercial purposes) in Singapore cost \$3,000 to \$4,000, and an inheritance of \$5,000 was considered sizeable in the same period.⁴⁸

Embroidery may not have been as expensive as other markers of prosperity such as imported furniture or metalwork, but beadwork was costly in terms of the time it took to produce each object, and this was reflected in its price. For instance, in the 1930s, beaded slipper tops cost about \$2.50 per pair and beaded slippers between \$5 and \$6 per pair – up to one-fifth of the monthly salary of \$30 that could be used to support a family.⁴⁹ In current prices, these amounts are equivalent to approximately S\$275 for a pair of beaded slipper tops and between S\$550 and S\$660 for a pair of completed beaded slippers.⁵⁰ Hence, although beaded slippers were considerably less expensive

⁴⁵ See Page, Lea, and Potash, "A Century of Straits Chinese Silver," p. 31.

⁴⁶ Jenny Soon, personal communication, March 2003. See also the discussion in Chapter Four.

⁴⁷ *John Little's Illustrated Catalogue* (Singapore, n.d.). The catalogue is estimated to be from the first decade of the 1900s based on the styles of clothing advertised. John Little's was a department store catering to a European clientele; however, well-to-do locals may also have patronized the store. Certainly, the catalogue gives an idea of the prices of comparable imported items. Pages from a John Little's catalogue from the early twentieth century showing the types of household furnishings and decorative items similar to those used in Peranakan homes are shown in Lee Kip Lin, *The Singapore House 1819–1942* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1988), pp. 95, 97, 103.

⁴⁸ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, 1988, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, transcript p. 43; and Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, 1986, reel 3, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore. These and all subsequent references to the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore should be understood to refer to the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, National Heritage Board, Singapore.

⁵⁰ This equivalence is based on the average monthly earnings of a worker in Singapore of S\$3,329 (Singapore dollars) in 2004, drawn from Table 2.2, "Average Monthly Earnings by Industry, 1994–

than imported European women's shoes, at between \$12.50 and \$15.50 per pair in 1934, they nevertheless represented a significant expenditure.⁵¹ In addition, the finer the needlework, the more expensive such slippers are likely to have been.

The new beaded and embroidered slippers of the bride and groom were often displayed prominently in a glass-fronted cabinet in the wedding chamber, arranged to catch the attention of wedding guests (fig. 66). A typical needlework display in a wedding chamber of the 1920s was described thus:

At one corner of the room could be seen all the bride's footwear ranging from those for use at home to those for outings. There were several pairs of slippers and shoes all colourfully embroidered with gold thread. These had been so strategically placed that for anybody entering the room they commanded immediate attention and admiration.⁵²

A large display of beaded and embroidered slippers was an unequivocal signal of wealth. Whilst hangings, receptacles, and other decorative items could be passed from one generation to the next, hired from a *sang kheh umm*, or even borrowed, beaded slippers were practical items that formed part of the bridal trousseau.⁵³ They were made or bought specifically for this occasion and for the particular bride and groom. Slippers depreciated with use – once worn, they showed wear and tear which subtracted from their subsequent exchangeability as a commodity. Hence, it is unlikely that second-hand slippers would have been highly valued or that there would have been an active market for them.

In his analysis of the social functions of commodities, Arjun Appadurai notes that sumptuary laws and royal monopolies which “de-commoditized” objects by preventing their exchange through the usual market mechanisms could, in fact, enhance the value of objects by virtue of their restricted circulation – a notion he referred to as

2004,” in Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, *Singapore Year Book of Manpower Statistics* (Singapore: Ministry of Manpower, 2005), available at <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/ManpowerResearchNStatistics/AnnualReports/SingaporeYearbookofManpowerStatistics2005Wages.htm> [accessed 20 July 2005].

⁵¹ These were the non-sale prices for Bally kid and calf leather and brocade high-heeled shoes. Sale prices ranged from \$1.50 to \$5 for the same types of shoes. Prices are from an advertisement for Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co., Singapore, *Malaya Tribune*, 29 May 1934.

⁵² Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 52.

⁵³ For instance, Grace Saw's Nonya grandmother hired out beadwork and other types of equipment for Peranakan weddings in Penang. Grace Saw, personal communication, November 2004. According to another Nonya, the bridal *sapu tangan* was rented. Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2002.

“enclaving.”⁵⁴ In the case of beaded slippers, their “enclaving” through the absence of a viable second-hand market can also be seen as restricting their exchangeability and contributing to their value. The difference here is that it was the destruction of the slippers’ subsequent exchangeability, not their restricted circulation, which amplified their perceived value. The value of slippers as an indicator of wealth was embedded in their specificity. That beaded slippers were good only for a one-off display enhanced their signifying power because the capital invested in these slippers could not be directly recouped. Unlike batiks or jewellery and metalwork, they could not serve as a store of wealth.⁵⁵ Hence, the display of a large number of slippers showed that the bride, and by extension, her family, were able to invest resources in a relatively illiquid asset that did not, indeed could not, once they were worn, yield a return apart from the use that would eventually be made of them.

It is not clear that Nonya beadwork was made exclusively for Peranakan use. Non-Peranakan Chinese may also have used Nonya beaded and embroidered slippers (fig. 67).⁵⁶ However, Nonya and Nonya-style beadwork (as distinct from Malay beadwork done in Perak, mostly in geometric and floral designs) was primarily associated with the Peranakans. 70-year-old Kamachee Pillay from the Melaka Chitty community recalls that her grandmother used and made beadwork.⁵⁷ However, Pillay suggests that her grandmother’s beadwork was a direct result of the influence of the Melaka Peranakan community since she used to work in a Peranakan household and patronized the same craftsmen as the Peranakans. Kamachee Pillay herself purchased two pairs of beaded slippers for her wedding in the late 1940s and relates their designs to those made for the Peranakans (figs. 68–69).

With the exception of commercially-made beadwork, Nonya beadwork appears to have been practised mainly by the Peranakan community, and beadwork was used by the Nonyas and those closely allied to Peranakan society. The use of beadwork thus carried a further implication – it associated the user with Peranakan culture. Since

⁵⁴ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 22–25.

⁵⁵ In Java, because batiks were a form of investment which could be pawned in times of need and remained the property of the wife even after marriage, such possessions contributed to her financial independence. Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ See also a photograph of a man with a queue and a young boy in Liu, *From the Family Album*, p. 87. The man may be wearing velvet beaded or embroidered slippers similar to those used by Peranakans. It is unclear if the man was Peranakan.

⁵⁷ Kamachee Pillay, personal communication, February 2004.

Peranakans were generally thought to be of a higher social class, belonging to a Peranakan household could connote a higher status, on occasion even reinforcing the association between Nonya beadwork and wealth.

Embroidery and Beadwork as Symbolic Practice

Chinese custom required young girls to master skills appropriate to being wives. Weaving, spinning, and embroidery were all women's work and represented virtue to the eighteenth-century Chinese scholar.⁵⁸ Proficiency in the needle arts was not only practical but also symbolized diligence and patience. Even where education for women was valued as something that could eventually be passed on to their sons and as an embodiment of the scholarly history of elite families, embroidery was given precedence over literary pursuits, including by women themselves.⁵⁹ For some Chinese women, activities such as painting were regarded as detracting from practising the needle arts.⁶⁰ For others, embroidery could be a means of self expression:

The needle is your writing brush; the length of silk your paper; the silk floss your ink. The materials needed are simple but its benefits are numerous. No wonder embroidery is the art of writing for women.⁶¹

In this sense, Dorothy Ko argues that the lotus shoes for bound feet which Chinese women stitched as gifts for relatives and friends could be seen as “a material extension of her [the maker's] body and her medium of communication. Literate daughters often wrote letters and poetry...but illiterate daughters spoke through the shoes they made.”⁶²

Chinese girls of marriageable age had to embroider shoes which were examined by matchmakers before the wedding, and “[b]ridal daughters were literally judged by the shoes they made.”⁶³ For girls from wealthy families, as many as 100 pairs of shoes

⁵⁸ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 14, 77.

⁵⁹ Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 58, 65, 77.

⁶⁰ Marsha Weidner, “The Conventional Success of Ch'en Shu,” in *Flowering in the Shadows: Women in the History of Chinese and Japanese Painting*, ed. Marsha Weidner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), p. 124.

⁶¹ Ding Pei, *The Way of Embroidery (Xiu pu)* (n.p., 1821), quoted in Dorothy Ko, *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 88.

⁶² Ko, *Every Step a Lotus*, p. 69.

⁶³ Ko, *Every Step a Lotus*, p. 69.

and numerous small bags had to be painstakingly prepared for display and then were presented to female members of the groom's family.⁶⁴

Chiang Yee described the mammoth task his sister had to undertake for her wedding:

For the bed alone she had to embroider a sheet, two pillow cases, the cover of the eiderdown, and two narrow curtains. ...She also had to embroider the door curtains, window curtains, cushion and mirror cover, and all her own clothes and shoes...a number of silk handkerchiefs, powder-puffs, little cases for visiting-cards, silk bookmarks and small flower baskets for distribution to the relations and intimate friends of the bridegroom after the wedding... Some of [the designs] were very complicated...sister had to begin the work two years before her wedding.⁶⁵

In Jiangsu in southern China, it was customary for the bride's needlework to be shown to the bridegroom's relatives and friends the day before the wedding and Chiang described how his sister's embroideries were carried in a slow procession to the groom's home, accompanied by bursts of fireworks that encouraged onlookers to view the works.⁶⁶ The reputation of the bride could be enhanced or hurt by her needlework, so much so that Chiang's grandmother sent "spies" to listen for criticism of his sister's handwork.⁶⁷

Whilst less public fanfare appears to have surrounded the display of embroideries at Peranakan weddings, the abilities to sew and embroider were regarded as an important skill for the young Nonya. Embroidery was linked inseparably with marriage and numerous accounts from the early twentieth century testify to this. One Singapore Nonya recalled:

my elders used to reminisce that when they were young a girl was expected to learn both [embroidery and beading] by her early teens./ She beaded a whole variety of items in anticipation of her marriage. Out of her trousseau she was supposed to have beaded her wedding slippers, the triangular hardened handkerchief suspended from her finger [*saputangan*] and the triangular piece of stiffened fabric overlaid by a long piece which was to be

⁶⁴ Judith Rutherford, "Chinese Textiles and Dress Accessories," *Arts of Asia* 23, no. 3 (1993), p. 142.

⁶⁵ Chiang, *Chinese Childhood*, p. 135.

⁶⁶ Chiang, *Chinese Childhood*, pp. 137–138.

⁶⁷ Chiang, *Chinese Childhood*, p. 138.

hung across her shoulder like a handkerchief [*sangkut bahu*]. She was also supposed to have beaded the groom's slippers and belt.⁶⁸

Another account by Lee Choo Neo described the training of a stereotypical Nonya:

[She] has to undergo a course of training in cooking and sewing. These two are essential accomplishments to achieve, without which she has scant hope of securing a good match. ...Her sewing comprises the embroidery of slippers, pouches, belts & c., which form features of a Chinese girl's trousseau.⁶⁹

Lee does not appear to have exaggerated the link between embroidery and favourable marriage prospects. The marital paths of three women illustrate this. Queeny Chang's mother selected a bride for her step-son, apparently after observing the girl's excellence in needlework.⁷⁰ Gwee Thian Hock's eldest aunt was able to secure her future because she "excelled in all the domestic skills, as a matter of necessity. Coming from a rather poor background, the only carrot the family had to dangle before a prospective groom was the daughter's domestic assets. Without these exceptional skills daughters from poor families faced the gloomy prospect of ending up as old maids."⁷¹ In contrast, Gwee's younger aunt who lacked domestic skills was married to a relative so that she (and her family) would not be disparaged by her in-laws for her domestic incompetence and she would not be faced with a "miserable" life.⁷²

Embroidery was firmly associated with domesticity. Good quality embroidery indicated that the needleworker was careful and precise. Fine sewing was judged by the size of stitches. The smaller and neater the stitches, the better the quality the work was considered to be. Young Nonyas were reprimanded by their elders for using large stitches which were considered to be "coolie class."⁷³ Appreciation of *halus* work encouraged attention to small details in beadwork and embroidery such as the depiction of eyes and hoofs of animals (figs. 1, 12).

⁶⁸ Chua Tian Hoe, quoted in Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 103. Chua was born in 1917 and was probably referring to the period from the end of the nineteenth to the first quarter of the twentieth century.

⁶⁹ Lee, "The Chinese Girl in Singapore," p. 562.

⁷⁰ Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 73.

⁷¹ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 12.

⁷² Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, pp. 130–131. Consanguineous marriages were fairly common and acceptable in Peranakan society as long as the bride and groom did not share the same surname. Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 19.

⁷³ Florence Chan's mother slapped her if her stitches were large. Florence Chan, interview by Danial Chew, reel 1.

The keenness for detail was not simply because the Nonyas had the time to inspect the embroidery at their leisure.⁷⁴ Fine, carefully executed embroidery was often taken as an indicator of patience, diligence, and meticulousness. In her article on the Nonya girl, Lee Choo Neo noted that embroidery “entails a great amount of patience, and it is not everyone who can perform such a task creditably.”⁷⁵

How accurately fine beadwork actually represented such characteristics is moot. Certainly, the minuteness of the seed beads used, which could be less than 1 millimetre in diameter, and the fineness of the size 13 and 14 needles meant that the beader had to have manual dexterity and good eyesight, quite independently of patience and diligence. By executing intricate designs in beads, the Nonya was putting her fine vision and deftness to use. Her ability to master this skill spoke of her physical, and not simply her personal, qualities. Competence in beadwork also conveyed the thoroughness of training in domestic skills that a young Nonya received. Beadwork was thus a selection mechanism to distinguish the desirable from the rest, particularly in a society where contact with eligible *anak dara* was so strictly controlled. A skilful beadworker was seen to equate to a domesticated daughter and a dutiful wife.

A Peranakan wife was expected to be a home-maker in whom qualities such as cleanliness, neatness, politeness, and respectfulness were valorized. She was required to ensure that the home was dust-free and orderly, supervise the preparation of meals, observe proper etiquette by waking up before her in-laws and serving them coffee and *sireh* in the morning, arrange her husband’s clothes and breakfast, and be of respectable appearance by dressing neatly.⁷⁶

These expectations are succinctly reflected in a traditional rhyme in Penang Hokkien, “Tek Gar Kee, Mor Hor Chee” (Dried Bean Curd, Sweet Flour Cakes), translated into English as:

⁷⁴ According to Chin, this is often cited as a reason for the Nonya’s fine work. Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 30.

⁷⁵ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

⁷⁶ Mary Chua Swee Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, 1987, reels 3 and 5, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

Dried beancurd, sweet flour cakes
A daughter-in-law must know how to behave
Goes to sleep late, rises early
Combs her hair, powders her face, applies lipstick
Upon entering the kitchen, washes the dishes
Upon entering the hall, dusts the furniture
Upon entering the room, plies the embroidery needle
She speaks well of her elders and juniors
Praises to our in-laws for having brought her up so well.⁷⁷

Although there is no evidence that can be cited, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that beadwork made by a potential bride was shown to matchmakers and prospective in-laws before commencing marriage negotiations. For instance, visitors could have been offered *sireh* from a tray lined with beaded mats made by a marriageable daughter (fig. 71).⁷⁸ Within a tightly-knit social circle, it would not have been difficult for a matchmaker to inform herself of the quality of a girl's needlework.

Embroidery was not only a useful screening device, it was also an activity that was pursued behind closed doors. Francis Light, the founder of Penang, observed that young Nonyas "are always kept at home with the greatest strictness until they are married; then they enjoy greater liberty."⁷⁹ This seclusion appears to have been designed to prevent girls from coming into contact with men, preserving their sexual propriety and hence their own reputation and that of their family. Learning to do beadwork therefore implicated the young girl in a world of specific moral and cultural values and a disciplined upbringing.

Beading as a Tool of Control

For those Nonyas to whom sewing came easily, embroidery may have been a pleasure. For other women who did not enjoy it, being required to do beadwork must have been agonising. Queeny Chang describes the frustration she felt:

⁷⁷ Raymond Kwok, "Hokkien Rhymes and Ditties," in *Sixth Baba Convention Souvenir Programme*, (Singapore: Peranakan Association, 1993), p. 39.

⁷⁸ For an illustration of a *sireh* box lined with velvet beadwork mats, see Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, fig. 104, p. 136.

⁷⁹ Francis Light, official report to Calcutta, 25 January 1794, quoted in Purcell, *Chinese in Southeast Asia*, p. 244.

It was customary that a bride include in her trousseau slippers for men and women, embroidered with her own hands, as presents for her in-laws and relatives. Thus, every day I struggled with gold and silver sequins and multi-coloured beads; disentangling knotted silk threads, pricking my fingers in a feverish endeavour to get perfect results, which of course I never did. I succeeded only in making myself feel frustrated.⁸⁰

Yet, as a dutiful daughter, Chang persisted with the task. Betty Lim had to bead ten pairs of slippers for her wedding, not all of which were for herself:

I spent large amounts of time embroidering *manek potong* (cut bead) slippers and also silver thread and pure silk thread slippers for my mother-in-law. I had to sew two pairs each for my father-in-law, mother-in-law and Koon Teck [the groom], and four pairs for myself.⁸¹

Embroidered and beaded purses and belts were used for the *lap chye*, similar to Chinese wedding tradition where embroidered fan cases, crepe handkerchiefs, girdles, and money purses were exchanged.⁸² Often, beaded belts were fitted with a concealed pocket in the lining where a gold coin would have been inserted to bring prosperity to the wearer (fig. 64c). Others incorporated non-functional purses which were purely decorative.⁸³ For Chinese New Year, a woman was expected to sew embroidered or beaded slippers for her husband's parents and elder brothers and sisters.⁸⁴

As Nicholas Thomas points out, "the artifact is not simply a valuable object of exchange or even a gift that creates relations of one sort or another but also a crucial index of the extent to which those relations are sustained or disfigured."⁸⁵ The beaded purses, belts, and slippers presented as gifts can be considered as indices of the relationship between a woman and her affinal family, emphasizing the primacy of the male lineage. Furthermore, the continued use of beadwork in Peranakan wedding customs implies an adherence to the idea of symbolic inequity, reinforcing the hierarchical nature of familial relationships.

⁸⁰ Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 67. Chang was married in 1912.

⁸¹ Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, p. 26.

⁸² For a list of items included in the *lap chye*, see Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, pp. 35–36; for a description of the Chinese gift exchange, see Mrs Bridgeman, "Letter from China," *FMI* 3 (1860), p. 97.

⁸³ See illustrations in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 52–53.

⁸⁴ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 1.

⁸⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 19.

The subordination of the wife (as giver) to the husband's family (as recipient) was embodied within the beadwork itself. Whereas obeisance at the formal tea ceremony was an observable recognition of status and respect, its performance was limited to the act of offering tea and hence was largely symbolic. In contrast, gifts of embroidered and beaded slippers required a sustained effort in their production that extended beyond the presentation itself. The convention that a Nonya had to *make* the gifts dictated that a good proportion of her time would be spent sewing for her elders and her husband. Time – one resource she would otherwise have had at her disposal – could be invisibly controlled through custom.

Control of Peranakan women appears to have been a concern that generated comment even from outside Peranakan society. In a speech to a Straits Chinese audience, G.T. Hare, a colonial official, compared the docility of Nonya and Chinese women: "I have often heard the China-born Chinese say that the Straits-born Chinese cannot control their women folk. By that I suppose is meant that the mistress of the household is not so submissive as the Chinese wife."⁸⁶ The implication is that the Nonya needed to be controlled lest they abused their liberty.

The typical mother-in-law was depicted as a tyrant who exercised absolute power over her daughter-in-law "without the least compunction or mercy," turning the newly-wed Nonya into "the drudge of the household...[who] must be ready to wait on her mother-in-law at all hours."⁸⁷ Queeny Chang's mother instilled in her the fear of a despotic mother-in-law, even though Chang appears to have found the reality pleasantly different.⁸⁸ The concern with control of Peranakan women was also reflected in the subject matter of popular opera. When Peranakans started to produce their own musicals, known as the *wayang* Peranakan, in the 1920s and 1930s, storylines centred around dominating mothers-in-law, strict step-mothers, matchmaking, and profligate husbands.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Hare, "The Straits-Born Chinese," p. 8.

⁸⁷ Lee, "The Chinese Girl in Singapore," p. 562.

⁸⁸ Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, pp. 95, 105–106.

⁸⁹ Tan Sooi Beng, "The Performing Arts and Cultural Activities in Malaysia," in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, ed. Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee Beng, pp. 318–319.

Whilst G.T. Hare advocated education as the modern solution for the discipline of the Nonya,⁹⁰ it can equally be argued that beading was a socially acceptable activity that could be used as a means to constrain her. In her study of European needlework, Parker suggests that needlework could be used as a tool of control when it was imposed forcibly. Women could control children by setting them task after respectable task of difficult embroidery, and girls were required to sew samplers whose embroidered pledges of obedience to parents or moralising verses reflect the growing importance in the seventeenth century of the ideology of discipline.⁹¹ In a similar way, the young Nonya could be obliged to bead and embroider, binding her within the home and controlling her activities. Beading was sedentary and could be done in isolation or under the watchful eye of a matriarch. For the unmarried girl, having to learn beading under the guise of a useful domestic activity in fact strengthened the platform for her elders or in-laws to impose their authority and buttress a hierarchical family structure.

The training of Peranakan girls was carried out by the women of the family.⁹² Gwee Thian Hock's mother, for instance, was taught home-making skills by her sister-in-law.⁹³ Although some women such as Alice Choo and Neo Kim Neo voluntarily learnt to embroider and bead, others such as Florence Chan described their confinement and enforced domestic training as being "like a prison."⁹⁴ One Nonya is said to have been driven to tears, "forced to unpick her beadwork day-after-day because it did not meet with the exacting standards of the matriarch of the house."⁹⁵

In teaching their granddaughters, daughters, and nieces to embroider, these Peranakan women may inadvertently have provided the affinal families of the young Nonyas with a means which could be used to subjugate them and reinforce the imbalance in power between the Nonyas and their husbands' families. What motivated the actions of these older Peranakan women to enforce the instruction of such a skill is debatable. It may have been a genuine belief that a Nonya had to be disciplined and beadwork was one such route to learning obedience. More likely, as the aforementioned Hokkien rhyme

⁹⁰ Hare, "The Straits-Born Chinese," p. 8.

⁹¹ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, pp. 88, 167.

⁹² Mary Chua, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, reel 5.

⁹³ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 79.

⁹⁴ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 26, 141–142; and Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 5.

⁹⁵ This account is provided in Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 135.

“Tek Gar Kee, Mor Hor Chee” suggests, it was the fear of social sanction and a loss of reputation not only for the Nonya but also for her family if she did not have the requisite embroidery skills. Felix Chia notes that displeasure with a daughter-in-law could elicit insults from a mother-in-law towards the woman’s parents.⁹⁶ For the womenfolk of her family, they had their collective family reputation to preserve. For the young Nonya, the imperative to learn beadwork was perhaps driven by the instinct for self protection. In-laws who were impressed by a girl’s beadwork skills may have been inclined to accord her better treatment.

The transmission of embroidery and beadwork skills therefore implied a tacit acceptance of Peranakan social values and the hierarchical social structure. It is thus not surprising that popular perception of embroidery and beadwork is that they were ostensibly indicators of feminine virtue. However, in spite of the links that can be drawn between embroidery, domestication, and desirability, embroidery and beadwork were, in reality, at most a contingent signal of the status and qualities of a Nonya.

Embroidery and Beadwork Displays and Practice as Contingent Signs

Even though embroidery was a desirable skill, not all Peranakan girls were competent needleworkers. Girls who could not or did not sew well had a range of alternatives such as obtaining help from their family members. Betty Lim enjoyed sewing and helped her sister with her needlework.⁹⁷ Gwee Thian Hock’s aunt purchased embroidery but also enlisted the help of her female relatives:

Although she [the bride] did possess some [needlework] skill, the standard demanded for a wedding was beyond her reach. Knowing this, grandma resorted to a more practical step: she purchased the items from a family that specialized in supplying such high quality products. The bride-to-be was also required to sew her own dresses, the *baju nonya*, for daily wear and the curtains for the bridal bed. Eldest sister-in-law came to her rescue with the curtains...⁹⁸

Except for beaded slippers, another source of beadwork was heirloom items passed down from one family member to another. It was also possible to purchase commercially-made beadwork and embroideries. Although no sizeable workshops producing Nonya embroidery and beadwork are known, there clearly were individuals

⁹⁶ Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 18.

⁹⁷ Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, p. 27.

⁹⁸ Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 50.

who embroidered commercially. Some of these were not Peranakan themselves but are said have had close ties with Peranakans. Siti Rahmah binte Haji Yahya, a woman of Arab origin who did beadwork for sale around the late nineteenth century prior to her marriage, lived close to a Peranakan community in Penang.⁹⁹ Commercially produced beadwork probably varied in quality, with the market offering intricately-crafted pieces as well as coarser ones.¹⁰⁰

Because it could be done in closed quarters, embroidery was one of the few respectable means of supplementing a family's income. As Song Ong Siang observed, women were able "to add a few dollars to the family income by doing embroidery work, by sewing or by making pastry or cakes to sell."¹⁰¹ Embroiderers operated from home, selling their work by word-of-mouth or through the itinerant haberdasher (the *klentong* man).¹⁰²

Commercial beadwork was not lucrative and it is doubtful that the activity could make a woman financially independent. In the early 1930s Florence Chan was paid \$0.80 (Straits dollars) per pair of beaded slipper tops, equivalent to about S\$80 (Singapore dollars) in current terms.¹⁰³ Each pair of slipper tops took about 50 hours to sew.¹⁰⁴ Although the hourly rate of return for sewing a pair of beaded slipper tops appears extremely low (equivalent to approximately S\$1.60 per hour in relation to the current average hourly wage of S\$18.90), it did provide supplementary and flexible income for women at a time when working outside of the home was frowned upon.¹⁰⁵

For women of a lower social class, embroidery not only enhanced their marriageability but was also a practical skill that could be turned to pecuniary advantage. This appears

⁹⁹ Zakaria Basheer, personal communication, January 2003. Siti Rahmah lived at the Kampung Masjid in the vicinity of the Khoo Kongsi (Khoo Clan temple) in Penang.

¹⁰⁰ For an example of a less refined piece stamped with a shop-mark, see Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 78.

¹⁰¹ Song Ong Siang, "The Position of Chinese Women," *SCM* 1, no. 1 (1897), p. 18.

¹⁰² Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 3. Note that the price paid was for workmanship only. The materials were supplied by the *klentong* man.

¹⁰³ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 3.

¹⁰⁴ This estimate is based on Neo Kim Neo's estimate of seven hours per day for a week. Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 2. Mary Chua estimates that it took her about two weeks to complete a pair of beaded slipper tops, but did not specify how many hours this involved. Mary Chua, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, reel 5.

¹⁰⁵ The average hourly wage is based on the average monthly earnings of S\$3,329 in 2004 (see n. 50 of this chapter), a standard 8-hour working day in Singapore and 22 working days per month.

to have been the case in the Straits Settlements and elsewhere in the East. Needlework was therefore popular with missionaries who used it widely as a way of gaining access to local women who may otherwise have been disinclined to associate with Christian missionaries, and to teach skills that could be used in fund-raising efforts.¹⁰⁶ In the Straits Settlements, they taught knitting, embroidery, and tatting. The Native Girls' School in Penang set up by Christian missionaries hired women to teach their pupils "native embroidery, which the mothers' prize, as it becomes a source of revenue to them."¹⁰⁷ At the Chinese Girls School in Singapore, Nonya or Malay embroidery was taught by two local pupils, Kin Sing and Hanio, and by an embroidery mistress.¹⁰⁸

Nonya embroidery appears to have coexisted as an activity for the leisured class at the same time as it was a source of income for others. The dual nature of embroidery was not unique to the Straits Settlements. In Europe, for example, wealthy women treated embroidery as a hobby and an exercise of virtue, but for girls from poorer families needlework abilities also acted as insurance which they could fall back on to earn extra income.¹⁰⁹

However, unlike embroidery practice in other parts of the world, there was no differentiation between the type of Nonya embroidery considered suitable for the elite and that done by women lower on the social scale. In China, the embroidery undertaken by elite women was in silk since that required a pair of smooth and delicate hands, a clean and spacious room, and servants to fan the embroiderer so that her hands would not perspire and soil her work.¹¹⁰ This served to distinguish silk embroidery from other coarser types of embroidery, and from spinning and weaving.¹¹¹ In Europe, the elite were similarly at pains to undertake needlework that was deliberately frivolous.¹¹² Fancywork, such as beading, tatting, crochet, and embroidery as opposed to utilitarian sewing advertised that a woman's husband was wealthy

¹⁰⁶ Cheah, "Christian Missionary Activities and the Transmission of Needlework Techniques."

¹⁰⁷ "Native Girls' School at Penang," *FMI* 1, new series (1858), p. 35. There is no explicit mention of beadwork and it is unclear if this was taught.

¹⁰⁸ See letters from Sophia Cooke published in *FMI* 1 (1854), p. 173; *FMI*, 3 (1856), pp. 106–107; and *FMI* 4 (1857), p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ Raffaella Serena, *Berlin Work Samples and Embroidery of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Laura M. Dini (Berkeley: Lacis, 1996), pp. 18–19.

¹¹⁰ Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 159.

¹¹¹ Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 159.

¹¹² Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1981), p. 183.

enough for her not to do housework.¹¹³ These contra-indications made fancywork the purview of the higher classes. Embroideries by women of the middle and upper classes were also more colourful and depicted different images – poorer girls sewed simple numbers and alphabets whereas the wealthy tended to depict flower baskets, mansions, lily pots, and peacocks.¹¹⁴

In the Straits Settlements, although beadwork displays, particularly those of slippers, could serve as an indicator of wealth, the pervasiveness of beading as an activity disconnected practice and social position. Contrary to received notions of beading acting as an indicator of her social standing, being able to do beadwork merely indicated the training a girl may have received. Even then, the effectiveness of extensive training in beadwork depended in large part on the aptitude of the Nonya. Furthermore, if embroidery displays were indeed a matter of “family honour” as Eng-Lee has suggested,¹¹⁵ then only those closely connected with the bride’s family would have known if the beadwork on display had not been made by the bride. However, the possibility of such a doubt renders beadwork practice at best a contingent signal of the upbringing and social status of a bride, dependent on the relationship of the viewer to the bride’s family.

In itself, however, the contingent nature of beadwork as a signifier of wealth and as an indicator of the character of the bride was unlikely to have altered the ostensible meanings of beadwork. The importance of embroidery and beadwork activity had been constructed on precedent and social expectations. So long as they were a conventional part of social practice, displays and exchanges of beaded and embroidered gifts communicated the bridal family’s commitment to Peranakan customs and their knowledge of Peranakan *adat*. Nonetheless, such a construction was bound to be unstable, especially in the dynamic environment that characterized late nineteenth and early twentieth century Peranakan society. The combined impact of social changes instigated by the proposals for reform within Straits Chinese society modified the conditions for the production and reception of beadwork. Together with the inherent uncertainty in the underlying significance of beadwork, it destabilized Peranakan attitudes towards beadwork.

¹¹³ Simpson, “Antiques: European Beadwork,” p. 238.

¹¹⁴ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 174.

¹¹⁵ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 19.

By the 1930s, if not earlier, girls from wealthy families were not compelled to embroider or bead. Chee Lak Neo, grand-daughter of Chee Swee Cheng, a prominent businessman and banker, was not taught to bead, embroider, or cook, even though she did learn to sew at home and continued to take sewing lessons in her adult years out of interest.¹¹⁶ Neither the eldest nor the youngest daughters of Tan Cheng Lock did beadwork or embroidery, although they were able to sew and learnt to crochet at school.¹¹⁷ Their mother had servants to sew her sarongs.¹¹⁸ Josephine Wee, grand-daughter of Tan Keong Saik, a wealthy Peranakan and a Justice of the Peace, learnt to sew and to bead slipper tops at school, but her matchmaker was explicitly told that she did not know how to sew or cook since her family was wealthy enough to employ servants.¹¹⁹ Within these contexts, doing beadwork became a perverse signal of wealth.

In the absence of more comprehensive records, it is difficult to ascertain how extensive this phenomenon was prior to the 1930s. Certainly, there appear to have been Peranakan women, such as Neo Kim Neo's mother, who could not bead.¹²⁰ The comments of women such as Queeny Chang, Lee Choo Neo, and Chua Tian Hoe suggest that young Nonyas who were not required to learn beadwork and embroidery may have been in the minority before the 1910s. Lee Liang Hye, a Singapore Peranakan born in 1924, recalls that his mother did not learn to bead, embroider, or cook as the "price" she paid for completing her Senior Cambridge examinations (equivalent to the English "O" Levels taken at age 16 or 17), then considered an achievement.¹²¹ She also learnt to play the piano, later considered an asset for a girl.¹²² Elder Mrs Lee was most likely at the forefront of a new generation of relatively well-educated Peranakan women. By the 1920s, the Nonya, now exposed to education,

¹¹⁶ Chee Lak Neo, personal communication, January 2003.

¹¹⁷ Agnes Tan, personal communication, January 2003; and J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003. Tan's daughters' experience appears to be consistent with a more recent example of a Nonya from a wealthy family who received an education and went to work but did not learn to make Nonya cakes. See Olivia Tay, "An Historical Perspective on Nonya-Kueh Making in Singapore," in *The Necessity of Craft: Development and Women's Craft Practices in the Asian-Pacific Region*, ed. Lorna Kaino (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1995), pp. 149–150.

¹¹⁸ Agnes Tan, personal communication, January 2003.

¹¹⁹ Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003. Wee was married in 1935.

¹²⁰ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 39, 44. Neo's maternal grandmother did sew beaded slippers but it is not clear if Neo's mother was taught to bead.

¹²¹ Lee Liang Hye, interview by Daniel Chew, 1986, reel 7, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

¹²² Lee Liang Hye, interview by Daniel Chew, reels 7 and 29.

began to question if beading was “old-fashioned,” and those who could afford to purchased, rather than embroidered, the beaded slippers that were the requisite gifts for weddings and Chinese New Year.¹²³

That wealthy Peranakans patronized commercial beadwork probably contributed to the acceptability of purchased beadwork for Nonyas in general, weakening beading as an instrument of discipline. Yet, even though “it was not considered absolutely necessary for a girl to learn beading,” some like Florence Chan and Mary Chua were still taught beadwork to qualify them for marriage.¹²⁴ Furthermore, submitting to hierarchical authority remained a crucial feature of a Peranakan girl’s upbringing, even for the wealthy. Josephine Wee’s mother-in-law, a Hokkien Peranakan, chose her clothes for her.¹²⁵ Similarly, the mothers of Chee Lak Neo and Agnes Tan chose the fabrics for their daughters’ clothes, and although Chee was permitted to select her own designs, her mother sometimes overruled her choice.¹²⁶ Young Nonyas were therefore contending with a period of transition where customs such as beading were becoming outmoded, but where their upbringing still emphasized domesticity, docility, and respect for an hierarchical order.

Education for Women and Attitudes towards Needlework

The somewhat ambivalent perception of beadwork in the 1920s and 1930s reflected the gradual process of adjustment towards social changes. The modification in the attitudes towards beadwork encompassed tensions in both gender and intergenerational relationships between younger Nonyas and their elders grappling with modernity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a coterie of largely Western-educated Straits Chinese community leaders began to criticize the mindset of the Straits Chinese. The queue, unscientific superstitions, unsightly wedding décor, and unhygienic funerary practices all came in for criticism. The reformists’ proposals were met with resistance from the more conservative Straits Chinese. A clear example of this is the acknowledgement amongst the Straits Chinese that the “younger generation” wanted to

¹²³ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 1.

¹²⁴ Chua Tian Hoe, quoted in Oon “Unravelling a Beaded Past,” p. 103; Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 1; and Mary Chua, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, reel 5.

¹²⁵ Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003.

¹²⁶ Chee Lak Neo and Agnes Tan, personal communications, January 2003.

take decisive reforms to mark their “difference” from older, more “conservative” members of society.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, their ideas did slowly take root. The *SCM*, established by Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, was one such forum for articulating these issues. The reformers’ messages may not have reached all levels of Peranakan society immediately, especially the vast majority of illiterate Nonyas.¹²⁸ One anonymous writer, perhaps Lim himself, recognized that the reformers’ views would have to be channelled through the *SCM*’s male readership to be effective:

The vast majority of our Straits Chinese women are ignorant and illiterate. They do not read nor write a word of either English or Chinese. Nevertheless, although I cannot address myself directly to them, if I can enlist the sympathy and interest of our Straits Chinese fathers, my message to the women will eventually reach them. The only request which I would make to you, fathers, in this connection is that when you impart my message to the ladies of the household, you will not distort it or render it harsher or in a less kindly spirit than this message is worded.¹²⁹

A central plank of the reformists’ efforts was to convince Peranakan society of the need to educate the Nonya as the best way to dispel her ignorance and superstitious beliefs. In the inaugural issue of the *SCM*, Song wrote

The present generation of Nyonyas, with a few exceptions, is a generation of illiterate and uneducated women. The only form of education that they do get is of a purely domestic character. That of course must be supported, and must ever form one of the phases or branches of the education which should be imparted to the Nyonyas. But that is far from being the whole duty of a Chinese woman. Not being taught to read or write in Chinese, English or Malay, they are deprived all through life of the ordinary means of gleaning or obtaining knowledge from newspapers or journals, or benefiting by the experience of other people recorded in books or documents. ... They become selfish and careless and ignorant, with a propensity for gambling and some even for drinking for the sake of something that gives them temporary excitement, and in some cases, apparently preferring now and again to have an audience of the Police Magistrate [when they are arrested for gambling] rather than to be

¹²⁷ “Chinese Philomathic Society,” *SCM* 1, no. 3 (1897), p. 113.

¹²⁸ The analysis in Chapter Six suggests, however, that new ideas and the momentum for change did filter through by the early twentieth century.

¹²⁹ Lew See Fah [pseud.], “Letter to the Editors. Straits Chinese Mothers,” *SCM* 5, no. 19 (1901), p. 112. Lew See Fah may have been a pseudonym for Lim Boon Keng. See Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, n. 51, p. 155.

occupied with the training, moral and mental, of their children, or to study to make their houses and their surroundings real homes for their husbands and grown-up sons...¹³⁰

In Song's assessment, it was through ignorance that the Nonyas developed a penchant for gambling, a problem not only in itself but one that also distracted women from their proper roles as devoted mothers and conscientious wives. The longer term effect of their ignorance was a vicious circle where incompetent mothers perpetuated the cycle of ignorance. "[T]he average Straits Chinese maiden at present is not altogether free from the ignorant prejudice, silly superstition, the inordinate timidity, the excessive shyness and the bigoted conservatism inculcated by the precepts and example of the ignorant mother," wrote another Straits Chinese.¹³¹ Equally, uninformed mothers stymied efforts to educate their sons. Mr Elcum, Director of Public Instruction in the Straits Settlements, voiced his sentiment that "there is no more absolutely ignorant, prejudiced and superstitious class of people than the Straits-born Chinese women. It is about hopeless to expect to be able really satisfactorily to educate the boys while their mothers remain stumbling blocks to real enlightenment."¹³²

The solution advocated was the provision of "wholesome" education in "elementary subjects such as Reading, Writing (whether in Chinese or English or both) and Arithmetic up to the work of Standard IV, Sewing and embroidery work under competent Nyonya mistresses, Domestic and household management, lessons in hygiene, in nursing and the laws of health, Music and Singing, Painting & c.," together with edifying lessons on the Bible or Confucian ethics and physical exercise.¹³³ Together, these would equip women with the skills to become good wives and mothers.

Conservative opposition regarded education for women as useless and even dangerous for several reasons. To begin with "[p]arents regard it as a waste of money to educate their daughters, who are supposed to be incapable of maintaining the family in time of need, seeing that, according to Chinese customs, it is indecent and disgraceful for girls to work for their living, which must of necessity entail their going out incessantly and

¹³⁰ Song, "The Position of Chinese Women," p. 17.

¹³¹ Soh Poh Thong, "Concerning Our Girls," *SCM* 11, no. 3 (1907), pp. 139–143.

¹³² Quoted in "Editorial: Female Education for Straits Chinese," *SCM* 11, no. 2 (1907), pp. 41–42.

¹³³ Song, "The Position of Chinese Women," p. 22.

thus exposing themselves to the public gaze.”¹³⁴ Added to that was the fear that literate girls “will become Christianized or be guilty of writing love-letters.”¹³⁵ A Western education was particularly worrisome, for “if the Nyonias are properly educated, following Western ideas, they will resent the neglect of their husbands and take to something worse than gambling.”¹³⁶ Education opened up a Pandora’s box of libertarian ideas which the more conservative Peranakans felt could threaten the passiveness deliberately inculcated in their daughters and wives through a strict upbringing.

Proponents instead argued that education was an appropriate force for restraining excessive liberty, itself associated with the adoption of Western ways. Perhaps directed more towards the “progressive” elements of Straits Chinese society, G.T. Hare warned that “it will be a great mistake for you if you let your wives and daughters follow European customs [“liberty of action”], unless you train and educate them first to take up such a position. ...[E]ducation will make them better daughters and more obedient wives.”¹³⁷ Education for women was thus motivated by producing marriageable girls, docile wives, and conscientious mothers capable of instilling in their children the values held dear by the literate elite.

The inclusion of sewing and domestic skills in the school curriculum provided an “acceptable face” of education for girls to win over the conservative elements of Peranakan society.¹³⁸ Lim Boon Keng explicitly stated:

It is necessary to teach the girls such practical things as sewing, cooking and the ordinary household duties in order to convince our detractors that education does not make them less fit as housekeepers. ...Before long I hope that some sort of education will have a marketable value from a marriage point of view...¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

¹³⁵ Song, “The Position of Chinese Women,” p. 17. It should be noted that Song was born into a staunch Christian family. See Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 78.

¹³⁶ Anonymous letter to the *Straits Times*, n.d., quoted by Neo Puak Neo, “Gambling Amongst Our Nyonias,” *SCM* 11, no. 4 (1907), p. 153.

¹³⁷ Hare, “The Straits-Born Chinese,” p. 8.

¹³⁸ The term “acceptable face,” strongly suggestive of a merely superficial veneer of acceptability, is borrowed from Rozsika Parker, who uses it to explain the inclusion of needlework in seventeenth century women’s education in England. Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 7.

¹³⁹ Lim Boon Keng, “Straits Chinese Reform: III – The Education of Children,” *SCM* 3, no. 11 (1899), p. 103.

Lessons in sewing dovetailed neatly with what society expected women to be. Education had a specific agenda – to teach a girl “the importance of cleanliness and the proper way to conduct herself in the different spheres of life she will eventually enter – as daughter-in-law, wife and mother.”¹⁴⁰ The cultural associations of needlework and domesticity rendered it an ideal fit with the notion of a woman’s position in the domestic sphere. However, needlework played no part in the moral upbringing of girls or assuaging their ignorance. These were the province of literacy and fine arts:

Are we ambitious if we plead for the next generation of mothers to be so educated in literature and the fine arts *besides their necessary domestic education* as to enable them to inspire in their children of both sexes from their childhood a love for moral excellence, and high and lofty ideas of life both in the home and in the state of which they are to become dwellers and citizens? [emphasis added]¹⁴¹

Appeals to the Straits Chinese to educate their daughters had a delayed but noticeable effect. In 1899, along with other progressive-minded Straits Chinese, Song founded the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School. Together with lessons in romanized Malay, English, Chinese, arithmetic, geography, and music, the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School gave needlework lessons, teaching utilitarian sewing – buttonholes and hems, for instance – rather than decorative embroidery.¹⁴² In its early years, Song complained that the school suffered from lack of financial support from the Straits Chinese community, but within 20 years of its establishment, parents were more willing to send their daughters to school and enrolment had increased from an average of 50 in the first few years to 250 girls in 1922.¹⁴³ Some Peranakan girls were also sent to Catholic-run schools, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) in Victoria Street in Singapore and the Light Street Convent in Penang.¹⁴⁴ In fact, by 1905, the

¹⁴⁰ “Editorial: Female Education for Straits Chinese,” p. 41. Here, the writer, possibly Song or Lim, also repeated his advocacy of elementary mathematics, the art of reading, hygiene of the home, the care of babies, the elements of cooking and needlework, and lessons in ethics.

¹⁴¹ Song, “The Position of Chinese Women,” p. 20. By “fine arts”, Song meant music and painting. Needlework was always mentioned in conjunction with cooking (a domestic skill).

¹⁴² Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 305. For commentaries on needlework standards, see “Report on the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School,” *SCM* 7, no. 4 (1903), p. 161; and “Report on the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School,” *SCM* 9, no. 4 (1905), p. 194.

¹⁴³ Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 306; and “Report on the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School” (1903), p. 160.

¹⁴⁴ For instance, Josephine Wee and Elsie Chia attended CHIJ in Singapore. Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003; and Noreen Chan, personal communication, December 2004. Khoo Sian Ewe’s first wife Sim, whom he married in 1905, and their daughters attended the Light Street Convent in Penang. Yeap, *Patriarch*, pp. 36, 59. Felix Chia’s mother, born around 1910, attended a convent school in Melaka and then CHIJ in Singapore. Chia, *Ala Sayang!* p. 67.

SCM reported that “the education of the Straits Chinese girl is making rapid strides [in Penang]...a large number of prizes at the St. George’s Girls’ School was recently secured by them.”¹⁴⁵

In the early 1910s, Lee Choo Neo also observed that

a perceptible change has taken place during the last three to four years and is steadily increasing. Girls are not kept so much cooped up in their houses, and a free life has been allotted to some of them, for the parents have now recognized the benefits derived from the little liberty and education which they allow their daughters./ Education is now considered necessary. Even the lower classes have adopted this... Girls now obtain as equal an education with the boys as their parents’ purses can afford.¹⁴⁶

For the young Nonya, however, education was associated with opening new social horizons, and the Nonya who had more than the minimum education occupied an elevated status amongst her own generation. According to Lee,

The number of educated girls is a very small one indeed, and those few hold a high place in the opinion of their ignorant sisters. A well educated girl is regarded with profound respect, and every word of hers concerning the outer world is taken as gospel truth, because she is supposed to be endowed with every branch of knowledge. She is consulted by her friends, and her advice is generally accepted by them. Her ideas meet with ready sympathy among the uneducated girls, but their elders are prejudiced against her, and generally seek to prevent any friendly footing existing between them, on the grounds that her society is harmful and apt to lead to discontent.¹⁴⁷

Literacy offered new visions of the world outside the home, and even the girl with only a few years of basic education assumed a knowledge of “English etiquette and customs, which it is...the height of her ambition to acquire... [I]t causes her to imagine that she is entitled to conduct herself with the utmost freedom, and to resent any interference on the part of her parents, relations and friends.”¹⁴⁸

Amongst the Peranakan community, the prominence of wealthy, educated women in public life may well have persuaded a younger generation of Nonyas that education (even a touch of it) provided access to a glamorous public sphere. A case in point is

¹⁴⁵ “Our Penang Letter,” *SCM* 9, no. 1 (1905), pp. 31–32.

¹⁴⁶ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

¹⁴⁷ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

the aforementioned Mrs Lee Choon Guan. She spoke fluent English, supported vocational scholarships for women, engaged extensively in charitable works for the Chinese Women's Association and the Red Cross, and was awarded a Membership of the British Empire.¹⁴⁹ Her public profile was accompanied by private activities such as four-o'clock teas and high-society black-tie dinners that resonated with European chic.¹⁵⁰ Education, sophistication, status, and freedom from restrictive control were conflated into a model of the modern and progressive Nonya.

Formal education effectively drew an invisible boundary between different modes of learning, taking the transmission of knowledge outside the domestic environment and formalising a specific body of knowledge that increasingly revolved around the written word. Whilst girls who did not go to school were given private tuition at home, their learning was generally restricted to elementary reading and writing.¹⁵¹ The schoolroom instead gradually became a conceptual space for vocational education and not simply a substitute for teaching domestic skills. By the 1920s, the curriculum at CHIJ had expanded to include geography, literature, history, algebra, geometry, science, and even shorthand, typing, and bookkeeping, valorising literacy and learning in a more commercial sense.¹⁵² In doing so, education provided a doorway to the world outside the home.¹⁵³

Scholarly and vocational learning and domesticity, however, were seen as binary choices. A commentary in the *Malaya Tribune* of 23 May 1934 reads:

[G]irls [at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School] are in the first instance taken up to Standard V and if they then desire higher education, they proceed elsewhere; but those who have no special scholastic ambitions may remain and be taught general knowledge, literature and domestic crafts, which fit them to become better – because more useful and resourceful – wives and mothers in their own homes.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 541.

¹⁵⁰ Lim, "Mandalay Villa." See also p. 83 of this thesis.

¹⁵¹ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 1; and Chee Lak Neo, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁵² Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), p. 65.

¹⁵³ Of course, not all Nonyas reacted in the same way. In Josephine Wee's case, although her father was keen to send her to university, Wee herself decided against it and opted to get married. Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁵⁴ "Chinese Girls' School," *Malaya Tribune*, 23 May 1934.

Basic formal education was still aimed at producing capable wives and mothers, but the alternatives had expanded. In the 1930s, girls were being trained to “play a much more useful part in the social affairs of their community.”¹⁵⁵

There was little substantive difference in the perception of needlework between those who advocated education for girls and those who were opposed to it. Both saw needlework as a domestic skill, one that assigned a woman to her place at home. Even though the Chinese Ladies’ Association gave classes in sewing, pastry-making, music, embroidery, and cooking, they were to provide a venue for social interaction amongst young Chinese women.¹⁵⁶ These activities appear to have been chosen because they were socially acceptable. At best, such activities helped women in their charitable works, allowing them to contribute to fund-raising bazaars. Needlework continued to provide the necessary veneer of domesticity – it was neither a vocational skill nor one that would provide for complete female financial independence.¹⁵⁷

However, the demarcation between formal and informal education offered heterogeneous spaces within which beadwork and other types of sewing skills could be taught, lending them vastly different associations. A hint of what this implied for the attitude towards needlework can be appreciated from an earlier comment made by a Peranakan. Whilst he agreed that girls “must be given lessons in needle work and cooking,” he simultaneously decried the “the pernicious bondage” of Nonyas who were cloistered at home cooking and sewing.¹⁵⁸ What is relevant here is the belief that sewing skills transmitted as part of an enforced confinement at home was deplorable, but it was legitimate and laudably appropriate if taught as part of a formal scheme of education. Crucially, the perception of needlework changed depending on the conditions under which it was transmitted.

Dressmaking, knitting, crochet, and smocking were generally included in girls’ school curricula. For instance, Tan Beng Neo, who attended Fairfield Methodist Girls’

¹⁵⁵ “Asiatic Womanhood,” *Malaya Tribune*, 23 May 1934.

¹⁵⁶ Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 541

¹⁵⁷ There does not appear to have been an effort prior to World War Two to enhance the status of needlework or cooking by turning these into professional qualifications in the Straits Settlements, as was taking place in Britain in a limited way through the establishment of schools of cookery or offering degrees in domestic science, not least because there were few opportunities for higher education within the Straits Settlements. For the British case, see Elizabeth Bird, “‘High Class Cookery’: Gender, Status and Domestic Subjects, 1890–1930,” *Gender and Education* 10, no. 2 (1998), pp. 117–131.

¹⁵⁸ A Baba [pseud.], “Our Nonyas”

School in Singapore in the 1920s, learnt to sew the Chinese *samfoo* and to smock at school.¹⁵⁹ The diffusion of these types of needlework in schools offered alternatives to Nonya beadwork and embroidery as leisure activities for those who enjoyed sewing. In addition, for the growing number of girls who were literate, magazines or newspapers such as *The Queen* offered advice on popular needlework techniques.¹⁶⁰ In both cases, apart from dressmaking, it was mainly the transmission of Western embroidery techniques that was associated with literacy and therefore linked to new horizons that formal education potentially offered.

In contrast to these types of needlework, Nonya embroidery was mostly taught in the confines of the home. St. Margaret's Girl's School in Singapore employed a Nonya to teach knitting, embroidery, and beadwork to the boarding pupils but this appears to have been unusual.¹⁶¹ Josephine Wee remembers being given lessons in beadwork by a local woman at CHIJ in Singapore, although this is not supported by the recollection of Mary Chua, another pupil at CHIJ and only four years younger than Wee, who learnt beadwork at home.¹⁶² Most other Nonyas learnt beadwork from female relatives or from friends outside of formal education. Florence Chan, Sally Phuah, and Alice Choo learnt to bead at home.¹⁶³ Oo Leng Choo, a Penang Nonya, learnt to crochet and knit at school in the late 1930s but was taught by her mother to do beadwork.¹⁶⁴ Agnes Tan learnt dressmaking, crochet, and knitting at the Suydam Methodist Girls' School in Melaka but picked up cross-stitch from her domestic servants at home.¹⁶⁵ Betty Lim

¹⁵⁹ Tan Beng Neo, interview by Liana Tan, 1983, reel 2, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

¹⁶⁰ For instance, issues of *The Queen*, a weekly newspaper for women contained sections entitled "The Worktable" on embroidery and fancy work. See, for instance, "Modern Purses and Hand Bags in Beaded Canvas Work," *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper*, 20 September 1913, p. 516.

¹⁶¹ Mrs. Wong Ho Eng, interview by Chua Chee Huan, 1994, reel 2, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore. The beadwork teacher was described as a *bibik* – a respectful term of address for an older Nonya – clad in *sarong-baju panjang*. St. Margaret's was originally established in 1842 to care for young slave girls. As mentioned earlier, in the late nineteenth century, orphanages and schools for the poor taught embroidery (including Nonya or some local style of embroidery), tatting, and crochet, and the pupils' work was sometimes used to raise money for the schools.

¹⁶² Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003; and Mary Chua, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, reels 4 and 5. That Mary Chua attended CHIJ can be deduced from her description of the school, then the only French convent on Bras Basah Road in Singapore. As a missionary-run school, CHIJ's emphasis was very much on nurturing Catholic girls and it was not until the early twentieth century that the enrolment of Chinese pupils increased. See Kong, Low, and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, pp. 64–68.

¹⁶³ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 1; Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2002; and Sally Phuah, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁶⁴ Oo Leng Choo, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁶⁵ Agnes Tan, personal communication, January 2003. Tan started school in 1926 at approximately age 7 and had sewing lessons until she was 14.

and Neo Kim Neo were unusual but nevertheless can still be considered as having learnt beadwork in an informal, domestic setting. Lim learnt to sew from her prospective mother-in-law, a Teochew woman, in preparation for her wedding.¹⁶⁶ Neo learnt beading from a “church friend” after she had stopped schooling.¹⁶⁷ Beadwork was taught at home, the same space in which confinement, subservience, and control were enforced.

The means of transmitting beadwork outside of formal education differentiated it from other types of needlework taught at school and associated it with different spheres of life. As the Nonya sought to engage with the world outside the home, the dichotomy between beadwork and others types of learning (reading, writing, painting, music, and even knitting) that introduced the Nonya to new and modern ideas was accentuated. This isolated Nonya beadwork not simply as a domestic pursuit but also as an old-fashioned activity.

The gradual abandonment of beadwork as a necessary skill constituted an emblematic rejection of the constraints of gender-based domestic boundaries. At a time when young Nonyas were eager to explore a reality to which they were not accustomed and when their parents were beginning to relax the restrictions on their daughters, modifying or discarding practices such as beading became just one of the ways of effecting this new mood. At the same time, filial piety and the structure of the family as a point of reference for Peranakan culture remained a central concern, objectified in the presentations of embroidered slippers, particularly for the *lap chye*, that persisted until the 1960s (fig. 71).¹⁶⁸

Nonya beadwork practice and the beaded object became increasingly divorced, as the former was discarded whilst the latter became popular in the form of the *kasut manek*. Their disconnection from one another permitted multiple and sometimes contradictory messages that were once separately encoded in beadwork practice and object to be collapsed into a single form. Beadwork practice had always carried ambiguous connotations of social status. Added to this, excellence in beading could now be

¹⁶⁶ Lim, *Rose on My Pillow*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁷ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript, pp. 141–142.

¹⁶⁸ The pair of slippers shown in figure 71 was commissioned by Lily Tan in Melaka for her eldest daughter’s wedding gift exchange in 1961. Although her daughter was a competent needleworker and won a prize for her needlework at school, she was not required to embroider for her in-laws. J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003.

interpreted as a manifestation of desirable femininity and domesticity or of an outmoded way of life. This apparent inconsistency expresses the predicament facing Nonya society of embracing modernity without effacing its cultural identity and losing sight of tradition. Domesticity, duty, refinement, and respect for the hierarchy remained within a stable of traditional values which had been valorized by the reform movement and remained central to Peranakan society, but for the modern Nonya, enforced domesticity had an antipathetic link with subordination and confinement.

On the other hand, the beaded object was both visually distinctive and hallowed by its association with past practice, making it eminently suitable for the expression of a Peranakan cultural identity. The *kasut manek*, established as part of the Nonya costume, allowed the Nonya to objectify society's cultural referents, becoming in itself a visible symbol of cultural identity. By the 1920s, the *kasut manek* had superseded metallic-thread embroidered slippers in popularity.¹⁶⁹ This coincides with a period in which the imports of European beads increased both in terms of volume and value as explained in Chapter One. According to Josephine Wee, who was given a pair of beaded slippers when she was 12, they were essential footwear when attending weddings and Chinese New Year celebrations.¹⁷⁰

As items purchased or voluntarily crafted, the *kasut manek* could be unburdened of the meaning of subjugated will. Beaded slippers, and beaded purses to a lesser extent, thus provided the Nonyas with a means of mediating the tensions between cultural expression and the desire to emerge from the restrictive binds of tradition. Using and giving these slippers without having to produce them permitted a necessary slippage between adhering to traditional values – domesticity, refinement, respect for the family structure, and filial piety – and modernity. The *kasut manek*, which could be put on and taken off at will, allowed the Nonya in search of liberation to remove symbolically, even if temporarily, the constraints of tradition without losing sight of a distinctive cultural inheritance.¹⁷¹

The reification of Peranakan cultural tradition provided Nonya society with a reference point during a period of transition. The *kasut manek* acted as a necessary link with the

¹⁶⁹ Michael Cheah, "Nonya Slippers. Gifts of Love – Nonya Wedding Slippers from 1880s to 1940s," *Pulau Pinang* 2, no. 6 (1990), p. 29.

¹⁷⁰ Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁷¹ Liberation is subjective. It is used here in the sense of freedom of choice and action relative to the secluded and strict upbringing of girls in Peranakan households, rather than in any spiritual sense.

past. They have thus remained in continued use as part of traditional Nonya dress, and in contemporary Peranakan society, they are regarded as a significant element in the visual imaginary of Peranakan culture, acting as a foundation for the configuration of a contemporary Peranakan identity. Distilled into beaded slippers were layers of meaning formed of shifting ideologies, values, and social relationships. Bound up with the manipulation of the *kasut manek* was the Peranakan community's collective attempt to bridge a historically constructed cultural identity with its understanding of tradition and modernity, the past and the present.

Peranakan identity is neither straightforward nor invariant. As discussed in Chapter Two, scholars emphasize its historically constituted nature. Trade, politics, and education influenced the Peranakans' interpretations of modernity from the second half of the nineteenth century. Intertwined with colonial rule and commerce, modernity – briefly characterized as rationality, progressivism, interconnectedness, and individualism – took on a culturally inflected tone. In the Straits Settlements, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Peranakans' discourse on the appropriateness of their cultural mix reflected their unease with the potentially destabilising impact of modern life.

The position of women in this male-dominated discourse has been highlighted in Christine Doran's study of the Straits Chinese reformists' rhetoric of modernity.¹ Doran argues that women were seen as a vital channel through which the reformists felt a modernized Chinese identity could be effected. Reformist discourse promoted female education but nevertheless sought to circumscribe women to the roles of wives and mothers, in which their key responsibilities were the transmission of Chinese cultural values and maintenance of social stability.² Doran's research leads to as yet unanswered questions on the agency of Straits Chinese (and Peranakan) women as they navigated their prescribed responsibilities. How did women react? Did they see society's demands as conflicting or as unproblematic? Did their reactions vary within and across class, educational, and age groups, and how were these viewed by the rest of Peranakan society? What was the impact on them and on the culture which they embodied in their everyday lives – a culture which we think of today as "Peranakan"?

Such questions are particularly salient for a study of Peranakan identity. Yet, as Tan Liok Ee notes, the role of women in the shaping of migrant Chinese identities in Malaysia is largely "hidden from view."³ This is certainly true of the Peranakans, and as discussed in Chapter One, there is little published research which specifically addresses the history of the Nonyas in the Straits Settlements. Studies that focus on Peranakan women are hindered by a scarcity of primary sources and the fragmented

¹ Christine Doran, "The Chinese Cultural Reform Movement in Singapore: Singaporean Chinese Identities and Reconstructions of Gender," *Sojourn* 12, no. 1 (1997), pp. 92-107. Doran, however, does not assess the actual impact of these reforms on society.

² Doran, "The Chinese Cultural Reform Movement in Singapore."

³ Tan, "Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History," p. 354.

nature of what is available – a notorious problem shared by researchers on Asian social and women's histories in general.⁴ In the context of Southeast Asia, Barbara Andaya Watson draws attention to a second, more unsettling barrier to the writing of women's histories. Women were seen as peripheral to the histories of nationalism and the struggle against colonialism, and where they are discussed, are merely re-inserted into the existing male-dominated narratives.⁵

Scholars have drawn on a number of sources to retrieve women's voices from the margins of history. Studies of Indonesian Peranakan women's writings explore how they contended with the often conflicting demands of a patriarchal society, a desire for emancipation, and multiple cultural spheres. For instance, Claudine Salmon argues that the limited subject matter of Peranakan women's fiction in the early twentieth century reflected the narrowness of Peranakan women's lived realities that ultimately impinged on the ways in which they articulated their ideals.⁶ Drawing on newspaper and magazine articles and novels of the 1920s and 1930s, Myra Sidharta suggests that traditional values continued to be important for the Indonesian Nonyas, and Western education was often regarded as a threat to Nonya identity.⁷ Faye Chan and Margaret Boucquet-Siek both examined similar sources to show how Nonyas reconciled their cultural traditions and values with social reforms in the second quarter of the twentieth century.⁸

Whereas these studies focus on the changes that affected women's lives, other scholars identify women as cultural intermediaries who have had a significant impact on society more generally. Jean Gelman Taylor's in-depth research on Indo-European literature

⁴ Anne-Marie Medcalf and Carolyn Brewer, "Introduction," in *Researching the Fragments: Histories of Women in the Asian Context*, ed. Carolyn Brewer and Anne-Marie Medcalf (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day, 2000), pp. i–xiv.

⁵ Barbara Andaya Watson, "Introduction," in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Andaya Watson (Honolulu: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i, 2000), p. 2. Her critique of such insertions parallels feminist critiques of art historical approaches which introduce women artists into an established, patriarchal canon without questioning its constructed nature.

⁶ Claudine Salmon, "Chinese Women Writers in Indonesia and Their Views of Female Emancipation," *Archipel* 28 (1984), pp. 149–171.

⁷ Myra Sidharta, "The Making of the Indonesian Chinese Woman," in *Indonesian Women in Focus*, ed. E. Locher-Scholten and A. Niehof (Dordrecht: Foris, 1987), pp. 58–76.

⁸ Faye Yik-Wei Chan, "Chinese Women's Emancipation as Reflected in Two Peranakan Journals (c. 1927–1942)," *Archipel* 49 (1995), pp. 45–62; and Margaret Bocquet-Siek, "The Peranakan Chinese Woman at a Crossroad," in *Women's Work and Women's Roles: Economics and Everyday Life in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Lenore Manderson (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983), pp. 31–52.

and genealogical records provides an insight into the pivotal role of Javanese and Indo-European women, through their liaisons with Dutch men, in moulding European society and culture in colonial Java.⁹ Taylor shows that, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they acted both as mediators of plural cultures between newly arrived Dutch men and the local society and as channels through which positions of power were transmitted or acquired. However, she argues that, as more European women migrated to the Netherlands Indies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the acculturating influence of Javanese and Indo-European women on Indo-European society gradually weakened. Through her brief survey of a broad range of cultural practices, Susan Abeyesekere also finds that local women were “agents of acculturation” in European and immigrant Chinese households in nineteenth-century Batavia.¹⁰

Like these Indo-European and Peranakan women in Java, the Nonyas were arbiters of culture. Many indigenous elements are associated with Peranakan food, dress, and language which relate to the female and domestic spheres.¹¹ Anne Pakir notes the gendered nature of popular terminology such as “Nonya food” and “Nonya ware” to describe Peranakan material and domestic culture, in contrast to the terms such as “Baba community,” “Baba customs,” and “Baba language” which relate to broader domains.¹² Rather than acting as keepers of an unadulterated Chinese culture as the Straits Chinese reform movement may have intended, Peranakan women can arguably be located at the junction of multiple cultures. Their perceptions of themselves and the world around them had the potential to inform Peranakan cultural formations and the construction of Peranakan identity itself.

Part Two of this study explores the fraught issue of modernity and its implications for Peranakan identity through the eyes of the Nonya by examining the temporal development of Nonya beadwork. Closely associated with the female sphere,

⁹ Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). Taylor did not draw widely on material culture as a source but she did examine paintings and photographs in addition to genealogical records, newspapers, and personal records.

¹⁰ Susan Abeyesekere, “Women as Cultural Intermediaries in Nineteenth-Century Batavia,” in *Women’s Work and Women’s Roles*, ed. Lenore Manderson, pp. 15–29.

¹¹ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 20.

¹² Anne Pakir, “A Linguistic Investigation of Baba Malay” (Ph.D. diss, University of Hawai’i, 1986), n. 2, p. 23.

beadwork is harnessed as a rich archive that can offer insights into Nonya agency and their interactions with Peranakan society in general.

The basic premise for this assessment is the evidential nature of art, one that is fundamental to the discipline of art history. Art historical methods, such as the study of style and iconography, render the visible “legible.”¹³ For instance, art historian Jules Prown draws on the vocabulary of formalist visual analysis to unlock the “mute heritage of things,” exposing changes in a society’s “shared beliefs – assumptions, attitudes, and values.”¹⁴ In his particular example, Prown shows that the change in the style of American furniture in the late eighteenth century from ornate, organic forms to self-contained, linear shapes with geometric surface decorations corresponded to a shift away from an emphasis on materiality and practicality to Enlightenment ideals of rationality and the primacy of mental faculties.¹⁵ Esther Pasztory, on the other hand, demonstrates through her analysis of Meso-American carvings how concurrent uses of different “ethnic” styles can signal cultural differences and distinctions of identity.¹⁶ Sited within its contexts of production, reception, and consumption, the art object can be treated as an historical document that complements textual records.

Rozsika Parker, whose study on European embroidery was discussed earlier, argues that needlework involved using a stock of patterns, and embroiderers selected those patterns or images which had particular resonance for them within their specific historical and social contexts.¹⁷ By adapting and interpreting the patterns, they were able to make “meanings of their own.”¹⁸ In addition, she proposes that imagery is not simply a passive expression of social norms but can be actively implicated in social change as a tool of resistance. Firmly embedded in the female sphere, embroidery is a

¹³ See Donald Preziosi, “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 13–18.

¹⁴ Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence,” in *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 52–54.

¹⁵ Prown, “Style as Evidence.” Prown’s analysis is conducted mainly in terms of closed and open forms, drawn from Heinrich Wölfflin’s basic binary visual concepts: linear versus painterly, plane versus recession, closed versus open forms, multiplicity versus unity, and absolute versus relative clarity. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, 1950). It should be noted that Prown uses these concepts to provide a starting point, not as an exclusive method, for object analysis.

¹⁶ Esther Pasztory, “Identity and Difference: The Uses and Meanings of Ethnic Styles,” in *Cultural Differentiation and Cultural Identity in the Visual Arts*, ed. Susan J. Barnes and Walter S. Melion, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989), pp. 15–37.

¹⁷ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 12.

record of the unspoken or unutterable thoughts of women, charged with multiple meanings and possibilities.

Brightly coloured and conspicuously visible, Nonya beadwork was a potent vehicle of nonverbal communication. The modifications in its forms, styles, and motifs embody the changes in the Nonyas' individual and collective consciousness and their engagement with social and cultural realities. Chapter Four develops a method to establish a workable chronology of Nonya beadwork through dated and dateable examples of beadwork that have been identified during the course of this research. This chronology corresponds to variations in styles and imagery, suggesting a phased evolution as beadwork traced its trajectory in time. In Chapters Five and Six, surviving pieces of Nonya beadwork are harnessed as a series of dateable artefacts from which it has been possible to piece together a narrative of the Nonya world from 1870 to the 1970s. Nonya beadwork styles and imagery are interpreted to suggest the ways in which Nonya attitudes to Westernization and ideas about modernity and tradition were contested, translated, and expressed through beadwork, intersecting with the negotiation of a Peranakan cultural identity.

The past 25 years have witnessed an intensification of interest in Nonya beadwork and embroidery by collectors and curators. However, only two publications – Ho Wing Meng's *Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery* and Eng-Lee Seok Chee's *Festive Expressions* – discuss Nonya beadwork in any detail. Although both of these broach the dating of beadwork, neither provides a satisfactory approach. Ho mentions the use of provenance for dating beadwork and embroidery but recognizes that information relating to owners and creators of beadwork can be unreliable, particularly when artefacts have passed out of family hands.¹ However, he dismisses style as an indicator of date on the grounds that there is little stylistic change, and he thus relegates most pieces of beadwork to a generalized period of manufacture in the “late nineteenth/early twentieth” century.²

Eng-Lee comments on the difficulty of dating Nonya beadwork and embroidery with any confidence because very few extant examples of these are accompanied by information on their provenance or production – only one beaded belt in the National Museum of Singapore collection she studied has a date stitched into it.³

Unsurprisingly, such factors have hindered efforts to develop a reliable set of stylistic criteria by which to assess a piece of work, resulting in a gap in our understanding of the chronological development of Nonya beadwork. The lack of historical accounts of Nonya beadwork exacerbates this. Attempts to place beadwork in a temporal perspective have thus largely been based on hearsay or the personal experience of a writer or dealer.

Other publications by journalists, dealers, collectors, and curators that address Nonya beadwork are informative with respect to the socio-cultural context, but observations of stylistic change have been restricted to cautiously worded remarks that beadwork increasingly incorporated Westernized elements. For instance, art historian Khoo Joo Ee asserts that the “styles of beaded slippers generally evolved through many more

¹ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 159–160.

² Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 158–160. Where museums provide dates for their displays of beadwork, they also tend to resort to generalizations of “late nineteenth century” and “early twentieth century.”

³ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 29, illustration p. 50 (top). The date of 1912 is stitched into the belt does not, in fact, irrefutably confirm when the piece was created, since it could also be a birth-date or other commemorative date. The National Museum of Singapore has been re-named the Singapore History Museum.

stages than the earlier metallic ones,” but in terms of design merely notes that “[b]y the 1930s and 1940s European cross-stitch patterns were popular,” that “[l]ater work featured regular or chequered backgrounds besides the central motifs,” and “[s]till later, the slipper tops had purely geometric designs.”⁴ Eng-Lee proposes that European needlework designs inspired Nonya embroidery from the second decade of the twentieth century, with motifs of cartoon characters and even designs of shop signs used on beadwork from the 1930s.⁵ Whilst we should not underrate the importance of experience and the trained eye, this alone does not provide adequate comfort for a productive analysis of beadwork made before the 1920s.

Where Nonya beadwork is assessed within a wider geographical context or ethnographic focus, the dating of beadwork (or more precisely, the difficulty of doing so) has not arisen as a significant issue. For instance, in their wide-ranging survey of the beadwork of the world, Caroline Crabtree and Pam Stallebrass provide a visual record that demonstrates the variety of beadwork traditions, of which Nonya beadwork is but one.⁶ Valerie Hector’s discussion of the significance and methods of Asian beadwork is situated in a regional context, facilitating productive comparisons between different techniques, styles, and meanings of historical beadwork.⁷

The absence of a comprehensive or rigorous chronology of Nonya beadwork, particularly for the period before the 1920s, for which textual sources are scarce, has thus far limited the usefulness of Nonya beadwork as an historical document. Jürgen Rudolph’s attempt to incorporate beadwork meaningfully into a socio-historical analysis of Peranakan identity necessarily treats Nonya beadwork as one category of Peranakan material culture alongside others. However, in his assessment of chronological change, he is not able to go beyond observing that the incorporation of European motifs from the 1920s onwards is a reflection of the “transition from a Chinese to a largely European symbolic world.”⁸

This chapter develops a chronology of Nonya beadwork based on transparent methods that can be assessed critically. This forms the starting point for an examination in

⁴ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 202.

⁵ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 29.

⁶ Crabtree and Stallebrass, *Beadwork*.

⁷ Valerie Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection: An Introduction to Asian Beadwork,” *Beads* 7 (1995), pp. 3–36.

⁸ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 234–236.

Chapters Five and Six of the ways in which designs were adapted, appropriated, or discarded. It shows a gradual process of incorporation of European-inspired motifs and the selective retention of Chinese designs, suggesting that Nonya beadwork was receptive both to external cultural influences and to ideas being discussed in the male-dominated Peranakan public sphere. The visual language of Nonya beadwork thus provides a narrative of the world of the Nonya during a period of change.

It is important to bear in mind that this chronology has been based on fieldwork that, due to physical, financial, and time constraints, could not be exhaustive. Apart from the fragmented nature of beadwork collections, one of the pitfalls of working with objects in private collections is that access is not guaranteed.⁹ Nevertheless, it has been possible to examine a large number of private collections, some with provenanced pieces, as well as public collections with relatively early accession dates. Fieldwork conducted in three stages between 2002 and 2004 in Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States has brought to light dateable examples of beadwork that had not previously been closely studied or published.¹⁰ Cumulatively, these have provided ample material for the construction of a fairly detailed beadwork chronology.

The following section develops systematic methods for dating Nonya beadwork pieces. Examples of embroidered and threaded beadwork are analysed and their techniques, functions, and the types of beads used are compared to assess their usefulness for constructing a timeline of Nonya beadwork. This approach places an emphasis on dating methods that do *not* rely on a judgement of style for two related reasons. Firstly, although relying on styles may appear reasonable, it would require an *a priori* assumption that styles in Nonya beadwork closely paralleled those of other forms of Peranakan material culture. Secondly, apart from Edmond Chin's research

⁹ Although I was not able to examine a sizeable collection of beadwork from Penang which, according to its former owner, does contain examples of beadwork that have newspaper backing which could potentially provide additional information for dating beadwork, a number of these pieces have been published in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 18, 29–33, 37, 48, 57, 69, 75.

¹⁰ Fieldwork was not conducted in Indonesia for three reasons. Firstly, this thesis deals primarily with beadwork from the Straits Settlements and extended fieldwork in Indonesia was beyond the scope of this research. In addition, the Indonesian state museums are not known to have significant collections of Peranakan beadwork; hence, resource limitations dictated that effort was directed elsewhere. Finally, many items of Peranakan beadwork from Indonesia, particularly Sumatra, have been retrieved by dealers and collectors and can be found outside of Indonesia, including in the Netherlands, Australia, and Singapore. Some of these examples have been included in this thesis, primarily to provide parallels or contrasts with beadwork from the Straits Settlements. In the light of the results of this thesis, however, research that focuses on Peranakan beadwork from Sumatra would certainly form an interesting complement to this investigation.

which briefly addresses the association between the variations in styles of Peranakan jewellery and other forms of Peranakan decorative arts, in-depth research on the stylistic changes in Peranakan decorative arts is currently not yet available.¹¹ Until more comprehensive studies are available across a wider range of Peranakan decorative arts, it would not be prudent to assign dates to specimens of Nonya beadwork on the basis of stylistic comparisons with other types of Peranakan material culture. The formal characteristics of beadwork and the comparison with styles of other Peranakan decorative arts are thus examined in Chapters Five and Six *after* a broad chronology is determined, and not treated as determinants of it.

Methodology

One of the difficulties facing any prospective student of nineteenth and early twentieth century Southeast Asian beadwork is the lack of reliable tools for dating beadwork, a challenge that also confronts the study of Nonya beadwork. In the case of European beadwork which spans over 400 years from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, the size of beads used and techniques, such as tambour beading which was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, may be used to indicate the period of manufacture.¹² However, tambour beading was not widely used in Nonya beadwork. Nor is an examination of the range of colours and types of glass seed beads used sufficient to yield a close dating since the types of European glass seed beads used in Nonya beadwork had been produced in the same or similar sizes and colours since the 1840s.

Whereas instruction and pattern books for European embroidery were published from the sixteenth century onwards, there are few similar documents that relate to Nonya beadwork. Apart from one undated graph book with cross-stitch patterns (fig. 72), no other written records relating to Peranakan beadwork techniques have been located.¹³

¹¹ As mentioned in n. 110 of Chapter One, Chin's discussion of his dating methods is cursory but examples of jewellery he illustrates are accompanied by information on ownership or photographs. See Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 193–194. Lee Kip Lin documents the changes in domestic architecture in Singapore and includes examples of domestic interiors of homes that belonged to Peranakan families, but only touches briefly on their decorative arts. Lee, *Singapore House*.

¹² Leslie Pina, Lorita Winfield and Constance Korosec, *Beads in Fashion 1900–2000* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1999), p. 15; and Clabburn, *Beadwork*, pp. 36–37. Tambour beading is done with a tambour hook.

¹³ The graph book, sold by MPH, a bookstore in Singapore operational in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth centuries, is in a format used after World War Two.

Nonya beadwork designs alone cannot be assumed to be proven indicators of age because the same designs could be re-used over different generations. This could be the case even if motifs no longer bore any specific ceremonial connotations but were chosen for their decorative effects, or where they had become part of the stock of conventional motifs associated with Peranakan culture. It is not unusual to see designs common in the 1920s used in contemporary beadwork. As explained in Chapter One, for Nonya beadwork, which has no more than 150 years of history, radiocarbon-14 dating is not useful.

Indian beadwork from Kutch and Saurashtra employed European glass seed beads and was made in a similar period to Nonya beadwork. In order to develop a chronology of Indian beadwork, M.A. Dhaky uses beaded pieces that have a known provenance and articles inscribed with dates as “anchors.”¹⁴ These examples of beadwork are characterized by the types of motifs and the chromatic range of beads used at different times. Despite the possibility that beads could have been re-used or older motifs copied at a more recent date, Dhaky finds that “the general trend of bead work fits admirably into well-defined chronological phases.”¹⁵ Dhaky’s brief study, however, does not mention the number of provenanced pieces in the total sample and provides a description of only one dated piece, made in 1888.¹⁶ This makes it difficult to evaluate the reliability or robustness of his three-phased chronology. However, the advantage of his approach is that it does not assume a pre-given stylistic correlation between beadwork and other art forms, but derives this from a study of the objects themselves.

With the identification of a number of dated and dateable pieces of Nonya beadwork, a similar approach is possible here. A small number of examples have a reliable provenance. In addition, circumstantial and other evidence – such as accession dates of museum collections and newspaper inserted into or pasted to the back of beaded panels – provide a means of inferring the date of an object. In this study, the latter are referred to as dateable pieces. In total, dated and dateable examples, a selection of which is documented in detail in this part of the thesis, span a 130-year period and a range of technical and formal characteristics. Oral histories are also used to

¹⁴ M.A. Dhaky, “The Bead Work of Kutch and Suarashtra,” in *The Embroidery and Bead Work of Kutch and Saurashtra*, by J.M. Nanavati, M.P. Vora, and M.A. Dhaky (Gujarat: Department of Archaeology, 1966), p. 69.

¹⁵ Dhaky, “The Bead Work of Kutch and Suarashtra.”

¹⁶ Dhaky, “The Bead Work of Kutch and Suarashtra,” p. 68.

substantiate inferences on techniques and materials that relate to beadwork made from the 1920s onwards.

Known provenance

Several pieces of Nonya beadwork in private collections are known to have belonged to specific Peranakan families. For instance, a set of mattress panels (the “Soon mattress panels”) was used for the weddings of a wealthy rubber magnate’s daughters in the 1910s (fig. 65).¹⁷ A beaded roundel was stitched to a food cover that belonged to Lee Siok Ten, a Melaka Nonya born in 1877 and who probably married in the early 1890s (fig. 58b).¹⁸ As red lacquered food covers were associated with weddings, the beaded roundels can reasonably be expected to date from around 1895. This date is supported by another set of lacquered food covers from Penang, said to have been about 80 years old when they were put up for sale in 1981.¹⁹ Although the latter may not have been beaded, the gilded design of bamboo, flowers, and butterflies on the body of the cover are in a style similar to that of the food cover to which the beaded roundel is attached.

A set of threaded panels (the “Basheer rose panel” and the “Basheer peony panel”) is said to have been made by Siti Rahmah binte Haji Yahya (figs. 73, 74). According to her family, Siti Rahmah, a woman of Arab descent who was born in Penang in 1878, may have learnt beadwork techniques from her Chinese or Peranakan neighbours and she did Nonya beadwork to supplement her family’s income prior to her marriage.²⁰ The panels were thus most likely made between 1895 and 1905. This dating is further supported by the existence of a piece of newspaper interlining found between the fabric backing and the velvet base of another piece of embroidery found in her sewing box, although this piece may not necessarily have been for Peranakan use (fig. 75). Justice Bigham, mentioned in the newspaper, was a trial judge active in the UK

¹⁷ Jenny Soon, personal communication, January 2003. Tan Chay Yan had six daughters who were married between the early 1910s and the 1930s. His youngest daughter was born in 1911 and was the last to use these panels.

¹⁸ Jenny Soon, personal communication, January 2003; and Leung Thong Pin, “The House that Chee Built,” *New Straits Times Annual* (1977), pp. 70–71. Generally, Peranakan girls were married when they were around 16.

¹⁹ “His and Her Food Covers: At the Nonya Antique Fair,” *New Nation*, 6 October 1981.

²⁰ Zakaria Basheer, personal communication, January 2003.

between at least 1897 and 1912.²¹ A mattress panel from Penang stitched with glass seed beads was given to a Penang woman when she was married in 1934 as an heirloom from her mother, by whom the mattress panel is believed to have been used (fig. 76).²² This suggests a date of around 1915 for the panel when the latter was married.

The reliability of the provenance of these pieces is strong because they have remained with the families of their original owners. More recent beadwork pieces whose makers are still alive (and hence can identify their handwork) provide a revealing contrast to these older pieces in terms of designs and techniques (figs. 77, 78).

Museum collections

Colonial museum collections hold some of the earliest dateable pieces of beadwork. A purse in the Museum Nusantara in Delft in the Netherlands (the “Delft purse”) entered its collection before 1887 (fig. 79). The purse was collected by a lieutenant in the infantry of the Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands Indies Army) and was recorded in a catalogue of the museum’s collection, published in 1887, as a “purse for letters” as part of their collection pertaining to objects relating to the social and domestic life of the Chinese in the Netherlands Indies.²³ The purse is likely to have been designed according to the prevailing style of the time and, judging by its used but good condition, is unlikely to have been made many years before it was acquired by the officer. However, the period when the officer was in the Netherlands Indies is not known. The purse is therefore assigned a date of before 1885.

A few pairs of beaded slippers in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam were also collected in the Netherlands Indies. One pair of these was collected in Batavia and accessioned in 1876 (fig. 80). Although this was not necessarily Nonya, its existence confirms that beadwork was in use in Java by second half of the nineteenth century.

²¹ The article also contains the words “evidence,” “disaster,” and “jury.” Justice Bigham headed a commission into the enquiry of the Titanic disaster in 1912 which involved a coronial inquest and jury. No further details of the newspaper’s text could be ascertained without damaging the backing of the embroidery. I am grateful to Bruce Kercher at Macquarie University and Simon Bronnitt at the Australian National University for their suggestions in relation to this.

²² Regina Wong, personal communication, October 2002. This woman, Wong’s mother-in-law, was born in 1916 and was married when she was 18. The mattress panel was used by her mother-in-law’s mother, and can therefore be estimated to have been made around 1915 or slightly earlier.

²³ Pim Westerkamp, personal communication, January 2003 and April 2005.

Several beadwork panels in a complex technique known as threading (akin to netting or macramé with beads to form a textile-like surface) were given to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (figs. 81, 82). According to the Museum's records, these had been purchased in Penang or Kuala Lumpur by Miss J. Gollan perhaps some 10 years prior to their catalogue entry date of 1938. Since these panels were not likely to have been made for the tourist market, and appear to have been slightly used, the panels can plausibly be dated to around 1925 or before.

Nearly 200 beaded belts, pouches, and *muka bantal*, over two-thirds of which may be attributed as Nonya were donated to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in 1926 and 1936 by Mrs. George T. Smith (figs. 62–64, 83–90). Mrs Smith had purchased the items that were donated in 1926 from Grace Nicholson, an Oriental arts dealer in Pasadena who, in turn, may have bought them from Kalebajian Frères, a dealer in Paris, in late 1925 or early 1926. Despite its uniqueness, the Field Museum collection, which had been classified as Chinese, received little attention as Chinese beadwork has not been a subject of major research in the past.²⁴ The possibility that some of the pieces could have been made by or for the Peranakan community was raised in 1995 by Valerie Hector.²⁵ In the late 1990s, the collection was re-assigned a Malaysian attribution.²⁶ A close examination of this collection, as discussed in Appendix B, provides evidence that a major part of this collection is indeed Peranakan from the Netherlands Indies and the Straits Settlements. Because of the large number of well preserved pieces and its relatively early accession date, the collection represents a significant source of material for the study of early Nonya beadwork.

Another public collection which includes several pieces of beadwork is the Alice Smith collection in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra (figs. 12, 49). Donated to the museum in the early 1990s, the collection was formed by Alice Smith when she lived in Malaysia prior to the Second World War and again from around 1946 to 1950.²⁷

²⁴ A one-page article featured 20 belts from this collection. See Mary K. Sherrill, "Old Chinese Money Belts," *Home Beautiful*, no. 67 (1930), p. 309.

²⁵ Hector, "Prosperity, Reverence and Protection," n. 1, p. 32.

²⁶ The objects are catalogued according to the last place of in-context use rather than the cultural affiliation of the makers or users. Bennett Bronson, personal communication, May 2005.

²⁷ Robyn Maxwell, personal communication, August 2002.

Of the Southeast Asian museums, the Singapore History Museum holds one of the largest public collections of Nonya beadwork.²⁸ However, most of its collection was donated or obtained after the 1960s (figs. 34, 60). Whilst the provenance of a number of pieces have been noted in the accession records, the earliest of these relate to the period after the 1910s.²⁹ Hence, although the breadth of this collection in terms of the variety of objects it comprises is appreciable, it serves as a less useful source of material for a chronology of early beadwork. The collections of the Penang Museum and Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur are of limited significance for the same reason.

Newspaper backing

Many pieces of embroidered beadwork have layers of newspaper or fabric pasted with starch to the reverse as interlining and to help the objects maintain their shape and durability.³⁰ Newspaper was used as backing material in the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies but is not confined to Nonya beadwork and embroidery. Examples of Malay beadwork from Sumatra in the collection of Suji Treasures in Queanbeyan in Australia also have newspaper backing dating from the 1910s onwards (figs. 91, 92).³¹

Currently, the only way of ascertaining the presence of newspaper interlining on Nonya beadwork is if the newspaper is exposed or if the backing fabric or beadwork surface has been damaged or is cut open to reveal the interlining within. Neither ultra-violet light nor an infra-red Vidicom exposes newsprint under fabric, but if a sufficiently large opening (2 to 3 centimetres or more) between the backing material and beadwork exists, an endoscope can be inserted to “read” the newsprint.³² Until technology develops, it is difficult to expand the range of examples known to have

²⁸ The collection was formed by the National Museum of Singapore. Some of this collection is now on display at the Armenian Street premise of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.

²⁹ For example, a pair of adult-size beaded slippers (accession no. G0579) belonged to the grandmother of the donor, Doreen Quek, who was born in 1899 and died in 1986. Singapore History Museum accession records. Mr Kok Putt Poh, born around 1915, donated a number of velvet bead-embroidered items. Kok’s mother used to do beadwork, but it is not clear from the museum’s records if all the pieces he donated were made or used by his mother. The pieces are illustrated in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 43, 51, 67, 68. For an interview with Kok Putt Poh, see Oon, “Unravelling a Beaded Past,” p. 104.

³⁰ Newspapers and magazines were also used as templates for American patchwork quilts. An example is the Saltonstall quilt which contained pieces of a Harvard College catalogue from 1701. The quilt itself is said to date from 1704. See Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), pp. 32–34.

³¹ The newspapers used include the *Boston Globe* and *Daily Telegraph*.

³² I am indebted to Robyn Maxwell and Carol Cains for their suggestions and help with arrangements, and to Micheline Ford at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra for advising on and carrying out these tests.

newspaper backing without undoing the beaded items themselves. However, for several pieces of Nonya beadwork where the inner lining has become worn away or exposed, a fairly accurate date for the newspaper scraps can be obtained directly from their printed date or deduced from their contents.

Since old newspaper would have become discoloured and brittle, hence less pliable, the newspapers used are generally unlikely to have been more than a year or two old at the time they were attached to the beadwork. Where the beads are not stitched into the paper itself, there is no certainty that the newspaper backing was added contemporaneously with the production of the beadwork, especially since old pieces may have been repaired and restored. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that most pieces of backing would have been applied once the beading was completed in order to render the beadwork useable. Most importantly, dateable newspaper backing sets a lower limit (the date of the newspaper) and an approximate upper limit (of two to three years from the newspaper date) within which the beadwork would have been completed (or in some cases, repaired), and may thus be used to indicate, confirm, or refute the possible date of a piece.

Fragments of newspaper were found sandwiched between the beadwork and backing cloth of a set of panels in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden (the “Leiden panels,” figs. 93, 95). From the placement of the advertisements, their typeface, and the content of fragments from one panel, they can be identified as being from a page of the Indonesian daily, *Bintang Soerabaia*, of 2 November 1887 (compare figs. 93b–d and 94).³³ A notebook with a bead-embroidered cover was probably used around 1912, the date on its newspaper interlining (fig. 96). Another beaded wedding wallet from Sumatra has newspaper sandwiched between the lining and beadwork (fig. 32). It contains an obituary of Colonel Frank Rhodes (brother of Cecil Rhodes) who died on 22 September 1905, indicating that the wallet was most likely made soon after that date.

Newspaper backing continued to be used in beadwork made after World War Two. Examples of this are provided by two beaded velvet panels for slipper tops. One of

³³ I am grateful to Ian Proudfoot for his help with deciphering the texts and identifying the appropriate newspaper. No accession records accompany these two examples of beadwork. However, it would appear reasonable to consider that these panels were made in the Dutch rather than the British sphere of influence. The *Bintang Soerabaia* was published in Java. In addition, knotted or crocheted gold thread borders mostly appear on examples of beadwork with a Netherlands Indies (and more specifically, Sumatran) provenance. See, for example, Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 85.

these belonged to a Penang Nonya who is known to have continued doing beadwork after World War Two.³⁴ A piece from the front page of the *Straits Echo*, a Penang newspaper, of 22 July 1951 is sandwiched between the beadwork and backing fabric (fig. 97). The second example, also from Penang, has on its reverse a newspaper article that refers to George Marshall when he was United States Secretary of State, placing the newspaper between 1947 and 1949 (fig. 98). This dates the slipper panels to the late 1940s or early 1950s.

Fashions, Photographs, and Functioning Objects

Changing fashions, which can be seen through old photographs, may also provide clues as to the period in which certain types of objects, particularly those for weddings, were used. Towards the 1930s, a new fashion which Khoo Joo Ee terms the “reformed-style” was gaining popularity with the Peranakans.³⁵ Many photographs of wedding couples from the 1930s show the groom in a Western-style suit and brides in traditional Chinese *koon sah* and European-style veil. Bridal attendants also wore European-style garments or the Chinese *cheongsam*. With the modification in dress, items such as the *sangkut bahu*, men’s beaded belts and belt purses, and bridal attendants’ beaded headdresses were no longer popular.

Ho Wing Meng comments that silver *sireh* sets, silver jewellery, hairpins, anklets, and other accessories were also discarded from the bridal trousseau as Peranakan wedding customs and dress were modified.³⁶ According to Ho, this was due to the embrace of Christian wedding ceremonies and English customs.³⁷ In fact, the modifications in Chinese wedding customs were more likely to have been expressions of modernity discussed in Chapter Three. Non-Christian Chinese and Peranakans alike adopted Western fashions. For instance, Lily Tan, the eldest daughter of Tan Cheng Lock, is shown in pale-coloured *koon sah*, a pink lace veil with a 10-foot train, and a floral bouquet.³⁸ This trend for lace veils and floral bouquets was not confined to the Straits

³⁴ Katherine Sim, personal communication, January 2003.

³⁵ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, pp. 92–94. See also illustrations in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, pp. 80–81.

³⁶ Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, p. 29.

³⁷ Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*.

³⁸ See photograph in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, p. 81. According to Lily Tan’s daughter, the Western elements in Tan’s dress were also due to the influence of the groom’s English sister-in-law. J. Chan, personal communication, December 2003. This sister-in-law organized the decoration of the Tan family home for the wedding as well. Scott-Ross, *Tun Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan*, pp. 52–54.

Settlements. In her memoirs, Koo Hui-Lan observed that brides in China took to satin gowns in “streamlined Chinese style” (presumably the *koon sah*) and augmented these with white tulle veils and bridal bouquets.³⁹

The growing popularity of brass beds and lace accoutrements may also have rendered beaded mattress panels that were attached around the front edge of the matrimonial mattress and beaded bed valances obsolete (fig. 4, 49, 65). Beaded curtain-ties and bed valances were most likely made before the mid-1920s, a dating that accords with a small number of provenanced or dateable examples (figs. 73, 74, 76, 81, 82). Beaded footstools for use at weddings may have been adopted following Victorian English furniture styles (fig. 99). In nineteenth century England, footstools were popularly beaded or worked in worsted wools according to canvaswork designs.⁴⁰ Studio photographs up to the 1920s often show the bride with her feet on a footstool, but their declining incidence in wedding photographs taken after that suggests that these were no longer as popular by the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁴¹

Another potentially revealing set of objects for study is the *kasut manek* which changed in shape as fashions changed. Photographs indicate that the *kasut kodok* (a style of slipper with a separate semi-circular panel joined to the slipper upper at the toe) appears to have been popular with the Nonyas in the Straits Settlements until the first decade of the twentieth century (figs. 100–103).⁴² From around 1910, the slipper face was modified to exclude the semi-circular toe-piece (figs. 104–109). The sleeve of the slipper was also eliminated. Photographs from around this date show slipper uppers made with a single panel and squared or rounded toe-pieces.⁴³ A photograph of a wedding chamber from around 1920 also shows two cupboards of beaded and

³⁹ Koo Hui Lan, *Hui-Lan Koo: An Autobiography as told to Mary van Rensselaer Thayer* (New York: Dial Press, 1943), p. 309. In the mid-1930s, Soong Ching Ling championed the New Life Movement in China. One of its elements, the *wenming jiehun* (or “civilized wedding ceremony”) was designed to reduce the cost of elaborate weddings. Mass weddings where brides were dressed in Western style gowns took place. Lynn Pan, *Shanghai: A Century of Change in Photographs, 1834–1949* (Hong Kong: Hai Feng Publisher, 1993), p. 122.

⁴⁰ Illustrations of footstools in Victorian domestic settings can be found in Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain 1500–1900* (London: V & A Publications, 2001), fig. 3, p. 402, fig. 12, p. 406, fig. 25, p. 414.

⁴¹ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 94; Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, p. 75; and Liu, *From the Family Album*, pp. 40, 48, 64, 76, 98, 113.

⁴² See also the photograph dated to 1912 in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, p. 55. In the Straits Settlements, the *kasut kodok* (literally, “frog slippers”) are also referred to as *kasut tongkang*, since they take the shape of the *tongkang* or tugboats on the Singapore River. It is not clear when the term *kasut kodok* was first used.

⁴³ See, for example, Liu, *From the Family Album*, p. 39.

embroidered slippers with squared- and rounded-toes (fig. 66). Gradually, the rounded-toe mules, first with a flat sole and later with heels, appear to have replaced other slipper forms (fig. 110–114).⁴⁴ These used crescent-shaped slipper faces and are known simply by the generic term *kasut manek* or as *kasut seret* (literally “dragged” slipper).⁴⁵ From the 1930s onwards, the open-toe slipper (*kasut cakiak*) was introduced (figs. 115–117). A variation of this, popular from the 1950s, was the *kasut pintal*, made of two interlaced V-shaped panels (fig. 115 bottom.)

Photographs taken from the mid-nineteenth century onwards are also helpful in dating Nonya beaded footwear from Java. A pair of velvet slippers donated to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in 1912 may be tentatively dated to around 1870 or before, based on its similarity in shape to those worn by the Nonyas in photographs taken in the Netherlands Indies by Woodbury and Page in the 1870s (figs. 118–120).⁴⁶ Additional support is derived from its similarity to the shape of a second pair from the Javanese Chinese community which entered the Tropenmuseum collection in 1877 (fig. 121).

Careful consideration, however, should accompany the use of old photographs as visual evidence for dating beadwork. As with dress, new fashions tended to be adopted more readily by the younger generation. It was not uncommon for several different styles of accessories to have been in use at the same time. In photographs of the 1920s, differences in accessories and hairstyles also corresponded to differences in dress – younger Nonyas sported fringes or Western-style bobs and wore the shorter *kebaya* and large paisley-shaped *kerosang ibu* whereas married Nonyas had their hair swept back and wore *baju panjang* with smaller *kerosang* (fig. 39).⁴⁷ Furthermore, most photographs taken before the 1930s were formal, posed photographs; formal and

⁴⁴ Rounded-toe mules had been used by Indo-European and Javanese women in the late nineteenth century. See illustrations in Robert Nieuwenhuys, *Komen en Blijven: Tempoe Doeloe, een Verzonken Wereld: Fotografische Documenten uit het ou Indie 1870–1920* (Amsterdam: E.M. Querido, 1982), pp. 100, 115. Photographs show that rounded-toe slippers were in use amongst the Nonyas before the 1910s, but their incidence increases significantly after this date.

⁴⁵ An 1887 publication on Baba Malay lists “kasot seret” as slippers under the vocabulary pertaining to dress and tailoring. Lim, *A Manual of the Malay Colloquial*, p. 69. One explanation for the term *kasut seret* is that the slipper faces did not entirely enclose the wearer’s toes and the wearer thus had to “drag” her slippers. Noelle Tan and Veronica J. Zuzarte, *Timeless Peranakan Legacy: A Pictorial Celebration*, (Singapore: Apex Club of Singapore, 2004), p. 64. Indeed, some old photographs show Nonyas wearing embroidered slippers that appear to be too small. See Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 8, 11.

⁴⁶ See also other photographs of Chinese women in the collection of the KITLV (image nos. 30531, 30532) at the Department of Archives and Images, KITLV online database, accessible at <http://www.kitlv.nl/hisdoc_2.html> [accessed 30 May 2005].

⁴⁷ See also Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 170.

traditional dress was worn for celebratory occasions and may not always be reflective of fashion in everyday dress.

Seed Bead Types

Readers, curators, and collectors have written about attributing dates to Nonya beadwork based on the size of beads used, pieces made with smaller beads being said to be older.⁴⁸ Florence Chan, a Nonya who did beadwork in the 1930s, recalls that the glass beads she used were not the smallest employed by the Peranakans.⁴⁹ One Nonya who learnt beadwork in the 1930s complains that “small beads” are “*repat*” or awkward to handle and needles that are fine enough to thread these are difficult to obtain.⁵⁰ Such accounts lend support to claims that larger and rougher beads indicate a later date of construction but the hypothesis that the smaller the beads, the older a piece cannot be overly generalized.

There is a widespread notion that it became more difficult to obtain smaller *manek potong* after 1945 due to the closure of German bead manufacturers.⁵¹ Yet relatively small glass seed beads continued to be produced into the 1950s. Seed beads are graded by size, the minuteness indicated by the number of 0s, such that 5/0 would be larger than 20/0, although the exact measurements for each size varies between manufacturers.⁵² The smaller beads used in Nonya beadwork averaged just above 1 millimetre, with larger beads measuring between about 1.5 and 2 millimetres (these correspond approximately to sizes 7/0 and size 5/0 respectively in the sample card shown in figure 122). Around the 1920s, beads from 7/0 and smaller (approximately 1 millimetre and under) were produced in Bohemia and sold through at least one bead

⁴⁸ Bebe Seet, “Beaded Beauties. The Kasut Manek,” *The Peranakan* (June–August 1997), p. 3; Cheah, “Nonya Slippers,” p. 29.

⁴⁹ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 3.

⁵⁰ Neo Kim Neo, personal communication, February 2003.

⁵¹ For instance, Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2002; and Tan and Zuzarte, *Timeless Peranakan Legacy*, p. 57.

⁵² Peter Francis Jr. discusses bead sizing and the lack of consistency in grading beads between producers and different periods of time in his article “Questions, Questions,” *The Margaretologist* 10, no. 2, issue 24 (1997), pp. 6–7. A simple example illustrates this. Francis found a sample of Czech seed beads of size 8/0 to be 3.1 millimetres in diameter. A sample card of Willem Klaar in the Muzeum Skla a Bižuterie in Jablonec nad Nisou, Czech Republic, examined during my fieldwork, was probably made around the 1920s and showed size 7/0 measuring under 1.2 millimetres. Hector gives measurements for beads used in contemporary beadwork – size 24/0 is under 1 millimetre diameter, 11/0 and 12/0 are about 2 millimetres diameter, 8/0 is about 3 millimetres in diameter. Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 16.

exporter, Willem Klaar (fig. 123). Even after 1945, beads similar in size to those used in Nonya beadwork were made in Europe and exported to Singapore (fig. 124).

Moreover, because beads are durable, they can be re-employed on a new object after the original object has disintegrated. Old beads seem to have been re-used in both Indian and Native American beadwork.⁵³ Unpicking old pieces of embroidery was considered to be taboo by the Chinese, but the Nonyas do not appear to have subscribed to the same belief.⁵⁴ Contemporary Nonya beaders remove the beads from disintegrating beadwork, wash them, and painstakingly sort them to re-use in new pieces of beadwork.⁵⁵ There is no guarantee that previous generations of bead-workers would not have done the same. Peranakan beaders also hoarded unused glass and metallic beads left over from other projects for future use – several Nonyas still have strings of beads which were purchased prior to World War Two (figs. 20, 21, 27). The same has occurred with fine needles, some of which have found their way to antique shops. Thus, whilst much of the beadwork made after 1945 is regarded as “rough,” this assertion needs to be applied with caution.

At best, the type of beads used can serve as a secondary indicator of the age of a piece. As explained in Chapter One, rocailles and charlottes which were used in Nonya beadwork were produced in numerous colours from the 1840s onwards. Claims that charlottes were used only from the 1920s cannot be substantiated by available evidence.⁵⁶ Even if earlier beadwork used mainly rocailles, a close examination of the *tudong saji* that belonged to Lee Siok Ten, the Basheer rose and peony panels, and the Delft purse all show that certain colours of beads used were charlottes (fig. 58c, 73, 74, 79c).

Francis’ guidelines for periods of manufacture of different types of glass seed beads are of limited use since square-hole beads, available from the 1890s, were seldom, if

⁵³ Dhaky “The Bead Work of Kutch and Saurashtra,” p. 69; and Judith Reiter Weissman and Wendy Lavitt, *Labors of Love: America's Textiles and Needlework 1650–1930* (London: Studio Vista, 1988), p. 242.

⁵⁴ See Chiang, *Chinese Childhood*, p. 136 in relation to Chinese embroidery. I am grateful to Jocelyn Chatterton for providing this reference.

⁵⁵ Oo Leng Choo and Sally Phuah, personal communications, January 2003.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 234. Furthermore, Rudolph’s supposition that drawn-glass seed beads were made in China until a few decades ago is unlikely to be accurate. Peter Francis, personal communication, July 2002. See also Francis, *Asia’s Maritime Bead Trade*, p. 84; and Peter Francis Jr., “Glass Beads of China,” *Arts of Asia* 20, no. 5 (1990), pp. 118–127 for a discussion of Chinese wound-glass beads.

ever, used by the Nonyas.⁵⁷ Silver-lined and lusted beads, manufactured after 1860, were employed but, as Nonya beadwork probably developed only after the mid-nineteenth century, this information is again not helpful for dating Nonya beadwork.

Metallic beads (*manek pirigu*) of 1 millimetre diameter and under tend to have been used in smaller quantities, perhaps because they were more expensive.⁵⁸ They appear to have gone out of production around the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Stocks of these were most likely more limited and it would have been necessary to unpick a large number of pieces of beadwork to collect sufficient metallic beads to compose a new piece. Thus, beadwork where *manek pirigu* were used in large quantities was probably made no later than the first ten to fifteen years of the twentieth century, although small amounts may have been used on later beadwork.

Chinese Beadwork and Marks of Origin on Imported Beadwork

Although using seed pearls and coral beads to embellish Chinese embroidered rank badges and other dress accessories is well documented, little research has been carried out on Chinese beadwork as a genre in itself and the Chinese have generally been thought not to have had any widespread tradition of working with glass seed beads. However, Valerie Hector has recently identified textual references to Chinese beadwork as well as examples of beadwork using glass seed beads.⁶⁰ These suggest that there may have been a history of beadworking in mainland China. Other examples of Chinese beadwork include wallets, small pouches, powder cases, and headbands (figs. 125–127).

The Chinese may also have made beaded slippers similar to those of the Peranakans. A pair of beaded slippers with the motif of single pink peony stalk against a light blue ground on each slipper face belonged to a Hakka woman, Heung Shui Geow (fig. 128). Heung migrated from Hongkong to northern Australia around 1903 for an arranged

⁵⁷ Francis, "Questions, Questions," p. 8; and Francis, "A Vocabulary of Seed Beads," p. 12.

⁵⁸ Eng-Lee has suggested that they were generally reserved for wedding accessories due to their cost and their fineness which made them more difficult to manipulate. Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Francis, "Questions, Questions," p. 8.

⁶⁰ Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, pp. 14–15, 156. She cites textual references to a beaded net used as a bribe, a woven gold beaded Buddhist cassock, beaded curtains, and beaded lanterns in the *Mingshi Liezhuan* 331 and *Northern History Biographies* 79.67.

marriage, perhaps bringing these slippers with her at that time.⁶¹ The border of the slippers are decorated with simple interlocking pink and white beaded isosceles triangles, similar to the border designs on some examples of Nonya beadwork. The form of the fully-beaded slipper face is similar to those for Peranakan men. Despite these observable similarities, the relationship between beadwork that may have been made in mainland China and that used by the Nonyas has not yet become clear.⁶²

However, although Nonya beadwork is generally assumed to be locally-made, it is likely that some beadwork they used was imported from China. As with silverware, larger embroideries, and special sets of porcelain used by the Peranakans, beadwork could have been produced to meet Peranakan tastes or commissioned by specific clients. A Penang Nonya recalls being told by her mother, who was involved in renting out equipment (including beadwork) for Peranakan weddings, that beadwork was imported from China.⁶³

Labels attached to some examples of Nonya beadwork stating their Chinese origin provide an approximate indication of the dates when Nonya beadwork could have been imported from China. Several beaded belts, *muka bantal*, and a pair of slippers in the Field Museum collection bear marks of origin which read “China” or “Made in China” on the reverse (figs. 129–132). These labels suggest a construction date after around 1890. Two sets of regulations were enacted which required marks of origin in the English language to be applied to foreign goods. In 1887, the Merchandise Marks Act was passed by the British Parliament. This required all goods which had trademarks suggesting an English origin to be accompanied by a phrase stating “Made in xx.”⁶⁴ A

⁶¹ According to Heung’s daughter, the slippers are unlikely to have been obtained in Australia because she did not have much disposable income. Madam Heung returned to Hongkong once in 1937 to visit her brother. Mavis Moo, personal communication, August 2004; and Mavis Moo and Leon Peter Moo, *The Moo Family History: A Written and Pictorial Record of the Moo Family of Northern Australia, from the 1880s Onwards* (Brisbane: CopyRight Publishing, 1995), p. 9.

⁶² According to Hong Shouzi, glass bead embroidery was first carried out in China in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Beaded slippers brought back to China by Chinese residents in Luzon (Philippines) provided the impetus for the production of beaded slippers in Fujian, and craftsmen from Zhangzhou sold beaded slippers in Xiamen. From the 1920s, the “Huoyuan” trading firm imported glass beads for embroidery. Hong Shouzi, “Zhuxiu” (Beadwork), in *Zhongguo Baike Quanshu* (Shanghai: Xinhua Shudian, 1983), vol. 71, pp. 666–667. A pair of beaded slippers of the Tagala people from Luzon is in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington (accession no. 216971). I am indebted to Valerie Hector for bringing these sources to my attention, and for generously providing the text and a translation by Joy Beckman of the entry from the *Baike Quanshu*.

⁶³ Grace Saw, personal communication, November 2004.

⁶⁴ H.M. Finch, *The Merchandise Marks Acts, 1887–1894* (London: Wm Clowes & Sons, 1904), pp. 99, 198, 206.

more general labelling requirement was contained in the McKinley Tariff Act passed by the United States Congress in 1890 which required all imports into the United States to be marked with their country of origin. These regulations were reiterated in subsequent tariff acts but no wording was specified.⁶⁵ Although researchers of porcelain differentiate between labels with only a country name, for example ‘Germany,’ and those with the phrase “Made in xx,” specifying that the latter appear only after about 1920, there is no specific legislation in the United States tariff regulations requiring such a change in labelling. Appendix B discusses this in detail.

Consistency of Evidence

Examples of beadwork that bear various types of evidence can be dated or dateable. These indicators of age are generally consistent. For example, the Soon mattress panels are embroidered with *manek pirigu* and their provenance indicates a date of no later than 1915 (fig. 65). Examples that can be dated to the the third decade of the twentieth century do not employ metallic seed beads in any significant quantities. All the round-toe women’s *kasut manek* examined during fieldwork were stitched with sequins or glass rather than metallic seed beads. Comparisons of dateable pieces with oral history records and information provided by Nonya beaders also appear to be fairly consistent.

Techniques and Materials

This section examines the techniques and materials on dated and dateable beadwork to ascertain their usefulness as indicators of age. This will form the foundation for an argument that techniques and materials are a useful (though not infallible) method of assessing the date of construction of Nonya beadwork pieces. Other characteristics, such as finishing techniques, may serve as secondary indicators of age.

Bead embroidery and threading are the two main methods employed in Nonya beadwork. Bead embroidery is an appliqué technique which involves attaching beads to a base fabric with needle and thread.⁶⁶ Threading is used to create a mesh or surface

⁶⁵ These include the United States Tariff Acts, 1 October 1890 (“McKinley Tariff Act”), 24 July 1897, 5 August 1909, 3 October 1913, and 19 September 1922, in *United States Statutes at Large* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 1890–1922).

⁶⁶ See diagrams in Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” p. 14; and Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger, *Textiles: A Classification of Techniques* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1994), p. 138.

of beads without attaching the beads to a base of fabric or other material.⁶⁷ Ho identifies a third technique of stringing used mainly for bead jewellery rather than beadwork which is not relevant to this research.⁶⁸

Threaded beadwork

Nonya threaded beadwork is noted for its fine workmanship and intricate designs. Threading appears to have been most widely used in Penang and Sumatra as all but one of the reliably provenanced pieces of threaded beadwork examined were from these areas. Close business and personal ties between Penang and Sumatran families would certainly have assisted in the exchange of techniques, but it is not clear why the Singapore and Melaka Nonyas did not adopt threaded beadwork to the same extent.

Threading appears to have been done in last years of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. Evidence suggests that the majority of Nonya threaded beadwork was most likely made no later than the mid-1920s. Khoo Joo Ee illustrates an unfinished piece of threaded beadwork with *manek pirigu* which is likely to date from the first decade of the twentieth century or earlier, after which metallic seed beads became scarcer.⁶⁹ In addition, the threaded Basheer rose and peony panels were probably from the late 1890s or first years of the 1900s and the threaded beadwork panels in the Victoria and Albert Museum can be dated to before the late 1920s (figs. 73, 74, 81, 82). None of the Nonyas consulted for this research, some of whom were born in the 1910s and early 1920s, knew how to do threaded beadwork or recalled seeing such pieces being made.⁷⁰ Similarly, Ho Wing Meng, whose research

There is some flexibility in the use of the term “appliqué.” For example, “appliqué stitch” has been used to refer only to couched beadwork in Crabtree and Stallebrass, *Beadwork*, p. 185.

⁶⁷ The term threading, rather than netting (where single or multiple threads pass through beads to link them into a unified structure) or weaving, is adopted following Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork* as the former is widely used in popular treatises on Nonya beadwork. See, for example, Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 27; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 199. In this sense, the threading technique can be understood as vertical, horizontal, or diagonal “linking” through beads. Seiler-Baldinger, *Textiles*, pp. 119–120. Although Hector has referred to threading as a “weave,” she stresses that threading is technically a form of bead netting, an off-loom technique, not weaving (which involves an active weft thread and passive warp threads). Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” p. 15; and Hector, personal communication, April 2005. The definitions of netting and weaving given here follow the distinctions given in Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 20. The term “threading,” is also used in the generic sense of stringing beads together in a number of different ways. See, for instance, Clabburn, *Beadwork*, pp. 20–23.

⁶⁸ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 50.

⁶⁹ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 197.

⁷⁰ Oo Leng Choo from Penang has experimented with threading simple geometric designs. She describes the method as similar to macramé. Beadwork teacher Bebe Seet in Singapore is studying old

was carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, did not come across anyone able to do threaded beadwork.⁷¹

Hector documents one example of Nonya threaded beadwork where there are as many different threads as there are columns of beads (multiple threads), each passing diagonally through beads to produce a “diamond-like pattern.”⁷² This is different from bead-netting using a single needle and single strand of thread done, for example, in Kutch and Saurashtra in India.⁷³ Instead, it bears superficial resemblance to the multiple-thread method used by Dayaks in Borneo. Accounts of beadwork done by groups such as the Kayans and Malohs describe a process where individual threads are attached to a horizontal foundation thread and passed through individual beads to form a pattern, progressing perhaps by following a paper pattern placed beneath the beadwork.⁷⁴

The Nonya threaded panel studied by Hector was constructed by placing threads diagonally; this technique is different from the vertical-thread construction found on examples of beadwork from Borneo.⁷⁵ However, as Hector cautions, without unravelling other pieces of beadwork, it would be an over-generalization to assume that all other pieces of Nonya threaded beadwork used a multiple diagonal-thread technique since different underlying thread structures can produce similar patterns.⁷⁶ It is thus not yet possible to state categorically the differences between Nonya and Dayak beadwork, an area which would benefit from further research.

pieces of threaded beadwork. Oo Leng Choo, personal communication, January 2003; and Bebe Seet, personal communication, December 2004.

⁷¹ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 34.

⁷² Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” p. 13. The diagrammatic representation in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 56 is significantly different and should be treated cautiously as it does not clearly indicate how threads pass through beads.

⁷³ Netted beadwork from Kutch and Saurashtra is done without a frame. For technical descriptions, see Crabtree and Stallebrass, *Beadwork*, p. 186; Hector “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” fig. 10, p. 13, p. 19; and Ann Morrell, *The Techniques of Indian Embroidery* (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1995), fig. 97, p. 109.

⁷⁴ Sarawak Museum, *Beads*, pp. 11-12; Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” figs. 11a, p. 14, p. 29. A photograph from the 1930s of a Kenyah woman with a half-finished beadwork piece attached to a wooden beading board is shown in Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 56.

⁷⁵ See Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” especially figs. 9, 11a, 11b, pp. 13–14, 29 for a comparison.

⁷⁶ Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” p. 14; and Valerie Hector, personal communication, October 2004.

Threading is a relatively complicated beadwork technique. On a “typical” beaded panel, there are some 60 columns or more of beads, necessitating the manipulation of as many threads (figs. 73, 74). The small size of beads used also made threading labour intensive. Based on Hector’s calculations, a Nonya threaded panel which she studied required 183 beads per square centimetre, a figure that was high compared to the example she examined from Borneo.⁷⁷ In addition, the panel averaged 61 connections per square centimetre (connections are defined as threads that have to pass around other threads, through beads, or both). Compared to the beadwork from Borneo, with 38 connections per square centimetre, the relatively high number of connections indicates the greater effort required in construction.⁷⁸

The complexity of threading is illustrated by two unfinished examples of threaded beadwork. In one of these, threading commenced from the central axis of the design, marked on the beadwork itself by a row of darker brown beads (fig. 133). As with netted beadwork practised in Borneo, an accompanying pattern was placed beneath the work as a guide.⁷⁹ Only half of the pattern was drawn in ink on plain cotton, probably because the beader simply reversed the guide once the first half of the threading was completed, using the row of brown beads as a placement guide. There were several possible advantages to this. By starting in the middle of a multiple-thread piece, the beader would not have had to push the beads up such a long distance of thread, saving time but also reducing the incidence of tangled threads with a shorter working length.⁸⁰ Reversing the pattern also helped to ensure that the beadwork could be perfectly symmetrical by avoiding mistakes which could arise in drafting the second half of the pattern. In a second example, threading commenced from the festoons at the base of the panel and proceeded unevenly upwards (fig. 134). The difference in methods indicates that there were variations in techniques used. However, substantial further research on technique is difficult to carry out because it requires potentially destructive undoing of beaded pieces.

The cotton pattern piece underneath one of these unfinished threaded panels has a design drawn in pencil or ink in a manner similar to the cotton templates used for silk

⁷⁷ Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence, and Protection,” pp. 16–17.

⁷⁸ Hector, “Prosperity, Reverence and Protection,” p. 17.

⁷⁹ An elderly Nonya told Bebe Seet that the beader used a second, coloured pattern as a supplemental reference. Bebe Seet, personal communication, December 2004.

⁸⁰ Valerie Hector, personal communication, February 2005. Hector also pointed out that some Dayak groups used this technique, mostly for fashioning their baby carrier panels.

thread embroideries (compare figs. 133, 135). The reasons for the adoption of threading are not known. One may speculate that threading was adopted to save on materials since fewer beads were necessary for a piece of threaded beadwork than a piece of equivalent size that is fully covered with beads. In this case, threaded beadwork may have developed initially as an alternative technique to bead embroidery with Chinese patterns. Where beadwork was embroidered onto plain cotton instead of velvet, as in the Delft purse for example, metallic thread was couched to hide the plain cotton ground. Threading made it possible to work in a single medium from the same type of basic template. Furthermore, since the threaded beads were not attached to the underlying pattern, the latter could be re-used. In fact, threaded panels from Penang exist which display similar or almost identical designs (compare figs. 136 and 137, 138 and 139).

However, the complexity of threading prompts questions on the derivation of this technique. Simple threaded beadwork bears some resemblance to a veil of beads or pearls in a 1740 illustration of a headband used by the Chinese in the Netherlands Indies.⁸¹ Alternatively, another possible source for the development of Nonya threading is that it was an extension of the knotting techniques used for fringes and tassels of festive hangings and embroideries ordered from China, even though multicoloured fringes used on Chinese textiles have threads that are inclined vertically rather than diagonally.⁸²

Hector provides evidence to suggest that netted beadwork was carried out in mainland China – examples of this include a spherical netted “beaded bead” and a Qing dynasty beaded scent bag.⁸³ The Chinese bamboo shirts worn under heavier outer-garments to provide ventilation and to protect the more expensive outerwear from perspiration damage were also netted from small bamboo tubes or “beads.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ For an illustration of the headband, see Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 150.

⁸² Eng-Lee also suggests that there is an affinity between Chinese knotted border and threading. Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 27.

⁸³ Illustrated in Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, pp. 14–15, p. 32. The Qing date for the scent bag is supported by a comparable scent bag that was given to the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1900 by missionaries who had been in southern China (accession number 70/1753). This piece appears to use wound- rather than drawn-glass beads. I am grateful to Valerie Hector for drawing my attention to this piece. The image may be accessed at the American Museum of Natural History online database <<http://anthro.amnh.org/anthropology/databases>> [accessed 1 September 2005].

⁸⁴ Hector, *Art of Beadwork*, p. 24. Hector notes that this was an instance of the export of Chinese beadwork to the Straits Settlements. Valerie Hector, personal communication, March 2005.

It is possible that threaded beadwork objects may have been imported from China for the Peranakans, as were other items of embroidery. Although the question remains of whether the Nonya threading technique could have been derived from or influenced by Chinese knotting or bead netting, the Basheer rose and peony panels and the unfinished threaded panels discussed provide evidence that bead threading was also undertaken in the Straits Settlements. Although infrequent, variations to the diamond pattern can be seen in a few instances and some pieces of beadwork combine more than one technique (figs. 140, 141). This suggests that there was some experimentation with techniques. The abandonment of bead threading by the Nonyas hints at the difficulty of the technique and its substitutability with other simpler and faster methods of embroidery.

Bead Embroidery

Bead embroidery was one of the most common methods employed in beadwork throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has been the main method of Nonya beadwork and is still practised today. The four main means of embroidered Nonya beadwork are bead couching, lane stitch, seed stitch, and petit-point beadwork.

Embroidering with beads requires the use of an embroidery frame or *pidangan* as a support. The basic structure of the Nonya *pidangan* is similar to the frames used by the Peninsular and Sumatran Malays (for whom it is also known as the *pamedangan* or *pemidang*) for silk and gold thread embroidery.⁸⁵ A basic *pidangan* appears to have been affordable and fairly easy to obtain.⁸⁶ However, ornate embroidery frames replete with little drawers for haberdashery were made for Nonya use, an indication of the attention they placed on embroidery and beadwork.⁸⁷

The oldest known *pidangan* is said to have belonged to a Nonya who lived in the 1860s and the design probably changed little over time.⁸⁸ The base fabric onto which

⁸⁵ Aswar, *Antakesuma Embroidery in the Minangkabau Adat*, p. 5; and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, *Glosari Budaya Malaysia (Glossary of Malaysian Arts)* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, 1995) vol. 4, p. 22.

⁸⁶ Neo Kim Neo recounts that carpenters used to refuse to make *pidangan* as the job was too small. She used to buy hers from a Malay man who sold stools for \$1 (the equivalent of approximately S\$110 in current terms). Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 1–3.

⁸⁷ See illustration in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 28

⁸⁸ Felix Chia, "The Slippers of Yesteryear," *Straits Times*, 2 November 1980.

beads are to be sewn is attached at its sides to canvas looped across four wooden rollers (*kayu kilingan*).⁸⁹ This material is stretched taut across the *pidangan*, which is made of two wooden sidebars and two braces, by passing thick string through the canvas at intervals, catching the *kayu kilingan*, and looping the string tightly around the sidebars and braces before passing it back through the canvas (fig. 142). The basic design of the *pidangan* is also similar to the rectangular wooden embroidery frames used in Chinese embroidery, although some frames used by the Chinese comprised only two rollers.⁹⁰

Unlike the Chinese frames which could be of any size, most old Nonya *pidangan* are no more than about 50 centimetres by 80 centimetres, the size suitable for embroidering slipper faces and *muka bantal*. The relatively small *pidangan* begs the question of how larger objects such as 200 centimetre long beaded mattress panels were stretched out for embroidery (figs. 4 top, 49, 65, 76). One view is that sizeable objects were embroidered or beaded on frames large enough to take dress lengths.⁹¹ In Malay and Sumatran embroidery traditions, large *pidangan* were used to accommodate more than one embroiderer working simultaneously on a piece of needlework,⁹² but a closer examination indicates that these may not always have been necessary, even for embroideries. Long pieces of embroidery could have been stretched across the frame in sections; when each section was completed, a different section could have been re-stretched and moved across the frame.⁹³ Although this would have been tedious, it avoided the need to construct large and unwieldy frames for the embroidery of only a few items or for domestic use in smaller spaces.

Before embroidering on velvet, the design was normally outlined in white (or yellow on some beadwork from the Netherlands Indies), occasionally visible beneath the beadwork (fig. 12b, 143c). The white colour could be a chalky substance or oyster shell powder.⁹⁴ The latter was used by the Chinese to transfer patterns onto a fabric base, usually by pouncing (dusting) oyster shell powder through a paper pattern that

⁸⁹ The description of the *pidangan* which follows is largely from Chia, *Ala Sayang!* p. 114.

⁹⁰ Chung Young Yang, *The Art of Oriental Embroidery: History, Aesthetics and Technique* (New York: Scribner, 1979), pp.17–18.

⁹¹ Chia, “The Slippers of Yesteryear”; and Chia, *Ala Sayang!* p. 115.

⁹² See illustration in Rita Wassing-Visser, *Weefsels en Adatkostuums uit Indonesië* (Delft: Volkenkundig Museum Nusantara, 1982), fig. 40, p. 29.

⁹³ See illustration in Leigh, *Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts*, plate 18, after p. 36.

⁹⁴ Oo Leng Choo, personal communication, January 2003.

had first been pricked.⁹⁵ Alternatively the design was traced onto fine paper with oyster shell paste and then transferred by laying the tracing with the drawn side on the fabric to be stitched and burnishing the back of the paper with a wooden spoon.⁹⁶ In Nonya needlework, if gauze or silk was used, it was backed by coarser cloth for added strength. On a cotton or silk base, the pattern could be drawn in ink or pencil (figs. 56b, 135). Sometimes, a silk or cotton base would be combined with multi-coloured velvet appliqués (figs. 2, 8).

The popularity of bead embroidery techniques changed over time. Bead couching appears to have been one of the earliest beadwork techniques used by the Nonyas and can be seen on examples of Nonya beadwork that may be dated to the 1880s or before (figs. 79, 93, 95). This involves stringing a length of beads with one thread and fastening this to a fabric base with a second thread. Two needles were most probably used – one to string the beads and another for the couching. Although this may have been awkward, it would also have been faster than attaching beads one-by-one. Couching was particularly useful for stitching borders where differently coloured beads alternated in a regular sequence.

Bead couching is more commonly known in beadwork literature as overlay or spot stitch and was widely used, for instance, in Native American beadwork from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹⁷ However, the technical similarity between Nonya beadwork and Native American beadwork does not necessarily indicate a transmission of methods from the West – this means of attaching beads to fabric is one of the most basic and may well have developed from already established local embroidery traditions. For instance, the technique is similar to gold thread couching, practised by the Chinese as well as the Malays and the Peranakans, where gold-wrapped threads were laid onto the surface of a fabric and held down by silk or cotton threads stitched through fabric. I have adopted the term “bead couching” because of this similarity.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Verity Wilson, *Chinese Dress* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), p. 107; Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 19.

⁹⁶ Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ William C. Orchard, *Beads and Beadwork of American Indians*, Contributions from the Museum of the American Indians (New York: Heye Foundation, 1929), p. 129.

⁹⁸ However, in contrast to metallic thread couching, with bead couching, the couching threads are generally not visible on the finished piece.

Couching appears to have been supplemented by a second method known as lane stitch. This is where two or more beads are fastened to the fabric base with a single stitch. The Leiden panels employ a combination of lane stitch and bead couching. Bead couching and lane stitch were also widely used on early Nonya beadwork from the Straits Settlements. For instance, on the National Gallery of Australia's mattress panel from Melaka, the couching threads are visible where the beads have come loose (fig. 49b). The *tudong saji* that belonged to Lee Siok Ten employed a combination of bead couching and lane stitch (fig. 58c).

Couched and lane-stitched beadwork appears to have been done primarily on velvet. Beadwork on velvet is generally said to predate beadwork on canvas.⁹⁹ Mrs Ong Chin Yam, a Melaka Nonya, learnt to bead around 1915 by stitching the beads individually; she did not bead on velvet.¹⁰⁰ Josephine Wee recalls sewing beaded slipper faces both on canvas and velvet in the 1920s and 1930s, and Neo Kim Neo, who learnt beadwork in Singapore in the 1930s, never beaded on velvet.¹⁰¹ Velvet continued to be used for embroidery, but mainly with silk or metallic threads, and some writers have suggested that the popularity of velvet as a base fabric, particularly for slipper faces, waned in the 1930s.¹⁰² Similarly, bead couching and lane stitch, the two main techniques of beading on velvet, were probably in decline by the 1910s. However, some beadwork on velvet continued to be done with lane stitch and by stitching beads individually. The existence of a small number of couched and lane-stitched beaded items on velvet with "China" marked on the reverse suggests that such beadwork may also have been imported (figs. 131, 132).

Initially used to supplement bead couching and lane stitch, individually-stitched beadwork in seed stitch and petit-point appears to have gradually superseded the former two methods. Despite its labour-intensive nature, entire surfaces of objects were covered with individually-stitched beads. Seed-stitched beadwork is where individually-stitched beads are aligned in many different directions, either randomly or, as is more often the case, following the contour of the motifs (fig. 56b). Petit-point beadwork refers to individually-stitched beadwork where every bead is aligned in the

⁹⁹ Cheah, "Nonya Slippers," p. 29; Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 29; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁰ Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2002.

¹⁰¹ Neo Kim Neo, personal communication, February 2003; and Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003.

¹⁰² Cheah "Nonya Slippers," p. 29; and Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 107.

same direction (fig. 89, 144, 145). A panel embroidered with seed-stitched beads in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum was accessioned in 1929 (fig. 146). Based on its dimensions, the panel was most likely for a belt. Many of the belts and pouches in the Field Museum collection that were accessioned in 1926 are also fully-worked in beads, probably in seed stitch or a combination of seed stitch and lane stitch (figs. 62, 83c, 85, 87).

There was some overlap of the periods of popularity of different techniques, and in the first quarter of the twentieth century, more than one technique could be used concurrently. The front of a belt from the Field Museum collection is exquisitely executed in seed-stitched beadwork, whilst the individual motifs were couched in beads on the flap that was folded over to secure the buckle (fig. 64). The choice of cotton for the underlying fabric may explain why only the back flap of the Field Museum belt, which was seen only by the wearer, had couched beadwork.

As techniques changed, so too did materials used. If the background was fully beaded, plain-weave cotton rather than the more decorative velvet was used, and the former became the dominant base fabric as fully-beaded pieces become increasingly popular. As with velvet, plain-weave cotton could be purchased from the itinerant haberdasher with designs already drawn onto them, to be used either for silk thread embroidery or beadwork (figs. 147–150). Mrs Ong Chin Yam purchased ready-drawn patterns for *kasut manek* from the haberdasher in Melaka.¹⁰³ Seed-stitched and lane-stitched beadwork on plain-weave cotton ceased to be a significant technique by about 1925. Examples of these that may be dated to after 1925 generally employed tubular or hex-cut beads rather than rocailles or charlottes (figs. 25, 151).

Towards 1910, Nonya beadwork was increasingly carried out in the petit-point technique, modifying the appearance of individually-stitched beadwork. Visually, petit-point beadwork presents a more even appearance than seed-stitched beadwork since all the beads are aligned in the same direction. Petit-point beadwork parallels an older European beadwork tradition inspired by canvaswork, popular in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ The petit-point stitch is a single, half cross-stitch worked on counted-thread canvas and the needleworker follows a sampler or a pattern drawn onto squared paper or graph paper, with each square of colour

¹⁰³ Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2002.

¹⁰⁴ Canvaswork is also known as Berlin woolwork.

representing one stitch. Every stitch is the same length and is aligned in an oblique direction. Small beads could easily be substituted for embroidery thread or wool, and each square of the canvaswork pattern could be taken to represent one bead. Petit-point beadwork is more commonly referred to as canvas beading or needlepoint beadwork.¹⁰⁵ However, in Nonya beadwork, it was carried out on velvet as well as on plain-weave canvas and the term “petit-point beadwork” is used to reflect the stitch direction rather than the material the beadwork was done on.

Although petit-point materials were available in the Straits Settlements by the 1880s or earlier, petit-point beadwork does not appear to have become popular until the twentieth century.¹⁰⁶ A beaded plaque dated to 1897 appears to be an early example of petit-point beadwork (fig. 152).¹⁰⁷ Other dated examples of petit-point beadwork are from around 1910 and after. A beaded altar panel has a Chinese cyclical date corresponding to the year 1908 written in ink on the red fabric border (fig. 153). The Chinese inscription records that it was an offering of thanks to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, from two women, Lin Qiao-er and Lu Yeh-mei, after their wishes were fulfilled.¹⁰⁸ Although the design was stitched in petit-point on counted-thread canvas, a single row of beads on the outermost border of the beadwork was couched.

As discussed above, until the 1910s the *kasut kodok* was a common shape for Nonya slippers but had gone out of fashion by the mid-1910s or early 1920s. Several pairs of slipper tops for *kasut kodok* and for a transitional shape between the *kasut kodok* and the crescent-shaped *kasut seret* are stitched in petit-point (figs. 106, 154, 155). Interestingly, only one belt in the Field Museum collection accessioned in 1936 is in petit-point beadwork, which supports the hypothesis that although petit-point was in use by the first decade of the twentieth century, it did not become the dominant technique until around 1920 (fig. 87). According to Florence Chan, in the 1920s,

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Clabburn, *Beadwork*, p. 38; and Carole Morris, “Elizabeth Maltby – Victorian English Beadworker,” *Bead Society of Great Britain Newsletter*, no. 70 (2003), p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Advertisements by NAUTA’s General Store and Blaze Reidel & Co., a department store in Penang, for Berlin woolwork patterns for cushions and slippers can be found in several issues of the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* throughout 1886 and early 1887.

¹⁰⁷ This plaque will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

¹⁰⁸ This inscription reads counter-clockwise: “*xujia nian shiyue chuwu*” (Chinese cyclical year 1908, fourth month, day five), “*Guanyin fozhu qianchu*” (Everlasting Guanyin), “*xingnu Lin Qiao-er Lu Yeh-mei zhuxie*” (Sincerely, Lin Qiao-er and Lu Yeh-mei, with thanks).

individually-stitched beadwork was more expensive than lane-stitched beadwork using larger beads, reflecting their greater effort required.¹⁰⁹

Requiring more preparation but fewer beads, petit-point on velvet and silk probably developed alongside petit-point beadwork on counted-thread canvas (fig. 156).¹¹⁰

Whilst petit-point beadwork on velvet involved additional preparation, it required fewer beads since the background could be left unadorned. To ensure the evenness of beadwork, a piece of squared canvas could have been placed above the velvet as a guide. The design would then have been transposed from the petit-point sampler onto velvet.¹¹¹ Once the beadwork was completed the canvas threads could be pulled out one-by-one leaving a visible ground of velvet. Petit-point beadwork on velvet was still done in the 1960s, evidenced by a pair of velvet child's slippers from the 1950s or 1960s (fig. 145).¹¹²

Most examples of beadwork that date from the mid-1910s to the early 1940s are on a double-thread canvas known as Penelope canvas, with paired warp and weft threads woven so that the threads form gridlines and the spaces between them are "holes" through which the needle passes. Penelope canvas is sized by the number of holes per centimetre or per inch and is also referred to by the Nonyas as *kain urat* (or *chap-ji-por* in Hokkien). The literal translation of *chap-ji* is twelve and *por* is cloth, so *chap-ji-por* probably refers to a cloth with a twelve-hole count.

A beaded mattress panel from Penang that is in a similar design to nuptial bed decorations used in Penang around 1915 may be dated to this period (compare figs. 44, 46b and 157). Another mattress panel from Penang, also dated to 1915, is in petit-point beadwork.¹¹³ Nonyas who learnt beadwork in the 1930s used the petit-point technique on *kain urat*.¹¹⁴ Beading was generally begun from the central spine of the

¹⁰⁹ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 4.

¹¹⁰ For an example on silk, see Eng Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 69.

¹¹¹ More experienced needleworkers may have worked on velvet without a guiding grid. Kok Putt Poh, a Singapore Peranakan born in 1915, recalled that his mother transposed petit-point patterns in wool into beadwork on velvet by "count[ing] each grain of velvet." However, she did place threads across the pattern piece to locate the centre and the corners. See Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 105.

¹¹² This pair of slippers was purchased new in the 1950s or 1960s in Singapore for a young girl. Dorcas Lim, personal communication, January 2003.

¹¹³ See n. 22 of this chapter in relation to the provenance of the panel.

¹¹⁴ Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2002; Neo Kim Neo, personal communication, February 2003; and Oo Leng Choo and Sally Phuah, personal communications, January 2003.

embroidery and worked outwards in either direction, either vertically or horizontally.¹¹⁵ This made it easier to count the beads of each colour, important in order to avoid mistakes. Some beaders preferred to work in isolation to facilitate concentration.¹¹⁶ A large darning needle was inserted into the centre of the design to be followed as a marker and was moved as the beading progressed.¹¹⁷

Compared to threaded beadwork, petit-point beadwork was a relatively simple method which could be worked either following a design drawn directly onto the fabric to be stitched, or a sampler or a pattern drawn on squared paper similar to those used for canvaswork (figs. 158, 159). Nonya beaders no longer use *kain urat* with patterns drawn directly onto them, indicating that these relate to an earlier period of Nonya beadwork. Khoo suggests that *kain urat* was preferred because it was more suited to beadwork based on European cross-stitch patterns.¹¹⁸ Apart from patterns printed on single sheets of paper, sampler books with fold-out pages that contained a range of floral, animal, geometric, and alphabet patterns were printed for European canvaswork by the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹⁹ These canvaswork or cross-stitch pattern books do appear to have provided sources for Nonya beadwork designs (compare figs. 159 and 160).¹²⁰ However, Chinese-inspired motifs, such as the pheasant, crane, and deer were also employed for the Nonyas' petit-point beadwork patterns (fig. 153).

Another possible explanation for the adoption of *kain urat* is that it was originally used for beadwork samplers.¹²¹ In fact, some of the patterns for textile weaving in the Netherlands Indies took the form of cross-stitch samplers.¹²² Certainly, as Eng-Lee

¹¹⁵ For a detailed description of the process, see Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 3–11.

¹¹⁶ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 67.

¹¹⁷ Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2002.

¹¹⁸ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 202.

¹¹⁹ A sampler book of 1854, produced by Groombridge and Sons, London, is shown in Nerylla Taunton, *Antique Needlework Tools and Embroideries* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1997), colour plate 202, p. 186.

¹²⁰ Elsie Tan, quoted in Lim Phay-Ling, "Where Only the Aristocratic Wore Kasut Manek," *Sunday Times*, 2 November 1980.

¹²¹ Un-named Nonya sources cited by Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 107.

¹²² See, for example, a cross-stitch sampler on counted thread canvas for weaving *songket* from Komering or Palembang in south Sumatra in Maxwell, *Sari to Sarong*, p. 206. Images of 25 similar pieces in the National Gallery of Australia collection (accession nos. NGA 2000.865.1–26) can be viewed at the National Gallery of Australia online database, <<http://www.nga.gov.au/IndonesianTextiles/Code/Detail.cfm?IRN=120297&BioArtistIRN=90723&MnuID=4>> [accessed 1 September 2005].

observes, *kain urat* was “a less taxing material” to work with, one reason for its sustained popularity.¹²³ This appears to have been the dominant technique of Nonya beadwork since the mid-1920s.

Because most Nonya beadwork, particularly that done before the 1930s, used seed beads under 1.3 millimetres in diameter, only the finest *kain urat* was suitable. Many contemporary beaders spoke of the difficulty of obtaining fine *kain urat* after World War Two, prompting the uptake of the multiple-thread Aida canvas. Some beaders also pasted graph paper onto the base fabric after it had been stretched on the *pidangan* as a guiding grid, and the paper is sometimes visible beneath the beads (fig. 161)¹²⁴

Whilst petit-point beadwork on counted thread canvas persisted after World War Two, there was a renewed interest in beadwork on velvet in the 1950s which appears to have been concentrated mainly in Penang. Beads were sewn on top of paper templates that mark the design (figs. 97, 98). Katherine Sim recalls her grandmother, a Penang Nonya, stitching beads in this way.¹²⁵ The use of paper templates was not novel. It was also used in traditional Chinese embroidery and Victorian beadwork.¹²⁶ However, the widespread adoption of paper templates by Nonya beaders was more likely a result of the adaptation of cardboard cut-outs used in raised silk and metallic thread embroidery. The resulting beadwork appears stiffer and less refined and the use of paper templates has not endured.

Other Techniques

In Victorian England, three-dimensional objects such as boxes, spectacle cases, and cutlery handles were encrusted with beads by stringing them onto a wire wound around the object and held in place by buttonhole stitch.¹²⁷ Nonya beadwork appears to have little relationship to this, even if it used canvaswork techniques and materials that can be associated with European embroidery. The Nonyas’ free-standing three-

¹²³ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 29. Presumably, *kain urat* is what she refers to as “loose-weave” fabric.

¹²⁴ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 8.

¹²⁵ Katherine Sim, personal communication, January 2003.

¹²⁶ The Chinese transferred embroidery patterns onto fabric by stitching through the rice paper designs onto the fabric. Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 19. Paper templates were also used on Native American beadwork. See Aimee E. Newell, “The Art of Flowering: Nineteenth Century Iroquois Beadwork in the Collection of Old Sturbridge Village,” *Piecework* 10, no. 4 (2002), p. 51–54 for a description of the procedure.

¹²⁷ Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework*, p. 184.

dimensional pieces of beadwork such as hairpin containers and vases were created by joining two dimensional bead-embroidered panels (figs. 53, 56). This involved a fairly laborious process of stitching the beads onto a canvas or velvet base, stiffening the pieces of canvas with layers of paper and then a piece of fabric, and then stitching the embroidered pieces together. Alternatively, embroidered canvas panels could be pasted onto metal containers that were probably specially made for this purpose (fig. 55). The creativity and ingenuity of the beader are also visible in hairpins or ornamental pins (*kemunchak*) for the altar table where beads were strung onto wire (fig. 162).

Knitted and crocheted bead handbags were popular in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Europe, beaded handbags had earlier been made by attaching a foundation thread to the top edge of a purse-shaped mould and working the beads *à feston* or with buttonhole stitch.¹²⁸ In the nineteenth century, this method was superseded by knitting and crochet with beads.¹²⁹ European beaded handbags were used by fashionable Nonyas in the early twentieth century. A photograph from the early twentieth century shows Mrs Lee Choon Guan with a handbag in a design similar to a beaded handbag which belonged to a Peranakan family (compare figs. 163 and 164).¹³⁰ By the early twentieth century, knitting and crochet were also widely taught by missionaries and in schools, and Nonyas such as Chee Lak Neo and Lily Tan were able to knit.¹³¹

Bead crochet appears to have been undertaken in the Netherlands Indies and bead crocheted two-part cases (possibly *daun nipah* cases) and miser's purses from Sumatra are dateable to the second decade of the twentieth century (fig. 165).¹³² However, the

¹²⁸ Clabburn, *Beadwork*, pp. 33, 38.

¹²⁹ Clabburn, *Beadwork*, pp. 33, 38.

¹³⁰ The handbag had belonged to a Peranakan family. Regina Wong, personal communication, October 2002.

¹³¹ Chee Lak Neo and C.C. Koh, personal communications, January 2003. Both knitted booties; Lily Tan knitted some for her grand-daughter born in 1973.

¹³² The example in figure 165 is closely comparable in form and size to Sumatran beaded pouches in the American Museum of Natural History in New York (accession nos. 80.0/4001 and 80.0/4002) accessioned in 1919. The pieces may be viewed at their online database <<http://anthro.amnh.org/?CFID=15335&CFTOKEN=35782497>> (search under donor name "Walcott" in the Asian Ethnographic Collection) [accessed 31 December 2004]. It is not clear if these pouches were Nonya. A set of two bead-crocheted miser's pouches are in the collection of the Gemeente Musea Delft, Museum Nusantara in the Netherlands (accession nos. S1859-3 and S2008). One is beaded with the word "Kota Gedang" (a town near Padang in Sumatra) and the date "12.3.1911." The other is beaded with the name "Dr Poser" and the date "23.6.16." These are discussed and shown in Cheah, "Christian Missionary Activities and the Transmission of Needlework Techniques."

crocheted articles made by the Nonya were not beaded and appear to have been fairly plain (fig. 166, 167). Perhaps the prosaic association of crochet and knitting precluded these methods from being adapted for Nonya beadwork which was highly decorative and used for festive objects. Or perhaps, once mastered, the versatility of the two techniques of threading and bead embroidery rendered other methods superfluous. Beaded mattress panels and belts that might have been made by techniques such as bead-weaving, favoured in the United States and Britain in the early twentieth century, could just as easily be threaded or embroidered.¹³³ Bead knitting and crochet did not gain a place in the Nonya beadwork repertoire.

The Nonyas did not adapt passementerie and lace-making techniques to their beadwork either, although lace and knotted metallic thread borders were used in Nonya beadwork from Sumatra (fig. 93a), and some examples of threaded beadwork fringes imitated the decorativeness of lace (fig. 29).¹³⁴ Similarly, tambouring – a relatively fast method of embroidering a large surface area with beads using a hooked needle – widely used for beaded evening dresses of the early twentieth century, did not find its way into Nonya beadwork. Tambouring gave rise to small gaps between each bead and did not fit the criteria of closely-spaced fine beadwork. The meticulous craftsmanship and designs of Peranakan embroidery remained a central concern in Nonya beadwork.¹³⁵

Finishing Techniques

Often overlooked, the way in which embroideries are neatened and finished can also yield information about when an object was made. Unlike contemporary pieces of beadwork which are edged with piping, many older pieces of beadwork are joined or finished with an edging woven from coloured perle cotton (lustrous twisted yarn) or metallic thread that is both decorative and protective (figs. 7a–c, 8, 12, 156). The technique is based on needle-weaving where different coloured threads can be combined to form colourful geometric patterns. The same technique of woven edging features prominently in Qing-period Chinese purses but also in coastal Malay and

¹³³ Bead-weaving was popular in America and Europe from the end of the nineteenth century and specialist looms, such as the Apache Beadwork Loom patented in 1903, were being produced for craftswomen by the beginning of the twentieth century. Edwards, *Bead Embroidery*, p. 183; and Dubin, *History of Beads*, p. 114.

¹³⁴ See also Crabtree and Stallebrass, *Beadwork*, bottom left illustration on p. 135.

¹³⁵ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 214.

Acehnese needlework.¹³⁶ A tortoise-shell “loom” (probably a comb) may have been used to separate the strands of thread to make needle-weaving easier.¹³⁷ Woven edgings appear regularly on beadwork that can be dated prior to 1925, as in the Delft purse and examples from the Field Museum collection (figs. 32, 79, 83c). Beadwork from the late 1920s onwards generally does not have a woven edging.

* * *

Nonya beadwork was certainly in use around the 1860s or 1870s. Two basic embroidery methods – bead couching and lane stitch – are found on early beadwork from 1870 to 1900. Bead couching was applied to decoration on velvet whereas lane stitch was also carried out on cotton. Occasionally, beads were applied to a rougher canvas fabric, in which case velvet appliqués and metallic thread embroidery were used to disguise the base fabric. Red and yellow flannel, common in Malay metallic thread embroidery and beadwork, were not widely used for Nonya beadwork. *Manek pirigu* are thought to have gone out of production by the first years of the twentieth century and are found mostly on beadwork on velvet, dateable to around 1905 or before. The early phase of beadwork therefore concerns mainly embroidered beadwork on velvet.

As beadwork established a foothold as an independent genre and embroiderers became more familiar with manipulating seed beads, the use of beads became more lavish, covering entire surfaces of objects. Some overlap of techniques is apparent in this period, with pieces employing both seed-stitched beads which were applied one-by-one and by lane stitch or bead couching. From about 1910, even-weave cotton as a base for bead embroidery also became more common. Threading – where beads did not have to be attached to a base material – was probably carried out until the 1920s. Its abandonment could be a reflection of the complexity of the technique relative to bead embroidery.

¹³⁶ See Loretta H. Wang, *The Chinese Purse: Embroidered Purses of the Ch'ing Dynasty* (Union City, California: Heian International, 1986) for examples of Chinese purses with various woven edging designs. See Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, p. 320 for a discussion of needle-woven borders of Malay and Acehnese textiles.

¹³⁷ Although none were found in any Nonya sewing boxes during my fieldwork, Kok Putt Poh, whose mother used to do beadwork, had a tortoiseshell “hand-held loom” in his collection. Oon, “Unravelling a Beaded Past,” p. 107.

By far the most enduring Nonya beadwork technique is petit-point beadwork which became increasingly popular in the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the middle of the 1920s, petit-point beadwork had largely displaced seed-stitched beadwork in plain-weave cotton. Beadwork was done by following samplers or patterns, many of which are likely to have been derived from canvaswork patterns or which may have been intended for canvaswork embroidery. Prior to the 1950s, double-thread *kain urat* was used for petit-point beadwork, but as this became difficult to obtain, the Nonyas found substitutes in Aida canvas or by pasting a sheet of graph paper onto plain cotton. Alongside this, a small number of petit-point beadwork panels on velvet also exist, pointing to the persistence of older methods of beadwork.

Between the 1930s and 1940s, a small number of slipper faces were beaded in lane-stitch on cotton using hex-cut beads. The period immediately following World War Two saw a brief resurgence of interest in lane-stitched beadwork on velvet, where paper templates were used to mark the designs. Whether this related to a shortage of glass seed beads or a revival of interest in older beading traditions is unclear. However, this method has not continued to be used, and most of the beadwork made after 1945 is in the petit-point technique.

The chronology proposed has been constructed on the basis of methods of dating and analysis that are transparent such that it can, and should, be critically reviewed and refined as new information comes to light. On the whole, the chronology appears consistent and robust, even though exceptions to the generalized description will exist. As different generations of beaders overlap, so will their preferred techniques. The phases in which different techniques are popular will therefore overlap, a reminder of the dynamics of the transmission of a craft form.

Changes in needlework styles and imagery can mirror transformations in culture or ideology. In the course of this research, in addition to published examples of Nonya beadwork, some 400 unpublished pieces of Nonya beadwork have been examined and organized in chronological order to provide a consistent empirical foundation for a diachronic analysis of beadwork. The results of this process indicate that the development of Nonya beadwork conforms to a fairly consistent pattern of change in terms of style and imagery. Nonya beadwork can be said to have passed through four main phases, each corresponding with a different dominant beadwork style. The subsequent analysis in this chapter and the next provides an interpretation of the changes in style and imagery in each phase to show the dynamic processes of Peranakan identity formation.

Because so many examples of Nonya beadwork no longer reside with the families of their original owners, it is often difficult to trace the geographical origin of these pieces. Beadwork may have passed through several different sets of hands – middlemen, dealers, and collectors – a trajectory that can obscure the original source of a piece. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter One, Nonya beadwork may also have been moved from one location to another as the Peranakans inter-married and migrated. It can therefore be difficult to delineate regional styles. However, where regional variations can be discerned by the predominance of certain styles of beadwork from specific locations, these will be discussed to the extent that it becomes possible to comment meaningfully on the similarities and differences in beadwork.

Periodising Nonya Beadwork

I have periodized Nonya beadwork into four overlapping but stylistically distinct phases. The end of each phase and the beginning of each subsequent one has been selected to coincide with observed turning points in stylistic developments.¹ This chronology broadly supports Chin's argument that Peranakan art and architecture in general evolved from "pure" Chinese and Malay styles to a more hybrid style.² The

¹ Although the term "approximate" has been dropped to avoid repetition in this chapter and the next, the reader should note that each phase overlaps with the preceding and subsequent ones.

² Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 35–38. Chin's support for his proposition is drawn primarily from examples of architecture.

early period of beadwork from 1870 to 1900 may be described as one of absorption and adaptation, in which materials relatively new to Nonya embroidery (glass and metallic seed beads) were integrated into its repertoire. Whilst some types of beaded objects, such as mats for *sireh* boxes, may have been based on Malay and Javanese forms, surface decorations were primarily Chinese, probably drawing on a pre-existing embroidery tradition as briefly discussed in Chapter One. The similarity in techniques of Nonya beadwork from the Netherlands Indies and the Straits Settlements suggests that common factors influenced their early development.

The following phase from 1900 to 1920 was a period of experimentation and innovation. The florescence of technically complex threaded beadwork and labour-intensive seed-stitched and petit-point beadwork coincided with the increasingly widespread adoption of European imagery along with the modification of Chinese-inspired designs. As petit-point became the dominant technique in the 1920s, regional variations in styles and imagery also converged in the third phase from 1920 to 1940. Chinese patterns continued to be used selectively alongside European-inspired motifs but designs were increasingly simplified and schematized. Beadwork during this period was mainly confined to slipper tops and smaller objects such as purses and wallets.

From the mid-1940s to the 1970s, designs were further conventionalized as beadworkers copied older models. Although beadwork became less popular with younger Peranakans during this phase, interest in Peranakan culture was rekindled from the 1980s. The meanings attached to contemporary beadwork form the subject of the final part of this thesis.

Adoption and Integration: Early Nonya Beadwork from 1870–1900

The earliest dateable examples of Nonya beadwork are from the Netherlands Indies. Early Nonya beadwork from the Straits Settlements appears to have shared common features with beadwork used by the Peranakans in Sumatra. Many pieces of embroidered beadwork on velvet which were collected in Sumatra, particularly Palembang, bear a close similarity to beadwork from the Straits Settlements in terms of techniques and themes. In his review of beadwork from the Netherlands Indies, Ho Wing Meng remarked that “[t]here were no notable differences in materials, designs and techniques of craftsmanship other than variations in detail” between beadwork

from the Straits Settlements and Sumatra, and that “the difference in provenance would not have been apparent except to very trained eyes.”³

With much of the Nonya beadwork on velvet, the similarities in style are marked, even if some types of objects may have been specific to Sumatra. For instance, the rectangular beaded envelope purse and square *tempat surat* (letter holder) for the exchange of marriage documents can generally be attributed to the Netherlands Indies, and in more specific instances, to Sumatra (figs. 32, 79).⁴ Similar forms of objects may also have been used differently. The *daun nipah* cases from Padang and Palembang were used to contain leaves of the nipa palm used for rolling cigarettes. A few cases of similar form, where a larger sleeve-like pocket is slipped over a slightly smaller one, are from the Straits Settlements. However, Eng-Lee proposes that these may have been used as spectacle cases or coin purses in the Straits Settlements as the Peranakans there preferred ready-made European cigarettes which came in their own boxes.⁵

In general, the shared style of beadwork from Sumatra and the Straits Settlements conforms to Chin’s characterization of the typical Peranakan aesthetic as a combination of a *horror vacui*, a desire for *halus* workmanship, and an appreciation of textural richness.⁶ As with Nonya ware, silverware, and furniture made for a Peranakan market, there was a tendency in beadwork to fill all available spaces with decoration, in contrast to both Chinese and Malay designs which featured motifs set against unadorned backgrounds. At its extreme, decoration was even applied to unseen surfaces such as wedding knee-pads worn underneath the wedding gown, or the back facings of waist purses, a parallel of the decoration found on the inside, and not just the visible surfaces, of ceremonial wares such as teapots, finger bowls, offering dishes, and *kum cheng* (fig. 168).⁷ This may have reflected a Peranakan concern that objects had to be properly finished. Perhaps, as Lim Suan Poh proposes in the case of

³ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 76–77. Although Ho attributed many of these pieces of beadwork to Java or, more generally, Indonesia, many of the examples he showed were from Palembang, as confirmed by Donald Harper who had earlier collected the pieces there (personal communication, May 2005). Some of the same pieces are shown in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 55, 93, 95 and attributed to Palembang or Padang.

⁴ Purses and *tempat surat* are illustrated in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, figs. 42, 43, 45, 46, pp. 80–84; and Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 55–56, 95. See also footnote 3 above.

⁵ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 69.

⁶ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 29–32.

⁷ See also Eng Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 45, 46, 57, 58, back cover.

Nonya ware, it also stressed the “overflowing wealth of the owners” who could afford objects where the unseen surfaces were decorated.⁸ Small velvet appliqués of different colours could be used to demarcate the borders of beadwork in a pattern of interlocking panels similar to that found on Nonya ware and Malay embroideries.⁹

The red, orange, and maroon velvet fabrics used for beadwork from the Straits Settlements and Sumatra were auspicious colours in Chinese custom and reflected the celebratory function of beaded objects. On beadwork from Sumatra, a plain cotton background would be overlaid with metallic thread couching. This appears in embroideries and is occasionally seen on beadwork from the Straits Settlements (fig. 8, 37, 38). Beadwork was also done on brown, olive green, and yellow velvet. Although black was generally associated with death and mourning, black velvet bases may occasionally have been used in this period, perhaps as a contrast to the cheerful and vibrant beadwork that offset the associations of black with death (fig. 5).¹⁰ Motifs were frequently similar, centering on Chinese auspicious symbols of pomegranates, peonies, prunus blossoms, lilies, lotuses, *qilin* (mythical creatures, often translated as unicorns), and phoenixes (figs. 2, 5, 12, 34, 49, 58–60, 70, 93, 95, 143, 168–170).¹¹ In the absence of Nonya beadwork examples from the Straits Settlements that can securely be assigned a pre-1890 date, this section draws on beadwork from the Netherlands Indies to show the factors that Peranakans across the Straits may have taken into consideration.

The Delft purse, dated to 1885 or earlier, is characterized by a schematic treatment of the motifs (fig. 79). The beader may have been adjusting to the visual possibilities presented by an unfamiliar medium and perhaps the more limited colour palette of glass beads that was initially available in the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies. An unfurling scroll with Chinese script and a flowering plant are depicted on one side of the purse (fig. 79a). The white and pink beads of the scroll motif are positioned vertically, but the red beads at the two ends are aligned in a herringbone pattern, reinforcing the zigzag pattern of multi-coloured stripes that runs down the two

⁸ Lim, “Nonya Ware,” pp. 25–26.

⁹ For examples of porcelain, see Ho, *Straits Chinese Porcelain*, fig. 18, p. 53, fig. 48, p. 84.

¹⁰ Black and white or blue and white beaded slippers were made for mourning, and blue and white batiks were used during the mourning period. See, for example, the batiks illustrated in Lee Chor Lin, *Batik: Creating an Identity* (Singapore: National Museum, 1991), pp. 85–87, 109.

¹¹ Compare also with the Sumatran beadwork illustrated in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 55, 56, 59, 79, 82.

ends of the scroll. As on the flap of the purse, Chinese characters are outlined with metallic purl to add definition and so that they stand out against the strong colours of the beadwork.

The peach on the front flap, a Chinese symbol of longevity, is depicted in two parts – the exterior “flesh” enclosing a “kernel” with Chinese characters (fig. 79b). The solidity of the green exterior is interrupted by decorative florets in contrasting colours, with each bead resembling a petal. Red beads outline the veins of the leaf, otherwise indistinguishable from the fruit. The “kernel” is filled with blocks of colour that bear no apparent relation to the colours of a peach or any clear significance. The beads are aligned horizontally and, together with the horizontal bands of colour, draw the eye across the flap, rather than vertically as its Chinese script was meant to be read. A vase of flowers, a common motif that signifies peace in Chinese designs, is placed on either side of the peach. The combination of contrasting colours for the flower petals adds to the naïveté of the beadwork.

This differs from the relative sophistication of the couched metallic thread ground and meticulously woven edge. The couching threads form a ground pattern reminiscent of the fretwork and continuous swastika designs on Chinese silk brocades.¹² The beader has taken care to create variety by using different patterns on the front and the back of the wallet. A border of maroon velvet on which tiny birds and flowers have been stitched in metallic thread frames the central motifs, adding to the overall decorativeness of the surface. The velvet border is enclosed by bands of braided and twisted metallic threads, perhaps indicating a concern to demonstrate the decorative permutations that could be achieved with limited types of materials. In a practical sense, these thin bands of metallic thread hide the untidy seams between the edging, appliquéd border, and couched ground.

The Leiden panels from the Netherlands Indies are dateable to around 1888 and demonstrate the same concern with neatness and surface decoration, although they dispensed with the couched metallic thread ground which is superfluous on the velvet base, the deep colours of the textured fabric providing a contrast to the colourful, glimmering beaded designs (figs. 93, 95). Each beaded motif is, however, outlined with twisted metallic thread or gold purl. Small flowers are stitched in gold purl and

¹² See, for example, a nineteenth-century Chinese robe illustrated in Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, figs. 87–88, pp. 102–103.

bordered with couched gold thread. The edges of one panel appear to be neatened with over stitching interwoven with crosswise gold threads in a method similar to that used on other examples of beadwork from the Straits Settlements and Sumatra which were edged with needle-weaving of perle thread (fig. 95b). The edges of the other panel are embellished with a knotted lace-like gold thread edging. This decorative edging, commonly incorporated into indigenous needlework traditions in the Netherlands Indies and parts of the Malay peninsula, was probably based on lace-making techniques introduced from the West. Jasper and Pirngadie described the making of bobbin lace, including with gold and silver thread, in Java and southern and western Sumatra (Bengkulu, Palembang, and around Padang).¹³ In Palembang, lace borders of gold thread were attached to shoulder cloths (*selendang*) and in the Padang highlands, narrow bands of lace made with gold thread were used to decorate the *kebaya*.¹⁴

The panels show a sophisticated placement of beads and use of colour tones. Beads were aligned to follow the contours of the designs. Concentric bands of darker followed by lighter beads give the impression of plasticity and depth to the main motifs, enlivening the pictorial flatness of the beadwork. Given the affinity of Nonya beadwork and Chinese embroidery designs, it would not be unreasonable to propose that the use of contours of colour derived from Chinese satin- or knot-stitch embroidery.¹⁵

The wedding purse from Sumatra that can be dated to around 1906 is decorated with figural imagery of Hock Lok Siu, the trinity of the Chinese Gods of Happiness, Prosperity, and Longevity (fig. 32).¹⁶ In the beadwork, the figures' noses are imaginatively suggested by aligning the beads perpendicularly to the direction of beads used to depict the cheeks (fig. 32c). This is in contrast to the method in embroidery where plasticity is suggested by long-and-short satin stitches that intersect at the eyes and jowls, and a stumpwork nose, a technique that is not possible in Nonya beadwork

¹³ Jasper and Pirngadie, *De Weefkunst*, pp. 305–312.

¹⁴ Wassing-Visser, *Weefsels en Adatkostuums uit Indonesië*, p. 33.

¹⁵ See, for example, details of Chinese embroideries in Jocelyn Chatterton, *Chinese Silks and Sewing Tools* (London: Jocelyn Chatterton, 2002), pp. 44–46, 48; Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 25; and Wang, *Chinese Purse*.

¹⁶ The Hock Lok Siu trinity first appears in the Ming dynasty, and although they are shown in Daoist imagery, seem to have been gods of popular religion in China. Stephen Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), p. 271.

(fig.171b). The images are delineated by beaded outlines and carefully considered shades of colours are contoured to suggest the folds of the figures' garments.

Examples of beadwork on velvet from the Straits Settlements show a similar concern with colour and alignment of beads. Colour was one of the most important elements of early Nonya beadwork, creating depth and contributing to the decorativeness of a piece. Pure tones such as fire engine red and cobalt blue were used together with the "muddy, mixed colours" that Chin describes as being a key part of the Peranakan colour sensibility.¹⁷ However, even though mixed colours such as olive green, mustard, lilac, and burnt orange can be found on beadwork and embroidery, no single colour aesthetic can be said to dominate beadwork and embroidery of this period (figs. 12, 102, 103, 143, 170). The individualization of Nonya beadwork occurred through varying the colour combinations, most probably limited only by materials available and the conventions associated with different colours.

The roundels on a set of *tudong saji*, a rectangular panel which may have been used as window treatment or a curtain tie, and a footstool cover are of couched and lane-stitched beadwork on velvet (figs. 58, 143, 169). The *tudong saji* are from Melaka and, based on their forms, the latter two pieces are most likely also from the Straits Settlements. As with the Leiden panels, beads are aligned to follow the contours of motifs (figs. 58c, 143d, 169c–d). However, fabric trim or beads are used instead of metallic thread borders to conceal where different fabrics abut.

Despite the small size of some of the motifs, details are rendered with clarity by the skilful alignment of beads and use of colour. For instance, in the depiction of a pomegranate on the rectangular beaded panel, beads are aligned following the crescent-shaped outline of part of the fruit. The pomegranate is shown with its skin partially cut away to expose its many seeds, depicted effectively by a beaded outline showing segments, each of which contains "seeds" in the form of a single bead of a contrasting colour (fig. 143d). The combination of external and internal views adheres to conventional Chinese depictions of pomegranates (fig. 172).¹⁸ In contrast to the foliage on the Leiden panels, beads are sewn in rows following the veinage for many of the leaves (figs. 58c, 143d, 169b–d). The curling of leaves and the gradations in colour are simultaneously suggested by placing darker beads followed by lighter beads

¹⁷ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 32.

¹⁸ See also the purses illustrated in Wang, *The Chinese Purse*, p. 43.

in curving parallel rows. Similarly, the gradually shifting alignment of beads for the stems and tendrils of the central peony on the footstool cover contributes to its sinuous curves and produces an impression of movement (fig. 169c).

Motifs such as the peony and the phoenixes on the footstool cover and the Singapore History Museum's beaded tea-cosy are depicted in vibrant colours which add to the exuberance of surface decoration and the celebratory feel of the beadwork (figs. 60, 169). Realism does not appear to have been a concern, underscoring the centrality of symbolic representations. Other ways of using colour, such as the alternating black and white beads for depicting butterfly feelers appear to have been drawn from Chinese textile designs (figs. 93, 95, 169, 170).¹⁹ The effect of this was to create an impression of wispieness and delicacy difficult to achieve with a solidly coloured row of beads. By altering the placement of beads and varying the colour combinations, an apparently endless permutation of designs could be achieved.

Early Nonya beadwork from the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies appears to have been dominated by Chinese-inspired designs. The application of Chinese designs such as the peony and the phoenix were not confined to Chinese forms. Instead, the Peranakans married Chinese decorative elements with borrowed indigenous and Western forms. Chewing *sireh* was a widely practised Southeast Asian habit that was also taken up by the Peranakans, and offering *sireh* became a part of Peranakan social custom and a formal mark of hospitality.²⁰ The importance of *sireh* chewing is reflected by their ownership of elaborately decorated *sireh* sets of silver, gold, and inlaid wood. Beaded panels were used to line wooden *sireh* sets and *sireh* boxes were sometimes adorned with beaded covers (fig. 70). The two-piece *daun nipah* cases also have parallels in indigenous forms.²¹ The *sangkut bahu*, which has no obvious equivalent in Chinese costume, was worn with the *sarong-baju panjang* on formal occasions and may have been derived from the *selendang* worn by women of some cultural and ethnic groups in Southeast Asia including the Malays and Minangkabau.²²

¹⁹ For examples of Chinese embroidered butterflies with two-toned feelers, see the illustration in Meg Andrews, "Symbolism and Status," in *Treasures from the Embroiderers' Guild Collection*, ed. Elizabeth Benn (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1991), p. 160.

²⁰ In the Malay and Indonesian languages, the term for offering of *sireh* is associated with marriage proposals and negotiations. Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, pp. 91, 93.

²¹ See, for example, a rectangular two-piece case (*anting-antingan*) in Veth, *Midden-Sumatra*, plate 80 and p. 33.

²² Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 41. In Minangkabau culture, women wear a *selendang* or shoulder cloth to indicate their married status. David and Vicki Salisbury, "Traditional Minangkabau

Early examples of *sangkut bahu* have beaded motifs of peonies, phoenixes, deer, and squid (fig. 12).²³ Western form such as footstools and tea-cosies, embroidered with beadwork on velvets in auspicious oranges and reds, were most probably used at Peranakan weddings. Smaller items like watch cases may have been for mundane use (fig. 34).²⁴

Dragons, phoenixes, *qilin*, deer, butterflies, lions (sometimes also known as the dog of Fo), peonies, prunus blossoms, peaches, pomegranates, and finger citrons appear to have been the most popular in the early Nonya beadwork examined. “Decorum,” which Ernst Gombrich defined as the appropriateness of subject matter to the context in which it was seen,²⁵ must have been an important factor in the choice of motifs. This would have been particularly sensitive for the Peranakans on occasions such as weddings, where liaisons were sealed and kinship pacts with potentially far reaching consequences were cemented. The motifs also aptly demonstrated the awareness of a Chinese cultural heritage, complementing the Chinese rituals and dress used at Peranakan wedding ceremonies.

However, the decoration on early beadwork may not have been exclusively based on overtly Chinese sources. Floral designs can be particularly difficult to place. For example, the cultural attribution of the floral design on the beaded roundel on Lee Siok Ten’s food cover is unclear and the surrounding motifs of birds, fish, and butterflies have no particular characteristics that set them apart as necessarily Chinese (fig. 58b). Birds and fish are common motifs in Javanese batik, and six- and eight-petalled flowers on scrolling stems can be found on Malay embroideries.²⁶ However, the food cover to which the roundel was attached has bird and flower decorations that are comparable to carvings on Chinese furniture, suggesting a Chinese cultural affiliation. Another pair of slipper tops of uncertain date embroidered in metallic thread on a

Ceremonies,” in *Walk in Splendor: Ceremonial Dress and the Minangkabau*, ed. Anne and John Summerfield (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999), p. 71. This shoulder cloth may have originated as a cotton sling that was used as a carrier for goods and other small items or for a small child. Gittinger, *Splendid Symbols*, pp. 61, 63.

²³ See also illustrations in Eng Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 42–43, 70–72.

²⁴ Pocket watches could be worn with Chinese clothing or the *baju tutup*, a high-collared local coat with Western-style trousers. See photographs in Liu, *From the Family Album*, pp. 107–108; and Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, illustration before p. 67, text on p. 84.

²⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), pp. 7–9.

²⁶ See, for example, the floral borders of the embroidered ceremonial shoulder-cloths from Palembang in Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, figs. 368, 369, p. 258.

velvet base provides a further illustration.²⁷ It is decorated with a six-pointed star, unusual in Nonya needlework but widely found on Malay textiles, flanked by finger citrons more commonly associated with Chinese culture.²⁸

One caveat that must be borne in mind is the possibility that examples of Nonya beadwork and embroidery with forms and designs that are associated with being Malay may not always be classified as Peranakan.²⁹ The difficulty of accurately identifying such examples is compounded by the lack of a large body of early beadwork with a reliable provenance as Peranakan. Whether such material will come to light through further research remains an unanswered question. It could add a further dimension to the research on constructions of cultural identity, but it would not necessarily negate the following analysis of early Nonya beadwork.

The motifs used by Peranakans were replete with appropriate symbolic intent. The rectangular velvet panel beaded with a peony, deer, phoenixes, pomegranates, and butterflies illustrates this well (fig. 143). For the Chinese, the peony was a symbol of feminine beauty, love, and affection, but through its bright vermilion colour, was also said to encompass the principle of masculinity.³⁰ The mythical phoenix was a composite bird that had the neck of a crane, feathers of a golden pheasant, and the tail of a peacock.³¹ In Chinese art, the female phoenix was shown with serrated tail feathers and the male with curling plumes, and this distinction was sometimes seen in batik from Java, but rarely on Nonya beadwork.³² Chinese brides, who were “empresses for the day,” adopted the phoenix, a signifier of the Empress, as their emblem.³³ The phoenix also stood for riches, honour, and the south, and the latter

²⁷ This panel is in the collection of Chwee May May, Chin Teck Curio Antique, Melaka and was viewed during my fieldwork.

²⁸ For instance, a shoulder-cloth of the Malay people of Palembang with designs of four- and six-pointed stars is shown in Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, fig. 456, p. 321.

²⁹ Ho provides an example of a panel of gold thread embroidery and threaded beadwork from Melaka, with a design of flowering trees, birds, and scrolling foliage. Whilst he assigns it to Malay workmanship, its cultural attribution is ambiguous. Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, fig. 12, p. 35.

³⁰ C.A.S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3d ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), pp. 320–321. The peony is known as the *moutan* in Mandarin.

³¹ Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 173.

³² The female phoenix is known as the *feng* and the male phoenix is known as the *huang* in Mandarin.

³³ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 323–326. The phoenix holds an important place in Chinese art and is regarded as the emperor of all birds. As a bird that will not injure living creatures, the phoenix also embodies Buddhist virtues. It is supposed only to appear in times of prosperity and symbolizes sun and warmth, harvests, and progeny.

meaning was particularly apt for migrants to the Nanyang.³⁴ Believed to be the messenger of the Eight Immortals of Daoism (Baxian), the appearance of the phoenix on earth presaged happy times and propitious events.³⁵ The female phoenix was also believed to have preferred to plunge into the fire on the death of her mate rather than take a new one, and a wooden carving of a red bird was used as a symbol of the bride's virginity and fidelity at Peranakan wedding ceremonies.³⁶

The deer was a common emblem of longevity and is often shown with *lingzhi* or the fungus of immortality in Chinese designs.³⁷ As a homonym for a high income (*lu*), the deer (*lu*) was also associated with riches.³⁸ The many seeds of the pomegranate signified progeny, and together with the peach (which symbolized longevity) and finger citron (which signified wealth) made up the three abundances.³⁹ Butterflies connoted conjugal bliss and were also a rebus for great age.⁴⁰ Spaces on the embroidery are filled by bees, which represent industry and thrift, butterflies which represent conjugal bliss, and floral sprigs.⁴¹ The panel thus conveyed wishes for a prosperous, productive, and harmonious union, virtues which had an impact beyond the wedding couple itself.

The grouping of butterflies, bees, and peonies was common in early Nonya beadwork. In Chinese designs, such compositions had deeper meanings. One southern Chinese legend involves a bee that helps a young man find the right bride.⁴² In images of a bee

³⁴ W. Perceval Yetts, *Symbolism in Chinese Art* (paper read before the China Society, London on 18 January 1912; Singapore: Cybille Orient Gallery, 1984), pp. 13–14. There are four directional animals in Chinese iconography: the azure dragon of the east, the vermilion phoenix of the south, the white tiger of the west, and the black tortoise of the north. These directional animals also correspond to the seasons – spring (east), summer (south), autumn (west), and winter (north). According to Chung, a phoenix with a peony in its beak was said to bring wealth. Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 173.

³⁵ Chung, *Art of Oriental Embroidery*, p. 173.

³⁶ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 84.

³⁷ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 115–116.

³⁸ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, p. 116.

³⁹ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 51, 315–317, 332–333.

⁴⁰ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 51–52; and Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*, trans. G.L. Campbell (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 52.

⁴¹ The finger citron is clearly identifiable but the six-petalled flower may have been a mistake if it was meant to represent the five-petalled prunus flower. Alternatively, the six-petalled flower may be associated with floral motifs from Malay embroidery.

⁴² Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, pp. 37–38. One Chinese story tells of a young student who ran after a butterfly and encountered a magistrate's daughter in her private garden. The student subsequently worked hard and won her as his wife, and also rose to high rank. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 51–52.

hovering above a peony, the bee represents the young man and the peony, the girl he loves.⁴³ The design of a butterfly and peony also carries undertones of a lover sipping nectar from the calyx of the flower; and the “love-crazed butterfly” and “wild bee” are euphemisms for sexual intercourse.⁴⁴ It is possible that some of these subtler meanings may have been known to Peranakans as such metaphors were common in *pantun*, but the younger Nonya may only have been dimly, if at all, cognizant of their import.⁴⁵ It is moot how much young girls were taught in terms of sex education, and it is unclear whether any instruction in conjugal conduct would have been offered during the dressing of the bride’s hair by the *sang kheh umm* (bride’s dresser) before the wedding ceremony.⁴⁶

Motifs of marine life can be found on silverware made for a Peranakan market.⁴⁷ Crabs, squid, prawns, and more occasionally, goldfish also appear both as primary motifs and as border decorations and secondary motifs on early Nonya beadwork and embroidery (figs. 8, 12, 49, 60). For the Chinese, the combination of fish, crabs, and prawns together represents the saying *fu ru dong hai* meaning “wealth as abundant as the eastern sea,” filled with marine life.⁴⁸ The southern Chinese further believed that the crab could propitiate malicious spirits and live crabs were sometimes released to ward off evil during childbirth.⁴⁹ In Nonya beadwork, crabs were normally shown

⁴³ Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, pp. 37–38.

⁴⁴ Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ Claudine Salmon believes that Chinese or Peranakan women in Indonesia may have been fond of *pantun* and *syair*. See Salmon, “Chinese Women Writers in Indonesia,” pp. 152–153. There is some discrepancy in information relating to the Straits Settlements. Felix Chia, writing about Peranakan life in the inter-war years, notes that the Nonya bride was coached in a *pantun* prior to her wedding at which she was expected to sing. Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 126. On the other hand, according to Florence Chan, the Nonya did not sing *pantun* and wives were not invited to dinners, which were the occasions at which men sang *pantun*. Chan herself, however, did learn *pantun* from attending the *bangsawan*. Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 5.

⁴⁶ Myra Sidharta mentions the initiation rites at the hair-dressing ceremony in “The Role of the Go-Between in Chinese Marriages in Batavia,” in *Archives of the Kong Koan of Batavia*, ed. Leonard Blussé and Chen Menghong (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 53, 58. Sidharta draws from Maurice Freedman, “Ritual Aspects of Chinese Kinship and Marriage,” in *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, ed. M. Freedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 183. However, whilst the hairdressing ritual is an important part of the Peranakan wedding preparation, it should be noted that Freedman’s description is largely based on wedding practices in Guangdong in China. On the hairdressing ceremony for Peranakan weddings, see Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, pp. 52–55.

⁴⁷ For examples on silverware, see Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, fig. 46, p. 74; and Page, Lea, and Potash, “A Century of Straits Chinese Silver,” fig. 3, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 56. For the Cantonese, fish and prawn dishes, said to symbolize prosperity (*yu* – fish) and joy (*ha* – the sound of laughter), are important for present-day Chinese New Year celebrations.

⁴⁹ Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese*, pp. 83–84.

together with other sea creatures. For the Penang Peranakans, the fish (*hu*), prawn (*hay*), and crab (*kim*) symbolized wealth from all directions – crabs move sideways and capture wealth flowing in from the left and right, prawns swim backwards and capture wealth from behind, and fish trap wealth flowing from the front.⁵⁰ In Buddhism, paired fish are auspicious symbols and the fish represents freedom from restraints, acting as an analogy to spiritual emancipation.⁵¹ For the Chinese, goldfish are also symbolic of fertility.⁵² Carp, although popular in Chinese designs, appear to have been less frequently depicted, although it must be noted that the motifs employed in Nonya needlework are not always clearly identifiable.⁵³

These motifs were drawn from a repertoire of symbolic imagery common in the Chinese decorative arts and on items which the Peranakans imported from China. In porcelain, the most common motifs were the phoenix and the peony, traditional wedding symbols; the crested pheasant, chrysanthemums, and cranes were also popular.⁵⁴ Embroideries used by the Peranakans featured auspicious motifs of butterflies, peonies, phoenixes, and lions. Many of these, particularly the larger pieces such as altar cloths and wedding costumes, are said to have been imported from China.⁵⁵ Patterns could also have been lifted or adapted from Chinese pattern books that were widely available in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Whilst no such pattern

⁵⁰ Michael Cheah, personal communication, September 2002 and July 2005. In fact, Cheah, a Penang Peranakan, has three aunts called *hu*, *hay*, and *kim*, and this was apparently their father's rationale for their names.

⁵¹ Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, p. 185.

⁵² Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, p. 131.

⁵³ The carp arising from waves or carps jumping over the dragon gate are popular Chinese motifs that represent success. See for example, a Qing embroidered badge of carps jumping over the dragon gate, with a border of crabs, water weeds, lobsters or large prawns, and goldfish repeated at regular intervals in Guoli Lishi Bowuguan, *Zhongguo Paofu Zhixiu Xuancui (Chinese Costumes, Brocades and Embroidery)* (Taipei: Zhonghua Minguo Guoli Lishi Bowuguan, 1977), p. 68.

⁵⁴ Lim, "Nonya Ware," pp. 24–25.

⁵⁵ No in-depth research has been done on the production of embroidered textiles for Peranakan consumption, but Queeny Chang's Chinese-style wedding costume was ordered from Penang. Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 85. On the other hand, according to Cheo Kim Ban, before the 1940s, wealthy families sent representatives to Shanghai to order wedding garments – his aunt in Melaka had a neighbor who used to do this. Cheo also cited a *sang kheh umm* who used to order wedding garments from a Shanghainese tailor in Singapore. Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 63. Garments obtained in Shanghai may not necessarily have been manufactured there. According to Julean Arnold, who was the commercial attaché for the United States in China, "Shanghai is the transshipping and export center for the larger portion of Chinese embroideries." Julean Arnold, *China: A Commercial and Industrial Handbook* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926), p. 254.

⁵⁶ Chinese pattern books had been available since the Song dynasty (960–1279), and pattern books specifically designed for embroiderers came into circulation after this. Arthur Stanley, "Embroidery," *Encyclopaedia Sinica*, ed. Samuel Couling (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1917), p. 162.

books have yet been found in the sewing boxes of elderly Nonyas and no records of itinerant haberdashers who sold embroidery material could be located, pattern books may well have been used but then discarded after they had been damaged by the method of transferring designs by pricking and pouncing.⁵⁷

The use of Chinese images in Nonya beadwork, however, was not a straightforward imitation of Chinese designs but reflects the Peranakans' crossing of cultural borders. In a few instances, the pomegranate may have been augmented with spiky leaves and beaded in shades of orange and yellow, thereby metamorphosing into a pineapple-like motif (figs. 169e–f). It is possible that the tropical fruit was knowingly incorporated, for it is shown alongside the pomegranate in some examples of beadwork.⁵⁸ The pineapple, pronounced *ong lai* in Hokkien, is a homonym for the arrival (*lai*) of the king (*ong*) and signifies the coming of wealth.⁵⁹

Because of the long history of contact between Southeast Asia, China, and India, it can be misleading to attribute every Chinese motif on Peranakan artefacts to a Chinese source, particularly if the items were crafted locally. The ubiquitous tree peony shown in Nonya beadwork can be associated not only with Chinese renderings but also Indian chintz.⁶⁰ As Maxwell suggests, some of the motifs such as the flowering tree in batik from Cirebon are attributed to Chinese influence but may also be linked to earlier Chinoiserie designs on Indian-made textiles traded to the Netherlands Indies.⁶¹ The combination of a bird and stylized leafy tree pattern can also be found on Malay embroideries from Sumatra.⁶² Nevertheless, given the incidence of similar motifs on

⁵⁷ Very few copies of patterns books for Chinese embroidery may have survived because the pages were used up in tracing or pouncing. See Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, pp. 106–107. See also Valery Garrett, *A Collector's Guide to Chinese Dress Accessories* (Singapore: Times, 1997), p. 16 for a brief discussion on the use of pattern books and the method of transfer by pricking and pouncing in Chinese embroidery.

⁵⁸ See Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, fig. 13, p. 37 for a clear example of this. Several different motifs are found on the same piece – a pomegranate with a wavy exterior, a young, green pineapple, a ripe, yellow pineapple, and a blue fruit that resembles a pineapple, all of which are similar to figure 169e.

⁵⁹ Michael Cheah, personal communication, July 2005.

⁶⁰ See the illustration of a *kalamkari* of Indian origin traded to Sulawesi in Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, fig. 24, p. 26. The latter has an ornate flowering tree typical of Indian chintz.

⁶¹ Robyn Maxwell, "The Tree of Life in Indonesian Textiles: Ancient Iconography or Imported Chinoiserie?" in *Indonesian Textiles Symposium 1985*, ed. Gisela Völger and Karin v. Welck (Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, 1991), p. 115.

⁶² Maxwell, "The Tree of Life in Indonesian Textiles," pp. 113–114. In gold thread embroideries from Aceh, the tree, peacock, and even phoenixes are part of the conventional motifs. See Barbara Leigh, "The Theme of the Heavenly Garden: Gold Thread Embroidery in Aceh," in *Weaving Patterns of Life: Indonesian Textile Symposium 1991*, ed. Ruth Barnes, Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff, and David J. Stuart-Fox (Basel: Museum of Ethnography, 1993), pp. 177–188.

items (such as porcelain and embroideries) imported from China for the Peranakans, it is likely that they would have been aware of the Chinese associations, if not the Chinese origins, of at least some of these motifs, particularly mythical creatures.

Decorations in early Nonya beadwork are distinguishable from Chinese designs in terms of both range of imagery and compositions. For instance, Chinese pattern books contained popular designs for embroideries such as slippers and purses with line-drawings of animals, fruits, flowers, and figures as individual motifs that could be arranged as the embroiderer wished, and of more complex scenes.⁶³ Figural imagery such as Liu Hai and his three-legged toad or Xi Wang Mu, the Goddess of the West, riding on her phoenix are rare in early Nonya beadwork and appear on few examples (fig. 6).⁶⁴ This was certainly not because of any restriction on figural imagery as was the case in the religious art of Islamic cultures. For instance, the Baxian was a common theme on items used by the Peranakans. Small metalwork plaques of these figures were frequently applied to headdresses and panels (fig. 173), even though the Baxian could have been, and sometimes were, represented by their attributes such as the lotus, flower basket, and castanets (fig. 62 top and second from top).⁶⁵ Other figural imagery, such as Hock Lok Siu, are common on embroidered altar panels.

Whilst the foregoing comments may also be true of other Peranakan artefacts such as Nonya ware which was produced in Chinese workshops specifically for a Peranakan market, a comparison of beadwork and Nonya ware highlights a second difference. A large number of surviving examples of Nonya ware were produced between 1862 and 1920.⁶⁶ The quality of the painting on Nonya ware is varied, some decorations being

⁶³ *Xiu Hua Tu* (n.p., n.d.), a pattern book in the London Missionary Society Collection in the National Library of Australia is typical of those in circulation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The pattern book may have been obtained in China or Southeast Asia, where Protestant missionaries were based. The collection includes material that was acquired by Walter Medhurst, the Protestant missionary who worked in Java and China. See Andrew Gosling, "Introduction," in *Catalogue of the London Missionary Society Collection held by the National Library of Australia*, compiled by Ching Sun and Wan Wong, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001), pp. 1–4. For other illustrations of pattern books, see Chatterton, *Chinese Silks and Sewing Tools*, pp. 33, 35.

⁶⁴ Xi Wang Mu appears on batiks made for a Peranakan market, however. Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda*, fig. 13, p. 47. See Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 20; and Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 51 for illustrations of other figural imagery in Nonya embroidery. However, the examples illustrated in Ho and Eng Lee are in the petit-point technique and probably date from the twentieth century

⁶⁵ The headdress shown in figure 173 is comparable to those illustrated in Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 149–151, 154–155. The Baxian each represent a different condition of life – poverty, wealth, aristocracy, plebianism, youth, masculinity, and femininity. Williams, *Outline of Chinese Symbolism*, pp. 151–156.

⁶⁶ There is broad consensus on this. According to Ho, most of the porcelain classified as Straits Chinese have reign marks of Tongzhi (1862–1874) and Guangxu (1875–1908). Referring more specifically to

more rigid than others, but many of them show a phoenix perched on a rocky outcrop or swooping down in flight. In the example illustrated here, lush foliage and peony blossoms seem to engage the bird in intimate dialogue, the porcelain painter occasionally threading a leafy stem between the bird's tail feathers to bind the phoenix and peony into a unified pictorial space (fig. 174). Depth is suggested by the overlapping leaves, flowers, and birdlife. Whilst the decoration was non-narrative, the pictorial intent evident on Nonya ware is largely absent in most examples of early Nonya beadwork.

In beadwork, each motif was generally treated as an independent unit enclosed within a separate space. Individual elements within a composition are connected to each other by their proximity (figs. 12, 58, 60, 93, 95, 143). With larger animal motifs, judicious placement of black and white beads (to represent the eyes) directs their gaze towards a flower or plant (figs. 143a, 175b–c). Individual elements of the composition are unified by inserting freely floating secondary motifs – insects and florets, or stylized cloud forms derived from Chinese imagery – as space-fillers. The lack of proportion between motifs appears to be characteristic of early Nonya beadwork, emphasising their symbolic rather than mimetic function.⁶⁷

On the footrest cover, a pair of phoenixes hovers on either side of the ubiquitous peony which forms the primary axis of the work (fig. 169). The symmetrical arrangement of the assemblage of individual motifs on either side of this axis lends order where narrative or pictorial content is absent. The independence of motifs and compositional symmetry is unlikely to have been due to any technical limitations in beadwork since a few examples of Nonya beadwork feature overlapping motifs where a bird is shown perched on a tree branch (fig. 3c, 175b). However, this may be more common in beadwork made towards the end of this early period as the latter occurs more frequently together with the use of contours of graded colours for the shading of

Nonya ware, a sub-category of what Ho classifies as Straits Chinese porcelain, Lim Suan Poh remarks that these were mostly imported between 1862 and the 1920s, whereas Khoo Joo Ee is of the opinion that most Nonya ware was produced between 1875 and the first decades of the twentieth century. See Ho, *Straits Chinese Porcelain*, p. 109; Lim, "Nonya Ware," p. 21; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 244.

⁶⁷ Parker suggests that the lack of perspective and discrepancy of scale in seventeenth century English stumpwork could have been because embroiderers copied engravings of flowers directly onto the material without re-sizing, but also because Stuart embroidery had an older precedent in appliqué which worked with individual motifs. Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 94. In either case, it indicates the unimportance of scale.

foliage, a characteristic of later beadwork as will be discussed in the next section (fig. 175b–c).

Scholars have suggested that the original significance and subtler meanings of Chinese motifs, particularly where pictorial logic is given by more complex rebuses and literary references, were lost on the Peranakans who did not read or speak Chinese.⁶⁸ Indeed, motifs such as the bat and vase, which are homonyms for wealth and peace in some Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, do not have equivalence in Hokkien.⁶⁹ Their conventional meanings, however, may have been transmitted through repeated use. Imagery such as the peony and butterfly were therefore incorporated as generalized auspicious symbols or pleasing charms in locally-produced textiles and other items that the Peranakans commissioned.⁷⁰ This is a convincing reason for the decorativeness of floral and animal imagery and the way in which they were combined.

However, the evidence from a range of Peranakan material culture does not provide consistent support for a generalization of this explanation. On imported Nonya ware, motifs were largely confined to flowers, birds, insects, and the eight Buddhist emblems that represent happiness and good fortune,⁷¹ with a low incidence of landscape, historical, and narrative scenes despite their popularity during the Qing era. On the other hand, on silverware and furniture made for a Peranakan clientele, it is possible to find scenes of warrior figures, horsemen attended by their grooms, ladies in pavilions, and processional imagery, some of which may have been drawn from Chinese classics and mythology.⁷² It is thus pertinent to ask why figural imagery is so rare and why there are hardly any narrative or pictorial scenes in early Nonya beadwork from the Straits Settlements. The selectivity of Chinese imagery thus merits a second look.

In fact, the level of education in Chinese varied between families and dialect groups, and the degree to which Chinese orientation was important clearly differed. For

⁶⁸ Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, p. 275. An example of a pictorial rebus would be a monkey and a bee on a horse's back – *ma shang feng hou* (*ma* – horse; *shang* – atop; *feng* – bee; *hou* – monkey) – a wish for rapid success. Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 54.

⁶⁹ I am grateful to Ian Proudfoot for highlighting this. For example, in Cantonese, vase is *ping* as is peace; in Hokkien, however, vase is *gan*, and peace is *peng*.

⁷⁰ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 54; and Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, p. 270.

⁷¹ Lim, "Nonya Ware," p. 24.

⁷² See, for example, illustrations in Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture*, pp. 83, 90–91, 102, 104–105; and Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, pp. 137, 157.

instance, J.D. Vaughan noted that it was the practice amongst the Teochew but not the Hokkien Peranakans to educate their sons in China in the nineteenth century, although the line may not in fact have been so strictly drawn.⁷³ A number of Chinese-educated Peranakans, like Tan Teck Soon from Singapore and Chan Kim Boon from Penang, were bilingual or trilingual.⁷⁴ But Chinese education was not widely taken up by the Peranakans, even though there were over a hundred Chinese schools in the Straits Settlements by 1884.⁷⁵ Peranakan girls were even less likely to have been literate in Chinese in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Naturally, there were exceptions. Queeny Chang's aunt, who appears in photographs dressed in *sarong-baju panjang*, was the daughter of a local Chinese leader in Pontianak on the west coast of Kalimantan and had some knowledge of the Chinese classics.⁷⁶ Tan Cheng Gay Neo, granddaughter of Melaka-born philanthropist Tan Tock Seng, also learnt Chinese and some English.⁷⁷ However, these were probably few and far between as formal education and literacy were not considered essential for females.⁷⁸ In fact, Penang-born Wu Lien-teh's third sister was given an elementary Chinese education because of her "scholarly disposition" whilst his eldest and fourth sisters were given no formal education.⁷⁹ As this last example shows, opportunities for education also varied within a family.

The lack of literacy in Chinese did not necessarily prevent access to Chinese myth, history, or legend. Oral renditions by family, literate friends, household members, and travelling storytellers transmitted popular stories such as *Sam Kok*; the occasional excursion to local *wayang* may also have introduced the Nonyas to popular Chinese

⁷³ Vaughan, *Manners and Customs*, p. 15. As mentioned in Chapter Two, only the wealthier Peranakan families could afford this. See Tan, *Baba of Melaka*, p. 37.

⁷⁴ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 94, 167.

⁷⁵ Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, p. 228.

⁷⁶ Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁷ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 66, 92–93. Another example is Grace Saw's grandmother, who was literate in Chinese and learnt the Confucian analects. Grace Saw, personal communication, September 2002.

⁷⁸ See Song, "The Position of Chinese Women," p. 17; and also Chapter Three.

⁷⁹ Wu, *Plague Fighter*, pp. 139–141. Wu's eldest sister was born in 1862 and his fourth sister in 1876. Wu's father was a *sinkeh* but his mother was a locally-born Hakka woman. A photograph of four of his sisters (probably including his Chinese-educated third sister) taken in 1936 shows them in *sarong-baju panjang* and with their hair in a *sanggul*. See Wu Yu-lin, *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh, Plague Fighter* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995), fig. 268, p. 128.

tales such as *Sam Pek Eng Tai* (Butterfly Lovers).⁸⁰ At least some Nonyas were literate in Malay and one even sent a letter to the editor of the *Bintang Timor*, a newspaper in romanized Malay published between 1894 and 1895 in Singapore.⁸¹ In addition, imagery of deities could be found on altar cloths embroidered in China and batik in Java.⁸² Figures of children and women were also represented on items such as sleeve bands and coffin shrouds most likely imported from China, and even occasionally on batik (figs. 176, 177).⁸³ It is thus unlikely that the Nonyas were completely unfamiliar with such imagery. Yet it was rare for these stories or legends, or even simple figures, to find their way into beadwork designs in the Straits Settlements.

One speculative reason for this curious lack of figures, particularly from popular literature and drama, in early beadwork from the Straits Settlements may be because of the function of beadwork as wedding gifts and decorations.⁸⁴ Perhaps the eschewal of figures was a reflection of the propriety of the bride. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, familiarity with the opera or a fondness for figural imagery may have indicated attendance at the *bangsawan* or *wayang*, implying too much exposure to the outer world, or to those who were educated and literate. Instead, the knowledge of symbolic imagery was culturally instilled; the experience of mythical nature could be imagined from the enclosure of a walled house. In a society where patriliney was

⁸⁰ For instance, Queeny Chang's aunt used to relate stories from *Sam Kok* to Chang's mother. Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 39. Lim Huck Ai, born in 1907 in Penang, recalled that a *lang ting tang* man (or travelling story-teller) would visit his home every night to read his Nonya grandmother a story from *Sam Kok*, *Water Margin*, *Travels to the West*, and *Sam Pek Eng Tai*. Lim Kean Chye, "Conversations with Lim Huck Aik," in *The Penang File*, n.d. <www.thepenangfileb.bravepages.com/histr324.htm> [accessed 29 May 2004]. Felix Chia, a Peranakan who grew up in 1930s Singapore, used to listen to his mother reading *Sam Kok* to him. Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 71. Although these accounts relate to the period after 1900, it is possible that this pattern carried over from an earlier period. Certainly, by the mid-1910s, Peranakan girls would have been familiar with better known Chinese legends and historical events as they were allowed to watch the performances that took place at the homes of friends or relatives. Lee, "The Chinese Girl in Singapore," p. 562.

⁸¹ Elzibeta Thurgood gives the example of a letter in the *Bintang Timor* of 6 July 1894 from a Nonya who objected to the portrayal of Nonyas in Singapore as only knowing how to beat their children. Elzibeta Thurgood, "A Description of Nineteenth Century Baba Malay: A Malay Variety Influenced by Language Shift" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawai'i, 1998), p. 38. It is, of course, possible that such letters were written by third parties.

⁸² On batik, see Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, fig. 375, p. 265, fig. 383, p. 272. However, figural imagery on batik is generally whimsical. It may be that batik with figural imagery was not widely circulated in the Straits Settlements. It would be interesting to compare the correspondence of imagery on batiks used in each region and the motifs in beadwork.

⁸³ According to Verity Wilson, figural decoration was not common on parts of the Chinese dress apart from the sleeve bands. Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, p. 61.

⁸⁴ Characters and narratives from opera and theatre should be distinguished from mythical and religious figures such as Buddhist and Daoist deities (for example, the Baxian).

crucial, appropriate imagery could well connote a well-trained daughter and a marriageable prospect.

This may also help to explain why it is easier to find figural and narrative imagery on furniture made for a Peranakan market, and its relative absence on Nonya ware.

Nonya ware and beadwork were sold by the *klentong* man who showed his wares from house to house, probably catering to the requirements of the womenfolk.⁸⁵ On the other hand, Peranakan men may have participated more actively in the commissioning or purchase of silverware and, as is likely, in the selection of significant expenditures such as furniture.

A comparison with the motifs and imagery in early European *Chinoiserie* raises another, perhaps more plausible, possibility. Art historians comment on the representations of mythological scenes and quaint little figures in fantastic clothes as a reflection of European perceptions of the exotic East, a “source of bizarre customs and fabulous treasure.”⁸⁶ This fascination was in part fuelled by the luxury status of imported Chinese goods as well as stories of the East that circulated through travel books, conjuring up a romanticized world of strange buildings, foreign landscapes, and unfamiliar people.⁸⁷ In contrast, the Peranakan selection and treatment of Chinese imagery was not about a world of people or their bizarre way of life but of abstract ideals conceptualized as norms and value systems, translated through non-figural representations.

Local symbols of abundance, prosperity and progeny such as the yam, banana, and lemongrass which were used at wedding ceremonies, are absent in early Nonya beadwork. Their choice of imagery was governed not only by familiarity and their relevance to Chinese merchant value systems – prosperity, industry, thrift, and the abundance of male heirs. They can also be seen as attempts to convey an inherited Chinese identity and tradition through a superficial acquaintance with patently Chinese symbols of good wishes and protection that required little explanation or translation. These widely circulated visual conventions represented a common vocabulary that

⁸⁵ Both Mrs Ong Chin Yam, a Melaka Nonya born around 1905, and Alice Choo, a Singapore Nonya born in 1925, recall that porcelain was purchased from the itinerant vendors. Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2003; and Alice Choo, personal communication, October 2003.

⁸⁶ Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon, 1993), p. 31.

⁸⁷ Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: J. Murray, 1961), pp. 40–50; Jacobson, *Chinoiserie*, pp. 10–16, 46–53.

captured the ways in which Nonyas could participate in, and were expected to contribute to, maintaining as domesticated daughters and dutiful wives.

Verisimilitude was not necessary given the familiarity with conventional symbols. In some cases, the beader may not even have had a direct experience or knowledge of what plant or animal was being represented since many of them, such as the prunus blossom (one of the flowers of the four seasons), were not native to the Straits Settlements and others, such as the *qilin*, were mythical creatures. This can be seen most clearly in the representations of long-tailed animals and unidentifiable creatures from beadwork and embroidery (similar to the unidentified paired creatures shown in fig. 96b).⁸⁸

Adhering to a well known stock of Chinese imagery allowed many of the beaded motifs to be understood at various levels, depending on the extent of the observer's Chinese education. The flower in a vase for example, could connote peace and good wishes through convention, but for those who were familiar with Cantonese or Mandarin, the homonym of peace would be apparent.⁸⁹ The multiple ways in which symbols could be read meant that the tried and tested stock of bird, flower, and animal motifs satisfied the needs of decorum and anodyne decorative requirements.

Relatively restricted in their ability to achieve and decipher meaningful combinations of motifs through narratives and rebuses, the Nonya chose instead compositions with an overflowing abundance of flora, fauna, and mythical creatures to animate the symbols of prosperity and emphasize the ideals of wealth and harmony.⁹⁰ It is perhaps in this that the Peranakan *horror vacui* described by Chin finds its rationale – in the visuality of an enchanted garden teeming with life.⁹¹

A greater range of designs and compositions appears to have been employed in Sumatra. In particular, figures of Chinese warriors, scholars, and children can be seen

⁸⁸ See the illustrations of the “animal-plant” and the “long-tailed animal” in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 35, 39. The latter may be a deer.

⁸⁹ Interestingly, the flower in vase motif appears more frequently in earlier beadwork from the Netherlands Indies than the Straits Settlements (figs. 79b, 93a, 95a), although Maxwell has noted that the non-Chinese speaking Peranakans in Java probably were not conversant with such homonyms. Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, note 43, p. 412. The familiarity with Chinese homonyms also depended on the extent of Chinese words in the Baba lexicon which varied between Singapore, Melaka, and Penang.

⁹⁰ The crowded compositions can also be found in Peranakan metalwork from the same period. See, for example, Ho, *Straits Chinese Silver*, fig. 31, p. 63.

⁹¹ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 29.

on Nonya beadwork on cotton attributable to the Netherlands Indies from the late nineteenth century or the very first years of the twentieth century (figs. 32, 178). It is possible that the two warrior figures on an envelope purse may represent Zhang Fei with his 10-foot spear and Liu Bei wielding his pair of ancient swords, two of the three main characters from *Sam Kok*.⁹² From the early 1880s, translations of Chinese novels in romanized Malay were published in Java, and a translation of *Sam Kok* was available by 1883, almost 10 years before Chan Kim Boon's 30-volume translation was published in Singapore between 1892 and 1896.⁹³ Peranakan publishers based in Java had distribution agents in Sumatra – for instance, the publisher Yap Goan Ho in Semarang had an agent in Padang.⁹⁴ These translations often had a number of line drawings that illustrated scenes from the stories.⁹⁵ Although it is probable that some of these translations also found their way to the Straits Settlements, the availability of romanized Malay translations may have enabled Nonyas in Sumatra to become familiar with Chinese tales and characters at an earlier date than in the Straits Settlements.⁹⁶ Furthermore, because the exact provenance of these pieces with figural imagery is not known, it is difficult to identify if they are particular to any region of Sumatra or if their use may be associated with locally-specific contexts.

The example of early beadwork on the Delft purse from the Netherlands Indies discussed earlier also features Chinese characters which could have been copied from embroideries (figs. 79a–b). Their illegibility is in contrast to the Chinese script on door lanterns, ancestral tablets, and gilded plaques placed around and above the main doors of Peranakan ancestral homes.⁹⁷ Nonya beadwork was not invested with the religious import of items that recording a family's lineage, nor with the function of

⁹² This purse is illustrated in Richard Green, "Straits Chinese Beadwork in the Alan Mitchell Collection," *Bead Society of Great Britain Newsletter*, no. 70, (2003), p. 16. I am grateful to Carole Morris for bringing this piece to my attention. The purse was obtained from a dealer in England. Richard Green, personal communication, April 2005. It can be tentatively attributed to Sumatra based on its form. Its couched gold thread ground is also similar to that of other envelope purses obtained in Sumatra. See, for example, fig. 78; and Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 55–56.

⁹³ Claudine Salmon, "Malay Translations of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia," in *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (Seventeenth – Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. Claudine Salmon (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Corporation, 1987), pp. 403–413; and Claudine Salmon, "Writings in Romanized Malay by the Chinese of Malaya: A Preliminary Inquiry," in *Literary Migrations*, ed. Claudine Salmon, pp. 442.

⁹⁴ Salmon, "Malay Translations of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia," p. 403.

⁹⁵ See illustrations in Salmon, "Malay Translations of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia," pp. 409–410.

⁹⁶ Claudine Salmon suggests that the Sino-Malay literary movements in Java and Malaya may have been connected. Salmon, "Writings in Romanized Malay by the Chinese of Malaya," p. 446.

⁹⁷ For instance, see illustrations in Lee and Chen, *Rumah Baba*, pp. 58, 61.

specific identificatory labels. Nevertheless, the presence of the notional script implied the self-conscious immersion of the Peranakans in a culturally Chinese world.

In the Straits Settlements, the profusion of Chinese mythical creatures and emblematic flowers was sufficient to demonstrate the Peranakan's cultural authenticity. At the same time, their conventionalized designs and symmetrical layouts palpably distanced these Chinese images from the lived reality of the Nonya world that was being effected in Baba Malay and *sarong-baju panjang*. The two were nevertheless rendered visually compatible through the unabashed celebration of colours and exuberance of details in beadwork, concealing the looming tensions between local birth and Chinese heritage, traditional ways and modernity, which would figure so prominently in the debates on the Straits Chinese identity at the turn of the twentieth century.

The final years of the nineteenth century were a period of change for the Peranakans in Singapore, Melaka, and Penang. Elzibeta Thurgood argues that the articles published in *Bintang Timor*, a romanized Baba Malay newspaper, reflect the changing awareness of the late nineteenth century Peranakan community – a result of the influx of *sinkeh*, the Peranakans' schooling in English and Malay, their overseas education in Britain, and the publication of newspapers offering international news which widened the horizons of the Peranakans.¹ Issues such as whether the Peranakans should provide assistance to *sinkeh* migrants and the benefits of overseas travel were debated.² For instance, in an 1895 edition of the *Bintang Timor*, a Peranakan Wee Theam Tew was criticized for leaving to study at Cambridge University as he left his family at home, whilst another Peranakan, Tan Hup Leong, was criticized for travelling around the world; the counter to this criticism was that knowledge could be acquired from travel.³ Even though the *Bintang Timor* probably reflected the views of a literate and socially-conscious minority, these changes also had intense consequences for the sheltered domesticity of the Nonyas, ushering in what is arguably the most dynamic phase of Nonya beadwork.

Experimentation and Innovation: Nonya Beadwork from 1900 – 1920

Social change did not necessarily take place evenly between 1900 and 1920. There is insufficient information to assess the relationship between the styles and socio-economic position, but the alacrity with which novelty and difference was embraced probably varied between individuals and their families. This is suggested by the co-existence of a number of different styles and techniques in beadwork from 1900 to 1920.

¹ Thurgood, "A Description of Nineteenth Century Baba Malay," p. 50.

² Thurgood, "A Description of Nineteenth Century Baba Malay," pp. 37, 39–40.

³ Article in *Bintang Timor*, 7 March 1895, cited in Thurgood, "A Description of Nineteenth Century Baba Malay," p. 37. Wee Theam Tew was a lawyer who was appointed in 1904 as secretary to the military governor of Beijing, a position which he held for one year. Tan Hup Leong was the third son of Tan Kim Tian, a wealthy merchant. Tan Hup Leong travelled around the world in three months and wrote a series of letters for the *Straits Times* about his travels which, Song wrote, "read like the experiences of the typical American globe-trotter." Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 274, 284.

The new methods that came into circulation in the first decade of the twentieth century point to a high level of technical competency in beadwork. The surfaces of beaded objects, hitherto only partially decorated with beads, were now fully-covered in individually-stitched beads, increasing the level of effort required. This may have occurred as early as the last years of the 1890s, gathering pace in the first 15 years of the twentieth century. Its widespread adoption coincided with a shift in the way pictorial space was organized.

The change in spatial organization is most evident in the rectilinear formats of the a number of beaded belts in the Field Museum's collection. These were probably made around the 1910s based on their technique and materials used. Each belt is divided equally along its length into between seven and nine sections, each panel containing a single motif (figs. 62, 63, 85, 87). Occasionally, different background colours further stress the discreteness of each motif. Compared to the freely-floating motifs of earlier beadwork, the regularity in the division of space gives equal emphasis to each individual motif, reducing the interrelationship between them and intensifying their individual symbolism. On some belts, the Chinese character *shou* is beaded in between peonies, bats, butterflies, and attributes of the Baxian, serving as an additional framing device and reinforcing the symbolism of longevity that often accompanied auspicious motifs.

The Nonyas had employed lobed panels and cartouches to highlight individual motifs in examples of earlier beadwork (figs. 12, 49). These often did not play a dominant visual role in the overall decorative compositions. However, on examples of beadwork from the first two decades of the twentieth century, the use of cartouches and medallions in colours that contrast with the backgrounds separate designs of fauna and abstract symbols from floral motifs (figs. 65d–e, 88, 130). Whilst it would be tempting to understand this formal separation as a classificatory rationalization of nature, the motifs on other fully-beaded belts belie such a reading. Even where motifs are contained in separate panels, animal life is frequently set against blossoms and foliage (fig. 88).

A number of beaded velvet belts that can be securely dated to before 1926 show blossoming branches separated by spaces of undecorated black velvet ground (figs. 179, 180). Here, cockerels perch on floral stems and carp and goldfish swim amongst waterweeds, in contrast to earlier beadwork where motifs were freely floating.

Compositionally, these belts may be more closely associated with individually-stitched beadwork from this period, where the backgrounds were often less “cluttered” with peripheral motifs. However, compared to the multitude of colours on pieces with fully-beaded grounds, the sharper contrast between the beaded motifs and the unadorned monochromatic velvet creates an impression of restraint.

These belts on dark velvet are similar to some metallic thread embroidered belts.⁴ In fact, it is likely that such patterns, drawn on velvet, were suitable for silk or metallic thread embroidery or for beadwork, depending on the predilection of the embroiderer. Elderly Nonyas purchased pre-prepared templates for embroidery from the itinerant haberdasher.⁵ This helps to explain the repetition not just of motifs but also of the standardization of formats that can be seen in some examples of beadwork (figs. 62, 85, 88). It is possible that, as beadwork became more popular and the demand for beaded items grew, the scope for commercial imports expanded. As discussed in Chapter Four, it was not just the templates for embroidery but completed beadwork that was commercially produced, some perhaps being imported from China. A common source for these decorations would go some way to explaining the correspondence in designs on different pieces.

Compared to earlier Nonya beadwork, greater attention appears to have been paid to perspective in this period. On several examples of fully-beaded belts, depth is created by the overlapping of motifs (figs. 84b, 88). The resulting boost to pictorial realism may simply have been through the adoption of a greater variety of designs from Chinese pattern books or the importation of beadwork produced in China. In either case, it represents a modification in the Peranakan ways of seeing, perhaps even a gradual embrace of the creeping consciousness of rationality and scientific reasoning. The focus on the pictorial element in beadwork may have encouraged the simplification or elimination of space fillers or discrete background elements in a design. Covering the entire surface of objects with beads tended to negate the effect of an undecorated monochrome ground. Co-existing with plainer beadwork on velvet, the result was the absence of a uniform aesthetic in the first decade of the twentieth century, reflecting the period of experimentation and change in beadwork styles.

⁴ A belt with mythical animals and auspicious emblems embroidered in gold thread on dark brown velvet was presented to the Singapore History Museum by Kok Putt Poh, whose mother used to do beadwork in the early twentieth century. The belt is illustrated in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 51. In relation to Kok Putt Poh, see also n. 29 of Chapter Four.

⁵ Mrs C. Y. Ong, personal communication, 2002; and Oon, “Unravelling a Beaded Past,” p. 105.

Covering entire surfaces with beads also expanded the range of colours available for backgrounds. In addition to couched metallic thread grounds and low sheen velvet piles in orange, green, brown, violet, maroon, red, and black, glimmering surfaces of sky blue (*biru manis*), yellow (*kuning ayer*), white, and pink (*paru-paru*) could be achieved (figs. 10, 11, 29, 52, 56, 62, 83a–b, 84, 85, 88, 90, 130, 155, 157). The densely beaded grounds also enhance the impression of an intricately-worked surface. A *muka bantal* dateable to around 1902 illustrates this well (fig. 90).⁶ The contrast between the green, yellow, and pink shades of the finger citron and pomegranates and the light blue beaded ground is feeble, but seems to be representative of an overall shift in aesthetic to brighter, lighter colours. Some examples of fully-beaded pieces resemble beadwork on velvet in their use of dark-coloured grounds, but the vast majority exploit the brightness of yellow and sky blue.

Light coloured grounds are also found in threaded beadwork, most examples of which probably date to between 1895 and 1925. White, light blue, and yellow grounds appear to have been the most popular, and the latter two do appear in Nonya ware but are less frequent than green, rose-pink, and white for reasons which are not entirely clear.⁷ Similarly, in batik used by the Peranakans, light blue and yellow were not common background colours. The choice of new colours may have been because these beads were easier to obtain in large quantities or, more likely, because of a change in tastes, perhaps in accordance with a wider change in urban fashions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Such changes can also be seen in the materials used for the Nonya's *baju panjang*, the *kain chaylay* in sombre reds and browns slowly replaced by pastel-coloured voiles.⁸ The choice of light but bright colours may have been part of a conscious means of emphasising the difference between “modern” beadwork and its older counterpart.

Nonya threaded beadwork appears to have been popular for a relatively short period, perhaps because it was technically demanding. In terms of technique, threading marked a fundamentally new approach to beadwork. Threaded beadwork is found mainly in Penang, although a number of threaded pieces have been obtained from

⁶ The date is estimated based on the newspaper pasted on the reverse with an image of a woman in what appears to be early Edwardian fashion – a high neck dress with lace inserts and a chignon.

⁷ Ho, *Straits Chinese Porcelain*, pp. 50–65. Dark blue (*biru tuah*) is associated with mourning, but not light blue is not generally associated with the initial stages of mourning. However, light blue is sometimes found on batiks worn during an extended mourning period.

⁸ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 165–167.

Sumatra and narrower threaded borders are attached to beadwork from Singapore and Melaka (fig. 6).⁹ As discussed in Chapter Four, threading is probably the most demanding technique and requires a high level of competence in manipulating multiple threads. Many larger pieces of embroidered Nonya beadwork, such as decorative mats and valances for the wedding bed, have a Penang provenance or have been acquired in Penang (fig. 47, 52). In fact, Ho Wing Meng has singled out beadwork from Penang for its fine workmanship, densely-packed motifs of flowers and birds, and wide variety of beaded items.¹⁰ The reason for the pre-eminence of Penang in beadwork in the first two decades of the twentieth century is not entirely clear, but does imply the vitality and importance of Nonya beadwork there.

Found together and made by the same hand, the Basheer rose and peony panels from around 1895 present an interesting comparison (figs. 73, 74). The former features roses on a light blue ground whilst the latter is of blue and red peonies on a white ground. The borders of both panels are of similar design. A single red peony sits squarely in the centre of the Basheer peony panel, flanked on either side by identical sets of blue peonies. Movement is almost exclusively created by the decentred trunk that rises from the left half of the panel, snaking its way towards the centre. In the Basheer rose panel, a trunk rises stiffly, bearing the weight of two roses. The beader has struggled to symmetrize an essentially asymmetrical design by placing equal numbers of smaller roses on either side of the main bouquet.

The graceful curves of the peony tree contrast sharply with the awkward trunk of the rose plant. Whether they were drawn directly or indirectly from mid-nineteenth century European needlework patterns, the rose blossoms were uncomfortably grafted onto a compositional model of a flowering tree which was given cogency by its axial symmetry rather than naturalistic design (compare figs. 73 and 181). The lack of stylistic harmony on the rose panel suggests that the Peranakans were attracted by European floral subjects rather than any overall aesthetic, superimposing motifs onto existing Nonya formats with minor rearrangements by substituting or even supplementing conventional symbols such as the peony and orchid.

⁹ Ho has come across embroideries that comprise a wide netted central panel in Melaka. Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 31. Threaded fringes may have been commercially produced and attached to beadwork. Michael Cheah, personal communication, September 2002.

¹⁰ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 74–75.

The early adoption of European motifs can thus be seen as assimilative, focussing on flowers which could be easily extricated from their Western stylistic context and inserted into a Nonya setting. The substitutability of the rose and the peony was emphasized by their visual semblance and is underscored by term “peony-rose.”¹¹ The similarity is more easily observable in embroidery than beadwork. For instance, a silk-thread embroidered panel from Penang features a large upright peony with two roses hanging on either side and along the border.¹² The peony has lost the wavy edges of its petals which now look like the smoothly curving petals of the rose.

Roses and rosebuds appear more frequently in threaded beadwork than in earlier embroidered beadwork. The choice of motif both reflects the gendered nature of beadwork and is suggestive of the forces that contributed to social change in the early twentieth century. For the Peranakans, the peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, and prunus blossoms carried the cultural resonance of hallowed Chinese traditions. The peony appeared not only on wedding paraphernalia and Chinese wedding robes but also on altar cloths, a signifier of fundamental religious beliefs.¹³

Like the peony, the rose was not native to the Straits Settlements. Cultivating the rose plant itself must have been a considerable indulgence in the equatorial climate of the Straits Settlements. Seah Liang Seah, a wealthy Straits Chinese, imported fresh rose bushes from China every year to satisfy his enthusiasm for the flower, a sufficiently unusual exercise that elicited a comment from the European observer Mrs Florence Caddy.¹⁴ By its association, the rose was a visual allusion to luxury.

Although the rose was an emblem of youth in Chinese designs, it was not as popular a motif in Chinese as in European art.¹⁵ The rose was primarily associated with the West. A *syair* in Baba Malay by Lim Hock Chee, published in 1890, locates the rose as a European flower:

¹¹ Ho first drew attention to the conflation of the rose and peony motif, but the term “peony-rose” appears to have been devised by Eng-Lee. See Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, pp. 74–75; and Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 14. There are, in fact, two main depictions of the rose in this period – one has pointed petals as is more similar to a lotus, the other has rounded petals (see, for example, fig. 55b).

¹² See illustration in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, fig. 60, p. 112.

¹³ See illustrations in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, fig. 49, p. 92; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht, "Sans Peur"* (London: Hurst, 1889), p. 84, quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, pp. 213–214.

¹⁵ See Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, p. 255. The rose is not even mentioned in Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*.

Bunga roos dalam kabon blanda
Bunga-nya chantek bar-inda inda
Timbul birahi di dalam dada
Sabab-nya antu datang mongoda

[A rose in a European garden
With pretty flowers, so beautiful
Passion rises in my breast
As a ghost comes to haunt me]¹⁶

The rose was found on furnishings, carpets, and velvet table covers imported from Europe. In the Straits Settlements, by the second half of the nineteenth century, European furnishings were status symbols that were not simply items of conspicuous consumption. Tan Kim Seng and Tan Beng Swee, two prominent Peranakans, were presented an epergne in 1862 by Boustead, an English trading firm with whom they had business dealings.¹⁷ It was decorated with a floral arrangement that included roses. As discussed in Chapter Two, the commercial and material impact of the West was becoming increasingly evident in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For a family at the pinnacle of Peranakan mercantile society, their location at the intersection of local and European commercial networks was important. The epergne acted a material marker of this relationship and, unsurprisingly, was “greatly prized by the family.”¹⁸ The rose was implicated in the networks that connected the Peranakans to the circulation of ideas emanating from the West.

For the average Peranakan woman, exposure to things Western was limited.¹⁹ “Shopping” for textiles, ceramics, and haberdashery and even the commissioning of jewellery were activities that took place within the boundaries of the home.²⁰

¹⁶ The *syair*, “Syair Bunga” in *Buku Sahyer dan Pantun Malayu*, by Lim Hock Chee (Singapore: Denodaya Press, 1890) can be accessed at “Pantun Baba Cina,” *Malay World Studies Portal* online database, ATMA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, <<http://www.malaycivilization.com>> [accessed 20 May 2005]. The translation was kindly provided by Ian Proudfoot. Lim Hock Chee’s writings are discussed in Tan Chee Beng, “Baba Malay Poetry,” pp. 112, 114–115.

¹⁷ See Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 91 and illustration before p. 91.

¹⁸ Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, pp. 91–92.

¹⁹ The qualifier “average” is used because a handful of (elite) Straits Chinese women were, in fact, exposed to wider European society. Tan Chay Yan’s wife traveled with him to England in 1911, where their daughter was born; Loke Yew’s third wife, who was Straits Chinese, traveled with him to England and France in 1902 and their daughter was sent to Aberdeen to study English. See Song, *One Hundred Years’ History*, p. 294; and “Notable Men of the Straits: Loke Yew,” *SCM* 8, no. 4 (1904), p. 206.

²⁰ Elderly and married Nonyas were at greater liberty to leave the house, and those who could not afford servants probably did so regularly to do their grocery shopping.

Confinement to the home was particularly stringent for the unmarried Nonya teenager who “is never permitted to venture outside the doors of her abode, unless it be to pay occasional visits to her closest connections.”²¹ When she did leave the house, she was transported in a *redi* (a portable hammock shielded with a cloth) and chaperoned by older female relatives.²² The Nonya’s awareness of new designs was thus limited to the novelties brought by the door-to-door salesman, what her peers talked about, and what she saw within her own residence and her relatives’ homes.

The images of roses on furnishings and textiles meant that these were accessible within the domestic context. Yet the rose was different from what could be found on Chinese painted screens and furniture, and took on a multiple significance of newness, interconnectedness, and sophistication, as well as an association with forms of modernity conveniently labelled as Western. For the young Nonya, the rose was a potent signifier in the negotiation of “modern” identity in a world where patriarchy, kinship networks, and hierarchy structured social relationships. Close enough in form to the peony, often even conflated with it, the rose did not threaten the value systems at the heart of a mercantile Peranakan culture – of filial piety, continuity through male progeny, industriousness, and wealth formation. Its innocuous beauty and connotations of luxury conformed to conservative Peranakan social values.²³ Equally perhaps, the modifications of the peony manifested a desire for change, cloaked behind a façade that could be interpreted as consistent with traditional values implicit in the practice of beadwork itself.

Although the peony-rose appears in beadwork from Melaka, the rose and peony-rose imagery seem to have been taken up most enthusiastically in beadwork from Penang (figs. 10, 50, 52–56, 106, 138–139, 153). In a speech he made in 1896, Song Ong Siang commented that “the Babas there [in Penang] hold more liberal views with regard to the position in society of their Nyonyas.”²⁴ Song did not provide any further details of their “position,” but his statement suggests a greater degree of tolerance

²¹ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

²² Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562. For descriptions and illustrations of the *redi*, see Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, pp. 16–17; and Chia, *Babas Revisited*, p. 85.

²³ In Malay *syair*, the rose was also associated with qualities of perfect womanhood – fidelity, high rank, generosity, honesty, sense of humour, and industriousness. H. Overbeck, “Malay Animal and Flower Shaers,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malayan Branch* 12, part 2 (1934), p. 130. Whether or not the Peranakans, and in particular the Nonyas, were aware of or acknowledged this is unclear. In relation to *pantun*, see n. 45 of Chapter Five.

²⁴ Song, “The Position of Chinese Women,” p. 17.

amongst the Penang Peranakans for change. This coincides with the emergence of a generation of literate Peranakans who had received some education in English.

Seen in its context as part of an article that promoted education for women, Song's statement further indicates his belief that there was greater parental support for education of the Nonyas in Penang, even if this may have been restricted to a token few years of formal schooling. Although needlework was a standard part of a Western educational curriculum, Western education may not have been directly responsible for introducing new imagery into the Nonya needlework repertoire. However, education in English, even at the most basic level, must have enhanced the Nonya's familiarity with the West. It was probably this that increased her level of comfort in drawing from the foreign imagery that she encountered. In addition, by the end of the nineteenth century, more Peranakan families who could afford it were incorporating Western imports alongside traditional Chinese decoration into their living spaces. The bilingual newspaper *Surat Khabar Peranakan (Straits Chinese Herald)* which was aimed at a Peranakan readership carried advertisements of English four-poster brass beds and European style wash-basin stands from Powell & Co.²⁵

Further evidence is provided by the homes constructed in the first decades of the twentieth century. For instance, what is now the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum on Heeren Street in Melaka was a residence for the Peranakan Chan family. Built at the turn of the century, it incorporates blackwood partitions that are carved in low relief with European-style floral garlands and animals.²⁶ The main staircase is a combination of wood, gilding, and tiles decorated with an art nouveau floral motif.²⁷ In 1906, the wealthy Chee family commissioned an Eurasian architect named Westerhout to design a Palladian-style mansion as their family home on Heeren Street in Melaka, incorporating tiles and stained glass imported from Europe.²⁸ In Singapore, it is not clear when the Chinese began to adopt European-style bungalow architecture, but after 1900, no traditional Chinese houses were being built because the cost was prohibitive.²⁹ European designs were adapted and Chinese features, such as the *jiho*

²⁵ These were illustrated full page advertisements in the *Surat Khabar Peranakan*, 3 March 1894 and 20 March 1894, for example.

²⁶ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 38.

²⁷ See illustration in Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 153.

²⁸ Leung, "The House that Chee Built," pp. 69-70.

²⁹ Lee, *Singapore House*, p. 95.

(the name-plate hung above the main entrance), the *pintu pagar* (the fence door), and the Chinese-style courtyard that separated the front and rear of the house were retained.³⁰ European furniture – dining tables, dressers, sideboards, even chandeliers – could be found in the homes of wealthier Straits Chinese.³¹ In the first two decades of the twentieth century, wealthy Straits Chinese built or acquired private mansions on Northam Road in Penang (known as “Millionaire’s Row”) that were modelled after European villas, with English names such as “Homestead,” “Hardwicke,” and “Northam Lodge.”³²

These reasons alone, however, are unsatisfactory explanations for the earlier embrace of Western motifs in Penang Nonya beadwork. Literacy and English education were not confined to Peranakans from Penang and an English-educated generation of Peranakans who supported social reforms could be found in Singapore. Some Peranakan families in Melaka and Singapore were supportive of a Western-style of education and accomplishments for their daughters, whether conducted at home by governesses or at the soon-to-be-opened Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (fig. 182).

A further explanation thus needs to be sought in the historical differences of the divide between the Peranakans and their *sinkeh* counterparts. The distinctions between the Peranakans and the *sinkeh* in Penang appear to have been less pronounced than in Singapore and Melaka. Although Penang Nonyas wore the *sarong-baju panjang* (and later, the *sarong-kebaya*), and chewed *sireh*, they were more proficient in Chinese than their counterparts in Singapore and Melaka.³³ The vernacular spoken by the Penang Peranakans contains more Hokkien terms than the Baba Malay spoken by Peranakans in Singapore and Melaka, and this is clear from the terms used to describe Nonya embroidery and clothing. For instance, gold thread is known as *kim suah* in Penang

³⁰ Lee, *Singapore House*, pp. 95, 98.

³¹ Lee, *Singapore House*, p. 98.

³² Homestead was home to Lim Mah Chye and was later acquired by banker Yeap Chor Ee; Northam Lodge was built for Heah Swee Lee, a wealthy planter and Perak State Councillor; Hardwicke was a European bungalow taken over by the Khaw family which had business interests in Penang and Thailand. See Neil Khor, *Glimpses of Old Penang* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Star Publications, 2002), pp. 130–131; and Khoo Su Nin, *Streets of Georgetown, Penang*, 2d ed. (Penang: Janus Print & Resources, 1994), pp. 134–135.

³³ Chia, “The Language of the Babas,” pp. 11.

and *benang mas* in Melaka and Singapore; the *baju panjang* is referred to as the *th'ng sah* and the *kebaya* as *pua th'ng tay* in Penang.³⁴

Penang Peranakans were actively involved in establishing Chinese clan associations, such as the Khoo Kongsi and the Cheah Kongsi which acted as umbrella organizations for dialect and kinship groups irrespective of birthplace. Although these existed in Singapore, the clan networks were more strongly differentiated by cultural affiliation. It is significant, too, that the Straits Chinese British Association, established in Singapore in August 1900 and in Melaka in October 1900, was not formed in Penang until 1920, although the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which included non-English-speaking Chinese members, was set up in 1903 and was led by the Penang Straits Chinese.³⁵ Perhaps there was a relatively greater acceptance of the Penang Peranakans' identification as Chinese that was, in a sense, liberating. More secure in their cultural authenticity, there may consequently have been less pressure on the Penang Nonyas to doggedly retain conventional Chinese designs that demonstrated their cultural affiliation as they sought to translate between modernity, Westernization, and their ancestral culture.

Nevertheless, the Nonya stepped cautiously between modernity and tradition, for the initial appropriation of European imagery appears to have been tentative and suggests the uncertainties inherent in change. In the early twentieth century, some Peranakans regarded Westernization as the necessary concomitant of modernity. The enlightened Western woman was put forward as a model for the young Nonya. One writer in the *SCM* urged parents to educate their daughters so that "in the near future, our young maidens will stand on the same footing and compare favourably with the girls of the West in mental as well as in other spheres of development."³⁶

At the same time, Westernization became a scapegoat, if somewhat conveniently, for the perceived deficiencies in Nonya behaviour. A Peranakan speculated that it was the

³⁴ Raymond Kwok, "Nyonya Kebaya," *Pulau Pinang* 2, no. 6 (1990), p. 24; and Michael Cheah, personal communication, January 2003. Teoh Boon Seng and Lim Beng Soon have argued that the Hokkien currently spoken by Penang Peranakans is not less strongly influenced by Malay, but may reflect the different pace of assimilation of Hokkien words in Penang and Singapore-Melaka. Teoh Boon Seng and Lim Beng Soon, "Malay Words in Baba Hokkien of Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 72, part 1, no. 276 (1999), pp. 125–137.

³⁵ The formation of these associations in Penang is discussed briefly in Christie, "Stranded by the Tide," pp. 31, 34–35.

³⁶ Soh, "Concerning Our Girls," p. 140.

“imperfect digestion of *Western culture* that...resulted in this domestic nightmare [of gambling], when women taking to the habit of their *Western sisters*, have proved too much for men to tackle...[emphasis added].”³⁷ It had the potential to upset culturally embedded values of respect, obedience, and discipline. As the discourse on Straits Chinese (and, implicitly, Peranakan) identity wrestled to reconcile logocentric progressivism and the apparently irrational foundations of traditional cultural practices, the Nonya sought a bridge to modernity through the peony-rose. The visual ambiguity of the peony and rose suggests a slippage of symbolic meaning that imbued the rose with multiple readings to suit different groups of audiences.

Notwithstanding the Janus-faced appeal of the rose, traditional imagery and patterns retained an important place in threaded beadwork designs. Images of butterflies, peonies, lotuses, and vases of flowers signalled continuity with earlier conventional symbolism (figs. 74, 82, 133, 136–137, 183–184).³⁸ Across the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies, a variety of Chinese motifs and designs also appeared on individually-stitched beadwork (figs. 51–52, 62–64, 83b, 85–87, 156).³⁹ The concurrent use of different techniques and subject matter in the first two decades of the twentieth century suggests the vitality of experimentation and the engagement with different cultural possibilities. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the culturally inflected debates on modernity, Nonya cultural identity was flexible and contingent on how external influences were assimilated, translated, and integrated into the fabric of life.

European motifs were most decisively taken up in conjunction with the widespread adoption of petit-point beadwork around 1910. Many patterns for Nonya beadwork after this date, such as the sampler for the beaded spaniel, are comparable to earlier canvaswork designs used in Europe (figs. 159, 160). Although it is possible that the technique became more popular as tastes changed towards European motifs, examples of petit-point beadwork that combine both Chinese-inspired and European motifs suggest that the shift towards the latter occurred only gradually (figs. 153, 154). In addition, as noted in Chapter Four, some ready-drawn pattern pieces for petit-point beadwork on *kain urat* were prepared in the same mode as pattern pieces for silk

³⁷ “Gambling Among Chinese Women,” *SCM* 1, no. 3 (1897), p. 108.

³⁸ The central flower in figure 133 is a lotus.

³⁹ Fully-beaded pieces on cotton examined for this research appear to include a smaller range of European motifs.

thread embroidery based on Chinese techniques and for fully-beaded pieces where designs were outlined in pencil or ink on fabric (fig. 158).

In relation to Peranakan jewellery, Chin notes that European styles were adopted in a somewhat arbitrary manner that did not necessarily follow the temporal course of the latest fashions in the West.⁴⁰ The patterns that were appropriated or adapted for Nonya beadwork did not necessarily mirror European trends either. For instance, the influence of art nouveau popular in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century is not apparent in most examples of Nonya beadwork from this time. However, the Peranakans' interest in European canvaswork designs should not be regarded necessarily as out of synchronicity with trends in Europe. Canvaswork patterns popular in the 1840s continued to be used in European embroidery until the end of the nineteenth century, sometimes with little modification.⁴¹

The uptake of European patterns is unlikely to have come from a sudden accessibility of canvaswork patterns since these had been imported from at least the 1880s for the expatriate European community.⁴² According to anecdotal evidence, "the travelling haberdasher... would take orders for [Nonya embroidery] patterns and he would arrange to have them made up."⁴³ These pattern pieces were then made up, either locally, or according to some Nonyas, in China.⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that DMC, a French producer of embroidery materials, instruction books, and patterns had maintained a warehouse in Shanghai since the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Some

⁴⁰ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 92–94.

⁴¹ Pamela Clabburn provides an example of two beaded pieces in similar style and technique, but worked some 30 to 40 years apart. Clabburn, *Beadwork*, p. 10–11. Mary White wrote of a revival of canvaswork beading in the early 1900s. Mary White, *How to do Beadwork* (1904; New York: Dover Publications, 1972), p. 67.

⁴² For example, as mentioned in n. 106 of Chapter Four, advertisements by Blaze Reidel & Co., a department store in Penang, for items including "Berlin woolwork patterns" for cushions and slippers were published in the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* throughout 1886 and 1887.

⁴³ Mrs Tan Hood Kim, quoted in Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 105.

⁴⁴ Oon, "Unravelling a Beaded Past," p. 105; and Alice Choo, personal communication, September 2002. Oon's accounts appear to have been obtained in 1981 and probably relate to the 1920s and 1930s.

⁴⁵ DMC Paris, personal communication, October 2002. Unfortunately, access to DMC's archives in Paris was denied. Interestingly, in a 1980 promotional booklet of the Shanghai branch of the China National Arts and Crafts Import and Export Corporation, Shanghai cross-stitch embroidery was said to have been made for export for a century. See Chatterton, *Chinese Silks and Sewing Tools*, p. 42. Certainly, by the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Chinese were exporting lace and embroideries to the United States in significant quantities, with values of \$2,800,000 gold for 1922 and \$2,000,000 gold in 1923. This was almost equivalent to the annual value of Chinese exports of china and porcelain internationally of \$3,000,000 gold in the same period. Arnold, *China: A Commercial and Industrial Handbook*, pp. 253–254.

Nonyas would modify the commercially-produced embroidery patterns themselves. Mrs Ong Chin Yam used to “peel” off the parts of the embroidery designs that she did not like (presumably this was where cardboard templates were used), eliciting interest from her peers in her unusual designs.⁴⁶

The beaded plaque given to Wu Lien-teh, a Queen’s scholar who started as an undergraduate at Emmanuel College in Cambridge in 1896, by his family provides strong support for the argument that the adoption of the petit-point technique and European motifs were not concurrent (fig. 152).⁴⁷ Although the plaque is unusual for its relatively early use of the petit-point technique, which became popular in the Straits Settlements towards 1910, the yellow ground, multicoloured scallops, and the alternating black and white outline of the plaque are analogous to decorative features found on other pieces of Nonya beadwork made around this time. More interestingly, however, this plaque illustrates the way in which the West was simultaneously embraced and re-interpreted at the turn of the century, and presents an instructive contrast to the later adoption of European imagery.

The design for the plaque was adapted from the Emmanuel College crest of a lion holding a wreath. At the hands of the beader, however, the Western lion was transformed into a lively Chinese lion. One of its paws holds a wreath that encircles an orange disc which recalls the ball with which the lion is conventionally depicted in Chinese art.⁴⁸ Wu had the plaque framed and hung in his college room.⁴⁹ The precise identity of the beader is unclear. According to Wu’s daughter, the plaque was said to have been made by his mother.⁵⁰ However, a handwritten inscription on a fragment of paper behind the plaque records that it was presented to Wu in May 1897 by his fourth sister, Meng.⁵¹ This suggests that the plaque may have been made by Meng. Alternatively, it may have been a collaborative effort. Whoever crafted it, the plaque

⁴⁶ Mrs Ong Chin Yam, personal communication, September 2002.

⁴⁷ Wu returned to Penang in 1906 and eventually married the sister of Lim Boon Keng’s wife. Wu later moved to China and made his name as the “plague-doctor.” I am indebted to Peter Lee for drawing my attention to this piece and for an introduction to Daven Wu, present owner of the plaque.

⁴⁸ The ball may signify the sun, the dual powers of nature (*yin-yang*), or a precious stone. Williams, *Outline of Chinese Symbolism*, p. 254.

⁴⁹ Wu, *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh*, p. iv.

⁵⁰ Wu, *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh*, p. iv.

⁵¹ The inscription reads “Presented by 4th sister Meng to her brother Tuck, Recd May 1897.” According to Wu’s grandson, the handwriting does not resemble Wu’s own. Daven Wu, personal communication, June 2005. Wu’s sister Meng was born in 1876 and was married at age 22. See Wu, *Plague Fighter*, pp. 139–141.

was identified as the handwork of womenfolk who inhabited a cultural spectrum that spanned their family's Chinese inheritance and a local identity.⁵² As clearly as the plaque encapsulated the pride of a family in a member's Western educational achievement, it also declared the family's strong awareness of and reverence for its Chinese roots.

The beaded altar panel from Penang dateable to 1908 illustrates the experimentation with new imagery and modifications in style (fig. 153). It combines conventional Chinese motifs of the crane, crested pheasant, and deer with lilies, roses, and sunflowers. Compositionally, it is similar to early beadwork on velvet where motifs were placed symmetrically around a central floral spray. This suggests that new motifs continued to be introduced by inserting them into a conventional format. On either side of a sprig of peony-roses is a pheasant flanked by smaller stalks of roses. Each pheasant is perched on a lily stem, its gaze turned towards another smaller spray of lilies behind. Continuity with earlier beadwork is further suggested by a pair of tiny deer completely out of proportion with the flowers and birds, upsetting the scale of the composition.⁵³ All the motifs are shown in profile apart from two small stems of lilies which are depicted from a bird's-eye view. This double perspective parallels the assortment of imagery from different sources.

As with threaded beadwork, early attempts at incorporating European motifs into embroidered beadwork (in seed stitch on cotton as well as in petit-point) were essentially decorative and concentrated largely on birds and flowers, very likely the mark of the female hand or eye at work. Floral designs appear to have been consistently popular throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. On a beaded cover for a *kum cheng* from the Straits Settlements, beribboned butterflies

⁵² Wu's father, Ng Khee-hok, migrated to Penang from Guangdong when he was about 16. There, Ng became a successful goldsmith, catering to Malay and Chinese clientele. Wu's mother, Lam Choy-fan, was a locally-born Hakka with a *sinkeh* father and a Penang-born mother. After she married, she contributed funds to send two of her brothers to Fuzhou in China to train as officers of the Chinese navy. Significantly, when her mother passed away in Canton in 1879, Lam had her mother's coffin shipped back to Penang for burial. Some of Wu's ten siblings received an education in English, one learnt only Chinese, and two of his sisters (including Meng) received no formal schooling. Wu, *Plague Fighter*, pp. 134–141. In a formal portrait, most probably taken in a studio setting, Lam was dressed in a wide-sleeved Chinese jacket and skirt; in a family photograph of 1903, she is pictured in typical Nonya attire of *sarong-baju panjang*, shod in *kasut kodok* and clutching a handkerchief. See Wu, *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh*, fig. 2, p. 12, fig. 16, p. 22.

⁵³ The small deer appear to be a fairly common motif in embroideries from Penang.

alternate with flowerpots on a velvet ground (fig. 185).⁵⁴ In this example, an outsize rose takes the place of peony blossoms in tiny pots that dominate other examples of beadwork from this period. On another example of beadwork on damask silk, a butterfly is perched atop a rose bush (fig. 186).⁵⁵ The trunk of the tree, issuing from a small green mound, strains under the weight of a disproportionately large rose. Compositionally, it bears a vestigial resemblance to earlier beadwork on velvet of a bee or phoenix hovering above a flowering peony tree set on a rocky mound.

On other examples, the departure from compositions of the flowering tree rooted to a rocky surface is apparent in the arrangements of posies and bouquets with cut stems. A pair of green velvet slipper tops with couched beadwork is decorated with a bunch of cut flowers.⁵⁶ A large petit-point beadwork panel has a central motif of a bunch of flowers – two roses and a poinsettia – surrounded by smaller floral sprays (fig. 187). The rocky surface has been dispensed with and in contrast to the meandering flower-laden branches of earlier beadwork and embroidery, the flower stems are attenuated and insignificant to the overall design. In addition, the overall design is composed of roundels surrounded by a wreath of flowers interspersed with pheasants. The rectangular format is achieved by adding four smaller additional circular floral arrangements at each corner. This is comparable to Chinese textile and needlework designs in which motifs are arranged to take the shape of roundels.⁵⁷

The adoption of a relatively narrow range of European imagery in Nonya beadwork is revealing compared to the breadth of European designs that were available at this time. Already, by the late nineteenth century, European subjects for canvaswork alone ranged from overblown flowers, birds, dogs, and musical instruments to hunting

⁵⁴ The depiction of ribbons is common on Chinese motifs such as the Eight Treasures and Buddhist motifs of the Eight Auspicious Signs. The ribbon is in fact a piece of red cloth tied around an auspicious object. See Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, p. 157.

⁵⁵ A gold and diamond brooch of two butterflies alighting on a pot or basket of flowers, worn by Mrs Tan Jiak Kim around 1900, provides an interesting comparison. See Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 112–113.

⁵⁶ This piece is illustrated in Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Showcase of Nyonya Kebayas from the Collection of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood*, rev. ed. (Singapore: Periplus, 2004), p. 141. This is stitched in the style of early beadwork and may date from the 1910s or 1920s. The slippers may have been re-soled at a later date.

⁵⁷ Probably the most notable roundels are those of dragons embroidered on Chinese imperial garments. In these examples, the cloud patterns are used to define the edges of the circle. See, for example, Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, fig. 31, p. 44. Dragons and phoenixes in roundels also appear in batik from Java.

scenes, wild animals, and figures in pastoral and architectural settings.⁵⁸ Certainly, the Nonya's familiarity with the subject matter would have affected choices. Aside from a few examples of squirrels scampering amongst trees, complex arrangements of landscapes and descriptive scenes were rarely used in Nonya beadwork (figs. 88c, 140). Those that exist may date to a later period of petit-point beadwork (figs. 188–189).

Lee Choo Neo observed that the Nonya of the early twentieth century “resigns herself to her fate [of a quiet and uneventful life], and afterwards becomes reconciled to it. She appears well contented... does not appear desirous of changing her lot for a more worldly one, and does not chafe at the bonds which bind her.”⁵⁹ Yet the gradual adoption of new motifs and subject matter in beadwork must surely have been an outlet for Nonya imagination and aspirations, whether they designed the patterns themselves, stitched pieces with ready-drawn patterns, or purchased the completed beaded items. Within the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, they found in the visual language of flowers a way to contest the strictures of culture and tradition.

Nevertheless, the range of subject matter was gradually broadened. It is, of course, possible that, as more Nonyas received an education, new designs from imported magazines such as *The Queen* became popular. These magazines regularly published needlework instructions and ready-traced patterns. For instance, an issue of *The Queen* carried the instructions for beadwork on Penelope canvas, a “novelty” of the 1913 autumn season in England.⁶⁰ Those who produced ready-made templates for beadwork and embroidery for sale may have drawn from such sources.

A beaded mirror cover shows an arrangement of two large roses crowned by some smaller flowers, flanked on either side by two children in European dress and pair of peacocks (fig. 190). Although there is an attempt to achieve naturalistic shading of the roses and leaves, as with earlier beadwork, the motifs are organized stiffly around a vertical axis and the design is bordered by a strip of interlocking velvet panels of different colours embroidered with conventional motifs of marine life. The peacock

⁵⁸ By 1840, over 14,000 canvaswork designs were available in Europe. Lanto Synge, *Art of Embroidery: History of Style and Technique* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2001), p. 262; and Lynn Szygenda, “From Tudor Coifs to the Twentieth Century,” in *Treasures from the Embroiderers' Guild Collection*, ed. Elizabeth Benn, p. 37.

⁵⁹ Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

⁶⁰ “Modern Purses and Hand Bags in Beaded Canvas Work,” p. 516.

was found on Chinese rank badges and Chinese embroideries but it does not appear with any frequency on Nonya beadwork prior to the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the peacock did feature in Peranakan *pantun* and also in jewellery from the turn of the century.⁶¹ All the other parts of the design with a Western derivation are purely decorative “spot motifs” that have no explicit link or meaningful relationship with each other.⁶²

Figural imagery, of which a favourite was the little girl bearing a flower basket or holding a flower, appears to have gradually increased in popularity in the 1910s. Unlike the peony-rose, however, no attempt was made to re-interpret or indigenize the figural images. On a circular table-cover beaded by a Penang Nonya and her relatives for her wedding, the image of a little girl with her brown tresses, fair skin, and pinafore acts as a representation of otherness (fig. 11). It was not the otherness of whimsy and exoticism that dominated Chinoiserie in eighteenth century Europe but more likely of a distant world, envied perhaps but out of reach for the young Nonya about to step into adulthood.

To understand how this could be so, it is worth re-visiting the relationship between women’s dress and age mentioned in Chapter Four. Posed photographs of Peranakan families taken between 1910 and 1925 show men and boys in European garb; babies and pre-pubescent girls are occasionally dressed in white lace, often in contrast to their older sisters who wear the Chinese *samfoo* and married women in *sarong* and *baju panjang* or *kebaya*.⁶³ In Peranakan families, whereas children of both sexes were allowed to mingle, once the young Nonya reached puberty, she was confined indoors, her freedom and hitherto easy relationships curbed.⁶⁴ From then onwards, domestic responsibilities – cooking, sewing, perhaps cleaning – were impressed on her. If the girl in European dress portrayed the innocence and guilelessness of childhood, for the

⁶¹ Chin illustrates a peacock belt buckle and refers to a Peranakan *pantun*, the translation of which reads: “The broken spool I set aside,/into a box of silk in Acheh./The golden peacock I release,/To claim the bird of Paradise.” The peacock, an emblem of wealth, is set aside for love, in the form of the bird of Paradise. Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 86-87. For the Chinese, however, the peacock was an emblem of beauty and dignity. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, p. 317.

⁶² Spot motifs are defined as motifs without a link or relationship to each other. Synge, *Art of Embroidery*, p. 26.

⁶³ Liu, *From the Family Album*, pp. 48, 107, 115.

⁶⁴ For instance, Lee Choo Neo describes the common experience of many Nonyas. As a child, the Nonya was permitted to “associate with boys and romp about the house and streets,” but at age 13 or 14, she was secluded and “everything considered unladylike is forbidden her.” Lee, “The Chinese Girl in Singapore,” p. 562.

betrothed Nonya, her presence may have been a wistful reminder or a reluctant valediction of the freedom she was fated to abandon.

An interesting parallel may be drawn here with the adoption of European-inspired floral motifs and figural imagery, such as Red Riding Hood, from nursery rhymes and children's stories in batik designs at the end of the nineteenth century. Maxwell argues that such patterns were inoffensive and acceptable for anyone to wear; at the same time, they were also regarded as new, attractive, and prestigious and lay outside of the restrictions of traditional designs.⁶⁵ She points out that these designs were thus popular with younger textile producers whose ties with traditional beliefs were weakening.

In Nonya beadwork, where European motifs were adopted, the scale of previously important mythical symbols of the phoenix and *qilin* were reduced as they were consigned to a subsidiary role as space fillers, replacing the bees and freely floating florets in early beadwork, as the potency of traditional beliefs was implicitly questioned.⁶⁶ The Chinese deer, paired birds, chickens, goldfish, and other non-mythical creatures remained within the repertoire, and in smaller pieces of beadwork these often became the dominant topos (figs. 1, 7c, 51b, 191–192). In general, the Nonya sustained a preference for birds, flowers, and easily identifiable animal imagery. Compared to earlier beadwork motifs which were sometimes not recognisable, the quail, crested pheasant, cockatoo, and paired lovebird motifs on beadwork of this period, particularly that from Penang, were well articulated (figs. 11, 47, 83a, 138, 139, 157, 187). Apart from roses and lilies, swans, dogs, kittens, rabbits, and squirrels supplanted mandarin ducks, butterflies, and snow lions (figs. 11, 140, 155, 193).

The choice of motifs could certainly have been influenced by Western fashions, as these common designs circulated on imported handbags and fabrics (fig. 164). European influence could also have come indirectly through the Netherlands Indies. The Peranakans appear to have adopted and adapted clothing styles used by the Indo-Europeans in Java. Sometimes, this occurred with a lag. For instance, the *kebaya*

⁶⁵ Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, pp. 382–385. See also Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda* for illustrations of European-inspired floral and figural imagery on batik produced by Indo-European batik ateliers for an Indo-European as well as Peranakan clientele.

⁶⁶ This is well represented by a petit-point beadwork table-cover from Penang, illustrated in Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, fig. 4, p. 18 and un-numbered detail on p. 22.

renda (lace *kebaya*), worn by Indo-European women in the late nineteenth century, was taken up by Nonyas in the Straits Settlements in the 1910s (fig. 46). Likewise, the popularity of the new arrangements of bunches of flowers in beadwork at about this time may be seen as a parallel to the preference for the beribboned bouquet (*bukitan* or *buket tanah*) motif and the floral bouquet designs of jewellery from this period.⁶⁷ Floral bouquets appeared in batik made for an Indo-European market around the late nineteenth century and the *bukitan* was popularized by the well-known Indo-European batik designer Eliza van Zuylen who composed her arrangements with several varieties of flowers from 1915 onwards.⁶⁸ Van Zuylen produced brightly-coloured batik that was popular with the Peranakans in designs similar to those made for Indo-Europeans, exporting her batiks to Singapore.⁶⁹ The *bukitan* remained a favourite with Nonyas throughout the second quarter of the twentieth century, and Van Zuylen's designs were later adopted by Peranakan batik producers such as Oey Soe Tjoen from the 1920s.⁷⁰

Beadwork from the first quarter of the twentieth century also displays the greatest variety of shapes and styles. In addition to the flat panels and mats, three-dimensional objects were crafted in Penang. Some of the items appear to have drawn their inspiration from forms found in Nonya ware. For example, the padded "handles" on three-dimensional receptacles are in the shape of stylized dragon handles (fig. 55a). Their decoration, however, was of peony-roses and European-inspired florals.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, beadwork with European imagery existed alongside examples that employed only Chinese motifs such as the attributes of the Baxian, the endless knot of longevity, peonies, lotuses, and fish amongst waterweeds. As only a few of these pieces of beadwork can be traced to their original owners, it is difficult to reach any specific conclusion on whether Peranakan society was split into those who patronized traditional Chinese designs and those who preferred European imagery, or whether the conversion to Christianity affected the choice of imagery. However, the photograph of four Nonyas posing in front of a

⁶⁷ A brooch in the form of a floral bouquet, dated to around 1920, is shown in Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 111.

⁶⁸ Pepin van Roojen, *Batik Design*, 2d ed. (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1996), p. 113; Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda*, p. 79; and Harmen C. Veldhuisen, "The Role of Entrepreneurs in the Stylistic Development of Batik Pasisir," in *Fabrics of Enchantment: Batiks from the North Coast of Java*, by Rens Heringa and Harmen C. Veldhuisen (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996), p. 76.

⁶⁹ Veldhuisen, "European Influence on Javanese Commercial Batik," p. 166.

⁷⁰ Veldhuisen, "The Role of Entrepreneurs," pp. 80–81; and Lee, *Batik*, p. 110.

nuptial bed suggests that tastes were probably eclectic (fig. 46). The bed itself was a Chinese carved and gilded wooden bed, but the draperies combine a panel with motifs of paired phoenixes and lotuses with an embroidered or beaded border of flowers and paired birds similar to those in figures 47 and 157.

Examples of petit-point beadwork that may be dated to after 1910 indicate that the Nonyas in the Straits Settlements were gradually succumbing to an interest in naturalism. The primary symbolic motifs of earlier beadwork gave way to more naturalistic floral arrangements. On larger pieces of beadwork, the border designs also became more complex, simple scrolls and stylized florets replaced by delicately shaded rosebuds and jasmine. The means of shading changed from schematically constructed bands of graduated colour to patches of differently graded tones (compare figs. 5, 58–60, 153, 169 with figs. 11, 76, 88, 155, 187, 193). In the absence of writings related to Nonya beadwork from this period, it is difficult to ascertain whether this alteration in the ways of seeing was conscious, or whether it took place simply because available canvaswork or cross-stitch patterns were designed in this way. However, together with the introduction of new subject matter, the modifications in representation do suggest a change in perception to something that may have been more in tune with modernity's stress on science and reason.

The full impact of educational reforms for women was not immediate, but the number of Nonyas enrolled in formal education appears to have increased fairly rapidly judging by the enrolments at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. In 1905, it had 66 pupils; this more than doubled to 150 by 1910, and by 1915, it was 212.⁷¹ Actual numbers of girls receiving an education may have been higher as families who could afford private tutors continued to engage them to teach their daughters. But even if basic literacy increased and the Nonyas were able to access the translations of Chinese histories and classics and popular English novels in Baba Malay, it is not reflected in the beadwork designs.⁷²

⁷¹ Ang Siok Hui, "Pioneer Female Mission Schools in Singapore, 1842–1942" (B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 1994), Appendix 2, p. 55. Although the school was started for Straits Chinese girls, some of the pupils were boys and it is possible that not all of them were Peranakan.

⁷² By the early twentieth century, apart from *Sam Kok*, translations of *The Water Margin* (*Song Kang*), *Travels to the West* (*Chrita She Yew*), and Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (*Hikayat Fileas Fogg*) were available in Baba Malay. See Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, pp. 44–47; and Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, pp. 260–262. A more comprehensive list of Baba Malay translations of Chinese stories, based on collections in Peranakan homes in Melaka, the University of Malaya Library, the

Beadwork from Padang may figure as the exception. Although the dates when these were made are uncertain, several examples of beaded belts, hangings, and *daun nipah* cases stitched with personal and place names in romanized script suggest female literacy. In addition, the inclusion of names of towns such as Aer Bangis (present day Air Bangis is on the west coast of Sumatra, to the north of Padang) also implies a sense of identification with place.⁷³ The imagery of paired Dutch flags emerging from a lotus blossom flanked by flowering jasmine and pomegranates on a beaded belt serves as an unequivocal statement of the Peranakan's political allegiance at the same time that it is a symbolic reminder of indelible ties to a Chinese heritage.⁷⁴

At this time, neither modernity nor its visible manifestations were necessarily synonymous with Westernization. Style-conscious Peranakan women followed Chinese fashions and donned the Chinese *koon sah* made of expensive silk brocades (fig. 194). Judging from descriptions of prominent women such as Mrs Lee Choon Guan and Lee Choo Neo, members of the Nonya elite took an interest in the modern world around them and also maintained a sense of their Chinese heritage. Whilst the ordinary Nonya was not as privileged, the espousal of such a cosmopolitan lifestyle by the elite probably endorsed it to some extent.

Weddings were still held with the pomp and pageantry of traditional Peranakan customs. That funereal and ancestral worship practices were still widely practised is evidenced by the vehement criticisms – that they were wasteful, scientifically unsupportable and pandered overly to superstitions – published in the *SCM*. The appropriation of European motifs in the first two decades of the twentieth century must therefore be seen as a deliberate and selective choice.

Displayed primarily in the wedding chamber, the messages encoded in beadwork were received, interpreted, and responded to by family and friends. The innocuous floral and faunal motifs satisfied the constraints of conservatism and tradition even as they incorporated novelty and signalled difference from the past. Modernity in its embroidered form was tolerated, co-existing alongside conservative values. In some

University of Singapore Library, and the National Library of Singapore, can be found in Tan, "Baba Chinese Publication," pp. 179–191.

⁷³ See illustrations in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, pp. 70–71.

⁷⁴ See illustration in Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 50. Embroidered above the lotus and flags are two hands with fingers pointing to the word KWEENGSOEN (probably the name Kwee Ng Soen, which Eng-Lee specifies is the name of the embroiderer). The belt, which measures 82 centimetres, may have been meant for a man.

cases, it was encouraged and endorsed as long as its expression was aligned to the prescribed position of women as diligent wives, respectful daughters-in-law, and responsible mothers. Within a pre-defined cultural space, set in the imagination by the border designs and compositional symmetry of older beadwork, the styles and motifs of beadwork were manipulated to interpret and imbricate “modernity” within tradition. As the Nonya negotiated and sought to re-define her place in Peranakan society, this process materialized in the variety, experimentation, and innovation that characterize early twentieth century beadwork.

Convergence and Consolidation: Nonya Beadwork in the Inter-War Years

The First World War did not affect the Peranakans severely but its economic and political repercussions were felt throughout the Straits Settlements. It galvanized the Straits Chinese sense of community and provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the Crown. They donated generously to the War effort and joined the Chinese volunteer movements. The Singapore Volunteer Infantry had been formed since 1901, but the outbreak of the First World War spurred the formation of similar groups in Melaka and Penang in 1916. The Straits Chinese British Association also released a booklet entitled *Duty to the British Empire. Being an Elementary Guide for Straits Chinese during the Great War*.⁷⁵ Wives of Straits Chinese were rallied to raise funds to finance the purchase of an aircraft, Malaya No. 27.⁷⁶ In addition, transport links between Singapore and Penang had improved, with a rail line connecting Penang and Johore in place by 1909.⁷⁷ This would have facilitated the exchange of information and may have contributed to greater interaction between Peranakan communities in each of these ports.

It is interesting that the styles of beadwork in Penang and Singapore-Melaka appear to have converged at about this time. In contrast to silk and metallic thread embroidery, beadwork from the 1920s onwards displays a marked shift away from Chinese-inspired designs. By the 1920s, together with the changing fashions in wedding furniture, beaded and embroidered gewgaws, hangings, *muka bantal*, and mirror covers were gradually replaced by lace accessories in the bridal chamber (fig. 195).

⁷⁵ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 532.

⁷⁶ Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 534.

⁷⁷ Howard Dick and Peter Rimmer, *Cities, Transport and Communications: The Integration of Southeast Asia since 1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 195.

Wedding garments were modified following wider trends in fashion. Old forms of beadwork such as the *sangkut bahu* and bridal attendant's headdress were no longer essential as brides and bridesmaids were clothed in lace dresses or the Chinese *cheongsam*. The Nonya beadwork that survives from this period is mainly of *kasut manek*, some wallets and clutch purses, and a small number of decorative objects.

Much of this beadwork was in petit-point on *kain urat* using charlottes and rocailles, although beadwork on velvet and some lane-stitched beadwork with tubular and hex-cut beads was also done (figs. 25, 151, 196). Repetition of motifs was inevitable as patterns were circulated or sold in the form of samplers which were purchased from the itinerant haberdasher or borrowed from friends and copied, even if there was some attempt to resist this (figs. 198–199).⁷⁸ The counted squares meant that it was easy to replicate patterns or duplicate them onto squared paper. Yeo Sing Guat from Melaka, who beaded slippers commercially, learnt this from his mother around 1935. He marked his own grid-lines on paper before transposing the motifs from “Chinese cut-out patterns” (presumably meaning Chinese paper cuts or pattern books).⁷⁹ Favourite designs were repeated and, sometimes, differences between two pieces of beadwork related mainly to differences in colour and small details (figs. 196–197, 198–200, 201–202). The increasing commercialization of beadwork probably contributed to the convergence in designs across the Straits Settlements.

Designs associated with Chinese culture were re-interpreted and slowly stripped of their cultural resonance. This can be illustrated by the *anak-anak* design – a set of motifs organized into a grid format. The petit-point beadwork panel on velvet may be estimated to date from around 1910 based on its size, material, and edging of woven perle cotton (fig. 156). Motifs of flower vases, bees, peaches, and pomegranates typical of earlier Nonya beadwork were combined with horses, grasshoppers, and flies. A later man's slipper top that was made prior to 1940 and a similar pair for a woman's slipper have vastly simplified versions of the earlier *anak-anak* design (fig. 203–204). Their individual motifs of crabs, birds, ducks, butterflies, mice, fish, and stylized flowers or fruits (perhaps a pomegranate or rosebud) are a haphazard combination of animals of the Chinese zodiac, earlier symbolic imagery, and other simplified motifs.

⁷⁸ Neo Kim Neo tells of the unwillingness of some Nonya beaders to lend their patterns. Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 13, 121.

⁷⁹ Tan Pek Leng, “Beads of Labour,” *The Star*, 16 October 1985.

To a large extent still constrained by what was considered the “proper domain” of women, suitably feminine flowers such as roses, morning glories, and lilies continued to be popular.⁸⁰ Writing for the public was not considered a respectable activity for women in the late 1920s and Nonya authors in the Netherlands Indies used pseudonyms such as “Orchid” and “Frangipani.”⁸¹ Flowers protected but also preserved the identities of these women. The floral patterns from this period varied from those composed of one or two flower heads set against a few leaves to those which resemble clearly articulated *bukitan* designs, with a few naturalistically rendered examples (figs. 144, 151, 205–208).⁸² But even the relatively simplified beadwork designs retained the element of naturalistic shading found on beadwork from the first decades of the twentieth century.

Spaniels, spotted deer, rabbits, cats, and little girls in frocks were favoured motifs (figs. 25, 159, 196–197, 200–202, 209–212). The Nonyas were probably taught nursery rhymes as part of their English-language education. D.T. Lim and Company in Singapore, a shop that sold books of Baba Malay *pantun* and beaded slippers, also advertised children’s records with nursery rhymes such as “Hey Diddle Diddle” and “Sing a Song of Sixpence.”⁸³ Some of these motifs, such as the girl in a frock holding a flower, may have been related to popular nursery rhymes such as “Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary.” A gold and diamond *kerosang* has a design of a girl and a lamb from the English nursery rhyme, “Mary had a Little Lamb.”⁸⁴

With more widespread literacy, girls were able to access magazines and books. Tan Cheng Lock subscribed to *Chick’s Own*, *Lots of Fun*, and other English language magazines for his children; his daughters also read stories such as *Grimm’s Fairy*

⁸⁰ June Freeman makes the point that women tended to choose floral and fruit imagery for their quilting for this reason. June Freeman, “Sewing as a Woman’s Art,” in *Women and Craft*, ed. Gillian Elinor et al. (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 57.

⁸¹ Claudine Salmon, “Chinese Women Writers in Indonesia,” p. 156.

⁸² See, for example, Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, fig. 376, p. 266; and Inger McCabe Elliot, *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* (Singapore: Periplus, 2004), figs. 58, p. 124, fig. 62, p. 131, figs. 77–78, pp. 148–149.

⁸³ See, for example, advertisements of D.T. Lim and Company in the *Malaya Tribune*, 13 April 1932, 7 May 1932, 9 July 1932, and 18 November 1932.

⁸⁴ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, p. 115. As discussed earlier in this chapter, nursery rhymes and children’s stories were already popular sources of imagery for batik designs in the late nineteenth century. See n. 66 of this chapter. A batik altar cloth of the 1920s from Java, probably used by Peranakans, has an image of a girl with a dog under her arm as its primary motif, with secondary motifs of men on bicycles and *wayang* figures. Harmen Veldhuisen suggests that this may be an image of Red Riding Hood. See *Batik: From the Royal Courts of Java and Sumatra*, with texts by Brigitte Khan Majlis et al. (Singapore: Periplus, 2004), p. 68 and catalogue entry by Veldhuisen, p. 85.

Tales and Aesops' Fables.⁸⁵ As familiarity with Western stories developed, motifs such as busts of horses and classical and Western architectural scenes were no longer curious anomalies (fig. 189). The reindeer appears fairly frequently in beadwork (figs. 188, 214–215). Hunting as a sport had been familiar to wealthy Peranakan families since the late nineteenth century but the reindeer itself is not likely to have carried any particular significance.⁸⁶ Tamed and passive, the Chinese deer and European reindeer were pretty decorations befitting a delicate pastime or a saleable commodity.

By the late 1920s, the activity of beading began to be regarded as old-fashioned, and for some, as competing with educational demands on a young girl's time. As beading lost its importance, the beaded object absorbed the meanings previously associated with the activity and its designs. As discussed in Chapter Three, the beaded artefact was becoming a token in itself of a distinctive Peranakan "tradition," rendering the signifiatory functions of individual motifs irrelevant.

To some extent, the void left by the loss of symbolic significance of the designs was also filled by attempts to compose coherent pictorial scenes. In some cases, motifs were set against a nominal landscape or a floral wreath (figs. 188, 198, 201, 211, 215). As if to compensate for the simplification of the designs, a busy beaded surface was created by the multi-coloured geometric backgrounds that were relatively simple to execute, emphasising the perfunctoriness of the surface ornamentation (figs. 151, 207, 209, 213, 215). Borders were simplified into slim rows of interlocking triangles in contrasting colours known as *tali ayer* (figs. 201, 208, 215). Elsewhere, English expressions such as "good luck" substituted for conventional Chinese symbols, perhaps demonstrating a new-found literacy which a basic education conferred (fig. 202).⁸⁷

Paradoxically, beadwork appears to have surpassed metallic thread embroidery as popular decoration for slippers at this time. Neo Kim Neo's grandmother gave up embroidering around 1915 because women preferred *kasut manek* to slippers decorated

⁸⁵ Scott-Ross, *Tun Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan*, p. 24. Neo Kim Neo also read *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as a child. Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 88.

⁸⁶ Tan Keong Ann, a Peranakan from Melaka, was apparently "an excellent shot." Marcus Scott-Ross, foreword to *Tun Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan*, by Alice Scott-Ross, p. iii.

⁸⁷ Compare this to the slipper template in figure 148 with "GOOD ULCK" pasted onto it, probably a mistake made by an illiterate pattern-maker. Another pair of slippers is beaded with a Mickey Mouse design and the words "CARTOON." See Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 68.

with silk or metallic thread.⁸⁸ According to Michael Cheah the popularity of beadwork was due to the fact that glass beads were easier to clean than velvet and metallic thread from which dirt was difficult to dislodge.⁸⁹ At a time when women, the main consumers of *kasut manek*, were gradually being allowed greater liberty to venture out of the confines of the home, the simplicity of cleaning off the dust and grime picked up from their excursions may have had a practical appeal.

The relaxation of authority can be seen in the trips that the Nonyas made to the open-air cinemas and theatres. Neo Kim Neo was not allowed to go to the movies alone because of her conservative upbringing, but the qualifier implies that she could do so with appropriate company.⁹⁰ Chaperoned trips to the cinema introduced new imagery into beadwork. Characters from popular culture such as Mickey Mouse (silent premier in 1928), Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (premiered in 1937), and Betty Boop (premiered 1930) were incorporated into designs for *kasut manek* (fig. 117). As with motifs drawn from nursery rhymes, subject matter that was originally intended for children was nevertheless taken up in the gamut of Nonya beadwork decoration.

The exposure to notions of romantic love through the idealized world of film, perhaps even fiction for those who did read, had another impact on the Peranakan psyche. It popularized the ideals of love as self-fulfilment rather than duty, and of freedom in choosing a marriage partner. A door was opened for expressions of romantic sentiment, illustrated by the phrase “forget me not” stitched on a pair of men’s slipper tops (fig. 216). In embroidery, the image of a couple in western dress and holding hands was used for a pair of wedding slippers presented to Chee Lak Neo by her mother-in-law (fig. 217).⁹¹ Marriage may still have been primarily about generating male heirs but marital bliss was now expressed directly as physical intimacy and affection rather than as symbolic paired butterflies. Studio photographs of brides and their husbands also show them in more relaxed and intimate poses (figs. 218, 219).

However, the reality of marriage did not always turn out to be so ideal. A passage entitled “Essay on Married Life: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Married Life,”

⁸⁸ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 44, 108.

⁸⁹ Cheah, “Nonya Slippers,” p. 29.

⁹⁰ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 27.

⁹¹ Chee Lak Neo, personal communication, January 2003. Chee was married in the early 1940s. She wore the embroidered slippers given to her by her mother-in-law (fig. 217) on the third day of her wedding celebrations.

written by a particularly articulate Nonya, Tan Guat Poh, in 1928, is worth quoting in its entirety:

Generally speaking marriage is not a bed of roses without its thorn[s], neither is it an essential condition of happiness. In many cases the man had [sic.] nearly all the advantages. Because men are beast, brute and devil, they have no consideration for the feeling of the opposite sex. So long as their capriciousness can be honoured they are contented and supremely happy.⁹²

Born in 1890, Tan Guat Poh was educated at a French Convent in Melaka, which she dubbed “sekolah Madam.” She was probably unusually well-read for a Nonya of her time and in her early 20s, she owned books such as *Life of William Carey*, *Cecil Rhodes: His Private Life*, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, and *English Synonyms Explained*.⁹³ Her love of books was encouraged by her elder brother, Tan Cheng Lock, who gave her a complete set of the novels by her favourite author, Mrs Henry Wood, and continued to support her subscription to the Times Book Club after she was married.⁹⁴ Apparently reserved by nature, Tan Guat Poh used to convey her emotions to her children and husband via letters.⁹⁵ Perhaps this eloquent essay was one of them.

Tan Guat Poh’s discontent was unlikely to have been unique. Marital happiness and domestic satisfaction was a common topic of readers’ letters to the press in the 1930s. One reader wrote in the Woman’s Corner of the *Malaya Tribune*, “[m]ost of us know what married happiness means to every one of us. But the question of striving to achieve this state is, in most cases, difficult.”⁹⁶ Her letter dispensed advice that ranged from taking an interest in one’s husband’s work and entertaining his relatives to applying “feminine charm,” a “sweet disposition,” and flattery.

Polygamy and concubinage were common amongst wealthier Chinese and Straits Chinese families and was legal in the Straits Settlements.⁹⁷ For instance, Khoo Sian

⁹² Tan Guat Poh, “Essay on Married Life: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Married Life,” 1928, courtesy of Lee Kip Lin, Singapore. I am indebted to Peter Lee for providing copies of Tan Guat Poh’s essay and title pages of her favourite books.

⁹³ Peter Lee, personal communication, April 2005; and Lee Kip Lee, *Amber Sands: A Boyhood Memoir*, 2d ed. (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1999), p. 16.

⁹⁴ Lee, *Amber Sands*, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Lee, *Amber Sands*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Tomboy Tan Kim Poey, “Married Happiness. How to Achieve It,” *Malaya Tribune*, 12 March 1932, Woman’s Corner.

⁹⁷ John Clammer, “Wives and Concubines: Power, Dispute and Sexual Economy in a Diaspora Chinese Community,” in *Diaspora and Identity: The Sociology of Culture in Southeast Asia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 2002), pp. 222–223; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 144.

Ewe took his wife's sister as a second wife because the former did not have children.⁹⁸ However, polygamy came under increasing criticism in the Straits Settlements in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁹ In 1918, a group of Nonyas in Penang met to discuss monogamy and the registration of non-Christian marriages, even drawing up a petition to the Governor.¹⁰⁰ From 1924, Tan Cheng Lock argued for civil legislation to support monogamous marriages for those who wished to register, and the Straits Chinese British Association welcomed a bill on monogamous marriage.¹⁰¹ Tan objected to the then existing legislation in which mistresses and their offspring could also share in an intestate's property, on the basis that these led to expensive litigation and exposed respectable widows to humiliation.¹⁰² In 1926, a Chinese Marriage Committee was appointed by the colonial government to resolve the issue but stalled because of opposition from the *sinkeh*. Finally, in 1941, the Civil Marriage Ordinance and the Christian Marriage Ordinance were passed, allowing the voluntary registration of monogamous marriages but continuing to recognize Chinese marriages.¹⁰³ At the time when polygamy was being challenged, beadwork designs mark a significant shift in gender relations, expectations, and the opportunities for personal expression.

There is little literature by Peranakan women in the Straits during this time. It is, however, instructive to look across to the Netherlands Indies for writings on women's emancipation in the same period. Claudine Salmon argues that the subject matter of Peranakan women's fiction in the Netherlands Indies in the inter-war years reflects the boundedness of the writers' real life experiences.¹⁰⁴ She finds that they did not touch on politics or religious issues but were more concerned with the reconciling the tensions between romantic love, independence, arranged marriages, economic security, and filial respect. Personal choice and personal happiness nevertheless had their pitfalls, as the unhappy endings of some of these stories show. Faye Chan argues that emancipation was still constrained by the social norms expected of women –

⁹⁸ Yeap, *Patriarch*.

⁹⁹ Polygamy and arranged marriages were already under attack in China in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Tan, "Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History," p. 371.

¹⁰⁰ Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, p. 92.

¹⁰¹ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 144.

¹⁰² Yeo Siew Siang, *Tan Cheng Lock: The Straits Legislator and Chinese Leader* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1990), pp. 50–51.

¹⁰³ Turnbull, *History of Singapore*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁴ Salmon "Chinese Women Writers in Indonesia."

refinement, propriety, domestic accomplishments, and respect for one's elders.¹⁰⁵

Rather than being one of indiscriminate Westernization or individualism that challenged traditional domestic values, the idealized image of the modern woman in this period remained one of enlightened wife and mother. Even if the ability to work, socialize, and to choose a marriage partner were being promoted by women's movements, modernity needed to be translated and transformed into appropriate social goals.

In the Straits, the girls' school curricula which had revolved around domestic skills and basic reading, writing, and arithmetic since the early twentieth century had, by the 1920s, expanded to include art, music, and science, as well as commercial subjects such as shorthand, typing, and book-keeping in some schools.¹⁰⁶ The changes reflected the gradual broadening of possibilities for women. A letter in the Girl's Corner of the *Malaya Tribune* commented on the greater opportunities faced by women, even if they were mainly confined to supporting roles. "A girl can drive a car. She is champion in swimming, badminton, and she is master of all games. She can ride a bicycle as easily as a boy does. ...Girls and women are engaged in offices, dispensaries, shops..."¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, education was still significantly geared towards conventional notions of women as homemakers and procreators, albeit with an emphasis on the scientific underpinnings of mothercraft and domestic skills.

Interestingly, the gendered attitudes to education paralleled colonial attitudes to women's education that cut across racial lines – the colonial government's English-medium school for Malay girls in Kuala Kangsar was to train girls to become suitable wives.¹⁰⁸ In her analysis of articles published in the late 1930s in the *Straits Echo*, an English-language newspaper published in Penang, Su Lin Lewis draws attention to the debates on gender equality and the perceived conflict between cultural tradition and Western-style emancipation of women across ethnic lines.¹⁰⁹ She finds that, whilst some readers attempted to reconcile gender equality with tradition, others decried the slow progress of women's rights.

¹⁰⁵ Chan, "Chinese Women's Emancipation."

¹⁰⁶ Kong, Low, and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, p. 65; Ang, "Pioneer Female Mission Schools in Singapore," p. 36. See also Chapter Three of this thesis.

¹⁰⁷ Lucky Star [pseud.], "The Weaker Sex," *Malaya Tribune*, 3 November 1934, Girl's Corner.

¹⁰⁸ Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, p. 235.

¹⁰⁹ Su Lin Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism and the English Press in Late Colonial Penang" (M.A. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 2004), pp. 21–27.

A series of letters in the Woman's Corner section of *The Malaya Tribune* in January and February of 1932 further reveals the struggle for autonomy and the attempts to reconcile it with the twin institutions of duty and marriage. The exchange of letters of two Chinese women (probably using pseudonyms) is worth quoting at length to show that their concern was not so much with the convention that a woman's rightful duty was as a wife and mother, but with the contradiction between their domestic duties and their self-fulfilment as members of a wider community.

C.L. Kan Neo appealed to logic and progress to argue that women were capable of dual roles as wives and career-women:

Modern women the world over do not conceive that matrimony is the be-all and end all of a woman's life. As home is the centre of human hopes so is matrimony an essential aid to the creation of the home. The question is: should all married women cling to their homes as their grandmothers did? ...Our grandmothers had enough and more to do to consummate the home. But to-day, when civilization has eliminated most of the so-called arduous domestic duties, the modern mother finds time heavily hanging on her. Further, her talents admittedly sink into a state of inertia if they are not given full play. In these circumstances, in addition to her home duties, she has to do something useful to be of service to others./ In more civilized countries it is found that married women are working side by side with men... it is fairly certain that talented women in Malaya and in the East will refuse to be held down any longer. They will exploit every profession to make a mark for themselves... The needs of our women are many. Sound education is their primary need, of which they have little or none at all. Freedom to choose their own careers is denied to our girls... Prejudice should not be allowed to smash their ambitions. Girls' schools and colleges ought to overhaul their system of teaching and keep pace with boys' schools.¹¹⁰

In response, Pradap Kow dismissed the possibility that the domestic sphere and a career could be properly reconciled:

[T]he educated girl is by her training unfitted [sic] to look after the home and makes a less useful wife. If she goes out to business – which seems to be a modern girl's ambition – it goes without saying that the citadel [of the home] is going to be the home of real fears and shattered hopes. If she stays at home, she will find the domestic work monotonous and uncongenial. ...If we therefore desire our education to render us better home-keepers, let us demand the right kind of education.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ C.L. Kan Neo, "Women of Malaya. Their Ideals and Aspirations," *Malaya Tribune*, 23 January 1932, Woman's Corner.

¹¹¹ Pradap Kow, "Women of Malaya. The Right Type of Education," *Malaya Tribune*, 30 January 1932, Woman's Corner.

Basic education for girls was an increasingly accepted norm amongst the Peranakans in the Straits Settlements. Although the rate of growth in enrolments at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School slowed between 1920 and 1935 compared to the previous 15 years, this does not necessarily indicate that Peranakans were becoming more resistant to formal female education as Peranakan girls also attended other schools. Elsie Chia and Josephine Wee were educated at CHIJ whilst Annie Yeo went to Fairfield Methodist Girls School in Singapore.¹¹² In general, enrolments at English-medium girls' schools in Singapore doubled between 1920 and 1935, growing faster than in the previous 15-year period.¹¹³

However, in the space of 30 years, the discourse of female emancipation had shifted from the education of girls in their proper place within the domestic sphere to their freedom to engage in the workplace, questioning the very basis of female education itself. The achievements of Amelia Earhart and Soong Ching Ling were, in all likelihood, fuelling the dreams of a generation of young women growing up in the 1930s in the Straits.

Within this environment, attitudes of Peranakan families and the Nonyas themselves appear to have been varied. Some Nonyas complained of their restrictive upbringing whilst others felt they were fortunate to have been allowed to continue their education. A few young Nonyas, some from elite families, were given an alternative – marriage or further education – although the latter may merely have delayed wedlock.

Josephine Wee's father wanted her to continue her studies and to attend university, but she opted for matrimony and married at age 17.¹¹⁴ Other families were not as liberal. Mary Chua left school at 14 to devote her time to learning domestic skills so that she could prepare for marriage and her in-laws would not complain that she was useless.¹¹⁵ Florence Chan had hoped to become a lawyer and was awarded a scholarship to continue her education but her parents barred her from further study.¹¹⁶

Many Nonyas may have noticed the relaxation in the attitudes of an older generation, but they also ultimately recognized (and many lamented) their restricted freedoms. In

¹¹² Maureen Lim, "Tales of the Century," *The Peranakan* (July-September 2000), pp. 14, 16; Noreen Chan, personal communication, December 2004.

¹¹³ Ang, "Pioneer Female Mission Schools in Singapore," Appendix 2, p. 55.

¹¹⁴ Josephine Wee, personal communication, January 2003.

¹¹⁵ Mary Chua, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, reel 5.

¹¹⁶ Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 3.

the inter-war years, the Nonyas inhabited what Margaret Bocquet-Siek refers to as an “in-between” space, reflected in the uneasy relationship between the traditional values expected of women (and that they appeared to have imposed upon themselves) and their desire for ever greater self-determination.¹¹⁷

Equally, Koh Tai Ann argues that the Nonyas’ lionization of their fathers or grandfathers and their appearance of Westernization in the biographies written by Queeny Chang in Sumatra and Ruth Ho and Yeap Joo Kim in Malaya conceals an underlying self-repression and a lack of liberty.¹¹⁸ Although Koh’s analysis spans a wider historical period from the 1900s to the 1940s, she identifies the same underlying conflict between individualism as a modern ideal and the upholding of traditional values as a carefully nurtured goal.

In the cosmopolitan and urbanized Straits Settlements, Westernization was no longer an anomaly, but neither was it the sole marker of progress. For example, Christine Wu Ramsay’s aunt Dolly, born into a wealthy Straits Chinese family in Penang, was sent first to Shanghai and subsequently to Boston for her education.¹¹⁹ Shanghai was considered a capital of fashion for the elite of Chinese society, and also acted as an indirect channel for the dissemination of Western fashion to the Straits.¹²⁰

The Nonya visual identity thus became less tightly defined in the 1920s and 1930s as Peranakan women enjoyed an increased vestimentary choice. In addition to the *sarong-kebaya*, the flapper-style dress, *samfoo*, and *cheongsam* were all acceptable dress (fig. 220). The *Straits Echo* even commented approvingly on the sartorial versatility of the Nonya:

She is the most versatile, if not the most progressive. Her versatility lies in the fact that she is able to adapt herself more readily in matters of dress, language and living than girls of other nationalities. She wears the comfortable Chinese coat and trousers à la Canton [*samfoo*], but the next moment she is ready to slip into the ‘sarong’ and ‘kebaya.’ She can be as much at

¹¹⁷ Bouquet-Siek, “The Peranakan Chinese Woman at a Crossroad,” p. 51.

¹¹⁸ Koh Tai Ann, “History/His Story as Her Story: Chinese Women’s Biographical Writing from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore”, in *Southeast Asian Chinese: The Socio-Cultural Dimension*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), pp. 251–260.

¹¹⁹ Christine Wu Ramsay, *Days Gone By: Growing Up in Penang* (South Yarra, Victoria: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), pp. 19, 56. Dolly’s mother, who spoke Chinese dialect and some Malay but no English, was the daughter of a Peranakan woman from Pontianak in Borneo. Dolly’s father was the son of Leong Fee, a wealthy *sinkeh* tin miner in Penang.

¹²⁰ *Costumes Through Time* (Singapore: National Heritage Board and Fashion Designers Society, 1993), p. 101.

home with the tight-fitting Shanghai 'cheong sum' as she is with the European skirt. She presents a mixture of styles and fashions of different places and periods. She still wears age-old Malaya anklets, while at the same time her hair is made up in the latest bob.¹²¹

As an analogue, beadwork designs became less overtly symbolic. The changed roles of beadwork as practice and as wedding gift largely relieved beadwork designs of their ceremonial and social import. According to Neo Kim Neo, who began to do beadwork in the 1930s, design choices were dictated primarily by preferences. Only "religious designs" (probably images of deities) were not permitted to be used on footwear.¹²² Beadwork designs with geometric grounds and small floral or animal motifs carried a decorative appeal, whilst the appropriation of cartoon characters reflected their embrace of popular culture. Yet, gendered roles remained inscribed into the choices of beadwork motifs – nature was tamed and domesticated and sweetly sentimentalized figural imagery was stereotyped and conventionalized.

Whereas visual imagery had been one of the few means of expression for the Nonya, greater literacy, expanded dress choices, and bobbed and permed hair presented the Nonyas with a range of alternatives. These rendered Nonya beadwork designs less relevant as a vehicle for the articulation of modernity, locating inter-war beadwork at the interstices of tradition and change. At this time, not all Peranakan women necessarily used beadwork, and those who did could "switch" between different "ethnic" dress – European, Chinese, and local. It is therefore dangerous to over-generalize any interpretation of beadwork imagery from this period. Those who did use beadwork, however, were tacitly acknowledging the boundaries erected by the values inscribed into beadwork of refinement, propriety, domesticity, and respect for the existing hierarchy. The discourse of modernity which had been translated into socially acceptable ideals of forming more enlightened wives and mothers created a female sphere ambivalent about modernity itself. In this uncertain landscape, Peranakan culture became a sanctum for customs and practices destabilized by a rapidly changing world.

¹²¹ "Random Notes," *Straits Echo*, 30 October 1937, quoted in Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism and the English Press in Late Colonial Penang," p. 26. The writer was probably a journalist, possibly Straits Chinese, as were many of the journalists working for the paper at this time. I am grateful to Su Lin Lewis for providing this additional information.

¹²² Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript pp. 50–51.

Re-asserting Tradition: Post-War Nonya Beadwork

World War Two represented a structural and psychological change for Straits Chinese society. For some, it meant a loss of security that material wealth bestowed. The rigours of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya exhausted the resources of many wealthy Peranakan families as they sold their properties at low prices to finance levies (euphemistically termed “gifts”) by the Japanese.¹²³ For others, it exposed the fragility of colonial protection. As Malaya moved towards independence and power was transferred out of colonial hands, the political clout of the English-educated Peranakans and Straits Chinese elite waned. As a consequence, one focal point for Straits Chinese communal identification as loyal British subjects crumbled.

Ethnicity rather than birth-place became the criteria for parcelling out political rights, focussing Straits Chinese attention on their political status vis-à-vis other Chinese and the indigenous population. The attitudes within the Peranakan community towards how they wished to be represented was divided, exposing the cleavage between those who hoped to protect their special status as “sons of the soil,” and those who saw the Peranakans’ survival as part of a larger Chinese community with a unified political voice. Some Peranakans such as Tan Cheng Lock and his son, Tan Siew Sin (later to become Finance Minister in Malaysia) supported integration with other non-accultured Chinese within a wider Malayan polity. In 1949, the Malayan Chinese Association was formed to represent the interests of all Chinese in Malaya, with the elder Tan as figurehead.¹²⁴ Others, such as T.W. Ong, campaigned for special rights for the locally-born Chinese on the basis of their local birth and long settlement in the peninsula.¹²⁵ The more radical, like Heah Joo Seang, President of the Penang Straits Chinese British Association, argued for the secession of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore from a federated Malaya.¹²⁶

Ultimately, as alternative bodies such as the Malayan Chinese Association in Malaysia and the People’s Action Party in Singapore took over as representatives of the Chinese, the Straits Chinese British Associations were politically sidelined.¹²⁷ The Straits

¹²³ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 166–167.

¹²⁴ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 177–185.

¹²⁵ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 182–183.

¹²⁶ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 184.

¹²⁷ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, pp. 26–27.

Chinese were criticized for being politically apathetic and less adaptable than the Chinese.¹²⁸ Even whilst Tan Cheng Lock, Melaka's most famous Peranakan, was at the forefront of the struggle for Malayan independence, the Straits Chinese were in the words of another famous son, Lee Kuan Yew, "bewildered at the political change in Malaya."¹²⁹ This political disorientation risked spilling over into Peranakan cultural irrelevance.

Singapore separated from the Malayan Federation in 1965. Singapore and Malaysia pursued different ethnic and economic policies post-independence. The nation-building exercises in Malaysia focussed on greater economic rights for ethnic Malays through the New Economic Policy implemented in the 1970s. In Singapore, equal rights for all ethnicities formed the ideological basis for government. The identity paths of the Peranakans in Penang, Melaka, and Singapore thus followed different trajectories. As Tan Chee Beng explains, in Malaysia, the increasing communal gap between the Chinese and Malays encouraged the Peranakans towards political solidarity with the wider Chinese community.¹³⁰ In Chinese-dominated Penang, the Peranakans merged culturally into a broader Chinese society, even if some (mainly the older generation) maintained the outward markers of Peranakan identity.¹³¹ On the other hand, because of its geographical concentration and maintenance of kinship networks, the Peranakan community has remained small but resilient in Melaka.¹³² In Singapore, a small Peranakan community continued to be distinguishable although the Peranakan identity was largely subsumed by a national Singaporean-Chinese consciousness.¹³³ But in all cases, the Peranakans were marginalized and the definition of Peranakan identity, predicated on locale, political allegiance, culture, and (perhaps to a lesser extent) economic status narrowed to a cultural and historical dimension.

¹²⁸ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 177.

¹²⁹ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 179.

¹³⁰ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, p. 29.

¹³¹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, p. 30–31; Tan, "Chinese Peranakan and Baba in Southeast Asia" (paper presented at the Symposium of The World of Peranakan: Baba and Nyonya Heritage of Southeast Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 3 February 2005), p. 11.

¹³² Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, p. 30–34; Tan, "Chinese Peranakan and Baba in Southeast Asia," p. 10.

¹³³ Tan, "Chinese Peranakan and Baba in Southeast Asia," p. 10–11.

As post-war economies struggled to rebuild, the working woman was no longer an anomaly but a legitimate member of the workforce. The changing role of women led to modifications in everyday dress, continuing a trend that had begun prior to World War Two. The *sarong-kebaya* was gradually abandoned in favour of the more practical Chinese *samfoo* or western skirt for everyday use, especially amongst the younger generation. As one Nonya notes, it was easier to board a bus wearing trousers and Scholl sandals than a *sarong* and *kasut manek*.¹³⁴ For some Nonyas, beaded slippers that had become a standard element of the Nonya costume were relegated to occasional, festive use.

Nevertheless, in the immediate post-war years, there appears to have been an effort to revive beadwork on velvet, perhaps as a reminder of a bygone era, or maybe simply because *kain urat* was difficult to obtain. In examples of beadwork on velvet from Penang, beads were stitched over paper templates, and this appeared rough in comparison to earlier examples (figs. 97–98). On petit-point beadwork, motifs were often scaled down and repeated as this was simpler to sew than larger, more complex designs (figs. 78, 116, 221–222).¹³⁵ With more competing demands to juggle, the decreased opportunity for leisurely sewing may have contributed to this. However, according to Neo Kim Neo, her wealthier friends also generally gave up sewing even when they had more leisure, preferring to pass their time gambling or to “go for outings.”¹³⁶

Beadwork was confined to only two types of ladies’ accessories – purses and slippers. The choice of colours was still an important part of the decorative process, but as it was no longer as stringently restricted by custom, it became a means of updating old patterns. Darker colours such as black and navy blue, previously reserved for mourning, were integrated into the Peranakan aesthetic by a younger, less superstitious generation (figs. 77–78, 222, 224). Lighter, brighter colours, however, also continued to be used (figs. 225–227). A pair of *kasut manek* belonging to Tan Guat Poh was decorated with a single rose motif against a yellow beaded ground reminiscent of

¹³⁴ Celia Wee, personal communication, February 2003.

¹³⁵ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 57.

¹³⁶ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 68.

earlier beadwork from Penang but now divided into diamond-shaped panels that reflect the Nonyas' interest in geometric designs (figs. 223).¹³⁷

A few Nonyas continued to do beadwork as a pastime, making their own slipper tops and clutch purses. With little to restrict her choice, Alice Choo, a Singapore Nonya, animated her beadwork with a range of designs. On one purse, she depicted a house against a snow-lined background on one side, and on the other, juxtaposed a camel and an Indian elephant under the swaying coconut palms and lush vegetation (fig. 228). It may perhaps have been their incongruity – imagery of the desert and the tropics, wilderness and human habitation – that trivialized the subject matter and emphasized its decorative appeal.

Other examples of beadwork kept to a narrower range of subject matter. Jane Wee, a Singapore Nonya born around 1910, used to sew beadwork for friends and relatives in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³⁸ A clutch purse that belonged to her, probably of her own craftsmanship, bears a thematic echo of Chinese vases, butterflies, and flowers (fig. 229). It has a vase of geraniums against a blue ground on one side, and a vista of what might be foxgloves and daisies, plants that were not native to Singapore, with a lone butterfly hovering above on the reverse. As with Alice Choo's purse, a three-dimensional perspective is suggested by the plants receding into the distance. Apart from the border of alternating red and white beads, there is little else to distinguish it as Nonya beadwork.

In general, however, the stock of motifs, already standardized in the period immediately preceding World War Two, lacked further change as beadwork was now consciously used in reference to tradition which had become a crucial defining element of Peranakan culture. Geometric patterns were often a primary design element. Peacocks, roses, carnations, and the Seven Dwarfs remained the "hot favourites" but patterns were simplified.¹³⁹ The Seven Dwarfs design is said to have been particularly popular with older women, perhaps as they reminisced about their pre-war youth.¹⁴⁰ Rather than the deer, dog, and duck, women chose locally-grown flowers such as the

¹³⁷ According to her daughter, Tan Guat Poh ordered her *kasut manek* from a Chinese shop on Arab Street in Singapore. The photograph in figure 223 was taken when Tan was in her mid-70s. Peter Lee, personal communication, April 2005.

¹³⁸ Celia Wee, personal communication, February 2003.

¹³⁹ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 125.

¹⁴⁰ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 127.

orchid and the *bunga raya* (hibiscus) alongside the ubiquitous rose (figs. 226–227, 230–231).¹⁴¹ Perhaps this reflected a sharpened appreciation of the local environment as the Peranakans deliberated their future in the Malayan peninsula.

* * *

The different phases of Nonya beadwork register the multiple and sometimes heterogenous reactions to historical, social, and economic changes that affected the Peranakan community, emphasising the dynamic and contingent nature of cultural formation. The selective borrowings and transformations of imagery and styles in beadwork constituted a vocabulary with which the Nonyas could script their reality. At the same time, it came to reflect a past that was indelibly etched into Peranakan consciousness. Through their appropriations across cultures and times, the Nonyas fashioned a space within which to engage with notions of modernity and gendered norms. The result has been the development of a craft tradition that we label homogenously as “Nonya,” one from which contemporary constructions of Peranakan tradition and cultural heritage are imagined today.

¹⁴¹ The hibiscus is now the national flower of Malaysia. The orchid is the national flower of Singapore.

The previous sections of this thesis argued that the social roles, imagery, and styles of beadwork were inextricably linked to the Peranakan impulse for modernity in an increasingly global world. By the 1920s, however, although Nonya beadwork may have retained its roles as a marker of domesticity, femininity, and a constituent part of the Peranakan cultural milieu, beadwork was no longer an important part of wedding decorations. As the relevance of Peranakan culture itself came under questioning in the post-war period, even the *kasut manek* lost its importance as wedding gift.¹ Despite this, Nonya beadwork has survived into the present, and is enjoying a revival as heritage, fashion accessory, and leisure activity. The concluding part of this thesis considers the ways in which Nonya beadwork is ascribed its cultural value in the present and how its accumulated meanings are now retrieved, interpreted, and woven into the constructions of contemporary Peranakan identity.

Stuart Hall argues that rather than being fixed in some essentialized past, cultural identities are constantly being “produced” and are therefore unstable, “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.”² Hall points to two distinct but related features of Afro-Caribbean diasporic identities. One is the awareness of a common origin in Africa that acts as a reference point for a shared cultural identity. The other is that these identities are unstable points of identification because they are constantly transformed by the ways in which culture and history are imagined in the present, with real and symbolic effects. This gives the diaspora a twofold imaginary – one of continuity with a unitary past, the other of the heterogeneous experiences and diversity that characterizes the Afro-Caribbean identity.

In this sense, the past can provide a context but the ways in which people position themselves in it can change. Representations such as film are not simply passive reflections but allow an active exploration of “different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification” that make up cultural identities.³ As Ien Ang points out, this implies that individuals or groups can manipulate the way in

¹ Cheah, ‘Nyonya Slippers,’ p. 29.

² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 225–226, 236–237.

³ Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” p. 237.

which their history is referenced, leveraging it as a source for active and ongoing constitutions of their identities.⁴

In the former Straits Settlements, Peranakan communities have been buffeted by different politics, giving rise to heterogenous contexts and identities. Yet, in the past 25 years, these Peranakan communities have made a conscious effort to revive a sense of cultural pride and identity. Nonya beadwork, as object and activity, is implicated in the construction of this collective Peranakan consciousness. As an artefact that has survived into the present, vintage beadwork represents a material connection with history. As a craft activity and dress accessory, contemporary beadwork provides a sensory experience of a world gone by. If Nonya beadwork is understood as a tangible link to the past, then it can also be seen as a medium through which Peranakan history may be imagined and articulated, not only as the weft that binds diverse Peranakan communities whose historical trade and kinship networks have now been eroded by political, social, and economic change,⁵ but also as the warp from which the multiplicity of lived Peranakan identities can be explored.

⁴ Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 150

⁵ To this, one could also include the Peranakan diaspora in the West. In fact, a few Peranakan families in Melbourne and Sydney gather annually to introduce their children to Peranakan culture. See Alfred Chi Teck Yam, "Nyonyas and Babas Down-Under," *The Peranakan* (July–December 2001), pp. 17–18.

For over 30 years, the Peranakans have nursed a deep-seated anxiety about their survival as a community. The language and customs which had become firmly associated with Peranakan culture were rapidly becoming obsolete, endangering the Peranakans' very existence. Writing in 1984, Felix Chia, a prominent Peranakan playwright and author, lamented that his children did not speak Baba Malay and were not interested in learning about Peranakan customs because "nobody does that anymore."¹ This threat of cultural loss reinforced a more widespread sense of the fragility of the Peranakan community's existence. They had become, in Chia's words, a "vanishing breed" with "no future...as a community."²

The spectre of loss has engendered a sense of urgency, particularly within the Peranakan community but also amongst state-run museums, to preserve and transmit what still remains of Peranakan culture.³ This has led to a revival of interest in Peranakan culture as heritage and commodity in the past 15 years, especially markedly in Singapore, but also apparent in Melaka and Penang. Restaurants in Singapore and Malaysia offer Nonya cuisine buffets, auction houses organize sales dedicated to Peranakan artefacts, and hoteliers have renovated old terrace houses once owned by Peranakans as "theme" hotels.⁴ Whereas the *sarong-kebaya* and *kasut manek* were previously worn only by older Nonyas and by waitresses in Peranakan restaurants, they are now enjoying a revival in popularity in Singapore and Malaysia as fashionable dress (figs. 232–234). Tourism boards in Singapore and Malaysia promote Peranakan "heritage trails." State-owned museums have refurbished and expanded displays of Peranakan material culture, portraying Peranakan decorative art as cultural history and representations of cultural syncretism, whilst museum shops concurrently commodify Peranakan culture by selling replica Nonya ware and bookmarks with images of beaded slippers.

¹ Felix Chia, *The Babas* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1980 [reprint, 1984]), p. viii.

² Chia, *Babas*, pp. viii, 193.

³ Kwok Kian Woon makes the distinction between preserving and conserving, preferring the latter term to represent a living heritage. Kwok Kian Woon, "Why Does 'Identity' Matter At All?" *The Peranakan* (April–June 2004), p. 5. However, I have chosen to retain the term "preserve" in line with the dominant terminology used by the Peranakan Associations in Singapore, Melaka, and Penang.

⁴ See, for example, *Treasures of the Babas: Fine Straits Chinese Porcelain, Jewellery, Embroidery and Bead Works* [auction catalogue] (Singapore: Asia Fine Arts Auctioneers, 1995). An example of a Peranakan "theme" hotel is the Hotel Puri in Melaka.

Alongside these state and commercial undertakings, the Peranakan community also plays an active part in preserving and showcasing its culture. They organize cultural events such as beadwork demonstrations and *cherki* sessions, regularly stage Peranakan plays in Baba Malay, and support publications on Peranakan customs and decorative arts, legitimising Peranakan culture as heritage and hybrid tradition. Privately sponsored Peranakan museums have opened in Penang and Melaka.⁵ I will argue in this chapter that the Peranakan community has participated in transforming Nonya beadwork into an artefact replete with historical significance, a sought-after fashion accessory, and a legitimate leisure activity. In these ways, they contribute to and sustain narratives that valorize beadwork not only as an emblem of domesticity and Peranakan tradition, but also as referent for contemporary constructions of Peranakan identity.

Paradoxically, whilst the recent revival of interest has increased the historical and commercial value of Peranakan artefacts, the desire to preserve risks not only reifying Peranakan culture but also stultifying the very process of cultural transformation that characterized the dynamics of Peranakan identity formation. By showcasing Nonya beadwork as one of the symbols of Peranakan culture, the Peranakan community has had to engage with this paradox.

Tradition, examined in the next section, is used as a conceptual lens through which the contemporary meanings of Nonya beadwork can be made legible and interpreted. The recent revival of interest in Peranakan culture is contextualized against a lengthy but necessary review of the discourse on cultural loss. This provides the backdrop fundamental to the subsequent examination of how beadwork – as historical artefact, hybrid chic, and contemporary activity – is given resonance in our imagination today.

Because they self-consciously subscribe to an overriding narrative as acculturated immigrant Chinese with a common cultural past even whilst they acknowledge their differences, the Peranakan communities of the former Straits Settlements will be treated as a singular unit. In line with the general approach of this research, this chapter focuses on the narratives generated within the Peranakan community itself. State activity in heritage management is thus addressed only insofar as it provides the context for an understanding of the Peranakans' own attitudes. This approach neither

⁵ These include the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum in Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Melaka and the Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Church Street, Penang.

ignores nor denies the politics of institutional and state involvement in cultural preservation and heritage management or the role of museums in the imaginary of the past. It also does not address the related issue of authenticity of cultural artefacts when craft activities are commercialized. The scant treatment possible within the scope of this thesis would not do justice to such areas that deserve sustained and detailed studies in their own right.

Tradition and its Other

The role of tradition in contemporary society has been the subject of extensive academic scrutiny in the last 25 years and scholars have consistently emphasized its importance as a pervasive theme of modern life. The term “tradition,” however, lacks a fixed meaning, ranging from its opposition to modernity, (conceived as a break with the past), to its representation of cultural continuity.⁶ In part, the varying understandings of tradition stem from the different ways in which tradition can be perceived in the present, making its meaning unstable and dependent on the function(s) which it fulfils.

Prefiguring *The Invention of Tradition*, an influential collection of papers edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Edward Shils’ study points to the pervasiveness of tradition in contemporary society.⁷ Shils acknowledges that tradition, which he defines as something that is handed down over time, can be created “from human thought and imagination,” so long as it embodies a quality of “pastness.”⁸ He nevertheless interprets traditions as sets of “essential elements” that persist and are “approximately identical at successive steps” of their transmission and possession over at least three generations.⁹ The requirement of three generations, which Shils imposed to distinguish tradition from fashion, is somewhat arbitrary. Anthropologists Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin criticize Shils’ notion further as being overly restrictive.¹⁰ They suggest that tradition is constantly changing, reconstructed through

⁶ Nezar AlSayyad, “The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings,” in *The End of Tradition?* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 6–8.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁸ Shils, *Tradition*, pp. 12–13.

⁹ Shils, *Tradition*, pp. 14–15.

¹⁰ Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” *Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984), pp. 274–275. It is interesting to note that Handler and Linnekin arrived at

“a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them ... a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past,” thereby highlighting the futility of classifying traditions as genuine or spurious.¹¹

Whilst this may be so, focussing on the “invented” nature of tradition from a historical perspective has yielded a framework for investigating traditions as politically-charged strategies that invoke mythic pasts, used to mobilize a collective consciousness to serve the ideologies of the nation-state. As the various papers in *The Invention of Tradition* show, what are today considered to be hallowed traditions with lineages unquestioningly accepted or popularized as antique are often recent “inventions” rather than relics of a historical past that continue their innocuous existence into the present.¹²

However, the anthology’s underlying definition of tradition as invariant, as opposed to customs in which innovation and change take place,¹³ reveal the same weakness as Shils’ characterization of tradition. Not only can tradition change, the very emphasis on change (or changelessness) is in itself a Western approach that may not reflect how non-Western societies view their own history.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Paul Taylor observes, it is difficult to determine empirically when a change constitutes a loss of tradition and when it is in fact the creative adaptation of a traditional form.¹⁵

It can be argued that relaxing the criteria for invariance need not undermine the central insight of the *Invention of Tradition*. As Handler and Linnekin explain, the symbolic value of traditions lies in their embodiment of references to the past. Traditions, whether variant or invariant, factual or fabricated, can serve as a unifying imaginary for a collective identity as long as they exploit the notion of a symbolic precedent. Even inversions of traditions can demarcate a group’s self-imposed boundaries.

the conclusion that traditions could be “invented,” but appear to have done so independently of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *Invention of Tradition*.

¹¹ Handler and Linnekin, “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” p. 287.

¹² For its definition of tradition, see Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, pp. 1–14.

¹³ Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” pp. 2–4.

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Afterword: Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary,” in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 286.

¹⁵ Paul Michael Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Fragile Traditions: Indonesian Art in Jeopardy*, ed. Paul Michael Taylor (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), pp. 6–7.

Nicholas Thomas argues that the manner in which tradition is deployed is contingent on how the representation of difference is shaped by the history of the encounters with others.¹⁶ The contexts in which traditions are created, manipulated, and interpreted can thus be significant to the establishment of markers of identity.

The conceptualization of traditions as mutable, subject to the vagaries of history, and constantly undergoing transformation unsettles the binary between tradition as fixity and modernity as change. Studies of location specific uses of tradition show how tradition and modernity can, in fact, be constitutive of one another. In this brief review, three examples will suffice to show the different ways in which “tradition” can be positioned to reinforce contemporary local identities.

Jane Jacobs argues that the process of modernization and its concomitant of globalization can give rise to traditions that may, at the same time, be understood as oppositional to modernity.¹⁷ Rather than overpowering the local, she interprets global processes of de-territorialization as giving rise to new ways of expressing local traditions. In the context of Aboriginal Australia, Jacobs explains that in seeking to provide for tourists’ demands for a romanticized notion of indigenous traditions, visitor centres and hotels have been constructed according to architectural principles that do not reflect the spatial logic of actual dwellings used by Indigenous Australians. She points out that the resulting structures can thus be criticized as inauthentic. However, Jacobs argues that the fact that these buildings were produced in collaboration and consultation with Indigenous communities reveals the processes through which the Indigenous Australians’ traditions of custodianship of and their obligations towards the land have been interwoven into modernity.

Barbara Leigh analyses how notions of historicity and tradition are employed in creating national symbols and a national identity in contemporary Malaysia where the flow of goods and capital renders national boundaries increasingly irrelevant.¹⁸ Leigh argues that the dual desires for the traditional and the modern find expression in batik and pewter – where their technology, presentation, and the ways in which their production is organized accord with modern industry, whilst they are concurrently

¹⁶ Nicholas Thomas, “The Inversion of Tradition,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992), pp. 213–232.

¹⁷ Jane M. Jacobs, “Tradition is (Not) Modern: Deterritorializing Globalization,” in *The End of Tradition?* ed. Nezar AlSayyad, pp. 29–44.

¹⁸ Barbara Leigh, “Batik and Pewter: Symbols of Malaysian Pianissimo,” *Sojourn* 17, no. 2 (2002), pp. 94–109.

associated in the accompanying rhetoric with tradition and a Malay “golden age” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She also highlights the dynamic relationship and collaboration between the Malaysian government and its political constituency, and their responses to the demands of a modern marketplace in the promotion of batik and pewter.

Examining migrant Chinese practices in Penang, Jean DeBernardi shows that traditional rituals which are viewed as inflexible and formalized have also been employed as vehicles for change and the promotion of new symbols and values.¹⁹ The Chinese in Penang have repeatedly drawn on patrilineal descent, ancestor worship, and celebrations of major festivals to mark social boundaries and define their identity. In the late nineteenth century, the secret societies of colonial Penang borrowed traditional Chinese structures of authority to validate new social and political arrangements. Today, contemporary celebrations of Chinese festivals are a focus for unity and a boundary marker of difference. In the 1970s and 1980s for example, the Hungry Ghosts Festival celebration was used to raise funds for “modernist” community projects such as schools, even though it was viewed ambivalently by the Chinese population, some of whom chose to distance themselves from such “superstitious” rituals.²⁰ Traditional religious structures have thus been harnessed in the constructions of identity formed under the conditions of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Despite their different contexts, these perspectives emphasize the active processes of legitimation that make use of the links to the past.

Referring specifically to art, Stanley O’Connor writes,

A tradition in art is never merely a set of transmissible practices but rather a way that consciousness is caught up in things. ... If we think of tradition, then, as a process much like the variation and development of a musical theme, capable of transformation, transfiguration, metamorphosis, we see that it is not timeless or exempt from the tensions and contradictions that arise under the conflicting demands of history. In this sense a tradition is what remains close to us, the presence of the past embedded in the lives we actually lead.²¹

¹⁹ Jean DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 5.

²⁰ DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging*, pp. 7, 156–181. DeBernardi explains that the organizers of the celebration in fact focussed on the “cultural” (for example, through music and martial arts performances) rather than the “ritual” aspects associated with such events.

²¹ Stanley J. O’Connor, “Memory and Discovery in Southeast Asian Art,” *Asian Art & Culture* (Winter 1995), p. 4.

Tradition can thus be appreciated as a consciousness of the past that is constantly reformulated in, and of, the present, one that allows room for the changing imaginary of the past in memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Rather than impairing its function as a reference point for collective identification, it is precisely the malleability of tradition that provides the scope for individual or collective agency in the construction of contemporary identities.²² The referential quality of tradition, rather than its invariance or repetition, serves as the constantly shifting frame on which the imagined past and the lived present are enmeshed in mutual interdependence.

Loss and Retrieval: Anxiety and the Peranakan Cultural Revival

There has been a widespread perception both within and outside the Peranakan community that Peranakan customs and, by extension, Peranakan culture, are inherently incompatible with modern life. In Felix Chia's opinion,

Modern times and modern ideas, marriages outside the once formidable circle surrounding the Baba community, and the total disregard of customs and traditions, because of one reason or another, are all causing the decline of Baba culture.²³

A Peranakan, Lim Thean Soon, describes his culture as “elaborate,” “more suitable for a sedate age,” and “at variance with modern times.”²⁴ Tan Boon Hui, a curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, asserts that, “[i]t is quite impossible to live the Peranakan lifestyle in this day and age. The language is dying, and the knowledge of complex customs has been lost through generations.”²⁵ Traditional customs such as twelve-day Peranakan wedding celebrations and practices such as beadwork and embroidery are regarded as impracticably time-consuming. An elderly Peranakan has remarked that young people no longer have the “patience” to do beadwork.²⁶ Even though T.W. Ong, a former President of the Peranakan Association in Singapore,

²² This echoes Maurice Halbwachs who argued that cultural memory is constructed to serve present social needs. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans., and introduced by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially pp. 22–25. Barry Schwartz draws from Halbwachs but stresses that cultural memory may be dictated in part by the present, but is also constrained by the historical reality of the past, providing a more nuanced understanding of cultural memory. Barry Schwartz, “The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory,” *Social Forces* 61, no. 2 (1982), pp. 374–387.

²³ Chia, *Babas*, p. viii.

²⁴ Quoted in Anne Pakir, “The Linguistic Heritage of the Peranakans,” in *Mas Sepuloh: Baba Conversational Gems*, by Gwee Thian Hock (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1993), p. xvi.

²⁵ Quoted in Lea Wee, “Baba Boom,” *Straits Times*, 6 December 2000.

²⁶ Neo Kim Neo, interview by Yeo Geok Lee, transcript p. 140.

considers that “the Baba language [Baba Malay] is much alive today although it is now rather different from what it used to be,” he simultaneously anticipates that “[p]erhaps in one or two generations, the Babas will die out as a recognized sub-ethnic identity within the Chinese race.”²⁷ Prominent scholars like William Skinner comment on the fading language and culture of the Peranakans, expressing their pessimism or uncertainty about the continued survival of a distinctive Peranakan culture and identity.²⁸

Some scholars, however, argue that the perception of Peranakan cultural demise presupposes a static understanding of it.²⁹ In particular, Rudolph observes that the dynamic process of Peranakan cultural change risks being stifled if Peranakans define their culture as that of a specific past. He recommends that Peranakan culture should instead be understood as “a changing kaleidoscope of phenomena” so that the abandonment or modification of traditional practices need not be regarded as cultural decline.³⁰ Independently, and perhaps also in response to this, Peranakans like Lee Liang Hye stress that “[t]he Peranakan is ever changing bit by bit, he is evolving.”³¹

Nevertheless, it can be argued that widespread focus on Peranakan cultural decline has, in fact, been a productive step towards managing cultural change. Not only has this stimulated a discussion on cultural loss, but the consequent nostalgia has also helped to revive interest in Peranakan culture. In the past 15 years, efforts to retrieve and preserve the Peranakan heritage have intensified. The linguist Anne Pakir succinctly sums this up:

Today, there is the question of the future of Peranakan language and culture. Modernisation and rapid urbanisation, Westernisation and the erosion of identity through intermarriage with non-Peranakans all pose threats to its continued existence. There is a great deal of nostalgia and regret for what is perceived as a beautiful but dying culture and a rich incomparable

²⁷ T.W. Ong, sponsor’s message in *Mas Sepuloh*, by Gwee Thian Hock, p. vii.

²⁸ Skinner, “Creolized Chinese,” p. 93. See also Suryadinata, “Peranakan Chinese Identities in Malaysia and Singapore”; and Tan Chee Beng, “Chinese Peranakan and Baba in Southeast Asia.”

²⁹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, p. 19; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 292–293.

³⁰ Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 294.

³¹ Lee Liang Hye, “Insights into the Peranakans,” *Suara Baba*, no. 11 (2002), p. 13. How far Lee’s statement was precipitated by academic literature is uncertain, but it is interesting to note that Lee published a favourable review of Rudolph’s *Reconstructing Identities* in Lee Liang Hye, “Some Thoughts on Jürgen Rudolph’s Book,” *Suara Baba*, no. 8 (1999), pp. 7–8.

language./ As a result, there has been in recent years – especially in the 1980s – a revival of interest in the Peranakan community and its language.³²

The heightened appreciation of Peranakan culture has stimulated museums to allocate or renovate dedicated spaces for the display of Peranakan material culture. The National Museum of Singapore began its collection of Peranakan artefacts in the 1960s, when it first realized that Peranakan culture “should be properly preserved and documented for future generations.”³³ In 1991, it organized an exhibition of Peranakan jewellery and in the late 1990s, it remodelled its Peranakan exhibit to typify the interior of an old Peranakan home. The Armenian Street building of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore is currently being converted into a dedicated Peranakan museum, and the Asian Civilisations Museum has initiated a Peranakan Research Project with the Ayala Museum in the Philippines, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam.³⁴ In Malaysia, the *Warisan Baba* (Baba Heritage or Legacy) exhibition opened at the Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur in 1983.³⁵ The Muzium Negara and the Penang State Museum both have permanent displays on Peranakan culture and customs. From 4 February to 3 April 2005, the Muzium Negara also hosted “The World of the Peranakan Exhibition: Baba and Nyonya Heritage of South East Asia.”

Media promotion has also contributed to a heightened awareness of Peranakan culture, with television dramas such as *Ways of the Matriarch* popularising Peranakan cuisine and customs. Interestingly, the underlying themes of the *Ways of the Matriarch*, produced by Singapore’s MediaCorp, are the intergenerational conflicts and the resolution of the tensions between tradition and modernity, in order that “[t]he viewer learns that one can still lead the traditional Peranakan way of life and still be in tune

³² Anne Pakir, “Peranakans in Plays: Cultural Record or Compelling Drama” in *Perceiving Other Worlds*, ed. Edwin Thumboo (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), p. 387.

³³ C.G. Kwa [Director of the National Museum, Singapore], preface to *Festive Expressions*, by Eng-Lee Seok Chee, n.p.

³⁴ One of its two goals is said to be “to strengthen Peranakan cultural identity and public awareness of this relatively unknown culture and its significance in today’s multicultural society.” See the brochure *Peranakan Research Project*, (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum; Manila: Ayala Museum; Leiden: National Museum of Ethnology; Amsterdam: KIT Tropenmuseum, n.d.). This and all further references to the Asian Civilisations Museum will be to their Armenian Street building.

³⁵ See Othman Mohd Yatim and Raiha Mohd Saud, *Warisan Baba dan Nyonya di Muzium Negara (Baba & Nyonya Heritage at the Muzium Negara)* (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Muzium, 1986).

with the modern way.”³⁶ Its cast includes members of the Singapore Peranakan community.

Significantly, for the Peranakan community itself, engaging with loss has encouraged them to address their ongoing relevance:

In dealing with the young generation, we have to come to terms with the fact that hardly any of them come from households in which the Peranakan patois is spoken exclusively and in which Peranakan traditions are observed by all members of the family. Consequently we must be relevant in order to cater to their needs.³⁷

It has motivated the Peranakans to play a key role in valorising their heritage, activating a collective program to preserve Peranakan artefacts and document customs. Peter Wee, scion of an established Peranakan family, set up the Katong Antiques House in 1979, acting as a repository of Peranakan artefacts and a reference point for those interested in culture.³⁸ The privately-owned Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum in Melaka was set up in 1986 by a Peranakan family in whose hands the site has remained for over a century.³⁹ It coincided with a time when the state was keen to preserve Peranakan culture.⁴⁰ The Peranakan Associations in Singapore, Melaka, and Penang, and the Gunong Sayang Association in Singapore, as torchbearers of the community, have organized or supported performances of dramas and musicals, such as *Bibiks Behind Bars* (first performed in 2003 under the auspices of the Peranakan Association, Singapore), in Baba Malay.

The annual Peranakan conventions were initiated in 1988 by Khoo Keat Siew, President of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang (Peranakan Association of

³⁶ MediaCorp Singapore, “Ways of the Matriarch,” in *Arts Central*, n.d., <http://artscentral.mediacorptv.com/local/ways_of_the_matriarch/default.htm> [accessed 6 June 2005].

³⁷ Lee Kip Lee, “Going Strong. A Rejuvenated Association Looks Forward to the New Millennium,” *The Peranakan* (October–December 1999), p. 2.

³⁸ Peter Wee’s maternal grandfather is Tan Cheng Kee. Tan Cheng Kee was the brother of Mrs Lee Choon Guan and the son of Tan Keong Saik, a prominent Melaka Peranakan. Tan Cheng Kee and Tan Cheng Lock were cousins; their grandfather, Tan Choon Bock, founded the Straits Steamship Company together with Tan Beng Swee (son of Tan Kim Seng). See Lee Kip Lee, “Personalities Behind Peranakan Street and Institutional Names,” *The Peranakan* (July–December 2001), p. 4.

³⁹ Chan Kim Sinn, personal communication, September 2003. The idea of a heritage house was sparked by the historic homes that Chan Kim Lay visited in 1983, when he was in the United Kingdom to attend his daughter’s graduation ceremony. Chan stresses the continuity of tradition through the performance of ancestral rites at this house. Chan Kim Lay, interview recorded for “Peranakan Expressions in the Twenty-First Century,” produced by the Peranakan Association, Singapore, screened at the Fifteenth Baba Convention, Singapore, 29 November–1 November 2002.

⁴⁰ Chan Kim Lay, interview recorded for “Peranakan Expressions in the Twenty-First Century.”

Penang). Hosted in turn by the Peranakan Associations, these have focussed on Peranakan history and cultural traditions, with themes such as “Living Traditions: Celebrating the Peranakan Lifestyle” (Singapore, 1999), “The Peranakan Network: The Melaka and Singapore Connection and the Phuket and Penang Connection” (Penang, 2003), and “Towards the Preservation of Our Heritage” (Melaka, 2004). Whilst these conventions might be dismissed as indulgent navel-gazing, it is also necessary to recognize that they facilitate the community’s own exchange and recording of information and the reconstitution of once important social networks, bringing together Peranakans from Singapore, Melaka, Penang, Indonesia, and Phuket in southern Thailand.

In 1999, the Peranakan Association in Singapore raised S\$17,000 in donations so that the National Archives of Singapore could acquire 180 old photographs of Peranakan life.⁴¹ Some of these photographs have recently been exhibited at the Asian Civilisations Museum.⁴² Conversely, the Peranakans have also made use of state-provided platforms to promote their culture. For instance, Felix Chia’s *Pileh Menantu* was written for the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1984. At a speech given at the opening of the Seventeenth Baba Convention in Melaka, the Chief Minister of Melaka encouraged collaboration between state institutions and the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Peranakan Association of Melaka) to promote Peranakan culture.⁴³ The retrieval and presentation of Peranakan history and culture must thus be understood as a collaborative and dialogic relationship between the Peranakan community and state institutions.

As Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner point out, the interest in preserving “ethnic art” and the frenzied acts of collecting engendered by the myth of imminent demise can benefit those who are positioned to capitalize on it.⁴⁴ Yet the Peranakan community’s active participation in retrieving and promoting Peranakan culture cannot

⁴¹ Lee, “Going Strong.”

⁴² The exhibition, entitled “The Gilded Age: Photos of the Peranakans from the Early Twentieth Century,” was jointly organized by the Asian Civilisations Museum and the National Archives of Singapore, 2003–2004.

⁴³ Speech by YAB Datuk Seri Hj. Mohd Ali Mohd Rustam at the official opening of “Towards the Preservation of Our Heritage – Look Listen and Move in the Peranakan Way,” Seventeenth Baba Convention, City Bayview Hotel, Melaka, 11 December 2004.

⁴⁴ Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, “Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter,” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 18–19.

be understood simply as naïve efforts at preservation, assuaging nostalgic longings, complicity with state narratives, or even cynical commercialism. It has obliged the Peranakans to confront their assumptions of cultural identity based on external markers such as language, dress, cuisine, and religious practices, and their relationship to cultural change:

[W]hat is our culture today and how are we as Peranakans evolving? ...[I]f we are undergoing a cultural evolution, then are we conscious of the processes of change within and around us?... How about the other hallmarks of the Peranakan culture like our cuisine, our dress, our porcelains and our architecture? ...Do we see them evolve and manifest themselves in 21st century versions?⁴⁵

It has encouraged a self-reflexivity and empowered the Peranakans by opening up a space in which their heritage and sense of community can be explored, imagined, and articulated through what Lee Kip Lee, President of the Peranakan Association of Singapore, calls “new perspectives on the past” that “blend the old with the new.”⁴⁶ The result has been to re-insert hitherto outmoded practices and artefacts such as Nonya beading and beadwork into the circuit of heritage and fashion, providing the essential media through which cultural valorization and transformation can take place.

Perspectives of the Past: Beadwork as Historical Fact and Artefact

The public face of Peranakan material culture is overwhelmingly concerned with images of a Peranakan “golden age” from the end of the 1870s to the 1920s. Although some Peranakan families in the Straits Settlements can trace their local ancestry to the first half of the nineteenth century or earlier, the bulk of the material culture displays relate to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Understandably, this is largely inevitable, partly because Penang was founded only in 1786 and Singapore in 1819. Material culture, such as Nonya ware, appears to have been imported in large quantities only from the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition, as discussed in Chapter One, it is generally difficult to date examples of artefacts such as silverware, furniture, and embroidery.

Notwithstanding such limitations, however, presentations of material culture tend to romanticize the Peranakan past, lending credence to narratives of Peranakan material

⁴⁵ David Ong, “Editorial – Identity: A September Snapshot” *The Peranakan* (July–September 2003), p. 1. See also Lee, “Insights into the Peranakans,” p. 13.

⁴⁶ Lee, “Going Strong.”

extravagance. An illustration in *Gilding the Phoenix*, written as an accompaniment to an exhibition of Peranakan jewellery, shows a contemporary reconstruction of a wedding bed dressed to emphasize the “sumptuous mood of a wedding circa 1910, [with] a combination of [embroidered and beaded] hangings in the Malacca and Penang styles...”⁴⁷ Used as props for a Peranakan wedding scene at the Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur and, most commonly, placed on a Chinese carved red-and-gold matrimonial bed and cordoned-off as at the Asian Civilisations Museum, public displays of beadwork and embroidery emphasize their lavishness and traditional nature.

Nonya beadwork is presented as an emblem of domestic accomplishments, refinement, and time-honoured customs. Narratives valorize old pieces of Nonya beadwork not simply for their “ornateness of design, brilliant display of colours and finely wrought workmanship” but because “they were the handiwork of the Nonyas.”⁴⁸ Exemplified by exquisite examples, beadwork and embroidery are characterized as authentically Nonya:

While they [Peranakan men] were not fond of manual work themselves, nevertheless, they permitted their womenfolk to engage in extensive needlework, which they considered a genteel rather than a degrading occupation, as it was not done for commercial gain. It is thus to the creations of the Nonya’s hands and nimble fingers that we must turn to find the true legacy of Peranakan culture.⁴⁹

As discussed in Chapter Three, the reality surrounding Nonya beadwork was somewhat more ambiguous. Whereas Queeny Chang conveyed her frustration with needlework and the overwhelming effect it had on her, suggesting her powerlessness to resist customary practice, Gwee Thian Hock described how purchased embroidery could be a practical and acceptable alternative.⁵⁰ Nonya beadwork was not exclusively made by the Peranakans, and Chapter Four discussed the possibility that some beadwork may have been imported from China.

Some of these intricacies are acknowledged in a more nuanced understanding of historical beadwork. For instance, Florence Chan’s description of how she made

⁴⁷ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*, pp. 136–138. Although Chin does not mention the chronology of beadwork, the illustration also appears to combine beadwork from different periods.

⁴⁸ Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Eng-Lee, *Festive Expressions*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Chang, *Memories of a Nonya*, p. 67; and Gwee, *Nonya Mosaic*, p. 50.

beaded slipper faces for sale is reproduced on an explanatory panel in the Asian Civilisations Museum.⁵¹ Beadwork from Penang is also acknowledged to be more elaborate.⁵² Overall, however, the dominant narrative simplifies and romanticizes the past.

Peranakans themselves have not only legitimized but also contributed to the construction of this narrative. Because the knowledge of Peranakan culture has until recently been largely undocumented and transmitted orally, institutional representations of Peranakan culture have drawn heavily on the Peranakan community's knowledge of its customs and traditions. Members of the Peranakan community have thus become what Mieke Bal terms "expository agents," with authority because of their lived experience, and authenticity because of their ancestry to objectify, codify, and transmit Peranakan culture.⁵³ Bal uses the term to refer to the analyst of culture, but her elucidation of "exposing" encompasses the framing and creation of a narrative or narratives of a culture and a past, which is what Peranakan commentators engage in.

Beadwork teacher Bebe Seet and antiquarians Peter Wee and Michael Cheah, all of whom have Peranakan parentage, are regularly called on to give talks and demonstrations on Peranakan culture. They emphasize the importance of beadwork as a traditional practice for young Nonyas of marriageable age. According to Michael Cheah, the *kasut manek* was "sewn by the Nyonya herself ...[and] worn for the first time on the third day of the wedding."⁵⁴ Bebe Seet comments that learning beadwork was not universally enforced in Peranakan society, but also stresses that "[i]t was incumbent on every potential bride to possess the skill to sew and decorate her own pillow and bolster covers, bridal slippers and other ornaments with beads and embroidery."⁵⁵ Peter Wee remarks that "[t]he nyonya's position in the household was determined by her cooking skills and beading work" and describes beadwork as "a

⁵¹ Although not cited in its entirety, the original source for this appears to be the oral history recordings for Florence Chan, interview by Daniel Chew, reel 3.

⁵² For instance, Ho stresses that "for sheer ornateness of design, Penang workmanship surpasses that of either Singapore or Malacca Straits Chinese." Ho, *Straits Chinese Beadwork*, p. 75.

⁵³ Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, ed. Mieke Bal (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 5-10.

⁵⁴ Cheah, 'Nyonya Slippers,' p. 26.

⁵⁵ Bebe Seet, "Beaded Beauties: The Kasut Manek," p. 3.

necessary skill that every well-shod nyonya practised and enjoyed.”⁵⁶ Cheo Kim Ban, a Melaka Peranakan, also writes that the Nonya of yore “had to be skilful in working beads on cloth for her own slippers and to embroider many things.”⁵⁷ Intricate beadwork is appropriated as visual support for Peranakan reconstructions of the world epitomized by the “Golden Chinese, that charmed circle who lived in Malacca in ducal splendour, cocooned in lush embroideries, ornate wood carvings, gold and yet more gold.”⁵⁸

Whereas, in the past, Peranakan families may once have disposed of old pieces of beadwork as being out-of-date and of little value, beadwork is now treasured and preserved. For Heather Ong, a Peranakan in her thirties, her family heirlooms are valuable not just for their beauty but for the “stories behind each piece.”⁵⁹ Some beadwork is carefully packed with white peppercorns (which some Nonyas believe will keep moths at bay), wrapped in tissue and stored, while others are encased in glass and hung on walls in Peranakan homes, amplifying their cultural cachet (figs. 65a, 71, 77, 152, 211). It is thus not only that “[s]tories form contexts within which craft objects resonate with meaning” as art historian Sue Rowley argues, but that the visuality and tactility of Nonya beadwork also animate the narratives of the Peranakan past.⁶⁰

As the product of a Peranakan “golden age,” Nonya beadwork provides the material link to a past which inspires dignity and encourages self-identification as Peranakan. As Tan Chee Beng suggests, the Peranakan community can, and has, found a source of pride and a point of subjective identification in the “historical, rediscovered or even reinvented Baba heritage.”⁶¹ Inscribed in contemporary imagination as heritage and authentic tradition, Nonya beadwork as an historical artefact has become a tangible symbol of a Peranakan’s proud ancestry.

⁵⁶ Peter Wee, quoted in Tan and Zuzarte, *Timeless Peranakan Legacy*, pp. 5, 57.

⁵⁷ Cheo, *Baba Wedding*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Oon, “Unravelling a Beaded Past,” p. 96. Oon, a Nonya, is a prominent food journalist and author of several cookbooks on local Singaporean and Peranakan food.

⁵⁹ Heather Ong, “What Does It Mean to be Peranakan?” *The Peranakan* (July–September 2000), p. 8. Barbara Leigh notes the importance of personal stories attached to material artefacts that “provide a window to the emotions: cultural and individual, that are attached to certain crafts,” and it might be added, the products of those crafts. Leigh, *Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ Sue Rowley, “‘There Once Lived...’: Craft and Narrative Traditions,” in *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, ed. Sue Rowley, p. 81.

⁶¹ Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage*, p. 34; and Tan, “Chinese Peranakan and Baba in Southeast Asia,” pp. 12–13.

Handmade: Contemporary Beadwork Activity and Cultural Expression

Even whilst Nonya beadwork has come to function as a cultural icon and a signifier of Peranakan heritage, Nonya beadwork as a contemporary activity has taken on new social roles that replace its traditional significance as part of the training for an eligible young Nonya. Beadwork projects have been harnessed as a force for social empowerment and change. For instance, Jenny Ling, a Penang-based Nonya, organizes beadwork lessons for single expectant mothers to provide them with a marketable skill, given the current popularity of hand-beaded Nonya accessories.⁶² The Industrial and Service Co-operative Society Ltd (ISCOS) beading project was set up in 1999 in Singapore to teach women prisoners beadwork “to aid the rehabilitation of the women inmates while equipping them with a marketable skill that encourages creativity yet instils patience...[and] to continue working as a productive force.”⁶³

Many Nonyas and non-Peranakans have taken up beadwork because of their interest in craft whilst some learn it because commercially-made beaded footwear is too expensive, not available, or not to their liking.⁶⁴ At the same time, beadwork lessons and demonstrations have become part of process through which intangible Peranakan cultural heritage is commodified in search of commercial gains. For instance, the Singapore Tourism Board’s brochure advertises *The Peranakan Experience* with an image of a Western woman receiving instruction in beading a set of rose-motif slipper faces from a *sarong-kebaya* clad Nonya (fig. 235). The increasing number of classes in Nonya beadwork in the last five years in Singapore and Malaysia can also be taken as an indication of its newfound popularity as a leisure activity.

Beadwork practice is opportunistically promoted and legitimized as the transmission of heritage art in danger of demise. The ISCOS beadwork project declared that its secondary aim was to “breathe new life into this fine tradition” of Nonya beadwork which “is in danger of being lost.”⁶⁵ The Peranakan Association of Penang, in

⁶² Jenny Ling, personal communication, December 2004.

⁶³ Industrial and Service Co-operative Society Ltd (ISCOS), “The Story,” in *Sayang: Our Peranakan Heritage*, n.d., <<http://mysayang.com/story.html>> [accessed 4 December 2003]. Since then, the project appears to have been terminated.

⁶⁴ Tham Ai Mei, “Hand Made Beaded Shoes,” *The Star*, 12 February 2004; “The Beads Have It,” *Singapore Learning Festival 2004*, supported by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency and Ministry of Manpower Singapore, 2004, <<http://www.learningfest.com.sg/234.local>> [accessed 28 August 2004]; and Thomas Tan, personal communication, September 2002.

⁶⁵ ISCOS, “The Story.”

conjunction with the Penang State Government, advertises beadwork and embroidery classes “to revive Penang’s Nyonya crafts.”⁶⁶ Retired nurse, Agnes Tan, offers to teach beadwork to pass on “a dying art,” even whilst she implies that beadwork is similar to widely practised cross-stitch embroidery.⁶⁷ Helen Chia, a non-Peranakan, remarks, “[t]his is a very unique and important part of Singapore’s heritage. By teaching [beadwork]...I am trying to promote awareness of Peranakan culture and revive this dying art.”⁶⁸

An examination of the beading practices of three women, two of whom are Peranakan, and one who is a Singaporean-born Chinese married to a Penang Peranakan, indicates that it is an interest in the handmade and aesthetic possibilities of the medium which sustains Nonya beadwork as a contemporary activity.⁶⁹ More significantly, however, practising beadwork allows them to connect with or re-discover a Peranakan cultural past, at the same time that it provides a medium for experimentation and contemporary exploration of the Peranakan identity in the present.

Bebe Seet was one of the first to popularize Nonya beadwork in Singapore. Seet had a keen interest in art and craft as a young girl but did not learn Nonya beadwork until some 10 years ago, when she chanced on a pair of vintage *kasut manek* in a shop window in Melaka. Seet decided to make a pair herself after she had difficulty acquiring one she liked, since the most refined had already become tightly held collectors’ items. Her learning process was a combination of intensive lessons over a five-month period from an elderly Peranakan lady and experimentation on her own by studying the techniques on old pieces of beadwork.

Bebe Seet is interested by the visual contradictions in Nonya beadwork designs, which she explains as the densely packed and often disproportionately-sized motifs that are nevertheless aesthetically pleasing, and the riot of colours which nonetheless maintain a coherent harmony. Her first work was a pair of slippers with a floral motif which she designed herself, inspired by the theme and colours of older beadwork (fig. 236;

⁶⁶ “Living Crafts Workshop” [advertisement], *Pulau Pinang* 2, no. 6 (1990), p. 25.

⁶⁷ Tham, “Hand Made Beaded Shoes.” Cross-stitch (gros-point) embroidery is in no danger of dying out, as evidenced by the abundance of cross-stitch magazines and easily obtainable cross-stitch kits.

⁶⁸ “The Beads Have It.”

⁶⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, material for this section was from personal communications with Bebe Seet, Regina Wong, and Oo Leng Choo in 2003 and 2004, originally gathered for a short article I wrote, “Keeping Tradition Alive: Contemporary Nonya Beadwork,” *Bead Society of Great Britain Newsletter*, no. 75 (October 2004), pp. 8–9.

compare also with fig. 223). Interestingly, even though both her parents were Melaka Peranakans, Seet acknowledges that it was through her interest in Nonya beadwork and, subsequently, Nonya dress that she “re-discovered” her cultural roots and her Peranakan ancestry.

Seet, who is also conversant in non-Peranakan beading techniques, now teaches Nonya beadwork. For her, the handmade nature of beadwork underpins its value as heritage and she emphasizes that careful stitching is an important characteristic of Nonya beadwork. Seet is interested in traditional Peranakan designs, particularly in florals, nurtured through her previous practice of Chinese painting. Yet, perhaps because she conceives of Nonya beadwork as traditional handwork rather than as a particular style, she brings her own interpretations of motifs and an individualized aesthetic to bear on her beadwork. Seet draws readily from the multiple influences that are part of her urban reality, using modern computer software to develop her own beadwork patterns. Her designs range from adaptations of what she calls Celtic motifs to the Chinese *qilin* that differs significantly from Nonya designs (fig. 237). The stylized frontal mask, the restricted palette of browns and gold, and the use of tourmaline beads all depart from conventional Peranakan schema of colourful prancing *qilin* in profile. Seet has also adapted Walt Disney’s depiction of Winnie the Pooh for a beaded teddy bear using Peranakan beading techniques (fig. 238). Although this recalls the Nonya’s earlier incorporation of Walt Disney characters into their beadwork, the teddy bear was completed in collaboration with a teddy bear maker for a charity raffle sponsored by the Disney Group at the World Dolls and Teddy Bear Show in 1998.

Septuagenarian Oo Leng Choo has been beading for 60 years. To Oo, the quintessence of Nonya beadwork is the neatness and perfect alignment of the beads, a reflection of the meticulousness that was demanded of Peranakan handwork in the past. Yet, although she learnt beadwork in a customary Peranakan context from her mother, a Penang Nonya, Oo’s recent beadwork is relatively unorthodox, comprising pictorial works rather than *kasut manek* faces or clutch purses. These panels were made for her sons and feature traditional Chinese subjects, such as a crane amidst pine trees, and peacocks and peonies.⁷⁰ Their emphasis on naturalistic shading and pictorial realism, as well as faithfulness to Chinese models, sets them apart from conventional Nonya designs of simplified flowers or small birds. In 1990, Oo’s work achieved recognition

⁷⁰ See illustrations in Leigh, *Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts*, pp. 33–35.

when she won the first prize at the Beadwork Competition and Exhibition organized by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang (then known as the Penang State Chinese Association).⁷¹

Oo's style is well represented by her latest work-in-progress, begun in the 1990s (fig. 239). Its design is based on a mural of the eight Daoist immortals that she saw in a relative's home. Her free-hand rendering of the design onto the canvas base is aided by a somewhat faded photograph of the mural and a practised eye. Each time she finishes beading a small area the size of a 10-cent coin (approximately 2 centimetres in diameter), she stops to "check" if her picture "looks real," unpicking beads if she is dissatisfied. Completion of this piece has been hampered by the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient supply of slender size-14 beading needles and lack of a sufficient range of light blue beads for the background. Although the piece is thematically similar to examples of older Nonya beadwork, its three-dimensional realism and absence of a cross-stitch template are unusual and mark a re-interpretation and re-working of conventional Nonya forms and technique.

Regina Wong, for whom beading is a relaxing pastime and a way of maintaining manual dexterity, made her first pair of Nonya beaded shoes as a gift for her niece's wedding several years ago. Like Bebe Seet, Wong is interested in the ways in which colours are used in Nonya beadwork and the forms that arise from different interpretations of an original design. Wong has a collection of vintage beadwork given to her by her mother-in-law, a Nonya from Penang, and she considers finely wrought Nonya beadwork as a repository of cultural roots and heritage. For her, beading serves as a reminder of shared values in a transient, modern world. Although Wong has since ventured out of Nonya beadwork, she draws on the forms and interplay of colours in Nonya beadwork for inspiration in her beaded jewellery, for example, simulating the visual impact of Nonya beadwork in a multiple-thread net using single-thread netting techniques (fig. 240).

All three beadworkers highlight the neatness, intricacy, and sophisticated colour combinations of older pieces of Nonya beadwork, regarding this qualitative element as a distinctive feature of a Nonya beadwork tradition. Yet, each of them brings different interpretations and markedly different aesthetics to bear on their own pieces of Nonya

⁷¹ Leigh, *Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts*, pp. 33–35.

beadwork. Their beadwork has emerged within an identifiable tradition but draws willingly, even if perhaps unconsciously, from without. Tradition thus provides the boundaries that give coherence and stability to their activity of Nonya beadwork. However, in the absence of any overriding narrative that restricts the definition of contemporary “Nonya” beadwork, these beaders can engage with multiple possibilities. Conceived as heritage and historicized, the tradition associated with Nonya beadwork acts as a source of inspiration, enabling rather than threatening cultural expression. The continual process of visual transformation represents the creative possibilities for exploring Peranakan culture in the present.

Packaging the Peranakan: Tradition and Hybrid Chic

According to the official website of the Peranakan Association in Singapore, Peranakan culture is:

a unique creation of Southeast Asia. It is the culture of an old immigrant Chinese community... Throughout the centuries, Baba culture has managed to maintain many ancient Chinese traditions while adopting many customs of the land they [the Babas] settled in and [of] their colonial rulers. You can find in Baba culture traces of Portuguese, Dutch, British, Malay and Indonesian influences.⁷²

This is representative of popular narratives of Peranakan culture that emphasize its hybridity, packaging it as one of un-problematic cultural syncretism. Simplified to reach a wider audience, such narratives tend to gloss over the mixed reactions amongst members of the Peranakan elite to the appropriateness of their cultural orientation at the turn of the twentieth century, implying that cross-cultural mixing can blend differences into a coherent unity.

To some extent, state institutions have put the Peranakans’ hybridity on display, not just as an example of harmonious intermingling but also as a successfully home-grown culture. This is particularly marked in Singapore, where some argue that the sudden revival of interest in Peranakan culture in the 1980s was due to the quest for a “national culture,” encouraged because Singapore’s political leaders did not disapprove of the revival.⁷³ The website of the Asian Civilisations Museum in

⁷² See “Our Roots,” in *Peranakan Association, Singapore* [website], n.d., <<http://www.peranakan.org.sg/Culture/culturehome.html>> [accessed 8 January 2004].

⁷³ See Chan Ee Hwee, “The Peranakan Culture in Transition,” (B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 1986), pp. 60–61.

Singapore claims Peranakan culture to be a “unique fusion of Chinese, Malay and other cultures,” and as one of “Singapore’s ancestral cultures.”⁷⁴ Mrs Lim Siok Peng, the chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board in Singapore, regards the promotion of Peranakan culture as a way to “greater understanding and appreciation of the cultural and heritage similarities between different ethnic groups...an essential step in fostering social cohesion and rootedness in Singapore.”⁷⁵

By the 1990s, according to one Peranakan, the Peranakan identity had become “unique and prestigious because it is the only ethnic identification [that] link[s] one to the foundation of Singapore. Association with Peranakans is like telling people that my ancestors were the forefathers of Singapore. Moreover, a lot of prominent people in Singapore have Peranakan identity, for example, the senior Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew’s mother is a Peranakan.”⁷⁶

In Malaysia, it is also possible to detect an increasing interest in Peranakan culture through the recent publications and state-supported exhibitions that fit with the promotion of racial harmony. The Malaysian National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur showcased the Nonya *kebaya* in the collection of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in 2003.⁷⁷ In 2005, the Malaysian Department of Museums and Antiquities organized a one-day symposium on Peranakan Heritage, followed by an exhibition of Peranakan material culture, cooking, and beadwork demonstrations and a Nonya dress fashion show. The press reported that the exhibition was to celebrate not only “the diversity that characterises the Peranakan culture which is a unique blend of Chinese, Malay, Indian and European influences” but also “the harmonious multiculturalism of Malaysian society.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Asian Civilisations Museum, “Peranakan Legacy Galleries,” *Asian Civilisations Museum Exhibits* [website], n.d., <http://www.nhb.gov.sg/ACM/exhibits/galleries/exhibits_galleries_as.shtml> [accessed 18 August 2004].

⁷⁵ Her speech at the opening of “The Gilded Age” exhibition of photographs at the Asian Civilisations Museum, 15 January 2004, is reprinted in the capsule in Maureen Lim, “A New Show at the ACM,” *The Peranakan* (January–March 2004), p. 5.

⁷⁶ Un-named Peranakan, interviewed by Annette Aw and quoted in Annette Johannes S.C. Aw, “The Peranakan Identity: To Be or Not To Be” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1994), p. 76.

⁷⁷ Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Showcase of Nyonya Kebayas from the Collection of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood* (Selangor Darul Ehsan: The Writer’s Publishing House, 2002). At the time of first publication, Abdullah Badawi was Deputy Prime Minister. A revised edition has been published in 2004 and contains a section on the exhibition and related activities, pp. 159–163.

⁷⁸ Marjorie Chiew, “The Peranakan Unveiled,” *The Star*, 2 February 2005.

The Singapore Tourism Board uses the label “Peranakan” as a branding tool and a drawcard to offer visitors an authentic local experience.⁷⁹ Stereotypical images of Peranakan beadwork are exoticized for tourist consumption. Juxtaposed on promotional brochures against Indian *sari* materials, gold filigree bangles, Burberry’s bags, wafer-thin laptops, and glass-paned shopping malls, an image of Nonya *kasut manek* in classic floral and grid designs suggests the co-existence of a dualism – the global and local, timeless tradition and fast-paced modernity – within a single space (fig. 241).⁸⁰ At the same time, it implies the consumption possibilities offered by the commodification of hybridity through its objectification as wearable beadwork or decorative home furnishings.

Until the 1980s, the Nonya *sarong-kebaya* was seen as traditional dress worn only by an older generation of Peranakan women (fig. 242). In addition, in Singapore and Malaysia, most younger Nonyas eschewed the *kebaya* in favour of the Chinese *cheongsam* or western dress for formal occasions. Recently, however, it has become chic to wear the *kebaya*.⁸¹ It is promoted by the state and worn by women in positions of privilege and authority (figs. 231, 243). The popularity of the *sarong-kebaya* derives from more than its costly embroidery and richness of detail that lend it its suitability as formal wear. It has been appropriated as “one of the most recognisable and enduring of Malaysian fashion icons.”⁸² The *kebaya* now trades on its double characteristic as autochthonous ethnic dress and hybrid fashion, an ascription that is indicated by the statement on the dust-jacket of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood’s book, *The Nyonya Kebaya*:

⁷⁹ Can Seng Ooi, “Identities, Museums, and Tourism in Singapore: Think Regionally, Act Locally,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31, no. 89 (2003), p. 84. See also the Singapore Tourism Board’s promotional booklet, *Uniquely Singapore: The Peranakan Experience* (Singapore, 2004).

⁸⁰ See Singapore Tourism Board advertisement, “Uniquely Singapore,” *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 26–27 June 2004. See also the website of the Singapore Tourism Board, *Uniquely Singapore*, n.d., <<http://www.visitsingapore.com/>> and <<http://www.visitsingapore.com/tp/>> [accessed 21 August 2004].

⁸¹ Neil Khor “The Disappearing Race” *The Star*, 14 February 2000.

⁸² Mahmood, *Nyonya Kebaya* (2002 edition), front flap of dust-jacket

Here and there, one can still see Nyonyas decked out in kebayas and all their finery. Having been part of the Malay Peninsula's history since the 16th century, the Nyonyas and Babas of the Chinese Peranakan communities ...were true multiculturalists from the very beginning. Their knack for combining the best of different cultural influences, from the Chinese, Malay and European, contributed to the rich Peranakan heritage.⁸³

Studies show that dress choices are contingent on how they may be interpreted. Emma Tarlo argues that clothing demarcates boundaries of identity, separating insiders from outsiders; clothing choice is simultaneously a process of differentiation and identification.⁸⁴ Tarlo demonstrates, for example, that the popularity of specific ethnic dress such as the colourful, embroidered, open-back bodice and skirt of village Gujarat amongst the elite in India can also be understood as a marker of difference from peasants who are discarding this dress, at the same time that ethnic dress has been appropriated as fashion in the West.⁸⁵ Ann Marie Leskovich and Carla Jones demonstrate that the readings of Asian dress in Asia will depend on how the audience perceives the local wearer's position.⁸⁶ In their assessment, where the wearer (or local designer) has access to cultural capital and status, ethnic dress is interpreted as fashion savvy, associating the wearer with flows of foreign capital and foreign circulation of ethnic chic. They argue that without this prop, ethnic dress risks being interpreted as unattractive and dated or exotic and traditional.

Nonya dress could be worn variously to forge or signal a sense of community, cultural awareness, exoticism, or even simply because of a fascination with embroidery and batik. But, as the studies above suggest, dress choices are constrained by the context in which they are seen and on the user's subject position. The twin narratives that connect Peranakan culture to a glorious past and endorse indigenous cultural hybridity validate the reclamation of Nonya dress for its Peranakan wearers as well as for those who wish to signal an affinity with Peranakan culture. Through their social calendars of dinners and dances, conventions, and stagings of Peranakan dramas, the Peranakan Associations provide appropriate contexts that legitimize its dual appeal as hybrid tradition and multi-cultural modernity.

⁸³ Mahmood, *Nyonya Kebaya* (2002 edition), front flap of dust-jacket.

⁸⁴ Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996), pp. 318–319.

⁸⁵ Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 324–326. The bodice and skirt are known as *ghaghro* and *kapdu*.

⁸⁶ Ann Marie Leskovich and Carla Jones, "What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?" *Fashion Theory* 7, nos. 3–4 (2003), pp. 281–299.

Nonya beadwork exposés detail the Indo-Malay, Chinese, and European influences and dovetail neatly with these narratives.⁸⁷ Even whilst it continues as a staple in the visual imaginary of the Peranakan past, setting the tone for period plays, the *kasut manek* has become the “newest fashion statement in town.”⁸⁸ Kenny Chan, the comedian and female impersonator, completes his elderly Nonya’s outfit of *sarong-baju panjang* with a pair of beaded slippers that once belonged to his uncle (fig. 244). Ivan Heng, who played Emily, the middle-aged Nonya protagonist, in Stella Kon’s play, “Emily of Emerald Hill” set in 1950s Singapore, wore *kasut manek* with a grid-like *anak-anak* design (fig. 245).⁸⁹ Concurrently, Noreen Chan, a Peranakan in her thirties, states, “[t]here’s never been a better time to be a Nonya; suddenly everyone wants a kebaya or some beaded accessory, and I’m actually funky for the very first time in my life.”⁹⁰

“Nonya” has become a ubiquitous label for beaded footwear embroidered on a *pidangan*-like frame, aimed mainly at a female market. Nonya beadwork accessories are enjoying a resurgence in demand, costing between S\$300 – S\$900 for a pair of finely-beaded mules, their labour-intensive nature justifying their appeal as luxury items.⁹¹ *Kasut manek* designs range from those that bear only an imagined resemblance to Nonya styles, to others that deliberately draw from older designs (fig. 246).⁹² However, commercially available *kasut manek* are dominated by stereotypical imagery of birds, flowers (roses, sometimes a hibiscus, seem to be favourites), small animals, and perhaps the occasional Seven Dwarfs, giving rise to a recognisable Nonya formula drawn from designs popular in the inter-war years. An advertisement for *kasut manek* offered “all kinds of designs such as floral, peacock, sunflower and also traditional Baba Nyonya.”⁹³

⁸⁷ See, for example, Khoo, *Straits Chinese*, pp. 198-206; and Bebe Seet, “Beaded Beauties.”

⁸⁸ “The Beads Have It.”

⁸⁹ Of course, the *kasut manek* are not restricted to female impersonations. See Chia, *Pileh Menantu*, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Ong, “What Does It Mean to be Peranakan?” p. 10.

⁹¹ See also “Proudly Peranakan,” *Singapore Magazine* (April–June 2005), <<http://sgzine.com.sg/feature03.html>> [accessed 14 July 2005]. Beader Bebe Seet explains that she is able to charge high prices for the fine handwork that differentiates her beadwork from those that are imported from Vietnam. Bebe Seet, personal communication, June 2004.

⁹² Compare, for instance, the geometric motifs derived perhaps from Eastern European designs with the rose and *anak-anak* designs, illustrated in Tham, “Hand Made Beaded Shoes,” p. 11; and Marina Emmanuel, “Nyonyas’ Favourite Shoemaker,” *New Sunday Times*, 9 January 2005.

⁹³ “Sinaran Collection” [advertisement], *The Peranakan* (October–December 2002), p. 16.

Nonya dress, *de rigueur* at the annual Peranakan convention, is almost inevitably accompanied by the *kasut manek* (figs. 247–249). Whilst several Nonyas from Penang differentiate themselves with the use of the *baju panjang* and a crown-like arrangement of their *sanggul*, there appear to be few differences between the types of beaded footwear worn by Nonyas from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. Though their *kasut manek* are made with both new and vintage beadwork from the 1950s or before (fig. 248e), few contemporary examples of beadwork are decorated with motifs and methods from the 1870s and 1920s.

The phoenix and the peony, so prevalent on late-nineteenth century Nonya beadwork, is still a highly symbolic motif for the Peranakans. A television programme on Peranakan culture, *On the Trail of the Phoenix*, and Edmond Chin's book, *Gilding the Phoenix*, reinforce the symbolism of the phoenix as a representation of the Peranakan culture.⁹⁴ The Peranakan Association of Singapore has also chosen the phoenix as its logo (fig. 250). The peony also appears on designs of *ang pow* (envelopes for gifts of cash) that the Peranakan Association of Singapore printed for sale (fig. 251). Yet, neither of these motifs appears regularly on contemporary *kasut manek*.

Roses, repeated florets, geometric patterns, and birds are the most frequently encountered themes. The triangular-panelled design, initially modified from metallic thread embroidery for beadwork, is another common pattern (fig. 247b). The preference for these patterns, all popular between the 1920s and 1940s, appears to be at odds with the nostalgic retrieval of a "golden age" which is emphasized in Peranakan narratives that legitimize beadwork as heritage and tradition.

The explanation for this limited selection of designs cannot be relegated to technical reasons. Although beadwork on velvet is no longer carried out, the technique of couching on velvet is probably not difficult to master, especially as couching with metallic threads is still done in contemporary embroidery. With the availability of museum displays and publications, visual sources for contemporary beadwork that draw from designs popular before the 1930s are not difficult to access.

Instead, several alternative explanations may be put forward for this phenomenon. One reason is that the designs of roses and peacocks reinforce the emphasis on cultural

⁹⁴ Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix*. *On the Trail of the Phoenix* is a six part series that was produced by Arts Central, Singapore in 2002.

syncretism that characterize narratives of the Peranakan identity. A second possibility relates to the convergence of regional styles in the inter-war years as shown in Chapter Six. The designs of Nonya beadwork from this period may thus provide a unifying image that connects diverse Peranakan communities in the former Straits Settlements, parts of the Netherlands Indies, and southern Thailand, reinforcing the historical bonds that linked them. As Pranee Sakulpipatana, a Nonya from Phuket, confirms, “[w]e do have the same kind of beadwork shoes and utensils. We learn[t] a lot of Baba culture from our sister Penang because it [took] only [a] one night journey from Phuket to Penang by the Straits Steamship Matang. We bought all what money could [buy] and brought it back... We eat the same food, talk the same language, and share the same belief[s]. We are only geographically divided.”⁹⁵ Although the Peranakans in southern Thailand may not practise Peranakan beadwork, it nevertheless forms a common element in their cultural consciousness.

The most convincing rationale, however, is related to the personal sentiments associated with selection of particular *kasut manek* designs. As Barbara Leigh argues, individuals may feel a special resonance with items that were used by their grandparents and great-grandparents.⁹⁶ In the case of Nonya beadwork, this is clearly illustrated by several contemporary examples. When stitching a pair of *kasut manek* for herself, one Nonya selected a pattern sewn by her grandmother when the latter was a young girl (fig. 249c). As she explains, the choice of pattern is a meaningful way of articulating her lineal ties and grounding her present: “if you know where you’re from, you know where you’re at.”⁹⁷ Another Nonya repaired a pair of beaded slipper tops that belonged to her grandaunt and had them made into *kasut manek* for herself (fig. 249b).⁹⁸ The referential quality of beadwork and respect for a Peranakan aesthetic sensibility is important for both these women. Other Nonyas have kept beaded slipper faces left to them by their aunts, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers, using these for shoes or as pattern sources that can be translated into dress choices, authenticating their cultural legitimacy. That they can associate these designs with family members whom they know personally may explain the strength of sentiments attached to motifs

⁹⁵ Pranee Sakulpipatana, personal communication, December 2004. Sukulpipatana is a lecturer at the Phuket Rajabhat University, and is involved in organising a Peranakan Convention in Phuket.

⁹⁶ Leigh, “Batik and Pewter,” p. 98.

⁹⁷ Noreen Chan, personal communication, December 2004

⁹⁸ Angeline Kong, personal communication, December 2004.

of the recent past. These ties provide the lineal connections to a more distant age. Indeed, younger Peranakans have started to trace their extended family trees.

For a community coming to terms with its own vulnerability, lineage can be crucial as a locus that sustains a collective identification. In her study of the Singapore Peranakan identity, Annette Aw associates Peranakan ancestry with local birth, but notes the difficulty in verifying claims of having ancestors that were Straits-born.⁹⁹ As the examples above suggests, Peranakan ancestry can be visualized through cultural history to corroborate the claim of a specific past.

The appeal to ancestry does not appear to have become an exclusive criterion for Peranakan identity, particularly since inclusiveness is a strategy to sustain interest in and relevance for Peranakan cultural traditions. For instance, in Melaka, where Tan Chee Beng argues that kinship networks provide the symbols by which the Peranakans relate to one another and are a crucial framework for the maintenance of a Peranakan identity,¹⁰⁰ membership of the Peranakan Association in Melaka is restricted to Peranakans born in Melaka. By contrast, in Singapore where the Peranakan community has gradually become less visible, the Peranakan Association of Singapore opened its membership to non-Peranakans, “and would even welcome any contribution to the Peranakan culture.”¹⁰¹ However, since lineage is an inalienable connection to a Peranakan past and allows identification as Peranakan without recourse to a static understanding of Peranakan culture, it enables the constitution of a stable reference to Peranakan identity that is independent of contemporary cultural practices. In addition, in societies where multiculturalism is heavily promoted, it facilitates the construction of plural identities as Singaporean or Malaysian *and* Chinese *and* Peranakan.

⁹⁹ Aw, *Peranakan Identity*, pp. 62–66.

¹⁰⁰ Tan Chee Beng, “Kin Networks and Baba Identity,” in *Ethnicity and Local Politics in Malaysia: Six Case Studies*, ed. Tan Chee Beng (Singapore: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1984), pp. 84–97.

¹⁰¹ Peranakan Association, Singapore, “The Peranakan Association Membership,” in *Our Linguistic Heritage: Sixth Baba Convention Souvenir Programme*, 26–27 November 1993, p. 32. In addition, the feedback at a forum entitled “Reviewing the Peranakan Identity,” organized by the Peranakan Association of Singapore in 2002 as part of the annual Peranakan convention, is also revealing. Some participants proposed personal qualities such as a sense of graciousness, tolerance, adaptability, and a shift to a more “inclusive” definition of Peranakan based on “a sensed affinity for the community and its cultural values.” See Tan Sooi Beng, “Colourful Community,” *The Peranakan* (January–March 2003), pp. 6–8. Whilst participants were most likely those with an interest in the survival of a unique Peranakan community and the conclusions of the forum may be criticized as biased, its results are nevertheless interesting.

Hence, for the Peranakans, the value of Nonya beadwork is its perceptible connection with “the generations of lived experience, the intertwined lives of so many individuals.”¹⁰² In this sense, Nonya beadwork as fashion accessory functions not only as a visual affirmation of cultural relevance and recovery of heritage; more meaningfully, it is a receptacle of personal history, embedded sentiments, a collective tradition, and the celebration of an ancestry that enables sameness and difference. Formularized imagery facilitates the identification of beadwork as Nonya, and the preference for birds, flowers, and geometric designs is suggestive of the extent to which the emphasis on lineage has been internalized in dress choices, disengaging the *kasut manek* both from ephemeral fashion and tourist gimmick. Worn on appropriate occasions, beadwork is a validation of the past as much as it is constitutive of a Peranakan sense of community in the present.

* * *

Peranakan narratives of cultural history coexist with and inform institutional inscriptions of Peranakan heritage, enabling the Peranakan community to use state endorsements of cultural harmony to reclaim its cultural relevance and to retain a crucial voice in determining its cultural future. An important part of the Peranakan community’s efforts to preserve and transmit its heritage has been to make its culture accessible to all, widening its ambit as a more inclusive society. Nonya beadwork has a place in their narratives as a material and experiential link that connects the present and the past.

Once a disappearing skill, Nonya beadwork is now cherished as part of a Peranakan heritage to be preserved and passed on. As historical artefact, it provides the visual imaginary for a shared Peranakan past. As contemporary activity, it is a traditional medium for eclectic experimentation and cultural transformations, a springboard to new perspectives of Peranakan culture in the present. As a fashion accessory, Nonya beadwork can be consumed by the non-Peranakan. However, for the Peranakan, beadwork can be an expression of personal histories and lineal ties that legitimize a Peranakan identity which is not only fluid but, in reality, plural and heterogenous.

Conceived of as tradition, cultural knowledge can be exposed, disembodied, codified, and archived, becoming an open resource for Peranakans to draw on as they re-create

¹⁰² Noreen Chan, quoted in Ong, “What Does It Mean to be Peranakan?” p. 10.

their memories, fantasies, narratives, and myths. Far from being prescriptive and restrictive, interpreting Peranakan culture as tradition co-exists with individual and collective explorations of Peranakan identities. Remembered as lineage, the presence of the past provides stability and defines difference, providing the core of an inalienable Peranakan consciousness. Imagined as cultural borrowings, the dynamic process of Peranakan cultural transformation is given renewed vibrancy and relevance.

Translated into tradition, this momentary fixity of “Peranakan culture” can be liberating, serving as a common chord that harmonizes polyphonic and ever-changing Peranakan identities. It is from this point that the Peranakan community can rise to the challenge issued by Peter Lee, a seventh generation Peranakan art historian and writer: “[r]ather than moaning about the loss of our heritage, or worrying too much about the future, let’s celebrate the spirit of being Peranakan now.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Peter Lee, “Peranakan NOW!” *The Peranakan* (October–December 2002), p. 3.

CONCLUSION

The Peranakan decorative arts play a significant role in the constructions of Peranakan cultural identity. Yet scholarly analyses of Peranakan identity have had to contend with a high level of generality of available research on their arts. This thesis addresses the need for art-historical approaches that can further scholarship on Peranakan cultural history. It demonstrates that an in-depth examination of the changes in Nonya beadwork, both as an activity and an object, offers insights into the dynamic processes of Peranakan cultural formation as Peranakan society responded and adapted to the world around it. Together with the modifications in the social roles of Nonya beadwork, the appropriations and changes in its forms, styles, and imagery registered the Peranakans' concern with modernity that mediated an acute consciousness of their Chinese ancestry and adaptations of local culture.

This study also demonstrates the potential of a group of embroideries to reveal the shifting attitudes of a Southeast Asian society in which a flow of ideas accompanied its location at the crossroads of trade. Whilst convention and continuity are a pervasive theme in Southeast Asian art, the majority of studies on Southeast Asian textile decoration which emphasize their roles as receptacles of timeless beliefs and enduring traditions offer only a partial perspective of textile history that does not give due consideration to the extent to which textile users engaged with changing political and historical contexts, contributing to a notion that their societies are bound by tradition. The temporal focus of this thesis suggests an alternative approach that can be particularly fruitful for analysing textiles as historical documents in societies where the impulse for change and adaptation, urbanization, and the openness to external influences may have been as significant as preservation of ancestral customs.

When viewed together with the social context in which they were produced, the patterns of change in needlework communicate the thoughts of those who embroidered and those who used the embroideries. In societies where needlework was carried out by the less literate, the history of embroidery can make visible parts of histories that are otherwise difficult to retrieve. In contrast to Western embroidery histories, the dearth of historical sources about Southeast Asian needlework activities presents a challenge to temporal analyses of the latter. It is therefore to the

embroideries themselves that this study has turned for clues, developing methods of assessing dates that may have a wider applicability than for Nonya beadwork alone.

As a secular item, neither the creation nor the use of Nonya beadwork faced the strict constraints of spiritual beliefs and cosmological world views that regulated the production of religious artefacts or other Southeast Asian ceremonial and ritual textiles. The Nonyas were therefore free to incorporate into their beadwork styles and motifs that reflected their changing ideals and lifestyles. Whereas Nonya beadwork is now considered traditional, this thesis argues that the meanings imbued in beadwork have always been shaped by the Peranakans' concerns about the social and political milieu of the times in which they were created and used. The history of beadwork therefore offers us a view of the Nonyas' engagements with modernity, gendered norms, and an ancestral heritage, engagements that have had a significant impact upon the Peranakan community's cultural identity.

The adaptations of local forms and interpretations of needlework designs in Nonya beadwork of the late nineteenth century articulated the Peranakans' attempts to bridge the distance between their inherited culture and their affirmation of belonging in the Straits Settlements. The predominance of peonies, prancing *qilin*, and lively phoenixes embodied the Peranakans' adherence to a Chinese culture. Yet, these motifs were not necessarily directly transcribed from Chinese models, and where they may have been, faithfulness to an original does not appear to have been a key concern. Aesthetically, the sinuously curving trunks of peony trees with their oversize multi-coloured blossoms have as much in common with flowering trees of imported Indian chintz as with those of a Chinese design. Imagery of insects, fish, and deer sometimes verged on the unrecognisable. Realism was secondary to the motifs' symbolic content, as designs were interpreted through a conception of Chinese culture as a marker of the Peranakans' common ancestry and as an overt reference to a shared value system across the Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies. A visible Chinese affiliation supported the ties that provided the links for commerce and marriage partners in a mercantile community that also made conscious use of its localization.

If the Peranakans nurtured a pragmatic flexibility towards their Chinese heritage, their concern with the ambiguity of its resulting expressions were crystallized in the debates at the end of the nineteenth century. Significantly, their focus on political allegiance

as British subjects diminished the association between their local birth and their assimilation of indigenous customs, and provided the grounds for contesting this relationship. Simultaneously, assumption of what constituted their Chinese heritage also came under scrutiny. Discussions on the appropriateness of the Baba Malay language, Nonya dress, and desirability of retaining selected Chinese customs were couched in terms of the pursuit of modernity, rationalized as a necessary effort for the Peranakan community's continued prosperity. This was accompanied by the Peranakans' re-appraisal of their cultural identity at the turn of the twentieth century.

Even if the majority of Nonyas were excluded from participating directly in the discourse on Peranakan modernity, their visual expressions in beadwork demonstrate that they were active players in an unfolding story of Peranakan cultural transformation as they navigated their prescribed roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. From behind the curtain of the *redi* or the seclusion of the Peranakan home, the Nonyas' selective incorporation of European motifs reflects their attempts to reconcile a desire for greater independence and liberty with the Peranakans' respect for their elders. Chinese designs of the narcissus, peony, lotus, and pheasant were beaded alongside the lily and paired lovebirds. Rose blooms were superimposed upon vestigial stems of the flowering tree, and children in Edwardian pinafores and Dutch dresses were inserted into compositional formats based on earlier beadwork. Underpinning the Nonya's experimentation with new motifs, styles, and techniques, however hesitant and awkward, was an awareness that cultural expressions were neither rigidly determined by past models nor confined by narrowly defined cultural criteria.

Whereas the choice of beadwork motifs was circumscribed by the bounds of acceptability, the appropriations of European imagery nevertheless expanded the Nonyas' visual vocabulary, providing them with a means of confronting the strictures of convention and incorporating change. In the merging of the Chinese peony and the European rose, the tensions generated by change were elided and translated into mutually acceptable symbols of sophistication and refinement. The Nonyas' understanding of modernity was tempered by their reverence for a heritage that emphasized a hierarchical family structure, whether based on their perception of Confucian precepts or on customary behaviour, remaining a crucial feature that ordered Peranakan society in the early twentieth century.

The range of different styles and motifs that co-existed in the beadwork of the early twentieth century reflects the cultural spectrum inhabited by the Peranakans and their varying positions within it. Whilst European-inspired motifs initially acted as a mark of difference from past designs, Peranakan attitudes towards Westernization were ambivalent and Westernization was not synonymous with modernity. It is revealing that naturalistic florals and fluffy animals with a clearly European derivation supplanted Chinese symbolic imagery only from the 1920s, when the Nonyas' alternatives for self-expression had expanded to hairstyles, dress, and the written word, rendering beadwork designs less significant as a carrier of meaning. As beading became outmoded, the decorativeness of beadwork motifs was further emphasized by chequered backgrounds and floral wreaths, supplemented by an occasional benedictory inscription.

The *kasut manek* was the main form of beadwork from this period, absorbing the associations previously attached to the practice of beading and the beaded motif. It became not only a significant feature of Peranakan dress but a representation of Peranakan cultural identity. However, from the 1950s onwards, the abandonment of customs and the lifestyle associated with the Peranakans seemed to auger the end not just for the *kasut manek* but also the demise of a once thriving Peranakan community. Yet, it is this threat of decline and potential loss that has motivated the Peranakans, once again, to actively explore their identity. In the process, Nonya beadwork has been valorized as a visual metonym of a hybrid and autochthonous culture. Older pieces of beadwork, once discarded, are now carefully preserved for the stories and the values they embody and as potent references to a past in which Peranakans were able to exploit their multiple cultural and regional associations. The rose, once an embodiment of the Nonyas' confrontation with modernity and cultural heritage, is now invoked as nostalgic of the golden age of the Peranakans. Framed in this way, Nonya beadwork has been transformed into a hybrid tradition that encapsulates the imagined marriage of East and West.

Despite their collaboration with the state in preserving and promoting their heritage, the Peranakans may be seen not as merely complicit but as significant agents in assembling and disseminating Peranakan culture. Their heritage houses, exhibitions, writings, dramas, and media recordings all form an open resource of cultural knowledge at the same time that they contribute to the narrative of Peranakan cultural

value. Yet, the accessibility of their cultural archive means that narratives can increasingly be formed outside of the Peranakan community, a process that has already begun with the analysis of Peranakan language and society by non-Peranakans.

It is still premature to assess whether the latter will coalesce with or contest Peranakans' self-constructions of identity, or whether they will, in fact, remain independent of the Peranakan community's interventions. However, with mottos such as "Borrow-adapt-better-adopt," (one Peranakan's decomposition of the term "Baba"),¹ the Peranakans are unlikely to fight shy of creatively engaging with externally-generated narratives in ways that enrich the Peranakan present. Always the restive phoenix, the Peranakan cultural identity is slowly emerging from the vestiges of a quest for a modernity that is no longer relevant, seeking legitimacy in its re-invention.

¹ Quoted in Jimmy Khoo, "Message by Mr Jimmy Khoo, President of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka," *The Seventeenth Baba Convention* [brochure] (Melaka, 2004), n.p.

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Abbreviations Used

FMI *Female Missionary Intelligencer*

SCM *Straits Chinese Magazine*

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