

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Peranakan Musical Culture in Malacca, Malaysia¹

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Abstract

Malacca's Peranakan community has occupied an important but marginal place in both colonial and post-colonial Malaysia. Resulting from unions between Hokkien-speaking Chinese traders and local women, Peranakans can be traced to the 17th century. Over time, they were gradually distinguished from the local Malay and immigrant Chinese populations by their English education, leadership of the rubber industry, wealth, and social capital. By the 1920s, their social life revolved around private clubs that organized balls, variety shows, and fancy dress parties. Wealthy Peranakans sponsored amateur musical and theatrical groups that raised money for charitable causes. Musical life was modern and highly eclectic. String orchestras and dance bands played the latest British and American hits as well as favorite Malay *kroncong* songs; smaller groups gathered at informal sessions to sing *dondang sayang* in Malay. The "colonial elite" lifestyle disappeared long ago, but Peranakan culture has been reinvented as an essential part of the heritage package in UNESCO-listed 21st-century Malacca. In order to claim a place in the modern Malaysian multicultural family, Peranakans now have to appear distinct, "exotic" and part of a nostalgic past. To this end, the tuxedos and ball gowns of the 1920s have been replaced by new markers of Peranakan identity: sarong kebayas and beaded slippers for the women and high-collared Chinese shirts for the men. Through a close reading of photographs from the 1920s on, I will discuss the complex and shifting hybridity of the community and will argue that although Peranakan culture has become visibly "retro," its underlying musical eclecticism has remained intact. A comparison between musical cultures then and now will demonstrate that although surface features may have changed, the songs remain the same.

Keywords: Peranakan culture, colonial elites, post-colonial Malaysia, visual anthropology, heritage.

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Resumo

A comunidade Peranakan de Malaca ocupa um lugar importante, porém marginal, na Malásia colonial e pós-colonial. Resultando de uniões entre comerciantes chineses de idioma Hokkien e mulheres locais, a origem dos Peranakans pode ser localizada no século XVII. Com o tempo, eles foram gradualmente se distinguindo dos malaios locais e das populações imigrantes chinesas por sua educação inglesa, liderança na indústria da borracha, riqueza e capital social. Até os anos 1920, sua vida social girava em torno de clubes privados que organizavam danças, shows de variedades e bailes à fantasia. Os Peranakans ricos patrocinavam grupos amadores de teatro e música que arrecadavam fundos para ações de caridade. A vida musical era moderna e altamente eclética. Orquestras de cordas e conjuntos de dança tocavam os mais recentes sucessos britânicos e americanos, assim como as canções malaias *kroncong* favoritas; grupos menores reuniam-se em sessões informais para cantar *dondang sayang* em malaio. O estilo de vida da “elite colonial” desapareceu há muito tempo, mas a cultura Peranakan foi reinventada como parte essencial do conjunto de patrimônio listado pela UNESCO, na Malaca do século XXI. A fim de reivindicar um lugar na moderna família multicultural da Malásia, os Peranakans agora devem parecer distintos, exóticos e como fazendo parte de um passado nostálgico. Para tanto, os smokings e vestidos de gala dos anos 1920 foram substituídos por novos marcadores de identidade Peranakan: sarong kebayas e sandálias de contas para as mulheres e camisas chinesas de colarinho alto para os homens. Por meio de uma interpretação atenta de fotos dos anos 1920 em diante, discutirei o hibridismo complexo e mutante da comunidade e argumentarei que embora a cultura Peranakan tenha se tornando visivelmente “retrô”, seu ecletismo musical subjacente permaneceu intacto. Uma comparação entre culturas musicais de então e de agora irá demonstrar que embora as características de superfície possam ter mudado, as canções permanecem as mesmas.

Palavras-chave: Cultura Peranakan culture, elites coloniais, Malásia pós-colonial, antropologia visual, patrimônio.

Introduction

This paper is part of long-term project on the musical culture of the Peranakan or Straits Chinese community of Malacca, Malaysia. I will clarify these terms below, but suffice it to say here that I am referring to a long-standing local minority associated historically with the cities of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore. Once a thriving colonial elite, today’s ageing community looks nostalgically back to its past for signs of who they are now. Musical performance has always been a key marker of the Peranakan lifestyle. This lifestyle has acquired new relevance since UNESCO designated Malacca a World Heritage Site in 2008 and has raised all sorts of questions and implications. Associated irrevocably with the city’s core historic area, Peranakans are currently reinventing themselves and performing their culture (whatever they/others decide that to be) for tourists, for the government, and even for their own neighbors. Old signs take on new meanings as they are juxtaposed (and even staged) in postmodern ways that tell quite different stories, stories that depend as much on the generation of the performer as on his or her own lived experience. As the imagined past is performed in the tourist-driven present, Malacca’s Peranakans are playing catch-up to another local minority, the Portuguese-Eurasians, who in the early 1990s cemented their position as the leading

purveyors of “cultural performance” in what was then packaged as “Malaysia’s Historic City” (see SARKISSIAN, 2000).

As this project developed, I began to see great value in photographs, both as sources of information and as tools for research. In my earlier work with the Portuguese-Eurasian community,² I took photographs to document my own fieldwork – I belonged to the “point and pray” school of field photography – but old photographs were not of particular value to community members. A family might have a cheaply framed and faded photograph of grandma and grandpa on their wedding day hanging prominently in their front room, but apart from that, old photographs were few and far between. As I got to know the Peranakans, in contrast, I realized the potential of photographs, not simply as visual sources of ethnographic information about the past (texts to be interpreted), but as effective resources for doing fieldwork in the present. Photographs were a great way of breaking the ice and creating rapport. Conversations with elderly community members at their clubhouse inevitably morphed into guided tours of the old photographs hanging on the walls around them (Figure 01). This was not the kind of carefully curated collection one might see at a museum, but an eclectic treasure trove that was, in effect, the story they told about themselves. Photographs documented every aspect of Peranakan life and material culture because the Peranakans of the late colonial period loved every modern gadget their money could buy. Today, their descendants look at the faded reminders of bygone times with a certain wistful nostalgia.

It did not escape my attention that many of the photographs on the walls of the clubhouse focused on musicians, parades, balls, fancy-dress parties, musical theater, and all kinds of music-related entertainments. My guides pointed out their fathers, uncles, aunties, even themselves in their younger days. Photographs became a tool for engaging people in conversations about music. I began asking people if they had other photographs of musical interest, which led me to Edwin Yeo, younger son of the late musician Yeo Kwan Jin (1922-96). In 2009 (after several years of coaxing), Edwin finally dug out 25 old photographs that had belonged to his father, though he couldn’t recognize many of the faces that stared out at us. I made photocopies, which I carried around and showed to anyone who had the time to sit and talk: Peranakan, Portuguese-Eurasian, Chinese, or Malay. This was the beginning of a fascinating ethnographic adventure through which I discovered amateur and professional musical networks I had no idea existed, even after so many years of fieldwork in Malacca. Sitting at coffee shops with photographs spread across the table, someone would inevitably look over my shoulder and recognize a face in a photograph. “That’s my auntie – she has a *sarong kebaya* shop out near the bus station,” led me to Doris Choong and more photographs, this time of rural Peranakans from the villages around Malacca engaging in music making with their Malay neighbors. “You should ask Ah Chai, he used to play saxophone,” led to a hole-in-the-wall food stall with rickety tables around which an ever-expanding group of elderly Chinese saxophone players, who ranged from a pork seller to a retired school master, dropped by to look at the images, summoned by the cell phone of “Ah Chai,” Datuk Soon Kim Hock. “My friend Audrey has photos,” led to the discovery of retired schoolteacher Audrey Lim and a huge collection of

² I began research with the Portuguese-Eurasian community in 1990-91 and have returned to Malacca almost every summer since then. I thus have over two decades of research experience with various communities in the city.

photographs taken by her father Lim Keng Watt (himself a schoolteacher and amateur musician) that documented every aspect of his world.



Figure 01 - Members of the PPCM attending a Tuesday night sing-along at the clubhouse. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.

Of course, I am not the first person to recognize the value of photographs of this time and place. In her fascinating study of popular photography in neighboring Java, visual anthropologist Karen Strassler called photography a “global technology introduced under colonial conditions and tied to transnational flows of people, capital, industry, and media, [that] continues to bring people into contact with imaginings and circuits that necessarily transcend and often undermine a strictly national frame” (STRASSLER, 2010, p.13). In particular she highlighted the contribution of a community she calls “ethnic Chinese” that had much in common with the Peranakan of colonial Malacca:

As a transnational community that often maintained cultural, economic, and linguistic ties to Chinese in other parts of Asia... ethnic Chinese in the late colonial Indies often served as cosmopolitan brokers of the global capitalist modernity – its ideas, practices, and products – that had taken hold more firmly in these pan-Chinese centers.... Because ethnic Chinese tended to be urban, cosmopolitan, and more integrated into capitalist economies than Javanese and other “native” communities, they adopted many of the practices of global modernity – including the use of photography as a technology of domestic life and leisure – more

quickly. In numerous respects, then, ethnic Chinese have been pioneers of popular photography. (STRASSLER, 2010, p. 14-15)

As “brokers of the global capitalist modernity,” the ethnic Chinese and Peranakans were making a visual record of themselves at a particular moment in time. The analysis and interpretation of these photographs as texts helps us to understand the historical moment. However, it seems to me that for today’s Peranakan viewers, the record is no longer fixed in a moment of time (now), but has become the object of their nostalgia (then). The photographs become more than objects; they are themselves the means by which I am doing my ethnographic research in the present.

This duality lies at the heart of the old historical musicology-ethnomusicology divide. For musicologists, pre-existing texts – whether written, or musical, or in this case photographic – are data to be analyzed and interpreted. Ethnomusicologists, in contrast, focus more on the analysis and interpretation of living cultures, creating their own data through fieldwork. This divide has been blurred over time. Ethnomusicologists like Kay Shelemay have emphasized ways in which the study of a living culture can “illuminate important aspects of a culture’s history” (SHELEMAY, 1980, p. 235) and Bonnie Wade recognized the significance of images. While (in her own words), *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India* (1998) stood completely “outside the box” when published, both in terms of methodology (using the methods of art history and historical musicology) and time (focusing on the past rather than the present), Wade systematically employed iconography – the study and interpretation of images – to answer the kinds of questions that occur to ethnomusicologists³. Peranakan photographs may be prosaic and ephemeral in comparison to Wade’s exquisite Mughal miniatures, but they do connect the visual to the musical and the past to the present in new and exciting ways.

The Peranakan Community of Malacca

The first problem one encounters when working with this particular community is one of nomenclature. What exactly should we call what is clearly a distinct, proud, and long-standing minority of modern Malaysia and Singapore? Many terms have been used at one historical moment or another and their precise nuances have been debated at great length, most cogently by Rudolph (1998, p. 45-73) and Hardwick (2008, p. 37-40). Suffice it to say that older terms like the King’s Chinese, Straits Chinese, and Straits-born Chinese, are rooted in the Straits Settlements of British colonial times.⁴

³ WADE, Bonnie C. Performing Studies of Music in Asian Cultures: Some Personal Reflections of What We Have Been and Are Up To. Keynote lecture delivered at the Society of Asian Music’s Annual Membership Meeting, held in conjunction with the Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, 1 to 4 Nov 2012.

⁴ Malacca, the oldest of the three Straits Settlements (the other two being Penang and Singapore) was founded, according to legend, by the Palembang-born prince Paramaswara around 1400. Conquered in turn by the Portuguese (1511) and Dutch (1641), ceded to the British in 1824, occupied by the Japanese during World War II, it became part of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. Penang was originally leased from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 by Francis Light on behalf of the East India Company. Singapore was founded in 1819

Preferred terms in post-Independence Malaysia are Peranakan (“local born;” from the Malay stem *anak*, “child”), or more specifically Peranakan Cina (local-born Chinese), as opposed to other local-born minorities. Less formally, community members call themselves Baba (collectively) or Baba-Nyonya (honorifics; Baba for men, Nyonya for women). Whichever term is used, there is general agreement that they all refer to a Baba-Malay- or English-speaking community that is distinguished from the local- or China-born Chinese-speaking community, the latter being descended from late 19th-century Chinese immigrants who intermarried among themselves.

The Peranakan community is primarily descended from Hokkien-speaking Chinese traders who came to the bustling entrepôt of Malacca from Fujian Province during the 17th and 18th centuries. They settled down, married women of Malay or other local origin, and raised families. Baba-Malay – a distinct form of the Malay language peppered with Hokkien words – gradually evolved as the language of women and the home. As the community grew in size, the children of these mixed-race families began to intermarry; the founding of Singapore in 1819 provided new opportunities for expansion.⁵ By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their mostly English-educated sons had become British Malaya’s preeminent colonial elite and pioneers in the Malayan domestic economy, especially in the rubber and timber industries. Distinguished by their wealth and social capital, many successful Malacca Peranakans bought property near the river godowns in the Heeren Street neighborhood, an area that was nicknamed “Millionaire’s Row” by the early 20th century.⁶ The picture is complicated somewhat by other Chinese immigrants who settled in rural Malay-style *kampungs* (villages) outside the city, where they farmed *padi*, coconuts, fruit, or small-scale rubber plantations. With a reputation for hard work, these men were desirable husbands for Malay *kampung* women, which led to the growth of a parallel Peranakan community that was, and remains, socially and economically distant from the first.

This leads us to a second problem: how does one define exactly who counts as Peranakan in 21st-century Malaysia? This is extremely important in a nation in which

by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles on behalf of the same company. The Federation of Malaya was granted independence from the British in 1957. The Federation, Singapore, and British North Borneo merged to create Malaysia in 1963; Singapore seceded from this union two years later and remains an independent city-state.

⁵ To this day there are still strong links between Peranakans of Malacca and Singapore. While Malacca and Singapore Peranakans speak Baba-Malay and are closely connected through migration and intermarriage, the Peranakans of Penang are more distant. Mainly descendants of Chinese traders who married Batak, Thai, or Burmese wives, they speak a distinctive Penang Hokkien that incorporates Malay words. The three communities take turns to host an annual Baba-Nyonya Convention. The 25th Annual Convention was held in Malacca, November 23-25, 2012.

⁶ Although still called Heeren Street by many residents of Malacca, its name was officially changed by the Malaysian government to Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, in honor of its most famous resident, Tan Cheng Lock, a Peranakan and architect of Malaysian independence. Chinese names are cited in the customary manner, family names first (i.e., Tan Cheng Lock). Some people have both Chinese and English names (e.g., Tan Cheng Lock’s oldest daughter, Tan Kim Tin, was familiarly known as Lily). In such cases, her name might be cited simply as Lily Tan or more formally as Lily Tan Kim Tin.

race is the preeminent sensitive issue. According to the late Jimmy Khoo, lawyer and President from 1994 to 2007 of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Chinese Peranakan Association of Malacca), to be accepted as Peranakan one must be “Baba-Nyonya in behavior, character, and lifestyle.” When I asked how that was determined, he replied, “*We know*” (interview, June 27, 2002). In practice, then, it is a matter of self-ascription: one knows one’s family heritage and that heritage is acknowledged by other members of the community. The line has become increasingly blurred, however, as many Peranakans have married non-Peranakan Chinese and their children now frequently read and write Mandarin, something their parents and grandparents have traditionally been unable to do. Further difficulties arise as politically-active Peranakans press for government recognition as *bumiputras* (“sons of the soil”), a preferred status with special economic privileges accorded to Malays and, in limited capacities, to designated local-born communities such as the Portuguese-Eurasians. In a nation in which everyone above the age of 12 is required to have an identity card that specifies one’s race, but where the only possible options are Malay, Chinese, Indian, or Other, Peranakans are counted as “Chinese” by the government, whether they like it or not.⁷

For the purposes of this article, then, I am going to focus on the close-knit group of Malacca Peranakans who belong to the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka and gather regularly at its clubhouse.⁸ They are the public face of Malacca’s Peranakan community, the people who come out, dressed in *baju cina* (for Babas) and *sarong keybayas* (for Nyonyas), whenever a Peranakan presence is required. They are the direct descendants of the British-educated upper-class Straits-born Chinese of Malacca. Their Association, originally called the Straits British Chinese Association, was founded in 1900 as both a social club and a politically motivated group that emphasized its Malayan roots and loyalty to the British crown. Its name was changed to PPCM in 1981 at which time the non-political status of the club was affirmed. Perhaps because many members have moved away from their traditional neighborhood, the PPCM has maintained a clubhouse at 149 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Heeren Street) since 1984. Events are primarily social: regular events like sing-alongs (Tuesdays) and bingo nights (Wednesdays) attract middle-aged and elderly members; occasional events like themed dinner-dances and food fairs draw a much broader cross-section of the membership and their families.

⁷ Race has become an increasingly problematic issue in contemporary Malaysia. To counter this, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak introduced a new policy in 2010 called *1Malaysia*, to encourage national unity and civility between races. Official government figures from the 2010 census state that the population of 28.3 million comprises 67.4 % Bumiputra (i.e., Malay), 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, and 0.7% Other. These figures of course disguise the true complexity of the situation, disenfranchising not only the recognized mixed-race minority groups, but also children of mixed-race marriages (see Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).

⁸ I am thus going to exclude descendants of the rural Peranakan community who have their own Association (confusingly called Persatuan Peranakan Cina Malaysia) in Bukit Rambai, a rural *kampung* outside the city, which functions more as a cultural organization than a social club. There is little to no overlap in membership between the two Associations. For a comparison of the Heeren Street and Bukit Rambai communities, see TAN, 1988).

With this historical continuity in mind, I am going to explore two key moments in time, moments in which Malacca's Peranakan community looks Janus-faced in opposite directions, to the future and to the past, respectively. The first spans the late 1920s to the beginning of the Japanese Occupation (1942), the end of what Felix Chia and others have called "the Golden Age" of Peranakan culture (1994, p. 104). It is a moment in which the community is on the cusp of modernity, looking forward to a bright future, its leaders prominent in civic society, education, business, and politics in Malacca. The second spans the first decade or so of the 21st century. This is a moment in which the community looks to the past as a means of re-making a social identity within the post-colonial Malaysian nation. Using a combination of archival, visual, and ethnographic evidence I will argue that although surface features may have changed considerably, certain core underlying values remain. In the case of their musical culture, for instance, the bands may have changed, but the songs remain the same.

Colonial Modernity: the End of the "Golden Age"

By the late 1920s, Peranakan culture was a unique synthesis that simultaneously embraced their mixed heritage and looked toward the future. We can see this clearly in the following sequence of wedding photographs, three of many old photographs copied, framed, and displayed on the walls of the PPCM clubhouse. The first (Figure 02) shows a traditional grouping of bride, bridegroom, page girl, and page boy.⁹ The bride and page girl wear elaborately embroidered silk costumes, lavish jewels, and ornately beaded slippers:

These costumes were usually custom-made in China by highly skilled tailors and embroiderers. The bride's ceremonial garments comprised a long silk robe with voluminous long sleeves, a broad circular collar with three to four layers of embroidered panels, and a pleated silk skirt. This costume is typical of those worn by women during the Qing dynasty period of Manchu rule in China (1644-1911). The motifs couched in gold thread on the garments were of auspicious symbols such as peonies, phoenixes, butterflies and mandarin ducks. However, the embellishment of this costume is unique to the Peranakan culture. (LEE; CHEN, 2006, p. 84)

⁹ At the PPCM this photograph is labeled "Bride and Groom, Circa 1925." The same photograph appears in Lee and Chen (2006), on the cover and on p. 86, where it is identified as "Mr and Mrs Yeo Hock Beng on their wedding day in their house on Chin Swee Road, Singapore, c. 1930." Exact identification is unnecessary for our purposes: the photograph stands for the many others that look just like it.



Figure 02 - Bride and Groom, c. 1925. From the collection of photographs displayed at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, Heeren Street, Malacca.

The costumes worn by the groom and page boy “consisted of a loose, long and flowing scholar’s robes reaching down to the ankles, and a silk jacket, both of which were intricately embroidered with auspicious motives in gold thread” (LEE; CHEN, 2006, p. 84-86). By the late 1920s, the traditional conical Manchu scholar’s hat was replaced by the more fashionable “Mandarin cap” seen here with a single diamond-encrusted brooch pinned to the front (CHEO, 1983, p. 62). The clothes are ornately Chinese, but the room in which they stand shows an eclectic taste in décor. The intricately inlaid Peranakan chairs and tables to the left of the picture are balanced by the high Victorian credenza at the back of the room upon which European china figurines are displayed.¹⁰ A large framed photograph of a colonial-looking polo player on horseback, probably a family member, looks down from the wall.

In the second photograph (Figure 03), the traditional Nyonya bride is standing next to an incongruously dressed groom who, in his formal three-piece suit and tie and highly polished shoes, looks every inch the modern English-educated gentleman. Although we cannot see much of the room behind them, they appear to standing in a similarly eclectic

¹⁰ I am grateful to Doug Salokar for identifying the style of this piece of furniture.

and cluttered Peranakan home with furniture of divergent styles surrounding them. The third photograph (Figure 04) shows another variation on the modern wedding party.¹¹ I believe this to be a photograph of the wedding of Lily Tan Kim Tin, oldest daughter of Tan Cheng Lock, who married “Charlie” Chan Seng Kee, third son of Chan Kang Swi, the wealthiest China-born Chinese merchant in Malacca, on April 20, 1935. The lavish four-day wedding was extensively discussed in the newspapers.¹² This time – perhaps a reminder of the family backgrounds – it is the groom and page boy who are dressed in traditional Chinese fashion, not the women. Lee and Chen describe the bride’s outfit as “an embroidered silk *koon sah*, Chinese upper garment and skirt, together with a western-style veil” (LEE; CHEN, 2006, p. 81). Both bride and bridesmaid are carrying bouquets, an English touch. The bridesmaid’s dress looks somewhat Chinese in style but, with her arms bare, it is clearly modern and unlike the ornately embroidered traditional style. The two page girls are wearing similar dresses, neither of which looks traditionally Chinese. They are posing on a rug that, far from being intricately “oriental” in style, appears to depict a ruined Greek temple near the sea, with cloaked Europeans in the foreground. Younger sister Alice Scott-Ross (née Tan), one of the two small girls in the foreground, later described the wedding at her family house, 111 Heeren Street, and provided a brief glimpse of the musical entertainment:

The wedding ceremonial rites were in accordance with the traditional Chinese age-old customs, but with some variation of a little splash of Western flavor thrown into it, whereas instead of the elaborate heavy head-dress of gold and diamonds, my sister wore a pink veil over her head with a long train measuring ten feet long.... It was the wedding of the year with all the grandeur, pomp and the elaborate and spectacular trappings accompanying the glittering and brilliant glory of the occasion and synonymous with such events, especially when the daughter and son of two well-known families in the ancient town were wedded in holy matrimony.

Hundreds of wedding invitations were issued to all my father’s friends of all races up and down the peninsula, who were even accommodated and entertained at my father’s expense.... [A]ll the guests seemed to enjoy themselves and savoured the festivities joyously as the occasion warranted. There was ball-room dancing, with an orchestra strumming the Viennese waltzes, tangos, fox-trots and slow waltzes. The men and women were formally dressed wearing black ties and long dresses respectively. (SCOTT-ROSS, 1990, p. 53-54)

¹¹ This photograph also appears both on the wall at the PPCM and in Lee and Chen (2006, 81). This time the caption is the same in both cases. Lee and Chen credit the photograph to the collection of Mrs. Alice Scott-Ross, who is one of the daughters of Tan Cheng Lock.

¹² The Singapore-based newspaper *The Straits Times* published a full list of guests and gifts in an article entitled “Brilliant Chinese Wedding: Two Leading Families Unite in Malacca,” a couple of days after the wedding (*The Straits Times*, April 23, 1935, p. 7). A longer account of the events (and description of all dresses) appeared five days later in “The Social Spotlight” section of the paper by “Our Woman Correspondent” (*The Straits Times*, April 28, 1935, p. 10).



Figure 03 - Wedding photograph taken c. 1937. From the collection of photographs displayed at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, Heeren Street, Malacca.



Figure 04 - Modern Malacca Bride and Traditional Groom, c. 1935. From the collection of photographs displayed at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, Heeren Street, Malacca.

If modern attire and ballroom dancing were creeping into Peranakan weddings, ritual practice was a domain of greater stability. As Alice Scott-Ross mentions, Chinese customary rituals were regularly observed at home even though few Peranakans spoke – let alone were literate in – Chinese. Furthermore, by this time many were practicing Christians; those who remained Buddhist mostly patronized the Sek Kia Eenh temple in nearby Gajah Berang where ceremonies were conducted in English rather than Chinese. Despite these concessions to modernity, every Peranakan house had an elaborate ancestral hall located immediately behind the main entrance hall. It was dominated by a large framed portrait of a family ancestor with hanging couplets either side of the frame. Under the portrait, against the wall was a high, narrow, carved altar table on which was placed an ornately carved shrine containing the family's ancestral tablets. Offerings of rice wine, joss sticks, flowers, and food were placed on the altar and a lower table placed in front. More elaborate offerings would be laid out when a priest was invited into the house for special occasions (Figure 05). Here we see a priest conducting a ritual in a family ancestral hall, accompanied by three musicians (two playing cymbals and one playing a small oboe-type instrument called *seroni*) and watched by an old man seated on the floor in the background.



Figure 05 - Chinese ritual activity inside the home. From the collection of photographs displayed at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, Heeren Street, Malacca.

Peranakan social life of the period, in contrast, revolved around a very British-colonial constellation of mission schools, scouting, private sports and social clubs, literary and dramatic associations, etc. Some institutions – the schools and Boy Scouts, in particular – provided opportunities for social mixing across race and class. In this photograph (Figure 06) we see the young Lim Keng Watt (1909-96), at the far left, dressed stylishly for an outing with a mixed group of school friends and again (Figure 07), seated on the right, at a Boy Scout campsite.¹³ Lim is a good example of the fluidity of Peranakan/Chinese identity at this time. His mother was a Nyonya but his father had been born in China and brought to Singapore as an orphan at the age of 13. Young Lim spoke Hokkien at home but studied at St. Francis Institution (one of the main English-medium mission schools in Malacca) where he played violin in the school orchestra. He married a Nyonya, served in the Volunteers during the war, and later became a schoolmaster at SFI. Since both Lim Keng Watt and his wife were teachers in English-medium schools and their sons went to SFI, English – rather than Hokkien or Baba-Malay – was spoken at home according to their daughter, Audrey, a retired English-medium schoolteacher herself (Audrey Lim, pers. comm., Oct. 11, 2012).¹⁴

¹³ Although Boy Scout troops were founded in individual schools a little earlier, the Malacca State branch was founded in 1926 by R. Brunstone.

¹⁴ Audrey describes herself as “only half Nyonya through my mother” (pers. comm., Oct. 7, 2012). Having told me that her father wasn’t Peranakan, she re-looked at old family photographs and noticed, for the first time, that based on her attire, his mother actually was a Nyonya (pers. comm., Oct. 11, 2012).

Private clubs and associations catered to more exclusive memberships and organized balls, galas, variety shows, and fancy dress parties (Figure 08) for Malacca's high society. Dress at such events was "formal": notice the white tuxedos and bow ties worn by the men at this fancy dress party. Some associations supported music and dramatic subsections that staged public performances, often in aid of charitable causes. Plays spanned the gamut from *bangsawan*¹⁵ to Shakespeare. Here (Figure 09) we see the cast of a 1934 performance of "Amed the Cobbler," a Malay-style *bangsawan* performance given to raise money for the Seng Cheong Society.¹⁶ Situated at #20 Tranquerah Road, a stone's throw from Heeren Street, the Seng Cheong Society was founded in 1929 primarily by China-born community leaders to promote cultural, recreational, educational, and morally uplifting activities for young Chinese. Public events, especially those organized as benefits, were frequently reviewed in the local newspaper, the *Malacca Guardian*, which published every Monday from January 1928 to December 1940. For example, in December 1932, the Malacca Merry Makers presented a "very fine initial effort for Charity when they staged the well-known 'Fortune Teller' at the Eldorado Cinema."¹⁷ Not to be outdone, the Malacca Hotspurs Association orchestra and dramatic section combined to stage "The Prodigal Son," complete with musical and comedic interludes called "extra turns," on February 4 and 5, 1933, at which they raised \$310 (50% of ticket sales) for St. David's Hospital.¹⁸

Musical life in Malacca was chaotically eclectic, as this 1934 *Malacca Guardian* cartoon by Peranakan artist Yankee Leong suggests (Figure 10)¹⁹. The ballroom dancing craze reached Malacca in the early 1930s and by mid-decade there were two public Cabarets – City Cabaret opened in December 1934, Capitol Cabaret in May 1936 – patronized by young men in search of "sing-song girls" and taxi dancers. In addition there were cinemas and amusement parks to entertain the general public. Being wealthy and modern, the Peranakans were at the forefront of every new craze:

Radios and gramophones also found their way into living rooms. In those days, the Peranakans were the first amongst the Chinese to own such "modern" equipment.... As a result of their constant contact with the colonial rulers, many Peranakans acquired an appreciation of Western classical and popular music in

¹⁵ *Bangsawan*, a form of "Malay opera" that developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, "was commercial in nature and ... constantly innovating to suit the changing tastes of the audience. It was 'modern', 'up-to-date', and incorporated Malay, Western, and other foreign elements. It was mainly because of its heterogeneous character that *bangsawan* became the common local theatre for different ethnic groups living in Malaya in the early twentieth century" (TAN, 1993, vii).

¹⁶ The young girl seated on the floor to the right is Audrey Lim's *koh cik*, or "youngest auntie" (pers. comm. Jan. 18, 2013).

¹⁷ *Malacca Guardian*, December 26, 1932, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Malacca Guardian*, January 9, 1933; February 13, 1933, p. 5. Two months later the Hotspurs traveled by steamer to Singapore for two additional performances in aid of the Non-European Unemployment Fund (*The Straits Times*, April 17, 1933, p. 12).

¹⁹ *Malacca Guardian*, August 13, 1934, p. 14.

addition to their appreciation of *keronchong* and *dondang sayang*.²⁰ Many song books were published containing the popular tunes of the day.... This musical interest encompassed the acquisition of pianos, which became common in many Peranakan homes. Families would gather round the piano, and to the accompaniment of violas or violins, accordions, and perhaps banjos and mandolins, popular songs would be sung. (LEE; CHEN, 2006, p. 92-93)



Figure 06 - Lim Keng Watt (left) and St. Francis Institution classmates. From the collection of Audrey Lim.

²⁰ *Kroncong* (or *Keronchong*) is a form of popular music with Portuguese characteristics imported from Java. It was “very popular among the *babas* (Straits Chinese male singers) in Penang and Malacca in the 1920s.... In the 1930s [it] became one of the most popular kinds of music on the Malay Peninsula” (TAN; MATUSKY, 2004, p. 342-51). The standard ensemble comprised a singer, Western violin, flute, guitar, ukulele, banjo, cello, and double bass. *Dondang sayang* (lit. “love song”) is a traditional Malay verbal art in which two singers (one male, one female) extemporaneously exchange verses in a complex 4-line poetic form called *pantun* in an attempt to flirt with, scold, or generally outwit the other. The form, particularly associated with Malacca, has a distinctive melody and rhythm and is accompanied by a small ensemble comprising at minimum one or two Malay drums (*rebana*), a western violin, and a gong. Peranakans from Malacca and Singapore have a great affinity for the genre and over time developed their own Baba-Malay style of *pantun* (see THOMAS, 1986). Both *kroncong* and *dondang sayang* are still popular within the Peranakan community. No Tuesday night Baba-Nyonya sing-along at the PPCM is complete without *kroncong* songs being requested.



Figure 07 - Lim Keng Watt (right) and friend at a Boy Scout camp. From the collection of Audrey Lim.

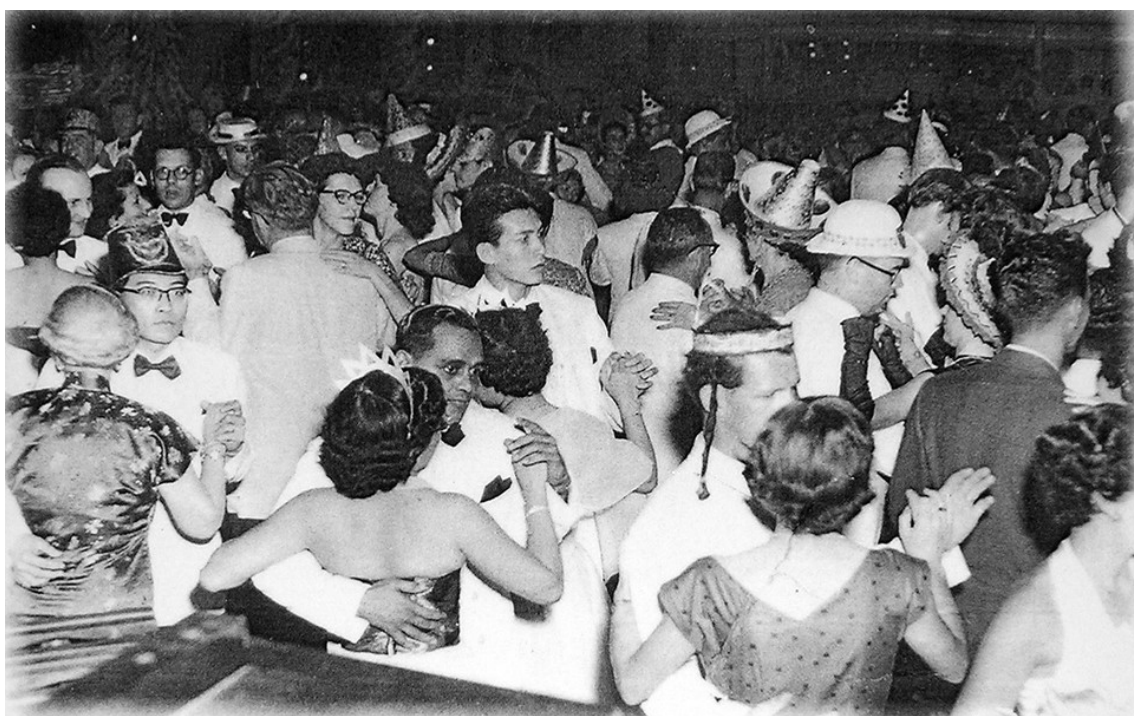


Figure 08 - Fancy dress ball. From the collection of photographs displayed at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, Heeren Street, Malacca.



Figure 09 - Amed the Cobbler. 1934 charity performance at Seng Cheong Society. From the collection of Audrey Lim.

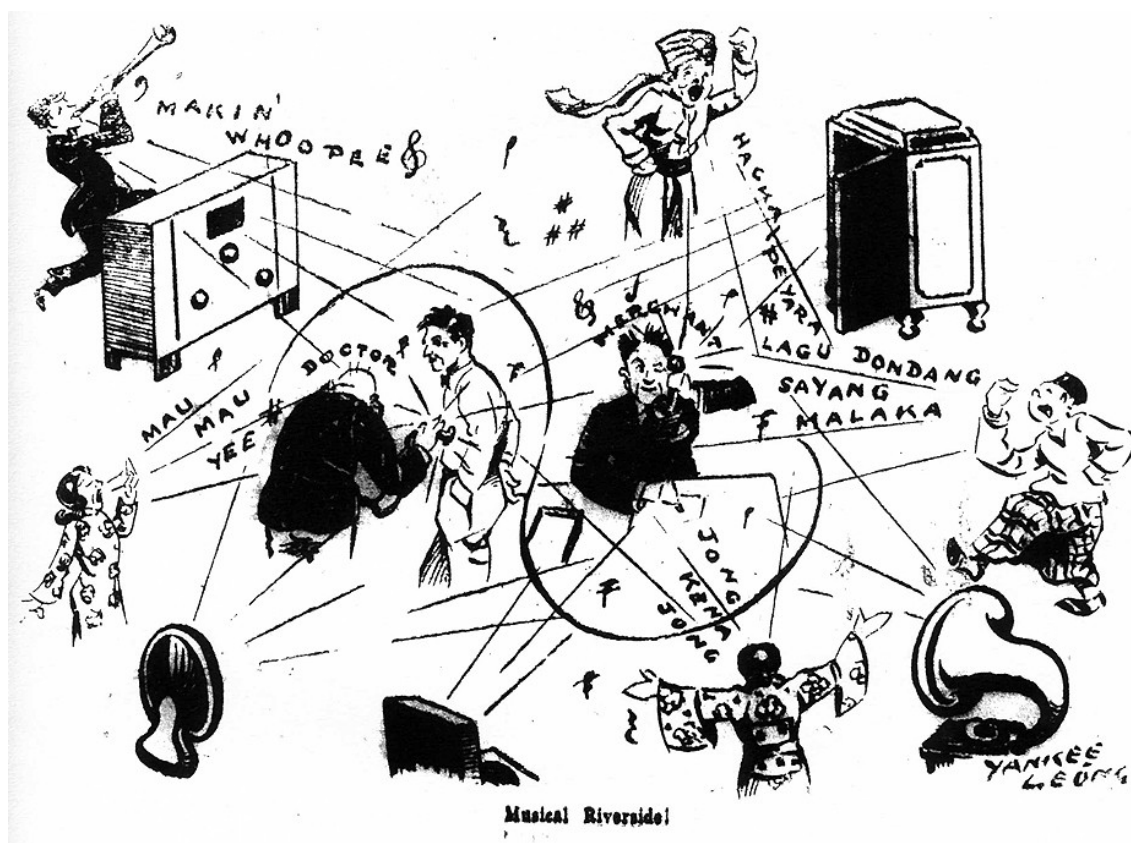


Figure 10 - Cartoon by Yankee Leong. *Malacca Guardian*, August 13, 1934, p. 14.

Young Babas actively sought out the latest music. Lee Kip Lee (b. 1922), who grew up in Singapore but had cousins in Malacca, reminisces fondly about this period in his memoir, *Amber Sands*:

When the grinder – the spring gramophone – became obsolete, Pa bought a Philco radio-gramophone. It was a comparatively massive piece of furniture measuring four feet high and three feet wide, with the automatic gramophone player on top, the radio component and control knobs in the middle and the loudspeaker at the bottom.... Both Pa and I spent many pleasurable hours glued to this equipment.... I, combing the radio wavelengths on Saturday nights tuning in to the NIROM (Netherlands Indies, now Indonesia) station to hear the “live” broadcasts of my favourite band, The Hawaiian Syncopators, opening the programme with their signature tune “On The Beach At Waikiki.” Or I would turn the dial to the request program of the Happy Station in Hilversum, Holland, or to the studio of the Voice of America at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. (LEE, 1995, p. 13-15)

Not content with simply listening to the radio or gramophone records, musically talented young Babas started forming amateur groups of their own. We know that many young Peranakans had music lessons and learned how to read notation. Violin and piano were the most common instruments, especially for the boys, but other stringed instruments (ukulele, mandolin, banjo, guitar, and upright bass) were also played. Amy Yeo Geok Hean (b. 1934) reported that six of her older siblings – three boys and three

girls – played together in a family string band to amuse themselves and entertain guests of their parents (interview, Aug. 21, 2005; see SARKISSIAN, 2011). For the girls, musical skill usually remained within the family, but for the boys, it was a window to the outside world. Young Babas like the Yeo brothers (who were first cousins of Lily Tan and her siblings) joined amateur “parties,” string orchestras and dance bands, to play the latest British and American hits as well as favorite Malay *kroncong* songs; smaller groups gathered at informal sessions to sing *dondang sayang* in Malay. By the late 1920s, there were at least three large Peranakan ensembles in Malacca: the Chan Teck Chye Orchestra, which bore the name of its wealthy patron,²¹ the Malacca Hotspur Association’s Music Section, and the Nightingale Minstrel Party (which collaborated with the Malacca Straits-born Chinese Dramatic Party). There were many other more ephemeral groups that drew occasional attention. One such, the Dandy Coons, was described in January 1933 as “another very useful and accomplished Straits Chinese Amateur Party.... They are a clever set of Amateurs, comprising a party of about 14 members and have a very wide repertoire of up to date hits. Purely a minstrel party on the usual orthodox lines they are likely to be in great demand at social functions in the near future.”²²

The most prominent ensembles, however, were those associated with the larger social clubs such as the Malacca Hotspur Association.²³ Here (Figure 11) we see the Hotspur’s Music Section posing for a group photograph. In typically colonial fashion, committee members sit front and center (the three men without instruments wearing black jackets and ties). In the center is Captain Tan Soo Hock, J.P. (1883-1936), commander of the Chinese Company of the Malacca Volunteers Corps; to his left, another community leader, Chan Soo Ann,²⁴ the third man is, as yet, unidentified. The 23 musicians, all wearing white tuxedos and black bow ties, are holding their instruments, most of which are stringed: violins, ukuleles, banjos, mandolins, and guitars. They are framed by a trap set at one end and, looking a little out of place, a single saxophone at the other. The

²¹ Mr. Chan Teck Chye, “a beloved Municipal Councillor [and] one of the richest men in Malacca... [who] owns considerable landed property, yet is a comparatively humble man,” patronized the Chan Teck Chye Orchestra, “a band of talented musicians,” who played at many public events and fund raisers. *Malacca Guardian*, April 30, 1934, p. 10.

²² *Malacca Guardian*, January 9, 1933.

²³ The Malacca Hotspur Association was registered under the Societies Ordinance in 1925 (*The Straits Times*, June 13, 1925, p. 8). One of the most active Straits Chinese social clubs in Malacca it fielded sports teams as well as amateur dramatic and music sections. I am not sure when the Association ceased to exist, but it was described as “now defunct” in September 1937 (*The Straits Times*, September 12, 1937, p. 22). According to Chan Yew Lock (1922-2009), the Music Section used to practice at #169 Heeren Street, in the heart of the wealthy Baba residential neighborhood (interview, July 15, 2009). As a boy, Yew Lock lived at #165 and nostalgically remembered watching and listening to the musicians, admiring how each musician played his instrument. Mr. Chan passed away 12 December, 2009.

²⁴ Although Capt. Tan Soo Hock, J. P. (Justice of the Peace) died in 1936, Chan Soo Ann remained active in Straits Chinese community affairs for many years. In 1950, for example, he was elected to the committee of the Malacca Chinese Benevolent Society (Meng Seng), *The Straits Times*, May 18, 1950, p. 5.

scene looks typically colonial, except for a few small details. Above the musicians' heads is a banner proclaiming that the Association is performing in aid of the Shandong Relief Fund, which dates the photograph to October 20-27, 1928. Further above is a large photograph of Sun Yat Sen, framed by *dui lian* couplets in Chinese – “The Revolution has not yet succeeded” and “Comrades still need to make greater efforts” – and two flags of the Republic of China.²⁵ These details point to a subtext, a link between the very “British” Babas (often called “The King’s Chinese”), the majority of whom could not read Chinese, and a more activist minority supportive of the Chinese Nationalists.²⁶ At this moment when overt Guomindang activity was banned by the British but raising funds for “disaster relief” in China was not, use of the late Sun Yat Sen’s image was a powerful local statement of Chinese nationalism in the face of Japanese imperialism in China.²⁷ We know that Guomindang members were active in Malacca at this time and also that networks of personal association were extremely complex.²⁸

The week-long Grand Charity Show in aid of the Shandong Relief Fund is a seminal example of the way the “Straits-born Chinese assisted by their China-born Chinese friends and brethren” interacted for a good cause. Significantly, however, the entertainment side of the event was dominated by the Peranakan community, which didn’t miss an opportunity to fundraise for its own causes as well; “the nett proceeds of the [final] night [were] given, part to the Poppy Day Fund and part to the Malacca

²⁵ The *Malacca Guardian* ran extensive coverage of the event in its October 22 and October 29 issues. The paper’s correspondent described the scene thus: “In the centre of this large, open space, a flag-staff had been erected, and some hundred yards away stood a two-storied circular building, which had been tastefully and brightly decorated. A large framed photograph of the late Dr. Sun Yat Sen had been placed in a conspicuous position on this double-storied kiosk, and on the flag staff beside numerous other Nationistic [sic] flags, was a large Chinese emblem” (*Malacca Guardian*, October 22, 1928, p. 9). No mention was made, however, of the Chinese couplets, their meaning, or any of the deeper political subtext of the event.

²⁶ Sun Yat Sen died in 1925 and the Nationalist party was taken over by Chang Kai Shek, who created a national front with the Communists. This fascinating and complex historical moment was carefully watched by Overseas Chinese throughout Asia who, rooting for the Nationalists to unite China, organized a massive anti-Japanese boycott when the Nationalists encountered the Japanese in Shandong.

²⁷ The Shandong Relief Fund, headed by the hugely influential Tan Kah Kee, was shut down after three months by a British government getting increasingly nervous about the growing strength of the Nationalist party in China.

²⁸ For example, we know that Capt. Tan Soo Hock was well-enough acquainted with Ho Pao Jin, a China-born community organizer and Guomindang activist, that on May 23, 1936, Ho translated a eulogy from Baba-Malay into Chinese at Capt. Tan’s memorial service (*The Straits Times*, May 26, 1936, p. 13). Ho Pao Jin, a fascinating transnational Chinese figure in his own right, was a prominent Malacca resident, but had formerly been leader of the Shanghai Student Union in 1919, a student and later faculty member at Fudan University, and recipient of a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. At this point in his life, he had turned his formidable organizing skills to actively promoting Chinese-language education in Malacca (Jerry Dennerline, work in progress).

Medical Mission.”²⁹ The Malacca Hotspur Association’s Dramatic Section and the Malacca Straits-born Chinese Dramatic Party both staged “Malay plays” (*bangsawan*) for the occasion – “Kok Cheng and Kok Chye” and “Toh Liang, the Orphan,” respectively. Both plays were described at great length in the *Malacca Guardian*, which, in addition to reviewing the plots and stage performances gave a complete list of everyone involved, from director and stage assistants to actors and musicians (and their instruments).³⁰ Furthermore, the musical repertoire presented by all three participating ensembles – the Chan Teck Chye Orchestra, the Malacca Hotspur Association’s Music Section, and the Nightingale Minstrel Party – was listed in full. From this we learn that audiences of the day were given a steady diet of marches, foxtrots, and waltzes.³¹

We can see musical change beginning to occur in two later photographs of the Malacca Hotspur Association’s Music Section. In the first (Figure 12), taken at a fancy dress party (probably at a wealthy Baba’s country house), we see a mixed string ensemble with the addition of three saxophones of different sizes. In the second (Figure 13), we see “the Hotspur Orchestra performing at the Residency for the visit of Governor Sir Hugh Clifford.”³² This time, although violins are still prominent, the ukuleles, mandolins, and banjos have been replaced by wind instruments, notably 6 saxophones (4 alto, 2 tenor), 1 clarinet, and 2 flutes. The presence of a rhythm section of trap set, string bass, and piano also suggests changing musical tastes. Apart from the changes in instrumentation, personnel changes support my assumption that these photographs post-date the Shandong Relief Fund event. There are several musicians who appear both

²⁹ *Malacca Guardian*, October 29, 1928, p. 11.

³⁰ *Malacca Guardian*, October 22, 1928, p. 7 and 9, and October 29, p. 11. We learn, for example, that the musicians of the Malacca Hotspur’s Music Section (presumably those in the photograph being discussed) were: “Mr. Chan Boon Eng (Conductor), Violin; Mr. Goh Tong Kiat (Assistant Conductor), Violin; Mr. C. Permal Retty, Violin; Mr. Ong Yan Chuan II, Violin; Mr. Chee Choon Ham, Saxophone, Mr. Tay Lian Watt, Flute; Mr. Yap Beng Chuan, Piano; Mr. Ong Kim Leong, Mandoline [sic]; Mr. Lim Kim Hoe, Mandoline; Mr. Wee Tiong Kim, Mandoline; Mr. Wee Eng Kee, Mandoline; Mr. Ong Kim Yam, Mandoline; Mr. Goh Tiam Siew II, Mandoline; Mr. Tan Kim Sun, Mandoline; Mr. Lee Sam Choon, Madoline; Mr. Wee Eng Suan, Guitar; Mr. Wee Eng Leong, Guitar; Mr. Yeo Tiong Hoe, Guitar; Mr. Toh Seng Hoe, Tenor Banjo; Mr. Gan Gok Kuan, Banjo; Mr. Tan Ann Lock, Ukulele Banjo; Mr. Tan Eng Lim, Ukulele; Mr. Low Kim Tee, Ukulele; Mr. Chan Cheng Chuan, Ukulele, and Mr. Chan Lian Beng, Jazz [i.e., drums]” (*Malacca Guardian*, October 29, 1928, p. 11).

³¹ The repertoire is equally fascinating. To give just one example, between 8 and 10 p.m. on Tuesday, October 23, the Hotspur’s Music Section performed: “Queen City” (march), “Don’t Sing Aloha When I Go” (foxtrot, Walter Smith), “Pansies” (foxtrot, M. Nicholls), “In A Little Spanish Town” (waltz, Mabel Wayne), “Barcelona” (one step, Tolchard Evans), “Susie’s Little Sister” (foxtrot, Leslie Sarony), “Smile When the Sun Is Shining” (foxtrot, Kenneth Lyle), “Hawaiian Sunset” (waltz, F.W. Vandersloot), “Stay Out of the South” (foxtrot, Harold Dixon), and “Liberty Bell” (march, J.P. Sousa). (*ibid.*)

³² Sir Hugh Clifford was Governor of the Straits Settlements from June 3, 1927 to February 5, 1930. My best guess, based on changes in instrumentation and personnel, is that this performance occurred after the Shandong Relief Fund performance (i.e., between November 1928 and February 1930).

in Figure 12 and Figure 13, including one – Lim Keng Watt – who was not present in the 1928 photograph (nor named in the *Malacca Guardian* list of musicians). In Figure 12 Lim is the 2nd violinist in the back row, wearing bead necklaces or Hawaiian *leis*) and in Figure 13 he is 6th from the right in the back row, holding his violin and standing behind the shoulder of the seated pianist.



Figure 11 - Malacca Hotspurs, Shandong Relief Fund, October 1928. Postcard, property of Edwin Yeo, from the collection of his father Yeo Kuan Jin.



Figure 12 - Malacca Hotspurs in fancy dress. From the collection of Audrey Lim.



Figure 13 - Malacca Hotspurs at the Residency. Sir Hugh Clifford (Governor)'s visit. From the collection of Audrey Lim.

By the late 1930s to early 1940s Peranakan musical tastes were further influenced by the steady diet of current American dance music being heard on the radio, in movies, and performed live by professional bands at the Cabarets. String bands were no longer fashionable and the old Malacca Hotspur Association had ceased to exist; new bands had taken their place. Two rival Peranakan bands of this era are still remembered today by older members of the community: Oleh Sayang (formed in 1937) and the Nightingales (formed in 1938 by ex-members of Oleh Sayang).³³ Both amateur groups regularly held concerts in aid of charity. While I have not yet found a photograph of Oleh Sayang, this image of the Nightingales (Figure 14) dates from February 1940 (despite the erroneous handwritten date) and shows a clear move towards a more modern dance band formation with the addition of saxophones, trumpet, and string bass³⁴. It is clearly a formal group portrait: the officers – founding President Teo Chong Lum (right) and secretary Chua Biow Liat (left) – are standing in the center in white tuxedos; band members are all wearing smart uniforms. It is unclear why saxophone player Chang Seng Chuan's jacket is the inverse of the others (unless he was the leader/conductor). I have not identified all the musicians in this photograph, but most are Peranakan and were recognized by elderly members of the community. Of particular interest are Amy Yeo's three brothers – Kuan Hock (violin), Kuan Jin (ukulele), and Kuan Ghee (side drum) – the older two of whom were stalwarts of the Peranakan music scene for the next half-century. It is also noteworthy that two musicians in the front row are not Baba – one is Malay (Mohammad Tamby Chik, saxophone) and the other Filipino (Bernard Zarzadias, string bass) – which shows not only that musicians intermingled across racial lines, but also that wind players were often not Baba, even in Peranakan bands.³⁵

³³ I have not been able to confirm whether or not there was any connection between the Nightingales, said to have been founded in 1938, and the Nightingale Minstrel Party that participated in the Grand Charity Show for the Shandong Relief Fund in 1928.

³⁴ A note affixed to a copy of this photograph in the possession of Yeo Kuan Jin's older son, Victor, says: "The Nightingales, 10 Feb. 1940. Prime mover of the founding of the Nightingales in 1938 was Mr. Wee Eng Leong [the trumpet player, right of center]. Founding President was Mr. Teo Chong Lum [center right] and secretary was Mr. Chua Biow Liat [center left]. To be expected, rivalry with the sister party was intense. Both parties regularly held concerts in aid of charity. The dawn of the Pacific War extinguished both parties." The handwritten date (1935) on the face of the original photograph (in younger brother Edwin Yeo's collection) is erroneous: the group was only formed in 1938 and there is a date, 1939, in the center of the bass drum.

³⁵ Identifying musicians in these later photographs proved to be a fascinating fieldwork experience. Elderly Peranakans were mostly only able to recognize Peranakan musicians; it was not until I showed the photographs to elderly non-Peranakan musicians that I was able to identify some of the non-Peranakan members. For example, Bernard Zarzadias was quickly recognized by several Portuguese-Eurasian musicians, including his future son-in-law, pianist Don Beins.



Figure 14 - The Nightingales, February, 1940. From the collection of Yeo Kuan Jin, courtesy of Edwin Yeo.

There are still a few surviving Peranakans who remember Oleh Sayang, The Nightingales, and their repertoire, which by all accounts was current and international. Harry Ong (b. 1926), a Hawaiian guitarist still active in 2012, recalls:

I was in the Oleh Sayang. You see, my father [Ong Kim Seng] was one of the officials, so I had to join them. He was one of the committee members.... The Nightingales split from Oleh Sayang, but my father stayed, so, of course, I had to stay. I was a singer then. I still remember singing that song, 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' We played some *kroncong* music, because at that time there was no such thing as pop and all those things, and 'Somewhere over the Rainbow.' We had functions and played some European songs." (interview, June 25, 2009)

"South of the Border," another favorite still requested at Peranakan sing-alongs today, is fondly remembered as being one of Yeo Kuan Jin's favorite songs of the day.³⁶

The "Golden Age" of Peranakan culture ended abruptly when the Japanese occupied Malacca in January 1942. Before the Occupation the Peranakans were a modern,

³⁶ The songs "Somewhere over the Rainbow" (music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by E.Y. Harburg) and "South of the Border" (written by Jimmy Kennedy and Michael Carr) were both published in 1939. The former was written for the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and made famous by Judy Garland; the latter for the movie *South of the Border* (also 1939) starring Gene Autry.

British-oriented forward-looking community marked by dress, décor, social organizations, and musical preferences. Philanthropy was a central focus for community leaders: charitable associations and benevolent societies were founded for the benefit of their “poor Chinese brethren.” Even the musical and dramatic groups existed to raise money for charity, local hospitals, and China disaster relief. The lives of the Peranakan and wealthy Chinese merchants were markedly different, but nevertheless there were friendships, cooperative ventures, and marriages (such as Lily Tan and Charlie Chan’s in 1935) that connected them. That all changed with the Japanese Occupation. Life became difficult for all Chinese, but especially for the wealthy British-oriented Peranakans. Elderly Nyonyas still tell stories of the loss of family jewelry, their fear of Japanese officers, and having to retreat to country houses to evade the notice of Japanese soldiers.

Post-Colonial Nostalgia: Life in the “Heritage zone”

The “colonial elite” lifestyle may have disappeared long ago, but Peranakan culture has survived into the 21st-century. In fact, it has recently received new prominence as a central part of Malacca’s “heritage” package. On July 7, 2008, after several unsuccessful attempts, Malacca and Georgetown, Penang, were jointly declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. While Malacca’s core heritage zone (Figure 15) includes St. Paul’s Hill, the ruins of the Portuguese fort, and many Dutch colonial buildings, a substantial portion covers the Heeren Street neighborhood (Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock) with its residential property, shophouses, and elegant homes once owned by wealthy Babas. While few Peranakans live in this neighborhood today, many grew up there, still have a strong attachment to the area, and attend functions at the PPCM clubhouse on Heeren Street (Figure 16). The entire neighborhood is in a state of transition. According to Lim and Jorge’s study of Malacca’s streets, by 2005 fewer than 40 of Heeren Street’s 183 buildings continued to serve as family homes (LIM; JORGE, 2005, p. 60). Some are in reasonable condition; others have been well preserved. Tan Cheng Lock’s house (Figure 17), for example, is still beautifully maintained by the family, even though his children no longer live in Malacca, and can be viewed by appointment, if you have the right connections. The Chee Mansion (Figure 18), the jewel of the street, is currently being renovated by the family. The Chan family house (Figure 19) has been converted into a private museum of Peranakan culture. Now called the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, the building has been beautifully restored, as this detail of an upstairs window shows (Figure 20). The less fortunate homes, however, have been turned into “birds’ nest houses” (Figure 21) or simply left to rot (Figure 22).³⁷ UNESCO World Heritage status has, for better or worse, turned Heeren Street into prime tourist real estate. Since 2008 an increasing number of houses have been bought up by outsiders (primarily Singaporeans) and turned into Peranakan-themed boutique hotels, cafés, art galleries, and cheap souvenir shops.

³⁷ In 2005, Lim and Jorge counted 14 houses already converted into breeding grounds for swiftlets; more have succumbed to this lucrative business since then (LIM; JORGE, 2005, p. 63).

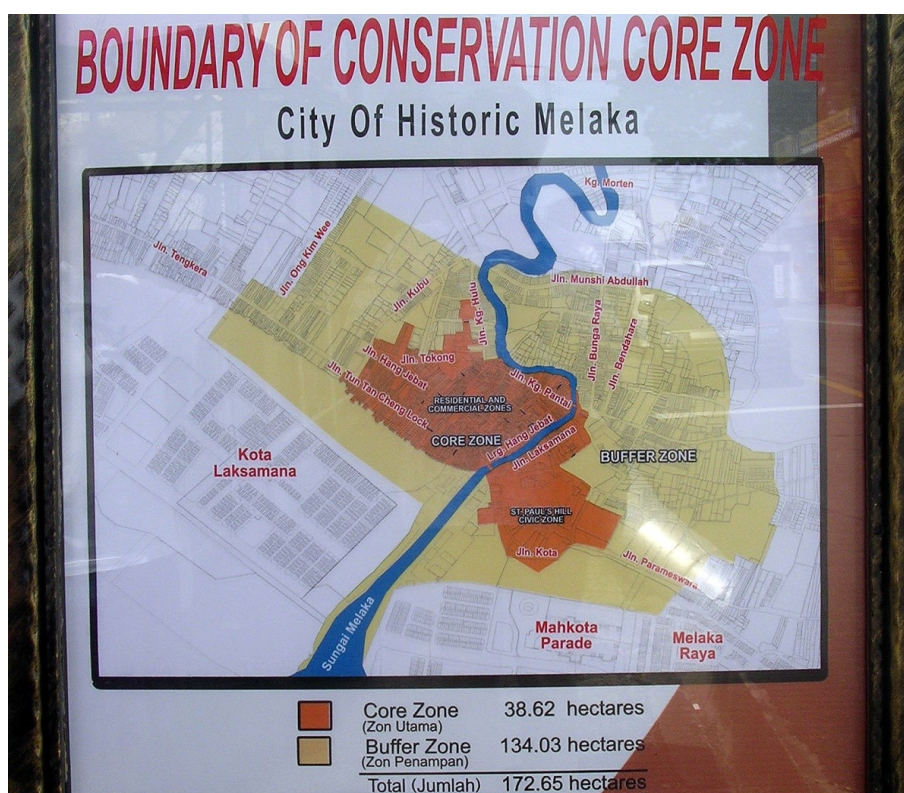


Figure 15 - Map of core heritage zone. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 16 - Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Peranakan Chinese Association of Malacca) on Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 17 - Tun Tan Cheng Lock's house on Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 18 - The Chee Mansion, Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 19 - The Chan family home, now the Baba Museum, Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 20 - Detail of upstairs window, Chan family home. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 21 - Swiflets nesting inside a boutique hotel on Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 22 - House in disrepair on Heeren Street. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.

Twenty-first-century Peranakans, then, are in a peculiar situation. In order to claim a place in the modern Malaysian multicultural family, they have to appear distinct, “exotic,” and part of a nostalgic past. In effect, in order to be seen, they now have to appear less modern than they once were and, in many cases, still are. To this end, the tuxedos and ball gowns of the 1920s and ‘30s have been replaced by other markers of Peranakan identity: *sarong kebayas* and beaded slippers for the women and *baju Cina*, high-collared Chinese shirts for the men. *Sarong kebayas* have always been the everyday clothing of Nyonya women, clearly marking their local roots albeit in a style distinctly their own, but they were not considered formal dress for public occasions. Today’s Nyonya women wear elegant *sarong kebayas* on formal occasions. Here (Figure 23) we see Dora Yeo and her three daughters, Dionne, Evonne, and Adelynn

dressed for a gala event in 2003. Dora, a local-born Chinese, is married to a Baba (Victor Yeo, son of the musician Yeo Kuan Jin); their three daughters identify as Nyonya, but can read and write Mandarin. The hybridity of their clothing is clear. It is nothing like the heavy, embroidered dresses imported from China and worn at traditional weddings (see Figures 02 and 03). Yet it still emphasizes their superior wealth, elegance, and taste. Nyonya *sarong kebaya*s may be finely embroidered and accented with exquisite jewelry and ornate beaded slippers, but they still link today's Nyonyas to other local *sarong kebaya*-wearing women – Malays, Portuguese-Eurasians, and Chitty Melaka (a small local-born Indian community)³⁸ – and to their own history as women of local origin. Formal dress for today's Baba is the high-collared *baju Cina* (Chinese shirt) (Figures 24 and 25). Although it does bear a passing resemblance to the short silk jackets worn by traditional grooms (see Figures 02 and 04), the *baju cina* is worn (without an accompanying hat) over trousers instead of a long Chinese scholar's robe, which serves to distance today's Baba from his Manchu ancestors.

Diamond-encrusted jewelry (Figure 26), fine embroidery, beaded slippers, and ornately decorated pastel-colored porcelain, together with *Nyonya* food and traditional games are now omnipresent markers of the Peranakan lifestyle, whether constructed by the community, the state government, television companies, or the tourist industry. Museums in Malacca, Penang, and Singapore are devoted to the display of the most opulent examples of this material culture from the past. While Peranakan culture is still *lived* by a dwindling and aging cohort born at the tail end of the “Golden Age,” it is now *performed* by young Peranakans. Distilled in the form of “the wedding scene,” Peranakan culture is now acted out by the younger generation as part of cultural shows and exhibitions. Cedric Tan, a young Baba from Malacca, has developed a business that stages “traditional” Peranakan wedding scenes for promotions and tourist events (Figure 27). Young Peranakans who play the roles of members of the wedding party are little more than mannequins for displaying the gorgeous costumes (Figures 28 and 29). The staged tableaux even draw on cross-dressing characters from much-loved Peranakan theatre (*wayang* Peranakan) in which men played the part of elderly women (*bibiks*) for comic effect (Figure 30).³⁹ In an odd reversal of life-imitating-art-imitating-life, some young Peranakans rent costumes for real weddings or even for staged wedding photographs – without observing, of course, the traditional rituals that accompanied old-style Peranakan weddings. Even the Babas and Nyonyas of the PPCM who gather for the regular Tuesday night sing-alongs (Figure 01)⁴⁰ occasionally dress up and take the stage to perform as “Banyas” (*Baba* and *Nyonyas*) on special occasions (Figure 31).

³⁸ Each community has a slightly different style of *sarong-kebaya* that can be recognized by the discerning viewer, but the basic combination of a short blouse (*kebaya*) over a long, wrap-around batik skirt (*sarong*) is shared.

³⁹ The *bibik* characters are standing second from the left and at the extreme right of this photograph. Both men are wearing *baju kurung* (Malay, “long dress”), the 3/4-length blouse worn over *sarong* characteristic of wealthy Nyonya's formal wear. In Peranakan theatre there is usually another comic cross-dressed character, the lower-class Chinese *amah* or female servant who acts as a sidekick to the main *bibik*.

⁴⁰ Amy Yeo, waving, is seventh from the right in the front row. She is a younger sister of the three musical Yeo brothers, Kuan Hock, Kuan Jin, and Kuan Ghee (Figure 14).



Figure 23 - Dora, Dionne, Evonne, and Adelynn Yeo (left to right). Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 24 - Mr. Ang and his wife, Alice Lee. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 25 - Their children, Elaine and Daniel Ang. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 26 - Detail of a Nyonya brooch. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 27 - Cedric Tan preparing for the “Wedding Works Promotion,” Kuala Lumpur.



Figure 28 - "Wedding Works Promotion," Kuala Lumpur, 26 May-6 June, 2011.



Figure 29 - "Wedding Works Promotion," Kuala Lumpur, 26 May-6 June, 2011.



Figure 30 - “Wedding Works Promotion,” Kuala Lumpur, 26 May-6 June, 2011.



Figure 31 - Members of BaNyas on stage at the Ministers' Wives Association dinner, August 2003. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 32 - Members of BaNyas performing a typical medley at the Ministers' Wives Association dinner, August 2003. Photo by Jerry Dennerline. Audio available.

On the surface, this may seem like a 180-degree turn-around from the world of the “Golden Age,” but if you look and listen closely, some common themes persist. First, the songs they sing remain largely the same. Second, today’s Peranakans still love a good dance. And third, though some of the band boys may look a little older than their counterparts from the “Golden Age,” Peranakan bands still provide the soundtrack. In terms of song repertoire, there has been great stability over time. Over the years the regulars at the PPCM sing-alongs have compiled their own songbook, an ever-expanding binder full of favorite song lyrics, which they bring along each Tuesday night. The song collection is an eclectic mix mostly of well-known English-language oldies, but with smaller subsections of *kroncong*, other Malay songs, and Chinese songs (the latter are written phonetically in roman script, sometimes with rough translations underneath). At the Tuesday night sing-alongs, participants sit in rows on white plastic chairs facing the band, which is on a small raised stage at the end of the room. Each participant chooses a song for the group to sing and calls out the title and page number when it is his or her turn; much good-natured banter and heckling occurs in conjunction with certain members’ choices. After everyone has had a turn, the singing portion of the session ends, thick sweet black coffee and Nyonya snacks are brought out, and members sit around to eat, chat, gossip, and joke around (the latter usually in increasingly raucous Baba-Malay).

When preparing for a public performance, Banyas members select a medley of songs, which they practice for several weeks in advance in order to memorize the lyrics and practice simple movements – sashaying onto the stage in two rows, men behind, women in front, the latter carrying Peranakan *bakul siah* (tiffin carriers) or decorative umbrellas. The medley they performed at a 2003 dinner organized by the Ministers’

Wives Association is typical (Figure 32⁴¹). The medley begins with “Hello, Hello Everyone,” a witty song that mixes Baba-Malay and English with a smattering of Hokkien words, segues into “Malam Cahaya Bintang” (“Evening Starlight,” a popular *kroncong* song with lyrics in Malay), “You Will Never Grow Old,” “Cruising Down the River,” and “When It’s Spring Time in the Rockies,” and closes with “Ai Pia Cia,” a well-known Hokkien “oldie.”⁴² These are all typical of the repertoire requested at the Tuesday night sing-alongs.



Figure 33 - Dinner dance party. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.

Social dancing is another key marker of Peranakan identity, past and present. In fact, Portuguese-Eurasian musicians joke that you can always tell a Chinese function from a Peranakan function because the Chinese will leave at the earliest possible moment (immediately after the food and speeches have finished) but the Peranakans will dance until midnight – or later, if the band is willing. A quick comparison of a 21st-century Peranakan dance (Figure 33), taken at a local Baba’s 70th birthday party, with a dance

⁴¹ The audio file is available in the website of this journal at this address: <<<http://musicaecultura.abetmusica.org.br/artigos-07-1/MeC07-1-Margaret-Sarkissian-Audio01-11Mb-07min.mp3>>>.

⁴² Of the three English-language songs, “You Will Never Grow Old” was recorded by Nat King Cole in 1952; “Cruising Down the River,” words and music by Elly Beadell and Nell Tollerton, dates from 1946; and “Springtime in the Rockies” comes from a 1937 film of the same name starring Gene Autry.

party from the earlier period (see Figure 08), clearly shows how Peranakan dress codes have changed over time. The ball gowns and white tuxedos of the “Golden Age” have been replaced by elegant *sarong kebayas* for the women and *batik* or plain shirts for the men. Cha chas, rumbas, foxtrots, waltzes, and other ballroom forms are still popular, but the Malaysian social dance *joget* (shown in Figure 33), the twist, and the latest favorite – line dancing – are guaranteed to fill the floor with enthusiastic dancers. There has even been a recent resurgence of interest in ballroom dancing, sparked by a series of Friday night lessons at the PPCM clubhouse.

Entertainment is still provided by live Peranakan bands. Harry Ong, the Hawaiian guitarist who began in the late 1930s with Ole Sayang, still has a band that plays every Thursday night at a sing-along session organized by the Malacca Senior Citizens Association. The most active Peranakan band at present, however, is the PPCM’s own house band, The Melodians (Figure 34). Core band members accompany Tuesday night sing-alongs at the PPCM, while the full band plays for weddings, birthday parties, and other functions.⁴³ Their leader is drummer Victor Yeo (Figure 35), whose father (Yeo Kuan Jin) and uncles (Yeo Kuan Hock and Yeo Kuan Ghee) were stalwarts of the Malacca music scene from the late 1930s until they died. The Melodians’ repertoire comprises the same “evergreens” played by Victor’s father spiced up with newer additions like the line dance favorite, “Achy Breaky Heart.” Keyboardist Robert Seet continues to use photocopies of song lyrics handwritten by Yeo Kuan Jin. Like the amateur Peranakan bands of the past The Melodians still believe strongly in philanthropic responsibility. Victor Yeo organizes regular dinner-dance fundraisers through the PPCM for all sorts of good causes, ranging from the Catholic Senior Citizens “Poor and Needy Fund” to medical treatment for Timorese children at an orphanage in Malacca (Figure 36). They even play “FOC” (free of charge) for charity events organized by others (Figure 37 and 38).

Closing Thoughts

With no place for a colonial elite in a post-colonial world, the Babas and Nyonyas of 21st- century Malacca have been forced to reinvent themselves in order to find space in the new Malaysia. The formal tuxedos and ball gowns of the old photographs have been replaced by *baju cina* and *sarong kebayas*. The heavily embroidered Manchu dresses and robes imported from China for weddings that already seemed old-fashioned in the 1920s, have been re-invented in lightweight materials and find new life in performance on stage as nostalgic markers of Peranakan identity. The old folks still laugh and joke in Baba-Malay, but their grandchildren more often converse in the peculiarly Malaysian form of English known colloquially as “Manglish.” The string orchestras and dance bands of the old photographs have given way to smaller combos. New songs and dances have been added along the way, but the old favorites – the “evergreens” – remain. Despite the many surface changes, the core underlying values and aesthetic preferences

⁴³ And, like the Peranakan bands of the old days, there are one or two regular non-Peranakan members. The left-handed guitarist on the left of this picture is a Malay musician called Zakariah. He is occasionally joined by another Malay musician, accordionist Idriss bin Haji Shariff.

– musical taste, love of parties and dancing, and philanthropic tendencies – have stayed the same.



Figure 34 - The Melodians. Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 35 - The Melodians: Victor Yeo (drums) and Robert Seet (keyboards). Photo by Jerry Dennerline.



Figure 36 - Melodians promotional material, courtesy of Victor Yeo.

MELODIANS CHARITY FUNCTIONS



MGSS MALACCA 100TH YEAR CELEBRATION, MITC MELAKA



MGSS MALACCA 100TH YEAR CELEBRATION, MITC MELAKA

Figures 37 and 38 - Melodians promotional material, courtesy of Victor Yeo.

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