

**Dress and Visual Identities of the *Nyonyas*
in the British Straits Settlements;
mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century**

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requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Thienny Lee
Department of Southeast Asian Studies
University of Sydney
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Statement of Originality

This thesis is my own original work. It contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text. Clearance was obtained from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee for the project.

Thienny Lee

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Abstract

This thesis examines the identities of the Straits Chinese women presented visually through their dress in the former British Straits Settlements from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century. The Straits Chinese were the Straits-born Chinese who were British subjects; their women were often called *Nyonyas* during the period under study. For that reason, the identities of Straits Chinese women are frequently assumed to be the same to that of *Nyonyas*. This thesis challenges that assumption and argues that the *Nyonyas*, unlike their men, did not visually present themselves as Straits Chinese women in the way they dressed, until a later point in time. It is the main argument of this thesis that their identities presented visually through their dress switched from being 'local *Nyonyas*' to being 'locally born Straits Chinese women', consequently revealing a visual gap in identity between Straits Chinese men and women before the twentieth century.

Straits Chinese men or *Babas* initially adhered to Chinese costume before adopting western attire in the later part of the colonial period. *Nyonya* dress, on the other hand, was unique, hybrid and adapted from the local dress styles of insular Southeast Asia in the period before twentieth century. Since the *Nyonyas* had a different visual approach to the men in the way they presented themselves to the world through dress, this thesis argues that the *Nyonyas* developed separate identities to the *Babas*, visually. The early twentieth century witnessed a process of change in dress among the *Nyonyas*, from local dress styles to Chinese and Western styles. This thesis demonstrates that the *Nyonyas* identities also changed visually, along with their dress styles. The identities portrayed visually switched and enabled the *Nyonyas* to join their men and be 'Straits Chinese', that is both (Straits) 'Chinese' and 'British' (subjects).

This thesis employs a visual approach to interrogate the identities of the *Nyonyas*, in a context where written sources by the *Nyonyas* are scarce. Specifically, this thesis reconstructs the *Nyonyas*' visual identities through their dress relying mainly on the evidence captured in portrait photographs and paintings, as well as dress materials that survive today. This thesis demonstrates that the changing identities of *Nyonyas* can be

observed visually through their dress and that the *Nyonyas* did not associate themselves with the 'Straits Chinese', visually at least, until the early twentieth century when they visually asserted themselves as such.

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Introduction

The term 'Chinese' in the context of Southeast Asia is complex. Its meaning varies from country to country and from region to region. In modern Southeast Asia, people may bear the label 'Chinese' for official requirements or it may be a label used to refer to oneself or others as unofficial identification. In the context of the long established usage of 'Chinese' in Southeast Asia, the term 'Straits Chinese', used by the colonial British for Chinese born in the former Straits Settlements (1826-1946), is relatively short lived. It began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century and was used significantly in the early twentieth century, but slowly disappeared when the Straits Settlements ceased to exist after the Pacific War.¹ The educated Straits Chinese men were particularly prominent publicly, and most studies devoted to the identities of the 'Straits Chinese' focus mainly and invariably on men. This thesis takes a different approach by investigating the identities of Straits Chinese women in the former British Straits Settlements separately from that of their men.

The Straits Settlements comprised of Penang (also known as Prince of Wales Island during the colonial period), Melaka and Singapore in Malaya (Figure 1), while the Straits Chinese were the Straits-born Chinese who enjoyed the right of being British subjects.² The Straits Chinese men were usually called *Baba* and the women *Nyonya*. Nevertheless, '*Nyonya*' appears to be a much older concept as the term appears to originate from the Portuguese word, '*Dona*' and most likely derives from when the Portuguese colonised Melaka (1511-

¹ Penang was Britain's first colony in Southeast Asia, 'founded' in 1786 by Captain Francis Light of the British East India Company. Singapore also came under the control of the British East India Company after a formal treaty was signed by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 with the Sultan of Johor. The Dutch exchanged Bencoolen for Malacca (Melaka today) with the British in the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824, which facilitated the establishment of The Straits Settlements in 1826 by the British. The government of India administered the Settlements until they were transferred to direct rule from London as a crown colony in 1867. The colony was dissolved in 1946 as part of the British reorganisation of its Southeast Asian dependencies following the end of the Second World War.

² The Straits Settlements included the Dindings from 1874 to 1935 when it was transferred to Perak, Christmas Island from 1900, Cocos Island from 1903, and Labuan which was transferred from North Borneo to the Straits Settlements in 1905 (Cheah, 2010: 20). In this research, references to the Straits Settlements conform to the common usage, which are Penang, Melaka and Singapore. Strictly speaking, the term 'Straits Settlements' only came into use in the 1830s. In 1829, when they were still a presidency, the Directors of the East India Company referred to "The Incorporated Settlements of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca". In July 1831 after the Presidency was demoted to residency, the Directors to government of India, described them as "The United Settlements of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca" (Turnbull, 2009: 51). Malaya is also a historical term used to refer to the Malay Peninsula including Singapore for the period before 1948.

1641). The ‘Straits Chinese’ on the other hand, is a fairly new term coined by the colonial British in the mid-nineteenth century, while ‘*Nyonya*’ was used to refer to the Straits Chinese women since at least the late nineteenth century.³ Hence, there was a long period of time where the *Nyonyas* were just ‘*Nyonyas*’, before the term ‘Straits Chinese’ came into use. In this thesis I ask when and how did the ‘*Nyonyas*’ become ‘Straits Chinese women’? Or more fundamentally, did the ‘*Nyonyas*’ see themselves as ‘Straits Chinese women’ in the British Straits Settlements? These questions cannot be answered with reference to the existing literature, which has a qualitative gap in the knowledge on the identities of the *Nyonyas*. Issues of *Nyonyas* identities have been insufficiently researched, definitely not in the ways that scholars have researched *Babas* identities. The fact that the *Nyonyas* were largely illiterate and left nothing in writing before the twentieth century period does not help. The long-standing identities of the *Nyonyas* prior to the arrival of the British and what happened to these identities after they were labelled, as ‘Straits Chinese’ by the British is a central concern of this thesis.



Fig. 1: The Malay Peninsular (<http://www.sailingstones.co.uk/wp/map-of-british-malaya-including-the-straits-settlements-federated-malay-states/>)

³ For instance, Song explicitly says he was dealing with the “*Nyonyas*” in his 1896 paper, “The Position of [Straits] Chinese Women” (1897: 16).

In my attempt to answer this question, I examine how the *Nyonyas* presented themselves as a distinctive group through their dress, which in turn became a significant cultural marker for the Straits Chinese community. I will show that the major feature of their dress was its local style, though incorporating foreign elements. In this way, the *Nyonyas'* self-representation was very different to the *Babas* who initially adhered to Chinese dress and then Western attire in the later part of the colonial period. Given that the *Nyonyas* had very different visual modes to the *Babas* in presenting themselves to the world through their dress, this thesis argues that the *Nyonyas* developed a separate and different identity to the *Babas*, visually at least.

Under British rule, the Chinese population of the Straits Settlements grew steadily. There were two distinctive groups of Chinese living in the Straits Settlements who migrated from China at different times. The pioneer Chinese settlers, later termed the 'Straits Chinese', may have been present earlier than when the Portuguese first referred to their settlement in Melaka in the seventeenth century and their women folk are the main focus of this thesis. The male ancestors of the Straits Chinese came largely from Southern China in Fujian province, while their female ancestors were mostly from the indigenous populations of the Malay Archipelago and, to a lesser extent, mainland Southeast Asia. They bear several labels, apart from those already mentioned; '*Baba*' for men, '*Nyonya*' for women, 'Straits Chinese' and 'Straits-born Chinese', there is also '*Peranakan Chinese*'. These terminologies are complicated and I will discuss each in the following section. A later wave of massive Chinese immigration took place during British rule from the nineteenth century, and although they are not the main focus of this thesis they will be discussed in comparison to the earlier settlers. They were termed '*sinkhek*' or variants of '*singke*', '*sinkek*' (according to different ways of romanising Chinese characters), which literally means 'new guest' in Hokkien, a localised Chinese dialect which originated in Fujian province and is used largely in Southeast Asia. However, these terms are not applicable to their offspring who were also born in the Straits, and therefore could not be regarded as 'new guest', and thus went out of use.

We now move to a discussion of the various terminologies used for the Straits Chinese before examining how the current literature on the Straits Chinese reveals a gap in the

knowledge on the identities of the *Nyonya*. Following that, I discuss the aim of this thesis, clarify the research period, describe the qualitative methodology, list the important sources and limitations, explain the significance of this thesis and lastly, outline the chapters.

Note on Terminology

One of the most challenging aspects of studying the earlier Chinese settlers concerns the terminologies used. It is a field complicated at a superficial level by the very loose, imprecise and constantly changing terminology used to describe the people and communities under study. As mentioned, apart from the 'Straits Chinese', the labels used to refer to these earlier settlers are varied. All kinds of writers ranging from administrators, journalists, academic writers and those in the tourist industry have constructed their versions of terminologies. It is further complicated because the exact meaning of the terms changes from time to time and the preference of certain terms over others also changes over time.

To begin with, I ask what is the 'Chinese' in 'Straits Chinese'? Obviously, the term 'Chinese' is problematic and one of the complications lies with the people who still call themselves or are called 'Chinese' by others when not residing within the borders of China. Shu-Mei Shih (2007) shows us the parameters that are set whenever the peoples from China have gone beyond the country border. In her words, "Such a notion is highly problematic, despite its wide adoption and circulation... The measures of inclusions of Chinese people appear to be the degree of sinicisation which discloses Han people centrism [sic] of a long-distance variety, because what often get completely elided is the fact that the Chinese diaspora refers mainly to the diaspora of the Han people" (Shih, 2007: 23-24). Hence, Chinese culture refers mainly to Han culture while the language of the Han is *Hanyu* (although there are diverse languages and dialects spoken across the nation). Besides the Han majority, there are at least fifty-five ethnic minorities in China. The word 'Chinese' is therefore a serious misnomer word since 'Chinese' is not an ethnicity but many ethnicities.

Historian Tu Wei-Ming (1991) proposes that the term 'Chinese' stands for both '*Huaren*' (people of Chinese origin) and '*Zhongguoren*' (people of China, the state). He refers to

'*Huaren*' as a "variety of nationalities that are ethnically and culturally Chinese" thus "not geopolitically centered" but with "a common ancestry and a shared cultural background" (Tu, 1991: 22). When used in the sense of '*Zhongguoren*', the term 'Chinese' could be interpreted as national identity and that "necessarily evokes obligations and loyalties of political affiliation and the myths of the middle kingdoms" (ibid).

Chris Vasantkumar (2012) also views the term 'Chinese' as becoming more complicated when used for the Chinese outside the border of China. By drawing upon the common translation of '*huaqiao*' (Chinese sojourners) for 'Overseas Chinese', Vasantkumar argues for the possibility of using 'Overseas Tibetan' as a translation for '*Huaqiao*'. As a matter of fact, a Tibetan from *Xizang* province who has emigrated from China is hardly referred to as an 'Overseas Chinese'. Instead, the common term used is "Overseas Tibetan Compatriots" (*Haiwai Zangzu tongbao*) (Vasantkumar, 2012: 429). In sum, we can safely say that the 'Chinese' in 'Overseas Chinese' actually refers to 'Han' Chinese. Following this, the 'Chinese' in 'Straits Chinese' also refers to the 'Han' Chinese for the fact that those early settlers were mostly, if not entirely, Han Chinese.

Ironically, the Chinese Southerners from the South China Coast (mainly from the province of Fujian and Canton) that migrated to Malaya do not refer themselves as 'Han Chinese' (from the Han dynasty) but rather as 'Tang Chinese' (from the Tang Dynasty) in their spoken dialects. Up until today these terms remain in the Hokkien dialects that they speak everyday which are '*Teng Lang*' as well as '*Tong Yan*' in Cantonese, equal to '*Tangren*' in Mandarin. Nevertheless, they do not use the term '*Tangren*' to refer to themselves when they speak in Mandarin, instead the term, '*Huaren*' is used, as well as in written Chinese. This could be because 'Mandarin' is relatively a new language skill to these Chinese migrants, who acquired it only when the Chinese school was established in Malaya in the early twentieth century with Mandarin as the medium of instruction. Therefore, the relatively 'ancient' words, '*Teng Lang*' or '*Tong Yan*', which they carried with them from Southern China, are only kept in their dialects and the mandarin version '*Tang Ren*' is not commonly used.⁴ This

⁴ *Mingshi* (Ming History), a work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, records that 'the label Tangren (Tang People) is used by foreigners to refer to Chinese, this is so in all nations abroad (Tan, 2000: 66, fn1)

point is not usually mentioned by scholars except for Khoo Joo Ee (1998) who gives us a fair explanation of why the Southerners from South China Coast did not identify themselves with the Han Dynasty but the Tang Dynasty:

the southern provinces had always been considered 'rebellious' in the eyes of the northern capital. The final sinization of southerners was during China's golden age, the Tang dynasty (AD 618-906), and for this reason, southern Chinese have traditionally referred to themselves as Tang Chinese (Fujian: T'ng Lang, Cantonese: T'ong Yen). The province of Fujian held out against northern Han Chinese expansion till the fourteenth century (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 17-18).

From 1852, the term 'Straits Chinese' had a legal definition that is they were 'Chinese British subjects'.⁵ To qualify for this legal term, one had to be 'Straits-born' or naturalised in the historical British Straits Settlements.⁶ The term 'Straits-born Chinese' then became an extended version of the term 'Straits Chinese' with the same meaning. Although there has been a tendency to distinguish strictly between the 'Straits-born Chinese' and the 'Straits Chinese' by scholars like Clammer (1980) and Khoo Joo Ee (1998), the term 'Straits-born Chinese' has been used synonymously with the term 'Straits Chinese' at certain periods of time. Rudolph argues, "We cannot take 'Straits-born Chinese' literally as it does not literally refer to a person born in the Straits, rather as an equivalent to 'Straits Chinese' which refer to legal status of 'British subject'" (Rudolph, 1998a: 43).

Although these two terms, 'Straits Chinese' and 'Straits-born Chinese' were coined for their legal implications, as argued by Rudolph, their general usage did not confine to the legal definition, very often they were used in a cultural sense. In general, the term 'Straits Chinese' is culturally inclined while 'Straits-born' Chinese was more legally related. For example, contributors to the Straits Chinese Magazine in the late nineteenth century used the two terms interchangeably and meant the same thing. In the time period in which the *Sinkhek* population had their offspring born in the Straits, they were also referred to as

⁵ From 1852, the legal definition of a 'Straits Chinese' was that of a 'Straits-born Chinese' or 'Chinese British subject' (Song, 1899: 61).

⁶ Song Ong Siang (1899: 62) notes that there were Chinese who were not Straits-born Chinese but became British subjects through the *Naturalization Ordinance of 1867* and they were considered Straits Chinese too, although such cases were not common.

‘Straits-born Chinese’, in this way, (legally defined) ‘Straits-born Chinese’ were often not considered as ‘Straits Chinese’, which Rudolph fails to see. For example, Felix Chia, a *Baba* himself, who grew up in an era where the *Sinkhek* offspring were mostly locally born, plainly says that ‘Straits-born Chinese’ is his term for non-Baba Chinese (Chia, 1983: 13). Nevertheless, the old meaning of the ‘Straits-born Chinese’, which was equivalent to ‘Straits Chinese’, was retained to some extent. For example, Tan, who did his research in Melaka in the 1970s and 1980s, says that some of his Melaka *Babas* informants referred to themselves as “we Straits-born” when they spoke in English.

In sum, the ‘Straits Chinese’ is, strictly speaking a legal term, but it has always been used in a cultural sense, to refer to a group of people of local birth with a long history in the Straits and a hybrid culture. And it is not exactly the same as ‘Straits-born Chinese’, which at times was inclined to be taken literally to refer to a person born in the Straits. Nevertheless, the two terms ‘Straits Chinese’ and ‘Straits-born Chinese’ were coined in English by the British and it is not difficult to imagine the usage of such terms among local populations in the mid-nineteenth century mostly confined to those who were educated, particularly the English educated *Babas* who use it to emphasise their right as British subjects and distinguish themselves from the later migrants, *Sinkhek*.⁷

Two other terms much mentioned above, ‘*Baba*’ and ‘*Nyonya*’ emerged early, are definitely culturally related and are still prevalent today. ‘*Baba*’ is mostly used to refer to male and ‘*Nyonya*’ to female, although *Baba* sometimes refers to both genders in the same way that the word ‘men’ can be inclusive of women. The origin of the term ‘*Baba*’ is unclear. Etymologically, it probably originates from India (it could be a Persian loan word) where it is a general title of respect for men in Hindustani. In time, the honorific *Baba* came to refer to respectable Straits Chinese men. J.D. Vaughan, in his early work, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (1879), traces the etymology of the word ‘*Baba*’ as a term used by the Bengali descendants to designate European children, “it is probable that the word was applied by the Indian convicts at Pinang to Chinese children and so came into general use” (Vaughan, 1879: 2). Based on a survey of dictionaries, Tan Chee Beng arrives at

⁷ T. Braddel is one of the first to use the term ‘Straits Chinese’ in 1855, “The intellect of the Straits Chinese as compared with the ordinary home Chinese, must be considered as an inferior order” (Rudolph, 1998a: 43).

the conclusion that “the word *Baba* is of Middle East origin and it was introduced to Southeast Asia through India” (Tan, 1988a: 13). However, it is not clear how long the term ‘*Baba*’ has been used. Although colonial writers like Crawford, Earl, and Newbold who were writing in the first part of the nineteenth century did not mention the label ‘*Baba*’, a local writer, Munshi Abdullah was already using it in the early nineteenth century. Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir mentions that when Raffles visited Melaka in 1810, he “took a house on an estate owned by Chinese Kapitan’s son whose name was *Baba Cheng Lan*” (Abdul Kadir, 2009: 74). Towards the later part of the nineteenth century, colonial writer Isabella Bird, who travelled through Malaya in 1879, wrote, “The Chinese who are born in the Straits are called *Babas*” (Bird, 2000: 35). Hence, despite the origin, we know for sure that the term ‘*Baba*’ was an honorific term of address for a respectable local-born Chinese man and was in use since the early nineteenth century. According to Suryadinata (1992: 87) usage of the term ‘*Baba*’ has a parallel in the *Pribumi* population of West Java, who called a local-born male Chinese ‘*Baba*’ as well. It could be that this influence came from the Straits Settlements where the term ‘*Baba*’ was commonly used. When used by the Malays and the *Baba* themselves, the term was a respectable designation. However, the term was also used by non-*Baba* Chinese migrants in a derogatory way to designate, for instance, an English-educated Chinese, who was perceived to know little about Chinese culture (Tan, 1988a: 14).

Unlike the term ‘*Baba*’, ‘*Nyonya*’ is not exclusively used for Straits Chinese women. The usage of this term has evolved over time and appears to be the oldest term used to describe the people and communities under study. As mentioned, *Nyonya* and its variants *Njonja*, *Nyonyah* and *Nonya* are derived from the Portuguese term, ‘*Dona*’, a prefix title to a respectable woman’s given name (and not the surname), equivalent to the English ‘Lady’ or Italian ‘*Mona*’. It was most likely made popular during the Portuguese colonial period by the Portuguese Eurasian or Indian women who arrived in Melaka from Goa as respectable spouses of Portuguese or Portuguese Eurasian men who therefore qualified for the title ‘*Dona*’. It was probably copied by indigenous women in Melaka who used to be slaves but were set free when acquired as spouses by foreign men, such as the Chinese. When such term was used by their Chinese husbands, it is not surprising that ‘*Dona*’ became ‘*Nyonya*’ overtime, as the difficulty in pronouncing ‘d’ for some native Chinese dialect speakers (such

as Hokkien or Teochew) which has no 'd' pronunciation in their dialect, can still be witnessed in Malaysia today.

Since at least the Dutch period, the term '*Nyonya*' began to indicate 'free, married women'. In the late seventeenth century, '*njenja*' appeared in the Dutch version of *Genesis* (1697), which Collins considers it a Portuguese influenced word and translates it to '*nyonya*' for married women in modern Indonesian (Collins, 2004: 97). Sydney Parkinson, the Scottish artist who visited Batavia as part of Cook's voyage in the eighteenth century, says that "free women" in Java "are called *Noonga Cabaia*" (Parkinson, 1773: 179). It is very likely that Parkinson meant '*Nyonya Kebaya*', *Nyonya* who were clad in *kebaya*. The status of 'married women' was important then because many indigenous slave women gained freedom and social standing through acquisition by men as spouses. Therefore, 'married women' would more truly mean 'free women'. Probably sometime during the Dutch occupancy of Melaka (1641-1825), the word '*Dona*' became '*Nyonya*' and was also used in other Dutch colonies indicated married women of some standing due to the very different status before and after marriage. The Dutch spelling *Njonja* or the abbreviation '*Nj*' was much used in the Dutch Indies by the *Peranakan* Chinese instead of 'Mrs' followed by their married or husband name. These are found in many signatures on batiks made by the *Peranakan* Chinese women in the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century (Veldhuisen, 1996b: 80).

According to Tan (1988a), in his contemporary dictionary survey, "the term *Nyonyas* being the Malay term of address for married non-Malay women, especially Chinese women, although in Indonesia it is also used to address married ladies of some status" (Tan, 1988a: 13). This contemporary indication of *Nyonyas* being 'foreign women' does not seem to exist in the distant past, it tended more to indicate 'free women' including those indigenous women who were set free through marriage. The female slaves acquired as spouses were mostly, if not all, local indigenous women. The indication of *Nyonyas* being 'foreign women' in the Straits probably only started in the very early twentieth century. In the Straits, sometimes the term '*Nyonya*' was also used to refer to the women folk of *Jawi Peranakan* (Indian Muslim) and *Chitty Melaka* (Hindu *Peranakan*) whose male ancestors came from South Asia but female ancestors were indigenous women. Today, it mainly refers to *Peranakan* Chinese women particularly those in Malaysia and Singapore, regardless of their

marital status. In this thesis, I prefer to capitalise '*Baba*' and '*Nyonya*' (some writers use the lowercase '*baba*' and '*nyonya*'), because in the present-day context, these terms have evolved from a common noun to a proper noun so they should be equivalent to terms like 'Chinese' or 'Malay' rather than 'men' or 'women'.

The term '*Peranakan Chinese*' (often abbreviated to *Peranakan*, as in this thesis) is also used synonymously to denote Straits Chinese in the former Straits Settlements. However, this term is generally used less in the Peninsular than in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly in the north. Even though it was frequently used among the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* who spoke *Baba Malay*, a variant of Malay, in Melaka and Singapore, the term has only recently been imposed on the *Baba* and *Nyonya* community in Penang. Possibly because *Baba Malay* is not the language of the Penang *Babas* and *Nyonyas* who speak Penang Hokkien. Nevertheless, the term '*Peranakan*' gradually became more common in the Peninsular when the term 'Straits Chinese' became obsolete. For instance, the 'Straits Chinese Association' in Singapore was renamed the '*Peranakan Chinese Association*' in 1966, followed by similar establishments in Malaysia except for Penang who renamed it to 'State Chinese (Penang) Association'.⁸ The term '*Peranakan*' was also popularised by scholars and came into more frequent use by the general public in Malaysia in the last thirty years or so.

The word '*Peranakan*' derives from the root word '*anak*', meaning son or daughter in Malay. Per- and -an are prefix and suffix respectively and by adding them to a root word, the final word becomes a noun (the root word can be a verb or a noun). Clammer takes it for granted and says '*Peranakan*' is simply the Malay designation for 'local-born people' (Clammer, 1980: 3). In the museum guide to the *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore, Kenson Kwok explains in the forward that, "*Peranakan*, a Malay term meaning 'locally born...'" (Tahir, eds. 2008: 9). The word '*Peranakan*' has actually had another meaning, namely 'the womb' right from the eighteenth century. In the dictionary compiled by Thomas Bowrey, there is an entry for "*Peranakan*" and the only meaning listed is "the womb" (1701: 148). According to Crawford:

⁸ Although the Association was registered in Malay as "Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang", it was nevertheless an official name that is not generally used. *Baba* Michael Cheah, former Vice President of State Chinese (Penang) Association, says, "*Peranakan*, this term is new to us" (Personal communication with Cheah in 2015).

The settlers whenever it is in their power, form connections with the native women of the country; and hence has arisen a mixed race, numerous in the old settlements, known to the Malays under name of Peranakan China, literally, “Chinese of the womb”, that is Chinese of native mothers (Crawfurd, 1856: 96).

This etymology seems to me a more convincing explanation for the way it is used to address the people of mixed local and foreign ancestry in the archipelago. However, like it or not, the term *Peranakan* has been used as ‘locally born’ perhaps because local birth is undeniably a distinguishing feature of the early *Babas* and *Nyonyas*.⁹ Towards the twentieth century, local birth became irrelevant as more and more ‘new’ migrant *Sinkhek* Chinese were locally born but the *Peranakan* term that refers to the *Baba* and *Nyonya* remains unique to them until today. Thus, *Peranakan* Chinese is a larger concept than *Baba* and *Nyonya* in the Straits as it also includes what Cheah calls “the acculturated descendants of Chinese migrants to the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago” (Cheah, 2010: 1). Therefore, the cultural aspect of ‘acculturation’ is an important aspect in using the term ‘*Peranakan*’.

In the late nineteenth century, the *Peranakan* produced publications in *Baba Malay*, in which the terms ‘*Baba*’ and ‘*Peranakan*’ appear frequently. In present day Malaysia and Singapore, the terms Straits Chinese, Straits-born Chinese, *Peranakan* Chinese and *Baba-Nyonya* are used interchangeably in many publications. Regardless of the exact origins and meanings of these terms in the past, they now refer to the early local-born Chinese who, in the former Straits, developed a hybridised culture, which is the distinguishing characteristic of this group.

For the purpose of this research, the term ‘Straits Chinese’ will be used in the context of former Straits Settlements. Firstly, because my research is in the period of British colonisation and secondly, to distinguish them from the *Peranakan* community in the Indonesian archipelago; thirdly, even though *Peranakan* is a larger concept it could exclude

⁹ Unlike in Indonesia, it should be noted that ‘*Peranakan*’ is not a commonly used word in present day Malaysia except for the label of the ‘*Peranakan*’ communities, and it does not exist in the third edition *Malay-English Oxford dictionary*, 1991. In *A Comprehensive Indonesian-English Dictionary* (Alan M. Stevens and A. Ed. Schmidgall-Tellings, 2004), four meanings are given: 1. half-breed, half caste. 2. Indo i.e. a person of mixed European and Indonesian ancestry. 3. a native of Jawi – a Tamil born in Malacca; Keling. 4. uterus, womb.

the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Penang for the reason explain above. I also use *Babas* for the Straits Chinese men and *Nyonyas* for the Straits Chinese women unless otherwise stated. However, for the purpose of quotations and citations the terms and the spelling of original texts will be adhered to. We now move on to the next section to review the current literature on the Straits Chinese and examine what has been written on them.

Locating the Straits Chinese in the Literature

One of the most important sources and evidence for the Straits Chinese of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, published quarterly in Singapore for 11 years from 1897 to 1907 by the Straits Chinese themselves. Dr. Lim Boon Keng and Sir Song Ong Siang cofounded the magazine at the time of the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The magazine, subtitled *A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture*, shows us how the *Baba* intellectual conceived their social history, culture and politics at the turn of the century in Singapore. The magazines were not homogenous; they were open to Confucianism and Christianity and contained differing reformatory messages concerning education, politics, beliefs and customs. However, after 11 years of publication the magazine ceased publication in 1907 due to a shortage of funds (Song, 1967: 235, 295-6).

Despite having these important magazines published by the Straits Chinese in the late nineteenth century, it is a pity that there has been hardly any systematic scholarly study on Chinese in the Straits Settlements in earlier literature. The valuable information gathered by the Chinese Protectorate, which was established in the Straits Settlements with William Pickering,¹⁰ appointed as the first special agent for dealing with the Chinese affairs in 1877, was unfortunately mostly destroyed during the Japanese occupation of the Straits (Freedman, 1970: 8).¹¹ Although the Chinese were a major element in the early British Straits Settlements, works on the Chinese are usually anecdotal and general in character.

¹⁰ The first Chinese Protector, William Pickering, who was trained in several Chinese dialects, arrived in Singapore in 1872 and held the first office of the protector of Chinese in 1877 (Khor et al., 2004: 31-32).

¹¹ Documents have been piled up in offices; Protectors of Chinese and Secretaries for Chinese have amassed lifetimes of experience of Chinese problems; we have little access to either. When the Japanese took Singapore in 1942 they made a bonfire of the papers in the Chinese Secretariats, and now as far as the Colony is concerned, the detailed history of a remarkable political institution has gone for good (Freedman, 1970: 8).

The 1948 classic work of Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* is one of the first major works on the Chinese in Malaya that we can refer to. Purcell, a specialist officer in Chinese affairs, provides general historical background to Chinese emigration. He covers early history, tracing the Chinese movement into Malaya from initial contacts through to 1947. Even though it is not his focus, Purcell does cover the formation of the Straits Chinese in Melaka, Penang and Singapore as well as acknowledging that *Baba* Malay is a variant of Malay.

The exception to the gloomy picture in the early literature is Maurice Freedman's *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (1970). His research was carried out over about two years between 1949 and 1950, revealing how the family functioned in then Chinese society in Singapore. Freedman argues that the *Baba* in Singapore became more Chinese as time went due to their fall from earlier economic power and the pressure of the majority. In his words:

While the Straits Chinese maintain their specific version of Malayised Chinese culture and their social eminence in Malacca, the history of twentieth-century Singapore shows them in decline. There is clearly taking place in the Colony a process of what, if the term is not too offensively barbarous, could be called Retro-assimilation. In the course of the flowering of Chinese cultural nationalism the older adaptations achieved by Straits Chinese – in language, in ceremonial, in dress, in relations both with non-Chinese and with Chinese of more recent vintage in the country seem to be breaking down (Freedman, 1970: 230).

Fortunately, from the 1970s onwards we begin to see more systematic scholarly research on the Chinese in Malaya generally, although research based on the Chinese in Malaya makes little effort to distinguish the Straits Chinese from the later mass migrants. It has only been in the last forty years or so that we have more detailed scholarly research on the Straits Chinese. From the late 1970s onwards, scholarly writing has expanded our understandings of the *Baba* and *Nyonya*, and the archives of their material culture have increased. I owe a great debt to these scholarly works, upon which my research is able to build. Of utmost importance are works by Tan, Ho and Rudolph who cover the *Baba* of Melaka, Penang and Singapore respectively. In addition, sociologist John Clammer published his research on *Straits Chinese Society: Studies in the Sociology of the Baba Communities of Malaysia and Singapore* (1980). In the new millennium, we have Neil Khor whose PhD thesis is on *Origins*

and Development of Straits Chinese Literature (2007)¹² and Hwei-Fen Cheah, who wrote *Phoenix Rising, Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements* (2010). Cheah's work is actually one of the first scholarly studies to focus on *Nyonyas* and she interrogates modernity and tradition through their handmade beadworks. One of the latest additions is Peter Lee's *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World, 1500-1950* (2014b), which discloses much valuable archival and primary source material and contributes to this research in a significant way. I now highlight some of the important points in the writing of the above-mentioned authors in chronological order.

Clammer investigates the social organisation of the long-established Straits Chinese community of Malaysia and Singapore, which can be interpreted as social histories of the *Baba*. Although he claims that, his works includes Malaysia and Singapore but he clearly centered his research in Singapore. His investigations include an examination of kinship, associations, economic and social groupings into which Straits Chinese gather themselves in the course of maintaining their cultural identity as a community distinct from more recent Chinese immigrants. He argues that *Baba* culture is not a result of intermarriage between Chinese and Malay. In his words:

Notably that while early Chinese-Malay intermarriages did undoubtedly take place, they were in the very distant past, and intermarriage ceased, when it occurred at all, after one generation. Thereafter marriage was always intra-ethnic. Except in extremely rare cases, intermarriage no longer takes place with Malays, not for many generations. The common idea that *Baba* culture is a result of a literal "intermarriage" of Chinese and Malay cultures is thus nonsense. Such biological intermarriage that occurred did so many generations ago in most instances, and thus cannot explain the nature of modern *Baba* society, which retain its essentially Chinese character, despite the adoption of many Malay forms (1980: 21).

He asserts that British colonisation was the crucial factor in the emergence and development of a distinct *Peranakan* Chinese society in the Straits Settlements. In another paper, he asks "When then does the account for the emergence of *Baba* culture, and when

¹² I was not able to gain access to the complete thesis of Neil Khor, but fortunately, I was able to read several chapters of this work that has been published separately in various journals.

did it spring into being when it did? The answer that I would propose in two words is British Colonisation.” (Clammer, 1979: 4). A major part of his argument is that the *Baba* is a political rather than a cultural phenomenon. According to him, they were originally a “product of the social relations of a colonial society based on a rigid system of stratification, which however encouraged a certain degree of accommodation from groups who were prepared to take the step of identifying their interests with those of colonialists”. Clammer identifies those who were to become known as *Baba* as those who rose to this challenge and with the decline of the political culture which nurtured them, the *Baba* declined correspondingly. Clammer has a point on the emergence of the *Baba* and the Straits Chinese as a whole, clearly, these two terms emerged during the British era. The fact that some *Baba* who were benefiting from the British commercially and politically, preferred to be known as Straits Chinese during the Straits Settlements time and switch their dress style from Chinese to European did highlight the importance of colonial rule in shaping the development of an acculturated *Baba* community in the Straits Settlements.

However, British colonisation does not adequately explain the acculturation process that has much to do with the womenfolk or the identity of *Nyonya* that was much older than the British colonisation. Nevertheless, Clammer realises that the *Nyonyas* persisted with their dress even when the *Baba* changed their dress style from Chinese to European. In his words:

In the nineteenth century the women had already long adopted their characteristically modified form of Malay costume, but the men continued to wear Chinese dress, and to arrange their hair in the traditional queue, although being well outside of the influence of Manchu empire they had no reason to adhere to this “badge of servitude”. This Chineseness in appearance gradually gave way later in the century to the adoption of European dress among the upper-middle class Babas. The *Nyonya*, however, clung sensibly to their attractive outfits, although the elaborate jewellery and accessories gradually diminished in conspicuousness, except on very important occasions (Clammer, 1980: 5-6).

The *Babas* political significance may have waned after British colonisation ended but the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*’ unique culture and language are still alive today. That says the British colonisation is not the only factor, although it might have been an important factor for the

emergence of the *Babas*. Clammer arbitrarily relies on the emergence of some affluent, educated and politically influential *Babas* during the British time to account for the emergence of the “*Baba* culture”, clearly ignores the contribution of the *Nyonyas*. This ignorance will be dealt with in this thesis.

Tan, an anthropologist, has researched the identity of *Babas* from a cultural and ethnic perspective. Tan’s comprehensive ethnography study on the *Baba* of Melaka, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia* (1988a), contributes to the discussion of the relationship between cultural acculturation and ethnic identity. He is of the opinion that *Babas*’ society is “a product of cultural syncretism and not biology”, arguing that intermarriage between Chinese and indigenous people was not common and became rarer with the coming of Chinese women from the mid-nineteenth century. He does however recognise that “close interaction with indigenous communities and intermarriage was significant in modes of dress, speech, cuisine and customs that reflect the adoption and adaptation of Malay and other indigenous Indonesian ways of life” (1988a: 34).

Tan has portrayed *Baba* identity as a product of both acculturation and cultural persistence. He comments on the process of acculturation reflected by the *Baba* as a way of localisation but he does not mention particularly that this acculturation process lead to a hybridised culture. Although he recognises the linguistic difference between the Chinese and *Baba* Malay dialect, a patois spoken among the *Baba* in Melaka and a crucial factor in their identity, he focuses on the fact that the *Baba* share Chinese folk religion and other aspects of Chinese culture with non-*Baba* Chinese and that “*Baba* has become a sub-ethnic identity within the general Chinese ethnic category” (1988a: 89). He recognises that *Baba* are also members of Chinese speech groups in Malaysia, principally Hokkien. Tan is of the opinion that *Baba* can be both *Baba* and Chinese and can “situationally” emphasise or de-emphasise their *Baba* identities. Tan reaffirms Paden's idea that in multi-ethnic societies a “situational ethnicity” is brought forth at the individual level. Unfortunately, it is unclear if Tan means that both *Baba* and *Nyonya* share the same identities and whether the sub-ethnic identities that he hypothesised for the *Babas* also apply to *Nyonyas*.

During the period that Tan undertook his research in the late 1970s to early 1980s, the term 'race' was increasingly being replaced by the term 'ethnic' in independent Malaysia. The term 'race' generally concerns the physical appearance while ethnicity is more multidimensional, usually referring to groups of people who share common ancestry and cultural background. The use of the term 'ethnic' in relation to concepts of 'race', 'ancestry' and 'culture' is a comparatively recent phenomenon, dating to the early twentieth century. In the census of the Straits Settlements, the term 'Chinese' evolved from the context of 'nationality' to describe the new *Sinkhek* migrants who came directly from China (from 1871) to 'race' to describe offspring of the *Sinkhek* who were gradually born in the Straits (from 1911). Independent Malaysia finally adopted the term 'ethnic' (*keturunan* in Malay) in 1980 census (Nagaraj *et al.*, 2007: 9). By describing *Babas* as the sub-ethnic Chinese, Tan positions the *Babas* as recognising their Chinese male ancestry (regardless of their local female ancestress) and culture based mainly on their Chinese religion.

Even from the visual perspective Tan has a good point, in that by dressing like their forefathers in the nineteenth century the *Babas* presented their place of ancestry as China. Nonetheless, Tan does not convey the fact that female ancestresses were not forgotten or suppressed in the nineteenth century as far as the *Nyonyas* were concerned. The presence of the female ancestress who were not 'ethnic' Chinese was obvious in the way the *Nyonyas* dressed during this period. Although Tan's point justly reflects the situation of his research period of the late twentieth century, in which *Babas* and *Nyonyas* belong to the 'sub-ethnic' Chinese identity, this may not be true for the nineteenth century when *Nyonyas* presented themselves differently from their men. Unlike the *Babas*, a dominant ethnicity was absent in *Nyonya* local dress style before the twentieth century period. As such this thesis questions the significance of 'ethnic identity' to the *Nyonyas* during this period.

Pertaining to *Nyonyas* dress, Tan comments, "Many *Baba* women at present still wear the Malay-style dress of sarong and *kebaya*. This kind of *Nyonya* attire is a distinct and an important symbol of *Baba* identity (1988a: 108)." He justifies this dress by saying, "the adoption of Malay-style dress... is not surprising since that was the form of women's dress in Southeast Asia (1988a: 242)." It however does not occur to him that perhaps this dress

was not an “adoption” but the original dress of the *Nyonyas*, being local women of Southeast Asia.

Tan Chee Beng (2010), in his recent paper “Intermarriage and the Chinese *Peranakan* in Southeast Asia”, maintains that intermarriage between *Peranakan* and Malays in Malaya was not common. Here he emphasises his earlier argument of 1988, which describes Melaka *Baba* as culturally characterised by localisation (such as speaking *Baba* Malay) and Chinese cultural reproduction (such as observing Chinese festivals and religious rites). Tan stresses that it is not accurate to describe *Baba* as “culturally hybrid” but rather, “localised cultural expressions” because according to him, there is no standard Chinese culture. In his words:

Culturally the Chinese *Peranakan* have overt localised characteristics such as using Malay language among themselves, the women wearing sarong and kebaya and eating a unique localised cuisine.....Thus, it is tempting to describe the *Baba* as culturally hybrid in comparison to the non-*Baba* Chinese. But there is no such thing as standard Chinese culture, and if the Chinese speaking Malay is hybrid, what about Chinese speaking English among themselves? ...Why are *Baba* singled out as hybrid? localised aspect such as eating spicy *Nyonya* food are remarked upon but the fact that many people today eat a lot of localised and fusion food. And if religious life of the *Baba* in Melaka who predominantly perform ancestor worship and pray to Chinese deities is taken into consideration, the Melaka *Baba* are in fact so traditionally Chinese that they can hardly be described as hybrid. Hybridity may appear to be an easy and romantic way of describing the Chinese *Peranakan* to emphasize their localised cultural expressions but this is ethnographically misleading (Tan, 2010: 37).

In other words, Tan argues that *Baba* culture and *non-Baba* culture are both localised Chinese culture and not a hybridised one; therefore, the difference in *Baba* and *non-Baba* is the varying degrees of their localisation. On this point, Tan almost argues against all other scholars of *Peranakan* culture who see the hybridity in the identities of *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. Coming out of the blue, unfortunately Tan does not provide an in-depth overview and explanation of the term ‘hybrid’ and the many issues that come with it. From post-colonial literature, hybridity can only happen when there is a stable or standard identity to fall on.

That is when a 'foreign elements' can be recognised from this stable or standard identity. We will come back to issues of 'hybridity' in more detail in the next chapter when I discuss the theoretical background. For now, we focus on examining the validity of Tan's point. If we see 'Chinese' in a 'Han-centric' way and narrow them down to the origin of their ancestral village, they probably had a 'standard culture' at the location and the time their ancestors left, which I think Tan fails to recognise.

Having said that, Tan's research was based in Melaka in the late 1970s to early 1980s and the cultural scene of the Chinese in Melaka at that time could be justly described as "no such things as standard Chinese culture". This is because during that time intermarriage was common among people of Chinese heritage, even between the *Baba* and the non-*Baba*, and was not confined to particular villages that their ancestors came from. The descendants of such marriages could not possibly be assigned with a stable or standard identity. Therefore, Tan is right in saying there is "no such things as standard Chinese culture" in Melaka or Malaysia generally; therefore, there is no ground or no standard identity for this hybridity to fall on, including those of the *Babas*. I therefore support Tan's conclusion that at the time of his research *Baba* and non-*Baba* culture were localised Chinese culture, with differing degrees of localisation instead of hybridisation. Having said that, an immigrant could be 'localised' but a local person who receive foreign influences could not be regarded as 'localised', as we shall see in the case of *Nyonyas* in this thesis. Although Tan's point is reasonable for his research time and probably right until the present moment, his argument does not do justice to the situation in the past where a stable identity could still be observed in the ancestral villages of the Chinese men. There were also standard local women identities, for instance, the identity of Javanese women, can be used to compare with that of the *Nyonyas* with Javanese background. Hence, the basis for hybridity issues existed in the past and definitely in the nineteenth century to the very early twentieth century where the inhabitants of the Straits Settlements (as well as other places in the world), usually dressed and did things according to their places of origin.

Eng Seng Ho (1985) took a refreshing approach in his research on the Penang *Babas*. He traced their role in the era of secret societies and shows that the achievement of the *Babas* was "distinction (in a sense of high status)" at the end of this period. He sees *Baba* identity

as not just about “local birth”, but more their “elite status” which they gained through English education. In this way, he demonstrates that “the *Baba* developed their new status from within the larger Chinese society, rather than apart from it” (Ho, 1985: 183). He regards the major divisions within Penang Chinese society during his research in the 1980s as being between the Chinese educated and the English educated, claiming that this social identity is far more important than traditional categories such as speech group. According to him, the Penang Chinese consider the difference between English-educated and Chinese-educated and the difference between *Baba* and *Sinkhek* as being differences of the same kind at certain periods of time. He argues that this division began to develop in the 1920s when the English and Chinese education systems were operating and that it is insignificant amongst persons with little education. Subsequently, when the distinction between *Baba* and *Sinkhek* became irrelevant after the war due to the decline of the *Babas’* identity, the difference between English-educated and Chinese-educated became the main distinction. In this way, Ho makes the point that English education was significant to the identity of *Babas*, although he does not make this distinction particularly clear in terms of the identities of the *Nyonyas*. However, he does open up the possibility for observation of the *Nyonyas* before and after they received an education, as it was mostly English education that the *Nyonyas* received, if any, just like the *Babas* in that period.

In contrast, to the scholarly research like that of Tan, Clammer and Ho who explore *Baba* identities, Khoo Joo Ee in *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (1998) provides a detailed account of Straits Chinese material culture. She examines religion, customs, festivals, everyday life, architecture as well as literature and performing arts. She uses the term ‘Straits Chinese’ not quite in a legal way but more in a cultural sense as signified by the title of her book, which is the typical way people in Penang use this term. And that explains why the material culture that Khoo discusses is mostly based in Penang; which is refreshing and serves as a useful comparison to that of Melaka and Singapore. One important point she makes in this otherwise rather general account on material culture, is that, “The history of *Baba* started not with their local birth [*Peranakan*], but with their socio-political maturity as an important new entity in the local community. Of their cultivated lifestyles, their language, dress and type of cuisine live on” (1998: 269). In other words, she argues that the *Babas* (not clear if this includes *Nyonyas*) emerged out of a social-political maturity during

the then Straits Settlements. This is somewhat similar to what Clammer claims, but the distinct difference in Khoo's views is that, she recognises the cultivated culture that was left behind when the political environment provided by colonisation no longer existed.

This point is later elaborated by Jurgen Rudolph who sees *Baba* identities evolving from political base to cultural base. In his book, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore* (1998a), Rudolph describes and analyses social, political and cultural aspects of their identities by taking into account the conceptual history of *Baba* designations from 1819-1994. He argues that 'defining' the *Baba* is misleading as there is no definite '*Baba* identity' and "attempts to define who a Baba, Nyonya, Peranakan or Straits Chinese is are somehow unsatisfactory" (1998a: 32). Rudolph denies the ethnicity concept of 'defining' *Baba* as an 'ethnic' or 'sub-ethnic' group or if they were 'Chinese' or '*Baba*', as he regards it more useful to employ the broader term 'identities'. He claims that his research was not undertaken to come up with a "better definition" but was to show the need for a socio-historical approach to *Baba* identity, to what it meant and means to be a *Baba*.

His socio-historical approach is to reconstruct *Baba* identities via discursive analysis to differentiate the distinct *Baba* identities by taking into account of all aspects including the legal, political, economic, cultural, linguistic and religious. As opposed to the way Tan described the *Baba* identity as "sub-ethnic" and having "double identities", Rudolph rejected the "ethnicity" concept to determine whether *Baba* is an "ethnic" or "sub-ethnic" group, even "Chinese" or "*Baba*". Instead, he considers it more useful to employ the broader term "identities". To Rudolph, a culturally-based definition of *Baba* is a modern and comparatively narrow conceptualisation that would render the writing of a social history almost impossible.

According to Rudolph, restricting oneself to cultural usage would make it extremely difficult to write about *Babas*, especially in the period prior to the twentieth century due to the lack of data on their cultural life and also because many of them do not seem to qualify for such a cultural definition. Rudolph continues to say that the emphasis on '*Baba* culture' is a fairly recent phenomenon and argues that applying a restrictive contemporary cultural based definition to the social history of the *Baba*, would effectively "empty 19th century Singapore

of its *Baba* population” (1998a: 3). He also claims that distinctive markers of *Baba* culture like the speaking of *Baba* Malay and female attire, when viewed on their own are not distinctive markers of *Baba* identity. According to him, there are *Baba* and *Nyonya* in specific historical context, to whom one or several of all these markers do not apply. On the other hand, there are non-*Baba* and non-*Nyonya* to whom one or several of these markers do apply. Rudolph highlights the two crucial turning-points in the history of the *Baba*, the Japanese occupation (1942-1945) and self-rule (1959) which led to public emphasis on their culture. In his words:

The Babas own public exposure concerning their self-identification prior to self rule, had been legal and political. Only when the Babas had lost all political stake as a ‘class’, did they start to become publicly more conscious of their ‘glorious’ cultural past (Rudolph, 1998a: 203).

What Rudolph has hypothesised is not wrong, as the gradual shift of *Baba* emphasis from political to cultural was clearly observed after the war and independence. However, he does not adequately explain how the *Nyonya* can be economically and politically identified. Unlike Clammer and Tan, Rudolph explicitly tells us that by employing the terms ‘*Babas*’ he refers to both genders to avoid the longer term “*Baba* and *Nyonya*” (1998a: 22). But it appears that he does not take *Nyonya* into consideration by adopting a socio-political approach. Such an approach could hardly be associated with the *Nyonya* who were largely uneducated and hardly any earning power in the nineteenth century.

The social political approach that Rudolph adopts definitely has advantages in identifying the *Baba* but it may not be right for the *Nyonya*. The *Baba* and *Nyonya* population of the nineteenth century would not necessary be emptied if *Nyonya* were taken into consideration as cultural bearers. Rudolph’s claims regarding a lack of data on *Baba* and *Nyonya* cultural life in the period before the twentieth century is true but we do have some early pointers. For example, in the late nineteenth century British writers like Vaughan were intrigued by perplexing manifestations of an indigenised ‘Chinese’ culture.

In the new millennium, Mark Ravinder Frost used a diasporic approach to interrogate changes in Straits Chinese identities in Singapore, mainly in an economic sense. His paper

Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1918 (2003), incorporates local-born and locally settled Chinese in Southeast Asia into wider studies of the Chinese Diasporas. Frost combines the study of *Peranakan* (locally born Chinese) and *Sinkekh* (locally settled Chinese) into a wider diasporic perspective. The first part of his essay focuses on the making of the Straits Chinese and covers the time period from 1819 to 1869 when Raffles first established Singapore. The second part is about the existence of Straits Chinese literati in Singapore from 1870 to 1920. These two parts reflect identity changes amongst the Straits Chinese from being merchants initially to becoming the literati elite.

The essential aspect of this paper to my research is that Frost points out that there is a gap between the public and private images of the Straits Chinese and is of the opinion that the Straits Chinese of the nineteenth and twentieth century represented a transcultural diaspora. Frost uses 'transcultural' to describe the crossing culture of the *Baba* in public and private and the commercial go-between roles they played:

Transcultural in the sense that the hybridity or creolisation evident in their domestic lives was carefully separated from their performance of a very Chinese ethnic identity in public. Transcultural, also in the sense that over time Straits Chinese leaders extended their role as commercial 'go-betweens' linking the Chinese community to the European settler elite to become cultural agents in the broader transmission and translation of modernity... (2003:2).

The *Baba* double identities, that is being both Chinese and *Baba* as Tan claims, is strengthened by Frost who regards *Baba* identity as fluid when they were in the public eye and at home. In this way, Frost says the Straits Chinese represent a transcultural diaspora as they did not necessarily experience a separate social existence from new arrivals even though they had lost their essential 'Chineseness'. That is, in public the boundary between these two waves of Chinese is actually porous. However, since the Straits Chinese behave differently in private they are therefore considered transcultural because they cross cultures from one to another. In this sense Frost stresses, the dialect connection in the public sphere of *Baba* and *Sinkekh*, quoting the Siah classification of some three hundred Malaccan born merchants and shopkeepers who stood at the top of the pyramid as "descendants of

Hokkien immigrants” (Siah 1848: 284). This is another way of looking at *Baba* Malay I suppose, a mixture of Malay and Hokkien language with an emphasis at the later.

Baba relations with newcomers were extended and cemented through involvement in public activities organised around Chinese temples and enhancing their standing as the leaders of Singapore’s dialect communities. During this period, the *Babas* may be seen to have hybrid cultural norms in their domestic arrangements but according to Frost, this does not necessarily mean they experienced a different social existence from the new arrivals:

For most of this period, the separation of creolization and hybridity in a domestic context is rarely impinging on the performance of ethnic identity outside the home until the century’s final decade. In addition, many local-born Chinese exhibited a striking capacity to move between private and public spheres, shifting languages and codes of social behavior in the process. Significantly this liberty of movement was not usually available to the female members of local born Chinese families. Like their expressions of cultural hybridity in dress and cuisine, *Nyonyas* were generally confined to the household and kept away from the public eye (Frost, 2003: 12-13).

In this way Frost makes an excellent point on gender issues, saying the liberty of movement between private and public spheres was not usually available to the women. Following his hypothesis, the *Nyonyas*, unlike the *Babas*, were not part of a transcultural diaspora. In other words, *Babas* and *Nyonyas* actually had different ‘identities’ in the public sphere in the colonial environment. This point is definitely supported by the fact that, both *Babas* (especially in public sphere) and *Nyonyas* adopted a very different visual approach to their identities, where women wore cloths adapted from local dress but men did not. Frost makes the stimulating point that the men, *Baba* and *Sinkhek*, could belong together if they wanted to, but *Nyonya* were certainly distinctive, no matter what. He thus reveals a gap in the identities of *Baba* and *Nyonya*, as evidenced in their visual approaches to clothing, a gap that I will investigate.

According to Frost, in the the later colonial period (1870-1920), improved communications combined with the expansion of Singapore into an international capital with intensive

labour migration, transformed the city into an international commercial centre. It thus represents an early period of globalisation and interconnection. At this point, the arrival of mainland Chinese literati as diplomats, journalists and teachers suddenly brought cultural authenticity to light. Domestic arrangements began to be commented on in public and one Chinese language daily claimed *Nyonya* were causing Chinese men to forget the five sacred relationships set down by Confucius (Frost, 2003: 20). One of the elements of Straits Chinese reform was dress, including the removal of certain heterodox fashions belonging to *Nyonya*.

In the new millennium, Hwei-Fe'n Cheah (2005, 2010) makes an important contribution to our understanding and appreciation of *Nyonya* beadwork in the former Straits Settlements. In her research, Cheah provides a detailed account of the beadwork evolution in designs and materials against a social history of their makers, the *Nyonyas*. Her research explores issues of modernity and its implications for identity through the historical development of *Nyonya* beadwork. The beadwork is intricate, meticulously crafted, and visually distinctive and eclectic. Like many scholars, Cheah is also aware that "*Peranakan* acculturation was most evident in the private sphere and recognizes the identity of Straits Chinese changed over time" (2010: 65). As writers including Tan and Frost, Cheah emphasises the boundaries between Straits Chinese and *Sinkhek* society were, in actuality, porous. She gives examples of *Peranakan* and *Sinkekh* cooperating in business ventures and circulating in the same social circles. She mentions Chan Kang Swi, the longest serving president of Straits Chinese Association in Melaka, whose parents were both from China, as an example of the "blurred boundaries" of cultural identities (2010: 68). However, given the gender focus of her study, Cheah does not comment on whether the "blurred boundaries" of cultural identities apply to both genders or just for the *Babas*.

Cheah makes the point that women have always been cultural intermediaries who have had a significant impact on society more generally. In her words, "*Nyonya* were arbiters of culture. Many indigenous elements are associated with *Peranakan* food, dress and language which relate to female and domestic spheres." Cheah definitely has a gender perspective and recognises the *Nyonya* contribution to making the Straits Chinese distinctive, visually as well as culturally. She argues:

Rather than acting as keepers of an unadulterated Chinese culture, *Peranakan* women can arguably be located at the junction of multiple cultures. Their perception of themselves and the world around them had the potential to inform *Peranakan* cultural formations and the construction of *Peranakan* identity itself (2010: 133).

Cheah analyses Nyonya beadworks alongside the changing perception in gender identities of the *Nyonyas*. That makes Cheah one of the pioneers in using material culture to explore the *Nyonyas'* identity issues. However, Cheah places more emphasis on the material culture than on the *Nyonyas* who made and used the beaded objects. Even though she touches on issues of *Nyonya* identities, it is not in the scope of her research to pursue these issues in depth.

We also see further light on Straits Chinese women's identities in Seah's MA thesis (2005). Although Seah does not question the identity distinction between *Nyonyas* and Straits Chinese women, she recognises the "transformation" of Straits Chinese women when they received education in the twentieth century. A large part of her research investigates the achievements of the educated Straits Chinese women in the public sphere at the time they emerge out of their cloister homes. Seah follows their written works published primarily in the *Straits Chinese Monthly* and the *Malaya Tribune* during the 1930s, and observes their "transformation" through these writings. In her words:

By the 1900s, Straits Chinese women began to negotiate with tradition and customs expected of them. To understand this transformation, it is necessary to examine internal developments within the Straits Chinese community as well as the larger context in which the international influences acted on this group of women.

Seah uses the term *Nyonyas* and Straits Chinese women interchangeably in her thesis but 'Straits Chinese women' is consistently used when she refers to the *Nyonyas* in the early twentieth century who were educated and modern. It is however not in the scope of her research to interrogate the identity of the *Nyonyas* before they could write in the twentieth century.

Another recent publication greatly related to this research is Peter Lee's book (2014a), *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World, 1500-1950*. It is the most significant contribution to the study of the dress of *Peranakan* women, being the first in depth scholarly research devoted entirely to their dress. Lee covers a long time frame from the sixteenth to mid-twentieth century and provides a wider picture that is fleshed out by details from both primary and secondary sources. Particularly significant is his extensive account of the primary sources, a valuable contribution in this field. As suggested by part of the title, "an interconnected world", Lee examines *Peranakan* in the Malay Archipelago as a whole and does not segregate them according to borders of the past, the Dutch East-Indies and the British Straits Settlements or the current nations of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. It is refreshing to see the *Peranakan* (his choice of term) in this light, whose culture developed and existed along a network that was not defined by any national borders. This approach profoundly changes the way we look at the *Peranakan* and their fashion (also his choice of term), sarong *kebaya*.

Lee looks at the Eurasian or the *Mestizas* elite in Asia that emerged following the Portuguese colonisation of India and Melaka in the sixteenth century. Their hybrid lifestyles embraced fashion that was largely influenced by Islamic and European fashions as well as the variety of cloths from India. He unearthed fresh evidence that features the *Mestiza* women in *bajus*, *kebayas* and Indian cloths. Lee shows us how the lifestyles and dress of women in port towns such as Batavia and Malacca responded to precedents established in the Portuguese colonies. He argues that some of the most important developments for *Peranakan* Chinese dress in Java are the rapid rise of commercial batik making in Batavia and the involvement of the Chinese in this batik industry. Although he claims that it is difficult to ascertain with any clarity what *Peranakan* women wore in Java in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he manages to provide a wealth of details from archival resources that the belongings of *Peranakan* Chinese women in Java often included batik handkerchiefs, batik *selendang* (shoulder cloths) and batik sarongs. The discussion on upper garments, *baju* and *kebaya* show early multicultural influences.

Lee also shows how a new type of North Coast or *Pesisir* style of batik was produced by European and Eurasian batik makers in the nineteenth century. These batik sarongs plus

lace *kebaya* became the costume of choice for Eurasian women and later for *Peranakan* women in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma and Thailand. The jewellery, an essential component of the sarong *kebaya*, especially the *kerosang* (three brooches used as button for the *kebaya*) is also examined.¹³ According to Lee, the jewelry has been the subject of misunderstanding regarding sources and originality. Eventually, all these themes came together in the middle of the twentieth century, when this fashion became more or less static with minimal changes.

Throughout his discussion, Lee takes a fresh view that this dress was not uniquely native to ethnic Malays as is generally claimed, or at least not any more so than it was for the *Peranakans*, Goans, Mestizas, Eurasians and others from across the Indian Ocean through island Southeast Asia. The evidence Lee provides is definitely convincing. Despite being an exciting addition to the literature on *Peranakan* women and their dress, it was not in the scope or interest of his work to discuss their identities:

The now-fashionable academic concept of “fashion as cultural identity”, while admirable in focusing attention on dress, has had the curious effect of eradicating the rich diversity of sources and influences. The desire to discover a pure and genuine native dress had led to misrepresentation of the past, often triggered by national and ethnic identity myths (Peter Lee, 2014a: 29).

The current literature reveals a gap in the knowledge on the identities of these anonymous *Nyonyas*. While they were mostly illiterate and therefore left little direct records, their ways of visually presenting themselves were still significant. The closest to my approach is Frost, who makes the claim that *Nyonya* identities were not as fluid as their men. That is the *Nyonyas* were just *Nyonyas*, unlike their men who could be both *Babas* and Chinese. The *Babas'* liberty of dual identity did not extend to *Nyonyas*. Therefore, there is an identity gap between the *Babas* and the *Nyonyas* and, I argue, this can actually be observed in visual terms. The *Nyonyas* constructed their own visual image through their mixed dress style. The visual gap between the two did not persist for a very long time however. In the early twentieth century, the *Nyonyas* began to include Chinese dress style in their wardrobe just

¹³ *Kerosang* is *Baba* Malay usage, the Malay is *kerongsang*.

as the *Babas* had done in the nineteenth century. At this time, the distinctive image of the *Nyonyas* slowly diminished and their images came closer to the *Sinkhek* women in the ways they dressed.

Farish A. Noor (2013) holds the colonial British responsible for the reverse assimilation of the *Peranakan* Chinese, due to the labels used in the colonial census. In his words, “The colonial administrators who invented and manipulated the colonial census were unable to locate such marginal communities like the *Peranakan* Chinese”. He asserts,

It rigidly categorised and compartmentalized the different cultural and racial groupings into their appointed (and exclusive) epistemic, occupational and geographical spaces. This effectively meant that the *Peranakan* communities who were simultaneously Chinese and Malay were no longer allowed to retain their liminal status as hybrid entities who straddled ethno-linguistic-cultural boundaries. In time they were forced to choose between being either Malay or Chinese, 500 years of inter-cultural cross-fertilisation were written off by colonial bureaucrats who were not comfortable with the notion of individuals having plural identities. (A. Noor, 2013: 78).

Noor definitely has a point in that when a label is imposed on someone, especially if it is regarded as a superior label like that of ‘Straits Chinese’ that entitled them to be ‘British Subjects’, we can certainly imagine the impact.¹⁴ Having said that, the government census might not necessarily be of interest to the general public, especially those that were less educated such as the *Nyonyas*. Since the categories were in English, which the *Nyonyas* had little knowledge of prior to English education, they could not have appreciated what was going on. The English literacy that *Nyonyas* were beginning to acquire in the early twentieth century helps to make this category appreciated. Just as Ho has discussed on the importance of English education to the identities of the *Babas*, this should also affect the *Nyonyas* in a similar vein.

¹⁴ A census was created for the Straits Settlements for the first time in 1871 and the category of “Straits-Born” continued in the census in 1881, 1891 and 1901 among other Chinese dialect groups. The importance of “Straits-Born” could be felt when the census of 1911 produced only two categories for Chinese, the “China-born” and the “Straits-born” (Charles Hirschman, 1987: 573). The diminishing of the Straits Chinese political and economic influence can also be witnessed by the absolute absence of the “Straits-born” category from the 1921 onwards.

It is not as if the *Nyonya* have not been a subject of academic discussion. On the contrary, the *Nyonyas* as cultural bearers have been widely discussed in academic scholarship. Nevertheless, unlike their male counterparts, whose identities have been investigated by scholars taking various approaches, little has been said specifically on *Nyonya* identities. There is also a tendency to assume that the *Nyonya* identities were equivalent to their men. The study of *Nyonya* identity issues, such as it is, has been mostly lumped into the study of *Baba* identities, without further investigation as to whether *Nyonyas* truly share the same identities of the *Babas*. Apart from this gender gap in the knowledge, a common problem in these studies of *Baba* identities is insufficient definition of the term 'identity' and little elucidation of what the authors really mean by using this term. I will examine this term further in the next chapter.

Aim

This thesis aims to address the gap in the knowledge on the identities issues of *Nyonyas* and particularly to answer the questions of when and how the '*Nyonya*', a relatively longer-standing identity, become equivalent to the modern identity of the Straits Chinese women visually?

In order to answer these questions, I observe the *Nyonyas* through the dress they wore as there are no written works produced by the *Nyonyas* before the twentieth century. The visual representation of the *Nyonyas* in their unique and mixed dress styles enabled me to visually reconstruct the identity of these anonymous *Nyonyas*. The abundance of Straits Chinese family photographs taken in studios and homes provided an important avenue for observing the *Nyonyas*' dress styles. This avenue only became available from around the 1860s with the earliest photographs featuring Straits Chinese families. This set the beginning of my research period, especially since it also coincided with the time when the term 'Straits Chinese' was first used. The research period ends somewhere in the 1930s when the mixed dress styles that visually conveys the distinctive identity of the *Nyonyas*, was increasing replaced by other dress styles. By examining the *Nyonya* dress, this thesis

also aims to present a cultural history of the unique style of dress that portrays the distinctive identity of the *Nyonyas* visually.

This thesis is the first research to interrogate *Nyonyas'* identities issues in depth for the period before twentieth century, separately from their male counterpart. In this way, it makes a significant contribution to the scholarship of the Strait Chinese. It challenges current literatures that have a tendency to assume *Nyonyas'* identities were attached to that of their male counterparts and argue for a separate identity for the *Nyonyas* at a certain period of time. The significance of this research is not just, about how dress is important in constructing one's identity, but more importantly, it is about how the *Nyonyas* being largely illiterate at the time deserve to be understood through their dress. We were left almost nothing in written form by the *Nyonyas* in the period of the nineteenth century and before, the identity constructing visually through their dress is therefore crucial to read them.

From a wider perspective, my application of the concept of 'visual identities' through dress in this research is one of the first attempts in the current literature. Although the literatures on identity, particularly cultural identity and dress are voluminous but little has been said regarding 'visual identity'. The use of 'visual identity' as a subfield to identity in this research should contribute significantly to the literature on identities. I return to this concept of visual identity in detail in the next chapter, for now we move on to discuss my visual approach, the use of visual images, in the next section.

The Visual Approach

My intention to interrogate the identities of *Nyonyas* through visual images is very much motivated by the abundant family or individual portraiture photographs of them. These black and white photographs vividly capture the distinctive visual images of the *Nyonyas* in their mixed dress style. Some portrait paintings also survive in museums and private homes, which serve as essential visual supplements to the old photographs, although these are not very common. The paintings are particularly helpful in examining colours, overcoming the

limitations of the old black and white photographs. The complete absence of the written works by the *Nyonyas* before the twentieth century makes this visual approach essential.

The 'golden age' of the Straits Chinese took place in the era when the camera was able to record the past and we are indeed very fortunate to have the abundance of images that have survived to this day, as well as examples of the garments worn in those images which have been collected in museums, institutions and private homes. These visual and material sources present a means to explore those unwritten histories. This visual approach is also essential due to the limited information I could obtain through interviewing present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas* whose knowledge does not usually go as far back as the nineteenth century.

This visual approach of using old portraiture photographs and paintings does not come without problems, and it is important to be aware of the limitations of using photographs as evidence. One of the major limitations is the fact that many of these portrait images were not exactly taken from 'real life'; instead, they were carefully choreographed in studios. In other words, they do not always represent reality. Not everyone could afford to go to professional studios during this period. Therefore, many of the portraiture photographs present views of what was appropriately held by the well-born and well-to-do. Often, the dress worn was the result of careful, considered selection. For the less well to do who could not afford such dress, some studios actually provided them.

Anthropologist Deborah Poole who researched the Andean world through portrait photography taken mainly in the studios says, 'Photography, no matter what its claims, cannot "shape" anyone's identity' (Poole, 1997: 201). In other words, portrait photography could not completely and truly portray the identity of the subject. Poole gives examples of people in Cusco in 1940 that had undoubtedly negotiated their own peculiar understanding of the new demands placed on them by Peru's modernising state, and may have negotiated their poses, backdrop and photographic selves with the photographer who was paid to take their picture. This is undoubtedly true especially for the portraiture photographs that were taken in the studio as they captured the purposeful constructed images at a particular time and space.

Roland Barthes, one of the most significant writers on the subject of photographic messages, recognises in *Image, Music, Text* (1984) that photographic image is “a message without a code”. According to him, “there is of course a reduction - in proportion, perspective, colour – but at no time is this reduction a *transformation*” (1984: 17). He goes on,

Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*; from which proposition an important corollary must immediately be drawn: the photography message is a continuous message (ibid).

Barthes also argues in his book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) that images, particularly photographic images operate as spaces of fantasy and desire. In which he describes as “supplementary message” on top of the analogical content which he calls “secondary meaning”, resultant of the action of the creator. Hence, the photography comprises two messages, “a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (ibid). In other words, the photograph delivers a continuous analog message, which is the reality in the context of photographs, at the same time it also delivers a connotative or communicative message that is created at the production end and the delivery of this message is depending on the interpretation of the viewers.

It is the former analogue message in photographs that concerns this thesis, due to the photographs are served here as a body of evidence and not as the analytical subjects. I must clarify that my visual approach differs from Poole in that I do not interrogate the *Nyonya* identities through the portraiture photographs, instead I analyse their identities through the dress that is captured in these old photographs. Hence, the portraiture photographs include a small collection of portraiture paintings that are used in the same way as photographs; they serve as evidence of how the *Nyonyas* used to dress in that colonial space and time. Even if the studios provided the dress, the choices rested with the wearers and the studios must had known how to dress up the *Nyonyas* and provided suitable choices in order to appeal to their customers.

Having aware of the limitations that come with formal portraiture visual images, either photographs or paintings, I shall move on to discuss my methodology and explain how I have used other means to curb the limitations of these images. Like Rudolph, I too see the shortcomings of a definitory approach to 'define' *Nyonya* and see the advantages to 'identify' *Nyonya*. Unlike Rudolph, however, my reconstruction of *Nyonyas'* identities is through their dress and relies on visual images and dress materials surviving in this day.

In Chapter One I will explore some of this theorisation of identity. It explains how and why Joanne Entwistle's (2000) concept of dress, fashion and body has set the important theoretical background for this thesis. Her theory indicates the strong relationship between dressed bodies that are made social, and the identities that are given through dressed bodies. Susan Kaiser, whose theory on clothing offers directions in analysing the social meanings of clothing in their multifaceted contexts, provides an excellent background theory in establishing my theory on 'visual identity'. Equally important, this chapter defines what 'identity' is in relation to this research. The 'hybridity' issues that lie in the identities of *Babas* and *Nyonyas* are also addressed; the understanding of hybridity through post-colonial theorists particularly Radhakrishnan (2003) who sees hybridity as a phenomenon of foreign elements valorised on "stable identity" helps to put my arguments in perspective. Backed by these theories, this chapter justifies the usage of the terms 'dress' and 'visual identity' in the title of this thesis.

The Methodology

The methodology I employ emphasise on visual images and dress materials that held in museum institutions and private collections. I examine old photographs in search of visual evidence on what the *Nyonyas* wore in the past and how their dress evolved over time. The regional differences in *Nyonya* dress across the regions of Penang, Melaka and Singapore as well as with other communities who lived side by side in the cosmopolitan Straits can also be observed in these old photographs. In any case, I do not examine the *Nyonyas* in isolation, instead I consider them in the larger multicultural and colonial context in the then Straits Settlements. In other words, instead of examining the dressing system of the *Nyonya* in isolation, I also investigate how other women who were living in the Straits dressed for

identification and differentiation during the period under investigation. Prior to this period, we have very limited information on what the *Nyonyas* wore, although one can imagine the likelihood of women in Melaka dressing like women in Batavia considering the increased mobility of people between these two cities under the Dutch. The Dutch ruled over both cities in the seventeenth, eighteenth and the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Images of the nineteenth-century reveal similarities in the ways women dressed in the archipelago. The similarity in dress is especially clear between *Peranakan* women in Java and *Nyonyas* in the Straits. It is for this reason that I closely examine *Nyonya* dress with the dress worn by the *Peranakan* women in Java. For example, the visual and material evidence reveals that the batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* were imported mainly from Java, and in particular from the *Peranakan* and Eurasian workshops.

Hence, I examined large collections of photographs that feature not just the *Nyonyas* but others who lived in the then Straits Settlements as well as the *Peranakan* women in Java. This is to observe how *Nyonyas* and others managed and perceived appearances in the colonial Straits Settlements and visually identified themselves by wearing what they wore. This also provides a good understanding of the dress influences among different cultural groups. These photographs are abundance in old and new publications, museum institutions, private collections and national archives. The National Archives of Singapore, *Arkib Negara* (National Archives) in Malaysia as well as the Australian National Archives and KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) are all good resources for visual images. Web-based sources such as the Singapore National Library, Penang Stories as well as Facebook including *Peranakan Material Culture*, *Rumah Peranakan* and others have helped in drawing plentiful of old photographs. To deal with the drawbacks of formal studios portraiture photographs or paintings, I have also sought photographs that were not carefully constructed in a studio but were snapshots taken spontaneously in daily life, which record private moments of their life. By joining the *Peranakan* Association, I have been able to form some good connections and friendships with the present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Australia and in the former Straits Settlements. Some of them generously shared old family photographs that were taken candidly in the comfort of their own homes. Unfortunately, however, this did not become common until the mid-twentieth century.

To further supplement the shortfall of this visual approach, I also examine the dress material collected in museum institutions and private collections. It is another important way to examine colour and texture which could not be done in the black and white photographs. Rich and abundant materials on *Nyonya* dress have survived through museum institutions and private collectors and greatly complement the image sources. I have managed to examine a big collection of batik sarongs and *kebaya* blouse, beaded or embroidered shoes and all kinds of jewellery used by *Peranakan* women in museums, antique shops or private homes in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. The many discussions that I have with museum curators, antique dealers and private collectors have extended my practical experience of *Nyonya* dress materials that could not possibly be achieved by examining photographs or other printed material.

Through this examination, I came to realise that some materials have been abundantly collected but are hardly seen in those carefully considered images captured in the portraiture photographs or paintings. For example, the beaded slip-in shoes of the *Babas* are mostly absent in their portrait images probably because the *Baba* beaded shoes were usually worn at home and were not considered appropriate for formal images. On the other hand, the dress materials used by *Nyonyas* mostly match what was shown on visual images for *Nyonyas*. The exception is the handkerchiefs that were much seen on *Nyonyas'* visual images does not usually see in private or museum collections. We will return to the possible reasons in Chapter Three.

There is, however, a major drawback in examining museum collections of batik sarongs or *kain panjang* in that the origin of the pieces are generally recorded but the origins of the users were never specified. This includes those pieces collected in the former Straits and it is very difficult to ascertain which were popularly used in the Straits. To address this shortfall, I resort to examining pieces in the private collections of present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas* who usually know exactly who wore those batik sarongs. However, this comes with another problem as hardly of those family heirlooms were ever passed down from the nineteenth century. Although mostly undated, they were quite clearly made in the early to mid twentieth century. For the gap in the knowledge in the nineteenth century, I can only resort to the black and white portraiture photographs and some portraiture paintings. Fortunately, there were a multitude of published and unpublished photographs available for

examination which enable me to observe what *Nyonyas* was wearing in the period before twentieth century.

I also supplement this visual approach with discourse analysis. My emphasis is on both historical and modern publications. The late nineteenth to early twentieth century saw the beginning of the prominent press published by the English educated *Babas*. This includes the *Daily Advertiser* (1890-1894) published in Malay and English, *The Straits Chinese Herald* (1894), *Surat Khabar Peranakan* (1894), *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897-1907), *Straits Chinese Annual* (1930), *Straits Chinese Monthly* (1931-1933), and the sole issue of *Bintang Peranakan* (1930-1931). The Malay-language *Jawi Peranakan* was also published in Singapore in 1876.

I do not of course neglect some of the earliest newspapers published by the British in earlier years or even before the establishment of the Straits Settlements. This includes the first newspaper ever published in Southeast Asia, *The Prince of Wales Island Gazette* published continually in Penang from the early 1806 until the early 1830s. The first newspapers of Singapore and Melaka, *Singapore Chronicle* and *Malacca Observer* respectively, were both published in 1824. Though published mainly for European readers before English education reached the local *Babas*, these early newspapers contain valuable accounts of past ages.

Fiction writing such as the novels or short stories of *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, as well as the non-fiction autobiographies or memoirs written by *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, are all informative and useful resources, particularly helpful in disclosing how the *Nyonyas* used to live, some of the stories could date back to nineteenth century. In the last century, some Straits Chinese women contributed articles for publication, particularly from the 1930s such as *Straits Chinese Monthly* and the *Malaya Tribune*. Not to forget, ongoing current publications by the *Peranakan Association Singapore*, *The Peranakan* as well as its predecessor *Suara Baba* are good references for up-to-date issues.

Apart from visual and textual sources, other primary sources include informal interviews that I made with present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas* who still call themselves *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. What I really mean by 'informal interviews' are indeed more like 'casual chats' with the descendants of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. These casual chats were conducted in an informal manner aiming to make the interviewees feel comfortable about sharing their

family stories with me. Although the results provided limited precise information on things that happened a hundred and fifty years ago, they nonetheless offered guidelines on how the present day *Babas* or *Nyonyas* view their cultural past and helped to point me in the right direction for further research.

I also made observations by participating in events like the Chinese New Year Celebration, annual dinner and dance and numerous get-togethers organised by the *Peranakan* associations in Sydney; as well as the events that took place during my field research in Singapore, Penang and Melaka. This was to observe the residual culture practiced by present day *Baba* and *Nyonya* and to get a glimpse through the descriptions of their members on how things would have been done during their parents or grandparents days.

Apart from the primary resources, secondary sources including academic and other research literature have been of paramount importance in ways that have been discussed above. However, one of my difficulties in the literature analysis pertains to my own linguistic limitations. Although I am able to read five written languages, Malay, *Baba* Malay, Indonesian, English and Chinese and speak several Chinese dialects including Hokkien, Cantonese and Hainanese that helped with the many conversations made during the field trips; I have limited access to sources written in Dutch. For that, I can only resort to the available translations in English. However, it was also possible to access some of these sources indirectly, through the works of other writers who have cited or utilised them.

In order to support my visual approach, I take another perspective and look at the different lifestyles of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. I argue that these different lifestyles were also important for the difference in identity construction between men and women. In Chapter Two, I examine the historical background and the origin of the Straits Chinese in three different places, Melaka, Penang and Singapore. Focusing particularly on the origin of the *Nyonyas*, I explain that the first generation of *Nyonyas* were natives to Southeast Asia and thus nurtured a distinctive hybrid culture. I discuss the social history of the Straits Chinese and reveal their lifestyle focusing on their women on how they used to live in these multicultural and cosmopolitan cities under colonial rule in the former Straits Settlements. *Nyonyas* as cultural bearers have been much mentioned in the current literature but their social ethics that were heavily homo social during such time periods have only been

mentioned in passing. This chapter demonstrate that such social ethics are crucial in leading the separate identity construction between men and women.

Chapter Three will examine the *Nyonyas'* local dress style in order to reveal the importance of this 'style' in portraying their visual identity. The dress style, consisting of a two-piece ensemble, *kebaya* and batik sarong, was essentially a local way of dressing. 'Local' is defined here in the wider sense of the Malay Archipelago where the *sarong kebaya* were worn and used widely. The two-piece ensemble was everyday dress for the *Nyonyas* and they were essential for the *Nyonyas* to identify themselves with the other 'local' women. This chapter aims to understand how this 'local' dress style contributed to at least a part of the expression of the *Nyonyas'* identity visually.

Chapter Four considers the Chinese elements that appeared in the *Nyonyas'* local dress style in order to understand if these Chinese elements bound the *Nyonyas* together and expressed a more exclusive visual identity within the population of local women. This chapter aims to examine whether these Chinese elements make them more in tune with the *Baba* men. It is in their batik sarongs that the *Nyonyas* reveal the most Chinese sense of aesthetics. The batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* were produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese and they came to be called *Batik Cina* (Chinese batiks) or *Batik Peranakan*. As the name suggests, these Chinese Batiks were produced by incorporating Chinese elements to cater to the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java and beyond including the former Straits Settlements. The aim of this chapter is to unfold the Chinese aesthetic values that appear on the *Batik Peranakan* as well as those that appear in the blouses and accessories.

European connections are also evident in the *Nyonyas* daily two-piece ensembles and will be the focus of Chapter Five. It aims to examine whether this European influence adds another perspective to the *Nyonyas* local dress style. The batik sarongs and *kebaya*, as well as the embroidered or beaded shoes all have some European aspects in them. I question whether these elements played a role in binding the *Nyonyas* together and expressing their role as the Straits Chinese women, the 'British' Straits Settlements. A later and shorter version of blouse is the infamous *kebaya*, which owes its origin to the Dutch influence. The batik sarongs that were made by the European and the Eurasian in Java, the *Batik Belanda* or Dutch batik were not just popular amongst the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java but also

penetrated the Straits Chinese market is another important material to investigate. This chapter considers a period when the sarong and *kebaya* was no longer the only dress style that was worn by the *Nyonyas*. The European influence brought in not just the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* but also the concept of 'fashion' with other fashionable dress styles including Western dress style, the European frocks and Chinese dress styles including the '*koon sah*' (skirt and blouse), '*cheong sam*' and '*samfu*' (blouse and pant).

Chapter One: Dress, Identity, Visual Identity and Hybridity

In order to answer the question of when and how the *Nyonyas*, at least some of them, became Straits Chinese women, I employ a visual approach to observe changes of identities through changes in dress. Although my approach puts the relationship between dress and identity at centre stage, we should not neglect the fact that a human body is required to put the dress onto. I therefore begin this chapter by examining the relationship between the body and dress, followed by a discussion of how the dressed body relates to identity. Joanne Entwistle's (2000) concept of dress and body has set the main theoretical background for this thesis. Her theory indicates the strong relationship between dressed bodies that are made social and the identity that is acquired through the dressed body. As the term 'dress' has been chosen for the analysis of visual identities, it is essential to explain the logic behind this choice and to define the term 'dress' as well as other closely related terms, including 'fashion'. This discussion substantiates the use of 'dress' in the title of this thesis.

Equally important, this chapter looks at ways to define the concept of identity. Post-colonial theorist Frederick Cooper (2005) facilitates an understanding of identity and shows a few key uses of identity. Particularly helpful is his strong and weak understanding of identity that helps to identify the *Nyonyas* through photographs. Susan Kaiser's (1997) theory on the social psychology of clothing paves the way for the foundation of 'visual identity', an aspect of identity that can be captured visually through dress. The 'hybridity' issues that relate to the identities of *Nyonyas* are also addressed through the studies of post-colonial theorists, particularly Radhakrishnan (2003), who argues that hybridity is "valorised on the basis of a stable identity".

The Dressed Body

Consistently in all cultures, human bodies are dressed, although what constitutes dress does differ. "[Dress] is a product and a process that distinguishes human beings from other animals" (Eicher *et al.*, 1993: 4). Unfortunately, we do not know exactly when, how and why

humans started to dress their bodies but we do know that it has been a social condition since the earliest time. Joanne Entwistle writes,

Dress is a basic fact of social life and this, according to anthropologists, is true of all known human cultures: all people 'dress' the body in some way, be it through clothing, tattooing, cosmetics or other forms of body painting. To put it another way, no culture leaves the body unadorned but adds to, embellishes, enhances or decorates the body. In almost all social situations, we are required to appear dressed, although what constitutes 'dress' varies from culture to culture and also within a culture, since what is considered appropriate dress will depend on the situation or occasion (Entwistle, 2000: 6).

Entwistle's concept indicates the strong relationship between dress and social roles, and she continues, "dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity" (Entwistle, 2000: 7). In other words, for the body to function socially it has to be appropriately dressed; thus, dress plays a social role. In order to understand the social role that dress plays on the body, it makes sense to explore what constitutes body.

Entwistle identifies two major theoretical approaches to discussions of the body. One is that of the social biology theorists who regard the body as "naturalistic body" (Shilling, 1993: 41). The 'naturalistic' approach is definitely appealing as the body has a biological presence, however it is important to recognise that the material body stands in the centre of culture. Therefore, there is a second group of theorists, broadly described as "social constructivists" (Entwistle, 2000: 12), whose theories take the body as a thing of culture and not merely as a biological entity. Entwistle recognises how Mary Douglas (1973) regards the body as a natural object, shaped by social forces and thus suggests that there are two bodies; the "physical body" and the "social body". According to Douglas, the social situation imposes itself on the social body and restricts the latter's expression as it is heavily mediated by its culture and hence constrains the way the "physical body" is perceived. Douglas hypothesises that "bodily control is an expression of social control" (Douglas, 1973: 99),

hence the controlled body corresponds with social order.¹⁵ In other words, the “physical body” is our biological flesh and bone, which has a natural basis, for instance the physical body needs to be covered with warm clothes when cold. Meanwhile, the “social body” expresses or behaves according to the cultures in which the body stands, for instance the body must be dressed appropriately according to social events or dress codes.

We can see this clearly if we consider how human beings, born with physical bodies, express themselves freely when little and not aware of the social situations surrounding them. For instance, toddlers often cry and throw tantrums but adults restrict their expressions when they are aware of the social expectation around them, therefore social bodies prevail over physical bodies. To be competent members of society, humans must acquire the knowledge of how to display the cultural norms and expectations on their conscious, social bodies. Dressing is one way to achieve these norms for social bodies. Hence, this body analysis can be extended to dress, as the dress in everyday life is the outcome of cultural and social pressures. In her words, “The dressed body is a product of culture, the outcome of social forces pressing upon the body” (Entwistle, 2000: 20). To sum up, dress is an extension or part of the ‘social body’.

Nevertheless, Entwistle observes, “the literature from history, cultural studies, psychology and so on, where it [dress] is often examined, does so almost entirely without acknowledging the significance of the body. Entwistle argues that an account of dress as situated practice requires drawing on the insights of two different traditions, structuralism and phenomenology. She explains, “Structuralism offers the potential to understand the body as a *socially constituted and situated object*, while phenomenology offers the potential to understand dress as an *embodied experience*” (2000: 12). She proposes the idea of dress as situated bodily practice as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture. Such a framework recognizes that bodies are socially constituted, always situated in culture and the outcome of individual practices directed towards the body. Examining the structuring influences on the dressed body requires taking account of the historical and social

¹⁵ Here Douglas gives the example of laughing, that laughter is a physiological function that starts in the face but can infuse the entire body. She asserts that the social situation determines the degree to which the body can laugh (Douglas, 1973: 99).

constraints on the body which impact upon the act of 'dressing' at a given time. Thus, dress is the product of the social context. Goffman (1973) examines how cultural norms and expectations are imposed upon the presentation of oneself in everyday life and individuals seek to be defined by others as 'normal' and 'dress' is an important presentation of one self.

Since this thesis is specifically concerned with the social aspect of the *Nyonyas'* gendered bodies, it is worth exploring what constitutes gender. Barnard (1996) brings our attention to the distinction between sex and gender. In his words, "sex may be described as being a collection of biological physiological differences" in which "men have one set of reproductive equipment and women have a different set; sex is determined by the presence or absence of the bodily parts necessary for reproduction". Gender, on the other hand, "can be described as a cultural phenomenon; gender differences can be described as cultural differences" (Barnard, 1996: 111). In other words, differences in sex are the biological distinction between male and female bodies while the differences in gender lie in what characterises masculinity and femininity as defined by cultures. Understandings of masculinity and femininity may differ from culture to culture but one of the universally important factors is dress code. Gaines (1990: 1) argues that gender is a cultural construction that dress helps to reproduce. In other words, gender boundaries are usually marked by the dress code and therefore dress plays an important role in gendered identity. For instance, the feminine version of sarong *kebaya* is a gendered dress style, the dress style for women, and by adopting this dress style the *Nyonyas* certainly identify themselves as women of the archipelago.

Traditionally, women are more closely identified with dress. Tseelon (1995) provides a number of examples to show how, historically, women have been defined as trivial, superficial or vain because of their association with the vanities of dress. Tseelon (1995) analyses women's relationship to their appearance and illustrates the different levels of body consciousness that inform the choice of dress. Understanding women's dress and how they come to wear the dress they do, therefore, requires situating their bodies within a very particular social space. As such, to understand how the *Nyonyas* came to dress the way they did, we must situate their bodies within the particular space and time of the former Straits

Settlements. In the way they dressed the *Nyonyas* presented themselves as local women of the archipelago and showed a much greater connection with other women in their environment than with their men in the period before the twentieth century. This certainly reflects a situation where gendered bodies seek connection with each other as a gendered group more than they seek connection with their men as a family unit. We return to this issue in Chapter Two where a homo-social structure existed in the former Straits among the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* for the period before twentieth century, thus setting the foundation for the *Nyonyas* to connect with other women of the archipelago in the way they dressed. In sum, what *Nyonyas* wore was an important feature to their perception of the environment around them, a social expression that came through their background and became part of their social body in that colonial time and space.

Dress versus Fashion

Having clarified the function of dress on body, I now turn my attention to the terminologies of 'dress' as well as 'fashion', which is closely related to 'dress', explain how it is used and perceived by clothing scholars. The following discussion justifies the use of the term 'dress' in the title of this thesis, as it appropriately includes fashion.

The term 'dress' is not just a noun; it is a verb to describe the act of covering the body with clothes and accessories. Thus, everyday English words like 'getting dressed' or 'dressing up' describe the practices of preparing to cover the body with garments. In the noun form, several related terms are used in a similar way to 'dress', including adornment, apparel, appearance, clothing, costume, dress, fashion, style and wearable art (Kaiser, 1997: 4). Yet, as Roach and Eicher (1965) rightly point out, the terms 'dress' and 'adornment' stand out as "the most descriptive and inclusive" terms (Roach and Eicher, 1965: 1). Generally, the terms 'dress' and 'adornment' are more associated with anthropological literature where "dress as an act that emphasises the process of covering" while "adornment stresses the aesthetic aspect of altering body" (Roach and Eicher, 1965: 1). Entwistle, quoting Polhemus and Proctor (1978), states that anthropologists remain concerned to find an appropriate universal and all-inclusive term to describe "all the things people do or put on to their bodies in order to make the human form, in their eyes, more attractive" (Entwistle, 2000:

43). Referring to Rouch and Musa (1980), Kaiser describes adornment as “any decoration or alteration of the body’s appearance.” The obvious disadvantage of using adornment highlighted by Rouch and Musa is the difficulty in determining aesthetic perspectives from a distant past. In other words, it is hard to ascertain whether this “alteration of the body’s appearance” is indeed meant for aesthetic purposes. Whether or not ‘dress’ emphasises aesthetic aspects is also arguable, though ‘dress’ definitely does not exclude the possibility of aesthetic concepts. Hence, dress can be ‘aesthetic’ or ‘functional’ or both.

‘Dress’ is the most suitable word to use in this thesis as it incorporates all the material objects added to the body, which are the main theme of this research. This thesis includes discussions of the various *kebaya* tops, sarongs as hip-wrapper, embroidered or beaded shoes, the metal belt and the *kerosang* (set of three brooches) that are needed to put the dress together on the *Nyonya* bodies. Having said that, there remains an obligation to explain the term ‘fashion’, which is used frequently in this thesis. Although the terms ‘dress’ and ‘fashion’ have been perceived differently, they are interrelated and without a clear understanding of ‘fashion’, we are unable to gain further insights on the term ‘dress’ such as used by the clothing scholars.

As a general term ‘fashion’ refers to any kind of systematic change such as interior designs, table wares, architecture, furniture, shapes of the body or even in academic writing, where some approaches can be more ‘in’ than others. Therefore, I should point out that fashion, when referred to in this thesis, is concerned only with clothing. The system of dress that came to be called fashion refers to a system of dress that change regularly. Significantly, this change in fashion is different from the slow evolvement experienced by some forms of ‘traditional dress’ over a long period of time that is often associated with ethnic societies. As Wilsons puts it, “rapid and continual changing of styles: fashion in a sense is change” (Wilson, 1985: 3). The ‘change’ that Wilson identifies here is a ‘quick change’ and characterised by ‘change for change’s sake’, a term used by Bell (1976).

The term ‘fashion’ therefore has a more specific meaning, it is a system of dress that is rapidly changing and arguably found in modern western society. Peter McNeil (2009) writes, “A well-established history of costume has argued that a dynamic fashion system emerged within a conjunction of the competing politics of France, England and Burgundy in the late

Middle Ages” (McNeil, 2009: xix). With reference to several fashion writers including Bell (1976), Laver (1969) McDowell (1992) and Wilson (1985), Entwistle summarises:

Fashion is understood as a historically and geographically specific system for the production and organisation of dress, emerging over the course of the fourteenth century in the European courts, particularly the French court of Louis XIV, and developing with the rise of mercantile capitalism (Entwistle, 2000: 44).

As early as the fifteenth century, Charles VII in France was asked to establish a separate ministry of fashion, thus showing the importance of fashion in France at that time (Svendsen, 2012: 9). However, the fashion as being quick changes did not emerge until the eighteenth century in Europe. The first fashion magazines, which made their appearance in Europe in the 1770s and 80, greatly increased the speed of fashion circulation.

As a direct consequence of the argument that fashion emerged in the West, dress worn in the East was mainly considered ‘traditional dress’ and often associated with ethnic societies. The perception of ‘traditional dress’ is that it is nearly fixed and does not project regular change as fashion does. Changes, if they occur at all in traditional dress, usually take place over a long period of time and are sometimes unnoticeable to the people themselves.

This Eurocentric model of fashion history has certainly prompted negative responses from fashion experts working on fashion in the East. For instance, Finnane (2007) argues for the existence of fashion in China, “Recent work on Chinese dress in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries revisionist in intent, shows evidence of the short-term changes in urban fashions, and a high degree of consciousness of their significance” (Finnane, 2007: 9). Finnane demonstrates with abundant evidence that in the late imperial era, fashion was part of Chinese life, based mostly on the nineteenth and twentieth-century representations of Chinese dress. Peter Lee (2014a) has attempted to document the sarong *kebaya* as part of *Peranakan* fashion but unfortunately, his pursuit is not well grounded in a weak understanding of fashion.

Clearly, fashion system imposes parameters around dress, within these constraints however, individuals can be creative in their interpretations of fashion and their practices of dress. Fashion is part of the dress system and it forms one criterion that people use to

make decisions about what to wear, alongside a wide range of social factors including social class, ethnicity and age. Hence, fashion does not affect everybody in the same way. For instance, some people want to look fashionable while others may consider it more important to dress appropriately according to her age group. This explains the situation when the concept of fashion arrived in the Straits among the *Nyonyas* in the early twentieth century as we shall see in Chapter Five; only selective, affluent young *Nyonyas* chose to follow fashion, while older *Nyonyas* retained their old way of dressing.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain whether a specific garment can be regarded as an item of fashion. This is because a specific garment cannot be considered as a fashion item unless it is viewed in context. Barnard explains this well:

There is no essence that a garment must partake of in order to be fashion; on this account, it may be fashion and fashionable, at one point in time but not at another. There is nothing common to all fashion or fashionable garments, just as there is nothing that is common to all the near synonyms noted above: fashion, clothing, dress and adornment. It is only the context that allows the identification of a garment as fashion or non-fashion, as it is only the context that allows the identification of the correct meaning of these words (Barnard, 1996: 16).

In other words, only the context can determine whether a garment can be referred to as an item of fashion. Therefore, the same garment could function as fashion in one location but not in another and at one time but not another. For this reason, exactly the same style of dress can be considered 'fashion' in the Straits Settlements but not in Java, as will also be discussed in Chapter Five.

I should point out however, that the dress studied in this thesis include daily wear items that present day-to-day reality. I exclude dress items that were worn on special occasions, like weddings and funerals, as the dress worn on these occasions did not reflect daily life. This occasional dress, however, should not be confused with 'mourning dress', the dress worn by close family members when a family member passed away, during 'mourning period'. The mourning period could last as long as three years and required lifestyle changes including the dress worn. This mourning period is taken into consideration due to the

considerably long period of time it involves. Now, with dress and fashion defined and discussed, I examine how the dressed body relates to the identity of the wearer.

Identity

The term 'identity' has a long history as a technical term in Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks through to contemporary analytical philosophy. Frederick Cooper (2005), in his critical examination of the term, quotes Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the earliest to characterise identity as "a sort of virtual center to which we must refer to explain certain things but without it ever having a real existence" (Cooper, 2005: 60). Identity was introduced into social analysis and expanded into the social sciences and public discourse in the United States in the 1960s. When used in social analysis 'identity' is a weighty term, meant to do a great deal of analytical work, which does not come without problems. To facilitate an understanding of identities, I refer to five key uses of identity identified by Cooper (2005: 64-65), which are summarised in the following paragraphs.

First, identity can be perceived as a "ground or basis of social or political action". In this way, action of an individual or a group of people may be governed by "*particularistic self-understandings* rather than by *putatively universal self interest*". Secondly, it can be understood as "a specifically *collective* phenomenon". As such, this identity indicates "a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category". This sameness can be shown in "shared state of minds or in collective actions", such as "on gender and on race, ethnicity and nationalism". Thirdly, it can be understood as a "core aspect of (individual or collective) selfhood or as a fundamental condition of social being". In this way, identity is "invoked to point to something allegedly *deep, basic, abiding or foundational*" of oneself such as the language, one speak. This is different from the temporary and changing aspects of oneself, for instance, appetite. Fourthly, it can be understood as "a product of social or political action" and as "a ground or basis of further action". In this way, it highlights the cohesion of a group or "groupness" that "enable collective action possible". Fifthly, it can be understood as "the evanescent product of

multiple and competing discourses". It is invoked to "highlight the *unstable, multiple and fluctuating and fragmented* nature of the contemporary 'self'".

Although usage of the term 'identity' discussed above is diverse, some usages actually overlap as recognised by Cooper himself. For instance, the second and the third reflects "fundamental sameness both across people and over time" which Cooper called "strong conceptions". On the other hand, the fourth and fifth "reject the notion of fundamental or abiding sameness" or "weak conceptions" according to Cooper. "Strong conceptions" is the more common usage but it requires assumptions to be made. These include, "identity is something all people have, or ought to have or are searching for"; "identity is something all groups (at least groups of a certain kind for example, ethnic, racial or national) have or ought to have"; "identity is something people (and groups) can have without being aware of it" (Cooper, 2005: 67). In other words, "strong conceptions" emphasises sameness over time and amongst people in the same group. The advantage of this usage is that the term 'identity' retains the everyday meaning. As such, this usage is advantageous in analysing the identity of *Nyonyas* as they shared some fundamental sameness, which we shall see in their dress that will be discussed in Chapter Three, Four and Five.

The "weak conception" on the other hand, is applicable in situations where the boundary of the group is not particularly clear. In other words, the group members do not appear to have obvious sameness over time and across people. This usage is also useful for identifying the *Nyonyas* at some stages. We have been constantly reminded by scholars like Rudolph that *Babas* and *Nyonyas* were, or are not, homogeneous; they differ from one location to another and even from one family to another. Since the *Nyonyas* generally did not have a static culture over time and across people, at times it makes more sense to use the "reject notion of fundamental sameness", in other words, in favour of the "weak conceptions". That is to say that instead of asking whom the *Nyonyas* were, I ask who the *Nyonyas* were not. Excluding those women who were not *Nyonyas*, those remaining should be *Nyonyas*, in theory at least. The strong conception of identities does not work efficiently if used solely for the *Nyonyas* because distinctiveness between members and non-members can sometimes be blurred, particularly in the nineteenth century. I find that using both the weak and strong conceptions is the most efficient way to identify the *Nyonyas*. I return to this

again in subsequent chapters as it becomes clearer in the discussion of particular circumstances.

In addressing the issue of 'differences' in the shared identities of *Nyonyas*, I also refer to Stuart Hall (1993) who argues that identities are "framed by two axes or vectors; simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture" (Hall, 1993: 226). Hall suggests two ways of thinking about cultural identities; the first is by defining cultural identities as "a common shared culture with people of a shared history and common ancestry come together". Secondly, he recognises that there are also "critical points of significant difference". Hall gave the example of black Caribbean identities, in which Caribbean identities must always be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. One gives them "some grounding in, and continuity with, the past". The other is "the experience of a profound discontinuity" (1993: 227). Hall explains that their similarity lies in their "enforced separation from Africa" into slavery but differs in that those slaves were from "different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods". The uprooting of African slavery and insertion into the Western economy actually "unified these peoples across their differences at the same moment that it cut them off from direct access to their past" (ibid).

This unification is similar to the situation of the *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements. Their female ancestors came from different villages or islands in the Malay Archipelago and, to a lesser extent mainland Southeast Asia, and came into the Straits Settlements on a different timeline. Those factors contributed to the profound differences in the culture and history of their past. However, these women of differing backgrounds were uprooted from their past, in which many of them were slaves, and their common experience of being married to Chinese men brought them closer, showed cultural similarities and gave them the identity of *Nyonya*. Even more so, it seems, when these *Nyonyas* were 'unified' by the colonial government as 'Straits Chinese women'. Hall thus provides a different way of thinking about identity, which allows for new points of recognition in the identities of *Nyonyas* in which "differences persist alongside sameness". In other words, the similarities among *Nyonyas* were their experiences of forming families with Chinese men and becoming the British subjects, while their differences were their cultural backgrounds from different villages or islands in Southeast Asia. Hall also urges us, "instead of thinking of identity as an already

accomplished fact,” we should think of identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 1993: 222). With this in mind, we should anticipate changes in identity from being *Nyonyas* of various backgrounds across Southeast Asia to becoming more unified ‘Straits Chinese women’. These changes, I argue, can be observed visually. In the next section, I clarify how visual images formed through dress are an aspect of identity and the term ‘visual identity’.

Visual Identity

The enormous scope of ‘identity’ as discussed above, gives rise to many complications and it is without doubt a heavily burdened term. I deal with the enormity of the term by breaking it down into the more manageable concept of ‘visual identity’, an aspect of identity that can be captured visually through dress. Nevertheless, the term ‘visual identity’ is not generally used in the context of dress; rather it is associated with company branding or corporate identity.¹⁶ In order to facilitate an understanding of the usage of ‘visual identity’ in the context of dress, I engage the theory of Susan Kaiser (1997) in her social psychology of clothing.

Kaiser explores the unconscious thought processes we use to decide not just how clothes look, but also what they mean. She examines the appearance and the self on how physical appearances and clothes come to have meaning for the wearers as they strive to make sense of their social realities. Kaiser considers three dimensions of the self, “the body, perceptions and evaluations of self in a social sense; the appearance management; and the self in contexts”. First, in discussing the body that is the physical self, she shows us how cultural ideals about bodies influence the way we evaluate our own bodies and how these ideals differ on the basis of gender. Secondly, the way people think about and identify themselves in a social context is the “self-concept”. This concept is developed, maintained and modified if necessary, pertaining to place and understanding of the self within the context of social life. Thirdly, “appearance management” facilitates “self-presentation” by enabling one to appear before others, as they would like to be seen. In other words, people

¹⁶ See *Visual Identities* by Jean-Marie Floch (2000).

may have only one “self-concept” but they may have many contextually relevant identities. For example, a police woman who is also a mother may have one “self-concept”, as a ‘decent and kind human being’, but at least two “contextual identities” as police woman and mother.

Kaiser sees “identity as a kind of self-in-context, the self that is embedded in social relations and situations”. She defines identity, as “the organised set of characteristics an individual perceives as representing or defining the self in a given social situation” (Kaiser, 1997: 186). For example, when the “given social situation” is a police station, a police woman may characterise and identify herself as ‘tough and strong’, while in another “given social situation” like her own home, the same police woman may characterise and identify herself as a ‘gentle and caring’ mother.

In this way, Kaiser argues that a person has “multifaceted identities depending on the social situation”. Through a process of “self-identification”, individuals place and express their own identities. Appearance management allows them to anticipate what identities they would like to have in a social situation, so they can present themselves to others accordingly. That is, “appearance management” is a means for “self-presentation”, a process of “displaying an identity” to others in a social context. “Appearance management” involves dressing up, for example, a police woman who is also a mother may choose not to identify herself as a police woman at her children’s birthday party by not wearing her police uniform and therefore identifying herself as a mother. Consequently,

Thus, self-identification, as well as the more specific act of appearance management, is like a transaction involving a person (and his or her self-image, goals, or mood), an audience (others with whom one interact) and a situation (with all of its attendant opportunities and constraints) (Kaiser, 1997: 187).

An audience, however, may comprise of other people but it may also comprise of just the self. On the other hand, “self-identification” is enacted with others in mind in a public context, often referred to as “self-disclosure”; whereas in a private context as when looking in a mirror, the self evaluates one’s own image and places it in context and that represents “self-reflection”.

Kaiser maintains that people cannot hold on to particular identities by themselves as identities tend to be constructed, revised and reconstructed in social transactions. Identities may be ascribed when they are assigned and attributed to individuals by society. On this point, she gives examples of gendered appearances as a socially constructed “ascribed identity”. Identities may also be “achieved” when people earn or create their own, in contexts over which a person has some control. In either case, Kaiser believes that the meanings and appearances associated with an identity are socially constructed so that at times it becomes difficult to draw a line between the self and social constraints. By viewing the self within larger social, cultural and historical contexts, we are reminded that meaning arises from “everyday life experiences and the changing imagery of desirable appearances”.

Kaiser also examines the intricate process of “appearance communication” which is the meaningful exchange of information through “visual personal cues”. Mutual processes of appearance management and perception contribute to “appearance communication”. Both senders and receivers bring unique qualities, past experiences and frames of reference to social interaction. Appearance messages are unique and complex in their own right and they are perceived in a way that involves a filtering of personal experiences and expectations. Meaningful communication can proceed when a sender and receiver sufficiently mesh their interpretations to develop a sense of shared understanding. Kaiser then proceeds from a discussion of appearance in a visual context to focus on processes of social cognition influencing “appearance perception”. She also discusses “appearance perception” as only one component of the two-way “appearance communication” process, the qualities that perceivers bring with them to social contexts will therefore influence and set the stage for “appearance communication”. She then pulled together the various pieces and processes of “appearance communication” to explore mutual negotiations of meaning in everyday life.

In sum, Kaiser addresses how appearance is linked to “self-concept” and “self-presentation”, as well as functioning as a “communication tool” with others. She analyses how we use clothes and appearance as forms of expression and argues that social meanings associated with clothes do not emerge as a result of the interpretations of just one or two people, although there may be some idiosyncratic interpretations of appearances known only to one or two. Many meanings are shared with larger numbers of people and the shared meaning and collective representation become relevant and allow us to fit in. Hence,

clothing and appearance become part of the social-historical nature of a group of people and represent a group's culture, facilitating shared meanings and collective representation. Thus, the desire for identification with others and differentiation from others makes one dress like some but not like others, while still having the potential to express a sense of self. Therefore, clothing choices and appearance management become part of a larger context of communicating identities on an everyday basis.

Fred Davis (1992) also discusses coding and whether the coding of clothes actually speaks for their wearers. He recognises that we are not passive recipients of identities ascribed to us by "some abstract entity termed society" and in fact actively engage in the construction and articulation of our social identities. However, because we are subject to many of the same conditions of life, it is in this sense that our identities can be spoken of as sharing a strong collective component. According to Davis,

clothing (along with cosmetics and coiffure) comprises what is most closely attached to the corporeal self – it frames much of what we see when we see another – it quite naturally acquires a special capacity to, speaking somewhat loosely, 'say things' about the self (Davis, 1992: 25).

He then says that dress easily comes to serve as a kind of "visual metaphor for identity" and for registering the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities.

Through Kaiser and Davis, we know that, in theory at least, dress does play a role in presenting a person's identity visually. Mainly because 'image' is itself 'meaningful' to the wearers and the audience. Although neither Kaiser nor Davis use the term 'visual identity', Kaiser's term "displaying an identity" and Davis' "visual metaphor for identity" are ways of saying 'visual identity', which I interpret as the 'complex process of visual expression through dressing that relates to the portrayal of identity'. In other words, visual identity is an aspect of identity that concerns how identity is presented visually at a particular time and space.

Kaiser's theories on the social psychology of clothing are supported by the case studies of Tarlo in India (1996), Hulsbosch in Ambon, Indonesia (2014) and Finnane in China (2007). These studies concern how dressing is vital in presenting identities at different locations. On

the one hand, Finnane focuses her studies on fashion rather than identities but she makes the observation that Chinese men in the Republican era could change their identities through changing outfits. These ranged from the conservative Changpao to the western suit that was often identified with financial success, Western imperialists and their Chinese cronies, while the Sun Yat Sen suit was a civilianised military uniform that confirmed its wearer's revolutionary spirit.

By emphasising the relation of dress and identity, Tarlo and Hulsbosch's studies are consequently closer to my approach. Tarlo, an anthropologist, offers a dynamic model of the complex and intriguing relationship between clothing and identity in India. Her detailed study, based on fieldwork in India in the late 1980s, examines sartorial style from the nineteenth century and shows how trends in clothing are related to caste, level of education, urbanisation and a larger cultural debate about the nature of Indian identity. According to Tarlo, clothes have been used to assert power, challenge authority, conceal identity and instigate social change throughout Indian society. In this way, Tarlo's Indian cloths speak for the wearers' social identities but ultimately she is pushing the Indian cloths to represent a larger Indian cultural identity.

Hulsbolsh on the other hand, asserts that image and meaning projected through dress are inherent in the construction of Ambonese cultural beliefs and values. She demonstrates that the intricate dynamics of colonial power influenced every aspect of dress worn in Ambonese society. Identity formation in Ambonese ethnic groups is directly linked to the identity construction of the coloniser and vice versa. She argues that the identity of the colonised and coloniser was mediated by embodied social and cultural experiences. Hulsbosch, in using dress to construct identities, argues that her approach considers not only outer but also inner image to construct the identity through dress, in her words:

The appearance is incomplete and therefore does not fully represent the colonial Ambonese communities unless it includes inherent cultural beliefs and values' considers people's inner and outer image within a historical/political and socioeconomic context. Therefore, this book does not only depend on visual images but also on the visuality of being, of meaning created and projected in everyday life, because identity includes feelings, actions and thought (Hulsbosch, 2014: 5).

Consequently, Hulsbosch also argues for the larger cultural identity for the Ambonese people through their dress, in which dress is usually apart. The significant relation between clothing and identities, particular cultural identities, are definitely well established in these case studies. Nevertheless, I find this approach unsatisfactorily, the enormous scope of identity as discussed earlier is complex, even though dress is a powerful statement and could portray a significant aspect of the identity at a particular time and space but this identity that displayed visually is incomplete, even for the one category of cultural identity. Culture is a broadly inclusive term, hence, a complete cultural identity should appropriately consider aspects of religions, languages, ethnicities, life styles and so on. As such, my approach differs from them, in using dress to construct the 'visual identity', I aim to construct an aspect of identity that is somewhat independent and not rigidly confined to a particular category of identity such as cultural identity. This 'visual identity' could enhance any category of identity that is dominant at a particular time and a particular place and it does not necessarily have to be culturally inclined. Take for example, any police women who puts on a police uniform presents her professional identity and does not represent her cultural background.

The advantage of constructing 'visual identity' through the dress of the *Nyonyas* for three separate locations over a considerably long period of time is that it is a flexible aspect of identity that portrayed through dress which could enhance an ethnic identity, complement an educational identity or assert a social political identity. For instance, various scholars have shown that the *Baba* identities were complex and multifaceted, differing from one location to another and from one period of time to another. Tan proposes a sub-ethnic identity for Melaka *Babas*, Ho asserts an educational identity on Penang *Babas* while Rudolph argues for social and political identity for Singapore *Babas* in their respective research period. In that case, the visual identity of a *Baba* in his Chinese jacket asserted his sub-ethnic identity while in a Western suit, a *Baba* complemented his English education and Colonial political identity. This research takes on the task to investigate the *Nyonyas'* visual identities in their hybrid dress styles and the inclination of such visual identities according to the different styles of dress worn.

Hybridity

In order to understand ‘identity’, it is important to also look at ‘hybridity.’ Many writers have described the identities of *Babas* and *Nyonyas* as ‘hybrid’, a concept with a long and complex history. It began as a biological reference to the cross-breeding between two different species and was then used in philological studies to define words formed by combining different languages. The meaning that most concerns this thesis is the subsequent usage in cultural theory, and particularly in post-colonial studies. In this respect, “hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007: 118). This hybridization can be found in cultural, political, language aspects and so on.

Mabardi points out that there is another biological definition of hybrid which means the offspring of a mixed union in the colonial context, which “adds the dimension of an artificial or forced union, a coercive or violent contact as in the case of colonization and conquest” (Mabardi, 2010: 247). Robert Young (1995) has similarly remarked that the term ‘hybrid’ was used negatively in imperial and colonial discourse in the context of damaging reports on the union of different races. Young argues that by the turn of the century, hybridity had become part of a colonialist discourse of racism.

The body of work on postcolonial hybridity is largely based on studies of the former European or American colonisers, focusing on cultural conjuncture and regarding hybridity as negative. Ashcroft *et al.*, on the other hand, observes that there is a body of postcolonial writing that regards hybridised postcolonial culture as a strength rather than a weakness. In his words:

hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen as the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2003: 183).

In this sense, a positive aspect is recognised. It is however not my intention to contribute to the ongoing debate on hybridity politics, nor do I want to go beyond the scope of this thesis to describe the hybridity experienced by other communities including the colonisers.

Instead, I would like to focus on ‘hybrid identity’ as an analytical category for *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. As such, I identify the work of Radhakrishnan (2003) as most relevant to this research. Radhakrishnan suggests that hybridity can be grouped into two main categories, metropolitan hybridity and post-colonial hybridity. The crucial difference between “metropolitan” versions of hybridity and “post-colonial” versions is that the former are “characterised by a comfortably given state of being”, the latter “an expression of pain and agonising dislocation”. He asserts,

Metropolitan hybridity is ensconced comfortably in the heartland of national and transnational citizenship, postcolonial hybridity is in a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity (Radhakrishnan, 2003: 314).

This metropolitan version of hybridity is an equally important phenomenon that occurred among *Nyonyas*. Melaka was a cosmopolitan city well before the arrival of Portuguese and the Dutch who further nurtured the cosmopolitan environment. When the British Straits Settlements was established in the nineteenth century, these settlements continued to flourish with people from all range of different cultural backgrounds, lived side-by-side and nurtured the “metropolitan hybridity”.

Colonialism is a very effective intervention and invasion. The history of colonisation has left ineradicable social and cultural marks on the colonised lands, which no process of decolonisation can erase. The colonial policy in the Straits Settlements to ‘divide and rule’ the multicultural people into different categories of identification for the purpose of control and domination had long term effects that have lasted well into the post-colonial phase. Hence, post-colonial hybridity was certainly apparent in the case of the ‘Straits Chinese’, a category that was itself created by colonial policy.

Another of Radhakrishnan’s concepts on hybridity emphasises that a constant, “stable identity” is most essential in the phenomenon on hybridity,

it would seem that hybridity functions as the ultimate decentering of all identity regimes, in fact in history, hybridity is valorised on the basis of a stable identity, such as European hybridity, French hybridity, American hybridity and so on (Radhakrishnan, 2003: 314).

In other words, Radhakrishnan recognises that foreign elements have to exist in a “stable identity” in order to be regarded as ‘hybrid’ in nature. In his writings on colonial discourse, Homi Bhabha has developed his notion of hybridity and says,

hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and ‘original’ identity of authority (Bhabha, 2004: 159).

In this way, Bhabha sees hybridity as identities that secure the “pure and original identity”, a similar notion to Radhakrishnan’s “stable identity”. For example, a Portuguese Eurasian was hybrid as Portuguese if she was largely raised to be Portuguese and lived in Portugal where the Portuguese element was dominant and therefore was her ‘stable’ identity. The situation reversed if the Portuguese Eurasian was raised to be a Melakan woman and lived, for example, in Melaka where the local element was dominant and therefore her ‘stable’ identity was local, so such a person was then hybrid as a Melakan woman.

Now then, what about the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*? Which were their stable identities? To begin with, were the stable identities for both the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* equivalent? Their situation is much more complicated than the Portuguese Eurasian mentioned above, as their hybrid identities did not just involve being local colonised subjects in relation to their coloniser, but also involved being migrants from China. To further complicate matters, both metropolitan and post-colonial hybridity were simultaneously at work in the *Nyonyas*’ hybridity. To deal with such circumstances I now proceed to discuss my strategy in examining the visual aspects of the *Nyonyas*’ identity through their dress.

Dress Strategy

I have attempted to deal with the question of which stable identity represented the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* by taking their dress style as a ‘stable’ or ‘base’ identity for the wearers. In order to observe the hybridity on which stable identity this hybridity was valorised, this stable identity needs to be a dominant one. To put this into the context of ‘visual identity’ where dress is used to portray identity, the dress style, or form of dress, is an obvious

choice as the dominant stable identity. For instance, the *Baba* men of the nineteenth century who wore Chinese dress style with the Manchu hair queue were selecting ‘Chinese dress style’ as their stable or base identity. From this stable identity, represented by the ‘Chinese dress style’, we can examine whether there exist any ‘foreign elements’ that do not belong to this ‘Chinese dress style’ for instance the *Baba* beaded slip-in shoes.

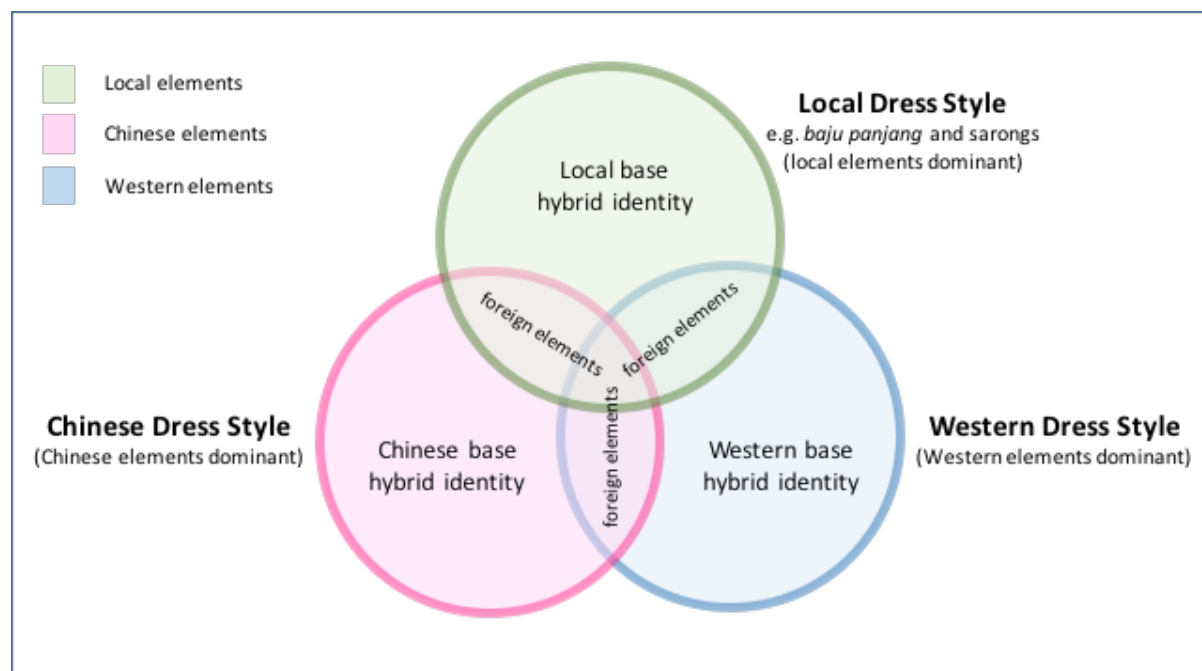


Chart 1: Hybrid dress styles.

In the case of the *Nyonyas*, as they were clad in the local dress style of *baju panjang* or long blouse and sarong that was worn all over the archipelago in the nineteenth century, the ‘local dress style’ was therefore their obvious choice for their base or stable identity. This is because the local elements in the local dress styles were the dominant factors and from there we can examine whether foreign elements occurred in the base style. For instance, *Nyonya* local dress styles may incorporate Chinese aesthetics. This strategy is shown in the chart 1 above. When the *Nyonyas* wore the hybrid local dress style, they stood in the green circle, they were hybrid as a local person, and their base identities were local. When the *Nyonyas* wore hybrid Chinese dress style, they stood in the pink circle, they were hybrid as Chinese, and their base identities were Chinese. The same goes with the green circle. I must stress that the hybrid identity that I examine here is only the visual aspect, or the ‘visual identity’ that is presented in their dress.

This strategy is valid for the nineteenth century to the very early twentieth century in the Straits Settlements because, although there must have been exceptions but generally in that period, the inhabitants of the former Straits Settlements dressed according to the way people dressed in their places of origin. For instance, British women would dress in European dress style while local women wore the *sarong kebaya*. This way of dressing among the inhabitants in the Straits Settlements persisted until modernisation of the twentieth century saw the inhabitants of the Straits slowly cease to dress according to their ancestral places of origin and in favour of dress styles determined by fashion. This was a period of major change in the dress styles of *Nyonyas* where *sarong kebaya* was no longer their only dress style, but Chinese dress styles such as *koon sah*, *samfu* and *cheongsam* became part of their wardrobe. I discuss how the 'local dress style' set the base identity for the *Nyonyas* in Chapter Three. The aspects of Chinese aesthetic, which are the 'foreign elements' to appear in local dress style, are discussed in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five I discuss other 'foreign elements', that is European influences as well as Chinese and Western hybrid dress styles, represented by the pink and blue circles respectively. Before proceeding to those chapters, in the next chapter I examine the social and cultural historical background in which the *Nyonyas* emerged.

Chapter Two: The Emergence and the Life of the *Nyonyas*

The previous chapter discussed my visual approach, explaining the logic of how local identities became base identities for the *Nyonyas* through their display of local dress style. This differs from the *Babas* whose base identities were Chinese as seen in the Chinese dress styles they wore. To support this visual approach, I take another perspective and look at the different lifestyles of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. I argue that these different lifestyles were also important for the difference in identity construction between men and women.

In order to give an overview of the eventual lifestyles of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, I begin by outlining the historical arrivals of the Chinese men in the former Straits Settlements. I investigate three different places, Singapore, Melaka and Penang separately because the historical arrivals of these Chinese men are very different in each place. This is followed by a discussion of the migration of Chinese women that took place a few centuries later. Women only started to arrive noticeably during the British colonial time from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Thus, there was an absence of Chinese women in the former Straits Settlements. Therefore, the earlier 'Chinese settlements' were not the result of cohabitation of Chinese men and women. Further investigation on the origin of the *Nyonyas* unfolds the local origin of the *Nyonyas* as natives of Southeast Asia. I then explore the common family values in Straits Chinese households that led to different lifestyles being adopted by *Babas* and *Nyonyas* and set the stage for separate identity construction between *Babas* and *Nyonyas*.

The Arrivals of Early Chinese Settlers

The history of Chinese male migration to the Straits Settlements is part of the overall pattern of the arrival of the pioneer Chinese men into Malaya. Previous studies have not been able to establish when these early Chinese settlers settled in Malaya. I confine myself to providing an overall picture of the historical arrival of early Chinese male settlers in the Straits Settlements to understand the background of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in the Straits. The result of the cohabitation of the Chinese male and local women. I will look at

Singapore, then Melaka and Penang, following the sequence of the earliest Chinese contacts found in the respective cities.

Singapore

Throughout Chinese history, there were contacts with Southeast Asia or the *Nanyang*¹⁷ through envoys, Buddhist pilgrims and traders, but there is no established evidence indicating a permanent Chinese settlement in Malaya until the Portuguese account for it in seventeenth century Melaka. However, John Miksic (2014: 144) claims that the earliest site of a 'Chinese community' in the Straits of Melaka is in fourteenth century Singapore according to archaeological and written evidence. Miksic uses the word 'community' here but he provides neither definition nor explanation as to whether this signifies a permanent stay. We shall explore this possibility in this section.

Singapore derives from the Sanskrit word, '*Singapura*' meaning 'Lion City', and appears in the *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*,¹⁸ together with 'Temasek'; which is generally regarded as the previous name of Singapore. In Chinese records, Tan-Ma-Hsi (*pinyin: Danmaxi*) for Temasek was also used in the fourteenth century. The earliest known Chinese contact with Temasek was recorded by Wang Dayuan, a trader, who undertook two lengthy sea voyages

¹⁷ *Nanyang* (南洋) or *Nanhai* (南海) meaning Southern Ocean or Sea, was the term used by the Chinese for modern Southeast Asia.

¹⁸ The Malay Annals is a collection of stories detailing royal genealogies. It contains no dates and gives a romantic account on the founding of Singapore. It describes how the founder of Singapore, Sri Tri Buana briefly saw a strange animal, after being informed by his followers that it was a lion or singa, he decided to establish a city at Temasek. The original version of the Malay Annals no longer exists. It is believed that an unknown author living in Melaka compiled a genealogy of Malay rulers in around 1436 which later generations copied and revised, and which eventually evolved into the Malay Annals. About 30 manuscripts of the Malay Annals exist. The oldest surviving version is believed to be the one acquired by Stamford Raffles during his residence in Southeast Asia in the early 19th century. It is known as Raffles MS 18 and this version was revised around 1612 and reflects the political situation of that time. Another version written around 1750 in Riau is known as Shellabear Recension (after Reverend William Shellabear who had it printed in the early 19th century). Despite this interesting account, a lion has never been found in Southeast Asia and Singapore is not a unique name, in fact it was a fairly common name in early Southeast Asia. Miksic reminds us that the earliest Singapore was in central Vietnam (fifth century), then central Thailand (modern Singburi, approximately twelfth century) and in West Java (fifteenth century). The name also occurs in Indian stories like the Jataka tales and Ramayana. The popularity of Singapura could be linked to the reason that put forward by Miksic, "The lion was already a symbol of Buddhism in the reign of Asoka in India in the third century BC" (Miksic, 2014: 151). Therefore, the name 'Singapura' is Buddhist inspired and that fits the profile of early Southeast Asia having been much influenced by Hindu-Buddhism. We do not know exactly when the name Temasek changed to Singapore, but we know that Temasek was still in used in the fourteenth century. Javanese records in the *Nagarakrtagama*, composed in 1365, contains a list of vassals of Kingdom of Majapahit and the name Tumasik appears among them.

in the fourteenth century. Writing in 1349, Wang listed his experiences for a local gazetteer under the title, '*Dao Yi Zhi Lue*' or 'Description of the Barbarians of the Isles'. *Danmaxi* was one of his destinations along with India, Yemen and North Africa. The following extract of his record describes Temasek and the Chinese, who stayed there,

Both men and women, even those Chinese dwelling there have their hair tied in a knot and wear a short jacket with sarong and blue stuff. The country produces rough lakawood and tin blocks. The merchandise for trading consists of pure gold, blue satin, pattern cloth, porcelains from Ch'u Chou, iron pots etc. As there is neither good timber in the mountain nor fine goods for tribute, they could only trade with Chuan-chou with booty and plunder (Wang Dayuan, 1349 quoted in Hsu, 1982: 2).

From Wang's account, we learn that Temasek was then a home for pirates and there were Chinese who 'dwelled' there and dressed like the natives. Also, Chuan-chou traders from South Fujian Province were trading in Temasek as early as the fourteenth century. Jones, who has done convincing research on the vernacular used among the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Penang that is commonly called Penang *Hokkien*, argues that this language actually originated from the dialect used in Quanzhou. He regards Chuan-chow, or Chiangchew, as variants for Quanzhou (*pinyin*) (Jones, 2009: 40) located in the south of Fujian province, and the 'Chuan-chou' used by Hsu is definitely another variant. Jones argues that the Chiangchew Hokkiens could be distinguished on linguistic grounds and played a singular role in the early history of *Nanyang* Chinese. They were true pioneers in the *Nanyang* although during much of the twentieth century their historical role seems to have been overlooked. Wang's account definitely strengthens Jones argument and in fact, Miksic reveals that Wang himself set out for sail on both his sea voyages from Quanzhou (Miksic, 2014: 171).

Wang's account is important in showing us evidence of acculturation among the Chinese to the local culture in that they wore "short jackets with sarongs" and had "their hair tied in a knot" like the natives. However, this account does not reveal the nature of their stay, whether it was temporary or permanent.

According to the *History of Ming Dynasty*, in 1373 a king of Tan-ma-sa-na-ho (commonly identified as Temasek) was one of the rulers of San Fot-tsi (commonly identified as Srivijaya). The other two were the King of Ma-na-ha-pau-lin-pang (commonly identified as

Palembang) and the Sang-ka-liet-yu-lan (cannot be identified). All three sent tribute to China between 1373 and 1375 (Winstedt, 1935: 36; Wilkinson, 1982: 50; Linehan, 1982: 61). However, the prosperous Temasek described in this Chinese account did not last. The same Chinese record states that the King of Temasek died in 1376 and his son sent tribute to China in 1377 to ask for recognition as a king but he never received the recognition conferred by China because the Chinese envoys were killed by the Javanese on their way to Melaka. Based on this Chinese record, scholars are inclined to view the great fall of Singapore¹⁹ at around 1376, despite the discrepancy with the dates given in the Majapahit era poem, *Pararaton* of 1361 (Wilkinson, 1982: 50).

From the written evidence of Wang's account, some kind of "Chinese community" with acculturation evident in their dress definitely existed in Singapore as Miksic claims.²⁰ Singapore continued to be occupied up until the early seventeenth century. In Godinho de Eredia description of Melaka, which he wrote in 1613, one of his maps contains a shahbandar or harbourmaster stationed in Singapore (Eredia, 2012: 70-71). Nevertheless, "sometime around 1611, early Singapore was set on fire and razed to the ground and to this day it is still unclear who was responsible" (Frost *et al.*, 2012: 14). Singapore then went into hibernation for about two centuries with the absence of any written records or any significant archaeological evidence of its activities.

¹⁹ Linehan (1982), rightly points out that the great fall of Singapore did not mean the total abandonment of the city, even though it never regained its former status. The city lived on under the authority of a chief and several Portuguese records show the continuation of Singapore after the great fall. According to Braz de Albuquerque, son of Afonso de Albuquerque, the conqueror of Melaka, Parameswara, a pagan king exiled from Palembang due to a faithless promise to pay tribute to his father-in-law, fled to Singapore before founding Melaka. While in Singapore, he was received hospitably from the local chief but Parameswara killed him and took his place. With the help of five thousand followers from Palembang, he made himself the ruler of Singapore for five years. The king of Patani, brother of the murdered chief, with the help of Singapore subjects who resented the new ruler, drove out Parameswara. Parameswara then fled up north to the peninsular and founded Melaka (see van Stein Callenfels 1982: 62; Tan, 1988a: 30). There are other Portuguese accounts including Eredia (writing in 1613) and de Barros (writing in 1553) of similar events. The Ming Annals state that Malacca already existed in 1403 but was not a kingdom and that Parameswara was a petty chief (van Stein Callenfels 1982: 71-72).

²⁰ According to Miksic, "The archaeological evidence for a Chinese community in Singapore [in fourteenth century] is circumstantial. It consists of the fact that the proportion of Chinese ceramics to locally-made earthenware is approximately 1:1. This is consistent with the expectation that Chinese settlement would be correlated with frequent use of Chinese artifacts, but is not in itself proof of this hypothesis" (Miksic, 2014: personal communication). In other words, the indication of a permanent Chinese settlement in Singapore during the Temasek's era of fourteenth century cannot be properly established.

Singapore became prosperous during the period of British colonisation (1819 to 1962). When Raffles arrived in Singapore on January 1819, the population consisted of about 150 fishermen and pirates, there were 120 Malays and 30 of this number were Chinese (Newbold, 1971: 279). Newbold, who wrote this account twenty year later, provided neither evidence nor reference and the accuracy of this report is questionable. Bartley (1982) on the other hand provides evidence that not only were there Chinese inhabitants in Singapore prior to the British arrival; there were a certain amount of agricultural development undertaken by the Chinese. Bartley cites excerpts of letters from William Farquhar, the first resident of Singapore, dated 1822, in which he writes that “A Chinese planter had formed a Gambier plantation there” prior to British establishment. Another one also dated 1822 states that “To various Malays and Chinese he [the *Tummongong*] has granted leave to clear grounds for plantations about 20 of which may have been commenced previous to the formation of the British Establishment.” In addition, there are three acknowledgements dated in 1822 by Tan Ngun Ha, Tan Ah Loo and Heng Tooan on the sale of gambier plantations established by them before the English settlement (Bartley, 1982: 117). Lee Poh Ping has argued that in 1819, there “already existed a Teochew agricultural settlement located in the interior of the island and devoted to growing gambier and pepper” (Lee, 1978: 27-30, 64-81), but this remains hypothetical.

What we can conclude here is that Chinese gambier plantations existed prior to British settlement and that says something about the permanent nature of their stay. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly when they began to reside and operate their plantations. Although the records are silent as to what went on in Singapore, one could imagine that Singapore in hibernation does not equate to total abandonment, probably there was still a small population of Sea People and that must have helped to maintain some Chinese, who went from temporary to permanent settlers and eventually resulting in the Gambier plantations.

The population expanded after the British foundation and although actual numbers are not available, it is obvious that early Chinese migrants to Singapore consisted largely of Melaka Chinese from the Dutch colony. Many writers have mentioned this in passing, including Png Poh Seng:

From the time Singapore was founded, its Chinese population comprised Malacca born (later Singapore born) Straits Chinese and China-born immigrants who came from various districts of South China..... The earlier residents were Babas who had immigrated from Melaka (Png, 1969: 95).

However, Rudolph points out that “the migration of Indonesian Chinese to Singapore should not be underestimated, as is usually the case. There are Singapore *Baba* families which originated in Java” (Rudolph, 1998a: 95). This is hardly surprising as many *Babas and Nyonyas* in Singapore trace their ancestors to Java including the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Raffles witnessed a rapid increase in the numbers of Chinese in Singapore, Lady Raffles wrote in 1830, “When the British flag was first hoisted [in Singapore on 29th February 1819], there were not perhaps 53 Chinese on the island, in three months the number did not fall short of 3000 and this was rapidly increasing” (Rudolph, 1998a: 95). The news of British establishment that was favourable for trading in the archipelago soon attracted Chinese from China directly to Singapore. The first junk from Amoy arrived in February 1821 and the Chinese population of Singapore increased from 30 in 1819 to 1,151 in 1821 and thereafter in constant increments. British policy encouraged the immigration of the Chinese and the Chinese population in Singapore grew dramatically due to this massive ‘*Sinkhek*’ Chinese migration.

Melaka

Melaka or Malacca, to use its colonial name, was the direct descendant of fourteenth-century Singapore. If the fourteenth century belongs to Singapore, the fifteenth century saw the rise of Melaka as the capital of trade in the oldest Malay Muslim Empire. With its central location on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula by the Straits of Melaka, Melaka was an important port and was colonised by three European powers, the Portuguese (1511-1641), the Dutch (1641-1826) and the British (1826-1957). Melaka is arguably the birthplace of the *Babas and Nyonyas* community particularly in their cultural aspects, even though it was the last British settlement among these three places. The community existed before the label ‘Straits Chinese’ was used by the British or the term, as well as the term *Babas*, which emerged during the British colonisation. This is due to the fact that Melaka is the birth place of the *Nyonyas*, who date to the Portuguese era and *Nyonyas* were the main cultural bearers in this community such as in dress, food and so on.

Melaka benefitted from its relations with Ming China. The first Ming Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang or Hongwu (r1368-1398) who replaced the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, reinstated harsh penalties for unauthorised contact with foreigners and all communication between China and foreigners had to be conducted through official channels (Miksic, 2014: 189-190). Official support for private trade came to a crashing halt and had a very negative effect on China's Southeast Asian commerce. This policy was relaxed by Emperor Yongle (r1402-1424) who seized the throne from his nephew, and Melaka apparently benefited from this. One of the main contributors to the success of fifteenth-century Melaka was definitely the foreign policy of Emperor Yongle that sent several large-scale voyages abroad including Melaka. Zheng He (Cheng Ho), a famous Muslim admiral and a eunuch who was later deified, led the eight best-known fleets to Southeast Asia and South Asia (Hsu, 1982: 137-138).²¹

Zheng He visited Melaka in 1409 and 1411 and Melaka's status was raised to that of a Kingdom by China. In 1413, Zheng He took with him someone known as Ma Huan who served as interpreter and recorder. Ma Huan later wrote a book entitled *Yingya Shenglan* or *General Account of the Shores of the Ocean* (1451) describing the Zheng He voyages. Ma Huan, probably writing between 1425 and 1432, did not indicate any Chinese settlements in Melaka during their visit, although he recorded that Melaka was visited by Chinese merchants (Groeneveldt, 1960: 125). Fei Xin who was in the military unit of Zheng He, made at least two voyages with Zheng He, (on the third, 1409-1411 and seventh, 1431-1433), wrote in *Xingcha Shenglan* (1436) that "The skin [of the inhabitants of Melaka] resembles black lacquer, but there are [some] white complexioned folk among them who are of Chinese descent" (Fei Xin, 1436 quoted in Sandhu, 1983: 95).

However, China closed itself again to the outside world after the last fleet sent by Emperor Xuande in 1432. The Sultanate of Melaka could then hardly be under the protection of China and it ended when the port city was seized by the Portuguese in 1511. However, Chinese records continue into the sixteenth century. One of these, by Huang Zhong was '*Hai Yu*' or

²¹ Apart from the commercial incentives, Yongle may have intended his voyages to secure his reign against possible challenges from the overseas Chinese communities. Zheng He's first expedition fought a large force of local Chinese at Palembang killing over 5000 of them. According to Miksic, this mission was couched in terms of suppressing piracy but was preceded by an order issued in 1405 for the Chinese in Palembang to return to China (Miksic, 2014: 193).

News from the Ocean published in 1537, and refers to an earlier period before the Portuguese:

According to their customs it is forbidden to eat pork; when the Chinese who live here eat it, the others are indignant and say it is filthy. They have much milk, which the rich people eat together with their rice... The merchants of the ship live in a hotel, the chief of which always send female slaves to serve them and sends them food and drink morning and evening" (Groeneveldt, 1960: 127).

The above account seems to indicate that there may have been some Chinese living there, but his later sentence "The merchants of the ship live in a hotel..." led Purcell to think that the Chinese stayed there temporary (Purcell, 1967: 19). However, Tan rightly points out Purcell's mistake in that Huang Zhong actually did not specify that the merchants living in a hotel were Chinese (Tan, 1988a: 29). It should also be noted that the Chinese written language does not have different terms for the English words 'stay' and 'live'. Huang Zhong might have meant 'stay' for both instances described above.

Overall, the Chinese records do not provide strong evidence on the nature of the stay of the Chinese, either temporary or permanent, in Melaka and Singapore during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although we can definitely say that the presence of Chinese merchants in Melaka prior to the Portuguese arrival is a historical fact, the nature of their stay is not well established.

Shortly after the Portuguese took possession of Melaka in 1511, Tome Pires who lived for two and a half years in Melaka and India from 1512 to 1515, wrote a book about the East that has an account of the marriage of a Melakan Sultan and a Chinese woman. According to Pires, the son of the Parameswara, Chaquem Daraxa²² visited China and on his return, the Chinese captain accompanying him brought with him a beautiful Chinese daughter whom the Melaka King married. She bore the king a son called Rajapute (Rajah Putih or White Raja), but was not a woman of rank (Armando Cortesão, 2005: 242-243). Apart from this marriage, Pires does make remarks on the Chinese traders but does not mention any Chinese settlement (Pires, 2005: 283).

²² Chaquem Daraxa, Xaquem Daraxa or Xaquem Darxa, as spelt in different places, represents Muhammad Iskandar Shah, the second ruler of Melaka (Cortesão, 2005: 236).

Braz de Albuquerque, the son of Afonso de Albuquerque the conqueror of Melaka, had the history of his father's activities in India and Melaka published in 1557. His account presents a similar story and it is likely that he was influenced by Pires. According to him, the second king of Melaka, Xaquedarxa (1424-44) married the daughter of the Captain of the King of China for the same reason given in Pires account (Tan, 1988a: 30). De Albuquerque also mentions that one of the four *Xabandar* (*shabandar* or harbour master), who were appointed to help the administration of justice in the case of foreigners, was Chinese. It is very likely that the second king of Melaka did marry a Chinese woman of whose background we are not certain. Regardless of the different accounts, the presence of a Chinese wife and Harbour Master suggests the possibility of Chinese settlements. However, as Shandu concludes, a permanent Chinese settlement as early as 1424-44 is not substantiated by any other evidence, these Chinese may have been temporary residents, coming and going with the reversal of the monsoons (Shandu, 1983: 96).

The local source, the Malay Annals gives an account of the marriage between Sultan Mansur Syah (1458-1477) and Princess Hang Liu from China. She bore him a child called Paduka Mimat. Five hundred Chinese youth of noble birth and several hundred female attendants accompanied the princess to Melaka. These escorts were given a dwelling on a hill, which to this day is known as *Bukit China* or Chinese Hill, a Chinese graveyard. These Chinese dug a well at the foot of *Bukit China*. Even though the hill and the well exist, the part of the Malay Annals where the Sultan Mansur Shah married a Chinese princess is not substantiated by evidence anywhere and there are no matching records in China.

The first definitive evidence of a permanent Chinese settlement in Melaka comes from a Portuguese, Eredia who lived in Melaka for the first four years of the seventeenth century. Eredia in his *Description of Malaca and Meridional India and Cathay* (writing in 1613) mentions "Campon China" where *Campon* or *Kampong* means village in Malay language. He describes *Campon China* at some length,

It [Campon China] extends from the above-mentioned Bazaar of the Jaos [Java] on the beach and from the mouth of the river, in a north-easterly direction, for a distance of 400 fathoms along the bank of the same river to the gate and earth-wall which forms part of the rampart; and beyond the marsh-land again, as far as the "*Nypeiras*" or Wild

Palms beside the stream of Paret²³ China. In this quarter of Campon China live the Chincheos,²⁴ descendent of the Tocharos of Pliny, and stranger merchants and native fishermen (Eredia, 2012: 19).²⁵

Although we cannot exclude the possibility that a Chinese settlement might have existed in Melaka before the seventeenth century, we have no reliable records for it. By the seventeenth century the presence of a permanent Chinese settlement is beyond doubt, since apart from Eredia's accounts, there is the grave of a Chinese couple at *Bukit Cina*.²⁶ According to the tomb inscription the man was Huang Wei Hong and his wife Xie Shoujie and it bears the word 'Imperial Ming' and is dated 1622 (figure 2) (Tan, 1988a: 32). However, since the tomb was never excavated there is no evidence that both husband and wife were buried in there. It has been Chinese practice, right up to the mid-twentieth century in contemporary Malaysia, that when a husband dies, the tomb for both husband and wife is prepared for the use of wife when her time comes. There are cases where the wives were not eventually buried there even though their names are on the grave due to unforeseen circumstances like remarriage or change of living place.²⁷ It is rare that a Chinese woman migrated to Malaya at this early time; therefore, it is possible that the wife was not buried there or that Huang Wei Hong married a local woman and this local wife was given a Chinese name. Nevertheless, it is also not impossible that the wife was actually buried there, as the prohibition on migration at the end of the Ming dynasty might not have been as strict as in the Qing dynasty.

²³ *Paret* should be the Malay word, *parit* which means open drain.

²⁴ According to Shandhu, "By the Portuguese the name Chincheo was applied indifferently to both Chang-Chou and Chuan-Chou. In fact, it denotes the region around and in the plural Chinese traders from the shores of Amoy Bay [South Fujian]" (Shandhu, 1983: 97). Again, this supports Jones (2009) vernacular research as mentioned above.

²⁵ Translated by J.V. Mills in 1930.

²⁶ Bukit Cina is the modern spelling use today.

²⁷ It happened in my own family, where my maternal grandparents share a tombstone but my grandmother was not actually buried there.



Fig. 2: Tomb of Huang Wei Hong and wife Xie Shoujie dated 1622, Melaka (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

There were 300-400 Chinese living in Melaka when the Dutch conquered it in 1641. The contemporary report of the Commissary Justus Schouten gives a clear picture of the condition of the town as well as the population at that time, “The Chinese living at the Basar on the north of the city have their own Captain Notchin who lives on small merchandise” (P.A. Leupe, 1936: 117).²⁸ Governor Balthasar Bort gave the first detailed statistics on the Chinese in Melaka in 1678. According to his very exact report written in 1678, “the Chinese had 81 brick and 51 *atap* houses with 127 men, 140 women, 159 children, 93 male slaves, 137 female slaves and 60 children of slaves (Purcell, 1967: 30). We have here then, the first recorded figures of Chinese in Melaka and that there were 140 women in the Chinese households. We know that Chinese women immigrants did not arrive until the mid-nineteenth century, though the report is not particularly clear on the 140 women who were categorised together with the 127 men in the Chinese households. We shall come back to this issue when we investigate the origin of the *Nyonyas*.

Penang

Pulau Pinang, known by its English spelling Penang,²⁹ existed under the English East India Company for nearly thirty years before the foundation of Singapore. It is located northwest of the Straits of Malacca, and was once ruled by the Sultan of Kedah. Captain Francis Light

²⁸ Translated by Mac Hacobian in 1859.

²⁹ I choose to use the name “Penang” because in contemporary Malaysia, Penang is more common used than Pulau Pinang amongst locals, although Pulau Pinang is the official name in Malay language. This differs from “Malacca” where the colonial name is not popularly used by locals today.

landed on Penang Island on 17 July 1786 to establish a trading post on behalf of the English East India Company and named it Prince of Wales Island. In the belief that it would protect him against powerful Siam, the Sultan of Kedah, Abdullah, allowed Light to establish a settlement in his Kingdom. The coastline, stretching 5 miles wide and 30 miles long from Kuala Kedah in the north to the Krian estuary in the south, offered security for Penang harbour and its food supply eventually went under the control of the English East India Company. It was named Province Wellesley (currently Seberang Prai) in the treaty signed in 1800.³⁰

When Light founded Penang, Newbold wrote in 1839 “Previous to the occupation of the islands by the British in 1786... there were only a few Malay fishermen living in huts on the sea-coast” (Newbold, 1971: 54). Newbold does not provide any reference to back up his claims, but it would be no surprise if his account came from Norman Macalister who says that when the island was first occupied there were only two or three individuals, “natives of the island, who subsisted by fishing and extracting from the trees, dammer and wood-oil” (Purcell, 1967: 39).

Through colonial records, we know that Penang was established as a free port and attracted a large number of Melaka Chinese just as happened in Singapore thirty years later. In his letter to Andrew Ross in 1787, Light says that,

Our inhabitants increase very fast, and did not the Dutch keep a strict watch over the Chinese, most of them would leave Malacca: 40 of them had prepared to come in the *Drake*, but were stopped by the order of the Dutch Government, and no man is allowed to leave Malacca without giving security that he will not go to Penang... (Purcell, 1967: 39).

The establishment of Penang was indeed a devastating blow to the then Dutch Malacca.³¹ Apparently, the Chinese who migrated to Penang were eager to escape the Dutch head tax (Ho, 1985: 19). We know that early Chinese settlers in Penang consisted of migrants from Melaka, but they were neither the earliest nor the majority Chinese population in Penang. This is also evidenced from the language perspective, the *Baba Malay* that was used by the

³⁰ In return, the company paid an annual payment of \$10,000 to the Sultan of Kedah but had no intention to ‘protect’ Kedah from his enemy as so wished by the Sultan, nor did they command any military power to do so.

³¹ The period of greatness for the Dutch East India Company was the seventeenth century but it decayed throughout the eighteenth century and gradually they abandoned their conquests, one after another.

Babas and *Nyonyas* in Melaka was also spoken among the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Singapore but not in Penang.³²

Light's diary tells us that there were Chinese who came to meet him on his arrival. Purcell notes that "On 18 July 1786, a few days after Light's arrival.... the Captain China arrived with some other Chinese bring a present of fishing-nets. Lights, who notes this in his diary, does not say where they were from, but it is possible that they were from Kedah" (Purcell, 1967: 40).³³ Khor *et al.* records a similar version:

The first wave of Chinese immigrants to the island came at behest of Captain Francis Light. Some had followed Light's entourage from Kuala Kedah. Light recorded in his diary that Chewan, the Kapitan Cina of Kuala Kedah, presented him with fishing nets several days after he landed. We now know that Chewan was Koh Lay Huan who was later appointed the first Kapitan Cina of Penang" (Khor *et al.*, 2004: 15).

Further to this, Tan Liok Ee writes:

Among the earliest arrivals on the island were the wealthy Tengku Syed Hussein, a member of the Aceh royal family, and Cheah Eam, A Chinese from Kedah. Kader Mydin Merican, the first Kapitan Kling, is reputed to have come to Penang from Kedah in 1786. Koh Lay Huan, the first *kapitan Cina* [of Penang] also from Kedah, is believed to have arrived a few days after light (L.E. Tan, 2009: 10-11).

Turnbull's (2009) account differs slightly, "The first Chinese settlers came over from Kedah with Francis Light, including Koh Lay Huan, whom Light appointed *Kapitan Cina* in 1787" (Turnbull, 2009: 35). Despite the many different versions mentioned above, the key point is that all provide written evidence that the early Chinese in Penang came from surrounding areas across the sea, apart from Melaka.

The knowledge we have on the Chinese in the Province in the early days is minimal. One of the earliest account, "Topography and Itinerary of Province Wellesley" was published by

³² See Russell Jones for Penang *Baba Hokkien* (2009, 39-66)

³³ Kapitan Cina, the Malay title meaning 'Chinese Captain' was originally a Portuguese title for the head of a Chinese enclave. The earlier rulers of Southeast Asia, such as Melaka and Banten (or Bantam), chose to deal with a single individual from each ethnic group under their rule. This indirect rule was later adopted by the Portuguese when they took over Melaka in the 16th century, as well as the Dutch and the English.

Earl in 1861 and tells us that in 1860 the Province contains about 64,000 inhabitants with 7,204 Chinese. He also says, “many of the former [Chinese] are employed as planters of rice, sugar canes, fruits and spices” (Earl, 1861: 2). In regards to the earlier Chinese population in Province Wellesley, Purcell writes that the Chinese had effected a settlement at Batu Kawan on the mainland of Kedah between 1786 and 1800 and is of the opinion that, “the extension of British control to the mainland was an encouragement to the Chinese to go there [Province Wellesley], for the great obstacle to peaceful settlement had been the lawlessness of the country” (Purcell, 1967: 66). He continues, “At Batu Kawan the Chinese grew sugar in patches cleared in the mangrove jungle. They were planting sugar here for twenty years before Europeans started to do so, says Earl, but it was probably much longer” (ibid). Newell, who researched the *Teochiu* family in the early 1960s at the Treacherous River (part of Province Wellesley) also says, “Although some Chinese had already settled in Batu Kawan on the mainland prior to the extension of control to the mainland by the British, the lawlessness associated with Malay rule had been a great hindrance to Chinese colonisation” (Newell, 1962: 11).

According to Khor *et al.* (2004) the local inhabitants on Penang island before the arrival of English in 1786 consisted mainly of Malay fishermen who were living on the north and southeast of the Island, Acehnese settlement along the Penang River and Chinese settlement in Tanjung Tokong (Khor *et al.*, 2004: 13). However, the Chinese settlements in Tanjung Tokong predate English settlement is not well established. There are three old Chinese graves in Penang Tua Pek Kong Temple at Tanjung Tokong, two of which date to the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the Qing Dynasty. The other one consists of two tombstones standing side by side and the temple caretakers claim it dates to the mid-eighteenth century, some forty years before Light’s arrival (figure 3). However, there is no hard evidence for it and dating is absent on the two joined tombstones. Since no excavation has been done hence archeological evidence could not be established. According to Tan Kim Hong, Toa Peh Kong temple was built in 1810 with a wooden plaque dated to 1810 and the oldest artifact in the temple is an old stone censer dated to 1792 (K.H. Tan, 2007: 206). Another Chinese tombstone marked 1795, the earliest date in Penang, belonged to Zeng Ting Xian at Mount Erskine. All these events took place after Light’s arrival so even though we know with certainty that there were Chinese settlements in Province Wellesley, it is only

a mere possibility that these might have extended to Penang Island, predating Light's arrival.



Fig. 3: Old tomb at Tanjung Tokong, Penang, undated (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

Apparently, the political liberty and stability that the British provided made Penang an attractive place to the Chinese of surrounding areas who had, or were making money, in the regions of southern Siam, northern Malaya and northern Sumatra, to settle in. According to Ho, many families emigrated from northern Sumatra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to escape the Dutch head tax (Ho, 1985: 19). Money could be made in other places, but Ho argues that they were more restrained in their display of wealth in Sumatran towns like Medan. Medan *Nyonya*, Queeny Chang whose father, a tycoon and the Kapitan China of Asahan, writes of the elite of Penang in the 1900s,

One family was as wealthy as the other, if not wealthier.... Each house was as luxuriously decorated as the other with gilded furniture, crystal chandeliers, Venetian glass lamps and bibelots (Chang, 1981: 51).

Chang also describes how she was astonished by a house where one of the rooms was built under the sea so one could see fish swimming above through the glass ceiling!³⁴ Ho also argues that in Thailand, successful Chinese were eventually assimilating into Thai society and that made Penang more attractive to the Thai Chinese as they could remain unassimilated, acculturated or not to indigenous life. These Thai Chinese instead could

³⁴ As opposed to Melakan and Singaporean Straits Chinese who speak “*Baba Malay*” as their mother tongue, their Penang counterparts speak “*Malaynised Hokien*”.

assimilate easily into Penang *Baba* society; which identity was probably seen to be a more superior identity at the time. In Ho words,

Wealthy Chinese [from the surrounding areas and China] could easily integrate into the [*Baba*] community, by practically setting up shop, home (complete with Penang Nyonya wife) and a name. This was especially easy if they were Hokkiens, for they could then lay claim to some affinity, practically (being then eligible to participate in the dominant Hokkien societies) and perhaps emotionally (Ho, 1985: 21).

We see a dramatic increase in numbers throughout the nineteenth century. Skinner accounted for fewer than 1000 *Babas* in 1800, 9000 in 1851 and at least 23,000 by 1891 (Skinner, 1996: 58). At this rate, a natural increment could not have been possible, it was definitely augmented by the assimilation of 'new' immigrants to Penang who assimilated into the *Baba* families and communities, either from surrounding areas, Melaka or China.

Having examined the early arrivals of Chinese men in three different places, we can now proceed to an investigation of the arrivals of Chinese women to the Straits Settlements. It will become clear that there was a period in which Chinese women were absent in the Straits even though it had been populated by Chinese men.

Female Chinese Migration

There was a long gap between the arrival of Chinese men and that of the women. Such a gap would infer that the pioneering Chinese men cohabited with or married non-Chinese women, giving rise to the early 'Chinese' settlements. Lim Joo Hock (1967) has pioneered research on the migration of Chinese women to the former Straits and this section is able to build upon his work.

Many social and political factors hindered female emigration. The social factors including the idea of women staying back to take care of the households and to observe filial piety as well as ancestor worship (Lim, 1967: 63-65). The place for Chinese women had always been in the home, women seldom went beyond the limits of their village. The danger and hazardous sea journey was also considered far from suitable for women. However, the essential political factor was that the then Manchu government of China made female

emigration illegal throughout the greater part of the Qing dynasty. The implication of this Manchu law was that male emigrants would send money back to their families and would finally return (Lim, 1967: 63). There was some concern on the part of the Chinese government that emigrants might rebel against it, and therefore the repressive emigration policy of the Manchu became more relaxed, although the law was not abrogated until 1894. Another factor was British policies that encouraged and opened the opportunity for male coolies to do manual jobs.

As a result, the immigration of Chinese women did not occur until about the middle of the nineteenth century and they came in large numbers into the Straits Settlements only in the early twentieth century.³⁵ Lim convincingly shows that the migration of Chinese women to the Straits Settlements only began in 1853 when a merchant brought his whole family with him from China to Singapore (Lim, 1967: 66). Lim, quoting the *China Mail* of 6.10.1853, states that “It was during the disturbances in Xiamen (Amoy) in 1853 that Chinese females were first noticed among the emigrants, not only to the Straits but also to San Francisco” (Lim, 1967: 62). Although we do have some records of Chinese women being brought to Malaya before 1853, those records were not well established. In 1837, Buckley using contemporary newspaper sources, reports that,

Up to this time, no Chinese women had come to Singapore from China, and the newspaper said that, in fact, only two genuine Chinese women were, or at any time had been, in the place, and they were two small-footed ladies who had been, some years before exhibited in England (Buckley, 1902: 320).

We also have Earl writing in 1837, “From five thousand to eight thousand emigrants arrive annually from China, of whom only 40 to 50 are females. About one-eighth of them remain in Singapore and the others scatter themselves over the Archipelago” (Earl, 1837: 367). Although we do not know how reliable this is, we do know that Earl was in Singapore in 1837, but the arrival of forty to fifty Chinese women is a significant number and could not have passed unnoticed. The British official records of Chinese immigrant arrivals put forward by Lim (1967) shows record of female immigrants as a separate column did not

³⁵ See Lim for the figure of women migration to Malaya (Lim, 1967, 58-110)

exist until 1878 (Lim, 1967: 96-99).³⁶ Nevertheless, this should not undermine the accuracy of Earl's record as Lim relies on the official record compiled by the Chinese Protectorate office that was only set up in 1877 as mentioned earlier, but it does show the female immigration was insignificant enough to have a separate column.

Apart from the women who accompanied their husbands to the Straits during the Xiamen disturbances in 1853-1854 mentioned above, there were also young girls brought in by junkmen. The first Chinese single women migrants are recorded in the *Penang Gazette* in January 1854, in which it is recommended that the government enquire into the working contracts of these girls (Lim, 1967: 66). Female immigration then occurred on and off but it was not until 1863 that it began again as a result of the *Taiiping* Rebellion that causes economic distress and insecurity, many Chinese women left their homeland to join their husbands or relatives. Other than the wives of the traders, there were single Chinese women among the arrivals in 1863 were imported by secret societies to be taken to the brothels (Lim, 1967: 67). The predominance of male Chinese population encourages the operation of the brothels thus resultants in single Chinese women migration to the Straits.³⁷

The immigration of Chinese women continued to increase and even more so when the legalisation of emigration by the Chinese government. The Convention of Peking 1860, legalised Chinese emigration including female, thus allowing labourers and their families to migrate to the Straits Settlements together. In 1878, 1818 Chinese women landed in the Straits, 3146 in 1880, 5842 in 1887, 10,650 in 1895 and reaching a peak in 1900 when 12,329 Chinese women were recorded as having landed in the Straits (Lim, 1967: 99). Nevertheless, Turnbull states that only from the 1880s onwards did respectable Chinese women, in which she probably meant 'not prostitutes or slaves', come to Singapore in any numbers (Turnbull, 1989: 57). She probably derived from Lim, who concludes that prior to 1880, the immigration of families to the Straits was hardly noticeable and it only came about in the Straits in the late nineteenth century (Lim, 1967: 78). It is therefore important

³⁶ Figures of arrivals for female immigrants from the year 1863 to 1877 are not available (Lim, 1967: 67).

³⁷ See Warren's (2003) research on prostitution in Singapore between 1870 to 1940 and Khor et.al (2004) on Chinese women and prostitutes in Penang.

to note that, in the period before 1880s, the women categorised as ‘Chinese’ were either *Nyonyas* or young Chinese women imported by secret societies.³⁸

During the nineteenth century, the sex ratios for the Chinese were extremely unbalanced. Even as late as 1911, men still outnumbered women by five to one in Melaka (Sandhu, 1983: 102) and eight to one in Singapore (Rudolph, 1998a: 95). To control Chinese males from flooding in, the official policy was to implement a quota on Chinese male immigration. The Aliens Ordinance of 1933 was introduced “to regulate the admission of aliens in accordance with the political, social and economic needs for the moments of the various administrations of Malaya” (Sandhu, 1983: 119). This policy encouraged the immigration of Chinese women to the Straits Settlements. Separate figures for the Straits Settlements are not available but there was a migration gain of 190,000 Chinese women during the period 1934 to 1938. As a result, the sex ratio improved and as a result, by 1938 the quota was applied for all categories of Chinese immigrants, both men and women. The flow of Chinese migrants fell sharply after 1938. However, at this point the natural increase became an important factor, as Chinese women were available. These *Sinkhek* men and women produced another category of ‘Straits-born’ Chinese, whose offspring were not called *Babas* and *Nyonyas*.

We know with certainty that Chinese settlements were present in the seventeenth century or possibly originated even as early as the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but those marriageable Chinese women only came to the Straits Settlements in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. This brings us back to the issue we raised earlier, of exactly who the early Chinese settlers cohabited with to form the early ‘Chinese’ settlement in the absence of Chinese women? To answer this question, I now move to the next section to investigate the origins of the *Nyonyas*.

³⁸ In response to Leonard Wray who in 1948 agreed with Earl stated that Chinese women did migrate in great numbers, the Singapore Free Press (1st Feb, 1849) says, “A real Chinese woman is a great curiosity in the Straits...The women whom Mr. Wray had confounded with Chinese women are the offspring of Chinese fathers and Malay mothers, or the descendants of such connections...” (Quoted in Lim, 1967: 62).

The Origins of the *Nyonyas*

The origin of the *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements has always been obscure. Prior to the twentieth century, we know very little about them. In comparison to the then successful and much publicised *Babas*, the *Nyonyas* were kept away from the limelight and mostly spent their time at home until twentieth century. Chia made some interesting comments on the untraceable origins of the *Nyonyas*, and put the blame partly on “The ancient Chinese trait of male Chauvinism did not help later generations trace their roots more accurately. A pity!” He goes on:

While all the *Babas* I know can readily name their male ancestors up to several generations before them, none is able to identify the wives of his more remote ancestors. Despite oral history handed down from generation to generation, the great-grandmother is as far as they can recall. Some know only their grandmother. Even those who are able to trace their male ancestors back to nine or ten generations cannot go beyond the great grandmother in the identification of ancestresses. They only know that the unknown females were *Nonyas* – descendants of the earlier pioneers who had taken local women as wives, few though they were. And it was not until the arrival of the 18th century immigrants that the community really began to flourish through inter-marriage within it (Chia, 1983: 5).

From the above example, we learn that there is a missing puzzle of the ancestress, especially mysterious is the first few generations of the *Nyonyas* who must have had local origins before the community was large enough to intermarry. The examination of the origin of the *Nyonyas* here specifically emphasises the first generation of *Nyonyas* that married Chinese men.

Since we know that female Chinese migration did not happen in the seventeenth century, the “140 women” in the Dutch report must have been non-Chinese women who married Chinese men or the offspring of such unions. Although the report did not explicitly state that they were Chinese, both men and women were in the same category in the Chinese household, obviously putting the women together with the male identities. Possibly, in the logic of the Dutch at that time, the women who married or cohabited with Chinese men and their offspring should share the identities of their husband or father. That is, they were

'logically' put under the umbrella of the Chinese identities. And I suspect this 'logic' went on for a while and was continued by the British who coined the term 'Straits Chinese', for both men and women, regardless of whether the women fit the category or not. As I mentioned earlier, we do not hear much directly from the women, since they were mostly illiterate and left almost nothing in writing, particularly in the nineteenth century. Thus, I argue that a visual approach to their identities needs to be employed to reconstruct their identities.

In practical term, the larger local Malay population would have supplied the women to whom the Chinese men would turn for spouses. However, they were not the most convenient, due to the religious barrier between the Muslim Malay and the Chinese who observed ancestor worship. Having said that, several earlier writers, including Newbold (1971: 172) write of Chinese men married to Malay women based on the fact that the Malay language was commonly spoken in their houses and became the vernacular of their offspring. Tan Chee Beng, who did his research in the late 1970s, claims that he came across at least two cases of Malay women adopting *Nyonya* identity through intermarriage. They only revealed their original identity when Tan had gained their trust. Certainly, cases like this from the mid or late twentieth century are rare, as in modern Malaysia it is not possible for anyone who are not Muslim to marry Muslim women without converting to Islam first. However, as Tan says, "The Malays in the past, at least up to nineteenth century, were more tolerant of religious differences as far as intermarriage was concerned" (Tan, 1988a: 38). John Crawfurd, the second resident of Singapore wrote in 1820, of Chinese intermarrying with the 'natives of the country' (Crawfurd, 1967: 135). Dr. Lim Boon Keng, a Straits Chinese himself, also writes that the itinerant Chinese traders married "women of the country" and mentions "native wives" which must have included Malays and non-Malays (1899b: 58). However, there are many writers argue that *Babas* could not have possibly married the Malay women without converting to Islam. For instance, Zahidan Abd. Aziz (1991) argues that,

Due to the requirement of the Islamic law that forbid marriages with non-Muslim, it is not possible for *Babas* to marry Malay women without first converting to Islam;

therefore, marriage with the Malay women is not possible. (Zahidan Abd. Aziz, 1991: 66).³⁹

However, Aziz's argument appears to be based on the enforcement of Islamic law in contemporary Malaysia rather than research evidence.

There are also numerous possibilities that the women were other Southeast Asian indigenous women; for example, Purcell comments on the 140 women that the Dutch reported, "We must remember that the women were mostly Batak and Balinese slaves and some Malays" (Purcell, 1967: 30), giving neither reference nor evidence, however. Sandhu, referring to Purcell says that the Chinese women were probably Batak and Balinese slaves, whom the Chinese males married in the absence of Chinese women (Sandhu, 1983: 98). Skinner also refers to Purcell and says,

That a large proportion of the indigenous mothers of *Babas* were of Indonesian rather than Malay origin is indirectly confirmed by the fact that the *Baba* Malay word for "aunty" is *bibi*, commonly used today in Indonesia, rather than *makcik*, the Malay equivalent (Skinner, 1996: 57).

Language can definitely provide good evidence but it appears unreasonable for Skinner to use only one word to judge the entire situation. He does however refer to Tan who examines the language carefully and says,

Certain *Baba* Malay words are similar in usage to Javanese or standard Indonesian rather than the Malay dialect in Melaka.... This is an interesting reflection of the intermarriage in the distant past between Chinese men and local women, especially women from Indonesia, hence the term *bibi* (Tan, 1988a: 135).

Apart from the Batak and Balinese slaves that mentioned above, Lubis speaks of the French Roman Catholic Priest, Father Boucho, who came into contact with slaves from Nias in about 1826 after arriving in Penang in 1824 (Lubis, 2009: 153). Referring to Teoh (1957), Tan wrote of how in Penang, the earlier Chinese settlers married Malay wives from Kedah, and

³⁹ My translation, from the original in Malay, "*Disebabkan agama Islam tidak membenarkan perkahwinan dengan orang yang bukan Islam terlebih dahulu memeluk agama Islam, maka perkahwinan dengan orang Melayu tidak mungkin dilakukan.*"

also married 'Orang Sam Sam' who according to Bradell were "half blood Siamese" (Tan, 1988a: 40). My personal encounter, I grew up in southern Kedah and the grandmother of one of my schoolmates was a Penang *Nyonya* of Thai origin.

Rudolph gives one of the most complete pictures of the women with whom the Chinese might have consorted. He proposes seven possible backgrounds for these early *Nyonyas*, that they could be (1) Malay women prior to Islam's dominance; (2) nominal Muslim; (3) Malay slaves; or (4) women, occasionally slaves (Baba Malay: *teman* or *Cha bo kan* for female slaves) from different parts of present-day Indonesia includes *Batak*, *Bugis*, *Balinese*, *Siamese* and *Orang Asli*; (5) daughters of Melaka Chitties; (6) Indonesian *Peranakan* Chinese; (7) Lastly, in the course of time, the offspring of male Chinese settlers and non-Chinese women (Rudolph, 1998a: 83 - 85). Due to the non-existence of essential records such as marriages certificates, Rudolph does stress that these are merely possibilities or conjecture.

However, in the absence of concrete evidence, these are the best possibilities for predicting the origin of the *Nyonyas*; although the seventh type could only happen after at least one generation of intermarriages, as stressed by Rudolph himself. We could imagine that given the lack of Chinese women in Malaya, intermarriage with indigenous Southeast Asian women was necessary for the early Chinese men settlers. The opportunities to marry 'local' wives were made easy for the early Chinese settlers as one of the most common ways to obtain the indigenous Southeast Asia women as wives or concubines was by procuring the slaves. We should, however, consider that not all of them were slaves, as there must be some opportunities for the early Chinese settlers to marry non-slave local women. Until the late nineteenth century, the slave trade was a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Slavery was only formally abolished in the Emancipation Act 1834 (Rudolph, 1998a: 101). Lubis quotes John Anderson of the East India Company who was sent to survey the east coast of Sumatra in the 1820s and who wrote of slavery in 1823,

From Asahan alone, there used to be sometimes 300 slaves, particularly females, exported to Melaka and Pinang in a year. The women get comfortably settled as the wives of opulent Chinese merchants, and live in the greatest comfort. Their families attach these men to the soil; and many never think of returning to their native

country..... I do not know any race of people who were and had every reason to be, so happy and contented as the slaves formerly, and debtors as they are now called, who came from the east coast of Sumatra and other places. (Lubis, 2009: 152).

Even when slavery had been outlawed, slaves continued to be imported and Anderson goes on to say,

I have the assurance of the natives that the slaves are still exported in considerable numbers, notwithstanding slavery has been discountenanced so decidedly both at Melaka and Pinang. Their admission into Singapore they do not find so difficult (Lubis, 2009: 153).

Chia also says, "Although the Emancipation Act was passed in 1834, a number of *Babas* still acquired and kept female slaves well after that. The law was lax" (Chia, 1994: 4). In that case, we could imagine the slave women continued to be purchased as spouses throughout the nineteenth century even though slave trades were outlawed.

This was the situation during the absence of Chinese women where intermarriage between local slave women and Chinese men was common. However, it changed in the late nineteenth century when Chinese women began to come to the Straits. Some of them were also imported as slaves, thus available for the *Baba* or Chinese men to procure as wives or concubines. Regardless of their status as slaves or otherwise, some of the early Chinese women migrating to the Straits actually blended in with the culture and led the *Nyonya* lifestyle and they emerged noticeably in the early twentieth century period. Today there are indeed many families who claim to have *Baba* and *Nyonya* heritage without mixed ancestries. The motive to convert to *Nyonya* is obvious. To use Turnbull's words, "respectable women" did not come to the Straits until the late nineteenth century, therefore if the women were not local *Nyonyas*, the chance of being categorised as a non "respectable woman" were therefore high. One could imagine that the Chinese migrant women would prefer to be identified as *Nyonyas* rather than as slaves or prostitutes.

Gwee, who wrote about his childhood time in Cuppage Road, Singapore in the 1930s, mentions that many Teochew *Nyonyas* lived in his neighbourhood. In his words, "One more Teochew *Nyonya* lived on our row... Though dressed in the *Nyonya baju panjang*, she could

only converse in the Teochew dialect” (Gwee, 2013a: 30). Gwee recognised her as a “Teochew Nyonya” because of her dress but he does not regard her as an authentic *Nyonya*. In his words:

In her strong Teochew-Baba tongue, she declared, “I am busy. *Ala sulala mo kahwin*, a relative is about to marry.” A true-blue Nyonya like Mother would have expressed the same statement in the more refined “*ada sudara mo kahwen*” (Gwee, 2013a: 32).

This is an interesting fact where the pronunciation of ‘d’ and ‘r’ becomes ‘l’ for the *teochiew* (a Chinese dialect) tongue. As I mentioned before, some native Chinese dialects speakers have difficulty in pronouncing ‘d’ and ‘r’ as their dialects do not have the ‘d’ and ‘r’ pronunciation in them. Therefore, they were not regarded as “true blue Nyonya” for Gwee. There was actually a nickname for these ‘converted *Nyonyas*’, Chia mentions “*Nyonya Chelop*” or literally dyed *Nyonyas* implying imitation (Chia, 1994: 84). It should be noted that in mentioning the *Teochew Nyonya*, Gwee reveals two important points. Firstly, he recognised his neighbour as a *Nyonya* because she dressed in “*Nyonya baju panjang*”, the dress made the *Nyonyas*. Secondly, he did not mention the identity of her husband; the *Nyonyas* had an identity of their own.

There were also cases where both Chinese husbands and wives migrated to the Straits together and identified themselves as *Babas* and *Nyonyas* after settling in the Straits. According to Rudolph, who made personal communication with the descendants of Tan Oh Lee whose history of arrival to Singapore together with his family that Song writes about, regarded themselves as *Babas* and *Nyonyas* (Rudolph, 1998a: 98). The affluent *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, being labeled as ‘Straits Chinese’, occupied a higher social status, which must have inspired some to belong to such social group. Although they were not born and bred in Southeast Asia and were small in numbers, the Chinese women who saw themselves as *Nyonyas* or converted *Nyonyas* should be added to the lists mentioned by Rudolph.

Having explained the backgrounds and origins of the *Nyonyas*, I examine the domestic and social life of the *Nyonyas*, which differed from the *Babas* in the period in question.

The Domestic and Social Life of the *Nyonyas*

What we know of the domestic and social life of *Nyonyas* is unfortunately quite limited in comparison to the much-publicised *Babas*. Only in the latter half of the nineteenth century do we start to have better glimpse of their lifestyle through some written works. Our knowledge about their material cultures, including their dress, also becomes much better with the invention and increasing use of cameras at the end of the nineteenth century. In this section, I focus on what we know about the domestic and social life of the *Nyonyas* during the research period. It is however not my intention to generalise about the *Nyonya* lifestyle, rather, I focus on what was genuinely common among the majority of the *Nyonyas* or more precisely, the common family values that *Nyonyas* lived by and adhere to. We have sufficient reminders from Rudolph and other scholars that the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* were never a homogenous group, in Rudolph's words:

Like most other people they consisted of 'conservatives', 'liberals' and people somewhere in between. Even in contemporary Singapore, there are families, *Babas* among them, who are strict with their daughter and wives. However, I have on a few occasions indicated, by the 30s, there were some *Baba* families who were very liberal and thus, did not fit well into many a traditionalist's conception of Singapore's '*Baba* culture' in the past (Rudolph, 1998a: 237).

What Rudolph says above makes sense as it took place in that early modern period "even in contemporary Singapore", crossing between conservative and liberal. Perhaps not realising it himself, Rudolph highlights a commonality among the *Nyonyas* by saying that within the family *Nyonyas* were subordinate to men who can be "strict with their daughters and wives". This is as good as saying that acceptable behaviour for *Nyonyas* was subject to family values set by the men. There were exceptions at times as in some Straits Chinese households; seniority in age was the first criterion in ranking family positions and gender second. Anyhow, it was common that the *Nyonyas'* acceptable behaviour and lifestyles were determined by the family values set by men and the elders.

Having been colonised by the west, the Straits Chinese must be considered behind in their behaviour in not treating women equally, and were criticised by some Westerners as well as the Straits Chinese themselves. For example, Vaughan writes, "Women are treated by the

Chinese, like all Eastern Nations, as inferior to the lords of the creation” (Vaughan, 1879: 36). This is especially clear when Song Ong Siong, a Singaporean *Baba*, wrote “The Position of Chinese women” in 1896, which was published in the *Straits Chinese Magazine* to persuade men to reform their old family values on matters pertaining to the womenfolk. Song challenged Straits Chinese men “who had the advantage of western thought but standing rebuke this degraded social status of the *Nyonyas*” (Song, 1897: 17).

These family values were evolving from traditional to modern during the nineteenth to the early twentieth century period, and some family values evolved faster than others were. Hence the values are very different to what Rudolph stresses above but in some ways they are also very similar. Song listed some common family values that he proposed be reformed. Although he uses “Chinese women” in the title, Song makes it clear that he is “dealing with the women of the *Baba* community” and uses the term *Nyonya* in his text.



Fig. 4: First Year of Singapore Chinese Girls' School, 1900 (Song, 1967: 304).

First and foremost, *Nyonyas* were not educated and ignorant in their behaviour. According to Song, this was causing them to indulge in gambling and be overly superstitious, “belief in anything that is strange and foreign to their limited experience”. Secondly, “the other deplorable thing” according to Song, is that *Nyonyas* were completely financially dependent on the men. Under the “existing state of society”, the *Nyonyas*’ ability to make any income was limited to embroidery, sewing or making pastries and cakes to sell. For this ignorance and dependency, Song advocates education reforms for girls. He later founded one of the

earliest girls school in Singapore, the *Singapore Chinese Girls' School* with Dr. Lim Boon Keng and other prominent Straits Chinese gentlemen, in July 1899 on Hill Street. A picture (figure 4) was taken in 1900, with the caption "First year of Singapore Chinese Girls School" (Song, 1967: 304).

Thirdly, the women lacked liberty,

It is that of keeping the Nyonyas, more practically the unmarried girls, confined within the four walls of a house, be that house a palace or a hut. It is the practice that prohibits any social intercourse between them and the male sex until marriage, and that prevents them from receiving visits from and paying visits to others of their own sex who do not come within the immediate family circle. Whether this custom is one that deserves praise or condemnation, I will discuss later on, but I state this as a patent fact (Song, 1897: 18).

In the nineteenth century, most *Nyonyas* did not go far beyond the house with the exception of temples or sites of worship. If this is the case for Singapore, Penang was even more so. Ho writes of how Chap Goh Meh (the fifteenth day of the first Lunar month) was the only day the young *Nyonyas* in Penang were seen on the street, they were "normally cloistered, were allowed out of the house after a year of literal imprisonment... The reason for the excitement was to witness the parade of fair maidens [*Nyonyas*] who were seen in public at no other time of the year" (Ho, 1985: 68).⁴⁰ Yeap writes that his maternal grandfather from Penang, Khoo Sian Ewe (b 1886), in his youth, probably the early twentieth century, was very excited for a trip to Singapore. Yeap describes how Khoo "had heard that the youths of Singapore were more extrovert than their Penang counterpart and that the ladies did not hide in the house all the time" (Yeap, 1993: 41).

Song argues that such circumstances be reformed, "They ought to be taken out of the house as often as possible for a walk and for a blow of fresh air, especially in the morning and live freer and more open-air life" (Song, 1897: 22). According to Chia (1994), the Picture of the Girls' School (figure 4) has actually caused some arguments among current *Babas* (his writing time) on the *Nyonyas* in the picture as it was a disgrace for *Nyonyas* of that time to be seen in public, some even implied that they could be the "*Nyonyas Chelop*" or 'converted

⁴⁰ The Chap Goh Meh custom was not practiced in Singapore or Melaka.

Nyonyas'. Chia however has provided evidence that his mother, who was born in 1906 and bred in Melaka, attended a Catholic school. He explains:

The olden-day *Nyonyas* were confined strictly to the home as soon as they turned twelve... With progressive modernity, the *Nyonya* maidens were allowed to be seen on the street only if there was a good reason and purpose. Education was certainly a good reason and purpose. However, it was straight to school and then back home... After school, it was "confinement to barracks" (Chia, 1994: 85).

One important point indirectly raised by Chia is that, the *Babas* do view those who wore *baju panjang* as *Nyonyas*, even though they regard them as "*Nyonya Chelop*". This provides further good evidence that dress made the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 5: Singapore Chinese Girls' School, 1913 (Song, 1967: 305).

My *Nyonya* informant who now lives in Johore Bharu⁴¹, Malaysia was born in Melaka in 1917 and lived in Singapore in her youth and went to the Singapore Chinese Girl's School for her primary years from 1923 and 1929. According to her, the school uniforms during her

⁴¹ I was fortunate to be introduced to *Nyonya* Manis in her nineties through her nephew whom I know via the *Peranakan* Association of New South Wales. She was born in Melaka but largely raised in Singapore. She went to the Singapore Chinese Girls School for her primary education and attended the Methodist Girls School in her senior years from 1930 to 1936 and attained a Senior Cambridge certificate. She moved to Johor Bahru after marriage and worked as stenographer in the Chief Police Office. In her teenage years she wore the sarong *kebaya* and *samfu* (Chinese top and pants) but discarded the sarong *kebaya* after her marriage.

time were blue trousers and white blouses. However, the uniforms during her mother's time were *baju panjang* and Sarongs just like in figure 4. Another picture, figure 5, shows a picture of the girls at the same school in 1913 with two types of uniform for girls; one in Chinese *samfu* and the other *baju panjang* and Sarongs. This period must have been between my informant and her mother and before they changed the uniforms to trousers and blouses. They were indeed some fortunate *Nyonyas* who were allowed to go to school despite the common confinement the *Nyonyas* had to observe.

Apart from being confined to the house, another point made by Song is that the *Nyonyas* were prohibited from socialising with the opposite sex. In other words, the social custom of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* emphasised homo-sociality. Nevertheless, the *Babas* hardly qualify for this term as they were actually allowed to socialise with women that were not *Nyonyas*. Gwee relates his mother's description of her cousin's wedding, in which the wedding guests were separated into two sessions, female guests came in the day and male guests came in the evening,

The guests, who arrived all morning and afternoon, were female.... father had arranged for the lunch time troupe.... Who had brought along only female guests at lunch. Thus during the *joget* the female dancers danced with one another. At functions where menfolk were present the *joget* was definitely popular as it gave the Babas the opportunity to dance with the lovely dancing girls... it was evening and the afternoon guests were beginning to leave.... Father stood by the main door to welcome the male guests... (Gwee, 2013b: 90-93).

Chia also describes the *Baba-Nyonya* wedding ceremony, which involved the Malay custom of exchanging betel nut, *kapur-sirih* and was meant exclusively for the women.

Sa kapur siray was a small bit of betel leaf into which a little chip of areca nut was stuffed. This served as a token of invitation to a wedding, and was meant exclusively for the *Nyonyas* to attend the *Chia Lang Khek*, or The Opening of Marriage Day lunch, while the *Babas* were asked to dinner (conservatism preventing mixed company was responsible for the women being invited to lunch and the men to dinner) (Chia, 1994: 120).

Apparently this custom of homo-sociality was also adhered to in intimate households by husbands and wives. J.D. Vaughan refers to domestic habits, saying, “Men take their meals alone, women and children take theirs in an inner chamber, there is no social intercourse between sexes” (Vaughan, 1879: 35). Although there must have been exceptions, as Rudolph stresses, this custom must have been practiced widely enough in the late nineteenth century for a foreigner like Vaughan to take notice. *Nyonyas* of several generations lived under one roof and led their own life at home while the *Babas* lived their lives mostly outside of their home. Therefore, husbands and wives did not spend much time together. Chang describes how her brother (who was born in 1906) and his wife “seldom see each other in the day... [she] had not gone out even once with her husband” (Chang, 1981: 154). Chang also describes how her mother was a tyrannical mother-in-law who found fault in everything her sister-in-law did. In that women’s world at home of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, typical mothers-in-law exercised absolute power over their daughters-in-law. Gwee describes vividly,

Therefore for many a girl, marriage was the beginning of difficult life... It was all natural for a young bride to have face a fierce and uncompromising mother-in-law and several equally fierce, spiteful and wicked sisters-in-law, especially those who were not married and were no longer considered young (Gwee, 2013b: 120).

Apart from the above three points that were raised by Song, I would add another common value to the *Baba* and *Nyonya* household during this period. That is, that *Nyonyas* were raised to be like their mother and the *Babas* like their father. Yeap writes of his grandfather in his youth that while “his sisters were trained in the genteel way of life by their mother, KSE [Khoo Sian Ewe] came more and more under his father’s influence (Yeap, 1993: 41). Skinner also writes,

There is some evidence that China-born fathers married to indigenous women may have been more diligent in ensuring that sons as opposed to daughters were reared as Chinese. Indeed there may on occasion have been a prior understanding between an immigrant who intended to return to China and his local wife that she was free to rear her daughters as indigenes” (Skinner, 1996: 54).

Indeed, this is common in Straits Chinese households, can be witnessed in other written accounts, and is recalled in conversations with present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. With these understandings of how the *Nyonyas* lived their lives in the research period, I now move on to the conclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter shows the different origins of the ancestors and ancestresses of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* as a result of the intermarriage between Chinese men and local indigenous women. The *Nyonya* could be purely of local origin without mixed parentage but the *Baba* is usually the offspring of or a descendant of a mixed marriage. That says, the identity of the *Nyonyas* emerged earlier than the *Baba* and this is in line with the origin of the term '*Nyonya*' that can be traced to Portuguese and was in use during the Dutch period, while the use of the term '*Baba*' is originated in the British time. The ancestral backgrounds of the *Nyonyas* were diverse, ranging from women across the Malay Archipelago as well as mainland Southeast Asia many of whom were slaves before they were acquired by the Chinese men as spouses. However, their experience in marrying men with a more common background brought them together and formed an identity for themselves, the *Nyonya*.

Unfortunately, we do not have precise statistics on the intermarriages, or precise information of when the intra-ethnic marriages took over intermarriage. Presumably, intermarriage happened more frequently in the distant past, until the population of *Babas* and *Nyonyas* was large enough to sustain intra-ethnic marriage. The other deterrent to intermarriage was the enforcement of the Emancipation Act 1834 that prohibited the slave trade and that must have interrupted the occurrence of the intermarriage. Even though the Act was not strictly observed, it would definitely have slowed down the intermarriage that resulted from the slave trade. One can imagine that these intermarriages happened perhaps once or twice or slightly more in each Straits Chinese household. As such, to justify 'local' base identities for *Nyonyas* because one or two of their ancestresses were indigenous women, may be implausible. Especially since Chinese male ancestors were the dominant identity and had been categorised by their colonial authorities as "Chinese" since the Dutch period in the case of Melaka. Nevertheless, the longstanding existence of *Nyonyas* as a

separate identity combined with the separate upbringing for boys and girls that continued into adulthood in their homo-social lifestyle in the British period provides a picture that supports the local identity as the base identity for the *Nyonyas*.

With the backgrounds of *Babas* and *Nyonyas* firmly established, I now move on to the examination of the *Nyonyas* local dress style to observe how a distinct visual identity of *Nyonyas* can be constructed and made possible through this dress style. More importantly, this local dress style represented by the green circle in chart 1 rendered the *Nyonyas* as local women.

Chapter Three: Local Dress Style

The previous chapter discussed the emergence of the *Nyonyas* and provided an overall picture of their separate lifestyles from the *Babas*. This chapter shows how this separate lifestyle was realised in the way they dressed. The pioneer Chinese migrant men who settled in the Straits continued the dress culture they brought from their villages in China and passed this dress style to their male offspring. However, their local spouses wore local dress and their female offspring continued this dress style for generations to come, right up to the twentieth century. This 'local dress style' consisting of the two-piece ensemble, *sarong kebaya*, was everyday dress for the *Nyonyas*; while a Chinese jacket and draw-string trousers was the typical 'Chinese dress style' for the *Baba* men. As mentioned previously, 'local' is defined here as the Malay Archipelago, as this is a clearer definition than one based on a singular ethnic group classification like the 'Malay', as some writers have done. This is because this dress style is difficult to attribute to any ethnicity, especially before the twentieth century, as it was worn all over the archipelago regardless of ethnicities. Hence, this dress style is not ethnically representative to the wearers but it could definitely be attributed to their locality, namely the 'Malay Archipelago'. One of the aims of this chapter is to reveal the different ethnic influences in the *Nyonya* daily dress style.

I begin this chapter by examining images of *Nyonyas* in local dress styles in order to understand how this dress style was initiated and what it meant to be dressed in this style. This is followed by the study of Javanese batiks because important developments in *Nyonya* dress are closely related to the rise of commercial batik making in Java, particularly with the involvement of Javanese *Peranakan* in batik making. The batiks produced by the Javanese *Peranakan* appealed to the *Nyonyas*. Nevertheless, not all articles of dress made in what was referred to as '*Batik Peranakan*' were adopted by the *Nyonyas* as part of their everyday dress. Even though at first glance the *Nyonyas* may have appeared like other local women in the archipelago without much distinction, by using or not using certain materials or articles of dress, they marked a specific group identity. Investigation of each article of dress that was part of the *Nyonya* wardrobe is therefore crucial in understanding the basis of this selection. Some accessories, which contributed to the local dress style such as the

kerosang,⁴² a set of three brooches that were used as buttons to fasten the *kebaya*, and the metal belts that held the sarong in place, will also be discussed in this chapter. Finally, it is also important to consider how the local knotted hair-style completed the style.

The Visual Image of the *Nyonyas* in Local Dress Style

As mentioned earlier, we have very limited information on what the *Nyonyas* wore in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before cameras were able to capture images in the mid-nineteenth century, we also have few visual images of the *Nyonyas*, except for a small collection of portrait paintings which were usually used for ancestor worship and which scatter all over the former Straits Settlements. As said before the nineteenth-century images reveal that there were similarities in the ways women dressed in the archipelago and the possibility of women in Melaka dressing like women in Batavia before the existence of visual images is high considering the Dutch ruled both places over a considerable long period of time.

As many first generation *Nyonyas* were indigenous women of slave origin, it is not difficult to imagine that they would have had minimal dress culture prior to their marriage. As said earlier, in many instances ‘married women’ could truly mean ‘free women’ therefore it is not surprising that married and free *Nyonyas* dressed according to the style of other ‘free-women’ in Melaka and Batavia, and that perhaps set the beginning of the *Nyonyas*’ dress culture. Sydney Parkinson (1773) made one of the earliest distinctions between the dress worn by slaves and free women in eighteenth century Batavia.⁴³ It is interesting that Parkinson categorised women according to their social status as either slaves or free women as if these were the most important categories among women during such time:

The women-slaves wear a long piece of cotton check wrapped about their loins which serves instead of petticoats, and over that, a very short white calico jacket, which

⁴² *Kerosang* is *Baba Malay* spelling, also known as *kerongsang* in Malay.

⁴³ Sydney Parkinson was employed by Joseph Banks to travel with him on James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific in 1768, in HMS *Endeavour* as a botanical draughtsman. On the way home, when the *Endeavour* called at Batavia for repairs, Parkinson was one of many who contracted dysentery, and he died at sea on 26 January 1771. His book was published later the same year, 1773 and titled *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty's Ship, The Endeavour*.

button at the wrist, and is close before. They have remarkable good hair, which they tie upon the tops of their heads, and stuck two or three silver or gold bodkins into it, this, with a silver peenang box which hangs to a girdle, and a handkerchief, with searee, put over their shoulders, makes them appear very gaudy. The free-women, who are called Noonga Cabaia, wear a long chintz banjan, called a Cabai, which reaches down to the heels; and they have square-toed slippers, turned up at the points very high, with which they make shift to hobble along (1773: 179).

The Scottish Parkinson, who travelled on the British ship, Endeavour, was obviously under the influence of British India in his choice of words like “banjan”⁴⁴ and “searee” that was put over shoulders which is actually the ‘*selendang*’ or shoulder cloth used in the archipelago. “Noonga Cabaia”, or “*Nyonya kebaya*” for free married women as mentioned earlier, wore the long chintz ‘*cabai*’ or ‘*cabaya*’ or modern day ‘*kebaya*’. He clearly differentiated the “free women” in long chintz *kebaya* from slaves who wore “a very short white calico jacket”.

The origin of the *kebaya* is complicated and if we were to trace the etymology of ‘*kebaya*’, the possibilities are extensive but all point to an Islamic origin. The Hobson-Jobson dictionary provides a dating of 1540 for *cabaya*,

Asiatic origin, was perhaps introduced into India by the Portuguese, whose writers of the 16th century apply it to the surcoat or long tunic of muslin, which is one of the most common native garments of the better classes in India (Yule and Burnell, 1903: 137).

Here “Asiatic origin” refers to the word ‘Qaba’ which is found in Arabic vocabulary, as well as Persian, Turkish and Urdu, to denote the long Islamic robe. The other contemporary Portuguese usage of this term, *cabaia*, according to Lee, refers to “a Chinese robe or garment and suggests a more recent reintroduction through the Portuguese Creole spoken in Macau” (Peter Lee, 2014a: 26). We can be certain that *cabaya* was used by the Portuguese for a long period of time and that its usage refers to a ‘long robe’, either the Islamic robe or the Chinese robe. Eredia, on the other hand, mentioned in 1618 that Arabic script and the wearing of “*Cabayas*” had been brought to the island of Southeast Asia by

⁴⁴ Probably means ‘banyan’, used in India as “an undershirt, originally of muslin” (Yule and Burnell: 1903: 64).

merchants from Egypt and Arabia (Eredia, 2012: 70). This could be one possibility, as Arabs had indeed made their influence felt since perhaps the fifteenth century particularly on religion. However, as we shall see later, the dress worn in Melaka and Batavia was much influenced by the Portuguese Eurasians from India, so the possibilities that the term *cabaya* and the use of this dress was introduced to Melaka by the Portuguese or the Portuguese Eurasians from India is much higher than by the Arabs or Chinese.⁴⁵



Fig. 6: Part of the “Two street scenes in Batavia”, 1779-85. Jan Brandes. Pen and Ink on paper. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam [NG-1985-7-3-141].

The descriptions provided by Parkinson match the illustration in figure 6, a sketch made in eighteenth century Batavia. It shows a woman in front, certainly a free woman walking side by side with her man, dressed in a long *kebaya* and slip-in shoes with her hair tied in a knot. The woman behind her, possibly their slave, dressed in a short *baju* and a long length of hip-wrapper (possibly checked) wrapped around her loin, bare foot with knotted hair in exactly the way that Parkinson describes “women-slaves”. Although not visible in this picture and not described by Parkinson, there must certainly be a hip-wrapper worn under the *kebaya* of the free woman that wrapped around her loin like the slave. The hip-wrapper is one of the oldest articles of dress in the Archipelago and usually local inhabitants could not do without them. On her feet, the free woman wears slip-in shoes or slippers, but they are unlike those described by Parkinson, “turned up at the points very high”. The pointy slippers

⁴⁵ “Although the word *kebaya* is known in contemporary Malay and Indonesia, and has been associated with national dress in Malaysia and Indonesia since the second half of the twentieth century, “historical evidence points to a relatively recent introduction into these languages”

that Parkinson describes were most likely the slippers of Indian influence, possibly brought over by Portuguese-speaking Eurasian women from Goa, India.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century Dutch paintings or sketches from the Dutch East Indies show Eurasian women and some local “free-women” in turned-up pointy shoes, although the length of the point varies. Judging from the Portuguese-based term *Nyonya*, Portuguese speaking Eurasian women could have been one of the earliest groups of women to be addressed as such and the “free women” described by Parkinson were most likely Eurasians with pointy shoes. It seems like one only had to be “free women” to belong to the category of “*Nyonya kebaya*” and one did not necessarily have to be ‘foreign’ as is commonly perceived today. The Parkinson account tells us that the best way to check whether a woman was “free” or not was to observe her dress. It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that when slave women were set “free” they were keen to showcase their new status as “Noonga Cabaia” through dress.



Fig. 7: The Malays and the Javanese, hand-coloured copper engraving from Jan van Linschoten, *Itinerio*, 1596 (Hoyt, 1993: colour plate 9).

Melaka during the seventeenth and eighteenth century was possibly subject to very similar dress styles. An engraving by Jan van Linschoten in the late sixteenth century (figure 7) shows two women in similar styles with short blouses or *baju*, hip wrappers with a shoulder cloth and bare feet. These two women were actually from different places, the couple on

the right are described as inhabitants of Java while the pair on the left are inhabitants of Melaka. This is one of earliest sources available on how people in Melaka dressed. Their dress style was similar, with the possible exception that the *baju* worn by the Javanese woman was more revealing with transparent material, while the Melakan woman was certainly more modest by using a shoulder cloth to cover her chest, indicating a stronger Islamic influence. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century era, the *kebaya* was nowhere to be seen or heard in Melaka or Batavia, therefore the status of “slave” or “free-woman” is not easily distinguishable through dress; except perhaps that bare footed women were more likely to be slaves.



Fig. 8: Malay noble women in *kebaya* (*baju panjang*) and checked sarongs (Wright, 1908a: 223).

In the early nineteenth-century Straits Settlements, the slave trade was outlawed and although it did not stop completely the distinction between the ‘slaves’ and ‘free-women’ was no longer as obvious as in the eighteenth century. The style of dress for ‘free-women’, sarong *kebaya*, was popularly worn by local women in the archipelago. Although in contemporary Malaysia *kebaya* is regarded as Malay dress, this section demonstrates that initially it was not confined to the Malay or to any ethnic group for that matter, rather, it

was associated with status. It seems to remain a more prestige style among women who held higher social ranking, at least in the peninsular Malaya possibly to the early twentieth century. Figure 8, dating to around the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century, depicts a seated Malay noblewoman from Perak dressed in sarong and *kebaya* fastened with *kerosang*, clad in shoes and knotted hair with decorated hairpins. The woman standing beside her is equally well dressed, except that she is bare footed so may be her attendant or even a relative of similar rank. These noble women appear dressed up for the photographs but being noble women, these dresses should also reflect their daily wear. As a matter of fact, the *kebaya* is opened at the front without buttons and needed jewellery like *kerosang* to fasten it, usually only woman of certain ranks could afford such jewellery.



Fig. 9: Unknown sitters, in *baju kurong* and checked sarongs, undated, Malaya (Moore, 2004: 76).

In contrast, the women in figure 9, possibly from a similar period as figure 8, wear *baju kurong* with a v-shaped opening at the neck, a long version of *baju* that was probably adapted from the shorter *baju*, which slaves used to wear. Although unidentified, the women seated on the ground were clearly not women of noble birth with their bare feet and a sarong hanging around their shoulders to function as a *selendang* or shoulder cloth, used to carry market goods or similar daily items. There is also a complete absence of jewelry, even on their hair knots.

The examination of these two pictures shows that the description of “free-women” made by Parkinson was still applicable to noblewomen in the early twentieth century. We can take this look and compare it to one of the earliest images of a *Nyonya* in the nineteenth century Straits Settlements, figure 10, as an important point of comparison. The subject of this picture has her hair knotted and two hairpins are visible although probably three were used as was common practice. This knotted hairstyle is called *sanggul* in Malay as well as *Baba Malay*. She dresses in a long *kebaya*, reaching almost to her heels, fastened with exquisite *kerosang*, showing part of a checked sarong and feet in square-toed slippers. It does seem like the image of the “free women” a hundred years earlier in Batavia which still holds for the *Nyonya* of the British Straits Settlements. It is easy to envisage that newly free women who were acquired by Chinese men as spouses would be preoccupied with dressing like other “free women”. To use Parkinson’s term “Noonga Cabaia” who clad in “*Cabai*” or *kebaya* showcased them as respectable, married and free woman. This dress style is often worn with the knotted hairstyle, which was observed by Wang Dayuan (1981) in fourteenth-century Temasek as a local hairstyle.



Fig. 10: Portrait of Mrs. Tan Beng Wan (1851-1925), late 19th century, Straits Settlements. Collection of the National Museum, Singapore (Hoyt, 1993: colour plate no.5).

We shall see that this local dress style was a universal style among the *Nyonyas* up to at least the first decade of the twentieth century. However, usage of this local dress style was not confined to the *Nyonyas* in the Straits; as said it was popularly worn by many local women in the archipelago. The purpose of this chapter is to reveal how within the scope of 'local dress style', the *Nyonyas* managed to make a style of their own and used it for the purpose of identification and differentiation.

Following this, I examine each article of dress that contributed to *Nyonya* local dress style, beginning with the sarong, then the *kebaya* and the *kerosang* and metal belt accessories. Before I plunge further into this dress style, I must first examine the batik textiles that were widely used by the *Nyonyas* for their sarongs and occasionally for the *kebaya*.

The Involvement of *Peranakan* Chinese in the Batik Industry

Batik material was of paramount importance in the two-piece ensemble constituting local dress style. Batik sarongs were of particular importance, as well as some *kebaya* which were also made of batik. For this reason, that this section investigates the production of batik by the Javanese *Peranakan*, whose products were a staple of *Nyonya* dress in the period under investigation.

Batik is a decorated textile made using a wax resist method. The involvement of *Peranakan* Chinese in batik production was important as the range of batiks that they produced came to the attention of the Straits *Nyonyas*.⁴⁶ This is one of the main reasons that batik garments were a significant part of *Nyonya* local dress style. An investigation of the historical origins and technological development of batik textiles is essential as *Peranakan* Chinese batik makers on the north coast of Java played a crucial role in the evolution of an industry, which made important contributions to the development of *Nyonya* dress.

⁴⁶ Producing textiles using resists that were applied with various tools and agents has been known in various parts of the world, it is not exclusive to Java or the archipelago. Fabrics decorated with a resist technique have been found in several places in the ancient world. In Fustat, Egypt, fragments of Indian cloths in blue, red and brown were made partly using resists technique have been unearthed and may date to as early as tenth century (see Barnes, 1997).

We know very little about the origin of the batik technique and whether batik in Java developed independently or was introduced by others is not firmly established. But we know that the wax resist technique using an instrument called *canting* to form intricate designs is unique to Java, as nowhere else in the world where other forms of wax decorated textiles have developed, can prove that a *canting* was ever used. *Canting* is a small red copper vessel attached to a pen-sized bamboo stick which functions like a fountain pen, except that instead of ink, it uses liquid wax. Batik made using this vessel is called *batik tulis* or drawn batik.⁴⁷

Batik *tulis* is comparable to Indian *chintz* or painted cotton and to a certain extent, batik was produced on a large scale to replace Indian *chintz*.⁴⁸ Indian textiles have much influence on Southeast Asian textiles especially on the motifs of Hindu-Buddhist iconography. Indian textiles are in fact, one of the earliest and most important sources of inspiration for the decoration of Indonesian textiles, including batik, in terms of their palette, design and layout.⁴⁹ One of the most widely traded types of Indian textile was a multi-coloured long cotton, decorated with *chintz* or cotton painting technique with a *tumpal* design on both ends from Coromandel Coast and eventually incorporated into part of the designs of old North Coast batik.⁵⁰ The Indian origin of the *tumpal*, a saw tooth design or a row of

⁴⁷ Maxwell hypothesises that the art of batik using *canting* did not develop until the seventeenth or eighteenth century which coincided with the word 'batik' first appearing in a Dutch bill (Maxwell, 2003b: 241). Nevertheless, recent research using radiocarbon dating suggests the origin of the resist technique using *canting* could also be earlier than the current estimation of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century (see Barnes, 2010: 34-45).

⁴⁸ The *chintz* technique implies that one side of the white cotton is painted with mordants, which after a soaking in a chemical bath, produces vivid colour-fast colours (Veldhuisen, 1993: 20).

⁴⁹ The Indian textiles unearthed in Fustat provide evidence of textiles with patterns almost identical to the patterns found on Javanese batiks. In the sixteenth century or earlier, Indian textiles formed a major component of international Indian Ocean trade; Indian goods particularly textiles, were mainly traded for spices in Southeast Asia. As Heringa says, "A variety of *cuscleeden* (coastal cloths), woven, painted and printed textiles from India, had functioned since at least the fifteenth century and possibly much earlier as the mainstay in the barter for spices from the Moluccas" (Heringa, 1996: 35). "Rouffaer reports that as early as fifteenth century, large quantities of Indian textiles from Coromandel Coast were exported to Java, where they were referred to as *serasah* or *sembagi*. *Serasah* became the general term use in Java for this type of cloth from the Coromandel Coast, while *sembagi* refers to the flower patterns which are common on many pieces of this type of cloth, and which the Javanese took over as a batik pattern" (Veldhuisen, 1993: 20).

⁵⁰ Curiously this famous mordant dyeing technique of the Indian cottons was never established in Southeast Asia, but it is possible that the Indian method of cotton painting stimulated the development of the batik technique in Java where a simple form of paste-resist batik already existed. With the development of the unique and highly efficient *canting*, a period of expansion heralded the flowering of one of the most famous textile traditions in Malay Archipelago.

elongated triangles, is frequently ignored and referred to as ‘traditional Javanese design’. Another type of Indian textile that influenced batik designs was the double-*ikat patola*, woven silk cloths from Gujarat, decorated with geometric designs. We shall see later that these Indian influences also had an impact on the batik made by the Javanese *Peranakan* and used by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, imported Indian textiles declined due to the loss of sales to European printed-textiles that imitated batik and penetrated the Indonesian market. In a way, locally produced batiks sort of filled the gap, gradually replacing the Indian textiles and kick-starting industrial batik production in Java. Nevertheless, the European imitation batik provided an impetus to speed up the batik process. Using *canting* to produce batik is very time consuming and as the demand grew, *batik tulis* could not cope. A copper stamp or *cap* was finally developed, probably around 1840-50, to stamp intricate designs in wax directly onto the cloth (Veldhuisen, 1996a: 42). It is a much faster process especially for repetitive patterns, significantly reducing the time required for this process. A few writers, including Veldhuisen (1996) and Taylor (1997a), vaguely suggest that the invention of the copper stamp can be attributed to the *Peranakan* Chinese but there is no hard evidence for this. Nevertheless, *Peranakan* Chinese involvement in batik making increased significantly, when the *cap* was invented.

The batik produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java is known as *Batik Cina* or Chinese Batik. The term ‘*Batik Peranakan*’ is also used (Duggan, 2001: 90). In this thesis, I prefer to use the latter to commemorate the *Peranakan* batik makers and users rather than the *Totok* Chinese (equivalent to *Sinkekh* in the Straits). Another name, ‘*Batik Nyonya*’ is not to be confused with *Batik Peranakan*. It refers to specific kinds of batik designs that were favoured by the *Nyonyas*, including the *Nyonyas* of the *Peranakan* Chinese which Kerlogue described as “European style” batik (Kerlogue, 2004: 33; van Roojen, 2001: 22).⁵¹ *Batik Nyonya* was not just produced by *Peranakan* Chinese but also by Eurasian batik makers. In this chapter, I focus on the making of *Batik Peranakan* while the examination of the designs of *Batik Peranakan* and its Chinese elements are discussed in the next chapter. The

⁵¹ Kerlogue (2004: 33) writes, “Pekalongan [on the north coast of Java] is now famous for the European styles of the [batik] *sarung* produced there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, known as ‘Batik Nyonya’”.

“European style” *Batik Nyonyas* are examined alongside other European influences on *Nyonya* dress in Chapter Five.

Unlike their counterparts, the *Batik Belanda* or Dutch batik, research on the batik made by *Peranakan* Chinese is limited. An exception is Genevieve Duggan’s work, *The Chinese Batiks of Java* (2001) which reinforces the work of Judi Achjadi and Asmoro Damais in their book *Butterflies and Phoenixes: Chinese Inspirations in Indonesian Textile Arts* (2006). Both works emphasise the symbolic meanings of Chinese motifs. Some other research includes that by Veldhuisen (1993, 1996) and Heringa (1996) as a small part of their research on Dutch batik or North Coast batik. This section and the next chapter are able to build upon this scholarship.

There were and still are two main production areas of batik making in Java, the Principalities of Central Java and the North Coast of Java. Surakarta (Solo) and Yogyakarta, the two principalities derived from the Islamic Kingdom of *Mataram* (1582 – 1755) in Central Java, are regarded as the twin capitals of the batik industry in Central Java. The princely families of *Mataram* were the great driving force behind the development of batik making and it was an essential daily activity of the aristocratic women in the palace. In the past, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, batik makers in the different regions of Java were known for their distinctive and characteristic colours and pattern styles. Different local recipes were used for a wide range of natural dyes, producing characteristic shades and certain motifs that can be immediately associated with particular regions. Particularly obvious are the distinctive differences between the North Coast batik and the batik of Central Java or the Principalities. The batiks produced in the Principalities of Central Java are generally considered the epitome of classical batik, especially those created during the eighteenth century at the Surakarta and Yogyakarta courts (*kraton*). These classical designs have undergone changes over the course of time, but within the bounds of an evolving tradition; characterised by a trio of cream, indigo and brown. It was in the palaces of Surakarta and Yogyakarta that the eight renowned *larangan*, or forbidden, motifs were designed and produced exclusively for court use, following decrees announced in 1769, 1789 and 1790. The generally accepted eight *larangan* motifs in use on *kraton* batik were *Kawung*, *Parang*, *Parangrusak*, *Cemukiran*, *Sawat*, *UdanLiris*, *Semen*, and *Alasalasan*

(McCabe Elliott, 2004, p. 68). Each design contains a large variety of visual elements drawn from nature, religion, local myths and other cultural sources. Some forbidden batik designs incorporate Hindu and Buddhist religious references; under Islamic court rules they inherited the tradition of limiting anthropomorphic representation as well. The resulting abstract designs are filled with visual metaphors and their hidden meanings were obscure outside the royal eighteenth century courts and remain so today. From a treaty between Raffles and Sultan Hamengkubuwono II in Yogyakarta we learn that by early 19th century the ban on the forbidden designs was lifted except for *Parang Rusak* and *Sawat*. Hence, the commoners from then on were free to produce those once forbidden designs for their own consumption and they were indeed popular batiks designs in Central Java up until today. The popularity of these designs did not extend significantly to the North Coast batik makers although those designs were also used but they were used in a different context, sometimes only as background designs. As batik making was very much confined to the court, it is understandable that the environment in Central Java was not conducive for the *Peranakan* Chinese to get involved in batik making.

The situation was different on the North Coast of Java, which was sustained by the livelihood of international commerce. The North Coast was the maritime hub of Southeast Asia and became the cradle of a unique culture that developed special characteristics. It was here the early Chinese settlers made their first home and the place where settlers of different backgrounds including the *Peranakan* Chinese learned the skills of batik making and began their own batik industries. The North Coast approach to batik production was essentially commercial and entrepreneurial compared with that of central Java. The North Coast batik producers have long had a reputation for being the most innovative in batik designs, drawing inspiration from various paths of Javanese life. Apart from Chinese influence, designs from Indian textiles, ceramics, carvings, as well as European floral patterns and fairy tales have also been added to the North Coast Javanese batik repertoire, resulting in designs that have fewer ancient Javanese symbolic values than those of Central Java. Given their similarly diverse backgrounds and equally cosmopolitan environment, we can appreciate why *Nyonyas* in the Straits found a connection with this group of batiks.

The principal batik centres in North coast of Java are (going from east to west) Surabaya, Gresik, Lasem, Juana, Demak, Semarang, Pekalongan, Kedungwuni, Cirebon, Indramayu and Batavia (modern Jakarta). However, *Peranakan* Chinese batik workshops were not in all of these centres, they were more numerous in Batavia, Cirebon, Lasem, Semarang, Pekalongan and Kedungwuni due to the denser population of *Peranakan* Chinese in those areas. Some of the earliest *Peranakan* Chinese batik workshops still operate in the same locales today. except for Jakarta, which hardly has any *Peranakan* batik workshops or any batik workshops for that matter. From what I gather through some owners of batik workshops, it is higher cost to run a batik workshop in Jakarta that usually requires some substantial space.

Those *Peranakan* Chinese traders were actively involved in organising the production and sale of batik from the very beginning has been well documented (McCabe Elliot, 2004; Maxwell 2003b; Veldhuisen, 1996, 1998). They began trading in white cotton cloth and various components of batik making. This role allowed them to establish contacts with the batik makers in villages. Women who made batiks for family usage began to produce batiks for these traders, initially with designs they commonly made for their own families but eventually the traders ordered batik with designs that met the demands of the consumer market. The *Peranakan* Chinese traders also took the first bold step towards entrepreneurial production by buying fabrics drawn with wax but not yet dyed. These fabrics were dyed for sale in the traders' home, initially by the women at home but later professional dyers were hired. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Indo-European women assumed the entrepreneurial method of production by hiring batik makers to work in their compounds for wages. Carolina Josephina von Franquemont is the first known Indo-European acknowledged as a batik manufacturess in 1840 in Surabaya, then Semarang (Veldhuisen, 1998: 38-39). After the establishment of Eurasian workshops in Surabaya and Semarang, *Peranakan* Chinese followed a few decades later.

Unfortunately, there is no information about the first *Peranakan* Chinese makers, but we know that the *Peranakan* Chinese duplicated the Indo-European method by hiring batik makers under their supervision, thus starting their own cottage industries and producing lines of commercial batik in their home compounds. There are also cases where male Chinese ancestors married local Javanese women who were competent in the batik

technique and made batik for family purposes, their descendants learned the method and became involved in the batik making industry.

Duggan (2001) carried out research on three early prominent *Peranakan* Chinese batik makers, Family Lim (Cirebon), Family Gan (Pekalongan) and Family Oey (Kedungwuni), including biographical information and family genealogies. The Lim family in Cirebon inherited the batik technique from a Javanese ancestress and began the cottage industry sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century. We know that Pekalongan and Kedungwuni have relatively newer workshops than Cirebon and Lasem; hence, the families Gan and Oey both started the batik workshop at the turn of the century. The fourth generation of the Oey family, Oey Kim Lian, whom I visited during my fieldwork, is in her late 30s (she is the granddaughter of Oey Soe Tjoen, one of the most famous *Peranakan* Chinese batik maker) and is still making batik. Interestingly, her customers have to place orders in advance and can expect to wait about three years for their batik to be produced.

Another *Peranakan* Chinese workshop that I visited during my field research in Lasem is owned by Sigit Witjaksono (Njo Tjoen Hian) who is now in his eighties. According to Sigit, his first male ancestor came to Java from Fujian, China around 1740 and his batik workshop has been running for four generations. He explained that none of his children was interested in taking over the batik workshop. Both Oey and Sigit are the fourth generation in their family business, so considering the age difference between them, Sigit's family probably started their family workshop at the end of nineteenth century. Given the limited precise information, roughly the end of the nineteenth century is probably the best estimation on when the *Peranakan* Chinese first started this cottage batik industry. Their involvement in batik making came at a time when mass production was made possible by the introduction of the *cap*, and combined with the high demand for Chinese batik in the regions and export markets, resulted in tremendous escalations in production up until World War II.

The *Batik Peranakan* was produced mainly for the consumption of the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java as well as for export markets, which reached the Straits Chinese. This is not surprising as traditionally, batik was produced for family usage and therefore batik was used according to the ethnic groups that produced it. This tradition continued even when the commercial methods of batik production began. Due to the similar backgrounds of the Javanese

Peranakan and the *Nyonyas* in the Straits, the *Batik Peranakan* appealed equally to the *Nyonyas*. Nevertheless, not all the batik made by the Javanese *Peranakan* was used by the *Nyonyas*, who selectively chose what was to be part of their daily ensemble. These selections could be due to their religious or status standing and they appear to be a group choice rather than a matter of individual preference. In order to understand the basis of their selection, it is important to first understand batik not just as a textile but also as an article of dress that *Nyonyas* used.

Local Articles of Dress Commonly Worn by the *Nyonyas*

In this section, we will examine those local dress articles that were commonly worn by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. The batik production of Javanese *Peranakan* discussed above have much influence on the way the *Nyonyas* dressed. However not all of those produced by the Javanese *Peranakan* were part of the *Nyonyas* dress and this section aims to investigate the *Nyonyas'* choices and the reason for their choices.

The application of batik in Java is widespread but it is most commonly made as hip wrappers to cover the lower part of the body. There are two main types of hip wrappers, the *kain panjang* or long cloth and the sarong. Other applications of batik include *dodot*, *selendang*, *gendongan*, *saputangan*, *kemben* and *ikat kepala*. In pre-Islamic Java, it is believed that the local dress style consisted of only a single garment, the *kain panjang* which was wrapped around the waist or directly under the armpit for both men and women (Maxwell, 2003b; Taylor, 1997a, 1997b; Heringa, 1996). Largely as a result of Islamic influence that requires the covering of the body, top and shoulder cloths were slowly added to Javanese women's dress when Islam was adopted. The narrow, rectangular cloth worn as a breast covering is known as *kemben*; a long narrow shawl worn in daily life on the shoulder is called *selendang* and another equally long but slightly wider one used as baby-carrier is known as a *gendongan*, while the even wider version but shorter than *gendongan*, the *kudhung* or head scarf is worn over head and shoulder. Even though *kudhung* is a proper headscarf but *selendang* is also frequently functioned as such. Square cloths, *ikat kepala*, are for men to tie in a variety of local styles on their head, and the *saputangan* or handkerchief. It is

possible that the more modest and practical tubular sarongs that were popular among people of foreign origins or mixed origins, were introduced at a later time. Once batik making began in Java all these garments were mostly made of batik. The exception here is the top; the *baju panjang* and the *kebaya* were rarely made of batik cloth in Java. Instead the *kebaya* were mostly made of Indian flowered *chintz*, fine, imported cotton, silk or velvet.

From the written and visual evidence, it is apparent that some of the applications mentioned above including *kain panjang*, *sarongs*, *gendongan*, *selendang*, *saputangan* were produced and frequently used by the *Peranakan* in Java who followed Javanese practices in their usage. This reflects the cultural acculturation that took place amongst *Peranakan* Chinese so that using *gendongan*, wearing *kain panjang*, *sarongs* and *selendang* was natural to *Peranakan*. However, as said, not all these applications of batik were adopted by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits and I will examine each of those that were selected by the *Nyonyas* and investigate the reasons for the inclusion as part of their daily wears, in the following sub-sections.

The Hip-wrapper – Sarong

The most commonly used garment made of batik by the *Nyonyas* is none other than the hip-wrapper, batik sarong. *Sarung* in Malay means cover, for example, *sarung kaki* and *sarung tangan* literally mean a cover for the feet and hands or socks and gloves.⁵² However, in this thesis *sarung* or its English spelling, *sarong*, refer to its more common usage, that is a rectangular garment with both left and right ends sewn together to form a tube, like a protective cover to wrap around the bottom part of the body (usually between 1.80 to 2.25 metres long and about a metre in height). The usage of the word ‘sarong’ as a cloth sewn into tube a does not seem to have a long history. One of the earliest accounts refer to this type of sarong is in *The History of Java* by Stamford Raffles published in 1817 where the meaning is given as “the principal article of dress, common to all classes in the Archipelago” (Raffles, 2010: 86).

⁵² ‘Sarong’ is often misused in contemporary English, referring to any kind of cloth wrapped around the bottom part of the body, especially for beachwear.

For unknown reasons, the sarong is much preferred by people of mixed or foreign-ancestry on the North Coast Java, perhaps because it is practical, relatively easier, and more convenient to put on than a *kain panjang*. The relative aversion to the sarong amongst the Javanese population may be due to their Hindu beliefs as Taylor states that uncut cloth may have had a sacred quality for the Javanese due to Hindu influence (1997a: 91). Maxwell also notes that Javanese women were reluctant to use locally produced cloth for tailored items (2003b: 306). In the central Principalities, the Javanese aristocracy always wore the *kain panjang* instead of the sewn sarong. The *kain panjang* or *kain* in short, the oldest type of *pasisir* cloth in Java as mentioned earlier, is a rectangular uncut and unstitched cloth, equal in height to the sarong but longer (approximately 2.5 metres), and with neither end sewn together could be associated with the Hindu concept of uncut cloth.

The format of earlier *kain panjang* produced on the North Coast was highly influenced by the format of the *serasah* with a decorated middle field and *tumpal* design on both left and right ends. There is also small band of border or *pinggir* along the upper and lower edge.⁵³ If this *serasah* influenced format of *kain panjang* were joined together, it forms the oldest format of sarong with *badan*, *kepala tumpal*, *papan* and *pinggir* as in figure 11. This is an interesting development in North Coast batik sarongs which drew on various influences and experiments that led to the eventual invention of the sectional *kepala* or head, *badan* or body, *papan* or board and *pinggir* or border on batik sarongs. *Kepala*, usually about a third of the total length, is the small, distinguished section, shown in figure 11, here consisting of two rows of intersecting sets of triangles or *tumpal* facing each other, and two standing rectangular vertical bands or *papan* placed to the left and to the right side of the *tumpal*. The remaining larger part of the design is called *badan*, or body. Along the upper and lower edge of the batik, as well as along the *kepala*, is the border called *pinggir*, which usually consists of two bands where a tiny band at the edge forms an imitation of an ‘Indian tassel’.

⁵³ This format however was not common on the *kain panjang* produced in Central Java. Central Javanese *kain panjang* usually have no particular format but are a piece of long cloth with one design all over. Another format of *kain panjang* shows a *badan* merely enclosed by a small border at the bottom called *seret*, without the *kepala* sections. This format was adopted as the specific dress of the central Javanese Principalities, where it was denoted as *kain seret* which is cloth with a plain border at the bottom. “There, instead of being wrapped in a circular movement, it formed a spiral that tapered toward the ankles in a more elegant manner. As a result, after functioning as the cloth type for “the elders”, the *kain panjang* with the plain borders of the *Pasisir* came to be linked with high status” (Heringa, 1996b: 58).

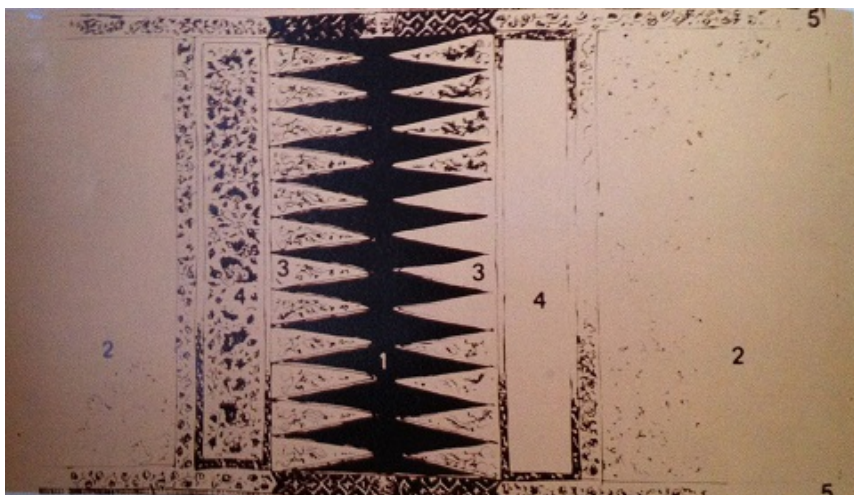


Fig. 11: Diagram of sarong - 1. Kepala 2. Badan 3. Tumpal 4. Papan 5. Pinggir (Veldhuisen, 1993: 18).

The development of this format has been observed by many scholars, including Rens Heringa who categorises it as “North Coast only” (Heringa, 2010: 127). The most traditional *kepala* design is obviously the *kepala tumpal*, sets of intersecting triangles facing each other. Although this triangle design has been widely referred to as ‘*tumpal*’ in Java, it is most likely a recent term started by the Europeans.⁵⁴ During my field research in Java, I realised that *tumpal*, so commonly used by batik scholars was not a commonly used by my informants or batik makers in Java. Instead, other names like ‘*pucuk rebung*’ or bamboo shoot were more frequently used, especially in the former Straits Settlements where the word ‘*tumpal*’ is almost unheard.

It should be noted that many portrait photographs and paintings from the mid-nineteenth century or earlier show *Nyonyas* in checked sarongs. At some point in the later part of the nineteenth century, batik sarongs are more frequently seen on the *Nyonyas*. Figure 12 shows the *Nyonya* on the left wearing a sarong made of *kain chalay* or checked cloths while the *Nyonya* on the right and the girls wear batik sarongs.

⁵⁴ For the etymology of *tumpal*, see Traude Gavin (2010: 226-239).



Fig. 12: *Nyonyas* in checked and batik sarongs ca. 1870s to 1890s. (Peter Lee, 2014a: 135).

Further examination of the abundant body of photographs reveals three important points. Firstly, there are various ways of folding the sarong in order to show the *kepala* section. Veldhuisen (1996d: 222-223) illustrates in various diagrams the myriad ways of folding the sarong and the *kain panjang* or long cloth, in which placement of the *kepala* is determined by the amount of the *kepala* to be visible. According to him, the *Peranakan* and Eurasians had similar ways of folding their sarongs, with approximately three-quarters of the *kepala* design shown in the front. However, only the *Peranakan* sarong is wrapped left over right, whereas the Eurasian sarong is wrapped right over left. Peter Lee (2014a) counters that and says that upper-class *Peranakan* women in the Dutch East Indies up to early twentieth century had another style, a double fold formed by folding from both left and right and then wrapping tightly towards the centre. Kerlogue adds further complication by identifying different wrapping techniques for each gender, saying women wrapped in clockwise direction and men anti-clockwise (Kerlogue, 2004: 136). At any rate, the visual evidence in photographs shows that *Nyonyas* in the Straits had various ways of folding. The reasons for different folding styles are not known; perhaps it was just a matter of personal preference. And they usually folded or pleated to fit, then fastened the sarong by tucking it in at the waist, with or without a belt.

Secondly, the sarong was not originally made of batik but of checked cloth. The application of the sarong as a hip wrapper is also unlikely to have originated in Java. Maxwell asserts that the sarong originated in Sulawesi among the Bugis who made checked cloths into sarongs, “These skirts, sewn into cylinders, became widely known as *kain sarong* throughout the Malay world, as Buginese seafarers and traders spread their textile throughout the region” (Maxwell, 2003b: 328). Maxwell definitely has a good point judging from the large quantity of checked sarongs supplied by Buginese. The visual evidence also shows that checked sarongs were widely worn in the archipelago, including by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits, before tidal waves of batik sarongs took over in the late nineteenth century. These hand-woven checked cloths were known as *kain chelah* or *kain chalay*, and were also called *kain bugis* in the peninsula, particularly the type supplied by the Bugis from Sulawesi of cotton gingham with small checks with somber, reddish brown hues. In Penang, they are called *chooi mua see* (in Penang Hokkien) by the Penang *Nyonyas* (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 208). According to Lee, the name *kain chelah* came from,

chelas, the old trade term for a range of checked cloths and the supply included handloom versions from Makassar [South Sulawesi], Sumatra, South India, Burma and elsewhere, as well as machine-made versions from Europe (Peter Lee, 2014a: 128).

However, the term *chela* originated in India and refers to a slave or servant in Sanskrit, so given that South India was one of the supplier of this woven checked cloth, it is probably the source of the term *chelas*. Judging by the meaning of the term ‘*chela*’ means a slave, ‘*chelas*’ was probably used to refer to the lower quality checked cloths used by slaves in India, even though other woven checked cloths like *kain bugis* were meant for upper class users like the *Nyonyas*. The sarong probably began to be made of batik when there were sufficient users for sarongs on the North Coast of Java. The North Coast, being a series of coastal ports, was usually the first place to receive any foreign influences. Hence, sarongs made of batik were, and to a certain extent still are, the articles of dress that developed and were used widely on the North Coast of Java (Heringa, 1996b: 52; Veldhuisen, 1993: 18).

Thirdly, the sarong was and is the essential hip wrapper of the *Nyonyas*. In fact, it was the hip wrapper of women in general in the former Straits Settlements, regardless of their ancestral backgrounds. The evidence collected from visual images is matched with the

materials examination, hardly any *kain panjang* or *selendang* or *gendongan* collected in the Straits could be attributed to the use of *Nyonyas*. This differs from Java, where sarongs were more popular amongst people of mixed ancestry, foreign ancestry or foreigners, while indigenous Javanese preferred the *kain panjang*. It is likely that the common use of sarongs among the local women in the Straits including *Nyonyas* came about through the Bugis people. Nevertheless, the use of batik sarongs is definitely an influence from Java, particularly the batik sarongs produced by the Javanese *Peranakan* which were commonly seen on the *Nyonyas*. It seems that the *Nyonyas* initially preferred batik sarongs with geometric patterns with North Coast characteristics that had a section of '*kepala tumpal*', a taste similar to their Malay counterpart.

The *kain panjang* that was produced and used by the *Peranakan* in Java never entered the *Nyonya* wardrobe. Azah Aziz (2006) writes that *kain panjang* or '*kain lepas*' (loose cloth, meaning both ends not sewn together) in the Peninsular Malaya "is not the garment of the Malay but the Indonesian, both men and women".⁵⁵ This could be the main reason why the *Nyonyas* did not venture into *kain panjang*, given that *kain panjang* was not worn by their contemporaries such as the Malay in the Straits Settlements.

Sometime during the first quarter of the twentieth century, the popularity of *kain panjang* diminished in favour of the *sarong* on the North Coast of Java and perhaps this is the reason why *kain panjang* underwent new developments. One of the first changes happened some time in the pre-war years, when a new format was introduced known as *kain panjang pagi-sore*. The *kain panjang* was divided into two halves by means of a diagonal line with each half decorated in a different motif and or colour/schemes. The term *pagi-sore* denotes these contrasting styles, the *pagi* (morning) section usually being of lighter colours for wear during the day while the *sore* (afternoon) part is in darker colours and usually for wear in the later part of the day. This allows the wearer to choose which designs she wishes to reveal according to the time of the day or sometimes the occasion. This *kain panjang* with *pagi-sore* format was in vogue in the mid-twentieth century before, during and after the wars and was widely produced and used by the Javanese *Peranakan* Chinese, who were

⁵⁵ My translation. The original reads "*Pada hakikatnya, kain batik lepas yang juga dikenali dengan nama kain panjang, bukan Pakaian orang Melayu; ia adalah pakaian orang Indonesia, wanita dan lelaki*" (Azah Aziz, 2006: 106).

most likely responsible for this innovation. The most extravagant example of the *pagi-sore* style is batik Hokokai, the batik that developed during the Japanese Occupation and characterised by dense motifs including flowers, rosettes and large butterflies. This type of batik was named after the political establishment of the Japanese Occupation, Djawa (Java) Hokokai, which organised labour conscription, athletic events and including batik exhibitions. Nevertheless, in the midst of these developments, the *Nyonyas* preference for sarongs continued, even when *kain panjang* made a comeback with the *pagi-sore* style developed by *Peranakan* on the North Coast of Java.

Shoulder Cloths – *Selendang* and *Saputangan*

Batik *selendang* and *gendongan* were frequently produced and used by the *Peranakan* in Java. The batik *selendang* or shoulder cloth is generally around 1.5 to 2.5 metres long and around 50cm wide while *gendongan* usually around 80 to 100cm wide. Both of these cloths were usually made from durable cotton, as said, they frequently serve as tools for carrying market goods or babies as well as functioning as a shoulder and head covering. However, neither *kudhung* nor *kemben* were ever part of the non-Muslim dress system. Hence, they were not produced or used by the Javanese *Peranakan* in any significant way, at least not enough to be noticed.

The batik *selendang* came to be fashioned from silk as a sign of status and an expression of elegance for urban women.⁵⁶ Especially the type called *Lokcan*, or ‘six skeins’ silk in Chinese (Peter Lee, 2014a: 125). *Lokcan selendang* became very popular not just in Java but in Sumatra and Bali and this term came to refer to the *selendang* made in silk, with Chinese or Chinoiserie motifs. Until around 1920, Chinese batik manufacturers in Juana and Rembang, situated to the east of Lasem, were the only two known suppliers of the batik silk *selendangs* (Veldhuisen, 1993: 88).⁵⁷ Apart from being elegant, the fact that many North

⁵⁶ Ibu Tien (1923-1996), the wife of Indonesia’s second President Suharto always appeared in public with a *selendang* and with her influence, *selendang* evolved into a fashion statement with fine fabrics, but not always made of batik.

⁵⁷ Iwan Tirta (1935-2010), the renown batik designer, did research on batik Rembangan (the name it was known by in Bali as it was made in Rembang) which is batik *lokcan* in silk. According to Tirta it was no longer made there, “the most extant examples dating back to the beginning of the 20th century” (Tirta, 2006: 10). Nevertheless, he found the batik workshop of Tan Kien Poen in Rembang who used to produce silk batik *lokcan* for export to Sumatra and Bali, mainly to the towns of Palembang and Padang. On Tirta’s request, Tan made a silk *lokcan* from a reproduction Tirta bought in Bali, and it took six months to complete. Tan however

Coast *Peranakan* Chinese converted to Islam in the eighteenth century probably contributed to the popularity of this item because it could also function as headscarfs like *kudhung*.



Fig. 13: Malay woman with batik *gendongan*, undated (Shawal, 1994: 19).

However, neither the silk *lokcan selendang* or the cotton *gendongan* type of batik *selendang*, produced and used by the *Peranakan* of the North Coast of Java, were popularly used by *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements. The observations from the photographs match the materials examinations. There was hardly any *selendang* collected in the Straits could be attributed to the use of *Nyonyas*. *Nyonyas* had always observed the religion of their menfolk, *Baba* that is the Chinese religion of ancestor worship. This is probably the main reason that the *selendang* was not widely used by the *Nyonyas*, as it appeared to be a Muslim way of dressing. Although batik *selendang*, including those imitation batik *selendang* from Europe, were in demand and imported to the Straits Settlements, they were most

declined to continue with this project as his workers were no longer familiar with the exceptionally difficult process of removing wax from silk.

likely meant for Malay and Muslim customers and not the *Nyonyas*, as in figure 13.⁵⁸ Regarding the disinclination of the *Nyonya* for *selendang*, Siti Zainon Ismail explains, “The *Nyonya* did not wear *selendang* on their shoulders instead they use handkerchief, often hung from their fingers when they go out” (Ismail, 2006: 193).⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the inspiration of using handkerchiefs might have derived from the use of *selendang*.



Fig. 14: Straits Chinese *Nyonya*, ca. 1870 (Peter Lee, 2014a: 140).

The batik handkerchiefs (*saputangan*) were widely produced and used by the Javanese *Peranakan* and were popular among the *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements too. One of the most common ones seen in the photographs is the larger square handkerchiefs folded half into triangle and drape it over the shoulder as in figure 14. The handkerchiefs that wore in this manner are usually about fifty square centimetre, one triangle end was attached to the topmost kerongsangs, tied into key-rings or tucked into waist bands. Siti Zainon Ismail mentions another way the *Nyonyas* wore the handkerchief, by tucking it into their

⁵⁸ According to Lee, “The *selendang* was clearly an integral part of Malay costume from at least the fourteenth century. In a passage in the *Hikayat Pasai* (ca. 1380), a character is said to be inappropriately dressed when she wore a *kain* without its *selendang*” (Peter Lee, 2014a: 45).

⁵⁹ My translation. The original reads “*Nyonya juga tidak memakai selendang di bahu, sebaliknya di jarring sering tersepit sapu tangan kecil apabila keluar rumah*” (Ismail, 2006: 193).

waistbands and tying a key ring and small containers to it. It is due to the the way it is folded into triangle that it is also called, '*Sah Kak Po*' in Penang Hokkien, literally means triangle cloth. When draped on the shoulders in this manner, these handkerchiefs were also called *selendang* by some. The popularity of the *saputangan* among the Straits *Nyonyas*, apart from the visual evidence, is also apparent from a song written by a *Baba* entitled, '*Saputangan Yang Putih*', which means, 'The White Handkerchief'.⁶⁰

Another shoulder cloth, narrow rectangular cloth called '*sangkut bahu*', draped over one side of the shoulder also occasionally appeared in the photographs, but the origin is unclear and unlikely to be made of batik. Like handkerchiefs, *sangkut bahu* was also served as alternative to *selendang* but they seem to be more worn on formal occasions (Cheah, 2010: 217). However, as mentioned, the material examinations do not match with the observations through photographs. The *saputangan* or *sangkut bahu* that could be attributed to the use of *Nyonyas* was hardly seen collected in the Straits by the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. This makes examination on the motifs show on these handkerchiefs impossible, unfortunately. One probable reason could be that the small sizes handkerchiefs did not survive in the humid tropical climate. What survive to these days are the ceremonial *saputangan* and *sangkut bahu* that are heavily beaded and embroidered, used on wedding days.

This section has shown that although *Nyonyas* portrayed themselves as local women by adopting local dress styles, but by not using the proper *selendang* made a strong statement about their religious standing, that is they were not Muslim. I now proceed to the next batik application that was not widely used by the Javanese but by *Nyonyas* in the Straits, the batik *baju panjang*.

Baju Panjang

Curiously, one of the oldest types of *baju panjang* worn by the Straits Chinese *Nyonyas* is tailored from batik cloth and such application of batik is different from those discussed above. It was not a Javanese practice to have *baju panjang* tailor made using batik.

⁶⁰ Personal communication with Robert Seet, Asst. Hon. Secretary of the *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka*, (2014) who is also a band member for the *Persatuan* and often performs during celebrations.

Baju panjang or *kebaya* is a long tunic and as discussed earlier, it is of Islamic origin. In the Peninsula Malaya, this *kebaya* is called *baju kebaya labuh* by the Malay and according to Zubaidah Shawal it is regarded as one of the oldest Malay garments (Shawal, 1994: 13). For unknown reasons, it was called *baju panjang* by the *Nyonyas* in Melaka and Singapore. In Penang, it was called *tang sah* in Penang Hokkien, which also means long tunic. I use the term *baju panjang* in this thesis to honour the term used by the *Nyonyas*. As mentioned, the *baju panjang* was in vogue in eighteenth century Batavia, evidenced in contemporary illustrations and accounts and was worn by high-ranking or “free women”.

The predecessor of *kebaya* is the short blouse, with a round or v-shaped opening for the head and often made of transparent material as discussed and seen in the engraving of Jan van Linschoten in sixteenth century Melaka and Batavia (as we saw in figure 7). This short blouse is probably the “*baju*” described by Eredia in the early seventeenth century for the dress worn by “civilized Malayo” in “Malaca”. In his words, “they wear a thin “*baju*” or short shirt made of muslin, and round the waist a skirt of Choromandel cloth” (Eredia, 2012: 31). The *baju* was also worn by Portuguese Eurasian women or *Mestizas* in Goa as observed by Francois Pyrard in the first decade of the seventeenth century as well as Peter Mundy who was in Goa in the 1630s. Peter Mundy states that women in Melaka were dressed “as at Goa” (Peter Lee, 2014a: 41). We could therefore assume that this *baju* was brought into Melaka by Portuguese Eurasian women from Goa who came with the Portuguese from the sixteenth century. By the early eighteenth century, this short *baju* continued to be worn by slaves in Batavia but wealthy “free women” were already seen in *kebaya*, as noted by Parkinson above. It does seem that the initial switch to *kebaya* was more associated with status than religion, even as foreigners like Parkinson observed. Slave women continued to wear *baju* while their wealthy patrons who were mostly not Muslim, switched to *kebaya*.

Interestingly, Rens Heringa who agrees that the word ‘kebaya’ has Islamic origins, has a very different suggestion on how this garment was introduced to Java, probably also influenced by the Portuguese who use *cabaya* to also describe the Chinese long robe used in Macao. In her words,

Although the term *kebaya* is derived from the Persian word for this type of garment, *cabay*, fifteenth century Muslim Chinese immigrants may well have been instrumental

in introducing the garment to the north coast. The form of the wide, long-sleeved robe with an open front meeting edge to edge, is quite similar to that of the Chinese *bei-zi*, which functioned as ceremonial dress for lower-class women during the Ming period. Thus foreign elements from India, Persia, and China all contributed to the dress styles that were adopted primarily by the immigrants' local-born wives. Although the costumes were eventually worn by all north coast inhabitants, they may be considered the first mestizo style. (Heringa, 1996b: 52-53).

Hua (2011) attributes *beizi* to the Song Dynasty (960-1276) in China,

“The most common item of clothing from the Song Dynasty that is not fastened in front so that the inner coat is shown..... Usually, the *beizi* was popular with people of both sexes and all social strata.... The *beizi* was preferred by men of the Song Dynasty as informal wear at home” (Hua, 2011: 36).

Figure 15 is a sketch of the front and back of the *beizi* while the garment at the bottom is an excavated man's *beizi* (undated), which does indeed look similar to the *kebaya*. However, the *beizi* has no gusset and, unlike the *kebaya*, was worn unfastened. The *beizi* was not meant for Muslims in China, so the Chinese connection of the *kebaya* cannot be substantiated without further evidence.



Fig. 15: Sketches of *beizi* and an excavated man's *beizi* (Hua, 2011: 35).

Although we are not certain as to how and when the “free women” switched to *kebaya* in Melaka, it is not going too far to assume that Eurasian women in Melaka dressed similarly to Eurasian women in Batavia, given that the mobility of people between these two cities was made easier during the Dutch occupation of both Melaka and Batavia. Similarly, the *Nyonyas* of Melaka must have been influenced by their counterparts in Batavia, and as a matter of fact many of them came straight from Java. As such, it should be around the eighteenth century that *baju panjang* was also worn by “free women” in Melaka. Khoo Joo Ee (1998), who states that the *baju panjang* is “traceable to the Javanese”, is therefore not incorrect although its journey to Melaka is more complicated than that. Black and white photographs from the Straits show *Nyonyas* in *baju panjang* from the mid-nineteenth century up to the early twentieth century, when it remained the preference for elderly *Nyonyas* while younger *Nyonyas* switched to other European style *kebaya*. I come back to this style of *kebaya* in Chapter Five alongside other European influences.

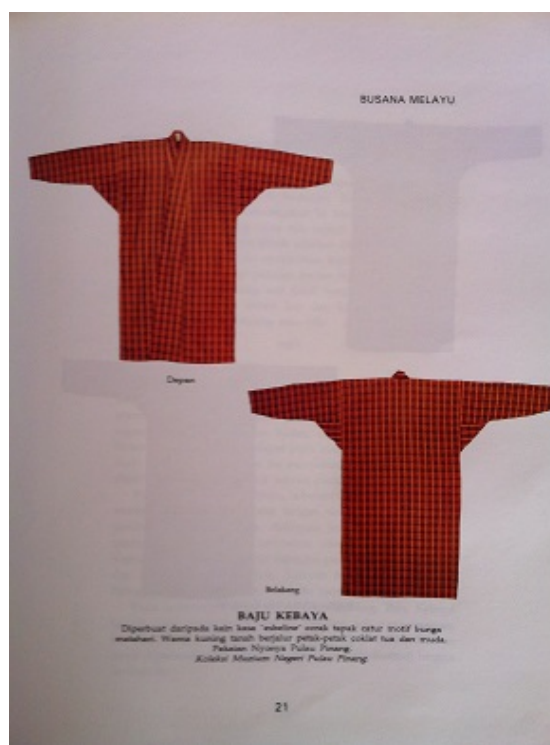


Fig. 16: “*Baju kebaya*” belonging to Penang *Nyonya* (Shawal, 1994: 21).

Examples of *baju panjang* from the late nineteenth century show that it had a tapered lapel sewn on the front robe and both sleeve gussets. Shawal provides photographs of two different *kebayas*. One of them belonged to a Penang *Nyonya*, which she described using

the generic “*baju kebaya*” possibly due to the fact that this *kebaya* did not belong to a Malay (figure 16).⁶¹ It was made of woven cotton in yellow and brown checks and belongs to the group of *kain chalay* mentioned earlier, a popular material for sarongs in the mid-nineteenth century period, seen here also used to make “*baju kebaya*”.

The other *kebaya* shown, figure 17, was made of colourful *songket* or brocade from Kedah and Shawal labelled it “*baju kebaya labuh*”. This is the name commonly used by Malays in the peninsular for the *long kebaya*, hence it indicates that this *kebaya* did not belong to the *Nyonyas*. The “*baju kebaya labuh*” was made of *songket*, popular material used by high-ranking Malays while the checked material, *kain chalay*, was typically used by *Nyonyas* for their *baju panjang*. Apart from the material used, the design of the two tunics (figure 16 and 17) are identical but they were known by different terms due to their different users. In this way, it clear that the materials and the terms used play an important role in identification and differentiation.



Fig. 17: “*Baju kebaya labuh*” from Kedah, Peninsula Malaya (Shawal, 1994: 22).

Obviously, the checked material discussed earlier was not limited to sarongs but was also used for *baju panjang*. Indeed, different kinds of *kain chalay* for the *baju panjang* and the

⁶¹ Shawal equates *baju panjang* with *baju kebaya*. In the caption of a *Nyonya* picture, she writes, “*Nyonya memakai Baju Panjang atau Baju Kebaya*” [*Nyonya wearing Baju Panjang or Baju Kebaya*] (Shawal, 1994: 16).

sarongs were often worn together as in figure 18. Many other types of material were used to make *baju panjang*, apart from the *kain chalay*, for instance Indian chintz and Chinese silk. Other popular materials appeared in the mid to late nineteenth century, including a type of batik used almost exclusively by the *Nyonyas*.⁶² Curiously, this batik *baju panjang* was worn by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements as well as in South and North Sulawesi (Makassar and Manado) but not in Java, Sumatra or other communities in the Malay Archipelago. Hence, just as checked sarongs were popular among the *Nyonyas*, it is possible that the use of this batik for *baju panjang* was another influence that came from Sulawesi. Perhaps *Nyonyas* from Sulawesi with Bugis background popularised the batik *baju panjang* as they had done with the checked sarongs. This is hardly surprising given the varied backgrounds of the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 18: A *Nyonya* in checked *baju panjang* and checked sarong, Singapore, 1870. (Peter Lee, 2014a: 131).

The batiks made for this purpose were made using a *cap* with tiny square or rosette grid patterns, mostly in natural colours of indigo blue and *mengkudu* red, and were probably made especially for export markets. Unfortunately, we have no clear evidence about where these batik cloths were produced although it is most likely that they were made by the

⁶² In the nineteenth century, one of the most commonly used fabric for the *baju panjang* in the Straits Settlements was commercially produced block-printed batik cotton from the north coast of Java. From the evidence of surviving examples, these cloths were specifically made to be cut and tailored into garments... To judge from extant examples and photographs, this cloth was exported in large quantities to the Straits Settlements and to Sulawesi and seems to have been favoured only by the Peranakan Chinese in these regions (Peter Lee, 2014a: 126-127).

enterprising batik producers of North Coast Java. Hardly any authors mention the early batik *baju panjang*, although Khoo does state, “*baju panjang*, made of typical Javanese batik cloth” (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 209) but tug in the caption of a picture. Lee did more research on this but he too was unable to identify exactly where this batik cloth was made and indicates that it was likely from along the north coast, from Batavia to Lasem.

By contrast, *baju kurong*, another type of top worn by the Javanese *Peranakan* as well as by other ethnic groups in the Malay Archipelago, was not worn by *Nyonyas* in the Straits. As mentioned earlier, it is a longer version of the earlier short *baju* (Figure 9). *Kurong* means enclosed in Malay and this name does justice to this top, as there is no front opening but a V-shaped opening for the head, and it reaches down to the thigh. The *baju kurong* was not adopted by *Nyonyas* in the Straits possibly due to the fact that at the time when the *Nyonyas* became “free women” or ‘married women of some standing’, the *kebaya* was chosen to display their “free women” status. It seems like the *baju kurong* was excluded at an earlier time for purposes of differentiation and that that tradition lives on.

Having discussed the *baju panjang* worn by *Nyonyas*, it is necessary to mention the accessories that finished off the style. *Baju panjang* could not go without *kerosang*, the set of three brooches that functioned as buttons. The *sarong*, on the other hand, needed a metal belt to hold it securely in place. On that note, I proceed to examine the *Kerosang* and metal belt.

Kerosang

Kerosang, the jewellery used to secure, as well as adorn, the front hems of the *baju panjang* always comes in a set of three. The *kerosang* shows obvious European connections, since using brooches or even diamonds for jewellery has been a long tradition in Europe.⁶³ The origin can be traced through linguistic links as the term *kerosang* is derived from Portuguese. As Lee reminds us, in the Portuguese dialect spoken in Malacca (*Kristang*), *korsang* and *korasang* are the terms for ‘heart’, *coracao* being the modern Portuguese word (Peter Lee, 2014a: 209). This fits well as most *kerosang ibu* are heart-shaped design. Whatever their origin, *kerosang* have been associated with *kebaya* or *baju panjang* from early times.

⁶³ According to Lee, “In general, techniques and motifs [of *kerosang*] have European origins, transmitted via India and Sri Langka to the Malay Archipelago, as well as Chinese, Malay, Indian and Sinhalese sources” (Peter Lee, 2014a: 209).

Without such brooches, the *Nyonyas* could not fasten their *baju panjang* that was tailored without buttons. Furthermore, the use of jewellery signifies a certain status, perfectly suitable for the “free woman” of some standing. Earlier designs include three identical, ring-shaped brooches or a large heart shape brooch and two circular ones (figure 19). This flamboyant *kerosang* is also called *kerosang thoe* with the prominent heart shape as the mother brooch or *ibu* in Malay, usually with the tips slanted to the left towards the heart of the wearer. It is pinned at the top of the *baju panjang* neckline and followed by twin circlets or *anak* in Malay.



Fig. 19: *Kerosang*, Straits Settlements, late 19th to early 20th century. Gold, diamond. Peranakan Museum, Singapore (Peter Lee, 2014a: 209).

Other designs include identical leaf shapes, star shapes and floral shapes, some with precious and semiprecious stones mounted on them including diamonds, *intan*, pearls and so on, and some are connected with a chain and called *kerosang rantai* or chained *kerosang*. The chain that connects them can be a simple single chain, a broad flat decorated chain or a triple patterned chain. Some brooches, especially the star or *bintang* shape, can be unhooked from the chains and used as single brooches (figure 20). Diamonds were widely used on the *kerosang* settings though other gemstones or semiprecious stones were used too. The best and most brilliant diamond is called ‘*berlian*’ in Malay. However, this old type of diamond does not sparkle as much as modern diamonds due to fewer facets being cut to reflect light. Another lower quality diamond stone which is normally cut off flat or in

irregular shapes is known as '*intan*' in Malay. Both *berlian* and *intan* were used in *Baba* Malay while Penang *Nyonyas* use the *Hokkien* term, '*suan phuay*' for *intan*, literally meaning 'diamond skin'.

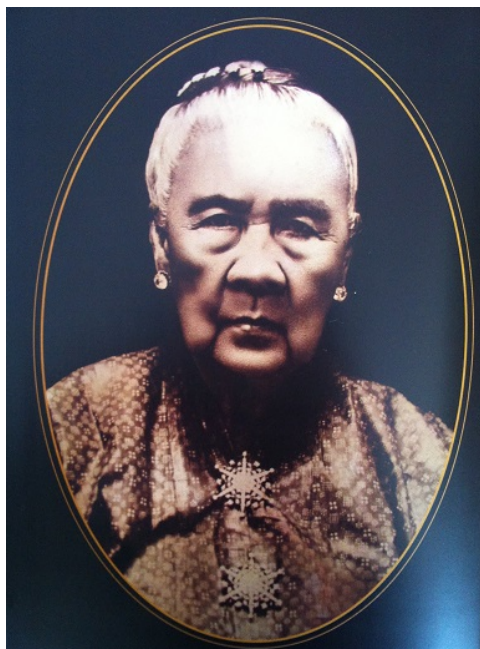


Fig. 20: Madam Lee Cheng See (1850-1930). She is wearing a batik *baju panjang* with a set of *kerosang bintang* (Tong, 2014: 68).

Although *kerosang* signify Portuguese influence, it is perceived as 'local' as much as *baju panjang* is despite being of Islamic origin. It appears to be a local invention combine the *baju panjang* of Islamic origin with the *kerosang* of European influence. Consequently, this 'dress style' is essentially 'local' and *kerosang* should be considered a part of 'local dress style'.

Metal Belt and Buckle

The *Nyonyas* used metal belts to hold the sarong on their waists. Many of the belts and buckles were made of silver, although other metals were used including gilded silver and reddish gold alloy commonly called *suasa* in the Straits, which gets its reddish colour from the copper content. The very wealthy Straits Chinese had belt buckles made of gold although not many survive to this day.

There is no standard length for the belts they were usually made to order and the width varied from 3 cm to 5 cm. The typical *Nyonya* belt was a flexible band comprising several hundred interlocking rings (figure 21, left). Some belts are overlaid at regular interval with

pieces of rosette or other geometric ornaments, usually individually hand crafted and soldered onto the surface of the belt of interlocking silver ring (figure 21, right). Other designs include links of various shapes in a single design arranged to form a regular pattern and joined by the loops. The belts usually have a hook or hooks at each end for attaching the buckle called *pending*. Typical *Nyonya pending* closely resemble those of Malay origin, which is ogival in shape. Ho gives us several examples of “ogival-shaped buckle of Straits Chinese workmanship sports a pronounced convex surface [instead of flat] after the manner of old Malay-Sumatran buckles” (Ho, 2008b: 95). Figure 22 shows some frequently seen ogival shaped buckles with motifs consisting of phoenixes, chi-lings and peony blossoms, executed in chased and *repousse* work.

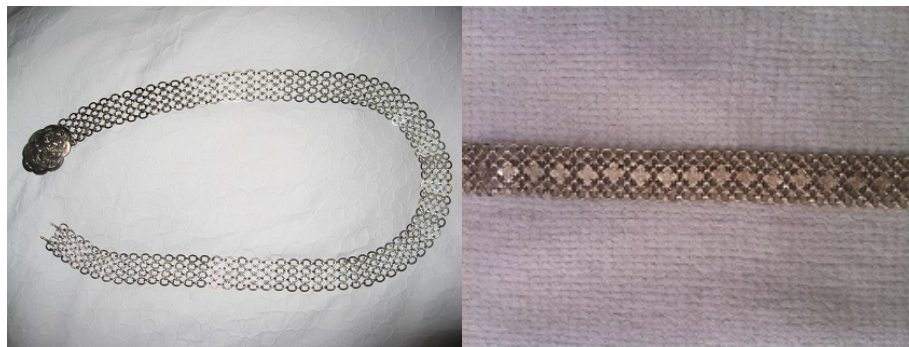


Fig. 21: Silver belts (courtesy of LeeChoon Chee and Thienny Lee).



Fig. 22: Metal belt buckles with motifs of phoenixes, *kilin* (mythical animal, lion dog) and peony blossoms (Ho, 2008b: 97).

Another type of belt is made of several silver wires twisted into thicker ropes combined in parallel to the desired width and is held together by sliding the square silver plaques. This type was however not popular among the *Nyonyas*, instead they were meant for the Chinese and other indigenous native tribes in Borneo. In fact, according to Ho (2008b), many of these were not made in the Straits Settlements but were made by Chinese silver smiths in Sarawak, (Borneo) and such squarish buckles were particularly popular with Iban and other well-to-do tribal chiefs from the interior of Sarawak. The large squarish buckles seem to bear “no evidence of old Malay influences either in shape of these articles or in the contents of the ornamental motifs” (Ho, 2008b: 95).

Through H. Ling Roth’s (2013) research first published in 1910, we have illustrations of sixteen belt buckles which were individually identified as originating in states in the Malay Peninsula like Perak and Pahang but the users or owners of the buckles were not specified, except for a few which he specifically identified as Chinese because of their typical Chinese motifs. In sum, the metal belts that the *Nyonyas* used were stylistically ‘local’ and

specifically 'Malay' but somewhat modified by including Chinese motifs. Further discussion of what constitutes Chinese motifs is found in Chapter Four.

Having taken into consideration the *kerosang* that held the *baju panjang* in place and the metal belts that held the sarongs, the discussion of local dress style remains incomplete without a discussion of the local knotted hairstyle, as was already observed by Wang Dayuan in fourteenth century Temasek.

Local Hairstyles

Visual images of the *Nyonyas* captured in photographs or paintings reveal that *Nyonyas* never wore their hair loose. Their hair was always in the tight knots known as *sanggul* in Malay and *Baba Malay*. It was common for *Nyonyas* to apply coconut oil and ghee to their hair in the nineteenth century to ensure it remained upswept and shiny. It seems that some *Nyonyas* only let their hair down when they washed it and often slept with hair intact and tied in a bun on a rectangular porcelain headrest to keep their hairdo from spoiling. Visual images of *Nyonya* hairstyles in profile or full view are lacking. In most cases, we only see the front part of their hair with hairpins visible but not the back of the hair. There are some exceptions in photographs taken where a *Nyonya* is positioned in front of a mirror to show off the back of her dress, but that does not come until the early twentieth century when hair was cut shorter and decoration less elaborate.

Through oral and some written sources (see Tong, 2014; Peter Lee, 2014a: 261) we know that *Nyonyas* of the mid to late nineteenth century kept their tresses up to waist length, twisted or plaited and wound up into tight knots and secured with hair pins in a similar way to local women. However, slight differences can be traced, for example Malay women had their bun positioned on the bottom part of the head (figure 9) while the *Nyonyas* put their bun close to the crown so it was visible from the front. Another variant of this local hairstyle was that *Nyonyas* swept up their hair on the side to form what was called "*ayam*

mengeram” or brooding hen (figure 23). According to Michael Cheah (2015), this was to create the impression of a heart-shaped face instead of the usual oval shape.⁶⁴



Fig. 23: A *Nyonya* in Singapore, knotted hair with three hairpins to form the ‘*sanggul tiga bintang*’, the side is swept up in what was called *ayam megeram* or brooding hen, ca. 1860s (Peter Lee, 2014a: 139).

Hairpins or *cucuk sanggul* in *Baba Malay* and *chiam mah* in Penang Hokkien were used to secure the hair bun. The hairpins are long and tapered, often coming in sets of three, five, six, seven or nine in graduating lengths and sizes. The usage of hairpins helped to identify *Nyonyas* from different locations. For instance, Penang *Nyonyas* preferred to use a greater number of hairpins, up to five, six, seven or nine; on important occasions fake or fresh jasmine buds were strung together to form a delicate crepe hair decoration which appears tiara like in photographs if viewed from the front (figure 24). *Nyonyas* in Melaka and Singapore, on the other hand, often used three hairpins and put their hair in a style called *sanggul tiga bintang* in *Baba Malay*, which means a hair bun with three stars (figure 23). The type of hairpin with a scooped knob is known as *korek kuping* in *Baba Malay*, which literally

⁶⁴ Personal communication (2015).

means earpick, as they resemble the tool used for such purpose. It seems that women in Riau also wore their hairstyle in this *sanggul tiga bintang* (Tong, 2014: 106).



Fig. 24: Penang Nyonya, knotted hair decorated with Jasmine buds and create a tiara like hair decoration, early twentieth century (Tong, 2014: 67).



Fig. 25: Penang Nyonya in *sanggul telefon*, (Tong, 2014: front cover).

Moving towards the twentieth century, hair became shorter while buns became smaller and simpler and it was then called *sanggul siput* or snail bun with fewer or no hairpins. Perhaps the last evolution of hairstyle derived from the local knotted bun is the one called *sanggul telefon* literally meaning *telephone bun* as a bun if formed on each side of the ear resembling an old telephone, accompanied by a wavy fringe on the forehead (figure 25). This hairstyle appeared on the crowns of *Nyonyas* in around the 1920s, way before Princess-Leia popularised it on Star Wars! Thereafter hair was cut and permed in western style by the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Even though the knotted hair style was common in the archipelago, it is clear that the *Nyonyas* made it their own. In particular, the style in which the hair at the side of the head was swept up in the '*ayam mengeram*', which is one of the most distinctive features to help identify the *Nyonyas*. Penang *Nyonyas* went even further with jasmine buds at the base and this became quintessential Penang *Nyonya* style. With that, I now make some concluding remarks on how *Nyonyas* managed to make a distinctive style of their own within the scope of local dress style.

Conclusion

The discussion of local dress style in this chapter shows that by taking on this style, *Nyonyas* portrayed themselves as 'local' women of the archipelago. From the *baju panjang* to the sarong, the metal belts, *kerosang* and their knotted hairstyle, the *Nyonyas* made it clear that they identified themselves with the land they lived in.

The foremost influence in this dress style came from Java, particularly in the various applications on batik that were produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java. Nevertheless, the influence of the Bugis, Malay and Riau can also be observed. In general, the *Nyonyas* only wore a small selection of all the possible dress items available to local women in the archipelago. This suggests that the *Nyonyas* took the matter of their identities, visually at least, into their own hands. It was within their control to choose what was and was not suitable to wear and as this chapter shows, this decision was not one of individual preference but a collective decision. Sarongs were the most popular hip wrapper among

Straits Chinese *Nyonyas*. Eventhough a majority of the batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* were made in Java but the batik *kain panjang* that was abundantly produced in Java never did enter their wardrobe in any significant way. The exclusion of *kain panjang* is a direct influence of local Malays in Peninsula Malaya and this reveals their specific origin as inhabitants of the Straits. However, by not using *selendang*, which were used by Malays in the Peninsula, the *Nyonyas* indicated their religious position as non-Muslims who followed their men in the cult of ancestor worship. Instead, *saputangan* or handkerchiefs were used as a sort of replacement for the *selendang*. The earlier influence of checked cloths used for sarong and *baju panjang* as well as the batik *baju panjang* suggests connections with the inhabitants of Sulawesi, particularly the Bugis. This chapter demonstrates that the *Nyonyas* made this local dress style their own. Although the influences came from various ethnicities, none of the ethnicities were a dominant feature in their local dress style.

Having said that, this local dress style could have made the *Nyonyas* unidentifiable amongst other local women particularly to an unlearned eye to which they would appear to be like any other local women in the archipelago. In this circumstance, both the “reject notion of fundamental sameness” or “weak conceptions” as well as the “strong conceptions” of identity could be used simultaneously to identify the *Nyonyas*. Using the “weak conceptions”, I identify *Nyonyas* by asking ‘who were not *Nyonyas*’ instead of asking ‘who were *Nyonyas*’. As such, those who wore *selendang*, *kain panjang* and *baju kurong* can be excluded from identification as *Nyonyas*. And we can further narrow down this group by using ‘strong conceptions’ of identity, that is by taking common aspects of their dress into consideration. For instance, *Nyonyas* of the Straits can be identified from the larger *Peranakan* Chinese community in the archipelago because they wore *baju panjang* made of batik and only wore sarongs as hip-wrappers. This strategy shows that both the “weak conception” and “strong conception” are workable on a majority basis, as there must be some anomalous cases that could not be included.

To further deploy the “strong conceptions” of identity, I move on to another common aspect that could be observed in *Nyonya* dress, namely the Chinese elements. In contrast to their *Baba* men of the mid to late nineteenth century who wore their hair in the Chinese queue and dressed in Chinese style to fully present themselves as ‘pioneer Chinese settlers’, or the later ‘Straits Chinese’ who wore the western suit, I argue that the *Nyonyas* did not

present themselves as the Straits Chinese women, visually at least, until much later. And this chapter sets the foundation for this argument by showing that in this local dress style, the *Nyonyas* were not portraying themselves as 'Chinese' or 'Straits Chinese' for that matter. If we refer back to chart 1 in Chapter One, the *Nyonyas* stood in the green circle when this local *baju panjang* and sarong was worn. In other words, their hybrid visual identities that represented by their dress styles were locally based. By putting up this style, the *Nyonyas* had chose their 'base' or "stable' identities" as the local woman in the visual sense. However, due to their association with Chinese men as their spouses, fathers or male ancestors, the *Nyonyas'* visual identities were transformed from a variety of local backgrounds, Javanese or Bugis for instance, to a single identity as *Nyonyas*. This was achieved by displaying their connection with the Chinese men through Chinese elements. On this note, we proceed to the next chapter to examine the Chinese elements that bound the *Nyonyas* closer to each other and to their men, *Babas*. This Chinese foreign element is represented by the pink section that intersects with the green circle in chart 1.

Chapter Four: Chinese Aesthetics in *Nyonya* Dress

The previous chapter demonstrated that *Nyonyas* expressed their local origin by wearing local dress style. To further pursue the “strong conception” of identification, I investigate other common elements of *Nyonya* dress that are distinctive to *Nyonyas*, namely the Chinese elements. The existence of these Chinese elements reveals the *Nyonyas*’ Chinese sense of aesthetics that bound the *Nyonyas* together and to the *Babas*. This chapter aims to examine the Chinese aesthetics in *Nyonyas* dress. These Chinese elements are mostly seen in the batik sarongs, which are therefore the focus of this chapter.



Fig. 26: Left - *Nyonya* in batik sarong with auspicious Chinese motifs ca. 1910, Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore (courtesy of National Archives of Singapore). Right - Sarong, Semarang, late 19th century (Heringa, 1996b: 64).

The image on the left of figure 26 depicts a *Nyonya* dressed in a batik sarong that resembles the batik on the right, featuring Chinese-inspired designs such as auspicious birds and undulating lines at the bottom representing a snake or dragon related to rains and nourishing water (Heringa, 1996b: 62). This is a typical design in *Batik Peranakan*,

although the origin of this design is unclear, an issue to which I return in the next chapter.

As *Nyonyas* mostly used the batik sarongs made on the North Coast of Java, particularly the *Batik Peranakan*, it seems fairly straightforward to posit that the aesthetic values of the batiks that worked for the *Nyonyas* can be judged directly from what was bought and used by the *Nyonyas*. However, there is far less scholarship devoted to the batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* than to the *Peranakan* of North Coast Java and we lack sales statistics or significant catalogues of the batik sarongs that were used exclusively by the *Nyonyas*, especially in the nineteenth century period. That makes proving what types of sarongs appealed to the *Nyonyas* incredibly difficult. Fortunately, we have a significant number of photographs in published and unpublished sources in which the *Nyonyas* are captured in batik sarongs. Unfortunately, however, we are unable to see the colour schemes in the black and white photographs. To address this shortcoming, I rely on extant examples of *Nyonya* sarongs and some portrait paintings that survive in museums and private collections in Malaysia and Singapore. A comforting factor is that, in the period of the nineteenth century, the colours used on batik sarongs are predictable, due to the limited organic dyes available at the time.

I begin this chapter by interpreting what ‘aesthetic’ pertains to in relation to the ‘Chinese aesthetic’. This is followed by a discussion of the three different aspects of Chinese aesthetics in *Batik Peranakan* to show how these aspects were incorporated in the production of the *Batik Peranakan*. I then explain why these three aspects were not entirely compatible with the *Nyonyas*. Other dress items, including the accessories which incorporate Chinese elements, are also be discussed because they further reveal the appreciation of Chinese aesthetics.

Chinese Aesthetics

This section describes the concept of Chinese aesthetics observable in *Nyonya* dress to understand how Chinese elements can be regarded as aesthetically appealing to the

Nyonyas. As an academic discipline of study, Chinese aesthetics is a relatively new field, however the notion of aesthetics itself is actually an old tradition and has existed since ancient times in China, despite the apparent Western origins of the study of aesthetics.⁶⁵

Ye Lang claims that by analysing ancient or traditional Chinese ideas of aesthetics, “we will be able to develop [Chinese] aesthetics studies to a new and higher level” (2010: 112). Thus, Ye applies ancient concepts of Chinese aesthetics to modern aesthetic systems. Drawing on books as far back as *I Ching* or *The Book of Changes* which was listed amongst the five classics from the second century BC, and ancient writers from The Tang (618–907 AD), Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, he proposes that in traditional Chinese aesthetics, “beauty consists in idea-image.” Furthermore, Ye states,

According to the traditional Chinese aesthetics, it [idea-image] is the interfusion between feeling and scene that cannot be understood as separate from each other, but only as a harmonious unification”. Ye tells us that “most ancient Chinese did not think there was a material and objective ‘beauty’ independent of human beings” (2010: 113).

In other words, the ancient Chinese believed that objective ‘beauty’ could not be disconnected from the aesthetic activities of mankind, the experience of human beings could turn a lifeless object to beauty but a lifeless object could not be beautiful without human appreciation. Hence, the world of idea-image is human creations and not the physical world. However, this world of idea-image could transcend the substantiality of physical objects that “illuminates a sensuous world that is full of vital energy”. Ye uses the term ‘*yixiang*’ or ‘idea-image’ to describe the aesthetic object, and ‘*ganxing*’ or ‘uplifting feeling’ to describe aesthetics experienced by humans (Ye, 2010).

The “idea-image” that Ye proposes for aesthetics objects, and the “uplifting feelings” for human experience, are concepts relevant to our analysis of *Nyonya* dress. In order for *Nyonyas* to experience “uplifting feelings”, the “idea image” or the designs on batik

⁶⁵ Peng Feng shows us that traditional Chinese academic institutions lacked not only the discipline of aesthetics but other disciplines including philosophy, physics, mathematics and so on. In his words, “dividing organic, unified knowledge into different, compartmentalised, and fragmented disciplines is a very typical characteristic of Western modernity” (Peng, 2010: 145).

sarongs had to be able to provoke such feelings. This concept of aesthetic is also similarly expressed by Howard Morphy:

An aesthetic response concerns sensations or feelings that are evoked or caused in the viewer looking at a painting – a positive emotional response, one that can be associated with feelings of pleasure, but which is not necessary to be interpreted as pleasure. An aesthetic effect may be additional to some other kind of property of an object, for example in communicating functions or practical properties. The aesthetics may be complementary to some other kind of property of an object or necessary to its fulfilling some other function. For example, an object may be aesthetically pleasing in order to draw a person’s attention to it so that some other function may be fulfilled or message communicated (Morphy, 2006: 302).

Hence, I use the word ‘aesthetics’ to refer to something with the capacity to provoke “uplifting feelings” in Ye’s words or “positive emotional responses that can be associated with feelings of pleasure” in Morphy’s terms. Applying this to *Peranakan* batik, means that for the batik to appeal aesthetically, a “positive emotional response that can be associated with feelings of pleasure” has to arise in the person looking at the batik so that its practical function, for example as a daily or ceremonial garment, is achieved. Before I examine how Chinese aesthetics worked for *Nyonyas* in the Straits, I first examine the batik produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java, that adopted aspects of Chinese aesthetics to appeal generally to *Peranakan* Chinese users.

Aspects of Chinese Aesthetics in *Batik Peranakan*

The array of designs produced by batik makers on the North Coast of Java show tremendous creativity and they were most popular among the *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements, particularly those that were made by the *Peranakan*. *Batik Peranakan* or *Batik Cina* (Chinese Batiks), as the name suggests, were produced by incorporating Chinese elements to cater for the the *Peranakan* in Java and beyond, including *Nyonyas* in the Straits. To increase the level of appreciation for batik amongst *Peranakans* in Java, who were the initial target

market, batik producers employed a whole new system of aesthetic values in their range of batiks.

In the previous chapter we learnt that Indian textiles were one of the earliest and most significant influences on Javanese batik. This chapter, however, will show that the Chinese influence is equally, if not more significant on the North Coast batiks, and so only came indirectly to the *Nyonyas*. One important example of early Chinese influence was observed by Veldhuisen who, as previously mentioned, studied the batik of Kerek. Veldhuisen states that “Principalities patterns do not appear on these batiks” and goes on to describe four major pattern groups of North Coast batik in Kerek, one of which is Chinese influence. Veldhuisen describes the first pattern group as patterns with dot motifs; the second group as intertwining leaves and flowers; the third group of leaves and blossoms combined with a phoenix; and the last group as the *ganggeng* or seaweed patterns with intertwined sea animals. The third pattern group is of interest to us, as it definitely suggests Chinese influence given that one of the flower types on the cloths is referred to as Chinese Rose, possibly peonies, while the phoenix is obviously a mythological Chinese creature. Veldhuisen rightly identifies the “Chinese influence which has been felt on Java’s North Coast since ancient times”. It is striking that these batiks were not produced by the *Peranakan* nor were they meant for *Peranakan* users, they were in fact produced in the village of Kerek for family usage. Hence, the Chinese motifs, just like their Indian counterparts, were accepted and used by indigenous people in their textiles “since ancient times”. It is likely that the Chinese elements in these batiks motivated the *Peranakan* to produce such batiks for their own use, thus instigating the production of *Batik Peranakan*.

Genevieve Duggan (2001) examines the symbolism of Chinese motifs found on *Batik Peranakan* and exhaustively considers many motifs including geometric, swastika, lozenge, coin, mythical animals (*kilin* or lion dog, dragon and phoenix), birds, centipedes, fish, butterflies, flowers and plants, grains and seeds. There is, therefore, no reason to replicate the symbolic meanings of those motifs here. Concerning her field research on the symbolism of Chinese batik, Duggan says,

[D]uring fieldwork it was not possible to establish if past *Peranakan* batik entrepreneurs or their customers had been aware of the exact symbolism of the

patterns in Chinese culture or of their origin. Today most of the original meanings seem to have been lost. The motifs underwent a transformation of meaning and in most cases became simply carriers of a good luck or prosperity message. Although some of the informants could not explain the different interpretations of the ornamentation, they consider them as part of their culture (Duggan, 2001: 91).

Thus, we are not certain whether the *Peranakan* Chinese, both the makers and users of batik, understood the symbolism of these Chinese derived motifs in past centuries. Certainly, it did not seem to be important to them to understand those symbols, although they considered them to be part of their culture. With this in mind, it makes more sense to examine the aesthetic rather than the symbolic values of *Batik Peranakan*. This approach requires an understanding of the aspects of aesthetics that motivated the production and use of *Batik Peranakan*. To further such an understanding, I refer again to Morphy who states that,

Aesthetic properties are often properties of objects which require them to be seen in a particular way by viewers who, because of their background or personality, are able to appreciate them (Morphy, 2006: 302).

These “aesthetic properties” are what I call the ‘aspects of aesthetics’ that are needed in the production of *Batik Peranakan* in order to be seen in a particular way by the *Peranakan*, who because of their backgrounds were able to appreciate them and to use or wear them. In other words, they are needed in order for the *Batik Peranakan* to appeal to the *Peranakan* in general. I argue that three distinctive aspects of Chinese aesthetic values were employed in *Batik Peranakan*, namely the motifs, the colour schemes and the applications. As such, the right motifs, the right colours and the right applications had to coexist in order for *Batik Peranakan* to appeal to the *Peranakan* users.

My investigation reveals that the aspects of Chinese aesthetics used to produce *Batik Peranakan* were differently received by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. This goes against a tendency in the current literature to assume that *Nyonyas* wore the same batik sarongs as the *Peranakan* in Java. For example, Khoo Joo Ee writes that “the characteristic of hip-hugging skirt which the *Nyonya* [in the Straits] wears with *Kebaya* is called *Batik Cina*” (1998: 210). Such statements seem to imply that the entire range of *Batik Cina* or *Batik*

Peranakan was favoured and used by the *Nyonyas*, thus likening the *Nyonyas* of the Straits to the *Nyonyas* of the North Coast of Java in terms of their selection of batik sarongs. This is not an illogical generalisation as both groups had male ancestors originating from China and shared a similar culture and values. Nevertheless, across different geographical areas, the then Dutch East-Indies and the former British Straits Settlements, we should certainly expect the establishment of different sets of aesthetic values. Therefore, a description of how *Batik Peranakan* was made and used by the *Peranakan* is essential to understand how this differed from the *Nyonyas*. This section explains the aesthetic values of *Batik Peranakan* pertaining to the three aspects in terms of the production of batik. Without understanding the production of batik, further analysis on how it was selected by the *Nyonyas*' is difficult, if not impossible.

Motifs

The *Peranakan* in Java produced and used batiks with symbols deeply rooted in Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Although the symbols may have lost their religious and philosophical connotations, they were nonetheless an aspect of the "aesthetic properties", in which understanding the symbolic meanings was irrelevant. Needless to say, popular Chinese motifs such as dragons, cranes, lotus, fish, peacocks, bats, phoenix, *kilin* (mythical animal, lion dog), bats, butterflies, peonies, chrysanthemums and so on are abundant in the *Batik Peranakan*.



Fig. 27: Butterflies on *Batik Peranakan* (Achjadi *et al.*, 2006: 51).



Fig. 28: Embroidered butterflies on a Chinese lateral curtain, Qing Dynasty, collection of National Museum of History, Taipei (Lin, 1988: 73).

There are striking transfers of motifs from Chinese paintings, ceramics and textiles to the *Batik Peranakan*. For example, in figure 27 the butterflies on *Batik Peranakan* resemble the embroidered butterflies on the Chinese textile in figure 28. Butterflies are regarded as beautiful creatures and are common motifs on North Coast Batik, particularly in *Batik Peranakan* where they are said to signify long life.⁶⁶

The two confronting dragons seen in the *batik gendongan* (figure 29) can be found on many Chinese ceramics (figure 30) (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 225). The batik in figure 29 is not dated but is likely a product of the twentieth century when chemical dyes were used in *Peranakan* batik workshops. Unlike their counterparts, the phoenix or *burong hung*, dragon motifs were actually seldom used in batik sarongs but often depicted on ceremonial batik hangings like altar cloths, door hangings and baby-carriers such as this. Chinese figurative representations such as human forms, animals and mythical animals obviously appealed to *Peranakan* Chinese users but were certainly less appealing to the Javanese due to Islamic culture that discouraged the portrayal of living forms. It is typical of *Peranakan* batik to have very clear flora and fauna motifs including all sorts of mythical creatures. This is in contrast

⁶⁶ Butterflies are called *hudie* or *die* in Mandarin which also means “90 years old” and for that reason, they symbolise long life (Ishwara *et al.*, 2012: 51).

to their Javanese counterparts, whose approach to the depiction of animals, mythical or otherwise, was subtle and abstract.



Fig. 29: Batik *Gendongan* consisting of two confronting dragons (Duggan, 2001: 95).



Fig. 30: A pair of balustrade-shaped vases (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 225).

Batik Peranakan decorated with typical Chinese motifs was more frequently seen in the earlier *Batik Peranakan* of the late nineteenth to the very early twentieth centuries. Many were made in the older *Peranakan* batik workshops of Cirebon and Lasem. Lasem was an important port during the Majapahit era and one of the first place where traders from China settled. The Chinese batik workshops in Lasem played a major role in the development of the local batik industry and their products, known as '*Batik Laseman*'. This style became so popular that '*Batik Laseman*' also refers to batik made elsewhere but with Lasem characteristics.



Fig. 31: Batik sarong Lasem ca. 1870 (Ishwara *et al.*, 2012: 151).



Fig. 32: Batik sarong Lasem ca. 1870 (Ishwara *et al.*, 2012: 145).

Figure 31 and 32 show *Batik Laseman* made in the nineteenth century in a traditional format, with the division of *kepala*, *papan* and *badan* as discussed in the previous chapter. The top example shows auspicious Chinese animals like turtles, roosters, birds, deer, fish and crabs all over the *badan* while the *papan* features the mythical phoenix or *burong hung* design. The *kepala* is in the 'traditional' *tumpal* design but with increasingly complex detailed motifs and a variety of colours on the triangles. The bottom example features a *badan* illustrated with Chinese knights on horseback from popular Chinese folk tales and other auspicious Chinese motifs on on the *papan*, while the *kepala* is a traditional *tumpal*. Over time, the 'traditional' *kepala tumpal* design evolved into a

design called *gigi balang* in which big and small triangles appeared alternately and the space between the rows of triangles was filled in with a row of diamonds incorporating a wealth of decorative details and overshadowing the triangle design at the sides (figure 33). Many of the *kepala gigi balang* designs had auspicious Chinese motifs in the *badan* section. However, the invention of *kepala tumpal gigi balang* designs could possibly be credited to Eurasian batik makers, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. The new innovation of *kepala gigi balang* was copied and remained for longer in the repertoire of *Batik Peranakan*, particularly in *Batik Laseman* where it became a trademark.



Fig. 33: *Peranakan* Chinese style *kepala, gigi balang*, Lasem, ca. 1910 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 106).

An extant example (figure 34) made in Lasem in *kain panjang* format clearly shows the influence of imported Indian textiles. The geometric designs in the main field resemble the *patola* of Gujerat and the *kain sembangi* of the Coromandel Coast that frequently have half the *kepala tumpal* design and *papan* or borders at both right and left ends. In Java this *kain panjang kepala tumpal* from Lasem is also known as *kain sisihan* or *kain bang-biru* (referring to the red and blue colours) whose colours and motifs contrast with each other. It has one bright side of red and another dark side of deep indigo blue, while the main field features stylised rosettes, arranged in diagonal bands on a red ground.

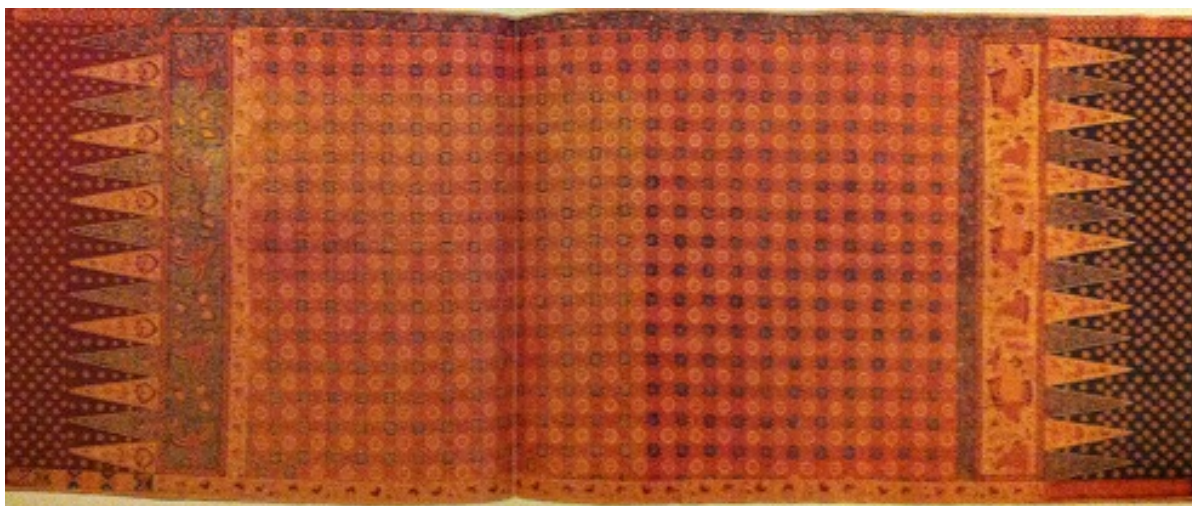


Fig. 34: *Kain sisihan* decorated with gold leaf, Lasem, ca. 1900 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 90-91).

Such petite geometric designs were popular in the nineteenth century and persisted until the twentieth century in Sumatra where Islamic influences were stronger. Many were decorated with gold leaf in Sumatra, as seen in this example (figure 34). It was usually meant for couples soon to be wed including the *Peranakan* Chinese. Chinese animal motifs appeared on both the *papan*, the stylised birds in the sky contrasting with fish in water possibly symbolised the bride and groom who were still two separate individuals, yet to unite as a couple. The fact that this type of *kain panjang* strongly resembled the earlier, popular Indian textiles almost guaranteed that it would be a commercial success amongst indigenous Javanese as well as amongst populations of nearby islands in the Malay Archipelago like Sumatra.⁶⁷ The aesthetic values of this *kain panjang* were obviously well received by Muslim populations who favoured geometric designs. By adding some auspicious animal motifs in the less significant sides, it works equally well for the *Peranakan* Chinese. In this particular case, *kain panjang* like this were similarly received by indigenous peoples and *Peranakan* as the variations in aesthetic values were minor.

⁶⁷ One of the most important centres for making *kain panjang kepala tumpal* for the Sumatran market was Lasem (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 90).

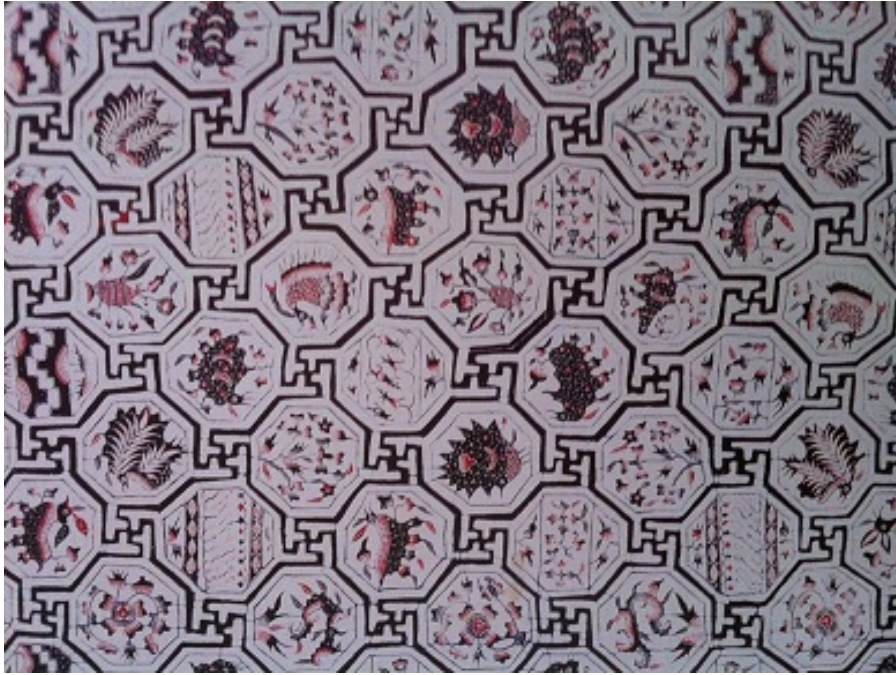


Fig. 35: *Banji* design from Cirebon, early twentieth century (van Roojen, 2001: 158-159).

Another popular geometric motif used by the *Peranakan* was the swastika or *banji* motif. Many variations of the *banji* design are depicted on Chinese batiks, both in the main field (figure 35) and as background decoration. It is a simple cross with arms of equal length with each arm bent at right angles pointing in the same direction. The use of the swastika dates back to the Hindu-Buddhist period in India and the word 'swastika' means 'well-being' in Sanskrit. However, it must have been the *Peranakan* Chinese who popularised it in batik designs, since the Chinese word *banji* is used and not the Sanskrit *swastika*. The word *banji* in Chinese *Hokkien* dialect is *wanzi* (pinyin) in Mandarin and it means 'the word for wan' or 卐. This design is not used just in *Batik Peranakan* but often appears in other North Coast Javanese batik, usually as a less prominent background. It is not surprising that the *banji* swastika design was easily be adopted as part of the Javanese aesthetic given the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of the Javanese past.



Fig. 36: *Kain panjang sisihan with lozenge design*, Cirebon, ca. 1910-20 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 93).



Fig. 37: Detail of Fig. 36 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 93).

Another geometric motif that often appears on *Batik Peranakan* is the lozenge design, also referred to as diamonds as in figure 36, which is an example of the asymmetrical *kain sisihan* format. It is also called *kotak seribu* or a thousand boxes and is exclusive to Cirebon where different figures appear in each of the lozenges, visible in the detail (figure 37). The lozenge design is often used as a background, dividing the *badan* and the diagonal sections, especially in some older flora and fauna motifs like the batik sarong in figure 38, made in Lasem, as well as figure 29. The lozenge motif decorated bronze vessels and textiles as early as the Zhou dynasty and later appeared on Chinese robes of the Tang dynasty (Duggan, 2001: 92). Although it is an ancient Chinese design, its appearance on *Batik Peranakan* might not necessarily be due to Chinese influence. The fact that this design also appears on Borobudur indicates that it was known in Java since ancient times so it could be a reverse influence from Javanese batik, nevertheless the fact that it was used in ancient China could facilitate the appeal of the lozenge design as an aesthetic agent, pleasing to the eyes of *Peranakan* Chinese. In other words, the aesthetic value of this lozenge design was most

likely influenced by indigenous Javanese but that this design was used in ancient China probably augmented the aesthetic appeal.



Fig. 38: Batik sarong, ca. 1900, Lasem (Ishwara *et al.*, 2012: 156-157).

Interestingly, apart from the geometric patterns, some mythical Chinese motifs were also incorporated into Javanese aesthetics. For example, the silk batik *lokcan* are mostly and mainly illustrated with phoenix or *burung hong*, sometimes referred to as standing phoenix or even birds of paradise. The silk batik *lokcan* were highly valued as *selendang*, a status symbol not just for the *Peranakan* but also for the indigenous population, including those of Sumatra and Bali. Perhaps there were few choices for luxurious silk batik during this period; hence the figural motifs were compromised. Nevertheless, the phoenix in silk batik *lokcan* is not the only phoenix motif that was acceptable to the Javanese, for example, the batik of Kerek mentioned earlier features the phoenix motif. Perhaps it is due to the phoenix motif being stylised (figure 39), making the wings the focal point, unlike the traditional phoenix motif from China (figure 40) where the bird shape is clear. Wings are not foreign to the Javanese, as the stylised wings ‘*sawat*’, possibly referring to the wings of the Garuda, are a bird motif from the Principalities and were used in batik all over the North Coast.



Fig. 39: Silk batik *lokcan*, early twentieth century, collection of Masina batik workshop, Cirebon (photo taken by Thienny Lee).



Fig. 40: Chinese red wedding gown with phoenix motifs in the centre, early 20th century (Garrett, 2007: 153).

Other stylised examples include the lotus flower and seed motif with curvy and flowing branches, accompanied by small creatures like birds, butterflies, and insects. Even miniature *kilin* with riders can be seen on the batik sarongs made in Lasem (figure 33 and 41). The flowing branches owe their style to the ‘tree of life’ motif from Indian chintz textiles and do not quite resemble the more realistic lotus embroidery on the Chinese textiles below (figure 42).



Fig. 41: *Peranakan* Chinese style *kepala, gigi baling* with lotus motifs, Lasem, ca. 1910 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 106).



Fig. 42: Embroidered lotus on lateral curtain, Qing dynasty, National Museum of History, Taipei (Lin, 1988: 73).

One other important motif which stylistically owes much to Chinese influence is the gradation of different hues of the cloud, the *megamendung*, or heavy cloud design, and the *wadasan* or rock motif. These motifs are recognised as batik *kraton* or the court batik of Cirebon (figure 43). They came directly from Chinese landscape paintings or Chinese court robes, as this gradation of different hues can be seen from not just in Chinese landscape paintings but on embroidered textiles (figure 43). The highly regarded *megamendung* design often comes with seven gradations in hue, while the simpler ones can have five or three colour gradations. The ancient city of Cirebon is one of the only cities on Java's north coast

where a strong court culture was imposed on the batik designs, with influences from both Hindu and Islam as well as the Chinese. Of all the Chinese elements that appear on batik, the case of Cirebon is unique, in the sense that the batik was not represented as '*Batik Peranakan*', for instance the *megamendung* design is essentially a design for *batik kraton* (court) of Cirebon. It is for this reason that I believe Duggan (2001) did not study the symbolic value of *megamendung* for the reason that *megamendung* is not regarded as a Chinese motif but a Cirebon one. *Megamendung* means heavy clouds in Javanese; hence, it is often interpreted as bringing the much-needed rain for agricultural activities.



Fig. 43: *Megamendung* design from Cirebon (van Roojen, 2001: 152).



Fig. 44: Part of a semi-formal Chinese Emperor's court robe, ca. 1850 (Rutherford, 2004: 60).

This is in contrast to the Chinese context where most of the cloud motifs, such as in figure 44, that appear with dragons on the court robes of Chinese Emperors are meant to put the dragons in the context of the celestial heaven that is high up in the sky.⁶⁸ The dragon motif is the most important mythical creature and it was the emblem of the emperor who assumed the role as son of heavens (Simcox, 2004: 76). Hence, the cloud motif is intended to resemble the sky or the celestial heavens in the Chinese context, which is quite different from the Javanese interpretation of 'heavy clouds'. Perhaps due to this different interpretation in the Javanese context, this motif became an essentially Javanese motif and was not generally used by the *Peranakan* for their batik.

One other characteristic of batiks made in Cirebon is that they do not particularly avoid the portrayal of animal and human forms. This includes Chinese animal motifs like *kilin* or lion dog, *burong hong* or phoenix, peonies and cranes that frequently appear in Batik Cirebon (see for example, figure 45). Cirebon has had a Chinese presence for centuries, especially during the Dutch period when the colonial government encouraged the rise of a Chinese entrepreneurial and bureaucratic class. Chinese communities sprang up and Kanduruan was one of the places in Cirebon populated by the early Chinese settlers who married local women and formed the *Peranakan* community (Abdurachman, 2004: 88). Many *Peranakan* Chinese converted to Islam during Dutch rule, since at least the eighteenth century, in order to escape the poll tax imposed on the Chinese.⁶⁹ Perhaps the reason that the Islamic restrictions on the portrayal of animals was not strictly followed is because some of these batiks were produced by the *Peranakan* who were nominally Muslim and had converted to Islam for convenience.

⁶⁸ For more symbolic meanings of the dragon and phoenix see Rutherford (2004: 59-73) and Simcox (2004: 74-89).

⁶⁹ As early as the eighteenth century, the *Peranakan* term used in Java especially by the colonial government meant Chinese Muslim. "Governor-General Diderik Durvaen in a letter of 30 November 1730, which mentions that the former head of the Peranakan Chinese was Toumagong Taxapraya, described Peranakans as 'circumcised Chinese' (besnedene Chineesen)" (Peter Lee, 2014a: 92). This term went back to refer to locally born mix-raced Chinese somewhere in the early nineteenth century in Java. However, this did not happen in the Straits as most of the Straits Chinese kept their ancestor worship Chinese religion although some converted to Christianity.

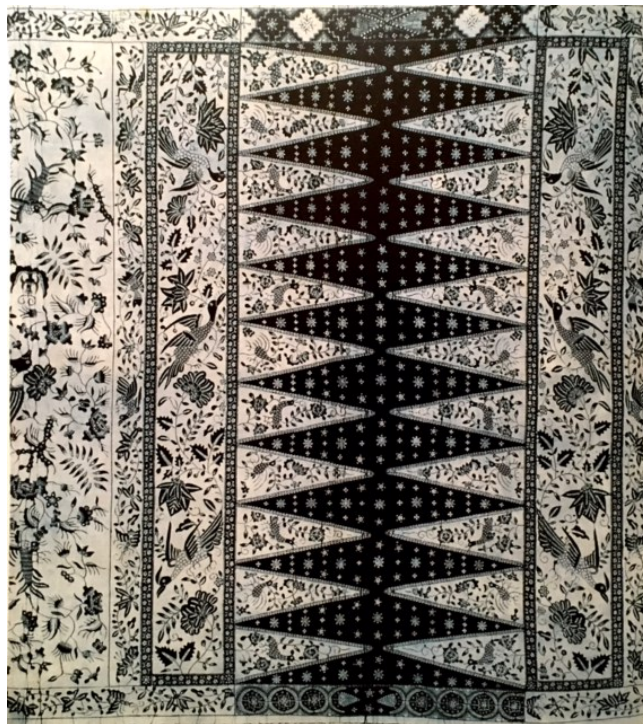


Fig. 45: Cirebon area batik with motif of cranes, heron, small birds and butterflies (Achjadi *et al.*, 2006: 120).

According to Robyn Maxwell,

the Chinese of Cirebon developed a batik style specific to the district, and Cirebon *kanduruan* batik (named after the once exclusively Chinese district of Kanduruan in the centre of Cirebon) is identifiably different from the batik made in Pekalongan for the Peranakan community of that region (Maxwell, 2003b: 265).

Unfortunately, Maxwell does not provide any reference or illustration for such a claim. With such limited information, it is impossible to ascertain the designs of Batik Kanduruan, but we can assume that the batik made outside the compounds of the palaces, that possess Chinese elements, are what was then called Batik Kanduruan, such as figure 45.⁷⁰ One possible reason why Batik Kanduruan was not categorised as '*Batik Peranakan*' may be due to the Muslim *Peranakan* being fully assimilated with the indigenous population. In other words, there was no longer a recognisable *Peranakan* community. Hence, the Chinese motifs in Batik Cirebon became one of the 'characteristics of Batik Cirebon' and suggest a perfect integration of motifs from one culture to another. *Batik Peranakan* became Batik

⁷⁰ When I visited Kanduruan in Cirebon in 2014 there was no population of *Peranakan* nor were there any batik workshops around.

Cirebon, the result of a cross-cultural aesthetic appearing in the cosmopolitan environment of Cirebon.



Fig. 46: Batik sarong, flowering trees and 'sawat' motifs in the *badan* section (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 107).

The development of a cross-cultural aesthetic is not usually a one-way process. Apart from typical Chinese inspired motifs, the *Peranakan* Chinese also adopted many ornamental motifs from Central Java, such as *kawung*, *parang*, *sawat* and *lar*, into their batik designs although in a less significant way, mostly as background. For example, figure 46 has a typical *Peranakan gigi balang* design in the *kepala* section. The main field shows flowering trees, while in between the flowers and leaves are sets of wings in the 'sawat' design, somewhat insignificantly in the same colour tone as the background colours. This example shows the perfect synthesis in cross-cultural aesthetic that worked for the *Batik Peranakan*. Such designs would appeal to *Peranakan* clients who were born and raised in Java and hence familiar with the local cultures. It was common for them to have relatives from Central Java and to understand the significance of the Central Javanese motifs.

Some other typical North Coast Javanese designs were used in *Batik Peranakan* and a notably popular one was the traditional *pasisir* seaweed motif, *ganggeng*. This is also one of the designs used in Batik Kerek, mentioned earlier, which Veldhuisen says "probably originated in the North Coast and is common on batiks from Kerek (as well as on batiks from other North Coast batik centres)" (Veldhuisen, 1993: 29). As seen in figure 47, the typical *Batik Peranakan* design of *kepala gigi balang* with the *ganggeng* motif in the *badan* is used

here in harmony with mythical Chinese creatures such as *kilin* and a wealth of sea creatures like fish, crabs, jelly fish, shrimps, and lobsters with other animals like birds, chickens, butterflies, scorpions, mammals and *kilin*, enclosed and separated by a spiraling vine of the seaweed strands. These motifs were fitting for the fishing villages and port towns of the North Coast like Cirebon where they were much produced.



Fig. 47: Detail of a batik sarong with *ganggeng* motifs in the *badan* (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 108).

The motifs of *Batik Belanda* or Dutch batiks also had a great impact on *Batik Peranakan* especially the floral bouquets, which were often used as the main motif. Initially, the floral designs on *Batik Peranakan* were not depicted in bouquet style but with roots or a line suggesting the ground where the plants grew with intertwined flowers and leaves such as the lotus motif is seen in figure 41 above. As far as plants and flowers are concerned, cut flowers are definitely a foreign influence “in Asia, plants are living beings and connected with the earth”, they were not meant to be depicted cut off from it (Duggan, 2001: 97). Common floral designs in *Batik Peranakan* before European influences included the lotus flower and its seeds, plum flowers, the peony, the chrysanthemum and the pomegranate, all of which had symbolic meanings.⁷¹ Cut flowers arranged in European bouquet style including poppies, daisies and carnations were later added to the floral repertoire of *Batik Peranakan*. This influence was primarily felt in Pekalongan, which became the most important centre for *Batik Belanda* or Dutch Batik, as well as *Batik Peranakan* of this flower

⁷¹ For the symbolic meanings of flowers see Duggan (2001: 97)

bouquet or '*buketan*' style. In Pekalongan, the *Peranakan* Chinese started their batik cottage industries later than in places like Lasem or Cirebon, mostly in the early twentieth century. Typically, auspicious Chinese mythical animals such as *kilin* and phoenixes were less frequently used in Pekalongan; instead, smaller creatures like swallows, dragonflies and butterflies in European form accompanied the European floral bouquets. The use of the European motifs in batik marked the beginning of what was called '*Batik Nyonya*'.

Many of the *Batik Nyonya* produced by the *Peranakan* in the early twentieth century were executed with background designs of *isen* or filler motifs based on patterns like dots, lines, *banji*, lozenges, rosettes or leaves. The idea of filling spaces with a variety of *isen* motifs is a characteristic derived from the batik made in Yogyakarta and Surakarta in Central Java where there is usually no empty space in the batik design. The *isen* filler motifs include *isen pola*, *isen latar* and *cocohan*. *Isen pola* are small cream coloured motifs in a coloured surround, hence their appearance provides a lightening effect on dark colours. *Isen latar* are small, insignificant motifs repeatedly applied to the background, for example, small *banji* designs can be used for this purpose. They can be executed in a single colour on a cream background or in cream on a coloured background. *Cocohan* are tiny, coloured dots and are applied using a pin to prick tiny holes in the wax layer before the batik is dyed. Intriguingly, the development of filling all the empty space in the background became something essentially *Peranakan* and was in fact, a move away from typical Chinese aesthetics which often have empty or 'negative' space to set off the main motifs, a principle embodied in traditional Chinese paintings. This development was described by Edmond Chin as "*horror vacui*" or "fear of emptiness" to describe the *Peranakan* sense of aesthetics (Chin, 1991: 29). The origin of this sense of aesthetic is unclear but it consistently appears in other *Peranakan* artifacts including silverwork (see figure 22), woodwork and ceramics of the same period. It could be due to the influence of batik that derived from Central Java or it could be a reverse influence, initiated in other artifacts and then transferred to *Batik Peranakan*. Regardless of the origin, the filler motifs became a distinctive element in *Peranakan* aesthetics.

In sum, the motifs on *Batik Peranakan* were varied and of mixed influence. Some, like the dragons on the batik *gendongan* and the *megamendung* on *Batik Cirebon*, were taken directly from Chinese artifacts; some were adapted and stylised from Chinese motifs, like

the phoenix on the silk batik *lokcan*; some developed as unique designs from traditional Javanese motifs like the seaweed *gangeng* motifs and the filler background motifs from Central Java; some came directly from Indian textiles like the geometric *kain sisihan*.

The motif is one aspect of *Batik Peranakan* aesthetics, but another two aspects similarly evoked positive emotional responses amongst the *Peranakan Chinese*, one of them, colour schemes comes follows.

Colour Schemes

The colours of natural dyes of North Coast batik consisted of gradations of indigo blue in combination with shades of bright brownish *mengkudu* red (derived from the root and bark of the *mengkudu* plant). In the North Coast, batik dyed in blue, red or in a combination of both on a white background is known as *batik kelengan*, *batik bang-bangan* and *batik bang-biru*, respectively. In the past, these colours could sometimes serve as an indicator to the wearers' age. *Batik bang-bangan* was meant for young girls; *bang-biru* for women with children; and *batik kelengan* and *irengan* (dark blue) for older women. However, these names were usually used on batiks made with this limited range of organic dyes. The colour range expanded when the vivid hues of chemical dye became available in Java and were adopted on the North Coast, especially by the *Peranakan Chinese*, from around 1890.

The cosmopolitan North Coast batik makers often chose colours for their batiks as an expression of their cultural affiliations. *Peranakan Chinese* favoured certain colour schemes and these colours formed another aspect of the Chinese aesthetic in *Batik Peranakan*. A good example is the highly symbolic red colour, the dynastic colour of the Ming and therefore considered auspicious and widely used for celebrations; it continues to be associated with festive events until today. It has a strong presence in *Batik Peranakan*. Lasem was famed for the quality of the red colour it produced for batik cloths, a shade of red known as "*abang-getih-pitik*", or chicken blood red, which later came to be known as Lasem red (Ishwara *et al.*, 2012: 137).

In fact, each town or region on the North Coast Java had its own recipes for colours and thus differences in colour were due to slightly different recipes or local water or soil conditions. According to Heringa (1993), the high salinity and iron content of the water and soil in the

eastern part of the *pasisir* where Lasem is located, resulted in the bright red *mengkudu* organic dye. It seems that nowhere else could produce such a beautiful red as in Lasem, a town whose batik making was almost exclusively in Chinese hands. Batik made in Lasem was known as batik Laseman, which refers not only to batik made in Lasem but to batik made elsewhere with similar characteristics. The characteristics of Batik Laseman include the use of typical Chinese auspicious motifs like the phoenix, *kilin* and other mythical beasts rendered in Lasem red on a white or cream background. Many of these were made into functional good-fortune cloths like baby-carriers or bridal bedspreads, as the auspicious motifs go hand in hand with the colour red for good fortune.

The recipe for this red colour was well guarded by *Peranakan* Chinese batik makers in Lasem. This may be a contributing factor to the production of the batik known as *batik tiga negeri*, or batik of three regions, which seems to have been the initiative of *Peranakan* Chinese who had interregional contacts that reached Central Java. This type of batik likely developed as an initiative to save on cost, but it resulted in a type of batik which combined the top craftsmanship and regional characteristics of three batik centres. The main drawing was applied and dyed in *mengkudu* red in Semarang or Pekalongan but primarily in Lasem. The cloth was then passed on to another North Coast town, for example Kudus or Demak, where more drawings were applied and dyed with indigo blue. Finally, another part of the pattern was applied and dyed *soga* brown in one of the batik centres of central Java like Surakarta. This process is the beginning of the reciprocal influences between the batik centres of the North Coast and Central Java.

During my field research, I visited one of the workshops that once produced 'chicken blood red' organically in Lasem. It is owned by Sigit Watjaksono (Njo Tjoen Hian) who is now in his eighties. According to Sigit, his ancestors came to Java in the 1740s and his batik workshop has been running for four generations. He explained that earlier generations used to produce red colours organically, but now chemical dye is used to produce the red. The *Peranakan* Chinese grew up in an environment that saw the colour red as festive or prosperous and thus found red dyed batik with typical Chinese symbolic motifs pleasing to the eye. The importance of red as a celebratory colour for the *Peranakan* Chinese is conveyed in this *pantun* or poem in *Baba* Malay patois:

*Kain sekayu sudah di-beli,
Kain merah di buat chai ki,
Taon baru se-taon se-kali,
Mari-lah kita hiborkan hati.*⁷²

English translation:

A yard stick of cloth was bought,
Red coloured cloths for door frames,
[Chinese] New Year comes once a year,
Let us all celebrate heartedly.⁷³

As a matter of fact, *mengkudu* red had always been popular in North Coast batiks but the chicken blood red made in Lasem had probably brought it to new heights. To appreciate more clearly the *Peranakan* Chinese preference for bright colours that was an important aspect of aesthetic, I should mention the opposite to the bright colour scheme, the sombre colours of batik *kelengan*, blue-black on white. These dark-coloured batiks were also given new meanings by the *Peranakan* Chinese. Unlike red and other bright synthetic colours, these sombre colours were not used aesthetically but were worn during mourning periods when close family members passed away.

The mourning period was significant for the *Peranakan* Chinese and required some changes in lifestyle and dress. Although the mourning period could differ slightly from one household to another, it usually lasted three years and was widely practiced among the *Peranakan* Chinese including those in the Straits, until at least the mid-twentieth century. Given this considerably long period of time, it is not surprising that batik sarongs were especially made for this purpose.

According to Vallery Garrett (1987) who researched on dress in Hong Kong and South China from 1840 to 1980, the ancient mourning dresses of bereavement in Southern China were made of undyed, unhemmed coarse hemp and were divided into five grades with different details set according to the different mourning period and the relation to the deceased (Garrett, 1987: 46). Undyed and unhemmed coarse hemp cloths were used to signify deep mourning when one cares little about appearance. Undyed cloths came to mean white

⁷² This Malay text was printed on red envelopes for sale in the *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore. I was unable to determine the source of the *pantun*.

⁷³ My translation.

cloths at some point and white dresses were usually worn immediately after the hemp cloth period. As time went on, this came to include black and other dark, sombre colours.

Things differed among the Straits Chinese where, generally speaking, mourning dress was divided into three grades: for the first year only black and white would be worn, followed by shades of blue and green in the second and third year respectively. In the Straits, photographs of the early twentieth century show hemp cloths were worn during the funerals that lasted for three days to a week, thereafter the mourner switched to black or white. The ancient colour of bereavement in China is white and it is not certain when exactly darker colours began to be associated with mourning in South China and the Straits. According to Garrett, in the nineteenth century, after twenty-one days of funeral rites, the hemp was exchanged for sombre clothes in which white was worn immediately after the hemp and there after switched to blue (Garrett, 1987: 46-47). For the *Peranakan* Chinese in the Archipelago, Lee suggests:

Blue and black probably did not become associated with mourning until the early twentieth century, as a consequence of European colonial influence. A large number of late nineteenth-century portraits in oils show Peranakan Chinese dressed in black or very dark bajus with blue and black batik sarongs [figure 49]. Batik dyed black and blue were also popular for weddings and some were decorated with prada (gold leaf) (Peter Lee, 2014a: 148, 150).

Lee is probably right about the European influence on dark mourning colours, as it was initially white for mourning and although dark colours were involved they were more like a latter addition, even in South China. As colonised subjects, the European influence on black for funerals is not a surprise. Although Lee does not provide any concrete evidence for his suggestion that the addition of dark colours for mourning happened “in the early twentieth century”, Khoo Salma discusses Cheah Cheang Lim (1875-1948), an influential man from Perak, (part of the Federated Malay States),⁷⁴ who had an important influence on the colours of bereavement. Cheah, who was born to a Penang Straits Chinese family, considered bereavement an important expression of filial piety, and reintroduced the

⁷⁴ The Federated Malay States (FMS) was a federation of four protected states in the Malay Peninsula—Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang—established by the British government in 1895, which lasted until 1946.

ancient Confucian tradition of mourning armllets in the aftermath of the 1911 Chinese revolution. Cheah colour coded them according to the relation and gender of the deceased; black armllets with white stripes for parents, blue stripes for siblings and other relatives. This was influential and was practiced in the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, Java and in many of the treaty ports in China. This development was reported in the Peking Post and reproduced in The Singapore Free Press in 1916 (Cooray and Khoo, 2015: 83, 131). Possibly the darker tones like blue then became established as a colour of mourning in the Straits. Rouffaer and Juynboll observed that in 1914, batik *kelengan* was used by the Chinese for mourning periods (Peter Lee, 2014a: 268). Hence, the batik *kelengan* that was commonly worn by older mature women in Java, was used for the purpose of mourning by the *Peranakan* Chinese.

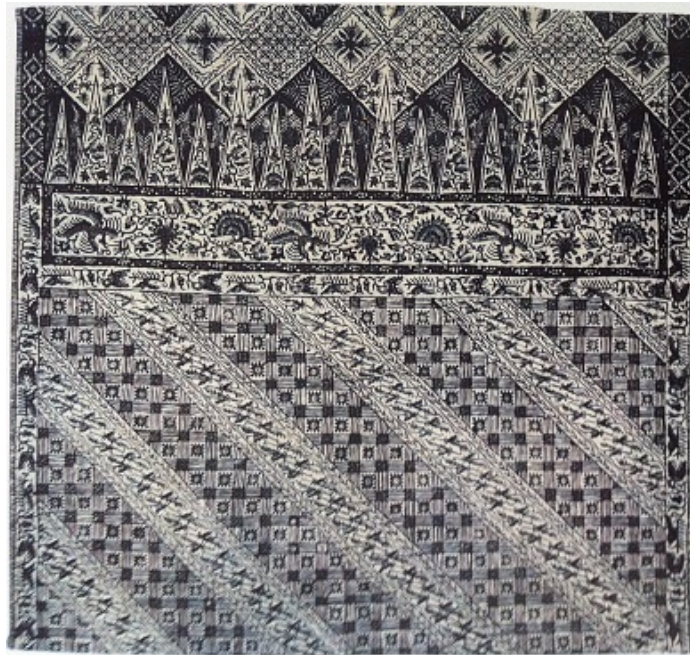


Fig. 48: Sarong batik *kelengan* from Indramayu (Kerlogue, 2004: 42).

The batiks made in Indramayu, a town closely related to the ancient court of Cirebon, favour traditional dark indigo blue on cream and were much used by the *Peranakan* Chinese for mourning (figure 48). The Indramayu batiks were distinguished by either indigo blue on creme as mentioned, or a kind of terra-otta or maroon red called Turkish-red on creme; but the blue and red seldom appeared together, therefore they were well suited for mourning and celebration purposes. This colour scheme is frequently seen on batiks made in the Cirebon area including Indramayu, especially the indigo blue on cream (figure 44 and 48).

Abdurachman hypothesises, “Perhaps the repeated use of red and blue in batik from this area was encouraged by the Chinese, for whom red symbolized fertility, happiness, good luck; blue meant sadness, mourning, and death” (Abdurachman, 2004: 81). Although Indramayu was not directly under the kingdom of Cirebon, it is close enough to have had Chinese influences which are apparent in the Chinese motifs that appear in *Batik Indramayu* such the phoenix and fan-shaped lotus in the *papan* in figure 48.



Fig. 49: *Peranakan* woman in black *baju kurong* and black and white sarong, Java, 1890-early 1900 (Peter Lee, 2014a: 148).

Having said that, we do see some *Peranakan* women dressed in black in portrait paintings who would have been unlikely to have portraits made during periods of deep mourning. For instance, the woman in black in figure 49 probably reflects the influence of Javanese culture in which dark colours were associated with old age. It is also possible that, since many *Peranakan* Chinese converted to Islam in this period in Java, the *Peranakan* woman in this painting could have been a Muslim *Peranakan* woman who did not follow *Peranakan* Chinese custom pertaining to colours. Instead, she followed the Javanese manner of using colours in which wearing dark colours was appropriate for elderly women.

Apart from bringing the colour red to new heights and giving blue and black a different interpretation, one of the biggest contributions the *Peranakan* made to batik making was the fast acceptance of synthetic colours that became available in the late nineteenth century. Their usage became even more apparent when Gouw Tijn Lian who specialised in making dyes in his batik workshop in Trusmi, Cirebon was invited in 1929 by a chemical company in Ludwigshafen, Germany to exchange and improve knowledge in chemical dyes (Duggan, 2001: 103). Initially, synthetic dyes tended to imitate the natural *mengkudu* red, indigo blue and *soga* brown, perhaps a safer approach to maintain their clientele base. However, around the early 1930s, a wider range of unconventional pastel shades became more significantly used with softer and lighter blues, pinks, greens, yellows, lilacs and oranges. Thereafter, the *Batik Nyonya* made in *Peranakan* workshops burst into full multi-coloured designs and this became an important characteristic from the twentieth century onwards.

The softer and brighter pastel palette is an obvious difference from the deep organic shades of blue, red and brown that continued to be used in the Eurasian workshops. The origin of these pastel colours is hard to determine. Chin hypothesised that this colour palette was “ultimately derived from the sophisticated colour combinations favoured by the Chinese during the *Qing* dynasty” (Chin, 1991: 30). Chin highlights the following conversation between two characters from a prominent Chinese literary work written in the Qing Dynasty, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao, Xueqin published in the eighteenth century:

“All right” said Bao Yu, “(make me) a sash fringe.” “What colour’s the sash?” said Oriole. “Crimson”. “Black or navy blue would go well with crimson,” said Oriole, “with anything lighter the crimson would be too overpowering.” “What goes with viridian?” said Bao Yu. “Peach pink”. “Mm, that sounds very colourful, certainly. “What about something but a bit more on the quiet side?” “What about leek green and greenish yellow?” said Oriole, “That’s a very tasteful combination” (Chin, 1991: 30).

Judging from the description of the colours used here, Chin is probably right as the colours viridian, peach pink, leek green and greenish yellow sound like the lighter colour shades popularly used by the *Peranakan*, particularly obvious in twentieth-century batik sarongs. it

seems that the pastel colours that became popular amongst the *Nyonyas*, particularly in batik sarongs like the one in figure 50 which features “peach pink” and “leek green”, were not an influence from mainstream Chinese culture but from the Qing Manchu people, the originally nomadic tribe from Northeast China who ruled China in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). This is because these colours can be observed in the formal and semiformal dress of the Manchu court from the nineteenth century, particularly that of women. Figures 51 and 52 show two Manchu women’s robes in light pastel colour schemes with background colours of “peach pink” and “leek green” such as described in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.



Fig. 50: Batik sarong with flower bouquet, butterfly and swallow in pastel colours of pink and green, 20th century (Achjadi *et al.*, 2006: 74).

According to Garrett, the basic garments of the working people in Hong Kong and South China were simple in construction and not as colourful as the costumes of some of China’s minority groups or the formal costumes of the Manchu court (Garrett, 1987: 79). This is

probably the reason Chin emphasises the “Chinese during the Qing dynasty”, because it was in the Qing dynasty that the Manchu way of dressing was most influential.⁷⁵



Fig. 51: Manchu semiformal robe in pink, late 19th century (Jacobsen, 2000: 501).



Fig. 52: Manchu women's informal summer light green robe, embroidered with butterflies and peony designs, late 19th century (Jacobsen, 2000: 493).

⁷⁵ Although the characters in the *The Dream of the Red Chamber* were given Han Chinese names it is clear that they had converted to Manchu due to their connection with the Qing imperial court, similar to the author's personal background. (Li, 1973).



Fig. 53: Ceramic tea tray with phoenix and peony design, late 19th or early 20th cent (Ho, 2008a: 107).

Most of the colours quoted above are unusual for Southern Chinese who used organic dyes and their synthetic equivalents in deep colour tones such as blue, red or black. Even though the darker colours blue or black were used for mourning in China at some point, this did not stop the colours being used during non-mourning periods, especially before the arrival of synthetic colours. Blue obtained from the indigo plant was by far the most common colour worn by the working class and evidenced by the blue clothing worn by the *Sinkhek* women that came to the Straits. For instance, the *Samsui* women from Guangdong's *Samsui* county always presented themselves in navy-blue *samfu*.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this colour trend was a direct influence from the Manchu to the *Nyonyas*. One source of inspiration for the use of pastel colours may have been the ceramics imported from China as mentioned (figure 53). Perhaps they were inspired by *Nyonya* ceramics imported from Qing China that became so popular that they were eventually made for the *Peranakan* market, which consistently showed a preference for pastel colours. By using Dutch or European inspired *buketan* or flower bouquet designs, the motifs of which will be discussed in the next chapter, combined with lighter and brighter pastel colours, this type of *Batik Peranakan* eventually came to be called *Batik Nyonyas* due to its popularity among *Nyonyas* that reach to the Straits.

Applications

Another aesthetic aspect of Chinese batik was the use of Chinese batiks in applications other than those commonly used and produced by the Javanese, as described in the previous chapter. *Peranakan* batik makers introduced new sizes and applications for batik, such as bedspreads, wall hangings, *tokwi* or altar aprons as well as the cloths hung in doorways or on bridal beds known as *muili*, or *chai-ki* in the Straits Settlements (mentioned in the *pantun* above). These kinds of batiks were mostly intended for ceremonial purposes so their designs drew very frequently on auspicious Chinese motifs.

To a certain extent, this is still practiced today, as shown in figure 54, a photo taken in 2012 of batik *tokwi* at the Lasem batik workshop owned by Sigit. The detail of the batik *tokwi* (figure 55) shows an auspicious Chinese proverb and motifs. These batiks were, of course, produced mainly for the *Peranakan* Chinese market and with their specific functions would have no appeal to the local Javanese even though they were made of batik cloth. However, both batik cloths and traditional Chinese ceremonial cloths are part of the *Peranakan* Chinese life, a combination of both was natural and they could evoke an aesthetic response towards those functional cloths made in batik. This confirms what Morphy says: "Aesthetics imply the existence of a scale of judgment or at least a standard that has to be achieved or properties that have to be created in an object if it is to be successful" (2006: 303). The aesthetic properties of this particular batik *tokwi* include the right motifs, a pair of magpies, and the right dominant red colour, and the right application of ceremonial cloth, *tokwi* making it successfully accepted by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java. In other words, this piece of *batik tokwi* has achieved a certain standard that can be appreciated by viewers of a specific background.



Fig. 54: Altar Cloth at the batik home workshop of Pak Sigit (photo taken by Thienny Lee).



Fig. 55: Detail of Figure 54 (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

Other applications of batik made and used by *Peranakan* Chinese in Java were discussed in the previous chapter and include the sarong, *kain panjang*, *selendang*, *saputangan* and *gendongan* were similarly accepted and used by them, although the usage was based on Javanese practices. This reflects the cultural acculturation that took place in the *Peranakan* Chinese way of life in Java, which meant that using *gendongan* and *saputangan*, wearing

sarongs, *kain panjang* and *selendang* came to appear natural to the *Peranakan*. As such, these indigenous applications of batik were also right and successfully appeal to the Javanese *Peranakan* as they had achieved a certain standard that the *Peranakan* were able to appreciate them because of their background.

Thus far I have examined three aspects of aesthetics in Chinese batiks: the motifs, the colours and the applications. I maintain that these three 'aesthetic properties' have to coexist in order for the batik to be aesthetically appealing to the *Peranakan* Chinese. It is with the existence of these aesthetic values that *Batik Peranakan* flourished and reached out to *Nyonyas* in the Straits. I now examine how these aesthetic aspects differed between the Javanese context and the former Straits Settlements.

The Aesthetic Values of the *Nyonya* Batik Sarongs

Examination of the batik sarongs worn by *Nyonyas* reveals different preferences in relation to these three aspects. In other words, what constitutes 'right' in each aspect differs between the Javanese *Peranakan*, who produced and used the *Batik Peranakan*, and the *Nyonyas* in the Straits who selectively bought and used them, which therefore had an impact on their distinct visual identity. Chin noted, "the *Peranakan* did not buy indiscriminately but with particular ideals in mind" (1991: 29); hence, aesthetic judgment began with the selection process and the batik sarongs that were bought by the *Nyonyas* can be considered to have been aesthetically appealing to them.

Motifs

As said earlier, research on the batik sarongs worn exclusively by the *Nyonyas* is patchy. To determine the batik sarongs worn before the twentieth century, I resort mainly to photographs that feature *Nyonyas* in sarongs. The photographs reveal that in the period before batik sarongs were produced by the Javanese *Peranakan*, that is before the late nineteenth century, checked sarongs were the choice of *Nyonyas* for their hip-wrapper. When batik sarongs began to appear on *Nyonyas* in the late nineteenth century, many of those batik sarongs were in geometric and *kepala tumpal* design such as seen in figure 56.



Fig. 56: Straits Chinese family, ca. 1900 (Falconer, 1995: 136).

Extant examples of the sarongs that can be clearly identified as having been worn by *Nyonyas* before the twentieth century have hardly survived or been collected. However, the visual evidence suggests that the checked sarong and batik sarong with geometric designs were much used by the *Nyonyas*. I examined significant collections of batik sarongs in individual collections, and although they were mostly not dated they certainly looked like early to mid-twentieth century pieces because chemical dyes could be detected. Needless to say, the collections of established museums like the *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore, National Museum, Textile museum, Penang State museum, Penang Peranakan Mansion, *Baba* and *Nyonya* Heritage House in Malaysia, Art Gallery of NSW and other museums in Australia feature significant examples of batik, some of which I have been able to examine.⁷⁶ However, the owners and users of the pieces in these collections are mostly unidentified so could not be used for analysis, unfortunately. The collections of batik sarongs and the old

⁷⁶ The *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore showcased a tremendous collection of batik sarongs in the exhibition “*Peranakan* Fashion and its International Sources” in 2011 and 2012. However, while details of place of origin for the sarong *kebaya* were given, no distinctions were made between those worn by the *Nyonyas* and the Javanese *Peranakan* so the collections in this exhibition unfortunately could not contribute much to this part of my research.

photographs consistently reveal that a typical range of batik sarongs were worn by the *Nyonyas* in the early twentieth century, notoriously characterised by the floral designs. Earlier pieces were either organic dyes or chemical dyes in similar shades. The later pieces, roughly from the 1930s onwards were usually dyed in colourful synthetic pastel colours. This was certainly the time period when floral designs were in vogue. Many of these floral designs were in fact European-inspired floral and fauna designs which we will return to it in the next chapter when we focus on European influences.

Taken together, the photographic and material examination reveals that certain categories of motifs were missing in the sarongs used by the *Nyonyas*. They are the *Batik Peranakan* that feature Chinese motifs such as dragons, phoenix, *kilin*, bats and so on, which is unlike the situation in Java where many of these batik sarongs were made and used. Although we certainly see some *Nyonyas* in the photographs taken in the very early twentieth century in *Batik Peranakan* with typical Chinese-inspired motifs such as seen on the *Nyonya* in figure 57 (and figure 26) where *banji* motifs with auspicious Chinese animals can be observed on the *badan* section, this type of motif was less commonly seen on the *Nyonyas*. Through these examinations, there certainly seems to be a gap in the batik motifs that were used and worn by the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 57: *Nyonya* in batik sarongs with *banji* motifs, Singapore, 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: front cover).

This reveals differences in aesthetics values with regards to the motifs used in batik sarongs between the Javanese *Peranakan* and the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. Some scholars have referred to such differences in passing, as for example Robyn Maxwell:

The Chinese communities who have become a permanent feature of Southeast Asian society have taken diverging paths, and the costume of the Baba Chinese of Malacca and Singapore, for example, has become closer to that of Islamic courts than to the *kain kebaya* cultures of the Peranakan community of north-coast Java (Maxwell, 2003b: 263).

Unfortunately, Maxwell does not give any further analysis nor provide any example on what she means by “closer to that of Islamic court” or “*kain kebaya* cultures of the Peranakan community of north-coast Java”. With this limited information, I interpret that to mean the geometric and floral designs that were favoured by the *Nyonyas* were closer to their Islamic counterparts than the Javanese *Peranakan* who had their *kain batik* designed in auspicious Chinese motifs. Maxwell rightly points out that the Malay Muslim women favoured geometric and floral patterns in batik sarongs as Islamic culture limits figural representation and this coincides with what appealed to the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 58: Portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore, 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: 113).

This preference for checked and geometric patterns seems to remain with the older *Nyonyas* towards the early twentieth century while the younger *Nyonyas* switched to the floral batik sarongs (figure 58). Nevertheless, typical Chinese motifs can be found on the accessories like the metal belt buckles used to secure the sarong. It seems that the belt and buckle used by Malays and *Nyonyas* were nearly identical in form and style with the ovoidal shape as discussed in the previous chapter, but the motifs on *Nyonya* belt buckles incorporated a variety of auspicious Chinese symbols particularly phoenixes and peony blossom (figure 59). While it is possible that the typical Malay buckles were used by the *Nyonyas* but it is unlikely that this would happen the other way round, as the Muslim Malays usually do not favour animal motifs.



Fig. 59: Metal belt and buckles or *pending* (Wee, 2009: 127).

The Chinese motifs did not come in significantly until probably the mid-twentieth century when a shorter version of the *kebaya* top began to feature embroideries of Chinese motifs. Although typical Chinese motifs were all over the ceremonial cloths that were commonly made of embroidered brocade, either imported or locally made, the use of ceremonial cloths in the Straits Chinese household was likely to be a joint decision with or by the *Babas* who were very involved in ancestor worship or similar rituals.

In sum, the batik sarongs used by *Nyonyas* definitely feature a smaller range of motifs than what were made and used by the Peranakan in Java. In contrast, woven checks and

geometric batik sarongs were the preference before the floral motifs came in vogue. It is of course possible that the *Batik Peranakan* with auspicious Chinese designs that were popular among Javanese *Peranakan* simply did not survive in the Straits or have not been studied or published. However, it would be very surprising if those *Batik Peranakan* featuring auspicious Chinese motifs that were used by the *Nyonyas* were not included in those batik sarongs collections in the former Straits if they were common there. And these motifs are also hardly seen in the photographs of the *Nyonyas*. Therefore, it seems more logical to conclude that woven check sarongs and batik sarongs with geometric patterns were the most popular motifs amongst *Nyonyas* in the Straits Settlements before the twentieth century.

Colour Schemes

Colour schemes, on the other hand, appear to have been similar between the Javanese *Peranakan* and the Straits *Nyonyas* in that both favoured the red celebration colour. In the early twentieth century, after second decade in particular, synthetic, bright and soft pastel colours were equally well loved by both communities. The preference for these colour schemes was consistent in Java and the Straits and they appear not only in batik sarongs but also in *Nyonya* beadwork, ceramics as well as the *kebaya* of the same era. Although not as popular, batik sarongs made in the darker organic dyes or their synthetic equivalents, like indigo blue, *mengkudu* red and *soga* brown were definitely part of *Nyonya* batik sarong collections. Surely, some *Nyonyas* must have favoured the darker shades, especially the older *Nyonyas*.

Another colour scheme, the black or blue on white *batik kelengan* were also similarly used by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits for mourning purposes and came to be known as '*batik tuaha*' in *Baba Malay*. The *Nyonyas* in the Straits put significant emphasis on mourning colours as did the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java. Using blue and white for mourning is consistent with the ceramics used in the *Nyonya* household. The blue and white ceramics in figure 60 were used as daily ware but particularly for funerals rituals and ancestor worship. In Melaka and Singapore, they were called "*mangkuk semayang*" in *Baba Malay* which means 'ritual bowls', they were also sometimes called "*mangkuk banji*" in Melaka as they resemble the blue and white *banji* pattern on batik. In Penang, the bowls were called "*batik oua*" or 'batik

bowl' for the same reason that they resemble the blue and white batik sarongs worn during mourning period.⁷⁷ Even though they were not exclusively used by the *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, the special names they were given suggests their evident ritual significance in the household.



Fig. 60: Blue and white ceramics, possibly early 20th century (courtesy of Thienny Lee).

Applications

In the former Straits, hardly any *Peranakan* Chinese ceremonial cloths like *tokwi*, *chai-ki*, *bedspreads* or *gendongan* made in batik were used by the Straits Chinese. In fact, as mentioned above, some ceremonial cloths were made in embroidered brocade in the Straits. Many of these were actually imported from Canton, Fujian and Zhejiang in China with the auspicious Chinese designs and embroideries (Ho, 2008c: 91). The *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore showcased a *batik tokwi* collection in 2014 in an exhibition entitled, “Auspicious Designs: Batik for Peranakan Altars”. During my field research, I had the honour to be taken on a private tour by the curator and closely examined the *batik tokwi*. The Museum stated that these *batik tokwi* were used by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java. Indeed, these ceremonial batik cloths could hardly be seen in the Straits Settlements. Hence, we could safely say that, for the Straits Chinese, this was not the ‘right’ application for batik

⁷⁷ Personal communication with *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in the former Straits Settlements, including Peter Wee (Singapore), Lily Chee, Robert Seet (Melaka), Lim Ah Han and Michael Cheah (Penang).

cloths. One of the reasons that these ceremonial cloths were made in batik was economic, for they were cheaper than the imported brocades. Even if these *batik tokwi* were made as cheaper options, they were also absent in Straits Chinese households of humble backgrounds. In fact, some households simply used red coloured cloths as a cheaper substitute, as mentioned in the *pantun* above.

Other applications of batiks made by *Peranakan* Chinese in Java that were also absent from the *Nyonya* wardrobe include those discussed in the previous chapter, *gendongan*, *selendang* and *kain panjang*. These garments can hardly be seen in the old photographs or in any private collections. No institutions identify them as used by *Nyonyas* in the Straits and there are hardly any written texts mentioning their use. Although they were popular among the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java, their unpopularity among *Nyonyas* in the Straits helps to make a distinctive identification for the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 61: A *Nyonya* in *baju panjang* and inner blouse with mandarin collar, Singapore, ca. 1900 (Falconer, 1995: front cover).

There is however a garment that developed in the Straits which is not made of batik but possesses an aspect of Chinese aesthetic in its application, the inner blouse of the *baju panjang*. These inner blouse garments with mandarin collars are visible in the old photographs of *Nyonyas* from the early twentieth century onwards as seen in figure 61.

Peter Lee (2014a: 150) points out that this short blouse “represents the influence or imposition of colonial sensibilities: the undergarment” and describes it as follows,

The jacket is completely European in construction and style: a round neck, or sometimes mandarin collared, long-sleeved white cotton blouse with a pocket, edged at the sleeves with cuffs or scalloped with some embroidery work (Peter Lee, 2014a: 150).

While the undergarment is indeed a European influence, the stand-up mandarin collars shows a Chinese aspect; as the twentieth century approached we see a great deal more mandarin collars than round collars, easily visible through the v-shaped neckline of *baju panjang* (figure 62). It is a visible garment and very handy in identifying *Nyonyas* in the photographs from the other indigenous women who did not normally wear an inner blouse under the *baju panjang*. In other words, it became an article for differentiation and identification. In Penang, this inner blouse is called *tay sah* in Penang *Hokkien* or short blouse as it ends at the hip, and it took on an exceptional twist. Although it began as an inner blouse and was initially worn only at home as an elegant costume for entertaining guests, it eventually became a fashionable garment on its own and was worn outside the home compound in Penang.



Fig. 62: *Tay sah*, Penang *Peranakan* Mansion (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

Having considered the three aspects of Chinese aesthetics that appeared in *Nyonyas* dress, we can now draw some conclusions.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the aspects of Chinese aesthetic on *Nyonyas* dress and demonstrated that the most obvious aspect of Chinese aesthetic appeared on *Nyonya* dress was the colour schemes. The frequent use of red colour in the nineteenth century and the bright pastel colour schemes that came in the early twentieth century were important in the *Nyonyas'* batik sarongs. Although Chinese-inspired motifs were present they were not significantly represented in the *Nyonyas'* batik sarong selection in comparison to what was available from the *Batik Peranakan*. Instead, the woven checked and geometric motif batik sarongs were more frequently seen in the nineteenth century, which reveals the influence of their Islamic counterpart in the Straits.

The Javanese batik technique for decorating textiles was widely accepted by *Peranakan* Chinese in the Malay Archipelago including the *Nyonyas*, largely because the batiks produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese incorporated Chinese aesthetics. However, as the discussion in this chapter reveals, the Chinese aesthetic is not always mainstream Chinese aesthetics, for instance the arrangement of motifs to fill all the empty space on a cloth was in fact, a move away from the typical Chinese aesthetic which values empty or 'negative' space to set off the main motif, a principle of traditional Chinese painting that can be observed in the embroidered Chinese dress. The intense motifs that left no empty space became an essentially *Peranakan* sense of aesthetics which may originate in the batiks produced in the Principalities. The use of lighter and brighter pastel colours in the early twentieth century might be an indirect influence from the Qing Manchu rather than mainstream Han Chinese culture. The mourning colour, white, that expanded to include black could be due to the western influence, but the addition of blue might have been promoted in Malaya by Cheah Cheng Lim and became influential in the region. Therefore, the Chinese sense of aesthetics has evolved to something that is more accurately referred to as '*Peranakan* Chinese aesthetics'.

This *Peranakan* Chinese aesthetics are manifest in three aspects or “properties” which are the ‘motifs’, the ‘colour schemes’ and the ‘applications’. The existence of these three aspects made the *Batik Peranakan* appeal to the *Peranakan* Chinese in general. However, the three aesthetic properties incorporated in *Peranakan* batik that worked for the *Peranakan* Chinese were differently received by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits, despite the fact that there has been a tendency to assume that they were the same. This chapter shows that complex variations in the aesthetic values of batik sarongs have to be explored in the context of particular societies and specific local cultural conditions.

The Javanese have generally been firm believers in the mystical qualities of certain textiles. One of the reasons the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java continued the deeply rooted symbolism in their adopted batik culture, must have due to their migration to a land where people firmly believed in the importance and symbolic significance of textile designs. When these Chinese motifs were overshadowed by European floral motifs in the early twentieth century, the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java continued to use and produce Chinese-inspired motifs in the ceremonial cloths made in batik. As Duggan rightly points out, “The *Peranakan* and the Javanese share the need to surround themselves with protective and good luck messages in their everyday life. Those messages are to be found on the batiks they wore” (2001: 91). Javanese *Peranakan* produced and used batiks with symbols deeply rooted in Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism; although the symbols may have lost their religious and philosophical connotations, they became an aspect of the “aesthetic properties” of the batik, in which understanding of the symbolic meanings are irrelevant.

In the Straits, the Chinese practice of displaying beliefs in symbols did not seem to be established in the *Nyonyas*’ selection of batik sarongs as Chinese-inspired auspicious motifs were not strongly represented in the *Nyonya* batik sarongs. The *Nyonyas* were subject to the stronger Islamic contexts of Peninsular Malaya where textiles in general and batik in particular had never played any important role in displaying mystical or spiritual meaning; probably one reason the *Nyonyas* favoured geometric and checked designs in their sarongs like their Muslim counterparts. Instead, batik with geometric grid patterns and *kepala tumpal* as well as the checked sarongs were more commonly worn by the *Nyonyas* than those with the auspicious Chinese motifs, before the *Batik Nyonya* with European floral

design came into vogue in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, the auspicious Chinese motifs do appear sparingly on *Nyonya* batik sarongs and on accessories like the metal belt buckles.

In the aspect of colour schemes, it appears that the *Nyonyas* preference for colours were similar to those of the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java. The *Nyonyas* employed the auspicious red colour for celebrations as evidenced by the *Baba* Malay *pantun*. Many Straits Chinese households hung a red cloth on the door frame as *Chai-ki* for good fortune, while some well-to-do owned elaborate valances. The mourning colours were also similar during the considerably long mourning period in the Straits. In regards to the bright pastel colours that might have their origins in the Manchu, they were most extensively seen in the Straits and most extant batik sarongs are in these shades.

As far as application is concerned, the *Nyonya* appreciation of batik cloths was effectively limited to sarongs. Unlike the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java who made and used batik *kain panjang* even added new batik applications for ceremonial cloths like the wedding bed cover, *tokwi* or *muili*, there is hardly a trace of these batik ceremonial cloths in the Straits. Many Straits Chinese had their auspicious ceremonial cloths made of Chinese brocade embroidery. These are however not applications that one could put on the body to showcase one's visual identity so even though they did represent the Straits Chinese culture as a whole, they were not specifically used to showcase the *Nyonya* identities. Ceremonial cloths made in batik by the Javanese *Peranakan* were probably produced as cheaper options; they nevertheless suggest that *Peranakan* Chinese in Java were more acculturated to the local customs than the Straits Chinese. This is also evidenced by other indigenous batik applications like *selendang*, *gendongan* or *kain panjang* made by the *Peranakan* Chinese that possess "aesthetic properties" for the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java but not the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. As such, using *gendongan* or *selendang* and wearing *kain panjang* was not part of *Nyonya* culture; it did not come naturally to them, even if the motifs, colour schemes and sometimes the silk materials would have appealed to them but the application was not right to be included in their daily wear. Instead other applications like the short inner garment, '*baju dalam*' or '*tay sah*' added a Chinese element, the mandarin collar, especially in Penang where this inner garment became the outer blouse. In Penang, the

Nyonyas did indeed appear to absorb more Chinese elements than the *Nyonyas* in Melaka and Singapore. Apart from the dress, the Penang *Babas* and *Nyonyas* speak a variant of *Hokkien*, a hybrid dialect adapted from a dialect originating in Fujian province, instead of the *Baba* Malay spoken among the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Melaka and Singapore.

Clearly, not all *Batik Peranakan* produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese possessed the aesthetics properties that the *Nyonyas* sought. In short, of the three *Peranakan* Chinese aesthetic properties that were required by the *Peranakan* Chinese in Java, only one property heavily coincided with the taste of the *Nyonyas*, that is the colour schemes. That Chinese motifs and Chinese applications were not well represented amongst the *Nyonyas* suggests that the *Nyonyas'* connection with their Chinese male ancestors were weak in the nineteenth century. Not only were they in local dress style but unlike their counterparts in Java, their aesthetic sense was heavily 'local' too, although we cannot deny that there were some Chinese aesthetic values at work. Evidently the Chinese ethnicity revealed in the Chinese Jacket of the *Baba* was hardly visible in the *Nyonyas'* local dress style before the twentieth century, particularly in Melaka and Singapore.

Moving towards the twentieth century, the most popular motifs in batik sarongs were the European floral designs and these became the dominant designs used by the *Nyonya*. The range of batiks favoured by the *Nyonyas*, eventually known as '*Batik Nyonya*' are, as Kerlogue describes, "European style" due to the Europeanised floral and fauna motifs. On this point, I move on to examine the European influences on *Nyonya* dress which is another foreign element that appear in local dress style which include the Europeanised *Batik Nyonya*, lace kebaya and slip-in shoes. This Western foreign element is represented by the blue section that intersects with the green circle in chart 1. Other local inventions in hybrid dress styles, the Chinese hybrid dress style represented by the pink circle and Western hybrid dress style represented by the blue circle are also touched upon in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: European Connections and Fashions

In the previous chapter I examined the aspects of Chinese aesthetic in *Nyonyas* dress and demonstrated that the most obvious was the colour schemes. I have shown that their shared sense of aesthetics with the Javanese *Peranakan* was not strong as far as the Chinese element went. Moving towards the twentieth century, the situation changed, there was a revolutionary transformation of the sarong *kebaya* worn by the *Nyonyas* which also had its beginning in Java. This transformation involved European elements and shows another foreign intrusion to the local sarong *kebaya*. Many *Nyonyas* in the Straits were attracted to these European elements, resulting in a groundbreaking new look among the *Nyonyas*, especially the then younger ones.



Figure 63: Penang *Nyonya* in Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, early twentieth century (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 207)

The phenomenon of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* began with the European motifs, particularly floral motifs and they were very much seen in *Nyonyas'* batik sarongs in the

early twentieth century. It reached a stage where these motifs nearly completely took over the motifs of the batik sarongs that were worn by the *Nyonyas*, as can be seen in many photographs taken in that period such as figure 63. The European style floral designs were initiated in the Eurasian batik workshop and was imitated in the *Peranakan* workshops. The batik with Europeanised floral (and fauna at times) designs were termed *Batik Nyonya* due to its popularity among the *Nyonyas*. The European influence expanded to include the Europeanised white lace *kebaya* and was completed by embroidered and beaded shoes that took the form of the European mule shoes (figure 63).

In this chapter I ask how did these European elements play a role in expressing the *Nyonyas'* identities of being the 'Straits Chinese women' in the 'British' Straits Settlements. The *Nyonyas* did not seem to have any connection with their colonial rulers in the nineteenth century when they were clad in their old dress style of *baju panjang* and checked sarongs. In this Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, the *Nyonyas* began to foster a relationship with their European colonial strata of society. It is the aim of this chapter to understand the rise of this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* and the factors that led to its popularity among the *Nyonyas* in the Straits.

In order to understand the situation in the Straits, I first explore the situation in Java where this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* began. In this chapter I will demonstrate that the *Nyonyas* shared the same preference with the Javanese *Peranakan* in the European elements in the sarong *kebaya*. Understanding the origins of the dominant form of dress of the *Peranakan* in Java in the early twentieth century relates to imitation of the way the Eurasian or the European women dress, requires exploring the attitude of the colonised subjects imitating their coloniser through the post-colonial concept of 'mimicry'. I draw on Homi Bhabha and others to understand the motives of the Javanese *Peranakan* in imitating the European or Eurasian women's ways of dressing. While some of the *Nyonyas* in the Straits might have been 'imitating' the way Javanese *Peranakan* dressed, the 'colonial mimicry' phenomenon does not completely explain the way this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* also got on popular in the Straits. Instead I will discuss how the concept of fashion might better explain the situation in the Straits.

The following discussion looks at *Batik Belanda* or Dutch Batik and how their designs were copied in *Batik Peranakan*, a crucial step in identifying the change of direction of *Batik Peranakan* from Chinese-inspired to Western-inspired which in turn helps to explain the process of Europeanisation amongst the *Nyonyas*. The development of the lace *kebaya* that began in Java had a strong impact on the *Nyonyas* in the Strait. The *Nyonyas'* shoes that complete the role in Europeanised the *Nyonyas* will also be examined. Other contemporary styles of fashions worn by *Nyonyas* will be included in the analysis.

Mimicry in the Colonies

In this section, I examine the situation in Java where the *Peranakan* as colonial subjects in Java imitated the way their colonisers dressed. This attitude is essential to understand as it led to the changing look of the *Peranakan* that was followed by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. This investigation parallels what Lukman et al. (2013) argue about that the *Kebaya Encim*, or the *kebaya* of the *Peranakan* women in the Indies, which they see as a phenomenon of mimicry in the Dutch East Indies. I however consider such mimicry as part of a bigger picture, include not just the *Kebaya Encim* but also the phenomenon of *Batik Nyonya* as well as the mule shoes, a style of shoe that is backless and often closed-toed, originated in Europe. This is because without such mimicking behaviour, the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* would not have made it into *Nyonyas'* wardrobe in the Straits.

'Mimicry' in Biology refers to the imitation of one species by another. In post-colonial studies, 'mimicry' is considered to be a series of unsettling imitations that are characteristic of colonial cultures (Kumar, 2011: 119). In other words, the colonised societies imitate the language, dress, politics or cultural attitude of their colonisers. Bhabha suggests that, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 2004: 122). According to Amardeep Singh, "in the context of colonialism, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behaviour: one copies the person in power because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity" (Singh, 2009: 1). In post-colonial theory, mimicry has

come to describe the ambivalent relationship between coloniser and colonised which is an unwelcome aspect of colonial discourse for the coloniser. According to Ashcroft et al., “When colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to mimic the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000: 139). This is because “mimicry is never far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics” (ibid). In other words, mimicry displays the uncertainty of colonial dominance in its control of the behaviour of the colonised.

In the case of Java, the colonial Dutch put up a law to prohibit the colonised subjects from copying the way the Europeans dressed. The nineteenth-century ordinance issued by the colonial government in 1872 prohibited anyone appearing in public dressed none other than their own ethnic cloths, to keep the different racial and religious groups in their places, that is to stop them mimicking the coloniser (Achjadi *et al.*, 2006: 29). The women who held European status due to their marriage to Dutch men were required by the colonial law to be seen in Western frocks in public affairs while the *Peranakan* women were prescribed *baju panjang* and sarongs (ibid). This ordinance also served to overturn the situation of the local Eurasian women who held European status to present themselves as such. The local Eurasian women were wearing the sarong *kebaya* long before the ordinance was established, not just in the private sphere but also in the public spaces. This was particularly well documented during the five years of British interregnum from numerous European visitors between 1811 and 1816. For instance, for Lord Minto, who accompanied Stamford Raffles during the British Interregnum, wrote of Batavia’s ladies with European status who were presented to him at a ball:

An elderly Batavian lady’s upper garment is a loose coarse white cotton jacket fastened nowhere but worn with the graceful negligence of pins and all other fastenings or constraints of a Scotch lass, an equally coarse petticoat, and the coarsest stockings, terminating in wide, thick-soled shoes... (Taylor, 1983: 98).

The visiting Europeans often considered sarong *kebaya* as ridiculous undergarments and termed them as ‘undress’; *kebaya* as the chemise and batik sarong as the petticoat. The

Lieutenant-Governor Stamford Raffles made some attempts to westernise the sarong-*kebaya*-wearing European and Eurasian women who lived in Java. However, this effort was not successful following the withdrawal of British Government in Java. The European and Eurasian women went right back to sarong *kebaya*. The climate is certainly one of the reasons for the popularity of the sarong *kebaya*, as the European dress with obligatory corset, was not appropriate to the tropical climate.

The Dutch East India company (VOC) recruits were mostly European bachelors. Social ethics allowed the freest intercourse with slave women from the very beginning. Nevertheless, during this time, the company's position was to limit the marriage of European man with Asia-born women (Taylor, 1983: 14).⁷⁸ However, there was a shortage of European women in the Dutch Indies due to a ban VOC imposed in 1652 on female emigration from Europe, a ban that was to last until the end of the nineteenth century (Taylor, 1997b: 108, 115). The Dutch and other European women only became more numerous in the archipelago after 1870, when barriers to immigration were removed by government decree. Inevitably, many of the immigrant European men who established households in the Dutch East Indies lived with local women. Many of the wives were Eurasian women, who held European status due to their marriage to European men.

The earliest Eurasian were the Portuguese-speaking, Eurasian women, mainly originating from Goa or Melaka, the '*mestizas*', who probably reached Java from Melaka when the Dutch colonised both places. There were also the Javanese or other indigenous women who became the housekeepers-cum-concubines, known as *Nyai*, who co-habited with European men (Taylor, 1983: 71, 136). The *Nyai* had an important role in the former Dutch East Indies as the practice of taking native concubines was long established under the Dutch by the European men. These concubinage relationships created another large Eurasian population. These local 'wives' who wore local dress style acted as the intermediaries who mediated the local dress style to the European women that came later in the mid-nineteenth century and "went native" in the way they dress.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ For details account on VOC early policy, see Taylor (1983: 16-32).

⁷⁹ The eighteenth century code by Jacob Mossel, entitled "Measures for Curbing Pomp and Circumtance" issued in 1754, was an immense piece of legislation and paid particular attention to dress; dealt chiefly with

To differentiate themselves from the mass of women who all wore the same style of dress, the European and the Eurasian women with European status worn the sarongs *kebaya* with distinctive European features. At least from the nineteenth century, the *kebaya* was made shorter and of luxury white cotton decorated with lace; their batik sarongs that called *Batik Belanda* or Dutch batik were made in the Eurasian batik workshops when they were available in the mid-twentieth century, which showed European motifs such as European floral and fauna.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was imitated fiercely by the *Peranakan* women in Java. According to Suryadinata, “In 1910, the Dutch Nationality Law (*Wet op het Nederlandsch Onderdaanschap*) was issued, under which the *Peranakan* Chinese were regarded as Dutch subjects” (Suryadinata, 1981: 11). Heringa writes, “Both men and women belonging to the leading classes among the *Peranakan* Chinese adopted European dress for certain public occasions, especially after 1920, when they had been *gelijkgesteld*, or declared equal to the Dutch before the law” (Heringa, 1996b: 55). She asserts,

soon the buketan [floral] style was adopted by *Peranakan* Chinese in an effort to express their position as legally equal to Dutch... to *Peranakan* women batik cloth not only served to express class and status but also underlined the need to link oneself with dominant Europeans, thereby to a large extent pushing aside the original theme of regional identity” (Heringa, 1996b: 66).

Iwan Tirta had his share of explanation about the rise of *Batik Nyonya* with *European* floral motif:

Was it because of the equal status accorded the ‘Asian Foreigners’ with the Europeans by colonial law in 1910? It is true that of these ‘Asian Foreigners’ the Chinese began to discard many vestiges of their original culture and adopt a more European approach to life, and this is definitely reflected in the art of batik. Prior to that year, much of the

the VOC employees and “their wives and widows”, but who the wives were, was not a concern. Hence, there were Eurasian and indigenous women that possessed ‘European’ status. Realising how dominant was the local influence in the daily life of VOC families which usually involved the indigenous or Eurasian women, the last section of the Mossel’s code permitted the VOC employees and their wife on the outer office, to dress “according to native customs” but when any of these officials came to Batavia, they and their spouses had to observe the codes (Taylor, 1983: 66-68).

batik produced by Chinese-owned workshops had included almost the entire lexicon of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist symbols... (Tirta, 2006: 13, 15).

In other words, these scholars suggest that the process of mimicking the coloniser by the colonised was underway when the *Peranakan* Chinese were given the equal rights to the coloniser and were legally allowed to wear what the coloniser was wearing. However, the “equal status” can only have been an indirect consequence, since the Dutch law did not restrict the imitation of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, which was “supposed” to be worn by women with European status in private. Either the codes were poorly understood or the *gelijkgesteld* may have made it socially acceptable for the *Peranakan* women to wear them.



Fig. 64: *Peranakan* women in Java, 1920 (Kwa, 2012: 313).

It was in the context of the former Dutch East Indies, Java in particular, that the ‘Europeanised’ sarong *kebaya* was nurtured and embraced by the *Peranakan* women in a very large scale to a point that most *Peranakan* women were wearing them, regardless of age. Such as seen in the figure 64 above, a photo taken in 1920 shows old and young *Peranakan* women were in Europeanised white lace *kebaya* and the European floral motif *Batik Nyonya* with only one exception of the oldest woman on second left in the front. This resulted in the escalating production of the ‘*Batik Nyonya*’ with European floral motifs in the

Peranakan workshops that supplied to the Straits. Although the period of time of introduction was relatively short, the impact on Europeanised white lace *kebaya* was huge, despite of the fact that white was the color of bereavement for the *Peranakan*.

A factor that was part of this popularity can be considered under the concept of fashion. Veldhuisen notes that, “the idea of fashion, which in the West had encouraged consumers to cast off wearable items, was introduced into Java by European women at the end of the nineteenth century” (Veldhuisen, 1996: 43). Indeed, Veldhuisen has a point, the world had increasingly globalised towards the beginning of the twentieth century, and what happened in Europe was easily known in Asia through media, personal experiences or words of mouths. Therefore, the concept of fashion that “encouraged consumers to cast off wearable items” seems also to have become a factor at the turn of the century in Java, and may be part of the reason that the *Nyonyas* of the Straits followed what was happening in Java.

The Rise of Fashionable Europeanised Sarong *Kebaya* in the Straits

The Europeanised batik sarongs and lace *kebaya* were equally popular among the *Nyonyas* in the Straits, particularly the then younger *Nyonyas*, such as seen in figure 63. However, the entry of this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* to the Straits Settlements has a different twist. Although the phenomenon of mimicry could do well to explain the situation in Java, it cannot explain situation in the Straits Settlements alone. The colonial situation in the Straits differed from that in Java, the entry of Europeanised sarong *kebaya* into the Straits therefore also happened differently.

In the British Straits Settlements, a 1615 English East India Company edict charged accompanying European wives against their employees (Barber, 2009: 12). Thus bachelor employees like Francis Light, who founded Penang, married local Eurasian women and had many children by them, with no issues from the Company. In the early nineteenth century however, a ban was imposed on marriage to local women. The East India Company’s possession of Penang in 1786 came at the time when the old-style East India Company was in transition into the civil service bureaucracy. Singapore was founded thirty-five years after Penang, when the new law was in placed. The British Straits Settlements was formed in

1826, after Bencoolen was exchanged for Melaka in 1824, during the time of this ban. The British East India Company was particularly strict in enforcing the ban on marriage to local women during the first tour of service. The European employees were expected to maintain the reputation of white man and to observe certain social standards, those who break the code would be sacked and sent home. Raffles' attitudes on Java reflected those of his employers, the East India Company.

Charles Allen (1983) vividly writes of the British expatriate's lifestyle in the early twentieth century, describing how if a European man "went native" and lived in the local village or *kampong*, he was ostracised from the European social circle. Any association with local women would have meant loss of a job (Allen *et al.*, 1983: 64). Hence, in the British Straits Settlements there was no significant Eurasian population formed during the British time. Relatively, the British had much shorter time in the Straits than the Dutch in the Indies, meaning that the British who had local Eurasian wives before the nineteenth century (such as Francis Light and William Farquhar) were exceptional. Given such a situation, there were no leading Eurasian woman who could establish a local dress style for British women. Hence, it was not possible that the *Nyonyas* in the Straits were mimicking the British women who did not normally dress in local dress style, sarong *kebaya*.

Nevertheless, many *Nyonyas* in the Straits were well informed of the situation in Java, especially given that a reasonable proportion of them actually came from or had relatives in Java. It certainly seems that the *Nyonyas* who initiated the 'Europeanised' sarong *kebaya* were those who had such connections. For instance, Lee Choo Neo (1895-1947), the first woman doctor of Singapore who had a Javanese *Peranakan* step-mother, was one of the first to be seen taking pictures in lace *kebaya* and batik sarongs with European floral designs in her late teens and twenties in the early twentieth century (figure 65). Although there is a possibility that the *Nyonyas* who wore the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* could have been mimicking the European women in Java but this seems unlikely. Rather, some of the *Nyonyas* were probably 'imitating' the Javanese *Peranakan* way of dressing. In this sense, the *Nyonyas* might be aspired to look 'fashionable' in the manner of their Javanese counterparts.

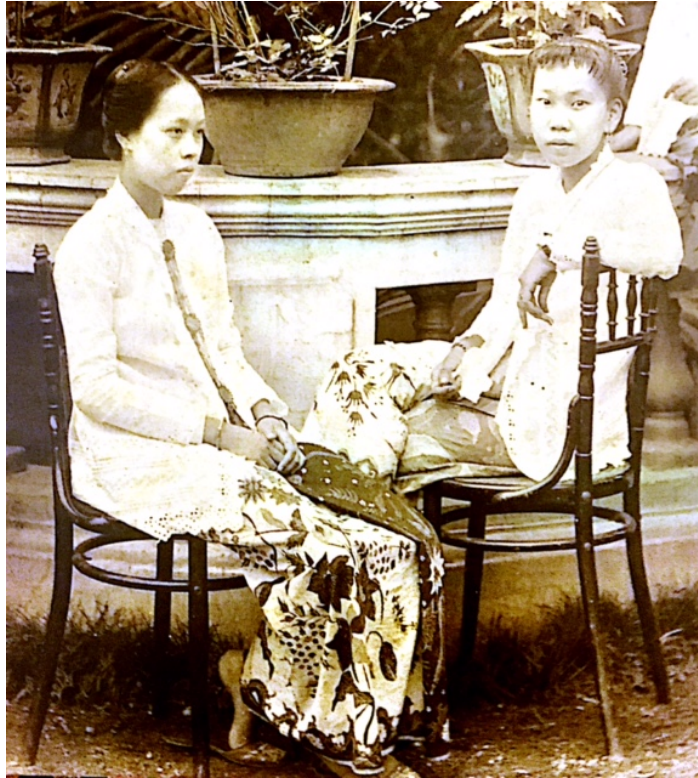


Fig. 65: Lee Choo Neo (right) with a friend in Europeanised sarong and lace *kebaya*, 1914, Singapore (Peter Lee, 2014a: 18-19)



Fig. 66: Straits Chinese family, photo taken at the Lee Brothers studio, Singapore, 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: 91).

The evidence in photographs show that the entry of Europeanised sarong *kebaya* to the Straits was not overwhelming. It did not happen suddenly nor did it attract every *Nyonya's* attention, as happened in Java. Figure 66 above shows two older *Nyonyas* in *baju panjang*, two younger *Nyonyas* in lace *kebaya* while the two youngest girls in Chinese dress style, *Koon Sah*. The women were all seen in floral batik sarongs, except for the *Nyonya* at the back whose sarong is not visible.

Nyonyas of different age groups dressed in different styles are common in the photographs taken during the early twentieth century period such as this one. One consistent feature is that elderly *Nyonyas* were not usually dressed in Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, particularly the lace *kebaya*. In fact, some elderly *Nyonyas* of the time were clad in *baju panjang* and woven checked sarongs. The younger, and most probably English-educated *Nyonyas* were very attracted to the new looks of lace *kebaya* and batik sarongs with floral motifs, particular the European floral motifs. This signifies an early sign of 'fashion' in the Straits, as fashion does not appeal to everybody, but selective groups who like and could afford to follow trends. It is hardly a surprise that such fashion started with the young and English educated *Nyonyas*.

English education definitely played an important role in modernizing the *Nyonyas*. The oldest British Settlement, Penang has the earliest established English education and it was first made available for boys with the foundation of the Penang Free School in 1816, followed by Hutchings School in 1821, St. Xavier's in 1852 and Anglo-Chinese Schools for boys in 1891. English education became available for girls in the mid nineteenth century in Penang following the establishment of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Light Street in 1852, St George Girls School in 1885 and Anglo-Chinese Girls School in 1892. In 1826, Malacca High School was opened for girl admission for the first time. English education for girls had begun in 1887 in Singapore, the Methodist Girls' School established by an Australian Methodist missionary, Sophia Blackmore.⁸⁰ When Sophia Blackmore founded the Girls' School, she had to visit many Straits Chinese homes to persuade the mothers to send their daughters to school, but it was not until the Straits Chinese themselves led a campaign

⁸⁰ The girls' school established by Blackmore was named Methodist Girls School in 1897 when another girls' school founded by Miss Eva Foster was amalgamated to it (Ho, 1975: 51).

for female education that more *Nyonyas* received elementary education (Ho, 1975: 48). In 1899, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang established the Straits Chinese Girls' School (later called the Singapore Chinese Girls' School).

Even though English education for girls was made available by the colonial government since the mid-nineteenth century, it was confined to the very privileged girls including some *Nyonyas* whose parents or other elders at home accepted the idea of elementary education for girls. It was only in the early twentieth century that elementary education became more common among *Nyonyas*. The English education brought in modern and westernised behaviours among the educated *Nyonya*. In his memoir, Lee Kip Lee (1995) wrote about his English educated and "staunch anglophile" mother (born in 1890), on how she was bothered by the politicians whose cried for independence were "disrupting the status quo and even tenor of her lifestyle" (Lee, 1995: 37). What also came along with the colonial education, was the appreciation of the colonial category, the 'Straits Chinese'. The label, 'Straits Chinese' not only made them the '**British**' subjects, but it also put them to the category of Straits '**Chinese**'. This category might not be well appreciated or understood by the *Nyonyas* in the nineteenth century, who were hardly educated and confined in their own house. But colonial education has made a difference in understanding the term and the benefit that came with such status.

Lee Choo Neo (1913) mentioned above was one of the first if not the first English educated *Nyonyas* to have published an article in English Newspaper when she was still in the medical school. In her article entitled, "The Chinese Girl in Singapore" she clearly saw herself as the Straits or more precisely Singapore Chinese girl, as evidenced by the title of the article (Lee, 1913: 562-563). This 'anglophile' attitudes among the English educated *Nyonyas* could certainly be observed through the way they dress. As a result, the young *Nyonyas*' wardrobes became crowded in the early-twentieth century, since they included not only the fashionable Europeanised sarong *kebaya* but also other hybridised Western and Chinese fashions. The change of dress styles from the local sarong *kebaya* to the hybridised Western and Chinese styles show-cased a new appreciation for their status as the 'British subject'. Privileged girls like Lee Choo Neo who received an English education at the dawn of the twentieth century was one of the earliest to be seen in Europeanised sarong *kebaya* as said,

and by the 1930s she completely abandoned sarong *kebaya* and wore instead the authentic Chinese fashion, *cheong sam* (Peter Lee, 2014a: 259). Lee Choo Neo's statement regarding these styles suggests a relationship between styles of dress and access to education. Although we should not generalise by conflating all *Nyonyas* with some privileged *Nyonyas*, her publication and dress styles certainly signified the shift in identities was underway and it was likely to be related to education. For some who were born in the early twentieth century, they might never have changed their identities from *Nyonyas* to Straits Chinese women and might never have worn the old style *baju panjang* and sarongs to present herself as *Nyonyas*. Rather, *Nyonyas* came to signify the elder women in the families, whereas those younger one were born as 'Straits Chinese'.

Connected to this transformation, was the way that *Batik Belanda* was imitated in *Batik Peranakan*, and later became known as '*Batik Nyonya*'. The transition was important as '*Batik Nyonya*' played a significant first step in Europeanising the *Nyonyas*, leading to the eventual change of visual identity from the old image of "free women" to the modern 'Straits Chinese women'.

The Influences of *Batik Belanda* on *Batik Peranakan*

Batik Belanda or Dutch Batik is the batik made in Eurasian or European workshops in Java. *Batik Peranakan* was most influenced by *Batik Belanda* through European floral motifs. As mentioned in the last chapter, earlier floral motifs in the *Batik Peranakan* show Chinese flowers like lotus, peonies, but they came to include European flowers in the twentieth century. This "European style" floral design was first made by the batik workshops run by Eurasians and soon picked up by the *Peranakan* workshops, especially those batik workshops established in Pekalongan in the early twentieth century. Gradually, by at least the third decade of the twentieth century, the batik sarongs with European floral motifs were widely worn by the *Nyonyas* such as seen in figure 67, a picture taken in the early-twentieth century. In this picture, although most part of the batik is covered by the *baju panjang*, the designs of the batik sarongs are still visible, at least three of them are *Batik Nyonya*, with the exception of that of the women in the centre and far right whose batik

sarongs' design are not clear. Here I will examine how the motifs of the *Batik Belanda* had an impact on *Batik Peranakan*, and how these two groups of batik became known as *Batik Nyonya*, meaning batik with European floral and fauna designs.



Fig. 67: *Nyonyas* in North-coast batik sarongs, Singapore, 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: 51).

The European influences on the North Coast batik suited the tradition of the North Coast, where foreign influences were accepted and translated within the existing cultural patterns. As in other batiks, the batiks produced by the Eurasian were initially meant for the use of the Eurasian and European clients. And this batik was referred to as *Batik Belanda* or Dutch Batik, although not everybody used this term, as with '*Batik Cina*', discussed in the previous chapter. The term gives us the idea that the foreign elements that appears in this range of batik were of European or Dutch. This range of batiks marked a new *Pasisir* or 'Coastal' style, and was made a few decades before *Batik Peranakan*. *Batik Belanda* is well documented compared to *Batik Peranakan*, especially through the works of Harmen C. Veldhuisen (1996), whose writing informs my own.

Two important Eurasian pioneers in batik making, Carolina Josephina von Franquemont (1817-1867) and Catherina Carolina van Oosterom, were credited with nurturing the birth of this *Batik Belanda* in the mid-nineteenth century on the North Coast of Java, first in Surabaya and then Semarang and Bayunmas. The earlier batiks produced by these

workshops incorporating some European decorative motifs with ‘traditional’ North Coast designs, *kepala tumpal*. The batiks were mostly characterised by naturalistic floral patterns with birds and butterflies, some of them clearly inspired by Indian Chintz as well as European embroidery manuals, pattern books of printed fabrics, tiles, fashion magazines and book illustrations. For example, von Franquemont held the sole right to adapt the patterns from the Dutch fashion magazines for Java (Veldhuisen, 1993: 40). Other western motifs include horseshoes, hearts, crosses and anchor as well as scenes from fairy tales like Cinderella and Red Riding Hood.

With the Eurasian involvement in batik making, even though the basic pattern of batik sarongs—the division into *badan* and *kepala*—remained, some evolvments of the format happened in stages in *Batik Belanda*. Von Franquemont introduced an imitation lace border on the lower side of the *badan*, just above the *pinggir* (figure 68). Such design in batik sarongs with undulating line in the bottom was occasionally seen worn by the *Nyonya*, for example the *Nyonya* in figure 69.



Fig. 68: Batik sarong produced by Von Franquemont ca. 1840, Semarang (Veldhuisen, 1993: 47).



Fig. 69: *Nyonya* in batik sarong with undulating lines at the bottom, 1910-1925, Singapore (Liu, 1995: 92).

According to Heringa, this design was inspired by one of the format of the *Peranakan* Chinese batik sarong in which an undulating line also appear above the *pinggir* as in figure 70. In this case, “it represents a snake or dragon, mythical animal that according to both Javanese and Chinese symbolism, are related to rain and nourishing water, both metaphors for abundance” (Heringa, 1996b: 62). This symbolic traditional border was thus translated into lace border in *Batik Belanda* in the mid-nineteenth century, according to Heringa. This however did not match with the records we have on batik. The *Peranakan* Chinese only started to make batik several decades after the Eurasians in the late twentieth century. If Veldhuisen’s dating of figure 68 is correct, that is ca. 1840, it is impossible for the Eurasian batik makers to have copied the snake-like form from the *Batik Peranakan*. It is likely that both designs were actually invented by Von Franquemont. Figure 70, also made by Von Franquemont, and dated by Veldhuisen ca. 1850, is a Chinese inspired design with the Daoist goddess *Hsi Wang Mu* on her phoenix and the peach tree depicted on the *badan*, it has the above-mentioned snake form designs at the bottom. This batik sarong was obviously meant for the *Peranakan* Chinese clientele, and what looks like the *Peranakan*

Chinese designs may originate from Von Franquemont, the Eurasian pioneer of batik-making.



Fig. 70: Batik sarong by Von Franquemont ca. 1850, Semarang (Veldhuisen, 1993: 47).



Fig. 71: Batik sarong with the bow border by Von Franquemont ca. 1860-1867 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 112).

Both the lace form and the snake form designs were copied and produced by the *Peranakan*, and it seems that *Peranakan* Chinese workshop, especially those in Lasem, continued to produce the lower lace border that became the characteristics of the batik sarongs made in Lasem. This lace *pinggir* later appeared along the *kepala* and came to call the 'bow border' or 'bow' as well as 'de boog' in Dutch such as seen in figure 71

(Veldhuisen, 1993: 45). This new type of *pinggir* is a variation from the old traditional *pinggir* of Indian tassel, sometime referred to as European *pinggir*. It became one of the features on *Batik Peranakan* that reached the *Nyonyas'* wardrobe in the Straits.



Fig. 72: *Nyonya* on the left in batik sarongs with *gigibalang* design, probably 1920s, Singapore (Liu, 1995: 101).

The *kepala* section also faced changes where *papan* was becoming smaller and then disappeared entirely. 'Traditional' *tumpal* design for *kepala* slowly disappeared and expanded to a much bigger repertoire and a series of new divisions became fashionable designs for *kepala* such as the *kepala gigibalang* discussed in the previous chapter. Although it is not clearly stated, it does seem that Veldhuisen gives credit to Von Franquemont for the *kepala tumpal gigibalang* designs (figure 68). That is *tumpal* alternated between large and small with vertical middle band of diamonds between the *tumpal*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Just like the lace *pinggir*, somehow *Batik Peranakan* continued to produce this design and it became the trademark of the *Batik Peranakan*. In fact, *kepala gigibalang* design with 'lace' or 'snake' border became the characteristics of the batik sarongs

produced in Lasem. And this batik sarong with *kepala gigibalang* at the bottom was also seen worn by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits as in the *Nyonya* on the left in figure 72.

In the late nineteenth century, Pekalongan emerged as an important batik making centre on the North Coast. There were many prominent Eurasian batik workshops in Pekalongan including those of Lien Metzelaar (1855-1930) and Lies van Zuylen (1863-1947) that started their batik making in the late nineteenth century. These *Batik Belanda* were well-loved by the European and Eurasian clients, and eventually popular among the *Peranakan* Chinese too. When the Eurasian and European communities discontinued wearing the local dress style, the Eurasian batik workshops persisted because their clientele were then switched to the wealthy *Peranakan* including those in the Straits.

The most popular batik designs produced in Pekalongan, the floral designs particularly the *buketan* or European flower bouquets motifs, made their first appearance in the Eurasian batik workshops around 1910. Eliza van Zuylen was credited with originating the *buketan* motif that had such a lasting impact on batik design (Peter Lee, 2014a: 198). The *buketan* motifs consisted of bouquets [hence the name] of European cut flowers such as irises, roses, carnations, poppies, lilies, tulips, daffodils and plant tendrils. The attractiveness of these *buketan* designs is that the flower bouquets could have a good mix of several different flowers instead of just one type of flower if depicted in a pot, for instance. Adding to the charm, these flowers bouquets were usually accompanied by some realistic depictions of butterflies, insects, tiny birds like swallows, hummingbird, some large birds like heron, storks or peacock.

At the turn of the century, there emerged several prominent *Peranakan* Chinese batik makers who began their workshops in Pekalongan area, including The Tie Set, Oey Soe Tjoen, Oei Kheng Liem, Mrs. Oey Kok Sing and Lim Ping Wie. They were relatively new *Peranakan* batik makers in comparison to the workshops in Lasem or Cirebon and their works were much like the *Batik Belanda* at the time, particularly those with European floral *buketan* design. Eventually, the European floral and fauna became so popular with the *Nyonyas* they over-shadowed Chinese-inspired flower motifs like the peony, lotus, chrysanthemums or cherries blossoms, although those did not disappear entirely. The term

'Batik Nyonya' was also adopted, regardless of the producers. Sometime used interchangeably with *Batik Pekalongan*, the place where *Batik Nyonya* were most produced.



Fig. 73: Batik Pekalongan by van Zuylen with *buketan* design ca. 1900-1910 (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 128).



Fig. 74: Batik sarong signed Oei Khing Liem, dated 1937 with Dutch popular flower bouquet of tulips and daffodils, surrounded by small birds and butterflies in both the *badan* and *kepala* (Heringa *et al.*, 1996: 160).

Figure 73 shows a batik sarong with *buketan* design made in Eurasian workshop while figure 74 also features *buketan* designs but made in *Peranakan* workshops. At some stage, the batik sarongs made in Pekalongan by the *Peranakan* workshops were indistinguishable from those made by the Eurasians in terms of motifs, techniques and colour schemes. It was not until the softer and brighter pastel synthetic colours that were popularly used in the *Peranakan* Chinese batik workshops around 1930s that we could differentiate clearer the *Batik Peranakan* from the *Batik Belanda* some of which continue with organic dyes or its synthetic equivalent. However, this situation did not persist, when the clientele for *Batik Belanda* had changed from the European and Eurasian to the *Peranakan* Chinese who favoured light, pastel colours, the batik sarong made in the Eurasian workshops were then beginning to convert to these pastel synthetic colours. According to Veldhuisen, Lies van Zuylen converted to synthetic dyes around 1935 (Veldhuisen, 1993: 97) and produced batiks with pastel colour schemes too. The Chinese flowers like Peony and Chrysanthemum were also beginning to be seen in Eurasian batik workshops following the change of clientele.

As mentioned in previous chapter, the *buketan* designs were later improvised and elaborated by the *Peranakan* batik makers as their range of batik were executed with background designs of *isen* or filling-in motifs, which is not a common characteristic in the batik made in the Eurasian workshop. As such, the *Peranakan* injected their sense of aesthetics by filling up the empty spaces into this *buketan* motifs and sort of made these designs their trademarks, particularly those works produced in Oey Soe Tjoen's batik workshop. This distinctive style became a marker to differentiate *Batik Peranakan* from those made in the Eurasian workshops. When signatures were practiced by the Eurasian batik producers in Pekalongan around 1870 like the artists sign on their canvas, it was much easier for the modern batik scholars to distinguish *Batik Peranakan* from *Batik Belanda*. This practice of signing batik was also taken up by the *Peranakan* batik makers especially among the batik makers in Pekalongan, around the turn of the century but the *Peranakan* makers used the signatures more like a company stamp for assurance of quality.⁸¹

⁸¹ The signatures appeared in the batik *Peranakan* are complicated issues and Duggan has researched widely on that. See Duggan (2001: 90-188).



Fig. 75: *Batik Nyonya* with floral designs, collection of Penang *Peranakan* Mansion, 2013 (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

This popularity of *Batik Nyonyas* among *Nyonyas* in the Straits is certainly evident. Apart from examining the photographs, I have also examined significant batik collections assembled by present day *Babas* and *Nyonyas*. Most of them were the twentieth century pieces and they consistently revealed the European floral and fauna designs. This include those owned by Peter Wee, the President of the *Peranakan* Association in Singapore. Wee is a prominent collector as well as an occasional consultant for the *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore. Some of the batik sarongs and *kebayas* from his collection were published in *Timeless Peranakan Legacy: A Pictorial Celebration – The Antique Sarong Kebaya Collection of Peter Wee* (Noelle Tan *et al.*, 2004). All the batik sarongs featured in this book are said to be from *Pekalongan*, either entirely hand painted (*Batik Tulis*) or block-printed (*Batik Cap*). Khoo Joo Ee (1998), herself a *Nyonya* from Penang, shows us her own private collection of batik sarongs. The *Peranakan* Mansion in Penang and the Penang *Peranakan* Association, both have good collections of *kebaya* and batik sarongs which I have been able to examine (figure 75). The Penang state museum allocated a section for the material culture used by the Penang *Babas* and *Nyonyas* which also show case many batik sarongs with *buketan* designs. Unlike bigger museums such as *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore or National Museum in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where users usually could not be identified on their collection of sarongs *kebaya*, the Penang State Museum collected pieces mostly used by the Penang *Nyonyas* such as figure 76 below.



Fig. 76: Batik sarong in floral design with Penang style lace *kebaya*, collection of Penang State Museum (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

Through the *Peranakan* Association in Penang, I also became acquainted with some Penang *Babas* and *Nyonyas* who generously invited me into their private homes to closely examine their private family sarong *kebaya* collections. I also examined some batik sarong collections in Melaka from my own *Nyonya* relatives and others whom I met through the *Peranakan* Association in Sydney. Through this Association, I have also met *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Sydney who were happy to share their family albums and their sarong *kebaya* collections with me. All these examinations on batik sarongs whose users can be identified as *Nyonyas* in the Straits, consistently revealed the Europeanised floral and fauna motifs. Some of them could be dated by the collectors themselves to the early twentieth century and indeed most of them that I examined clearly are the early to late twentieth century *Batik Nyonya* with the use of chemical dyes.

Around the same time when this floral designs were in vogue, the older *Peranakan* Chinese batik centres like Cirebon, Lasem, Semarang and Surabaya gradually decreased in production in the early twentieth century. That made the *Peranakan* batik makers in

Pekalongan the major players in producing batik at that second and third decades of the twentieth century. These relatively new *Peranakan* batik workshops in Pekalongan did not produce much of those typical *Batik Peranakan* with Chinese auspicious motifs discussed in the previous chapter. As such, the typical Chinese-inspired motifs, like the mythical *kilin* and phoenixes, were significantly reduced in *Batik Peranakan*, even though they did not totally disappear. Hence, a significant difference between the batiks produced by the *Peranakan* Chinese in the late-nineteenth century and those of the early-twentieth century has been noted by many batik scholars, as discussed earlier. Certainly, this was encouraged by the phenomenon of mimicry that happened in Java. The next section further scrutinises how the ‘mimicking’ behaviour of the *Peranakan* Chinese led to the eventual change to lace *kebaya*, which had also affected the way the *Nyonyas* used to dress in the Straits.

From *Baju Panjang* to Lace *Kebaya*

The earlier indigenous *baju panjang* was getting a western twist in the early twentieth century. Adding to the repertoire of the materials used for *baju panjang* were imported cloths from Europe. At the dawn of the twentieth century, transparent organdie in colourful prints from Europe were particular popular to use for *baju panjang*. By using the inner blouses that was discussed in the previous chapter, the transparent form of materials was able to be used for *baju panjang* (see figure 69). Various colloquial names were called for the printed imported organdie, including ‘*tek kok see*’ or German cloth, ‘*teng see*’ or stiff fibre in Penang; ‘*kasa gelair*’ or glass gauze in Melaka and Singapore. This colourful transparent organdie plus the use of inner garment was perhaps one of the first European influence that could be observed on the *Nyonya* blouse. They were particularly popular in Penang and sometimes referred to as Penang *Nyonya tang sah* (long blouse in Penang Hokkien). The organdie *baju panjang* with the inner garment was exclusively worn by the *Nyonyas*, their Malay counterpart in the Straits was not usually seen in this hybrid dress style. At least not numerous enough to be noticed.



Fig. 77: Penang Nyonya in *Batik Nyonya* and lace *kebaya*, ca. 1920 (Peter Lee, 2014a: 263).

Around this time, the *Nyonyas* also started wearing a shorter version of blouse ended around the hips and the term, '*kebaya*' was eventually adopted for this blouse. Obviously, *baju panjang* that means 'long blouse' was not suitable to address this shorter version of blouse. On this shorter *kebaya*, the European material such as European lace was trimmed along the front opening hems and sleeves and came to known as *kebaya renda* or lace *kebaya* such as seen worn by the Penang *Nyonya* in figure 77. This lace *kebaya* was initiated and popularised by the Eurasian and European women in Java such as witnessed by Lord Minto in the early nineteenth century. Being first class citizens and at the top of the social ranking, they had their own selection of expensive fabrics. These fabrics were the finest cottons of white or off-white which mostly imported from Europe and decorated with white lace. The integration of lace into *kebaya* reflects an important feature of European influence on this blouse. The influence is also clearly seen from the borrowing of the Portuguese term for lace, '*renda*' in Malay and *Baba Malay*; '*lienla*' was used in Penang Hokkien, apparently adapted from '*renda*'.

Even though the Eurasian had been wearing the lace *kebaya* since at least the early nineteenth century, but it was only a century later in the early twentieth century that the *Peranakan* woman in Java began to wear this type of white and expensive Europeanised lace *kebaya*. With no doubt they were mimicking the European women in the way they dressed. Surely, the Dutch Indies 'equalisation' in 1920 discussed earlier had indirectly encouraged not only the production of Europeanised batik sarong but also the making and wearing of lace *kebaya*. It probably started in a smaller scale with some privileged and affluent Javanese *Peranakan* who initiated this trend as a result of the social contacts with the high-ranking Dutch in the working or even schooling environments. However, in response to the 1920's 'equalisation', lace *kebaya* was worn by the *Peranakan* women overwhelmingly, regardless of age group. This could be witnessed in the abundance of photographs taken in the early twentieth century.

The early lace *kebaya* worn by the Javanese *Peranakan* were nearly identical to those worn by women with European status, except perhaps for minor individual preference. Ironically, while this Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was picked up by the *Peranakan* in the East Indies as well as the *Nyonyas* in the Straits in the early twentieth century, the popularity of Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was in decline among the European and Eurasian women, and had completely disappeared amongst the European women in Java by the first quarter of twentieth century.

The great influx of the Dutch after 1870, took place in the era when the camera was able to record. Photography shows the European women in European dress with high neck and loose sleeves in the earliest photographs. Skirts were spread widely like a bell over hooped petticoats on rattan frame behind their skirt or *crinoline*. The bustle (flattened on the front and sides creating more fullness at the back of the skirts) replaced the crinoline in the 1870s (Taylor, 1997a: 101).⁸² Although in these photographs the European women had to dress according to what they ought to dress for a formal portraiture but the decline of sarong *kebaya* was certainly on the way. One of the main reasons was due to the alternative European fashion for the tropical climate became available. Other reasons include what

⁸² In 1923, another colonial arbiter of taste, C.J. Rutten-Pekelharing, advised women travelling to Dutch Indies to take with them a range of light clothing for the tropical weather, including skirts, blouses, dresses and even trousers (Peter Lee, 2014a: 189).

kind of leading women were setting the trends in fashion in the Indies' European circles. Until 1880, the leading women, the wives of the senior officer were Eurasian. After 1880, those women were no longer Eurasian but women who were born and educated in Europe and they wore and sponsored European women fashions (Taylor, 1997b: 114).

The batik production by the Eurasian was also in decline by the twentieth century. As mentioned before, of those workshops that survived, such as van Zuylen's, the main clientele switched from European and Eurasian women to *Peranakan* women. As sarong *kebaya* disappeared among the European, some of the *Peranakan* women in the Indies also wore full European dress, albeit this option was limited to those who had the means, status and care to look fashionable like their European counterparts. Nevertheless, among the *Peranakan* women, the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* remained as the main attire, probably because this was a convenient way to mimic the European and Eurasian women, since this was similar to what they used to wear.

This Europeanised lace *kebaya* also became popular in the Straits. As mentioned, those *Nyonyas* who initiated the lace *kebaya* in the Straits were probably those who had connections in Java, such as the *Nyonya* in figure 78. However, unlike the situation in Java where the lace *kebaya* were worn by the old and young *Peranakan*, this lace *kebaya* was popular particularly among the younger women in the Straits.



Fig. 78: A *Nyonya* from Melaka with Javanese background in lace *kebaya*, ca. 1920s (courtesy of Thienny Lee)

There is sufficient photographic evidence to support the fact that the generational distinction in dress is visible in the early twentieth century in the Straits such as figure 66 that mentioned above. Although hand-made laces were made in many places in the Malay Archipelago, including Melaka and might have been used in some of the *kebaya*, most of the lace *kebaya* surviving to this day in the former Straits are machine-made imported laces from Europe.⁸³

Unlike the batik sarongs which were imported from Java, most of the *Nyonyas'* *kebaya* were made locally in the Straits. There were tailors who specialised in *kebaya* from Java lived in the Straits. There were also local tailors were equally proficient and productive in producing *kebaya* including lace *kebaya*. Lim Ah Han, descendant of Penang *Nyonya* recalls her mother used to bring her to Javanese tailors in Penang to have her *kebaya* tailored. According to Lim, her mother said these Javanese tailors were the best tailors and had been making organdie *baju panjang* and lace *kebaya* for her family. Lim also reported that some of her *Nyonya* friends went to the local tailors for their *kebaya* tailored.⁸⁴ Having said that, there seems to also have local tailors in Melaka who took orders locally but have them made by their contact in Java.⁸⁵

Before the 1920s, only a few young and privileged *Nyonyas* in the Straits were photographed in lace *kebaya*, and these seem to have been mainly those who had contact with Java. It only became more popular from the 1920s onwards, especially on the younger *Nyonyas* in the Straits. The *baju panjang* gradually went out of favour during this time, although the Penang style organdie *tang sah* or *baju panjang* with inner blouse remained longer in their wardrobes, even among the younger *Nyonyas*. It is also around this time that the Penang style short inner blouse or *tay sah* made in transparent organdie became an outer blouse on its own with increasingly elaborate lace border such as seen in figure 77. The development of this *tay sah* into the outer blouse was likely inspired by the lace *kebaya*, especially those with machine-made imitation lace known as '*lianla po tay sah*' or 'short blouse in lace cloth'. One of the main reasons for this way of wearing white, otherwise a

⁸³ See Peter Lee on lace making in the Malay Archipelago (2014a: 250-252).

⁸⁴ Personal communication (2014) with *Nyonya* Lim Ah Han, age 79. Now residing in Kulim, Kedah whose mother was a *Nyonya* from Penang.

⁸⁵ Personal communication (2016) with anonymous *Nyonya*.

sign of mourning, was acceptable was due to the fact that the white lace *kebaya* was paired with brightly coloured batik sarong.

As the Europeanised lace *kebaya* and the sarong with *buketan* motifs were fashionable items, their popularity was not confine to the *Nyonyas*, they were equally popular among other local women in the Straits such as the Malays and the *Jawi Peranakan* women (descendant of Indian Muslim and local women). The *Nyonyas'* distinctive identity was no longer as 'distinctive', judging by their fashionable Europeanised sarong kebaya. It was not until the kebaya came to be increasingly colourful and heavily embroidered, sometimes with Chinese inspired motifs that we could identify the *Nyonyas* through their dress again. The Europeanised white lace *kebaya* was slowly replaced by colourful embroidered *kebaya* improvised by the *Nyonyas*.



Fig. 79: Dragon embroidery on *kebaya Nyonya*, (Tan *et al.*, 2004: 30).

The improvised and embroidered *kebaya* showcased the *Nyonyas'* preference for bright pastel colours. Introduction of colours was subtle in the beginning, with small light coloured floral embroideries on the *kebaya*. By the 1930s, the base materials for *kebaya* began to change from the fine white cotton used for lace *kebaya* to voile material or *rubia*, particularly Swiss Voile that came in a variety of colours including blue, violet, apple green, pink, lemon yellow and some with subtle patterns like checks or dots. In addition to this, the

threads for the embroideries were also increasingly colourful. *Kebaya Sulam* literally means embroidered *kebaya* were known in the Straits, while *Kebaya Bordir*⁸⁶ was used in the Dutch East-Indies, eventually bloomed into much more intense colours with ornate decoration and complicated embroideries that contrast the translucent quality of the sheer and light-weight voile such as the dragon embroideries in figure 79. Together with the pastel *Batik Nyonya*, this relatively new sarong *kebaya* came into explosion of vivid pastel colours. It is hard to establish where exactly this embroidered *kebaya* originated. It could be either in the Straits or in the Indies, but as the *Nyonyas'* dresses were much influenced by Java, it is not surprising if this trend was also brought over from Java. Kwa asserts, "*kebaya bordir* was exported to the *Nyonyas* in Singapore and Malaysia" (Kwa, 2012: 313).

Although it started with minimum decorative laces trims at the edges, decoration on *kebaya* became increasingly elaborate. Apart from embroideries, appliqué work and cut-work were also added along the way. This effect could not have been achieved without the sewing machines which were made widely available in the late twentieth century. The wide use of sewing machines in the former Straits did not only improve the speed of making embroidery but also opened up more design possibilities. The earliest sewing machines were hand-operated, and when the foot-operated machines were introduced, they speed up the embroidery process even more and were capable of executing complicated embroideries.

By the 1920s, elaborate techniques to imitate the look of lace, such as cut-work were introduced in the handbooks in various languages for sewing machines. Cut-work, a technique known in *Baba Malay* as *ketok lobang* (punch holes) is perhaps the most tedious part of the embroidery process. It involves several small pieces of the fabric being cut-out, after the stitches were made around the holes. When the fabric in between the stitches is removed, these stitches hold the fabrics together and prevent it from falling apart. This technique eventually replaced the use of lace on *kebaya* completely. In Europe this cut work technique is known in the French word as *broderie anglaise*, literally means 'English embroidery', and was associated with Victorian England because of its popularity there during the nineteenth century. The *Nyonyas* were exposed to this decoration on the Victorian dresses that were worn by the English in the Straits such as seen on the European

⁸⁶ *Kebaya Bordir* from the Dutch word '*borduur*' which means embroidery (Kwa, 2012: 300).

boy in figure 80. With the help of the sewing machines, the *Nyonyas* eventually achieved the lace-like effect and incorporated such look into their *kebaya*.⁸⁷



Fig. 80: Portrait of a European boy in a frock decorated with *broderie anglaise* on the collar. Photo taken at Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: 31).

By the 1930s, the lace *kebaya* had begun to look more modern with fitted cut and some of them featuring the two triangular front panels known as *lapik* reach to the upper hips which style is more popular in the Indies than the Straits, however. Elaborate cut-work began to fill more spaces of the *kebaya*, appears along the edges of the collar, the front opening, the *lapik* and the cuffs. This type of *kebaya* with cut-work and colourful embroideries came to be known as ‘*Kebaya Sulam Kerawang*’ or ‘*Kebaya Kerawang*’ in short, in the former Straits; while another term, *Kebaya Kerancang* was more used in the Dutch Indies.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, those decorated with full embroideries without cutworks remained to be called *Kebaya Sulam Penuh* or (fully embroidered) and *Kebaya Bodir* in the Indies.

⁸⁷ It seems like Sumatran ladies excelled in this handiwork, and “Penang *Nyonya* recall the Medan connection with regard to such embroidery” (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 195).

⁸⁸ Kwa writes, “*kebaya Kerancang* refers to *kebaya* in which holes would be made in certain parts using a small pair of scissors, after the embroidery was completed” (Kwa, 2012: 303).



Fig. 81: Cut-works *kebaya* with chrysanthemum and insects (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 213).



Fig. 82: Chrysanthemum embroidery, collection of National Museum of History, Taipei (Lin, 1988: 81).

The motifs of the embroidered *kebaya* consisted of a combination of floral, figural and geometric motifs, with floral being the most common. In the earlier embroideries, many

motifs echoed the floral and fauna motifs in batik sarongs which have their European influence like roses, irises, and lilies. However, later embroideries, especially those made in the mid twentieth century, show much more diversity and were going in different directions to the motifs which appeared on *Batik Nyonya*. Chinese-inspired flower motifs were one of the most commonly found embroidered motifs on the *kebaya*. These included peonies, plum, chrysanthemum and lotus, accompanied with small birds like magpies and sparrow. For instance, the Chrysanthemum flowers with bees on figure 81 are reminiscent of Chinese embroideries dating from Qing dynasty (figure 82). Other Chinese-inspired motifs such as phoenix, dragon (figure 79), *kilin* or butterflies also frequently appeared.



Fig. 83: *Kebaya* with embroideries on floral, butterflies and ducks, courtesy of Penang State Chinese Association, undated, possibly early to mid 20th century (photo taken by Thienny Lee).

Although the bulk of the embroideries were usually chosen from a scrapbook of designs or ready-made templates provided by the tailors, some of these embroideries actually expressed a certain degree of the *Nyonyas'* individualities due to the possibility to personalise each *kebaya*. According to Peter Wee, the president of the *Peranakan* Association, Singapore:

The *Nyonyas* of the olden days [early to mid twentieth century] would commission the tailors to make embroideries that they fancy. It may reflect their Chinese zodiac signs,

or mythical creature that inspired her such as the phoenix, or anything that sentimental to her or simply makes her happy (Wee, Jan 2014).⁸⁹

Therefore, the embroideries on *kebaya* are to a certain extent personalised. Unlike motifs on batik sarongs that were made in commercial batik workshops which designs were meant to appeal to the mass target market. The embroideries on *kebaya* that I have examined from the early to mid twentieth century are mostly floral accompanied by small animals or insects such as in figure 83 with flowers and ducks. There are nevertheless some very unusual designs published in books and catalogues or collected in museums, such as western musical instruments, human figures like Hawaiian girls, matadors, and different kind of vehicles. Although the embroidery designs do not on their own provide a basis to analyse the *Nyonyas* collectively, we can certainly conclude from the majority of the embroideries on *kebaya*, that the Chinese-inspired motifs were definitely important on *kebaya* made in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, for the *Nyonyas* in the Straits this is the first time the Chinese theme was obvious on their local dress style, albeit from the basis of the Europeanised *kebaya*.



Fig. 84: *Kebaya* in bright colours, courtesy of anonymous Nyonya, circa 1970s. Ordered in Melaka but possibly made in Java.

⁸⁹ Personal communication.

By the 1950s, the development of the *Kebaya Nyonyas* nearly froze. It is with the *Kebaya Kerawang* and *Kebaya Sulam*, such as figure 84 (probably made in the 1970s), that the modern *Nyonyas* today identified themselves with, generally terming them as '*Kebaya Nyonya*'. The modern *Nyonyas* in Malaysia and Singapore today consider this Europeanized sarong *kebaya* as their 'traditional costume'. In modern Indonesia, another Hokkien term, '*Encim*' meaning 'aunty', became the polite way to address the older *Peranakan* women and came to refer to this style of *kebaya*, which they wore. Therefore, the term '*Kebaya Encim*' used as a generic term for the *kebaya* of the *Peranakan* in Indonesia.

With the coming of the fashionable Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, many other fashions also came flowing in to the *Nyonyas*, particular the young and English-educated. The photo in figure 85, was taken in Ipoh, Perak,⁹⁰ where the couple resided but the man was a Straits Chinese originally from Penang, while the woman was *Peranakan* from Dutch Indies in Borneo. There were many Penang Straits Chinese moved to Perak for their expanding business in tin mining since the late nineteenth century. It seems that the extravaganza of the Straits Chinese lifestyle continued in the neighbouring state of Perak, particularly in Ipoh and Taiping. The *Nyonyas* that lived in Perak were fast in their adoption of full swing European dress at the start of the twentieth century, even more so than their Penang counterpart. In an excerpt of the *Perak Pioneer* dated sixth of March 1902:

An enlightened Chinese gentleman informed us that the Chinese ladies of this town are fast adopting Western ideas in dress for outdoor walks and evening drives. That the toilette of several wealthy Nonias comprise several items in a European lady's costume, has been observed by the recent Chap Goh Meh festivities, where it was noticed that in many instances the massive glangs or arm rings has given place to European bracelets (Ho, 2015: 119).

One possible explanation is that many Straits Chinese family sent their younger generations to Perak to manage their tin business. As a result, the younger generations like the young couple in figure 85, assumed more freedom in running their household including the

⁹⁰ Through the signing of the Pangkor Treaty on 20 January 1874, Perak, a state on the western shore of the Malay Peninsula located south of Penang, was under the British indirect ruled. J.W.W. Birch was appointed as the first British Resident in Perak.

freedom to embrace European dress, without the presence of their in-laws or elders at home.



Fig. 85: A young couple, Straits Chinese couple, woman dress in Edwardian dress and hat, 1910s (Wu, 2007: 36).



Fig. 86: The Straits Chinese girls in Western blouse and skirt, European shoes with big anklet, big pendants and brooches reminiscent *kerosang*, ca. 1920s to 1930s, the Straits Settlements (Tong, 2014: 88).

In the Straits, particularly Penang, some young *Nyonyas* embraced Western dress style, but much in the hybrid way of the young Penang *Nyonyas* in figure 86 and 87. Judging from the hairstyles, this picture is likely to date to at least a decade or two later than the one in Perak (figure 85). This Western dress style is unlike the full Western frocks worn in Ipoh, as this clearly is a hybrid combination. This dress style was worn with local hair style, '*sanggul telefon*,' big brooches reminiscent *kerosang* and European shoes with bulky *gelang kaki* or anklet. In this hybrid combination, these western blouses and skirts much like the locally invented hybrid Chinese dress style, *koon sah* (figure 88), particularly the long sleeves, length of skirt and blouse as well as the materials used.



Fig. 87: Penang *Nyonyas*, the elder in organdie *baju panjang* and batik sarong while the young *Nyonya* in Western dress style (possibly local made), ca. 1920s to 1930s (courtesy of Michael Cheah).

This *koon sah* (skirt and blouse in Hokkien) also called *baju shanghai* (literally Shanghai dress in *Baba Malay*) was equally popular among the young *Nyonyas* around the same time, particularly in Singapore. This ensemble of long blouse and pleated skirt regularly appeared in the family portraits of the Straits Chinese family (figure 88), most notably in the second decade of the twentieth century in Singapore. Although the top with its length reached to the knees reminiscent *baju panjang* but the details such as the mandarin collar, the asymmetric fastening and the embroidery made this dress style essentially Chinese. Often

European materials like lace were also incorporated into this ‘Chinese’ dress style. As suggested by one of its name, *baju Shanghai*, they were possibly first tailor-made by the prolific tailors of Shanghainese origins who had their businesses established by the first decade of the twentieth century in Singapore (Chung *et al.*, 2012: 20). Our understanding of the hybridity in these locally tailored-made Western and Chinese dress styles is unfortunately very limited due to lack of studies. This area definitely deserves much more scholarly attention to fill in the gap in the knowledge.



Fig. 88: Elderly *Nyonyas* in *baju panjang* and checked sarongs the younger generations in *koon sah*, Singapore, 1910-1925 (Liu, 1995: 40).

The Straits Chinese enjoyed their privileged status in the British colony for about two to three decades in the early twentieth century, and came to appear more ‘Chinese’. At this time, fashion coming directly from China like *cheong sam* also came to be worn by some *Nyonyas*, such as Lee Choo Neo mentioned earlier. In the mid 1920s, *cheong sam* was mostly worn as fashionable, novelty party wear by some elite *Nyonyas*. It later established itself in the mid-twentieth century as an everyday dress associated with modernity among educated and white collar working women and was also well worn by the *Sinkhek* women and their descendants. Another Chinese dress, *samfu* (blouse and pants in Cantonese), brought over and popularised by the working class *Sinkhek* women, particularly Cantonese

women indicated by the Cantonese term, were also adopted by young *Nyonyas* as casual wear. *Samfu* were worn by some *Nyonyas* in their childhood since at least the first decade of the twentieth century. It became noticeably and overwhelmingly worn in the Straits Chinese household when these young *Nyonyas* continued this practice in their adulthood in the 1930s. The beginning of the downfall of the Straits Chinese came sometime after the 1930s, when their position was contested economically, socially and politically by their contemporaries in the Straits. When the Straits Chinese political and economic significance gradually diminished, the *Nyonyas* distinctive and hybrid identities also came to disappear.



Fig. 89: Descendant of Penang *Nyonya* in *samfu* in 1950s (courtesy of Thienny Lee).

Although some older *Nyonyas* preferred to stick to their woven checked sarongs and *baju panjang*, many younger *Nyonyas* changed between two or three dress styles. When neither of those hybridised dress styles were worn, the *Nyonyas* could appear just like the *Sinkhek* women in authentic Chinese dress styles (figure 89). Nevertheless, the *samfu* and *cheong sam* also incorporated some local elements, more appropriately referred to as “localisation” process, as discussed by Tan Chee Beng (1988a), who did the research in the period of late

1970s to early 1980s. It is however not in the scope of this thesis to pursue this “localisation” process. While our knowledge of this process as it pertains to dress is very limited due to insufficient studies, it is another area deserving more scholarly research. Apart from the dress style, another important European influence that was notably seen on the *Nyonyas* is the slip-in-shoes, and that bring us to the next section on footwear.

Footwear

One obvious dress item that owes its influence to Europe is the shoes that the *Nyonyas* wore. In the mid-nineteenth century, some of the *Peranakan* women in the Dutch Indies were seen bare-footed, unlike their man who wore Chinese-style shoes (figure 90). Shoe wearing among the *Nyonyas* in the Straits can be seen in the earliest photographs, bare feet being rare in photographs.



Fig. 90: *Peranakan* Chinese family, Indonesia, 1860-1865 (Newton, 2014: 99).

Wearing shoes is not an indigenous practice in the Malay Archipelago and the eventual shoes wearing is definitely a foreign influence. Eredia wrote of the Malays in Melaka in 1613, “in accordance with ancient usage they retain the custom of walking barefooted,

without sandals or shoes” (Eredia, 2012: 39). The word ‘*kasut*’ for shoes in Malay, signifies an Arabic or Persian origin for the practice.⁹¹ The European influence on shoes is also obvious through the names used for shoes in the Archipelago. This includes *cenela*, derived from the Portuguese term ‘*clinela*’ for slipper, which Baron van Hoevell describes as, “*cenelas*, with high heels and pointed upturned toes” (Hulsbosch, 2004: 112).



Fig. 91: Picture on the left entitled “Citizen living in Batavia, with his wife”, picture on the right entitled “Two mestizos”, 1670, Georg Franz Muller, water colour on paper from Muller travel journal (Peter Lee, 2014a: 54).

The simplest shoe form of South Indian origin, wooden sandals ‘*terompah*’, has a silver upright piece meant to be held between the largest toe and the next, and this might have been one of the earliest shoes used in the Archipelago. A seventeenth-century water colour entitled, “Citizen living in Batavia, with his wife”, shows that “his wife”, possibly a Eurasian woman, wears a pair of red mule shoes with low heels, while having another pair of *terompah* at her side (figure 91). Although the full view of the shoes is not visible in these two pictures but the side views show the shoes are turned-up. The influence on wearing shoes among the “free women” could definitely count on the influence of the Eurasian women from the Portuguese Goa. As said, Parkinson describes the shoes for the “free women” in Batavia were “square-toed slippers, turned up at the points very high” which

⁹¹ Collins who examines the seventeenth century translation work of Brouwerius’ *Genesis* (1697) from Dutch to Ambonese Malay noted the near absence of Dutch words in Ambonese Malay. According to him, “in *Genesis* (14:23) the word *caous* appears and its meaning is ‘shoe’, which supports the interpretation that it is a loan word from Arabic (Wilkinson n.d.) or Persian (Jones 1978) ‘footwear, boot’. It is not very likely to be related to Dutch *kous* ‘stocking’, *pace* Mahdi (in press). The overall paucity of Dutch loanwords argues against that..., rather too early for Dutch to have been a source” (Collins, 2004: 98). Collin’s paper and his argument on shoes was brought to my attention by H. Cheah (2014).

very likely owe its influence to South India. These slip-in shoes with the pointed and up-turned toe covered, had been reported worn in the Malay Archipelago since the earliest Dutch time. It had been recorded in numerous travelers' accounts that the 'wives' in VOC household wore a *kain panjang* and long over blouse that reached the knees or ankles and had long sleeves; and wore slippers on bare feet (Taylor, 1997b: 105).



Fig. 92: *Nyonyas'* slippers, late 19th century Malaysia or Singapore. Collection of the Asian Civilisation Museum, Singapore (Cheah, 2015: 16).

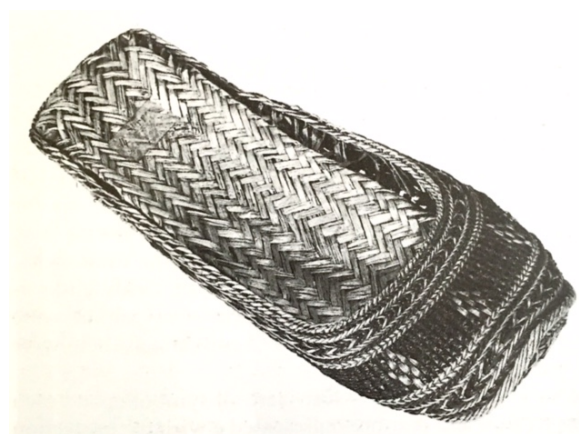


Fig. 93: Chinese man's rush slipper, Hong Kong, 1868. Collection of Horniman Museum, London (Garrett, 1987; 27)

The first generation of the *Nyonyas* who were mostly indigenous and slaves' origin would probably not have had the luxury of wearing shoes before they were married. The status of becoming *Nyonyas* after they were married made the shoes an essential part of their dress to showcase their status as "free women". However, it is not clear if *Nyonyas* ever wore the shoes described by Parkinson. The earliest *Nyonyas'* shoe forms that we know of are those seen in paintings and photographs, as well as the extant examples from the nineteenth century such as figure 92. Judging from this slip-in shoes form, the *Nyonyas'* earliest shoes form could have owed its influence to the Chinese men's slip-in shoes (figure 93), which

they closely resemble; both had a square head and a semi-circular piece for the toes (visible from the front of the shoes) and were slightly turned up.

The fact that the earlier Chinese men did not bring in the women dress culture with them, set the *Nyonyas* free from bound feet. Hence, the *Nyonya's* shoes development would have no influence from Chinese women's shoes; rather, the earlier *Nyonya* shoes resembled Chinese men shoes. These shoes were known as *kasut kodok* or toad shoes in Penang and *kasut tongkang* or Chinese bumboat shoes in Melaka and Singapore, after the shape of the Chinese bumboat; sometimes also referred to as *kasut seret* or 'dragging shoes' due to the fact that one has to drag when one walks with the slip-in shoes. These shoes shapes for women remained popular till the end of the nineteenth century and mostly worn with *baju panjang*.



Fig. 93: Embroidered *Baba* and *Nyonya* shoes, part of the wedding gifts, the three larger pairs on the right were made for the groom while those on the left were made for the brides (Ho, 2008c: 119).

The shape of shoes around this time has two distinctive styles for the *Nyonyas* and *Babas*. Interestingly, *Babas'* slip-in shoes that were usually worn at home do not resemble the Chinese men slip-in shoes mentioned above. *Baba* shoes shows protruding rounded piece looking like a tongue sticking out (figure 94). According to Michael Cheah, a *Baba* from Penang, "this shape of the shoes are meant for men who have bigger feet and toes".⁹²

⁹² Personal communication, Jan 2014.

While the shapes of women shoes keep changing, the shape of men shoes remained the same until the mid-twentieth century, when these shoes were no longer made for the *Baba* men.

Many of those shoes were embroidered with satin or silk thread on velvet or silk base by employing various embroidery techniques. *Nyonyas* learned to embroider the top of the shoes for their wedding, both brides and grooms and sometime including the in-law. The most common embroidered shoes were velvet-based uppers, often bought with ready-made paste-on stencils for satin stitch embroidery.⁹³ The designs for embroidery were commonly based on Chinese auspicious motifs like the gold fishes in figure 95, Chinese-inspired flower motifs such as peonies are common.



Fig. 95: Embroidered shoes with gold fish motifs, Straits Settlements (probably Penang), 1900 (Cheah, 2010: 107).

By the 1910s, gold and silver metallic threads were more frequently used for embroidery. Gold thread embroidery has always been associated with status in the Malay Archipelago. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch reserved gold and silver trimmings on apparel to members of the supreme government and their wives and children.⁹⁴ Gold thread embroidery is known by the *Nyonyas* as *sulam benang mas* in *Baba* Malay or *kim siew* in Penang Hokkien. The Malay word, '*tekat*' is also used and the most common type of the

⁹³ According to Khoo if silk was used instead of velvet, Peking knot was used, this was because the rough texture of the velvet complimented the smooth silk while Peking knots with rough finish stood out on the smooth silk (Khoo Joo Ee, 1998: 195).

⁹⁴ Governor-General Rijklof van Goens (1678-81) is one of the earliest to legislate on personal habiliments, reserving for members of the supreme government and their wives and children the right to wear pearls, other jewelry, and gold and silver trimmings on their apparel (Taylor, 1983: 66).

Nyonyas' metallic thread is raised embroidery or '*tekat timbul*' and it reveals the close relationship between the *Nyonyas'* embroideries with the other local embroideries made in the Malay Archipelago.⁹⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Javanese and Malay aristocratic families wore velvet slip-in-shoes embroidered with metallic thread. The gold and silver-thread embroidery were usually adopted by people who could afford it and occupied a higher social status across Malay Archipelago to reflect their social ranking, the Straits Chinese included. Its status was perhaps further reinforced by the restricted use of gold and silver embroidery imposed by the Dutch in the mid-eighteenth century.



Fig. 96: *Nyonyas* shoes modified from the *kasot kodok*, without the semi-circular toe-piece, from the Straits Settlements, ca. 1915 (Cheah, 2010: 155).

Also around this time, women's shoes show modified version of *kasot kodok* with sharper and rounder toe ended and without the semi-circular toe-piece attached in the front, also losing the turn-up at the tip of the toe (figure 96). These shapes for shoes increasingly appeared and became more frequent in the photographs dated after 1910s and still known as *kasot seret* for the flat shoes. At around 1920s the shoes began to appear with slightly built-up heel and were then known as *kasot tumit* or heel shoes (figure 97). This kind of velvet rounded-toe, embroidered with gold thread in the form of the mule shoes, had actually existed for a long time in the Malay Archipelago and was first worn by the Eurasian women from at least the seventeenth century, such as in figure 90 mentioned above.

⁹⁵ See Cheah on "Gold Thread Embroideries of the *Peranakan* Chinese" in *TASSA Review* Vol. 24, No.1 (Cheah, 2015: 16-18).



Fig. 97: Metal embroidered *Nyonyas'* shoes almost entirely with silver threads, silver wires and sequins from the Straits Settlements (Ho, 2008c: 121).

The painting in figure 98 dated 1873, depicts a Eurasian girl in a white lace *kebaya* and batik sarong, clad in a pair of red mules with low heels. The shoes in this painting appear similar to the shoes in the seventeenth century show in figure 91, and therefore we could account for its long existence in Java. However, it only appeared on some *Nyonyas* in the Straits in the early twentieth century, about the similar time when the *Nyonyas* began to wear lace *kebaya*. The earlier *Nyonyas'* mule shoes were embroidered (figure 96) but soon they were decorated with beads instead. Although the *Nyonyas* had been using bead to decorate their shoes since the nineteenth century, but it was only randomly used to enhance the thread embroideries. When the shoes decorations were eventually dominant by beads in the early twentieth century, the generic term *kasot manek* and *manek eh* (Penang Hokkien) or beaded shoes is used until the present day (figure 99). Chinese inspired designs continued to be used alongside European-inspired motifs including Snow white and Betty Boop. It is this beaded shoes that became part of the 'traditional' outfit for the *Nyonya*.



Fig. 98: Eurasian lady in lace *kebaya*, batik sarong and red mules, 1873 (Kerlogue, 2004: 148).



Fig. 99: *Kasot manek*, Straits Settlements second quarter of the 20th century (Cheah, 2010: 130).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, European glass beads were exported to the English and Dutch colonies in a large scale and small glass beads (measuring less than 2 to 3 millimetres in diameter) were found in abundance in the Malay Archipelago including the Straits Settlements. These glass beads or *manik potong* in *Baba Malay* were most popularly used in

Nyonyas' kasot manek.⁹⁶ According to Cheah, although European beads and designs were employed in the *Nyonyas'* beadwork, a direct relationship between the emergence of *Nyonya* beadwork as a distinct genre and European influence is difficult to establish however, due to insufficient evidence. As such, the connection of the *Nyonyas* shoes with Europe lies in the mule shoe shape as first worn by the Eurasian women.

From the long static appearance over a few centuries, shoe shapes changed fast in the Straits; from the 1930s onwards, the open-toe slipper or *kasot cha kiak* was introduced. Another shape was the *kasot pintal*, made of two interlaced V-shaped panels, an early sandal, was popular from the 1950s. The 'Europeanised' sarong *kebaya* and mule shoes clearly took off much later for the *Nyonyas* than they had been in fashion for the Eurasian. The dates all coincide with the time when the *Peranakan* in Java were 'equalised' before the Dutch law.

Conclusions

Peranakan Chinese in Java mimicked the way the colonisers dressed, as evidenced by the popularity of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* and shoes specifically at the time when the *Peranakan* Chinese were 'equalised' with the European under Dutch law. The European-inspired motifs on batik sarongs to lace *kebaya* and down to the mule shoes eventually became the look of the *Peranakan* women in the early twentieth century. This chapter supports many writers who collectively made the similar conclusions about the mimicking behaviour of the *Peranakan* in the Dutch East Indies.

Considering the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* were worn by the Eurasian or European women for at least a hundred years before it was worn by the *Peranakan*, it is unlikely that

⁹⁶ Beads are one of the earliest international materials used for all kind of crafty objects and glass beads had been imported to Southeast Asia for a long time. Early sources of beads import ranges from West Asia, India and China. European-made glass beads became one of the main sources of beads imported to the Malay Archipelago as a result of the European arrivals in Southeast Asia. Venetian-made glass beads were traded in Melaka in the fifteenth century and Dutch imitations of Venetian chevron beads have been found in Java in 1711 (Cheah, 2010: 31).

the main factor that motivated the changing dress to Europeanised sarong *kebaya* and shoes by the *Peranakan* women in Java, was just 'fashion'. It is certainly hard to imagine the adoption of mule shoes that had been existed in Java for centuries by the *Peranakan* was due to fashion. The Europeanised sarong *kebaya* and the mule shoes all happened together; most likely due to the Dutch law that indirectly suppressed the desire for mimicking. It is of course a far more convenient and economic way to mimic the colonial Dutch women in sarong *kebaya* instead of the full western frocks, as this local dress style was what the *Peranakan* women were wearing. Mimicking the colonial in expensive, authentic western frocks did also happen, but in a much smaller scale, confined to those who had the means and access to do so.

In contrast, 'fashion' could justify the fact that the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* became popular in the Straits Settlements. The idea of mimicking the British coloniser was vague and there was also no such British law prohibiting the imitation on the European women's way of dress in the Straits Settlements. The Latest trend of batik sarong and *kebaya* from Java were definitely fashionable and most influential to the then young *Nyonyas* in which *Batik Nyonya* with European floral designs, lace *kebaya* and mule shoes were the 'in' thing to wear at that early twentieth century period. The woven checked and geometric motifs batik sarongs were popular among the *Nyonyas* in the nineteenth century, but it was the *Batik Nyonya* with floral motifs that were in vogue in the early twentieth century. *Baju panjang* was 'old fashioned' and phased out, replaced by shorter and trendier *kebaya renda*, *kebaya sulam* and *kebaya sulam kerawang*. According to fashion theorist Barnard, "context must be used to determine whether a garment is being referred to as fashion" (Barnard, 1996: 17). The same outfit functioned as 'fashion' in the context of the Straits Settlements but not in the Dutch East Indies. The fact that the lace *kebaya*, *Batik Nyonya* and mule shoes were preferred by the younger *Nyonyas* in the Straits shows that these items hold the characteristic of 'fashion'. This is because fashion does not usually appeal to everyone but attracts a selective group of people who care to look fashionable and have the means to follow new trends. It is hardly surprising that it began with the then younger *Nyonyas* who had started to receive English education and becoming modern and apparently being fashionable was one of the way to express this modernity. The Europeanised sarong *kebaya* is not the only fashionable outfit to the then modern *Nyonyas*

in the early twentieth century. Locally tailored-made Western and Chinese dress styles formed other fashionable choices.

These locally made outfits, either in Western or Chinese style, were also hybrid in many ways. In these hybridised, locally made Western or Chinese dress styles, the *Nyonyas* continued to present their hybrid identities. However, these hybrid identities were unlike the identities in the nineteenth century. In the local dress style, the foreign elements that appeared were either Chinese or European. In contrast, in these hybridised Western and Chinese dress styles, it is the local elements that are foreign to the Chinese or Western dress style. Therefore, the situation overturned when the base style, 'local' dress style, (sarong kebaya) changed to that of 'Chinese' and 'Western'. And this changed of dress styles certainly indicate that the base identity ("stable Identity" in Radhakrishnan's words) of the *Nyonyas* had changed accordingly from that of local to that of 'Chinese' and 'Western'. This is shown in chart 1, the *Nyonyas* stood in the pink and blue circle when they wore the Chinese or Western hybrid dress style respectively. In other words, their hybrid identities could be Chinese or Western based, depend on the dress styles they wore.

Other authentic Chinese dress style such as *samfu* and *cheong sam* were also worn by the *Nyonyas* and *Sinkhek* women alike in the early to mid twentieth century. In these authentic Chinese dress styles, the *Nyonyas*' distinctive hybridised identities became blurred and they were unidentifiable from the wider *Sinkhek* women, visually. When different dress styles, other than the local dress style, sarong *kebaya*, began to be worn by the *Nyonyas*, their identities were progressively complicated and multifaceted. At this point, the *Nyonyas* could bear double or multiple identities visually, changing visual identities by changing dress styles just like their *Baba* men who used to change between Chinese jacket and Western suit.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that *Nyonya* dress was hybrid and that their hybrid identity was manifested visually through the way they dressed. In theory, a hybrid identity is recognised as such when it is compared to a base, or “stable” (following Radhakrishnan) or “pure” (following Bhabha), identity, and foreign elements can be detected. In order to apply this theory to the examination of *Nyonya* identities visually through dress, I apply the ‘dress strategy’ which uses ‘dress style’ as the base identity. As said earlier, such an approach was possible because, although there must have been exceptions, in the nineteenth century period and certainly before, the inhabitants of the cosmopolitan Straits Settlements, migrants included, dressed in styles distinctive to their places of origin. For instance, men from China wore the dress style of China. Thus, the identity of each inhabitant in relation to their place of origin was clearly portrayed in their dress style. By using dress style as the base identity, I demonstrated that the complexity of hybrid identities could be made more comprehensible.

Beyond doubt, the *Nyonyas* presented themselves as the local women of the archipelago in this local dress style of two-piece ensemble, *baju panjang* and sarong, accompanied by a metal belt that held the sarongs in place and the *kerosong* that functioned as buttons, with hair in the knotted bun (*sanggul*). However, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, the *Nyonyas* had made this dress style hybrid and unique to them. To analyse the *Nyonyas*’ hybrid visual identities, I use my dress strategy which uses the dress styles to determine the base identities. While the *Nyonyas* were wearing the local dress style, their base visual identities were therefore the local women. Apart from the local style per se, aspects of Islamic aesthetics can also be observed in *Nyonya* dress. For instance, the *Nyonyas* favoured sarongs of woven check and geometrically patterned batik before the twentieth century, shows a more specific influence from their Islamic counterparts in the Straits. Even though at a glance, *Nyonyas* were just like any other local women but they managed to portray their more exclusive identities in the Straits by selecting only certain articles from the wider range of dress items in use throughout the archipelago. For instance, the *Nyonyas* had specific reasons for excluding articles of dress like *selendang*, *kain panjang* and *baju kurong*.

They excluded the *selendang* to identify themselves as non-Muslim, while by not wearing *kain panjang* they identified themselves as women of the Straits and distinct from Java, and the *baju kurong* was not worn so that they could identify themselves as respectable women of some standing, given that the *baju kurong* an adaptation of the *baju* once worn by slaves.

In addition to their exclusive selection, the way that *Nyonyas* identified themselves as the spouses or descendants of Chinese men made their dress hybridised and presented their hybrid identities. Through their associations with Chinese men, *Nyonya* identities were transformed from women of varied backgrounds to a more exclusive identity. In other words, Javanese, Bugis, Balinese, Batak or Thai women all became *Nyonyas* when they married *Babas* or Chinese men. This transformation of identities could be observed visually because the *Nyonya* dress became increasingly hybridised. That said, the *Nyonyas* continued to show their local origin by using local dress style but included alien Chinese elements that did not belong to the local style. Closer examination of *Nyonya* dress reveals some aspects of Chinese aesthetic and these elements are crucial in identifying the *Nyonyas* who were bound to their men and to each other through these Chinese elements.

The Chinese elements that appeared in *Nyonya* dress in the nineteenth century were relatively minimal in comparison to the twentieth century. The earlier period saw some Chinese inspired motifs in the batik sarongs and the metal belt buckles while the shape of the slip-in shoes resembled the shoes of Chinese men in the late Qing dynasty. The most obvious Chinese elements in this period were the colour preferences and its symbolism that determined which dress was appropriate for specific occasions. The case of Penang is slightly different, the '*tay sah*' or short blouse with mandarin collar reflected more Chinese elements. In addition, the Straits Chinese of Penang spoke a hybridised *Hokkien* instead of *Baba Malay*, thus, displaying more Chinese connections.

The visual evidence from the nineteenth century revealed *Baba* men in Chinese dress with their hair worn in queues, hardly any foreign elements. The male descendants of mixed marriages, that is the *Baba* of local birth, assumed the dress culture of their forefathers. In the Chinese dress style, visually the *Babas* took on the identity of their forefathers as Chinese men and recognised China as their place of origin. However, there are limitations

on using photographs as evidence as photographs do not always tell the complete story. Evidence from written sources, oral histories and material culture, tells us that foreign dress articles were used by the *Babas* in the comfort of *Baba* homes which were not usually captured in the portrait photographs or paintings. For instance, the locally made beaded slippers that were worn at home by the *Babas*, is foreign to Chinese dress style but do not appear in the visual images. The existence of foreign element shows that the *Baba* visual identities were also hybrid like the *Nyonyas*. To apply this to my dress strategy, the *Babas* were unlike the *Nyonyas*, their base visual identities were essentially Chinese judging by the Chinese dress style that they wore.

In this thesis I have questioned the general assumption that *Nyonya* identities were aligned to those of their husbands and male ancestors. I have shown that this assumption does not do justice to the *Nyonyas* in the period before the twentieth century, visually at least, due to the different dress style they wore. The application of different base identities for men and women is thus justified on this grounds. These base identities, Chinese for the men and local for the women, persisted over several generations mainly because *Babas* and *Nyonyas* were separated during their upbringing and into adulthood. While this 'dress strategy' is strategic and analytical on my part, by choosing to present themselves in 'local dress style' it was the *Nyonyas* who themselves, in fact, made the choice to reveal their local origin just as their mothers had. Similarly, by putting on Chinese dress, the *Babas* chose to show their place of origin as China following their forefathers.

Given their local dress style, which I emphasise in this thesis, the visual identities of *Nyonyas* did not, and could not, wander too far from identification as natives of the archipelago. In other words, the hybridity that embodied the *Nyonyas* before the twentieth century did not ride on a Chinese base identity as is generally assumed. Rather it rode on the indigenous women of the archipelago, judging from their dress visually. As this dress style persisted for generations, so did their identity visually. Hence, the local identity of the *Nyonyas* were not confined to their local ancestress who were married to Chinese men but this local identity was also passed down to the female descendants of such unions.

Nevertheless, in this hybridised local dress style, the *Nyonyas* revealed more than their 'local origin'. In Chapter Three, we learn that the dress culture of the *Nyonyas* resembled that of the "free women" in the archipelago, based on the evidence from Batavia where dress for free women were distinctively different from those of slaves in the eighteenth century. By mid nineteenth century however, when we have visual evidences in the Straits, the basis of this style, *baju panjang* and sarongs was popular amongst women in the archipelago generally. When the slave trades were outlawed, the need to distinguish dress styles between 'free' and 'slave' women no longer appeared critical. Yet, this dress style remained somewhat flamboyant as it was confined to those who could afford the use of jewellery like the *kerosang* and metal belt. The 'Nyonya' is a long standing concept with an image inherited from older images of "free women", certainly older concept than that of the 'Baba' or the 'Straits Chinese', even possibly older than the 'Peranakan'. Henceforth, 'Nyonya' identity probably began as a sub-identity of the original Portuguese 'Dona' or the English equivalent, 'Lady' which means a woman of some rank.

Consequently, before the twentieth century this local dress style was not 'ethnically' based in that it lacked a dominant ethnic feature, rather, it was 'stratificationally' inclined. For that I mean the aspects of ethnicity were inexplicit in this dress style but it enabled the *Nyonyas* to display their social status. As such the visual aspect of the *Nyonyas'* identity before the twentieth century enhanced the social hierarchy of the *Nyonyas* as 'local, married (free) women (to *Baba* or Chinese men) of some standing'. This visual identity certainly gives the impression that 'ethnic identity' was not crucial to the *Nyonyas*, but identifying themselves as prestigious local women was essential.

At this point, I revisit Maxwell (2003b: 263), who states, "The costume of the Baba Chinese of Malacca and Singapore, for example, has become closer to that of Islamic courts than to the *kain kebaya* cultures of the Peranakan community of north-coast Java". Maxwell raises an important point but it is unfortunate that she does not specify the time period to which she refers. My research addresses this gap by inserting a time period to contextualise this observation, namely the period before the twentieth century, from at least the latter half of the nineteenth century for which evidence exists in photographs. In this period the dress of the *Nyonyas*, particularly those in Melaka and Singapore was closer to their Islamic

counterparts in the Straits than the Chinese in the region, including the *Peranakan* Chinese of the North Coast of Java. This provides an answer to my research question regarding when and how the '*Nyonyas*' became 'Straits Chinese women'. This thesis demonstrates that it certainly did not happen before the twentieth century, visually at least, as their hybrid local dress style worn by the *Nyonyas* did not showcase themselves as 'Straits Chinese women'.

This identity persisted until the end of nineteenth century and even up to the first decade of the twentieth century when local dress style was the only style the *Nyonyas* wore. However, when the *Nyonyas* added other dress styles to their wardrobes, their base identities changed accordingly. In the twentieth century, there was a palpable switch in *Nyonya* dress styles to incorporate more European and Chinese influences. Thereafter, *Nyonyas*' identities turned away from the local direction towards the modern 'Straits Chinese women', led by the younger and educated *Nyonyas*. Consistently in this period the *Nyonyas* demonstrated a preference for Europeanised *Batik Nyonya* with motifs of European flower bouquets dominating their batik sarongs. The European influence did not end here, it was further augmented with the Europeanised lace *kebaya* and mule shoes. As I have demonstrated, the phenomenon of mimicry might well explain the situation in Java but it does not account for the situation in the Straits Settlements. Instead, 'fashion' better explains the popularity of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* in the Straits.

The twentieth century batik sarong with European floral designs and lace *kebaya* from Java were definitely fashionable and especially favoured by younger *Nyonyas*. Coming as fashion, the popularity of *Batik Nyonya* and lace *kebaya* did not just confined to the *Nyonyas* but also to other communities in the Straits. At times, it was difficult to identify the *Nyonyas* from this popular fashion. However, the modified lace *Nyonya kebaya* soon came to represent their exclusive identities in the twentieth century as they became increasingly colourful and embroidered with Chinese motifs. The Europeanised sarong *kebaya* heralded a new visual identity for the *Nyonyas*, in which they negotiated modernity through 'fashion'. This manifestation of modernity was in stark contrast to the lives of *Nyonyas* prior to the twentieth century. The younger *Nyonyas* of the Straits incidentally displayed their identity visually in the twentieth century as fashionable and modern Straits Chinese. Although the hybrid identity was still locally based but the foreign elements was largely European.

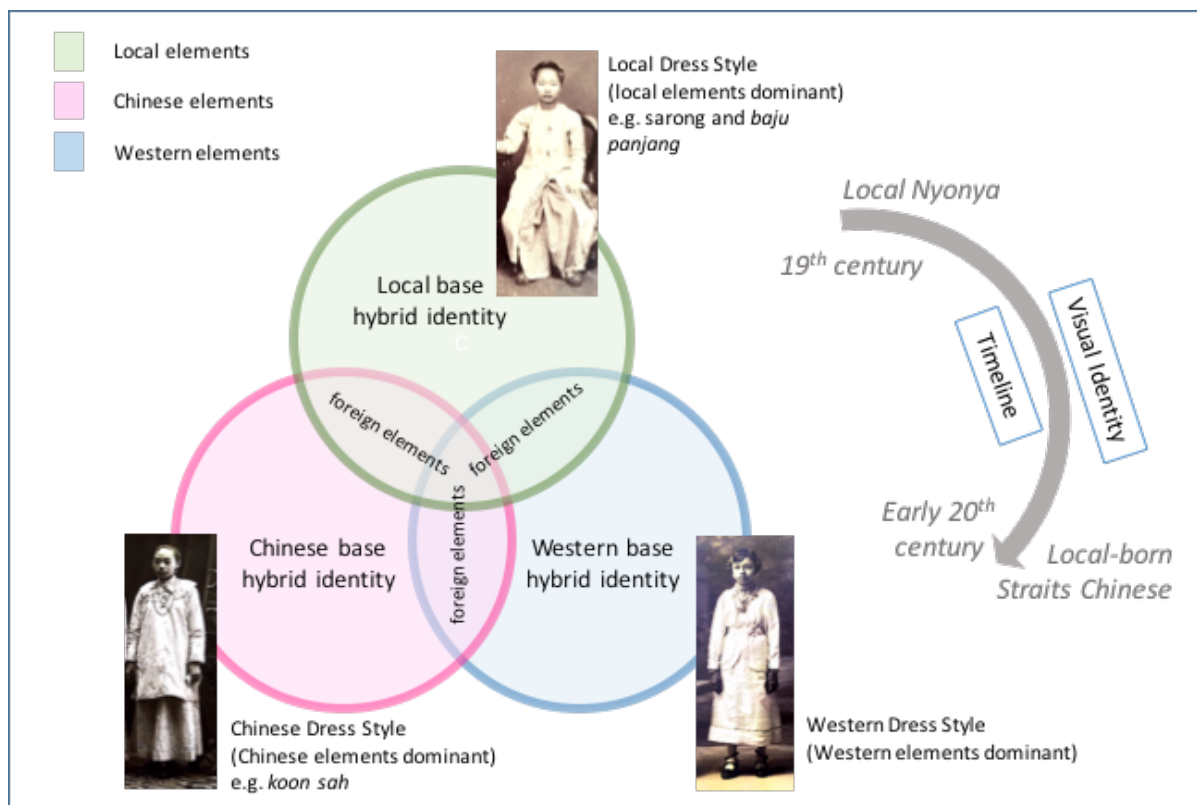


Chart 2: Local invention hybrid dress styles show the evolvement of *Nyonyas'* visual identities.

This fashionable, Europeanised sarong *kebaya* served as if to mediate the eventual change to other fashionable dress styles. At this time, the *Nyonyas'* wardrobes were crowded with different dress styles including not only Western but also Chinese dress styles. All this took place sometime after 1910 when Chinese dress styles like *koon sah*, also called *baju shanghai*, became available. *Koon sah* is also a hybrid creation but stylistically Chinese. Another hybrid invention also appeared, the locally made Western blouse and skirt was worn by young *Nyonyas*, particularly in Penang. Thus, in these two new dress styles where hybridity manifested, the *Nyonyas* were still portraying their hybrid identities. However, this hybridity was no longer a manifestation of local dress style, as such the *Nyonyas'* base identities were no longer based on those of local women but Chinese or Western instead. Hence, their hybrid identities crossed, visually, from 'local *Nyonyas*' who clad in sarong *kebaya* to the 'local-born Straits Chinese women', the British subject, who wore hybridised Chinese or Western dress styles. Although both identities were notably hybrid, but the base or "stable identities" that this hybridity was built upon changed from local to Western or Chinese as shown in chart 2 above. This time period saw visual identities of the *Nyonyas*

evolved from simple to complex and multifaceted, becoming more 'ethnically' and 'politically' inclined just like the *Babas* during such time.

Although the Straits Settlements had existed since 1826, it was only from 1852 that the 'Straits Chinese' were legally defined as 'Straits-born Chinese' or 'British subject'. As these terms were English, they naturally had greater impact on the English educated. While the 'Straits Chinese' as British subjects brought in a European connection, another aspect of this term is the word 'Chinese'. By giving this label to the *Nyonyas*, the colonial government effectively associated the *Nyonyas* with the 'British' (subject) and the (Straits) 'Chinese'. The fact that only some privileged *Nyonyas* began to receive elementary English education at the very end of the nineteenth century meant that this legal term had hardly any impact on *Nyonyas* in the nineteenth century. When education became more common for *Nyonyas* in the twentieth century, the appreciation of the concepts of 'Straits Chinese' and 'British subject' that related them to both the 'Chinese' and 'British', increased among the *Nyonyas*. In other words, the educated *Nyonyas* must have comprehended their political standing much more than when they were uneducated and confined to their homes, living separate lives to their men. Therefore, the *Nyonyas* were no longer just *Nyonyas*, through education they understood that they were also Straits 'Chinese' women and British subjects.

Another concept that came with literacy in English was the modernity associated with Europe or Britain, for instance, the concept of 'fashion'. The realisation of being 'British Subjects', 'Straits Chinese' and the concept of 'modern' and 'fashionable' was all displayed in *Nyonya* dress in the early twentieth century. By adding more dress styles to their repertoire, the *Nyonyas* could now choose their identities visually by choosing which style of dress to put on. Although some *Nyonyas*, especially the older *Nyonyas*, chose to wear checked sarong and *baju panjang* for their whole lives and remained just "*Nyonyas*" others, particularly younger *Nyonyas* switched between two or three styles and portrayed several visual identities. The liberty once enjoyed only by the *Babas* also became available to the *Nyonyas*. From this point on the identity gap between *Nyonyas* and *Babas* grew narrower, particularly among the younger crowds, and eventually merged and together they portrayed themselves as 'Straits Chinese'. The visual aspect of the *Nyonyas*' identity in either the hybrid Chinese or Western dress style that they chose to put on, not only

enhance their now ethnically based (Straits) 'Chinese' identity but also socio-politically inclined identity, the 'British' subjects.

However, the distinctive identity of the *Nyonyas*, constructed visually through their dress slowly disappeared when the significance of the Straits Chinese diminished. Even more so when the colonial era ended, the identity of the Straits Chinese, associated as it was with the former colonial government, was undoubtedly bleak so they became irrelevant. As such, the sarong *kebaya* or the hybridised Western or Chinese dress style, *koon sah*, did not see much light. Instead, the authentic Chinese dress styles that had been introduced and worn by the *Sinkhek* women were also worn by the *Nyonyas* and united these two identities into one, visually. Nevertheless, the identity of the *Nyonyas* did not disappear entirely and became somewhat like the "situational" *Nyonyas*. In the late 1970s interest in the cultural aspects of *Baba* and *Nyonya* life revived and the term 'Peranakan Chinese' came to replace the obsolete term 'Straits Chinese', either way, these labels enable the *Nyonyas* belong to while simultaneously, stand apart from the majority Chinese, a sub-ethnic identity according to Tan (1988). By then dress styles were very much a global phenomenon and much determined by fashion trends. Sarong *kebaya* became the 'traditional' dress of the *Nyonyas* and portrayed a 'traditional' *Nyonya* identity visually, whenever the sarong *kebaya* was worn. This visual aspect of *Nyonyas*' identity enhance the "situational", sub-ethnic identity of the *Nyonyas* in modern Malaysia and Singapore.

This thesis has demonstrated that the changing identities of *Nyonyas* can be observed visually through their dress. This is evidenced by the straightforward and simple identity of the *Nyonyas* in their sarong and *baju panjang* or *kebaya* that portrayed them as 'local married (free) women with some standing' before the twentieth century. This aspect of *Nyonya* identity is missing in the current literatures, and the fact that *Nyonyas* were largely illiterate before the twentieth century does not help. The first generation of *Nyonyas* were recognised as indigenous women who married pioneer Chinese men but the community that came to prosper through these unions undermined the fact that the women had separate visual identities to the men. Through their local dress style, these women were showing us that they identified with their mothers or ancestresses who were essentially local women. This is strengthened by the fact that at this time, although the inhabitants of

the cosmopolitan Straits Settlements came from all over the world, they dressed according to their place of origin and displayed their identities as such. Obviously the *Nyonyas* were no exception, they too dressed according to their place of origin which was the Malay Archipelago, as opposed to their *Baba* men who were known as ‘pioneer Chinese settlers’, or later ‘Straits Chinese’ by the British.

In the early twentieth century, the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was worn when the impact of the label ‘Straits Chinese’ and ‘British subject’ was at their height. At the same time, the *Nyonyas* began to include other hybridised Chinese or Western dress styles in their wardrobes. Although a definite timeline is difficult to establish, it was in the early twentieth century that *Nyonya* identity was somewhat equivalent to ‘Straits Chinese women’, a label created and an identity made possible by the British colonials. Nevertheless, this identity shift was a collective or group identity shift. In other words, it might not be an individual experience; some *Nyonyas* might remain *Nyonyas* their whole life cladding in their *baju panjang* and checked sarongs, while the younger generations might grow up in the era where the label ‘Straits Chinese’ was enforced and had probably never related themselves as *Nyonyas*. Thus, sarong *kebaya* was never part of their dress style. As a group, the ‘local *Nyonyas*’ became or became equivalent to the ‘local-born Straits Chinese women’ in the early twentieth century displayed visually through their dress.

In conclusion, the identity of the *Nyonyas* portrayed through their dress, that I call ‘visual identity’, was not that of a ‘Straits Chinese woman’ before the twentieth century. The *Nyonyas* did not associate themselves with the ‘Straits Chinese’, visually at least, until much later when they visually asserted themselves as such. The hypothesis of Farish A. Noor (2013), that holds the “colonial census was the most damaging feature in erasing and denying the legacy of cultural borrowing and cross fertilization”, is certainly enlightening. However, the colonial government simply created the category, the *Nyonyas* could have ignored it or remained ignorant about it as had happened when the Dutch first reported on the ‘Chinese’ in Melaka. It was English literacy that made the term ‘Straits Chinese’ fully appreciated. In this way, becoming ‘Straits Chinese Women’ was a step that facilitated the eventual merge of *Nyonya* identity with the wider *Sinkhek* Chinese women when they wore exactly like the *Sinkhek* women in *samfu* and *cheaong sam*.

In post-independent Malaysia and Singapore, the racial groupings initiated by the colonial government were continued by national governments. In Malaysia, each citizen is prescribed a '*kaum*' or 'race' (ethnicity or *keturunan* was later used) identity on their birth certificate, the minute they are born, including myself. I was told, and constantly being reminded, that I am a 'Chinese' and I took the identity that was imposed on me as a matter of fact. This identity is not something I can ignore as it is on many important documents. It was only much later, and after years of living abroad, that I began to question this 'ethnic identity' that is imposed on me. That made me realise the significant influence of a 'label' that is put on someone, especially a label that existed since one was born. At the present moment, I fail to perceive the rationale behind the 'ethnic identity' that is still persistently and officially used in Malaysia and Singapore. 'Ethnic identity' is not an identity that everyone must have, ought to have or thinks is essential to have, the word 'heritage' adequately describes my background. I now consider myself as someone who has Chinese heritage but I am not a Chinese. I fully identify with the land where I was born and raised, independent Malaysia and not the land where my ancestors came from. That was the biggest motivation behind this research, to give a voice to the mute visual images of the *Nyonyas* in the nineteenth century. In those images, I almost hear the *Nyonyas* mesmerising to the viewers with stories of who they saw themselves, in what they made themselves dressed.

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