



Eclectic Sociocultural Traditions of the Baba Nyonya of George Town, Penang, Malaysia*



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[*Abstract*]

Strategically situated between the East-West maritime crossroads, the peoples of Southeast Asia over the centuries witnessed the comings and goings of traders from territories from East Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Europe. There were also those from North America that crossed the Pacific for commercial profits in this region. Foreign traders undoubtedly in the course of their visits and sojourns had liaisons with local women, some engaged in marriages. Offspring of these interracial miscegenation possessed rather unique characteristics. As a community, they were identified with the Malay term, *peranakan*, from the root word, “*anak*” meaning “child,” hence “offspring” or “descendent”. Specific terms – Baba Nyonya, *Tionghoa-Selat*, *Chitty*, *Jawi Pekan*, *Pashu*, *Kristang* – referred to particular groups. Although

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socially they appeared 'neither here nor there', members of mixed parentage were able to carve an especial niche in the local environment throughout Southeast Asia, conspicuously in urban, port-cities where trade and commerce predominated. Following in the footsteps of their progenitor, the Peranakan acted as intermediaries, comprador between foreign and indigenous enterprises, profiting financially and socially from trade and commerce. Tapping on the author's personal experiences and first-hand observations, complementing with oral sources, and support from secondary materials, this present essay explores, discusses, and analyzes the eclectic sociocultural practices and traditions of the Baba Nyonya of George Town, Penang. Purposeful intention is to further enlighten our understanding, and in turn, our appreciation, of these ever increasingly diminishing communities and their cultures across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Social history, *Baba Nyonya*, George Town, Penang, Sociocultural heritage, Ethnohistory

I . Introduction

Baba Nyonya, *Tionghoa-Selat*, *Chitty*, *Jawi Pekan*, *Pashu*, *Serani* and *Kristang* are some of the varied labels referring to descendants of offspring between foreign men and native Southeast Asian women since the fifteenth or earlier centuries. Collectively identified with the generic Malay term *Peranakan*, from the root word, "*anak*" meaning "child", hence "offspring" or "descendent". A maritime crossroads between East Asia and South and West Asia and Europe, Southeast Asia¹ witnessed the comings and goings of traders from without since earliest times. Trading sojourns inevitably led to liaisons or cohabitation with local women including bona fide marriages. Communities borne from such interracial miscegenation possessed characteristics that are proverbially neither here nor there. Nonetheless these communities of mixed parentage, hence heritage,

¹ The term 'Southeast Asia' was borne from South-East Asia Command (SEAC), a British designated military theatre of operation during the Pacific War (1941-1945). Since then the term became common usage for the region in the post-war period.

were able to carve an especial niche in the local wider society across Southeast Asia, conspicuous in urban, port-cities where trade and commerce were the main livelihood. Like their progenitor, the Peranakan functioned as intermediaries between foreign and local enterprises and benefited financially and socially from trading and commercial activities.

This present study focuses on the unique attributes of the *Peranakan* utilizing the *Baba Nyonya* of George Town, Penang as illustration and reference. Their genesis as a community and exceptional characteristics are analyzed to enlighten our understanding and appreciation of one of these increasingly diminishing communities across Southeast Asia. It shall be argued that the inimitable characteristics of the Baba Nyonya were borne between Chinese patriarchal influence and indigenous (mainly Malay) matrilineal impact. On the one hand, the patriarchal maintenance of Chinese world of beliefs (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) was balanced on the other hand, with the sustainability of matrilineal bearing on the greater parts of sociocultural traits and traditions including home language, cuisine, and clothing, particularly of female attire.

II. Terminology and Ascription

Peranakan derives from the Malay, "*anak*", denoting child, hence "born of" or offspring, but often has the implied meaning of descendent. *Peranakan* refers to the locally born, by local is meant within the Malay World, namely contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia. Singularly, *peranakan* does not ascribe to any racial or ethnic background, but with a qualifying noun of the particular descent, the patriarchal, is identified. Hence, there is Peranakan Chinese, or Baba Nyonya as in Malaysia, the Peranakan Tionghoa/Cina in Indonesia, both of Chinese heritage, or Peranakan Belanda, of Dutch descent.

The Peranakan Chinese / Baba Nyonya of modern Malaysia and Singapore are descendants of Chinese forefathers who came to port-cities of Melaka (from the fifteenth century), Penang (from late eighteenth century), and Singapore (from early nineteenth century)

who took local (Malay) wives. Owing to Penang, Melaka and Singapore comprising the British administrative creation of the Straits Settlements (1826), the Peranakan Chinese was also ascribed the term, Straits Chinese, denoting Chinese born in the Straits Settlements. But not all Straits Chinese were Baba Nyonya, unless they demonstrated Sino-Malay syncretic characteristics (Khoo 1996; Clammer 1980).

The double-barrel term of *Baba Nyonya* refers to the male and female respectively of Peranakan Chinese (Ooi 2004). *Baba*, from the Hindustani, which originated from Parsi (Farsi) or Persia (contemporary Iran) entered Malay lexicography as a term of endearment for one's male grandparent. Subsequently, in the Malay vernacular, *Baba* came to be an honorific of respect for Straits-born Chinese of standing. *Nyonya* (*nyonyah*, *nonya*), denotes a Straits-born Chinese female, is an honorific in the Malay World as a form of respect to a non-local (non-Malay) married woman borrowing from the Portuguese *donha*, a lady. Melaka was a Portuguese colony for 130 years, between 1511 and 1641. *Nyonya*, thus, came to be attributed to non-Malay women of standing; subsequently became exclusively for female members of Peranakan Chinese.

III. Baba Nyonya of George Town, Penang

The thrust of this study focuses on the unique attributes of the *Peranakan* in utilizing the Baba Nyonya of George Town, Penang as illustration and point of reference. The period from the later part of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Pacific War (1941-1945) forms the bulk of the timeframe. The second phase comprised the post-war era between 1945 and 1970s, early 1980s. Thereafter, the 1990s to 2010s.

3.1. Ancestral Roots

During the pre-steam era, the monsoons largely dictated the schedule of traders and merchants (Cleary 2004). The northeast monsoon (November-February) brought merchants from East Asia to Penang where they traded and sojourned while awaiting the change

to the southwest monsoon (June-August) that brought traders from the West (South and West Asia, and Europe) that at the same time took those from the East home. Natural instincts ensured that they sought local female company; others opted for formal marriages for long term sustainability of their businesses under the care of their bloodline.

Like most Peranakan across Southeast Asia, Penang's Baba Nyonya families traced their progenitor's origin to Hokkien of the trading and entrepreneurial class. Trade in medicine and foodstuffs to the southern seas, *Nanyang*, were carried out by enterprising Hokkien traders and merchants from the southeast provinces of Fujian and Guangdong (Ng 2017). Exiting from ports of Guangzhou (Canton) and Xiamen (Amoy) in the pre-Qing period as early as the fifteenth century, and more cautiously during Qing rule of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries owing to imperial sanctions of venturing abroad, Hokkien traders and merchants bravely carved a commercial niche in Siam (Thailand), Burma (Myanmar), northern Sumatra, western Malay Peninsula, northern Borneo, and northern Philippines (Kong 2017). Hokkien Chinese comfortably settled in Melaka since the fifteenth century, and in southern Burma and Siam and the northeast Malay states from the late eighteenth century.

The knot of Hokkien traders, not only survived the tropical elements of disease, dangers of the erratic seas, of the dense jungle, but also of avaricious local potentates who ruled through whims and fancies. Armed only with their wit, charm, creativity, resourcefulness and large dosages of providence on their side, the early Hokkien traders cultivated networks of patronage with local rulers, notable chiefs, and local traders ensuring sustainable relations for commercial gains and protection and security of lives and property. Overall Hokkien traders sufficed on the grace and kind-heartedness of local patrons.

Unsurprisingly Hokkien traders were one of the first to join Francis Light on Penang when declared Prince of Wales Island in August 1786 and George Town lay out shortly thereafter to serve the Honorable English East India Company (EEC) in its China trade (Ooi 2017). The Hokkien Chinese seized the commercial opportunities

that the newly established port-city offered where all transactions were legally protected under British law and justice, far from the arbitrariness of native rulers.

It was these early Hokkien traders, merchants and entrepreneurs that begun to extend their sojourning period beyond the trading season and decided to carve a more permanent existence. The Hokkien men took on local women, initially as house maids and also as companions; others decided on more permanent relations in entering into formal marriages. The local women were drawn from the pool of slaves of various ethnicity notably Malay, Acehnese and Batak, also Bugis, Javanese, Balinese, and Boyanese (Nordin 2007). From these humble unions, the Baba Nyonya of Penang emerged.

Besides Hokkien Chinese, other dialect groups such as Teochew and Cantonese also migrated to Penang in this early phase. Hakka and Cantonese arrived from the mid-nineteenth century consequent of the coolie traffic for the tin mining industry in the western Malay states particularly in upper Perak (Larut and Kinta) (Lee 2013). Besides mine workers that came through the port-city of George Town whereby the majority moved on to the Malay states, there were artisans and craftsmen (mainly Cantonese), and peasant farmers (largely Hakka) as well as war refugees (Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, etc.).²

Sino-Malay miscegenation that brought forth the Baba Nyonya of Penang occurred during the late eighteenth century (opening of Penang as a trading outpost) and the early part of the nineteenth century (immigration of traders to Penang). By the second half of the nineteenth century, not only were the ethnic lines apparent between the Baba Nyonya and China-born Chinese, but also Sino-Malay marriages were increasingly rare within Penang society. Marriages amongst Baba Nyonya families seemed to be the norm rather than the exception. It was only in the post-war period (1945-1970s/1980s) that the Baba and Nyonya begin to intermarry with other Chinese (non-Baba Nyonya), across dialect groups, and

² Many refugees, including Taiping rebels, fled following the failure of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). Hakka war refugees settled in George Town and Balik Pulau, a settlement in the interior southwest of the island.

a small sample of the then still rare interracial marriages with non-Chinese, namely Indian and Malay. The chief barrier to the latter was, and still is, the mandatory ruling of conversion upon marriage to a Muslim, regardless of ethnicity.

Owing to the predominance of the patriarchal tradition, Chinese men who married local women insisted that the ancestral culture be retained hence Chinese beliefs and practices, viz. Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism remained central and sustainable for *Peranakan* descendants. But for other sociocultural practices and norms such as food, clothing, and to some extent the home-language, influences from the indigenous (women/wives/mothers) were more pronounced.

3.2. Language

The Baba Nyonya of Penang is unique in retaining their Hokkien dialect to contemporary times, often complimentarily described as a sing-song rendition (Wong 2017). Their brethren in Melaka, however, had long discarded the Hokkien dialect being only conversant in Baba Malay (Tan 1988). Amongst Penang's Baba Nyonya, spoken Hokkien customarily comprised a jumble of Hokkien intermixed with Malay and English words and phrases (Teoh and Lim 1999). Unsurprisingly their rendition of Hokkien is largely unintelligible to Hokkien speakers in Taiwan or Xiamen, and vice versa (Ding 2016).

The fact that local women were taken as wives, Malay being their mother tongue, played a pivotal role in Baba Nyonya households. Offspring learnt the Hokkien dialect that was much infused with his/her mother's native tongue, namely Malay.

Moreover, owing to the tradition of English-medium schooling in government-supported Penang Free School (1816) and missionary schools such as St Xavier's Institution (1852), the Penang Baba acquired fluency in the King's English (latter Queen's English). Well-to-do Baba Nyonya families sent their sons for tertiary education in British universities notably, Oxford, Cambridge, London hence their command of English was further heightened. English words and phrases inevitably crept into the daily usage of

conversational Hokkien. When increasingly more females were sent to English-medium schools such as the various Catholic Convent schools and the premier (initially Anglican) St Georges Girls' School, the Nyonya too became conversantly adept at English infusing more loan words into daily Hokkien speech. Subsequently, the rather jumble ensemble of Penang Hokkien dialect came into being. A sample illustrates this admixture.³

Wah chee-nya suka chiak chocolate ice-cream after kari hoo-tau eh lunch. [I very much like to eat chocolate ice-cream after having a lunch of fish-head curry.]

Wah chee-nya [Hokkien] *suka* [Malay] *chiak* [Hokkien] *chocolate ice-cream after* [English] *kari* [Malay] *hoo-tau eh* [Hokkien] *lunch* [English].

In recent years, efforts have been made to codify the Hokkien dialect in Penang that is heavily influenced by the Baba Nyonya.⁴

Until the late-1990s, Baba Nyonya brand of Hokkien continued to be used both at home and in the wider community in Penang at markets, street stalls, restaurants. But consequent of the implementation of three streams on the basis of medium of instruction at government elementary schools in the 1990s, viz. Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) for national schools, and national-type schools either Mandarin or Tamil as the main medium, the use of Chinese dialects including Hokkien gave way to Mandarin. Hence by the latter half of the 1990s and from the 2000s, Chinese children and adolescents increasingly used Mandarin in daily conversations. Inevitably, the Baba Nyonya version of Hokkien gradually lost its utility even within Baba Nyonya families.

Furthermore, from the late 1970s, the nuclear family took precedence over the extended family format especially in urban settings whereby couples raised their children on their own. Youngsters of Baba Nyonya families did not, like their parents, have

³ Transliterated by author.

⁴ In recent years, there has been a spate of interest in the Penang brand of Hokkien with at least two English-Hokkien dictionaries (Gijzel and Lee 2016; Gijzel 2009), and two other books for conversation (Tan 2008; Tan 2016).

the benefit to live with grandparents who continued to converse using the Hokkien dialect. New Zealand academic, Catherine Churchman of the School of Languages and Cultures in Victoria University of Wellington, who researched the Taiwanese and Penang Hokkien dialects, regrettably stated that “languages often die the same way, and one of the reasons is simply the existence of a generation gap” (Wong 2017). Compounding the phenomena, intermarriages between Baba Nyonya and non-Baba Nyonya are commonplace as choice or love marriages replaced arranged marriages from the 1970s. The traditional Hokkien dialect of the Baba Nyonya had lost its pivotal place within the family circle likewise in the wider public sphere where Mandarin has increasingly replaced Hokkien as the *lingua franca* amongst the Chinese in Penang (ibid.).⁵

3.3. Eclectic Sociocultural Characteristics

Owing to the admixture of interethnic heritage, the Baba Nyonya possessed eclectic sociocultural traits. Drawing on the life experiences, insights, and knowledge of respondents namely Madam Tan Ai Gek, 90, Madam Chew Chui Gek, 94, and Madam Ong Poh Choo, 84, all third generation Nyonya of Penang, the foregoing section explores, discusses and analyzes a host of characteristics, viz. religious traditions, marriage practices, first-born, attire, cuisine, livelihood, and political affinity. The oral traditions and secondary materials are complemented by the present author’s first-hand observations and inquiries to various Baba Nyonya households in George Town over a span of five decades.⁶

3.3.1. Religious traditions

The dominant patriarchal system ensured that the Chinese world of beliefs, viz. Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism remained the religious tradition of the Baba Nyonya of Penang. Age-old customary practices of honoring Buddha and Daoist deities in the

⁵ Likewise, with all Chinese dialects across Malaysia. Cantonese, once the predominant dialect in Kuala Lumpur, has taken a back seat to Mandarin.

⁶ The author is a fourth generation Baba Nyonya descendant and a resident of George Town since the 1950s.

household with sanctified permanent altars in the main hall or living room, the kitchen, and at the main entrance or main doorway were adhered with concomitant devotion to rituals passed on from generation to generation. The first and fifteenth day of the Chinese lunar calendar were especial for prayers. While daily prayers only comprised the mandatory three lighted joss sticks at the altars, flowers and/or fruits were served during the first and fifteenth of each month.

Household deities in most Baba Nyonya homes feature the Heavenly Jade Emperor (T'nee Kong) with an altar outside the main door. A wooden red-colored plaque with Chinese characters in gold denoting T'nee Kong is flanked by two candelabras for red candles on either side of a joss holder, and space for offerings including three small red cups of tea or water, and a tray of fruits and/or vase of flowers. Prayers to T'nee Kong preceded all others, and the customary three joss sticks are placed in the holder following obeisance.

Upon entering the household through the main entrance, one is confronted with the main altar facing the door. On the altar sits a statuette of the Buddha often of Chinese Buddhist design, and flanked by Kuan Im (Goddess of Mercy), especially popular amongst Nyonya. The altar's paraphernalia includes a centrally placed joss holder, flanked by candelabras on either side, the mandatory three red cups of tea or water, and space for plates of fruits and/or flowers. Vases for flowers on either side of the altar were commonplace decorations. In front of the altar, a small stool or miniature bench facilitates kneeling. Altars often come with drawers on either ends where prayer paraphernalia are stored.

Below the main altar is an altar devoted to the earth deity, Thay Chu Kong. The aforesaid prayer paraphernalia are replicated. Devotees need to kneel and bent down when offering prayers to Thay Chu Kong. The Cham Mu Kong or Kitchen's God altar is emplaced in a vantage position overseeing the family hearth where all daily meals are prepared. Similar altar paraphernalia are in place.

Family members conduct their daily prayers at all household altars commencing with the Heavenly Jade Emperor and concluding

at the Kitchen's God. In respondent Madam Tan's words on household prayers.

Mah [her mother] is [a] devout [follower of] Kuan Im, and we children [herself and her cousins] had to pray every morning before meals [breakfast]. Goh Ee Poh [fifth matrilineal grand aunt] will light my joss sticks, always reminding [to place] three for each altar. We children were instructed to appeal to Kuan Im for good health of our father and mother, grandfather, grandmother, family, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles. I [tend to] forget one aunt, sometimes, two aunts ... I usually also add [sic. ask] Kuan Im to ease my headaches.⁷

Additionally, on the auspicious first and fifteenth of every month of the lunar calendar, Nyonya in particular would make an effort to pray at Kuan Im Teng, the Goddess of Mercy Temple on Pitt Street (present-day Jalan Mesjid Kapitan Keling) in downtown George Town. Kuan Im holds an especial place amongst Chinese womenfolk, and the Nyonya was no exception in her devotion (Blofeld 2009). Besides joss sticks and a variety of prayer papers, the Nyonya would also offer three variety of fruits and/or flowers. While the joss sticks and prayer papers were burnt, the fruit offerings were brought home for family members to partake.

Likewise, on commemorative days such as Chinese New Year and birthdays of deities, the entire Baba Nyonya household would offer prayers at the temples. Kuan Im, for instance, celebrates three birthdays, namely the 19th of the Second, Sixth and Ninth Lunar Moon where devotees including the Nyonya will flock to Kuan Im Teng or other temples to pay homage and ask for blessings for the entire household. "We children," Madam Tan recalls, "travel on trishaws from [our] house in Burmah Road to Pitt Street temple [Kuan Im Teng] accompanying Ee Poh [aunt] to pray."⁸

Respondent Madam Ong recollects memories of childhood visits to Kuan Im Teng.

There were many *ang-mah-mah* [beggars] at the entrance begging for

⁷ Interview, 21 July 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

alms. My mother will give them coins; my Sah Ee Poh [third matrilocal grand aunt] refused [such] charity and did not give any money. It was very crowded [with] many people and burning joss sticks. It made my eyes tear, and I was frightened of the crowd. Chanting was prevalent with bells ringing, and sound of gongs. People were very loud, often shouting. I could not see [the deity] Kuan Im [at the altar], only [see] women's back.⁹

Although Kuan Im Teng is the most popular, each family patronized their preferred temple owing to traditional ties or personal relations since past generations. Some of these familial relations dates back several generations to the family progenitor.¹⁰

Furthermore, Chinese temples were also important for consultations, blessings, and thanksgiving for the Baba Nyonya. Thanks to their English-medium schooling, most Baba Nyonya subscribed to Western medicine, diagnosis and treatment, but spiritual assistance was concurrently sought with deities at temples. Pragmatism was the underlying principle amongst the Chinese in overcoming illnesses or other predicaments, and the Baba Nyonya were no exception. Mediums at temples were consulted for advice whether an ailment was provoked by malevolent spirits or otherwise, and the prescribed panacea to counter such adverse influence.¹¹ Besides, crucial decision-making relating to career moves, marriages, business ventures also sought the medium's advice and/or resolution. Bona fide mediums charged a nominal fee for consultation, and the clients' generosity ensured an *ang pow* (red packet) donation to the temple upkeep. For instance, Hor Kai Kong Temple, a Chinese temple on Cantonment Road (Jalan Cantonment), Penang has a medium session each evening (except

⁹ Interview, 24 July 2015.

¹⁰ Madam Chew's grandmother had fostered close relations with the founder of Phor Tay Ee, a Chinese Buddhist temple-cum-school on Gottlieb Road (Jalan Gottlieb), Bagan Jermal, Penang. This relationship continued during Chew's mother's generation, hence Phor Tay Ee came to be like the family's "temple". Interview, 2 August 2015.

¹¹ Madam Tan is adamant that her two daughters and only son do not marry Christians or Muslims as she is worried that in the event of ailments of the grandchildren, consulting Daoist deities through mediums might be an issue with their spouses. Interview, 21 July 2015.

Saturday, and Sunday, from 12 noon) at about nine o'clock. Devotees would consult the medium on various issues, and talismans, prayers, and blessings together with advice would be given. A mere 20 sens consultation fee is mandatory; additional donations are unlimited.

Funeral rites may follow Daoist rituals or Buddhist practices but remembrance of the deceased was dictated by Confucian ancestor worship rituals. Cheng Beng (Qingming) or Chinese All Souls Day falls in the early part of the Chinese third lunar month (equivalent to the Gregorian 4th or 5th of April). Rituals could be undertaken on any day during a 20-day window (ten days prior to the date and ten days thereafter). The venues for prayers depended on where the deceased was emplaced. Traditionally, most Baba Nyonya would be buried in family plots. Hence, the tomb or grave site was where prayers were offered with cooked foods, fruits, *kuih* (Nyonya cakes), prayer papers including paper money, paper products (personal items such as clothing, shoes, radio, etc., all made of paper). Roasted pigs, chickens, ducks were mandatory food offerings. Traditional practices of ensuring that the food offerings were piping hot when served, charcoal braziers were carried to tomb sites, requiring hiking up a hill or knoll, and the warming up of the cooked dishes were undertaken prior to serving to great-great-grandfather. It was an "expedition" of sorts involving the entire extended family and household with a brigade of servants (*amah-chieh*)¹² helping with transporting all the required paraphernalia to the grave site and executing the needful. Every family member, from infant to grandpa, was required to pay respect to the honorable ancestor. The grave site often overgrown with weeds were cleared, cleaned, and additional soil was heaped on the mound of the tomb to ensure that the latter was always "full", never sunken for want of soil lest inauspicious for *kia soon* (lit. children and grandchildren, descendants).

During respondent Madam Tan's mother's lifetime (d. 1956),

¹² The *amah-chieh* largely comprised Cantonese women who came in the late 1920s and early 1930s to work as domestic workers in European and affluent Chinese households. Owing to their customary attire of white blouse over loose black pants, they were renowned as the "black and white amahs" (Ooi 1992).

Cheng Beng was undertaken at the grave site of ancestors at Mount Erskine, Tanjong Tokong, Penang. It was a major annual undertaking involving the entire household of extended relatives comprising five families. A 40-seater bus was hired to convey the entourage, the various foods, and equipment including at least two braziers and charcoal.¹³

When cremation became more acceptable from the second half of the twentieth century partly owing to the rising cost of burial plots consequent of land scarcity and partly for convenience, ashes were interred in urns and kept at Chinese or Buddhist temples. It was at these temples that the practice and rites of ancestor worship were undertaken. For the exceptional few who wished that their ashes be scattered at sea, their *sin choo* or soul/death plaque was placed at a temple or columbarium to facilitate ancestor worship. In the case of respondent Madam Chew, who lived with her nieces, entrusted the younger niece that her ashes be scattered at sea. Her niece did undertake her wishes and her ashes were indeed taken out on a boat out to sea off Persiaran Gurney and strewn on the waves.¹⁴ Following the mandatory 7th-, 49th-, and 100th-day rituals, the deceased would be invited for subsequent prayers – Cheng Beng, death anniversary, etc. – at the household. Prayers at home replicated all the rituals performed at the tomb, temple or columbarium.¹⁵

Baba Nyonya religious traditions have increasingly been eroded since the mid-1970s. The trend of nuclear families had compromised many traditional rituals as much due to ignorance as of the attitude of discarding the “old” and embracing the “new”. Young couples might also turn to other faiths, for instance Christianity, hence starting new “traditions” in their family. By the third timeframe, 1990s to 2010s, few young people from Baba Nyonya heritage were neither aware, able to identify or even

¹³ Interview, 21 July 2015.

¹⁴ Personal communication with Ann Cheah, younger niece of respondent Madam Chew.

¹⁵ Following the passing of her mother in the mid-1950s, Madam Tan decided to carry out the Cheng Beng rituals at home for the sake of convenience. Interview, 30 July 2015.

comprehend the myriad rituals and traditions.

3.3.2. Marriage

Not until the 1970s, the norm of Baba Nyonya marriages were arranged affairs. A union of two families formed the basis of a marriage, and elders undertook this all-important pairing. Typically, when a child comes of age, a matchmaker was engaged to seek him/her a spouse. Acting like a sleuth, the matchmaker would “investigate”, viz. cognizance of family history of insanity, epilepsy, retarded, and any other adverse elements; if evident, the candidate was disqualified. Equally pivotal was the socio-economic standing; fairy tales do not happen, as matchmakers have reputations to uphold, hence no farmer’s son is going to marry a rubber *towkay*’s¹⁶ daughter.

Once a match has been decided upon by both families, preparations for the engagement and the marriage itself were undertaken months prior to the auspicious occasions. A host of preparations for the wedding ceremony were time-consuming endeavors owing to elaborate rituals and ceremonies involved. The wedding costumes for the couple were tailored-made, decorations of the bridal chamber, ensuring that all wedding paraphernalia are on hand for the various ceremonies (viz. *Lap Chai*, *Cheo Thau*, *Pang The*, etc.), drawing up of the guest list, wedding invitations to be personally delivered to relatives and friends by the parents of the couple - *pang lau-hiok*, lit. “dropping leaves”, extending an invitation, the *th’ng tok* (long table) lunch for wedding guests, entertainment during the wedding. The elaborate menu for the wedding’s *th’ng tok* lunch or dinner was both costly and protracted in preparations. Home-cooked wedding fare to offer a traditional sumptuous meal for guests comprising relatives, business partners and acquaintances, friends and neighbors (Wong 2003).

To the Baba Nyonya, acquiring a son-in-law or a daughter-

¹⁶ A Hokkien Chinese term whereby *tow* (head) and *kay* (family) literally denotes “head of a family” or “patriarch.” Also refers to a proprietor of a business, shop, mine, or commercial plantation; in large measure, the term is attributed to an individual of social standing and wealth, and commonly used as prefix to the individual’s name, viz. Towkay Lim Lean Teng, a prominent philanthropist of pre-war Penang.

in-law was a coup of sorts as marriages ensured the sustainability of the family with offspring. Unlike China-born Chinese who favored the male line where having sons were gainful in bringing into the family daughters-in-law who became part of the family, the Baba Nyonya favored both male and female child. A *chin choay* (matrilocal) marriage whereby a son-in-law was welcomed into the bride's family was a common Baba Nyonya practice but shunned by the China-born. But for the Baba Nyonya, the *chin choay* marriage was a means in enriching the family gene pool with the taking in of a talented son-in-law. Other circumstance too might favour a matrilocal marriage. Madam Tan, who had an arranged marriage in the early 1950s, is an example.

Mah [her mother] insisted with the matchmaker that the prospective bridegroom must agree to 'marry in' the [bride's] family, if not, abort the match. Being the only child, Mah needed me to care for her [often ill], and also later, to look after Pah [her father]. The first prospect's [bridegroom] family, especially the father, was not keen, hence opted for the second. The latter, a widow who then lived in a rented room in a shophouse, was agreeable.¹⁷

Stories told of a talented young man being supported in his education by a Baba *towkay* who subsequently marries one of his patron's daughters and taken in as a son-in-law.¹⁸

A traditional Baba Nyonya wedding was a protracted 12-day affair with most activities and ceremonies at the bride's residence (Cheo 1983). *Lap Chai* or the exchange of gifts between the families are carried out with much pomp, an opportunity to showcase wealth and affluence. On the eve of the wedding, the bride undergoes the *Cheo Thau*, literally hair-combing ritual that symbolically marked a coming of age. Her mother, symbolically for the *final* time, combs the bride-to-be's hair while whispering advice to her of being a good wife, mother, and daughter (in-law) in her husband's family.¹⁹ Undoubtedly an emotional affair, both mother and daughter shed

¹⁷ Interview, 30 July 2015.

¹⁸ Related to author by Madam Chew, interview, 2 August 2015.

¹⁹ Owing to a *chin choay* marriage, Madam Tan's mother spoke to her of wifely duties and responsibilities of a mother. Interview, 30 July 2015.

tears during this solemn ceremony witnessed by family members and close relatives.

On the wedding day, by tradition the bridegroom on a horse with his entourage journeys to the bride's residence. This procession was of great pomp and fanfare accompanied by musicians playing *serunai* (a wind musical instrument), and men carrying umbrellas and lanterns. All the rituals and ceremonies were orchestrated by a Pak Chindek and a Sang Kek Um, the wedding master and mistress of ceremony respectively.

The *Chim Pang* ceremony was when the bride would lead her groom into the bridal chamber. There for the first time, he would unveil her to have the first look of his bride. Both would be served tea followed by a bowl of *kuih ee* (mini white and red dumplings in a sugared consommé), symbolically that they both share a sweet life together.

In the *Pang Teh* ceremony, literally serving tea, an introductory ritual whereby the bride and bridegroom serve tea to their respective parents, followed by elder relatives. The elders would be seated, and the couple in their knees serve them tea; prior to each serving, the proper address of the elder would be publicly announced by the Sang Kek Um, and the couple to vocalize the address, for instance, "Fifth Uncle and Fifth Aunt, kindly accept our offer of tea". Having drank the tea and in returning the cup, the elder would present the couple a gift wrapped in red packet (often of gold jewelry, cash). For junior members of the family, they would in turn serve the seated bride and bridegroom tea, and in return, received an *ang pow* from the couple. Often this ceremony might stretch between an hour or two as most Baba Nyonya families commonly comprised three or four generations.²⁰

A crucial ceremony was performed on the twelfth day, hence *Dua Belas Hari* ceremony, whereby a ritual was performed to confirmed the union. The bride's parents, often her mother, would

²⁰ For images of a traditional Baba Nyonya wedding and feast, for instance, see C. K. Lam, Baba-Nyonya Wedding with a Peranakan Dining Experience. October 14, 2010. <http://www.what2seeonline.com/2010/10/baba-nyonya-wedding-with-a-peranakan-dining-experience/> (Accessed Dec 17, 2017).

invite the bridegroom's mother to inspect a *Bim Poah* (a white handkerchief) collected from the matrimonial bed. She would ceremoniously place the *Bim Poah* on a tray, presented to the bridegroom's mother, and invite the latter to squeeze lime juice on the handkerchief to ascertain the authenticity of the blood stain, evidence that the bride was a virgin.

Meanwhile at the bride's family residence, *nasi lemak* would be prepared. It is a common Malay fare of rice (*nasi*) cooked in coconut milk (*lemak*, meaning rich taste) served with a variety of condiments such as chicken or beef curry, fried tamarind-marinated prawns, slices of boiled eggs, fried anchovies with salted peanuts, slices of cucumber, and *sambal belacan*. No one consumes the *nasi lemak* until favorable news is received from the bridegroom's household.

But prudently and diplomatically, the bridegroom's mother would decline the invitation to perform the test, hence circumventing any untoward result that would undoubtedly forever marred relations between the two families. According to Madam Tan, her mother-in-law ruled out this twelfth day ceremony, and her own mother concurred with the decision.²¹

Up until the early 1970s, most of the aforesaid wedding ceremonies and rituals remained intact with minor modifications in respect of the changing times. Instead of a horse, for instance, the bridegroom arrives in a car. Thereafter, new trends overtook traditions. Lunch or dinner at restaurants or hotels freed the residence from the hordes of visitors, circumvent the burden of preparation and cleaning up thereafter, and the required skills and expertise needed to serve a *th'ng tok* meal. Arranged marriages made way for love matches albeit blessings from both parents. Those who had embraced other faiths, Christianity or Islam, or married other ethnic groups such as Indian-Hindu, Europeans would also dispense with Baba Nyonya wedding traditions.

Owing to a revitalization of Baba Nyonya heritage in Penang since the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the declaration in mid-2008

²¹ Interview, 30 July 2015.

of “Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca” as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), the traditional Baba Nyonya wedding with all the ceremonies and rituals are staged for the benefit of visitors.

3.3.3. First-Born

The Baba Nyonya prized both male and female offspring in contrast to the China-born who considered raising daughters as raising other people’s child consequent of the fact that when daughters marry, they *belong* to their husband’s family. A traditional Chinese saying wryly denounced a female offspring: “It is better to raise geese than daughters.” The geese, when sold, at least had a commercial value rather than the losing proposition of having a female child. The Baba Nyonya, however, readily welcome a *chin choay* marriage; daughters in fact proved an asset, for marriage brought into the family a son-in-law who could enriched the family gene pool. Nonetheless, there remained partiality towards a male offspring as the continuity of the family name was assured. After having two daughters, Madam Tan had her third offspring in the hope for a son, and she was fortunate to be blessed with a boy.²²

Gender notwithstanding, the birth of a child was indeed a celebratory occasion. Traditionally, *bidan* or mid-wives were engaged for the delivery often at home in the family residence. During the entire nine-month pregnancy, the mother-to-be adhered to a variety of *pantang* (restrictions), from dietary control to physical movements. A Nyonya heavy with child was refrained from viewing less than beautiful objects as it might adversely impact on her unborn. For instance, it was forbidden for a pregnant Nyonya to visit Penang’s sprawling Botanic Gardens famed for roving bands of macaques lest the new born might resemble or behave like the primates.²³ Hence, an expectant Nyonya was kept indoors with minimal physical exertions.

As obstetrics advanced in the twentieth century coupled with English-medium education being widespread amongst the forward-

²² Interview, 30 July 2015.

²³ Madam Tan, interview, 21 July 2015.

looking Baba Nyonya, the traditional home birth made way for delivery at specialist maternity homes or at the Penang General Hospital. Maternity homes ranged from converted shophouses to terraced houses refurbished to accommodate between six and eight expectant women.²⁴ Often operated by a retired nurse or well-known *bidan*, with assistance from several housemaids (for cooking, house-keeping, caregivers), the maternity home customarily received routine visits by a medical practitioner. During the later stages of labor, a doctor was present to address complications. Respondent Madam Tan recalled her ordeal.

Labor was much longer [than for her first-born]. [There were] problems [breech birth] during the birth of my second child. It was beyond the capabilities of Mary [the *bidan*], and Dr Khoo was called in. It was costly, almost twice the cost four years ago [when she had her first-born].²⁵

Often normal deliveries were solely attended by the *bidan*. The *bidan* also specialized in post-natal care whereby specialist foods were prepared for the mother. Given that babies then were breast-fed, the diet of the mother was especially important to ensure nutrients benefitted the newborn. A must-have post-natal food was stir-fry chicken with lavish amounts of shredded ginger fried in generous doses of sesame oil; a strengthening dish for a new mother. Ginger and sesame oil are both considered “hot” foods that new mothers should consumed to regain strength, vitality, and replenish blood loss during childbirth.²⁶ Again, a regime of *pantang* were in place.

‘Cold’ foods such as *la-la*, *siput*, *kappa* [various types of shellfish] were forbidden. Everything consumed must be served piping hot, rice, soup, fried vegetables. Mah [her mother] was strict on *pantang*; she says if you are stubborn [disregard prohibitions], you will suffer in your old age. Heng [her husband] had to buy only big fish such

²⁴ Madam Tan’s two daughters and a son were born at maternity homes, a commonplace practice of the 1950s. Interview, 30 July 2015.

²⁵ Interview, 21 July 2015.

²⁶ There is a specific section titled “Confinement Food” in Wong’s *Nyonya Flavours* (2003) for post-natal care.

as *tau tay* [pomfret], *siakap* [barramundi or Asian sea bass] not small fishes ... if not, Mah will be furious as the latter [small fishes] are believed to be *tok* ['toxic'].²⁷

Little has changed relating to pregnancies and childbirth since the late nineteenth century to the 1960s as far as *pantang* and *bidan* were concerned. The latter's services were gradually phased out as hospitals became the preferred choice over maternity homes. Many *pantang* during the pre- and post-natal period were also disregarded and/or ignored from the mid-1970s. Education undoubtedly was a bane to tradition.

Paternal grandparents traditionally furnished a name for the new-born. Baba Nyonya tradition adhered to the generational common middle name whereby all male cousins share a similar middle name, likewise their female counterparts. If "Seng" is the chosen middle name for the male child, and the family surname is "Cheah", male cousins would all be named: Cheah Seng Huat,²⁸ Cheah Seng Kim, Cheah Seng Koon. Similarly, for females, "Poh" as a common middle name, hence Cheah Poh Choo, Cheah Poh Gek, Cheah Poh Eng.

By the late 1970s, many couples took on the task from grandparents in naming their offspring. Although Western names had been fashionable even before the Pacific War, the post-war period witnessed increasing adoption of Hollywood-style names such as "Mary", "Elizabeth", "Shirley", "Richard", "Robert", "Tony". Thus, "John Lim Kheng Huat" or "Anne Lee Bee Gim", and the likes became popular. Then from the late 1980s and 1990s, some parents discarded altogether the Chinese given name, simply "Marilyn Cheah" or "Joshua Khoo", "Ben Yap".

Traditionally a baby's first moon or month²⁹ was celebrated with especial food: *nasi kunyit* (glutinous rice with turmeric), chicken curry, red-colored hardboiled eggs, and *ang-koo* (red-colored

²⁷ Madam Tan, interview, 21 July 2015.

²⁸ After the fashion, whereby the family name precedes personal names in direct contrast to the Western rendition.

²⁹ The first month of a baby is crucial; in the past, a male offspring might succumb to ailment prior to his first moon.

kuih with mung bean paste); the color red being auspicious in Chinese culture. Packed in tiffin-carriers, the father of the child assisted by a female relative would deliver the auspicious foods to relatives and friends by way of announcing the baby's first month. Recipients in turn offer ang pow as a form of felicitation to the parents and family. Although the norm, circumstances might pose exceptions as Madam Ong recollected.

We did this *mah-guet* [commemorating the first moon] for Seng Hin [her first born] giving relatives *ang-koo* [and] *nasi kunyit*. Ah Pin [her husband] and his father did the distribution on bicycles. I was worried that the *gulai* [curry] would go bad. But not for the others [three daughters and another son] as times were hard.³⁰

A male baby would be brought to the clan temple to have his name registered, and in this manner, symbolically “introduced” to the ancestors ensuring the continuity of the clan, a Confucianist filial obligation for each succeeding generation.³¹

From the late 1980s, confectionary shops designed “First Moon Package” that comprised the aforesaid mandatory foodstuff. Innovative vendors offered options of cupcakes instead of *ang-koo*, or a chocolate cheesecake in lieu of *nasi kunyit*-chicken curry ensemble. Although elders frowned on such disregard for tradition, young parents savored the twist in gifts.

3.3.4. Attire

Consistent with the female ancestor being indigenous, the Nyonya's overall attire was partial to native (meaning Malay) dressing (Cheah 2010). In the nineteenth century, the *t'ng sar* (long blouse) was the norm overlying the upper body until the knees worn with a *batik sarung* (wrapped-around, pareo) that stretched to the ankles. Inner garments or *tay sah* were loose fitting camisole in lieu of a modern brassiere. Agreeable to the tropical climate, cotton was the preferred

³⁰ Interview, 24 July 2015.

³¹ Neither Madam Ong or Madam Tan brought their sons to the respective clan temples. Both did not recall the reason(s) that this ritual was not undertaken. Madam Ong, interview 24 July 2015; Madam Tan, interview, 21 July 2015.

fabric. Footwear was a colorful pair of *manik* (beaded) shoes. *Sanggul* or coiffure for Penang Nyonya was traditionally worn on the top or crown of the head³² and held in place by several *cucuk sanggul* or coiffure hairpins. Custom accessories include *anting* (earrings), *gelang tangan* (bracelet), *gelang kaki* (anklets), *cincin* (ring) all made of gold and silver (Ho 2003; Chin 1991). Malay influence was conspicuous in form and design in traditional Nyonya attire.

Thanks to English-medium schooling the Baba was Anglicized in attire. A light summer suit, a white shirt with tie, dark pants and a pair of Oxfords represented the quintessential Penang Baba of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Western-style cotton shirts were ironed stiff with starch, likewise the loose trousers with fold-up at the ankles. Madam Tan spoke of washing and ironing her father's white long-sleeved shirts and white pants, and threw in a ditty for measure.

*Pehk sah, pehk kaw,
Imsee Towkay, see chong-paow!*

White shirt, white pants,
If not a Towkay, obviously a cook!³³

A pair of Argyll or plain socks, paired with the black laced-up Oxford. Cotton was the preferred fabric as it could better accommodate the tropical clime.

Family portraits and wedding photographs captured during the last quarter of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries displayed in museums and/or in private collections showcase the evolution of Baba Nyonya attire. A typical wedding image at a photography studio depicts a seated Nyonya bride dressed in all finery with a standing Baba smartly in a Western suit and tie. A bridegroom in the professions - doctor, lawyer, or engineer - might opt for a bowtie.³⁴

³² In Melaka, and thence Singapore, the *sanggul* settled at the lower back of the head.

³³ Interview, 2-3 January 2016.

³⁴ Madam Tan remembered that one of her granduncles who was a medical practitioner often wore a bowtie. Ibid.

The 1920s witnessed a fashion shift in Nyonya attire (Choong 2016). Introduced from Medan, then under Dutch colonial rule, the *Nyonya kebaya* made its debut as formal attire in Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. Apparently fashioned after the Portuguese *kobaya*, hence its name, was simply a laced blouse but the Nyonya transformed the *kebaya* into a tantalizing attire with colorful intricate patterns (Endon Mahmood 2012; Lee 2015). Devoid of buttons, the delicate *kebaya* was held in place by a set of gold *kerongsong* (brooch), with a main brooch with two secondary and smaller brooches intricately connected to one another with a fine chain (Chin 1991). Worn over the *batik sarung*, the slim-fit almost transparent *Nyonya kebaya* accentuated the feminine curves. By then the modern brassiere was worn under a camisole. *Manik* shoes continued to be the preferred footwear (Ho 2003).

Known in Penang as *Pua Th'ng Tay*, literally “half long, half short” describing the combination of the short *kebaya* with the long *batik sarung*, the *Nyonya kebaya* was synonymous with Nyonya attire to contemporary times.³⁵ Western-style dressing amongst Nyonya had rendered the *Pua Th'ng Tay* for auspicious occasions such as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, Chinese New Year. Despite a revival and interest in Baba Nyonya culture and heritage, few would don a Nyonya kebaya for office wear.

Western attire of shirt and pants for daily wear, and a suit with tie for formal functions remained the mainstay for the Baba to current times. Although some donned *batik*, few took on the Chinese-collared jacket with loose dark pants.

3.3.5. Nyonya Cuisine³⁶

As the forte of the Nyonya, it was not surprising that indigenous Malay influence had a major impact on foods for daily consumption

³⁵ It was the preferred attire for all three respondents, viz. Madams Tan, Ong, and Chew. The *Pua Th'ng Tay* is like a ‘uniform’, in the words of Madam Tan, an identity marker for a Nyonya. Interview, 2-3 January 2016.

³⁶ In the past decade and a half due to renewed interest in the Baba Nyonya of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore, there appeared numerous publications on the community’s cuisine. For a sampling, see Tan (2010) and Wong (2003) focusing on Penang, Chia (2011) and Lee (2003) on Singapore, and Liew (2010) on Malacca.

and festive occasions (Wong 2003). In both preparation and ingredients, the Nyonya borrowed much from the Malay kitchen ascertained from the various Malay terms of Nyonya cuisine: *gulai kay* (chicken curry), *assam pedas* (spicy tamarind-based curry), *otak-otak* (fish pieces in spice-paste wrapped in banana leaves, steamed or char-grilled), *Kari Kapitan* (Captain's curry), *acar* (pickles), *Inche Kabin* (deep fried chicken pieces marinated in a mixed paste of coconut milk and an assortment of *rempah* or spices). Consequent of assisting her mother in the daily preparations of meals for an extended family of fifteen, Madam Tan lamented the labour-intensive work involved.

I particularly dislike pounding *ketumbar* (coriander), because of the large amount when cooking *gulai* [curry]. Mah [her mother] always reprimand that my *jiu hu see* (dried cuttle fish julienne) is not fine enough, an embarrassment to my future *niaeh* [mother-in-law]. Despite acquiring the various culinary skills through force of circumstances, I never [like] cooking, but to help Mah.³⁷

Key and common ingredients in Nyonya cooking comprised coconut milk, *galangal* (a subtle, mustard-scented rhizome), *buah keras* (candlenuts), *pandan* (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*), *belacan* (fragrant shrimp-based condiment), *assma-ko* (tamarind), *chu'ng-mau* (lemongrass), *buah kantan* (torch ginger bud), jicama, fragrant kaffir lime (*Citrus hystrix*) leaf, *cincajuk* (sour and salty shrimp-based condiment). Both *galangal* and *buah keras* are used for their unique flavoring as well as a thickening agent. While *belacan* enhances flavours in curries, *cincajuk* is often mixed with lime juice, fresh red chillies and shallots to create a side dish or condiment or dip for deep-fried fish. *Belacan* is the main composition in *sambal belacan*, a fiery hot condiment of *belacan*, *cabai burung* (fiery bird's eye chillies), *ikan bilis* (tropical anchovies) and lime juice. Penang Nyonya dishes are generous with *assam-ko* for its sour flavours drawn from the Thai kitchen.

For the wedding *th'ng tok* lunch or dinner,³⁸ guests savored

³⁷ Interview, 13 August 2015. She, however, confessed that she 'enjoyed' preparing fried yellow Hokkien noodles and making *chai ean* (agar agar) for her children.

³⁸ Madam Tan participated as a member of the cooking team on at least three

the mandatory curry, either *Kari Kapitan*, *hoo gulai tumi* (fish curry) or *assam pedas hoo* (tamarind-based fish curry), also *tau-eiw bak* (belly pork in dark soy sauce), *kiam-chye too-kah th'ng* (mustard leaf and pork leg soup) or *tu thor th'ng* (pig's intestine soup), *lohbak* (pork wraps), *chap chye liow* (cabbage, glass noodles, *bok nee* or wood ear fungus stir-fry with *taujoo*, fermented bean curd) pairing fabulously with steamed white rice. *Owh th'ng chooi* (dark sugared drink) was the traditional beverage³⁹ besides hard liquor (generally brandy) and free-flow of Tiger beer⁴⁰ for the menfolk.

At Baba Nyonya birthday celebrations invariably of venerable elders, guests were feted to *siah-jit mee* (birthday noodles) comprising blanched yellow noodles in a pork broth topped with shrimps, slices of boiled pork belly, and shredded omelette. *Sambal belacan* was an indispensable condiment.

Jiu-hoo char was a mandatory dish for the annual Cheng Beng offerings. Shredded turnip or jicama, carrot, and cabbage are fried with thin slices of pork belly and dried cuttlefish (*jiu-hoo*) strips. *Siew-too* (roasted pig) was a mainstay for funerals together with roasted chickens and ducks presented at the prayer altar.

The signature characteristics of Nyonya dishes were the finery slicing of ingredients of both meats and vegetables reflecting the culinary skills of the Nyonya and a prized wifely attribute. Finery also extended to the colorfully glazed crockery, exquisite and delicate pieces of artworks (Choong 2005). Unlike chopsticks with the China-born, Baba Nyonya preferred the Western fork and spoon. The Malay manner of partaking food with the right hand was commonplace with first and second generation Nyonya, thereafter Western cutleries were the norm in households.

weddings held at the *kong chu* (family home), mainly involved in the preparation section of chopping vegetables, peeling potatoes, onions, shallots, garlic, etc., and the washing-up. She recalled the “hills and mountains” of plates, cups, culinary utensils, pots, pans to wash while squatting at the washing section of the cavernous kitchen. Interview, 13 August 2015, and 2-3 January 2016.

³⁹ From the 1950s, bottled carbonated orange from Fraser & Neave became increasingly popular especially among children.

⁴⁰ Tiger beer was locally produced by Malayan Breweries Limited (1931), an Asian brewery. Today's Tiger beer is from Heineken Asia Pacific based in Singapore.

My father trained [my] children on table manners and how to use fork and knives like *ang moh* [lit. red hair, Europeans], at the same time in handling chopsticks, and to eat rice with their [right] hand. I was proud to observe that at Wing Look [a restaurant on Penang Road that serves Western cuisine] my children used the fork and knife to tackle the pork chop and chicken Maryland.⁴¹

Nyonya cuisine has suffered setbacks adversely impacting on its sustainability. As women increasingly entered the workforce from the late 1960s, full-time Nyonya homemakers dwindled over the decades. Age-old recipes, cooking skills and techniques inherited from generations through cooking together gradually phased out. The revival and interest in Baba Nyonya culture and heritage in recent decades notwithstanding, most families opt for a meal at one of the several Nyonya restaurants in George Town. Nyonya cookbooks were bought owing to nostalgia than practical purposes.

3.3.6. Economic Livelihood

As mentioned, trade and commerce served the early Chinese sojourners. Over the decades, the Baba descendants of these pioneers expanded their commercial interests from wholesale, retail to investments in commercial agriculture (pepper, sugar, rubber) and tin-mining (Xiao 2010; Yeoh 2009; Wong 2015). The Baba *towkay* took advantage of his fluency in English, Hokkien, a smattering of other Chinese dialects (Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, etc.), conversational Malay and Tamil to liaise with colonial authorities, European firms, Chinese businesses, Malay farmers, and Tamil workers. As *comprador* he interceded between the colonial government, Western enterprises, imported labour (Chinese, Tamil, Javanese), and local indigenous (Malay) producers. Interactions with coolies and stevedores, and plantation workers were in pidgin Malay and/or Tamil. Managers and supervisors were engaged to oversee mines and plantations located in the Malay states with occasional personal visits by the Baba *towkay* or his sons.

But traditionally the Chinese, regardless whether peasant farmer or wealthy merchant, since dynastic times had high respect

⁴¹ Madam Tan, interview, 2-3 January 2016.

for the scholar, a lettered person, and wished for their sons to secure an official appointment as scholar-bureaucrat in the imperial government bureaucracy (Lee 1999). In the colonial context of Penang, however, Baba Nyonya families regarded English-medium education as the social mobility tool for both sons and daughters.⁴² Nonetheless, as regards female education, there appear much reservations on the part of the older generation of Baba Nyonya. On her schooling, Madam Tan recalls.

Ang Mah [grandmother] and Ee Poh [grandmother's sister] were not at ease of us girls [Madam Tan and her female cousins] going to school. The elders reckon that *char boh gee-nah* [young maidens] shouldn't be expose to others and in public, jumping, running [referring to Physical Exercise class on the school field]. But Tua Koo [eldest maternal uncle] insists that education is important for boys as well as for girls. I managed to complete elementary level [year six], and was looking forward to go to [year] seven [lower secondary level], the big school when the Japanese came.⁴³

The affluent would send their sons, rarely daughters, to universities such as Oxford, Cambridge or London to read medicine, law, or engineering. During the 1920s the University of Hong Kong (1911) was an alternative for tertiary education, especially architecture and engineering. Baba professionals were highly respected in both British colonial society and the wider Chinese community.⁴⁴ A Baba medical doctor or architect in the eyes of both Baba and China-born was a role model for their sons to emulate.

Others, for want of funds or academic credentials but with only a Junior Cambridge certificate served as clerical staff in the

⁴² Madam Ong and her three sisters attended the Convent Light Street in downtown George Town. Interview, 24 July 2015. Madam Tan and Madam Chew on the other hand were pupils of the American Methodist School on Anson Road (Jalan Anson). The outbreak of the Pacific War (1941-1945) cut short their schooling. Interview, 30 July and 2 August 2016 respectively.

⁴³ Interview, 30 July 2016.

⁴⁴ Madam Tan's maternal granduncle, the youngest, was a medical practitioner while another was an engineer. The former, a confirmed bachelor, often threw parties for his European friends with ballroom dancing of which he was an enthusiast. Sadly, both her granduncles passed away in their thirties during the early 1930s.

colonial bureaucracy, European agency houses, banks, shipping lines, or insurance firms (Loh 1976; Ooi 1992). Becoming a *chai-hu* (clerk in Chinese) or *kerani* (clerk in Malay) was an enviable position during the colonial period.⁴⁵ A clerk, whether government or commercial sector, enjoyed a “respectable” standing within Baba Nyonya circles as well as in the wider Chinese community. Malays and Indians too possessed respect for clerks. During the colonial period, the literacy rate was relatively low hence for an individual, irrespective of ethnicity, to attain the Junior Cambridge, a basic qualification for clerical work, was an accomplishment. The colonial government and Western firms only recognized English-medium qualifications (Junior and Senior Cambridge certificates). Middle School Certificate from vernacular Chinese schools was not recognized for employment (Tan 1997).

Being a clerk enjoined a Baba into the middle class of Penang colonial society. Armed with spoken and written English, a Baba clerk was well-regarded even in the eyes of class-conscious Englishmen. The reasonable remuneration of a clerk afforded a family and a modest double-storey terraced house. Cycling to work on his Raleigh Made-in-England bicycle was as respectable as it gets in pre-war (before 1941) George Town. His work place was invariably in one of the offices along Beach Street (Jalan Pantai), the heart of the commercial business district (CBD) of George Town. Co-workers were Baba like himself and/or Sinhalese, Eurasian, and the occasional Malay. His immediate superior was the C.C., chief clerk,⁴⁶ a position he enviously sought. Only intermittently did the Baba clerk interact with his European manager.

A Baba with a Senior Cambridge certificate could opt to be an assistant teacher in government schools like the Penang Free School or Christian missionary schools such as St Xavier’s Institution, Methodist Boys’ School. He would “assist” the European master who was literally imported from Britain or Europe along with the school

⁴⁵ Madam Tan’s father and husband initially started out as clerks in commercial companies in George Town. Both had their schooling at the Penang Free School. They both ended as managers of rubber estates in Kedah.

⁴⁶ Madam Chew’s cousin was a chief clerk in a German shipping line on Beach Street (Lebuh Pantai). Interview, 2 August 2015.

curriculum and textbooks. The Penang Free School, the oldest English-medium school in East and Southeast Asia, was managed and operated along the lines of British public schools like Harrow and Rugby (Hughes 2014).⁴⁷ The position of assistant schoolmaster was slightly (socially) higher than a C.C., but the highest position an “Asiatic” could aspire then.

Preferred careers for Nyonya with English-medium schooling were either as elementary schoolteachers or nurses, both seen as ideal for women then.⁴⁸ But only in the early part of the twentieth century were there Nyonya schoolteachers and nurses. Despite schooling for their daughters, even forward-looking Baba Nyonya families were reluctant to allow daughters to embark on a career. Respondent Madam Tan’s mother was keen on a medical career but her aspirations were objected by her parents who adhered to the then prevalent attitude, “No decent respectable family would allow their daughters to work outside.”⁴⁹ Another prevalent expression, sounding more like a reprimand or warning, told by mothers to daughters: “You won’t be able to find a husband if you are so highly educated” in discouraging ambitious young Nyonya.

For the majority of educated Nyonya, they fulfilled their filial duties for arranged marriages becoming housewives who ensured that their husband was well taken care of and bringing up filial children in sustaining the family line. A typical Nyonya’s existence was within the family household.

The post-*Merdeka* (1957)⁵⁰ generation enjoyed many post-schooling options. Many from Baba Nyonya families opted for tertiary education abroad; both sons and daughters being given equal opportunities. Besides Britain, the late 1960s and 1970s saw students enrolling in colleges and universities in U.S., Australia, New Zealand, or Canada, a few for studies in Germany, France,

⁴⁷ Madam Tan’s father had a brief teaching stint at the Penang Free School. One of his students was a prince of the royal house of Kedah, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, first prime minister of Malaya/Malaysia.

⁴⁸ One of respondent Madam Chew’s spinster friend, was a nurse, who subsequently became matron at the Penang General Hospital. Interview, 2 August 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview, 2-3 January 2016.

⁵⁰ Malaya was granted independence (*merdeka*) by Britain on 31 August 1957.

Switzerland, even Sweden. Some turned to India, mainly for medicine, and Japan, for engineering and other technical studies. Meanwhile, Singapore's and Hong Kong's premier universities drew many of Penang's top students, including those from Baba Nyonya families.

Overall, the current generation of Baba Nyonya of Penang are more akin to the parent's and grandparent's choice of career paths, namely as professionals if they benefitted from tertiary schooling, rather than their pioneering forebears' involvement in trade and commerce, investments and entrepreneurship. Madam Tan's two daughters, both graduates from American universities, hold managerial positions in private companies.⁵¹ Undoubtedly there are those with entrepreneurial spirit venturing in businesses despite a law degree from Inner Temple.

Although generally filial to their parents and grandparents, there is little semblance of the blind, unquestioned obedience of the pre-1960 generation. "It was a scandal, an embarrassment," regretted Madam Chew when she spoke of her grand nephew opting for a music career as a guitarist in a band; his parents were furious.⁵²

3.3.7. Political Affinity

As comprador, the go-between of Western enterprises and local producers, and sheltering under the colonial judicial system, it was not surprising that the Baba Nyonya community possessed faith and loyalty to the British colonial government in Penang. Subsequent generations too maintained a pro-British stance.⁵³ Their English-medium schooling secured them professional careers (doctors, lawyers, engineers), teaching appointments and clerical positions that provided a respectable social standing and economic livelihood in colonial George Town.

⁵¹ Interview, 2-3 January 2016. Her only son, however, decided to venture into business after completing high school. He currently lives in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. There was reluctance on Madam Tan's part in volunteering details of her son's career path. Ibid.

⁵² Interview, 2 August 2015.

⁵³ All three respondents – Madams Tan, Ong and Chew – spoke warmly of Queen Elizabeth II, and highly of the British colonial era in recollections.

Being groomed in the English-medium schools, it was understandable that the Penang Baba were highly Anglicized. English was the preferred language of choice amongst their circles. Moreover, the Baba, who comprised the majority of the Penang Clerical and Administrative Staff Union (PCASU) and Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), claimed to be the “King’s Chinese” subjects, and pledged loyalty to the House of Windsor (Koh and Ho 2009: 3).

Loyalty to the colonial administration was apparent and conspicuously demonstrated in the late 1940s when the British proposed the incorporation of the then British Crown Colonies of Penang and Melaka to the newly-established Federation of Malaya (1948).⁵⁴ The Penang Secessionist Movement led by a Baba petitioned Whitehall that Penang be excluded lest it compromises its hitherto advantages, notably its free port status pivotal to its entrepôt economy, politically submerged by a Malay-dominated Federation particularly of Malay special privileges relating to education (higher education), government scholarships, civil service appointments, land ownership, and business and industrial licenses (Christie 1996: 28-52). The secessionists proposed instead to maintain Penang as a Crown Colony, or to join Singapore (excluded from the Federation) in a resurrected Straits Settlements that continued to maintain ties within the British Empire. The secessionists comprised the business community and middle-class organizations such as the SCBA (Mohd. Noordin Sopiee 1973: 52).

The British government, however, in 1951 rejected the secessionist’s petition of November 1949. Timing was against the secessionists. Having just resolved the largely unanticipated unparalleled Malay opposition to the Malayan Union (1946-1948), the British did not wish to risk another Malay backlash. Malay support was then pivotal in facing a Chinese-led leftist insurgency, the Emergency (1948-1960) (Ooi 2004: 1051).

In the post-*Merdeka* period, the Baba Nyonya who comprised the bulk of the middle class in Penang lent their support to the

⁵⁴ Economically and militarily Singapore was too invaluable an asset not to be a Crown Colony hence its retention.

Alliance Party of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.⁵⁵ But during the 1969 General Elections, there was a vote swing to the opposition Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia or Gerakan led by Dr Lim Chong Eu (1919-2010) who was from a prominent Baba family in Penang.⁵⁶ Gerakan comprised many professionals and intellectuals with support from Penang's educated middle class hence the electoral triumph. But within two years in the opposition, Gerakan became a component party of the wider coalition of Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) under Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (t. 1971-1976). Gerakan, within the ruling BN coalition at the federal government, administered Penang for nearly four decades relying mainly on middle class support.⁵⁷

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As has been shown, Baba Nyonya unique characteristics were borne from Chinese patriarchal impact and indigenous matrilineal influence. Chinese patriarchy impressed on the continuous adherence to Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Indigenous matrilineal input was conspicuous in language, cuisine, and women's attire.

The 1920s marked the heyday of the Baba Nyonya where family wealth derived from rubber and tin and the entrepôt economy of Penang was flourishing thereby ensuring descendants enjoyed the grandeur and comforts of resplendent *ang mor lau* (lit. "red-hair's mansion"; European mansion), evening drives in the family Rolls Royce, vacations abroad, and overseas higher education for college-age children.

But the Depression (1929-1931) adversely impacted many Baba Nyonya families. Economic recovery gradually emerged from the

⁵⁵ The Tunku was Malayan prime minister (1957-1963), and thereafter of Malaysia (1963-1970).

⁵⁶ His father was Dr Lim Chwee Leong (1891-1957), a renowned British-trained medical practitioner of colonial George Town.

⁵⁷ The Malaysian 2008 General Elections swept the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) to power in Penang. DAP retained its hold on Penang in the subsequent elections of 2013.

mid-1930s, but optimism was short-lived as rumours of impending war in Europe was rife, and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)⁵⁸ on the Chinese mainland.

The Japanese military occupation (1941-1945) was undoubtedly hard and bitter for all quarters (Kratoska 1998). War literally wiped out family fortunes and destroyed lives. Baba Nyonya families in George Town like all townspeople endured material deprivation, and the pervasive fear of reprisals simply because of being ethnic Chinese. Whilst young men were afraid of abduction to labor gangs, young women feared rape and induction into military brothels.

Post-war recovery was gradual, and many Baba Nyonya families who had suffered reversal of fortunes barely survived into the 1970s. Many who had grown up in ten-room *ang mor lau* had to endure living in a three-bedroom terraced house in the outskirts of George Town.

The late 1980s witnessed a revival of interest in Baba Nyonya sociocultural traditions prompted by nostalgic recollections of the “good old days”. By the 1990s and 2000s a rejuvenation of interest of a community in its “twilight” years was the needed antidote. An increasing curiosity and appreciation of Nyonya cuisine spurred a cottage industry in recipe books. Meanwhile a plethora of websites, blogs emerged. All the discourses in whatever media contribute in sustaining the ongoing interest of the community. Undoubtedly George Town’s listing as one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in mid-2008 spurred further attentiveness of the eclectic Baba Nyonya.

Conceived some three decades ago, the annual Baba Nyonya Convention promoted the celebration of all things of the eclectic community. The 30th International Baba Nyonya Convention on 29 November 2017 was hosted by the State Chinese (Penang) Association.⁵⁹ Venue of this yearly gathering rotates between

⁵⁸ Mainland Chinese scholars preferred the term, War of Japanese Aggression (1937-1945).

⁵⁹ Cavina Lim and R. Sekaran, Baba Nyonya convention aims to uphold precious heritage, *The Star*, 29 Nov 2017 <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2017/11/29/telling-the-peranakan-story-baba-nyonya-convention-aims-to-uphold->

Penang, Melaka, Singapore, and Phuket.⁶⁰ Seminars, sociocultural presentations, display of fashionable attires, savoury dishes and *kuih* were attractive highlights showcasing the community's exotic, eclectic, and exclusive characteristics and features.

Like Peranakan communities across Southeast Asia, the Baba Nyonya of Penang face imminent extinction if the current generation forgo their sociocultural practices, language, identity, and heritage. Efforts from within Baba Nyonya circles appear to be the engine for rejuvenation and future growth.

Respondents

Tan Ai Gek, born 1927, Hokkien Baba-Hokkien Nyonya parentage; third generation; residence in Burmah Road (presently Jalan Burma), moved to Tanjong Bungah when she was 75 years old when the family *ang mor lau* was sold off; a widow since 1989; two daughters and a son. Interviews 21 July, 30 July, and 13 August 2015; 2-3 January 2016.

Chew Chui Gek (1923-2017), Teochew Baba-Hokkien Nyonya parentage; third generation; residence in George Town; spinster who lived with her two nieces, Adeline and Ann Cheah until her passing in April 2017. Interview 2 August and 12 September 2015.

Ong Poh Choo, born 1931, Hokkien-Baba-Teochew Nyonya parentage; third generation; residence in Pulau Tikus; two sons and three daughters. Interview 24 July 2015.

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⁶⁰ Extending to Medan and Mandalay are in the pipeline.

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