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Headline: A culture more than the sum of its parts

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SINGAPORE

Over the centuries, Chinese migrants have spread around the world, often creating enclaves within large cities, Chinatowns where their culture, including religious practices, culinary skills and artistic tastes, would remain intact. But in peninsular Malaysia, Chinese migrants integrated so well with the locals, appropriating certain cultural traits and assimilating these into their own culture, that they created a new culture with its own identity: the Straits Chinese Peranakan.

Chinese merchants first settled in Malacca in the 15th century, and by the 19th century they were playing a pivotal role as intermediaries with the Portuguese, Dutch and then British colonial traders. As the Chinese merchants started to integrate with the local population, they started fusing their Chinese heritage with the local Malay influences, developing a distinctive hybrid culture.

"The Peranakans were very open-minded toward other cultures, and they took the best from everywhere," said Kenson Kwok, director of the Asian Civilization Museum and the Peranakan Museum in Singapore.

"They were able to operate in a multicultural world, something we all need to be able to do today. We all need to speak different languages and operate in different cultures, and that's something the Peranakans were doing back in the 19th century."

The small Peranakan Museum, which reopens on Saturday after two years of renovations, explores this unique culture, presenting artifacts like porcelain, jewelry and textiles from the former British Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore, as well as displays that detail the Peranakans' way of life, including their elaborate wedding ceremonies, religious practices and funeral rites, some of which continue to this day.

As intermediaries between the British and mainland Chinese traders, many amassed large fortunes, which they used to spend lavishly on their homes, commissioning, for example, colorful porcelains from Shanghai, known as Nonyaware, and elaborate gold and silver jewelry.

The Peranakan culture was very colorful and elaborate, and Nonyaware is a great example of that taste, says Randall Ee, a curator at the Peranakan Museum.

While Chinese utensils tended to be plainly decorated and painted in pale washes of enamels, Nonyaware is characterized by vivid enameled tints on a brilliant painted background, and they were decorated primarily with flowers, peonies in particular, and



An ancestral altar. The Peranakan fused their Chinese heritage with Malay influences.

phoenixes. "The Chinese wanted to appreciate the whiteness on their porcelains because it tells you of the quality of the firing, but the Peranakans appreciated the color and the form — not so much the porcelain — so their porcelain is completely covered with color," Ee said.

Pola Antebi, who heads Christie's Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art Department in Hong Kong, notes that the Peranakan patterns would have been considered too busy to be used as table settings for the mainland Chinese market. "The table settings incorporated some Western-shaped vessels as well, such as cups with handles, as the Peranakan adopted drinking tea in English teacups," she said.

Some of the rare porcelains on display at the museum include large kamcheng jars (covered food containers) topped with a finial in the shape of a qilin (a Chinese mythical animal) and decorated with unusual café au lait or coral red colors.

Another distinctive expression of Peranakan aesthetics can be found in

their beadwork and embroidery, which was often produced by the Nonyas (the Peranakan women). The eligibility of a young Nonya in well-to-do families could hinge on the quality of her needlework, and she had to produce a complete trousseau, painstakingly using thousands of tiny glass beads, often imported from Europe.

The museum displays needlework examples of beaded slippers, a densely beaded daun nipah case (which would have contained palm leaves used to make hand-rolled cigarettes), as well as embroidered kebayas, the traditional long-sleeved, tight-fitting blouses that first appeared in the nonyas' wardrobe in the 1920s and that today remains very much in fashion in the region.

Four galleries are devoted to the story of the traditional 12-day Peranakan wedding where significant ceremonies like the lap chai, (exchange of gifts) and chiu thau (coming of age, which was the most important rite) are presented.

"While the actual wedding took place on the first day, the ceremonies stretched over 12 days until the bride

left her parents' house and moved in with her in-laws," Ee said.

The recreated wedding chamber displays an ornately carved Ranjan Kahwain (wedding bed) decorated with beadwork and embroidery featuring motifs such as birds, rats and crabs, (seen as fertility symbols by the Chinese.) "A young child, preferably a boy, would roll three times across the bed three or four days before the wedding," Ee explained. "The child would come from a family who has many sons, to get his male energy."

Other contextual presentations include a Peranakan dining room set up for a grand banquet, a religious altar to worship ancestors, as well as a coffin decorated with a colorful embroidered cover. "The coffin is actually not empty, we've put some wood inside, because our belief is that a coffin cannot be left empty or it calls for someone," said Ee, who is Peranakan.

While the Peranakans absorbed the local culture around them from very early on, they held on to their religious beliefs from China strongly and for a long time. The ACM curator David Alan Henkel notes that by the mid-19th century, many Chinese migrants coming to the Straits Settlements were surprised to find archaic worshiping practices that were no longer to be found in China.

Yet as they interacted with the British colonial rulers, the Peranakans became influenced by Western ideas, and many converted to Christianity. The museum displays an example of a Bible written in Baba-Malay (the Peranakan language) as well as a rare Catholic altar converted from a Chinese piece of furniture that is decorated with Daoist deities, like the stellar gods of happiness, wealth and longevity, and auspicious creatures juxtaposed against a central Catholic devotional image of the Holy Family.

Kwok says the curators have strived to present the Peranakan culture not as a "dusty" one of days gone by. "We don't want the museum to be seen just as a celebration of the past. It is also a record of the present, and we have tried to look at the taste of the Peranakan and re-interpret it in a contemporary way," Kwok said, pointing out that the museum also includes a few contemporary paintings by Peranakan artists.

While the museum exhibit concentrates on the former Straits Settlements, it does include a few exhibits from Sumatra and Java. "In the future we hope to widen that brief and look at other Peranakan-related communities in southern Thailand and even some in Myanmar," Kwok said. "The field is wide open for research."

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A slide show from the exhibition.