

**Tan Sooi Beng (Ed).** *Eclectic Cultures For All: The Development of the Peranakan Performing, Visual and Material Arts in Penang.* Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 2019. xxvii + 312 pp. ISBN: 978-967-461-406-5.

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According to the editor, this book has been forty years in the making. An established expert on the *bangsawan* (a form of traditional theatre), Tan Sooi Beng, an ethnomusicologist, has published several articles and books about it, devoting much of her life researching it since the 1980s, when she began her doctoral studies (xxv). This edited volume, however, focuses on the development of Peranakan or Straits Chinese culture in Penang. It consists of seven chapters: four written by Tan; two by Sarena Abdullah; and one by Grace Choong Ai May. Whilst the last three decades have witnessed more research and publications on Peranakan life and culture, these marginal communities are still under-studied and fast disappearing in Malaysia, making this a timely publication.

The depth of Tan's forty years of work in this area is evident in the introduction (chapter one), specifically in how she frames Peranakan culture in the Straits Settlements (with a focus on Penang), and in chapter two of the book, "Homegrown in Penang: The Cosmopolitan Festivals, Performances and Identities of the Peranakan Prior to the Second World War", which is approximately a third of the book and its longest chapter. She discusses the Peranakan *bangsawan*, which has its provenance in Penang, and highlights *Nyonyas* acting and staging *bangsawan* in the 1920s and 1930s, which was rare as it was culturally unaccepted and frowned upon. However, Tan's argument is about the cosmopolitanism of elite Peranakan culture in Penang, which she cogently demonstrates by taking us through the Chap Goh Meh celebrations (on the fifteenth day of the Chinese lunar New Year) when *Nyonyas* would parade in their resplendent jewellery, to Chingay processions, minstrel parties, Malay poetry singing of *dondang sayang* and Indonesian *Kronchong* music. Similarly, in chapter six, Sarena explores the cosmopolitanism in the artwork of Low Kway Song, Yong Mun Sen and Tay Hooi Keat. However, it needs to be pointed out that Low was born and spent much of his life in Singapore (and is proudly claimed by Singapore). The same oversight occurs in the last chapter, also written by Sarena, in which out of the seven artists whose works are examined, three are Singaporean. Yet, the subtitle of this book reads as "The Development of the Peranakan Performing, Visual and Material Arts in Penang". Tan, in chapter two, also focuses on the performing scene in Singapore and, in chapter four, analyzes cartoons reprinted in the *Straits Echo* (in Penang) that were first published in the *Malaya Tribune* in Singapore (144). If the book's aim was to focus on Peranakan culture in the Straits Settlements, rather than just in Penang, this would not have been an issue.

The strongest chapters are two and six, which focus on the cosmopolitan aspects of Peranakan culture. Chapter three, “The Decline and Revival of the Eclectic Peranakan Performing Arts in Penang in the Post-independence Eras: A New Generation Recreates Transborder Forms”, makes an interesting argument about transnationalism particularly in relation to the annual Peranakan conventions initiated by Khoo Keat Siew in 1988 (21, 124). However, I am not aware of a Peranakan Chinese Association in Makassar, Indonesia (21) and if there were one, it is certainly not part of The Federation of Peranakan Associations that recognizes Peranakan associations in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Australia.<sup>1</sup> While chapter four archives cartoons from the 1930s, it is the weakest chapter by Tan. The arguments in this chapter are not as well conceptualized as in her other chapters, and chapter four also lacks a conclusive commentary. The same can be said of Sarena’s examination in chapter seven of Peranakan imageries in Malaysian and Singaporean modern art. Although she corrals a wide range of contemporary paintings on the Peranakans, she fails to make a convincing argument compared to her earlier chapter (six) — perhaps she was biting off more than she could chew in dealing with so many artists and artworks in a single chapter.

I find chapter five, “The Eclectic Costumes of the Penang Baba and Nyonya: Representing Sociocultural Changes from the 1900s to the 1960s” by Choong to be the most problematic — the chapter lacks academic rigour and understanding and is also marked by factual inaccuracies. To highlight just a few: the *baju panjang* (literally, long dress) or *th’ng-sah* was not ankle-length (177) but calf-length, for if it reached the ankle, it would certainly have obscured the *Nyonyas*’ often expensive and intricately woven (songket), hand-drawn or printed batik *sarong*. *Nyonyas* did crochet their own “lace”. However, these were sewn onto the *choli* (camisole), and not the *kebaya* itself (188). The *kerongsang* or chain brooch always came in a set of three, never five (209). The most glaring example of Choong’s lack of attention is her description of Nyonya Chan Tin Eng in Fig. 5.12, with the caption: “The sitter dons a *tay-sah* with lace at the bottom, carries a handkerchief and wears a tiara of flowers and jewellery on her head, necklace, bangles, earrings, rings, and a mother and two-child brooch” (183). Choong is essentially saying that Nyonya Chan was posing elegantly with her resplendent jewellery in her undergarment or *tay-sah* (in the South, we call them *baju dalam*). Granted that Choong has a photograph of *Nyonyas* in their *tay-sah* or *baju dalam*, Fig. 5.10 (182), but these are rare — usually only family members would have been able to take such photographs; most *Nyonyas* would not have allowed photographs to be taken of them in their *tay-sah*. If one observes Fig. 5.12 (183) carefully, one would be able to discern, especially from her elbow resting on the armrest, that Nyonya Chan has a translucent *kebaya* on top of her *tay-sah*. Furthermore, Fig. 5.12 is a photograph taken in a studio; no *Nyonya* in 1923 would have gone to a studio to be photographed in her undergarment.

The book's significance lies in its concern with Peranakan history, a history that has been under-researched and under-documented. It is also a first in academically conceptualizing the culture and arts of a once elite community of the Straits Settlements and its development and survival in contemporary times. Regrettably, however, the book is of an uneven nature with chapters of markedly different quality.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Peranakan* magazine, produced by The Peranakan Association of Singapore, in every issue lists all the Peranakan associations under The Federation of Peranakan Associations.