

**Kenneth Y.K. Chan, *Chrita-Chrita Baba: A Collection of Short Stories in Baba Malay*. Singapore: Wolf et al, 2019. xvii + 242pp. ISBN: 978-981-14-1907-2.**

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Published materials written in Baba Malay are rare, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, we were fortunate to have *Perjanjian Bharu (Baba Malay New Testament)* reprinted by The Bible Society of Singapore, which was first published in 1913, owing to the labours of W. G. Shellabear; and even this publication has not been translated to everyday spoken Baba Malay. Chan, with *Chrita-Chrita Baba*, however, tells these stories in everyday spoken Baba Malay—at a time when the Baba Malay patois is under deep threat.<sup>2</sup> Nala Lee Huiying, in her dissertation (2014) on Baba Malay, estimates that there are about 1,000 speakers of Baba Malay in Singapore and even less in Malacca.<sup>3</sup> Considering these estimations,<sup>4</sup> one can understand how endangered Baba Malay is. But is Chan’s collection of stories timely or too late?

This beautifully leather-bound book with illustrations consists of six tales, written both in Baba Malay and English (on the corresponding page). *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah* (Garlic and Shallots) in the middle of the book stands out as it is a popular Nusantara traditional folklore; however, the version told here is the lesser known tale with the pumpkin (*labu*).<sup>5</sup> Chan seems to be capitalising on the fact that the pumpkin version is less known, and I cannot help but wonder if it is also an attempt to appropriate the lesser known version as *Peranakan*, since this collection of stories is called “*Chrita-chrita Baba*” (Baba Stories). The first tale, *Si-Swee Merah* (Sweet and Beautiful “Red”), an endearing name referring to the protagonist, is a reinvention of the *Little Red Riding Hood* lore, which also invokes the archetypal colour red; but integrating horror elements by calling up the *penanggalan*, a Southeast Asian nocturnal vampiric spirit whose form is a floating dismembered woman’s head with trailing organs. The third story entitled *Bachik*<sup>6</sup> involves a *toyol*, a supernatural undead infant/foetus brought to life through black magic usually to conduct crime and mischief—another folkloric creature of the Southeast Asian animistic spiritual world. And the last, *Di-Dalam Bilek Loteng* (The Room Upstairs), narrates a story of a boy who becomes possessed because his parents refused to observe the *adat-adat* (customs) of the *Peranakans*, when moving into a new home, offending spirits that reside in the house. *Dunia di-Bawah Rumah* (The World Underneath the House) is reminiscent of Narnia, where a set of twins is transported to a parallel world. Five out of six of the tales embody the supernatural, animistic and malevolent world of the *Peranakans*, which is an extension and integration of the Malay and

Chinese spiritual worlds that also adapts other ideas and religious practices of other cultures such as that of the ethnic Indians and even the Europeans.

The second story *Rumah Tangga Wee* (The Wee Household) is unlike the rest of the book as it does not evoke the supernatural but is steeped in reality, drawing us into the typical family intrigues of a *Peranakan* household and extended family with secondary wives and concubines. Considering the paucity of literary and fictional work in Baba Malay, this is a commendable effort particularly at this time. Supported by the Singapore government, the collection nostalgically captures the *Peranakan* household culture of at least three generations within many of the (abandoned) stately colonial mansions and also encapsulates the imagination of the *Peranakan* spiritual and animistic world. It also depicts the community's fear and reverence of *sinjakala* (twilight) and the dark where many superstitions prevail as it is regarded as an unclean time when evil spirits would roam. True to its form of folklore, these tales are heavily didactic as well, promoting filial piety, tradition, assiduity and grace. However, the book's English counterpart is a little stilted, and overweening, with each story ending with: "We end our tale here, and continue with another story later. Wow! It is such a joy to read these stories." (*Kita boleh b'renti chrita sini dulu, sama nanti sambong-kan chrita lain. Wah! Bila bikin bacha, bikin ada sedap ati.*)

Supported by the National Heritage Board, Singapore is at the forefront of preserving and promoting *Peranakan* culture, which is understandable as it serves as an ideal bridge between its dominant Chinese<sup>7</sup> and ethnic Malay population. However, the book lacks originality and literary merit. At worst, it can be seen as a mere cobbling together of stories and ideas, which will somewhat work as *Peranakan* culture itself is a hybrid and cosmopolitan culture. At best, it contains and records history and culture. It is quite clear that the collection does not aspire to be a great work of art but an earnest effort and attempt to regenerate interest in a fast vanishing language. So is the publication of this collection too late? Materialising at the twilight of this *lingua franca* and *Peranakan* culture? Or will it spell a revival and resurrection of this unique *patois*? Only time will tell.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, and more specifically Melaka in Malaysia. *Peranakan* Chinese culture in Malaya flourished under British colonisation namely in the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore), but Baba Malay *patois* has been particular to Melaka and Singapore as Penang essentially retained its spoken *Hokkien* dialect. Indonesian *Peranakan* cultures have deeper histories and are more diverse with some distinctive authors contributing to its language and literary achievements. In the Straits

Settlements, Baba Malay literary works were mainly translations of *Sam Kok* (The Romance of Three Kingdoms) and the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Chan has also published *Mari Chakap Baba: A Comprehensive Guide to the Baba Nyonya Language* (2018) and the book has been used to conduct courses in learning Baba Malay in Singapore.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, Nala Huiying. *A Grammar of Baba Malay with Sociophonetic Considerations*. 2014. The University of Hawai'i of Mānoa, PhD dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Malaysia and Singapore have inherited the British system of racially categorising their population into Malay, Chinese, Indians and others. Therefore, the Peranakan population is hard to determine in terms of size; and it is even harder to determine the number of fluent Baba Malay speakers.

<sup>5</sup> The more popular version with the fish has been made into several films in Malaysia (and Singapore when it was not yet independent, by S. Roomai Noor in 1959) and Indonesia.

<sup>6</sup> *Bachik* is a commonly truncated *Peranakan* term from *Baba kechik*—hence *Bachik*, becomes an endearing term ironically used here.

<sup>7</sup> Singapore since its independence has always sustained its majority Chinese population.