

Chinese Culture and Customs in Peranakan Funerals in Malaysia and Singapore

Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar
School of Communication
Taylor's University

David Hock Jin Neo
School of Communication
Taylor's University

Antoon De Rycker
School of Communication
Taylor's University

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ABSTRACT

The *Peranakan* community is studied in a qualitative manner to understand and document the customs and traditions that underlie the *Peranakan* funeral. This research was informed and guided by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979a), which explores the meanings associated with being members of a social group. Social identity theorists have argued that because people define themselves in terms of their social group membership, they enact roles as part of their acceptance of the normative expectations of in group members. This shapes how communities come to understand and enact roles which make them part of a social group. Interviews were conducted with senior members of the *Peranakan* community and undertakers to aid in fulfilling the objective of the study. In addition, observations of funerals greatly enhanced the study. Findings from the analysis of funeral customs show that the Social Identity of the *Peranakan* community is seen in the observance of filial piety of children to their parents, patriarchal customs, a show of grief and adherence to Chinese religious customs. Status and wealth is also part of the community's social identity.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory; Peranakan funeral, filial piety; Babas and Nyonyas

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1.0 THE PERANAKAN COMMUNITY

The Peranakan Community is a unique and rare blend of predominantly Chinese and Malay cultures. In fact, it is not just a potpourri of cultures but a genuine synthesis of behavior, material culture and language (Dharmarajan, Aziz and Lokman, 2006). The Peranakans are also often referred to as Straits Chinese or

Corresponding author: Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar. Email: lokasundari.n@taylors.edu.my

Nyonyas (term for Peranakan ladies) and Babas (term for Peranakan men). The origins of this community is said to go as far back as the 11th century when Chinese merchants married local women in the Malay and Indonesian archipelago (which includes modern Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia). These Chinese traders were dictated by the monsoons, and thus, it was often necessary to spend as long as six months in Southeast Asia. Many set up homes both in China and Southeast Asia. The term Peranakan has its roots in the Malay word anak or “child” and refers to local born children (Peranakan) of these Chinese immigrants who married local women (Low, 2014).

While trade was an important factor in Chinese migration, other issues such as famine, floods, overpopulation and political unrest gave rise to large numbers of male migrants leaving China permanently to seek a better future in Southeast Asia (Hardwick, 2008). The Peranakan culture evolved in Southeast Asia, but it was the Straits Settlements—Malacca, Penang and Singapore that the culture flourished. Under British colonization, the Peranakans acted as compradors helping the British develop the Straits Settlements where they became wealthy and the culture peaked in the 19th century.

Many became very rich through trade, tin mining and cultivating rubber. They “spared no expense in housing, furnishings, dress, schooling, ceremonies, recreation and houses of worship” (Low, 2014:133). Their legacy is vast and the community has enjoyed much publicity for their unique culture. These have been captured through tourism materials, coffee table books and news articles which focus on the exotic features of their culture, such as their elaborate and old-fashioned wedding customs, the style of dress worn by the Nyonyas called the kebaya, jewellery and beaded shoes, pre-war houses and the distinctive porcelain found in their homes (Lee, 2008).

During the Dutch (more so in Indonesia) and British colonial times, the Peranakans started to embrace a more European lifestyle and came to be identified as an urban white collar community. They were associated with high social class, living in stately colonial verandah-ed bungalows and were mostly English educated (Azizi and Mahyuddin, 2003).

Chinese immigrants, who arrived before the 19th century, usually arrived alone and tended to marry local Malay women. However post 19th century saw a change as both men and women arrived from China in larger numbers, thus less assimilation occurred between the two cultures. Previous research has gone on record to state that the Peranakan culture is on a decline and in danger of dying as the community—they have become a victim of rapid dissolution through “geographical dispersion, modernization and socialization with other groups” (Lee, 2008: 166).

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Peranakan Community is fast losing its unique language and way of life. Firstly, increasing immigration from China changed, during the latter part of the 19th century, as women and families of the Chinese migrated rather than just single

men. This slowed or negated the process of assimilation between the Malay and Chinese communities. These new Chinese immigrants did not identify with the Peranakans but instead adhered to the language and customs which they brought from China (Lee, 2008; Hardwick, 2008; Low, 2014; Pue and Shamsul, 2011). Secondly, the unique Peranakan culture which flourished for much of the 19th and 20th centuries finds itself in fast decline in modern Malaysia. The Great Depression was the first blow and the Second World War decimated their wealth, having to survive during the impoverished years of the Japanese occupation. Modernity has also rendered much of their practices obsolete and impractical. Inter-marriage between the Chinese and local women happened at a specific time in their history, where it is said that they married Batak women and strict Islamic practices were not in place. After the Peranakan community had been established in the Straits Settlements, they married within the community—quite often even with maternal first cousins, to keep and expand their wealth within the family. As well, with increasingly stringent adherence to Islam, any person marrying into the Malay community is required to convert to Islam and practice Malay customs and language. With the increasing influx of Chinese migrants, whom the Peranakans referred to sinkek (new arrivals), they only allowed their daughters to marry them when the sinkek showed potential and were then absorbed into matrilocal Peranakan marriages. But since the Second World War and the decimation of their wealth, compounded with rapid modernization, much of the elaborate traditions and customs of the Peranakans are fast disappearing.

Dharmarajan, Aziz and Lokman (2006:2) in their study of the Nyonya Kebaya (tunic) cite several issues with the preservation of cultural heritage in Malaysia: lack of standards in the description of cultural products, poor maintenance and preservation of cultural products, the history of oral tradition and the lack of proper documentation of products that could be in private ownership or in different institutions—all of these issues point to the need for proper documentation of Peranakan practices so that they may live for posterity.

Several authors have researched into Peranakan history, their language and much of their legacies in material form such as dress, cuisine, furniture and architecture which have been captured in coffee table books, tourism brochures, museum sites and cookery books (Lee, 2008). However, the topic of death has traditionally been avoided as Chinese culture regards it as “taboo” and courting death, when it is focused on. There is, therefore, a need to research and document these practices and funerary rites. With the resinsitisation among the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore from later Chinese immigrants, the Peranakan funerary rites are adapting to new influences. Photographic evidence of Peranakan funerals exist though none have researched into the social, religious and cultural basis for the customary Peranakan funeral. It will be a rich addition to available literature if meanings underlying funeral customs could be studied and documented. It is envisaged that this study could fill this gap.

2.1 *Objective and Research Questions*

The objective of this study is to understand and document the customs and traditions that underlie the Peranakan funeral. In order to facilitate the study's objective, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are the principal actors in the Peranakan funeral?

RQ2: What roles do actors in a Peranakan funeral play?

RQ3: What customs guide the Peranakan funeral?

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections outline the origins of the Peranakan community and describe their socio-cultural practices that evolved from Chinese and Malay cultures. These will aid in analyzing the Peranakan identity.

3.1 *Peranakan Beginnings*

The historical beginnings of the Peranakan community are difficult to trace. According to Chinese records, there were links to the Indonesian archipelago as early as 131 BC (Mastuti, 19-29). The Peranakan communities were formed through the assimilation of Chinese men, who arrived for trade, with local women. Abdullah (2013:147) quotes historical evidence of the existence of a Chinese village during the Portuguese rule of Malacca from 1511-1641. Traders arrived from China to engage in commercial activities and they married local Southeast Asian women and the children born locally were called Peranakan China. As marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims required conversion, the Chinese traders married Batak, Balinese and other Southeast Asian women brought in as slaves (Azizi and Bahyuddin, 2003). Abdullah (2013:146) further quotes from the Malay Annals written around the 17th century that a Chinese princess called Hang Li Po was sent by the Chinese emperor to marry the Malaccan Sultan, Mansur Shah. She apparently brought with her 500 people in her entourage and it has been postulated that they became part of the Peranakan community. However, there are no Chinese imperial records that substantiate this (Knapp, 2012: 9).

Khoo (2010) states that the Baba community of Malacca is the oldest (from 16th century) while the Penang and Singapore communities were formed later in the late 18th century through to the 19th century. Hardwick (2008) concurs stating that with the British colonial establishment of the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore in the 19th century, large settlements of people who identified themselves as Peranakan developed and flourished. The British acquisition of the islands of Penang and Singapore as trading ports encouraged many Peranakan families from Malacca and other areas in Southeast Asia to move to these British controlled territories thus expanding Peranakan establishments to Singapore and Penang.

3.2 *Peranakan Customs*

The community follows a mix of Chinese and Malay customs. Clammer (cited in Lee, 2008:162) however, asserts that although they speak Malay, eat Malay cuisine

and tend to dress in Malay costumes; they used Chinese kinship terms, and the customs are heavily Chinese in form and substance. Filial piety is an essential part of their culture, which is manifested in the home ancestral altar to remember and venerate their ancestors (Lee, 2008).

3.2.1 *Customs derived from Malay Culture*

The (southern) Peranakan speak a patois of Malay with loan words from Chinese (mainly Hokkien) and sometimes mixed with several other languages such as Portuguese, Dutch, Tamil and English (Clammer cited in Lee, 2008:163). As language is known to be the bastion of home and as women ruled the home, it is understandable that the language spoken is more Malay and a little of other languages.

Subramaniam (2010) in her research into Baba weddings found several Malay customs such as the tepak sireh (betel nut set), use of bunga rampai (a box containing different types of flowers mixed with scent) and the preparation of the bride's room to be following Malay custom. Lee (2008) cites further evidence of Malay-ness in the traditional Nyonya dress—the baju panjang (long tunic), which she traces to Javanese origin. This tunic is fastened usually with a set of diamond kerongsang (brooches). This dress is worn over a batik sarong. The long tunic was abandoned for the short and sexy baju kebaya, (in the 1920s) made with transparent material and intricately embroidered with fine lace. Although the dress was originally made in cotton, with wealth and status, Nyonyas opted for French and Swiss voile.

Peranakan cuisine is very famous in both Malaysia and Singapore and is unique to the region. The food incorporates influences from Indonesia, India, Holland, Portugal, Thailand and England (Tan cited in Lee, 2008:165). It is “fusion” food even before the term became famous. The food is mainly Malay in origin as it has rempah (a blend of spices common in Malay cuisine) and the Peranakan eat with their fingers as Malays do (Lee, 2008).

The Peranakan also follow Malay rituals during childbirth and the care of mothers after childbirth such as employing a tukang urut (masseur), avoidance of certain types of food, use of herbs for cleansing and the use of a postpartum girdle. All of these customs are followed during a strict confinement period which is aimed at the physical and spiritual recovery of mother and child (Pue and Shamsul, 2011).

3.2.2 *Chinese Culture and Other Influences*

As mentioned earlier, the core of Peranakan culture in its substance is Chinese. These relate to the keeping of Chinese names, conducting business practices that are Chinese in origin, observing filial piety, patriarchy and engaging in religious practices from China.

Low (2014: 137) in identifying leadership styles among the Peranakan Chinese, found that patriarchy is steeped in a ‘Father’ leadership style of doing business among the community. He found that “the Chinese’s love of kinship extending to relatives related through marriage is also inherent in the Babas” The early buildings constructed by the Peranakan incorporated business at the ground floor while living

quarters were upstairs; having brought with them a Chinese style of doing business. By the early 20th century, the Peranakan owned large acres of rubber estates and tin mines, clearly establishing themselves among the rich and elite (Azizi and Mahyuddin, 2003). As more and more impoverished Chinese arrived in droves during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Peranakan formed an identity distinct from the new Chinese arrivals and the Malay community through their lavish lifestyle of living in large houses, their ladies' preoccupation with intricate and exquisite jewelry, using expensive home furnishings and opting to educate their children in England (Hardwick, 2008).

Azizi and Mahyuddin (2003) also report that the Peranakan architecture comprised of an eclectic style that incorporates influences from the East and West. The concept of shop houses came from China which incorporates European influences such as Greco-Roman columns and decorative tiles from Holland, Spain and Scotland. Their homes had the hallmarks of Chinese culture because the interior of the Peranakan house incorporates a family altar for ancestor worship and is often decorated with Chinese mother-of-pearl blackwood furniture such as chairs, side tables and ornately carved teak cupboards with Chinese motifs depicting an affinity to their Chinese heritage.

Lee (2008) reports that several Chinese customs are observed by the Peranakan community such as Cheng Beng when one pays respect to dead relatives; Tang Chek or the Winter Solstice Festival and Chinese New Year—the most important festival of the year. Southern Chinese customs can also be seen in the elaborate wedding rituals, funerals and ancestor worship that are practiced by the Peranakan communities (Khoo cited in Hardwick, 2008).

4.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This research is informed and guided by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979a), which explores the meanings associated with being a member of a social group. Social identity theorists have argued that because people define themselves in terms of their social group membership, they enact roles as part of their acceptance of the normative expectations of the group members (Turner et al in Burke and Stets, 1998:4). This could shape how communities come to understand and enact roles which make them part of a social group.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979b) which held that there were three cognitive processes that were relevant to a person being part of an in group. These were:

- i) Social categorization: where a person decides which group he/she belongs to.
- ii) Social identification: the processes by which members identify themselves as part of a social group.
- iii) Social comparison: members' own concept of themselves and their perception of how members of the in group should behave in comparison to other groups.

SIT proposes that people categorize themselves into social groups. Membership and the value placed on it are called Social Identity. To enhance self-esteem, people want to develop a positive identity and in order to do so, they show behavior that are

associated with the group as opposed to other social groups.

SIT is proposed as the framework for this study as it enables the study of the people of a group—the Peranakan community, as they take on roles and certain behaviors during the course of a funeral which is an integral part of any community's culture. The study of such behavior will enable the researchers to not only document vital information on a community's culture but it will also enable the study of a social group's practices to categorize themselves as part of a special and distinct community in order to develop a positive identity about themselves through these special practices.

Figure 1, shows how the need for individual self-esteem encourages roles and behavior that will allow social categorization as a community thus resulting in positive social identity. The conceptual framework (see Fig 1 below) allows the study of Peranakan funerals which will facilitate the documentation of Social Identity forged by the community members in order to socially categorize themselves as a distinct group. This categorization will then facilitate positive self-esteem and a positive social identity for themselves through roles enacted during the funeral ceremony.

The following diagram (Figure 1) shows the proposed conceptual framework for this study:

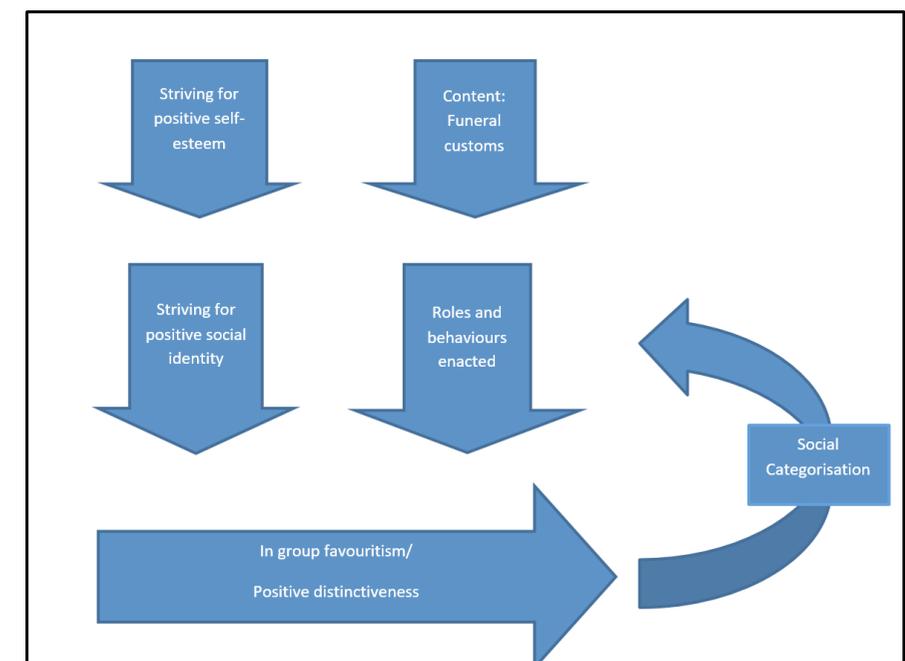


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Social Identity through Funeral Customs. Adapted from Trepte, 2006:261

4.1 Methodology

This study takes a qualitative approach to study Peranakan funerals and the concepts associated with them. Today, there are very few funerals that are conducted in the traditional Peranakan way. This is because they are elaborate and costly and have been rendered impractical and even irrelevant in our modern society. The second researcher had the privilege of attending one recent authentic traditional Peranakan funeral and working from his past experiences and memories of Peranakan funerals. Several senior members of the Peranakan community and undertakers have also been interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka, Penang and Singapore. Each interview lasted for approximately one to two hours. The interviews were semi structured and focused on obtaining sufficient information about the funeral practices and the roles played by various family and community members during the funeral.

Table 1 lists the data collection process:

Table 1

Data Collection Type	Number
Interviews	7
Observation of funerals	1

The Sample consisted of 7 members of the Peranakan community and undertakers, who were well versed with the customs associated with funerals. They were able to share insights on the roles played by family members of the deceased and also the role of community members. Table 2 outlines information about the interviews:

Table 2

Interview Number	Time spent at interview	Venue	Discussion Topics	Reason for choosing the interviewee
1	1.5 hrs	Melaka	Funeral Process	Undertaker with intimate knowledge of funeral customs
2	1.5 hrs	Kuala Lumpur	Death, Funerals	Senior member of the Peranakan community with understanding of funerals
3	2 hrs	Penang	Death, Funerals	Well-versed with Peranakan culture.
4	1.5 hrs	Singapore	Death, Graves	Researcher at Bukit Brown
5	2 hrs	Penang	Death, Funerals	Senior member of the Peranakan community with understanding of funerals
6	2 hrs	Melaka	Death, Funerals	Senior member of the Peranakan community with understanding of funerals
7	2 hrs	Penang	Death, Funerals	Researches Chinese folklore and graves.

Table 3. Dimensions of Confucian Work Dynamism

The information collected during the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The data was then studied for information that will aid in answering the Research Questions and were coded according to the themes that arose from the data studied. This information was enriched further through the personal observations made and enabled a documentation of the community’s rich culture pertaining to funerals.

5.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section gives a brief description of the Peranakan funeral ceremony and then outlines the themes that emerged from the interviews. The analysis revealed various concepts that were associated with Peranakan funerals.

5.1 A Brief Description of the Funeral

The funeral ceremony is elaborate with various roles for family members. The eldest son plays the most important role throughout the funeral as he will lead the family, ceremoniously with the tong huan, a lantern that indicates he is the eldest son to continue the family name. If the eldest son is dead, then his eldest son (eldest patrilineal grandson) will take this role. If the dead eldest son does not have any male issues, then the deceased’s second son will take this role according to patriarchal Peranakan customs. The ji ho, a plaque often indicating the family name and/or origin that hangs above the main door and couplets of blessings on the windows of the house must be crossed with white paper indicating that there is a death in the family. If the deceased is male then a gong is placed on the left side of the entrance while if the deceased is female, then the gong is placed to the right side of the entrance. All lights in the house must be switched and left on until the funeral. The household deities must be covered with red paper, so that the deities do not get defiled by the death in the family. All reflective surfaces, especially mirrors must be covered with white paper. A wake, in odd numbers, such as three, five or seven days will be held for all who wish to pay their last respects to the dead. The richer and more important the family is, the longer the wake. Seven days is usually the longest; however, there are prominent families who have been known to keep the coffin in the house for a month, sometimes even years to bury the dead on certain appropriate and favourable dates according to the Chinese almanac and geomancy.

The deceased is dressed by the children (although lately, the undertaker has taken over this responsibility). A pearl is placed in the deceased mouth to illuminate his/her way in the afterlife . Red colour clothes are used to dress the deceased who are 80 years and above as this is a celebratory expression that the deceased has lived a long life. For Nyonyas, silver and pearl jewelry is used to fasten their baju panjang or kebaya. Once dressed, the deceased is placed in a coffin which is lined with paper money ingots (for use in the spirit world), clothes, and the deceased’s favourite things. A Chinese catafalque called quan tah covered with heavily embroidered silk cloth is raised and used for the funeral procession.

¹Some informants say it is to prevent the deceased from uttering curses as s/he has to hold the pearl in his/her mouth.

The children of the deceased wear belachu or hemp, with karong or sackcloth (burlap) over the belachu. They are not to wash themselves throughout the wake. Nyonyas will let their hair down—traditionally this is one of two occasions when women will let their hair down; the other is when a Nyonya is casting a curse (sumpah). Otherwise, traditionally Nyonyas always have their hair dressed in a bun. Daughters-in-law are considered daughters as they have been married into the family. Therefore daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to kneel in front of the coffin and wail and announce the arrival of the guests to the deceased. The term used is *jatoh kaki*, literally translated as falling on one's knees to thank the guest for coming. Wailing and crying signifies mourning and relatives are expected to do loud wailing. Rich families are known to hire mourners who will cry at the funeral. Children are expected to mourn their parents for three years.

5.2 Filial Piety through a Display of Grief

Analysis of the interviews revealed that one of the main concepts of a funeral with the Peranakan community is filial piety. Roles and rituals played out at the funeral by children show how much they will miss the deceased parent. The mourning apparel they wear, the loud wailing, the colours used and the care shown when preparing the deceased body for the wake and funeral are all examples of filial piety. These roles played out serve two functions: the first is to appease the dead and to show that they will be missed and secondly it is to show the community at large, their status and membership within the Peranakan community. The following is an excerpt from Interview 7:

“...before the funeral, the sons and daughters, immediate children can't wash or comb their hair, and supposed to eat porridge, not supposed to eat rice until the funeral ends. In Taiwan they wear a conical hat and black underneath, in Penang a lot of things with sackcloth.”

The above quote by Interviewee 7 shows the importance of ‘showing grief’ to the deceased and the community at large by the children. This filial piety exhibited through abstinence from good food and clothes is expected from children of the deceased.

The following excerpt from Interview 6 shows the significance of wearing of black, hemp and what different colours indicate:

D-siapa pakai hitam?

(Who wears black?)

P-menantu, hitam with belacu.

(daughter-in-law, black with hemp.)

D-anak jantan atau perempuan semua belacu kan? So menantu semua hitam with the belacu across?

(Sons and daughters will all wear hemp? So daughters-in-law will wear black with hemp across?)

P-Yes. A lot of variation. Sometimes the family says you must tiam merah, then you know why it's all black with one dot red—because the mother's still alive.

As seen from the above quote, filial piety extends to both parents. Sons-in-law who have one parent alive, such as the mother, will need to wear a red piece of cloth on their black patch to indicate that one parent is alive. Red represents good omen while black signifies mourning.

Another quote from Interview 6 shows the ritual for dressing the corpse by the eldest son of the deceased:

D-when your parent dies, are you supposed to pakai baju terbalik (wear your clothes inside out)?

P- the terbalik baju is the ritual of dressing the corpse, only the eldest son will wear the clothes meant the for deceased inside out. And then transfer/dress the deceased in the same clothes the correct side up...

The above quote shows the care and importance of the eldest son in the ritual of dressing the corpse.

Another quote from Interview 7 shows the importance of, especially black and blue even in the food served during the wake:

D-Are there special food?

L-Yes, everything will be in mourning colours, such as or ku.

D- So what else is especially for funerals?

L-Porridge is usually served.

D-Do they actually worry about feeding their guests?

L-Yes, they employ a caterer to serve usual food.

Ang ku kueh, which is usually red will be made black (or ku) instead to indicate mourning as seen from the above quote and porridge is served to the guests. It is not uncommon that a caterer will be engaged to cook for the guests who arrive for the wake, showing that they are well able to look after their guests as custom requires them to.

Wailing or crying is an important act that shows grief and a display of grief is considered appropriate. All children and family members are expected to wail and cry. As seen in the following excerpts, professional wailers are even paid to cry at funerals so that the deceased is appeased at the show of grief.

L-When the relatives come and pay respects the women have to wail and announce the guest's arrival.

(Interview 5)

P-The women will meratap (lament/express grief).

D-What does ratap mean?

P-Expression of grief, by lamenting the dead. They pay people to do these things.

D-When do they do this?

*P-One portion is when the guests come. Also the children have to invite the deceased to breakfast, lunch and dinner, three times a day throughout the wake.
(Interview 6)*

All the above excerpts show that filial piety is a necessary component during funerals as children are required to invite the deceased to eat his/her meals daily, show their grief through the clothes they wear, the food they eat and through loud wailing.

5.3 The Appeasement of Gods / Deities / Spirits

As the Peranakan tradition is an amalgamation of Chinese and Malay culture, many traditions are steeped in the Chinese patriarchal system where Chinese customary beliefs are adhered to. The sam seng, three sacrificial meats of pork, chicken/duck and squid/fish is offered at important occasions such as celebrating particular deities' birthdays, weddings and ancestral worship. Sometimes, particularly with wealthy and prominent Peranakan families, the sam seng is offered at funerals to the deceased as well. When someone in the family dies, the family must beli air (buy water) from the spirits to clean the corpse. So water must be obtained from a river, stream or well and coins must be deposited where the water was obtained to pay the spirits. These days in Malaysia, most no longer obtain water from natural sources—so water must be purchased (coins deposited at the source) from any public taps.

During the wake and funeral, at all the ceremonies, the eldest son will lead the family, carrying the tong huan. At the funeral procession, before the procession reaches a bridge, the eldest son must kneel at the edge of the bridge and ask permission from spirits of the other world to allow the funeral procession to pass, so that his father or mother can be laid to rest with the blessings of guardian spirits. This can be seen from the following quote taken from Interview 6:

D-Before they cross the bridge-

P-they go down, stop the procession, go to the edge of the bridge and-

D-jantan sulung saja? Apa dia cakap?

(Only the eldest son? What does he say?)

P-Ask permission for the entourage to pass, not sure which language. This must be done when there is any gap to cross, as long as there's a bridge to cross. All these are pantang-larang because there are spirits residing at bridges.

Another Chinese custom seen at grand Peranakan funerals is the Chinese mythology of the Eight Immortals. The wealthy who are able to afford it would engage stilt walkers dressed as the Eight Immortals to be part of the funeral procession. The funeral procession is led by the sons-in-law, who would usually sponsor the bands that will herald the procession. Banners are also essential; as they indicate the Chinese association that the family belongs to and poetic verses in praise of the deceased is also carried as a banner so that the gods of the spirit world will know that s/he is good and needs to be admitted to the upper realms.

The family of the deceased, however, will proceed behind the quan tah, with the eldest son leading, followed by all the offspring of the deceased in ranking order. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Interview 6:

D-the stilt walkers-

P-typically, the Chinese mythology of the Eight Immortals.

D-So stilt walkers are the ba xian (Eight Immortals)?

P-should be. Flower girl this and that, journey to the west. Macam wayang (theatrical) to show their filial piety-

P-and they have the banner carriers, indicating the associations...

D-kia sai jalan kat depan kan (the sons-in-law at the beginning of the procession)?

D-Apa (what is) si sing lei?

P-That is banner—his credentials. The banner that they put on the car, poetic verses. Sing lei represents kia sai (son-in-law), it's red, which means the kia sai's parents are still alive.

D-Why do the sing lei, the kia sai lead the procession?

P-because he's the daughter's husband and not considered part of the immediate family, whereas all the members of the immediate family are behind the cortege.

The masters of ceremonies and priests will also be in the front.

Another Chinese custom adhered to at the funeral ceremony is the bringing back of the deceased's spirit to the family home. After the burial, the deceased's portrait and hio lor (joss stick holder) that represents the deceased's spirit is brought home in a sedan chair (which was taken on the quan tah to the burial ground). This is then placed on a side table/altar (while the family is in mourning) before it is installed into the family ancestral altar. The following excerpt from Interview 6 clarifies the process:

D-During the procession ada kio (is there a sedan chair)?

P-Ada, the sedan chair is to bring back the deceased's spirit to the family house—taruk dalam kio (placed inside the sedan chair), when they have covered the grave.

D-Tapi tu hio lor ikut (so does the joss stick holder follow)?

P-Of course ikut (follow) because it's going to come back into the house.

D-So where do they put the hio lor?

P-On the kio (sedan chair); if they don't have a kio, they will put it in the quan tah (catafalque).

D-And once it reaches the burial grounds then taruk (place it) on the altar?

P-On the ground or the tomb, they just put it on a makeshift thing, then they take a bit of the earth and put into the hio lor, and then they burn the joss papers. This, they will bring back so that the spirit will be brought home. It will be housed in the rumah abu (ancestral home). A small altar will be created, and the plaque or the sin chi will be added when it is ready in a few months.

From the above excerpt, it is clear that ancestor worship is central to Peranakan culture, a very important practice brought from China. The deceased's memory is

preserved through the creation of an altar that will house the deceased spirit which is brought back from the burial ground and honoured at the family ancestral altar.

5.4 Status and Display of Wealth

The 19th century witnessed the peak of the Peranakan Chinese culture in the Strait Settlements. The Peranakan Chinese in many ways helped the British develop the Straits Settlements. They were compradors and become rich in the British colony. Status and a display of wealth were ways that the Peranakans distinguished themselves from the *sinkek* (newcomers) seen in their stately homes, jewelry and furniture. And needless to say, in death, their grand funerals. The richer you were, the more elaborate the funeral, so that the community recognized your wealthy status. The following four excerpts from Interview 5 show the importance of the display of wealth at Peranakan funerals:

Excerpt 1:

L-depends on how prominent you are, whether it's 3 days 2 nights, 5 days 4 nights, the numbers have to be odd, or whether it's 11 days or 2 or 3 months, these are all Chinese traditions.

Excerpt 2:

L-... what you have is the hearse in the front of the procession, the eldest son carries the white lantern... But before that, there's a whole retinue of people before the hearse, the more prominent you are, the more you'll have...

Excerpt 3:

D-were there bands?

L- those guys were so wealthy they had military bands, flower girls, even carriages with black horses imported from Singapore.

Excerpt 4:

P-baju orang mati are seven layers, if you are very high ranking. Three, five, seven, the more you have the more complete your robe is.

The above excerpts show that pomp and grandeur was a way of establishing wealth and status among the Peranakan community. This was displayed during funerals by the number of days of the wake, number of layers of the funerary robe for the deceased, the number of mourners accompanying the funeral hearse and the music bands, flower girls and even black horses to pull carriages.

Further indication of the importance of displaying of wealth is provided in Interview 7 as the following excerpt shows:

R-you basically start preparing when you're young, the first thing you do is you buy the wood for the coffin. You'd select good wood and then you'd buy that first. I can only talk about Malacca, over there all the rich families have *lagang*, basically

like a plantation, estate. Lagang is field, basically your plantation, all Malaccan Peranakans had that practice of owning lagang. You have your rumah abu? Then you have your town house where you live, you may live in your rumah abu in your early days but then later on many of them moved to bungalows. The land served many functions, the most common things rich families did were rubber, durian trees, mangosteen trees, etc. So some of our ancestors were buried on the estate land itself.

It is obvious from the above excerpt that the rich Peranakans bought rubber and durian plantations or estates where they lived and did business. They sectioned off areas where family members were buried in the estate itself.

5.5 China Ties

There were several references made to the importance of Peranakan culture stemming from China. Although many old customs and practices have been discontinued since the Cultural Revolution in China, the Peranakan communities continue to revere and still hold on to the old customs that they know from China as they symbolize their unique identity. The following excerpts from Interview 1 suggest these ties:

D: Somebody was saying that in China and Taiwan,

tak ada (don't have) *quan tah lagi* (anymore).

S: I think long time no more already.

D: Since when? So only here in Malaysia, we still have *quan tah*?

S: I've never been to China, so I cannot confirm these things. But actually our culture is from there.

D: Yeah.

S: So if you say that China don't practice these, I'm curious about their practices.

D: But the Cultural Revolution destroyed a lot of the Chinese tradition.

S: Yah, yah lah. Maybe from the Cultural Revolution cut off a lot already. Then no more all these things lah. But before that I think they got lah. Because this culture, we migrate from China. So that's why we practice this way.

D: I know...but the thing is that there are a lot of things that we, the Peranakans do, that the Chinese don't do anymore.

S: Yeah.

The above excerpt talks of how the Peranakans follow the Chinese custom of using the elaborate *quan tah* or decorated hearse which houses the coffin, the sedan chair and banners carrying the deceased's associations and virtues, even though the custom is no longer practiced in China. The following excerpt shows that ties with China still continue today with the purchase of funerary items such the special clothes, embroidered curtains or *langsir* and other items needed to conduct an elaborate funeral as there are salesmen selling these items in Malaysia and Singapore.

S: No, I order from my friend in KL. He has the connection in China.
D: So like the ones that you showed me? Those are all from China, right? Were they bought in the last 20 years? You got them in the last 20 years?
S: Yeah, last 16 years—all from China. We specify the design lah. Oh, I want dragon style, I want phoenix or I want the crane or whatever.
D: So it's not already made and you just buy? You actually tell them what you want.
S: Yah, yah... We give the length lah. The width, I want this width. Then they will know how to make...
D: So, do you know where it comes from in China? Shanghai or...
S: No, no... I think this kind ah... uhh... more Teochew style.
D: What? Swatow?
S: Ah Swatow. Their workmanship is very nice. But recently, I heard he went to, uhhh... Wuxi. Wuxi is near Shanghai there. I'm not really sure where he gets it lah.
D: So this person you use in KL—Is it just funeral embroideries or does he do other embroidery?
S: No, no, he orders a lot of things related to bereavement lah. Like uhh...
D: So all to do with funerals...
S: The costume they will sell also. You know... the urn, marble urns. Uhh... all these things lah. The cloth... everything lah. Like this donation box. If I order from him, he also has lah.

The following excerpt from Interview 3 refers to offerings and maintenances of graves and the Chinese style tombstones that were mostly imported from China:
 A-What you do as a descendant when you come and pay respects? Do you make offerings thanking him or her? Then if you have spares, you put that and paper money around the neighbour's graves thanking them for looking after your ancestor.
 A-So in the really ornate ones, there are three levels because your ancestor is only meant to take care/benefit three generations of descendants. The side panels are the names of the children. This is Teochew style, the old traditional Chinese armchair style.

The following excerpt from Interview 4 shows how the Peranakans feature Chinese mythology on their tombs which were mostly imported from China:

Z-the reliefs were all commissioned from china, but the statues, some of them were probably done locally—I can't say for sure.
Z-The 24 exemplars were also a prominent theme along with sam kok (Three Kingdoms) and other themes.
D-Ba Xian (Eight Immortals) was the same as the anthropomorphized Fu Lu Shou (deities of good fortune, emolument and longevity)?
Z-The Ba Xian came during that time, the point is you don't have many themes back then, it's very straightforward and simple.
D-Scenes of Sam Kok (Three Kingdoms), what will they typically be? Other than Sam Kok what other depictions can there be?

Z-Sam Kok is just one period in Chinese history, some depictions are legendary and some historical, some were brought into theater, so some of these stories became popular and they could end up as carvings. The fighting scenes might not be Sam Kok, depending on the flags, weapons and characters.

The above excerpts signify the reverence that the Peranakans have in maintaining their ties to Chinese culture.

6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the objective of documenting funeral customs of the Peranakan community. These findings aided in discovering the social identity of the Peranakan community through roles and rituals observed during funeral ceremonies. A discussion will follow in the following sections to analyse the Research Questions outlined in 2.1.

6.1 Research Questions

RQ1: Who are the principal actors in the Peranakan funeral?

RQ2: What roles do actors in a Peranakan funeral play?

From the findings above, the principal actors of a Peranakan funeral appear to be sons, grandsons and sons-in-law who are given the important roles during the funeral. These customs show that patriarchy deeply entrenched in Peranakan culture. Daughters and daughters-in-law have to kneel and wail each time a visitor arrives at the wake signifying further, a lower position for women of the family. The daughter too does not have an important role: it is in fact passed on to her husband instead.

All family members (sons and daughters) wear sackcloth during the wake and funeral signifying filial piety through a show of grief. They are not to wash and are to remain unkempt to show their distress over the death. Wailing and crying is also an important enactment which must reach the deceased as a display of grief. The performance of the Peranakan funeral identifies the Peranakans as society.

While the family mourns the loss of a loved family member, it is also important to show wealth and status by hiring caterers to prepare meals for guests who arrive for the wake and funeral. Status and wealth is also shown by hiring professional wailers, stilt walkers and the grand catafalque or quan tah. The quan tah and langsir (curtains) are rich embroideries imported from China which also display of their status, wealth and identity in Peranakan society. Priests and undertakers are hired who will take charge of the funeral and ensure the adherence to Chinese customs and the safe arrival of the deceased's spirit to the afterlife.

RQ3: What customs guide the Peranakan funeral?

The Peranakan funerals are mainly guided by Chinese customs of filial piety shown by close family members. Patriarchy is steeped in the culture observed in the roles played by sons, grandsons and sons-in-law. Chinese religious affiliations

to gods and deities are observed in family altars and the Eight Immortals who are reprised through stilt walkers at the funeral procession. Chinese priests and undertakers guide and conduct the funeral according to Chinese customs and the serving of pork at the funeral also signifies Chinese rather than Malay custom. It seems that in death, the Peranakans remain truest to their Chinese roots. In other aspects of their culture such as the wedding, evidences of acculturation is clear, particularly of the Malay culture. But in death and funerary rituals—much of its practices are of Chinese origin albeit older Chinese practices that the Peranakans have adhered to from when they migrated from China that might have been lost in modern China.

6.2 Social Identity and the Peranakans

The above discussion shows the importance of patriarchy and filial piety as observed by Clammer (in Lee, 2008). A grand show appears necessary as a mark of status seen in the ornate *quan tah*, the procession of stilt walkers, banners and bands, grieving family in sackcloth, austerity observed by the children and the loud wailing as seen in the findings. This grand show alludes to a social identity that is obtained through social categorization (Trepte, 2006:257). In-group behavior and solidarity among members of the social category (the Peranakan community) is shown through positive roles undertaken during the funeral ceremony which adheres to the community's expectation of filial piety, a show of grief and the adherence to Chinese funerary customs.

Identification with the social group is important to the Social Identity of an in-group (Burke and Stets, 2000). In this study the Peranakans appear to do this in a rather loud and grand manner. No expense is spared in importing embroidery and other artifacts that are associated with being Peranakan. Roles are undertaken by various members of the family 'to show' their affiliation to the group through their dress, the elaborate *quan tah* and funeral procession, the food preparation, the employment of cooks, waiters, stilt walkers, priests and undertakers in order to belong to Peranakan society.

Rubin and Hewstone (1998:42) state that Social Identity Theory encourages intergroup discrimination in order to achieve, maintain and enhance positive distinctiveness of their social identity. In this study, it was observed (please see 3.2.2) that the Peranakan community achieved this distinctiveness through their rich and lavish lifestyle and their purchase of estates, plantations and bungalows thereby distinguishing themselves apart from Malay culture and the impoverished Chinese migrants who came later in the 19th century. They preferred a western, educated outlook, lived in posh houses filled with priceless Nyonya ceramics and specially carved furniture of a distinctive Baba style and built unique buildings of hybrid architectural forms that have been described as Peranakan. Nyonyas wore very distinctive clothes bejeweled with diamonds, pearls and lace to show wealth and status.

The above study shows that the social identity of the Peranakan community lies in their distinctiveness as a social category, apart from the Malay and Chinese; but an amalgam which makes them separate as a social group. Status symbols are also a part of this community. This is shown in many ways: their lavish lifestyle, the rich dwellings and the grand twelve-day wedding and funeral ceremonies. Their membership to the community is often enacted through the roles they play showing an affiliation to Chinese customs such as filial piety, patriarchy and adherence to Chinese religious beliefs.

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Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar is an Associate Professor with the School of Communication at Taylor's University. Her interests include research in culture and ethnicity with a linguistic bent. She prefers qualitative methods and is actively involved in research involving the sociology of language.

David Hock Jin Neo received his Ph.D from La Trobe University, Melbourne; and his dissertation was on magical realism in cinema. He is currently Senior Lecturer at the School of Communication, Taylor's University and research interests are world cinema and the Peranakan culture.

Antoon De Rycker is an Associate Professor at Taylor's University, Malaysia, where he teaches creativity and argumentation. His main research converges on recontextualisation of social practice, which he examines for a variety of discourses (e.g. crisis and scientific research). More recently, he has also become involved in the study of social networks among urban Malaysians and attendant issues of ethnic diversity, social capital and nation building.