

The Prospect of the Peranakan Community at the Age of Globalization

By Tan Ta Sen

Ladies and Gentlemen, I felt extremely honoured to be here today to share with you my thought on the prospect of the Peranakan community at the age of globalization. Being a Baba and Nyonya yourself, I am sure, you are very concerned about the future of the Peranakan community. The word “peranakan” is very commonly used in bahasa Indonesia than in bahasa Melayu. In the past “baba and nyonya” were commonly used for the localized Chinese. Peranakan in fact includes all localized foreigners or their descendents. Thus we have the Chinese peranakan (baba & nyonya), Indian peranakan (Chitty or mamak-Indian Muslim), Portugese peranakan, European peranakan (eurasian or serani). Melaka is the home of the Peranakans in both Malaysia and Singapore and so it is not only appropriate and relevant but also historically significant for me to deal with this topic here. Although I am a Singaporean and I am not a Baba, in the past decades, I have business concerns in Melaka, and a frequent visitor of Melaka. Thus, I am virtually a local Melakan, live at the centre of the old town and have witnessed the change that has taken place in the past two decades.

I would like to begin by giving you a few significant glimpses into the history of Chinese diaspora as well as the eventual development of the Peranakan community in Melaka so as to set the tone of proper historical perspective. The Chinese have been migrating southward from China to Southeast Asia for centuries, driven from their homeland by economic necessity, political disturbance, flood and drought. Chinese diaspora outside China are generally addressed as *Tang Ren* (*Teng Lang* 唐人) because

since the 7th century in the Tang Dynasty, Chinese mariners and traders were engaging in considerable international maritime trade, traveling as far afield as East Africa through the Straits of Malacca. They went to mainland Southeast Asia much earlier and they were addressed as Qin Ren (秦人). However, they were merely sojourners before the 14th century.

Cheng Ho's historic seven voyages to the Western Ocean in the early 15th century **marked the first wave of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia.** Cheng Ho discovered the presence of Chinese settlements in Island Southeast Asia. Three crew members of Cheng Ho's fleet, Ma Huan, Fei Xin and Gong Zhen have recorded their eye-witness accounts of Cheng Ho's voyages to the western ocean in their books. They witnessed the existence of Chinese settlements in Sumatra's Palembang and Java's Majapahit, Tuban, Gresik and Surabaya. **This first wave of Chinese emigration was characterized by indigenization (localization) as these pioneers were quick to interact and even intermarried with the natives and as a result they were gradually assimilated into the local population.** However, Ma Huan and Gong Zhen made no mention of Chinese settlement in Melaka but Fei Xin casually referred to some pale-looking people among the Melaka residents as the "Tang" people. "Tang" like "Han" is commonly used to refer to the Chinese. Therefore, we safely conclude that there were a handful Chinese in Melaka during Cheng Ho's era and they were too few to form any so-called Chinese settlement. As Cheng Ho built an outpost in Malacca and all ships going to other ports were required to assemble in Malacca awaiting fair wind to make the homeward journey, there were certainly sizable crew members of Cheng Ho's fleet temporarily

putting up in the guanchang (government warehouse complex). Ma Huan, Gong Zhen and Fei Xin were quite clear about these itinerant Chinese and so it was unlikely that they would be confused between the itinerant Chinese crew members who were sojourners and the few Chinese residents.

The legend of Hang Li Poh has hinted the existence of Melaka's earliest Chinese settlement at Bukit Cina during the Cheng Ho era. Princess Hang Li Poh has long been conveniently dismissed by historians as a myth. But I would like to review the Hang Li Poh story in a fresh historical perspective. On the subject of Hang Li Poh, in my opinion, it was a historical event which might have possibly taken place. When we survey the legends of Southeast Asia, especially of Indonesia and Malaya, we often find stories of Chinese princesses marrying native rulers. It can be attributed to the fact that China throughout history was a great power and a cultural centre surrounded by undeveloped native states. These native rulers would feel extremely honoured to marry a Chinese princess as it could enhance the prestige of the native rulers and win the trust of the Chinese emperors. During colonial period, it would be great honour for a native to marry a white girl. In history, there were many examples of Chinese princesses marrying native rulers such as Princess Wencheng who was married to a Tibetan king and Wang Zhaojun to a Xiongnu ruler. Hang Li Poh could have been another Wang Zhaojun who was not a princess but a maid in the imperial palace. In fact, the Malay Annals' story of Hang Li Poh marrying Sultan Mansor Shah was an error. The sultan who married Hang Li Poh should have been Megat Iskandar Shah (Parameswara's son). Western scholars were also agreeable to this version but mistakenly regarded her as the daughter of a local Chinese

kapitan. The kapitan system was only introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century but the Hang Li Poh story took place in the early 15th century. In my view, Hang Li Poh was very likely one of the maids in Yongle's palace. In addition, 'Puteri' in Malay and Indonesian languages may not necessarily mean "princess". It is widely used as pet name for girls like Chinese call their daughters *Qian Jin* (千金) (thousand gold). Historian's suggestion about the story of Hang Li Poh as a legend simply because there was no record on her in the Ming dynastic history may not be totally correct. The Malay and Indonesian historiographies are fairly similar to the Chinese historiography as literature and history is inseparable. Literature, biography, even mythology are in complete harmony with historical facts. Moreover, Hang Li Poh was not a princess, why should Chinese official record this event?

Cheng Ho's historic seven voyages to the Western Ocean in the 15th century opened the door for the Chinese living in the coastal provinces in China such as Guangdong and Fujian to migrate abroad. **The second wave of Chinese emigration took place between 1644 to 1840s and was characterized by westernization. The overthrow of the Ming Dynasty by the Manchus in 1644 led to an exodus of Ming royalists to Southeast Asia.** A group of these Ming royalists like Melaka's second Chinese kapitan, Li Wei King (李为经) also known as Li Jun Chang (李君常) or Li Kap took refuge in Melaka and later given the Kapitan post by the Dutch ruler.

These cultured Ming royalists soon made fortunes from trade and were picked by the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial governments as community

leaders and appointed them as Kapitans in charge of Chinese affairs from the 17th to 19th centuries. The office of the Chinese kapitan was located in the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, the oldest Chinese temple in Melaka and Malaysia. Hence, Cheng Hoon Teng was the most important power base of the Chinese in Melaka. Cheng Hoon Teng Temple was jointly established by the first two Chinese Kapitans, Tay Hong Yoe (郑芳扬) also known as Tay Kap and Li Wei King in 1673 . Then, the Chinese population in Melaka was small about 100 plus; there were 160 Chinese in 1675, two years after the foundation of the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. In 1678, the Chinese population increased significantly to 426. Since they were entrusted to be in charge of the Chinese affairs, they took the first step to organize the Chinese community by forming the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple.

Li Kap, a native of Xiamen, was one of the Ming royalists who fled from Manchu rule after the overthrow of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. Together with other like-minded Ming royalists, he took refuge in Malacca. These Ming royalists being learned Confucian scholars, brought Chinese culture to Malacca. Li Kap went into business and made his fortunes. He then collaborated with Tay Kap to establish the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. Later, he bought and donated a piece of land for use by the Chinese community in Malacca as a burial ground in Bukit China or Sam Po Hill. It is not surprising that Tay Kap and Li Kap had targeted temple and burial ground as urgent services for the Chinese in Malacca. For immigrants the temple is constantly the first refuge to seek salvation of inner peace and spiritual attachment to and link up with fellow clansmen in a foreign land, and the cemetery is to ensure the wanderers a last resting place. In any early Chinese settlement abroad, temple, clan associations and burial ground are always the

first forms of social organizations as they bond the immigrant community into a cohesive society.

In 1698 a French business delegation on its way to China made a brief stopover in Melaka and visited Cheng Hoon Teng. One of delegation members, Francois Froger paid a visit to the Cheng Hoon Teng and he wrote about the temple with a temple layout plan. He described that the temple consisted of four major sections, namely the main hall, front hall, inner hall and women's prayer quarter. On the day of his visit, the temple priests were performing religious ritual. He was so engrossed that he stayed in the temple for two hours and jotted down his impressions of the happening. Froger made one important remark of very historical significance. He called the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple as "**The Pagoda of the Chinese Refugees in Melaka**". It testified the existence of a considerable group of Ming royalists taking refuge in Melaka after the Manchus overthrew the Ming Dynasty in 1644. After half a century, this "refugee" impression of Melaka was still distinctively noticeable.

These refugees or Ming royalists were the pioneers of Melaka Chinese society. They brought Chinese culture to Melaka shaping the development of the Chinese society in Melaka and eventually nurtured the birth of a Peranakan Chinese culture showing the fusion of the cultural traits of both Chinese, **English** and Malay cultures.

The kapitan system was a legacy of the Portugese, Dutch and British colonial governments from the 16th to early 19th centuries. The kapitans were acknowledged as the Chinese leaders by virtue of their enormous wealth and high social status. **Their descendants attended Portuguese, Dutch and English schools. Many of them worked**

in foreign firms while others started their own companies engaging in imports and exports of spices and China trade. They were the forefathers of the westernized prosperous Peranakans. For instance, Kapitan Chua Soo Chong in the 18th century was the father of prominent Baba Chua Chong Long and the grandfather of Baba Chua Yan Ling.

The British abolished the Kapitan system in 1825. Thereafter Cheng Hoon Teng Temple introduced an appointment of temple president to be the leader of the Chinese community in Melaka in place of kapitan. The temple presidential system was later abolished in 1915. From 1825 to 1915, there were a total of six temple presidents: Liang Mei Ji, Si Hoo Keh, Tan Kim Seng, Tan Beng Swee, Tan Beng Jiak and Tan Jiak Wai. Si Hoo Keh, Tan Kim Seng, Tan Beng Swee and Tan Beng Jiak and so on were prominent Babas and dominant Chinese leaders in Singapore and Melaka. It shows that the Peranakans were the backbone of the Chinese in Singapore and Melaka in the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Babas were involved in opium, sireh, nutmeg, pepper and gambier cultivation, tin mining, commodity trading and property. In the early 20th century, many Babas invested in rubber. Baba and Nyonya were financially better off than China-born Chinese. Their family wealth and connections with the Malay royalties and the British and Dutch colonialists enabled them to form a Straits-Chinese elite, whose loyalty was strictly to Britain or the Netherlands. Most Peranakans were English or Dutch-educated, as a result of the Western colonization of Malaya and Indonesia, Peranakans readily embraced English and Dutch culture and education as a

means to advance economically. Thus administrative and civil service posts were often filled by prominent Straits Chinese. Many in the community also worked as compradores (Chinese middlemen) for big Western companies and banks. The Peranakan community thereby became very influential in Malaya, [Singapore](#) and Indonesia and were known also as the King's Chinese due to their loyalty to the British Crown.

The third wave of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia in the 19th century coincided with political turmoils in China and economic exploitation of Southeast Asia by the Dutch and British colonial powers. The Taiping Rebellion in China was a widespread civil war in southern China from 1850 to 1864. The [First Opium War](#) from 1839 to 1842 and the [Second Opium War](#) from 1856 to 1860 between [China](#) under the [Qing Dynasty](#) and the [British Empire](#). These events caused great hardships and economic dislodgements to the farmers in Fujian and Guangdong. In the meantime, the Dutch and British colonial governments were earnestly engaged in developing labour-intensive sugar and tin-mining industries in Dutch Indies (present Indonesia) and British Malaya in the Malay Peninsula. As a consequence, the job opportunities in Indonesia and Malaya led to the mass exodus of the dislodged farmers in Fujian and Guangdong to the region. These new arrivals, mostly illiterate, worked as cheap labourers in plantations and tin-mines. **As a result of the massive influx of the Chinese immigrants, the China-born Chinese outnumbered Peranakan Chinese. The demographic change coupled with the rise of a good number of adventurous new rich who made their fortunes from tin-mines, gambier and rubber plantations as well as trade, ushered in a new phase in the history of Chinese Diaspora. The rising China-born Chinese merchants**

overtook Peranakans as community leaders. They actively built temples, clan associations and Chinese schools to educate the immigrants' children. As a result, it signified a phase of re-sinicization as a dominant feature of this third wave of Chinese migration and Chinese-educated Chinese became the mainstream of the Chinese communities.

This re-sinicization process remained predominant during the fourth wave of Chinese migration which was triggered by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Soon after the war, a great number of Chinese literates and intelligentsia such as teachers, journalists and so on migrated to Southeast Asia and they reinforced dissemination of Chinese culture in overseas Chinese communities.

The post-war political developments in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore had great impact on the history of Chinese Diaspora. The end of the Pacific War in 1945 saw a rise of multi-racial nationalist movements in Southeast Asia and people of all ethnic groups of former colonies were united to fight for independence.

Changing Chinese communities entered a phase of commitment to national identity after World War Two. We saw two noticeable features in this process. Firstly, the rise of a local pan-Chinese identity signified the decline of the Chinese dialect or sub-ethnic groups including the Peranakan Chinese when the Chinese joined hands with the Malays and Indians in the struggle for independence. Secondly, after independence, the Chinese moved to adopt citizenship and develop a sense of national identity and actively engaged in nation-building.

Now we come back to review how these postwar changes had affected the **Peranakan community**. As a community that always considered Malaya home, many Peranakans were involved in civic projects and local government. Due to their strict loyalty, they did not support Malaysian Independence. Things started to change in the later half of the 20th century, with some leading Melakan Peranakans, for example Tan Cheng Lock and Tan Siew Sin, starting to support Malaysian independence.

Peranakan culture has started to decline in Malaysia and Singapore after Independence. Without British colonial support for their perceived racial neutrality, they have been faced with a cultural identity crisis. The Japanese Occupation and the Government policies in both countries following Independence from the British have resulted in the assimilation of Peranakans back into mainstream Chinese culture. Singapore classifies the Peranakans as ethnically Chinese, so they receive formal instruction in [Mandarin Chinese](#) as a second language instead of Malay. In Malaysia, the standardization of Malay as [Bahasa Melayu](#) (required for all ethnic groups) has led to a disappearance of the unique characteristics of Baba Malay. The Peranakan culture is losing popularity to modern Western culture, but to some degree, Peranakans try to retain their language, cuisines and customs. Young Peranakans still speak their creole language, although many young women do not wear the *kebaya*. Marriages normally follow the western culture because the traditional Peranakan customs are losing popularity.

The situation has been aggravated in the present age of globalization in which we see the **fifth and last wave of Chinese emigration** into Southeast Asia in the last 30 years

since the Chinese government relaxed the policy on overseas emigration. The rapid economic integration and the improved political relations between ASEAN and China resulted in new Chinese migration to Southeast Asia being possible and acceptable. Following the rise of China as a world's powerful political and economic nation, China's export, Chinese investment and contracted project constructions in Southeast Asia, have risen dramatically with massive new Chinese immigrants coming into Southeast Asia.

This new wave of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia and beyond is unprecedented in Chinese history not only because the migrants originate from northern and central Chinese provinces, but also because travel has become easier due to better transportation links both inside and outside of China. That results in potentially larger numbers than previous waves of Chinese migration throughout the globe. These new immigrants are a breed apart from their forebears, who spoke regional dialects and exhibited little nationalism, identifying more with the localities in China from which they hailed. The recent arrivals are not only better educated, speak Mandarin, but also tend to identify with China as a whole. They are patriotic and loyal to the motherland. They are currently rising up as an important force within overseas Chinese and ethnic Chinese communities. **However, the new immigrants have to move along with time to develop a sense of national identity and integrate into the mainstream local Chinese society.**

The Peranakans were therefore squeezed on the one hand by the governments' nation-building policies, and on the other hand by the influx of the Chinese new immigrants. Despite the national overtone of nation-building policies, it consciously draws Peranakans into the mainstream Chinese society politically and culturally. The Chinese immigrant phenomenon also puts pressure on the Peranakans to be re-sinicized.

Hence, in the 21st century, the Peranakans face the same dilemmas and problems as other Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia: the decline of traditions, the inability to speak the dialect, the growing number of mixed marriages. All these factors lead to the great changes in the culture and uncertainty about the future. The frenzied activities revolving around Peranakan life and language in this decade could perhaps be seen as the frantic last throes of a declining community. But the Peranakan community seems determined to re-assert its identity in the face of encroaching modernity and loss of traditional culture and within the context of language shift and re-acculturation.

In short, the Peranakan community was born during the Cheng Ho and western colonial eras. Their main characteristic was at first being localized (indigenized-Malay or Indonesian) ; westernized during colonial era, and re-sinicized at the present national stage.

Thank you.