

**HERITAGE, HYBRIDITY AND THE GLOBAL CITY-STATE:
SINGAPORE'S PERANAKAN MUSEUM**

by

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Abstract

This thesis will demonstrate how cultural policies in Singapore are informed by underlying political and socio-economic objectives. The topic addressed is the state's use of material culture in the Peranakan Museum to meet the demands faced by the repositioning of Singapore as a global city-state without a natural hinterland. My study will make use of the tools offered by various disciplines, including anthropology, history and sociology. This will serve to address the themes of identity construction and nationhood from different angles, while applying these concerns to public policy. It is one of the main aims of this thesis to bring together interdisciplinary scholarship alongside my original research and personal experience at the Peranakan Museum. This thesis will be organized thematically into three chapters, followed by a brief conclusion. Chapter One will centre on two important, interrelated questions: What does the museum tell us about the past of the Peranakan? And how does the museum construct the idea of Peranakan at the present moment? Chapter Two focuses on the museum's production of nostalgia, intended to anchor Singapore's global citizens to the nation during times of change. This chapter will also discuss the regional and global uses of Peranakan culture for national branding purposes. Finally, Chapter Three explores why the state feels as if it needs to actively interfere in resolving tensions that have resulted from the reinvention of Singapore as a global city in the twenty-first century.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Sharon W.Q. Lim. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

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Dedication

To Alan

INTRODUCTION

“How were we to create a nation out of a polyglot collection of migrants from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and several other parts of Asia?”
- Lee Kuan-Yew, first Prime Minister of Singapore (1959-1990)¹

Throughout its history as an independent nation-state, Singapore has grappled with issues of identity and belonging and how to address them in a post-colonial nationalism unique to the city-state’s context. Lee Kuan-Yew, often heralded as the founding father of Singapore, was reflecting on such concerns in the quotation above.

In a contribution to the TODAY paper, Adrian Kuah penned an article entitled, “Facing up to identity myths and politics in S’pore,” thus evincing that these concerns remain relevant today. In twenty-first-century Singapore, the issues once considered by Lee Kuan-Yew are now inextricably linked to globalization, migration and the implied risk of a nation-state diminishing in importance. Kuah writes:

Whether the focus has been on the day-to-day issues of jobs, the cost of living, transport, housing and the like, or on the longer-term ephemeral visions of a shared future, of grave concern has been the erosion of the Singaporean identity by the influx of immigrants brought on by deteriorating demographic trends. The fear is that this sense of ‘we’ will disintegrate, or at least alter irretrievably, in the face of ‘they.’²

Kuah proceeds to consider the “dangers” that today threaten the “myth” of the coherent unified nation-state.³ He shows how “myths, not historical facts” have formed the foundation for a mythic sense of collective social consciousness based on shared territory across time.⁴

The distinction that Kuah makes between myths and historical facts speaks to the contrast

¹ Lee Kuan-Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. (Singapore: Times, 1998), p. 22.

² Adrian W.J Kuah, “Facing up to identity, myths and politics in S’pore,” *TODAY*, 6 March 2014, accessed 8 April 2014, <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/facing-identity-myths-and-politics-spore>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

between “history” and “heritage” that this paper will subsequently address. Although Kuah seeks to problematize the ahistorical construction of national identity, he states nevertheless that “the most basic form of identification that people make is with their locality,” an assumption that implicitly naturalizes the nation as the principal site of identification.⁵

In contrast to Kuah’s assumption, Kenneth Pomeranz contends that the tendency to imagine the nation as the primary unit of historical identification is an increasingly outdated legacy inherited from the nineteenth century.⁶ Pomeranz suggests that, rather than the nation, categories such as class, ethnicity, and gender may be more important units of historical analysis.⁷ While Pomeranz warns historians against what he terms “methodological nationalism,”⁸ when addressing global connections past and present, this paper will show how the Singaporean state has attempted to actively intervene amidst the effects of globalization by re-situating socio-cultural heritage as national “history.”

Heritage: its meanings and implications

Departing from this point, it is necessary to situate the term “heritage” and develop a clearer sense of how this term has been deployed and understood. Stuart Hall has written that the term “heritage” has “slipped so innocently into everyday speech.”⁹ Hall attempts to interrogate this term, contending that it speaks to the “whole complex of organisations, institutions and practices devoted to the preservation and presentation of culture and the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz, “Histories for a Less National Age,” *The American Historical Review* 119:2 (April 2014), p. 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-settling ‘The Heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-nation,” *Third Text* 13:49 (1999), p. 3

arts—art galleries, specialist collections, public and private, museums of all kinds (general, survey or themed, historical or scientific, national or local) and sites of special historical interest.”¹⁰ From this broad definition, almost anything related to the past or present of a culture may be fairly regarded as “heritage.” However, not all aspects of a culture are identified in this manner. The process of classification is an active means of selection based on a subjectively determined range of criteria that may include aesthetic value, historical and national significance.¹¹ Frequently utilized in determining heritage status, the last criterion is also the most revealing in terms of making evident the ideological aims of heritage preservation. While aesthetic value is subjective, historical significance, though it may be relative in different contexts, is generally more objectively determined. Meanwhile, national significance is contentious as it involves the implicit judgement of which perceived historical narratives are important and worth preserving as integral to the nation’s heritage. Here, it is important to consider Michael Rowland’s observation that the “invention of ‘cultural heritage’ was bound to powerful mythologies which seek to reclaim and repossess lost parts, return to imagined homelands and redeem the wisdom of ancient Golden ages.”¹² Thus, heritage is broadly connected to the construction of a national meta-narrative through the active process in determining which cultural elements will be included as part of the story the nation wishes to tell about itself to its own citizens as well as to the rest of world.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ I refer to the acquisition justification form used by state-run museums in Singapore. For curators to classify an artifact/artwork as a “National Treasure,” the following criteria have to be met: great national significance, unique and irreplaceable (rare), great social, historical and aesthetic significance.

¹² Michael Rowlands, “Heritage and Cultural Property,” in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers), p. 106.

As an instrument for telling the story of the nation, heritage operates at multiple levels of engagement. In the rather exceptional case of Singapore, the local context is also a national context. At this level, heritage is deployed mainly as an ideological tool, creating a vision of the nation for its citizens. A report on national museums coordinated by Linköping University in Sweden concluded that “visitors overwhelmingly agree that national museums of all kinds, not just nationalistic ones, are key institutions in representing national values.”¹³ The report furthermore asserts that, “national museums remain essentialising institutions imbued with ideological positions in relation to knowledge, ethnicity, lifestyle and history.”¹⁴ This means that the narrative being told through such museums is limited and purposeful.

The key themes addressed in this paper are directly connected to my own experience interning at The Peranakan Museum’s curatorial department in 2011. During this brief stint, I began to wonder what the connection was between the historical Peranakans and the later Singaporean nation-state—who was suggesting these linkages and why? Consequently, one of the major concerns addressed throughout this thesis is the Peranakan Museum and the pragmatic uses to which it has been put in the service of various aspects of government policy. As Lily Kong has noted, “Singapore’s economic development can be achieved only if Singaporeans are willing to support their political leaders and play their part in the country’s growth.”¹⁵ Therefore, this thesis will show how cultural policy is closely intertwined with the government’s socio-cultural agendas and economic vision. Globalization and Singapore’s aspirational “global” financial hub status have resulted in changes in the everyday landscape

¹³ P. Aronsson, *National Museums Making History in a Diverse Europe*, (Linköping, Sweden: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), p. 64.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lily Kong, “Cultural policy in Singapore: negotiating economic and socio-cultural agendas,” *GeoForum* 31:4 (2000), p. 418.

of the city. The material casualties of rapid infrastructural development led to a growing sense of nostalgia among long-time residents. The state has attempted to ease such anxieties, as well as use the collective sense of longing for a vanishing past, by positioning the remaining un-spoiled heritage traces as “national.” At the same time, in order to meet the labour and technological demands of competition in the global economy, the Singaporean government seeks to encourage migration, particularly from Mainland China. As these policies have been met with some ambivalence among the populace, cultural institutions such as museums are utilized in order to achieve the state’s objectives. Sites such as the Peranakan Museum now play an important role in presenting a particular group, the colonial-era Peranakans, as exemplary “multicultural” proto-Singaporeans.

What is “Peranakan?”

At the outset of this paper, it is necessary to clarify the term “Peranakan” and note its relation to other sometimes synonymous and historically contingent terms. “Peranakan” refers to one’s indigenous relationship to the land as it comes from the Malay word, *anak*, which means “child.” This term is used to identify non-Malays of mixed origins born in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Another term that appears frequently in my sources is “Straits Chinese.” This term, in contrast to Peranakan, although sometimes used to describe the same people, tends to evoke a more colonial connotation.¹⁷ After the end of British colonial rule, the use of term “Straits Chinese” became increasingly rare. For example, the Straits Chinese British

¹⁶ Philip Holden, “Colonial Fiction, Hybrid Lives: Early Singaporean Fiction in The Straits Chinese Magazine,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33:85 (1998), p. 96.

¹⁷ Lee Kam-Hing and Neil Khor Jin-Keong, “Quest for Relevance: Peranakan Chinese Political Leadership in Malaysia,” in *Peranakan Chinese in a Globalizing Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Baba House, 2010), p. 61.

Association which was founded in 1900 was renamed the Peranakan Association in 1966.¹⁸ Given the historical period examined in this paper, the usefulness of the term “Peranakan” as opposed to “Straits Chinese” is quite apparent. The former is not nominally tied to any specific racial group, while the latter is explicitly connected in name to the Chinese. In addition to the above terms, “Baba” (for males) and “Nyonya” (for females) have also been used to more specifically distinguish residents with deeper roots in Singapore. While the different meanings and applications of these terms remain a source of some debate, this will not be the main focus of this paper.¹⁹ This thesis, focusing closely on the Peranakan Museum, will likewise employ the term “Peranakan.” The first chapter will discuss in greater detail what exactly “Peranakan” means in the context of this study.

Scholarship on Singapore’s museums

In 1993, the National Heritage Board was established as a statutory board under the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA).²⁰ This saw the merger of three separate organizations: the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department.²¹ This marked a turning point in Singapore’s heritage sector, as new museums began to open in the years that followed—such as the Singapore Art Museum in 1996 and Asian Civilisations

¹⁸Bonny Muliani Tan, “Straits Chinese British Association,” *Singapore Infopedia*, accessed 8 April 2014, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_496_2004-12-20.html

¹⁹ Many scholars have deliberated on the terminological distinctions and specific definitions of the terms “Straits Chinese,” “Straits-born Chinese,” “Peranakan,” “Baba,” and “Nyonya”. For example, see: Png Poh-Seng, “The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A Case of Local Identity and Socio-cultural Accommodation” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10.1 (January 1969), pp. 95–114; Jurgen Ruldolph, “Approaching the Babas” in *Reconstructing Identities: A social history of the Babas in Singapore*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1998), pp. 25–64; Tan Chee-Beng, “Intermarriage and the Chinese Peranakan in Southeast Asia,” in *Peranakan Chinese in a Globalizing Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Baba House, 2010), pp. 27–41.

²⁰ Tan Lay-Yuen, “National Heritage Board,” *Singapore Infopedia*, accessed 8 April 2014, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_94_2005-01-27.html?s=national%20heritage%20board

²¹ Ibid.

Museum in 1997.²² Therefore, scholarship on museums in Singapore is a relatively new area of inquiry that has begun to develop and expand over the past decade. Some of the more important works have been contributed by three scholars: Can-Seng Ooi, Joan Henderson and Emily Stokes-Rees. Ooi's work on cultural services management has focused mainly on the relationship between Singapore's museums and place-branding and identities.²³ Henderson has examined the way that heritage tourism has been used as a nation-building tool and economic resource in Singapore.²⁴ Stokes-Rees, an anthropologist, has looked at how Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum have been used for the promotion of cultural citizenship among the populace.²⁵

Another significant contribution to this growing literature on museums in Singapore, specifically the Peranakan Museum, is Jackie Yoong's thesis on exhibitions that focus on Peranakan material culture from 1985 to 2008.²⁶ By studying the uses of Peranakan culture in Singapore over three decades, Yoong shows how the "perceived representativeness" of Peranakan culture has expanded between the mid-1980s and the twenty-first-century.²⁷ Other academic works from the National University of Singapore have similarly examined

²² "History & Milestones," *National Heritage Board*, accessed 8 April 2014,

<http://www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/AboutUs/History&Milestones>

²³ See: Can-Seng Ooi, "Identities, museums and tourism in Singapore: think regionally, act locally," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31:2 (2003) and Can-Seng Ooi, Tourist historical products: packaged past of Denmark and Singapore," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 1:2 (2001).

²⁴ See: Joan C. Henderson, "Exhibiting Cultures: Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11:3 (2005) and J. Henderson, "Ethnic Heritage as a Tourist Attraction: the Peranakans of Singapore," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9:1 (2003).

²⁵ See: Emily Stokes-Rees, "Making Sense of A M lange: Representing Cultural Citizenship in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum," *Museum Anthropology* 36:1 (2013) and Emily Stokes-Rees, "'We need something of our own': Representing Ethnicity, Diversity and 'National Heritage' in Singapore," (Paper presented at National Museums in a Global World, Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007).

²⁶ Jackie Yoong, "A History of Peranakan Museum Exhibitions in Singapore 1985-2008," MA Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2009.

²⁷ Jackie Yoong, p. 90.

the development of the National Museum, which also covers how Peranakan material culture has been displayed prior to the establishment of the Peranakan Museum.²⁸

Thesis contributions

On first glance, my arguments may appear similar to some of this literature, in particular the contributions of Stokes-Rees and Yoong. In addition to synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship relating to the topic, I believe that this thesis has something new to add to the discussion. It is also important to acknowledge the things that I will not attempt to do in this paper. While museum exhibitions will be discussed, one will not find detailed analysis of these exhibitions through the lens of curatorial interviews and exhibition files. My study is informed both by my experience as an intern and museum visitor, as well as by a broader analysis of Singaporean political discourse and how it relates to the topic of cultural heritage, the Peranakan Museum in particular. Furthermore, this study will attempt to expand upon the scholarship described above, through a close examination of the museum's narratives and how they are closely linked to government policy. Therefore, I will not be studying the museum in a vacuum, nor working directly from curatorial theories. Instead, I am situating the Peranakan Museum in a national space so as to better understand its complex implications for governing and living in a multi-racial, "global" society.

²⁸ Rajamogan, "The National Museum in historical perspective, 1874-1981," unpublished B.A Honours Thesis, National University of Singapore, 1987/1988, p. 59, notes that it was only in the late 1970s that the then-Director of the National Museum, Christopher Hooi, started to build the museum's collection of Peranakan objects. Karen Low, "The management of identity: a case study of the National Museum of Singapore," unpublished B.A Honours Thesis, National University of Singapore, 1993/1994, p. 19, posits that the National Museum's "Gliding the Phoenix" exhibition in 1993 was a watershed moment in the development of renewed interest in Peranakan material culture. Low's paper includes an interview with a curator who remarked, "Never has an exhibition on Peranakan jewelry been done before... they mixed everything local and came up with their own hybrid style which is quite identifiable and never been highlighted."

State-run museums in Singapore can be considered as an extension of public policy. While the government has been careful to acknowledge Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature, the conceptualization of the nation has in recent years transitioned from the government's Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) vision of multiculturalism towards an understanding of Singapore as a "hybrid" society.²⁹ A hybrid society, although not seamlessly assimilated as in the American "melting pot" model, does imply that there is a distinct national culture comprised from the mixing of different cultural entities evolving together under the auspices of the state. Historically, in post-colonial Singapore, hybridization has not been "vernacular and organic" in nature, but rather "mechanically structured" according to the CMIO racial grid.³⁰ Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 has led to the development of a "multiracial ideology." Such an ideology has been marked less by the kind of cultural blending that one associates with hybridity and more with racial separation.³¹ Yet, given the different economic and political stakes today, the government has sought to use the Peranakans as a contemporary ideal for a more seamless fusion and hybridity, while de-emphasizing essential differences among Singaporean citizens.³² Haj Yazdiha defines hybridity as a "means of reimagining an interconnected collective."³³ This act of re-imagining is the work that the Peranakan Museum does on behalf of the state and

²⁹ In the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Emily Stokes-Rees, "Making Sense of A M lange," p. 38, observes that "Singapore's cultures are compartmentalized and displayed with clear boundaries." Founded in 1997, ACM is the sister institution of the Peranakan Museum. There are four galleries at ACM which focus on the geographic areas of Southeast Asia, West Asia, South Asia and China—the ancestral origins of Singaporeans.

³⁰ Daniel P.S Goh, "Between History and Heritage: Post-Colonialism, Globalisation, and the Remaking of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2:1 (2014), p. 95.

³¹ Zarine L. Rocha, "Multiplicity within Singularity: Racial Categorization and Recognizing 'Mixed Race' in Singapore," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30:3 (2011), p. 103.

³² Zarine L. Rocha, p. 100.

³³ Haj Yazdiha, "Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid," *Formations* 1:1 (2010), p. 36.

its current objectives. This imaginative construction of a shared past and experience relates significantly to the notion of “imagined communities”, a socially constructed concept of community where members maintain a strong sense of kinship despite the lack of personal interaction.³⁴

Shape of interdisciplinary thesis

My study will make use of the tools offered by various disciplines, including anthropology (museum studies), history and sociology. This will serve to address the themes of identity construction and nationhood from different angles, while applying these concerns to public policy. It is one of the main aims of this thesis to bring together interdisciplinary scholarship alongside my original research and personal experience at the Peranakan Museum. In this thesis, I hope to show how numerous scholars and figures outside the academy, who many not presently know that they are speaking to one another’s points, are in fact contributing to a common conversation. By combining their works within the space of this thesis, I believe their arguments register more effectively than in disciplinary isolation.

This thesis will be organized thematically into three chapters, followed by a brief conclusion. Chapter One will centre on two important, interrelated questions: What does the museum tell us about the past of the Peranakan? And how does the museum construct the idea of Peranakan at the present moment? Chapter Two focuses on the museum’s production of nostalgia, intended to anchor Singapore’s global citizens to the nation during times of

³⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

change. This chapter will also discuss the regional and global uses of Peranakan culture for national branding purposes. Finally, Chapter Three explores why the state feels as if it needs to actively interfere in resolving tensions that have resulted from the reinvention of Singapore as a global city. The contentious topic of immigration and the historical context of Chinese migration to Singapore will also be examined in this chapter.

What this thesis aims to show above all else is that “heritage is not a neutral conceptual tool.”³⁵ The classification and presentation of objects, traditions and ideas as sites of “heritage” is an active process of selection and omission. In his study of museums in Hong Kong, John M. Carroll has observed that “commemoration is as much about forgetting as about remembering.”³⁶ What is being selected for “remembering” as national heritage in the case of Singapore’s Peranakan Museum cannot be separated from the active conceptualization of the nation as a coherent entity.

³⁵ Michael Rowlands, p. 108.

³⁶ John M. Carroll, “Displaying the Past to Serve the Present: Museums and Heritage Preservation in Post-Colonial Hong Kong,” *Twentieth-Century China* 31:1 (November 2005), p. 97.

I. AN ORIGIN STORY FOR THE NATION

Officially opened in April 2008 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong, the Peranakan Museum is housed in a historic building designed in an “eclectic classical” style typical of Straits Chinese bungalows during the early twentieth century. The architectural elements on display are a mixture of Asian and Western aspects. This is not a coincidence, but is rather an illustration of how wealthy Peranakans sought to emulate the European style so as to publicly highlight their elite status. Their presentation is a telling reminder that the museum is an effective instrument of the state to collect and appropriate cultural objects as expressions of national identity.

Prior to the museum’s opening, the building had been utilized by the Tao Nan School, an institution founded by a Peranakan, Tan Kim-Ching.¹ The colonial-era building’s history and association with this accomplished Peranakan lends an air of educational objectivity to the museum’s exhibitions. The perception of the museum as a neutral institution meant to educate its visitors is directly connected to its power and efficacy as a political institution. Carol Duncan goes so far as to compare museums to temples and shrines in terms of the “work” that they do; acknowledging that these institutions are not the “neutral and transparent sheltering space that [they] claim to be.”² The museum is a “ritual site,” a hallowed, albeit secular, cultural space wherein a particular vision and narrative of the past

¹ Tan Kim-Ching was recognized as an influential leader in colonial Singapore. He was also knighted by King Chulalongkorn for cultivating good relations with Siam (Thailand), see “Peranakan Museum celebrates the 3rd reunion of Baba Tan Tock Seng’s Family” *The Peranakan Museum*, 28 July 2011, accessed 24 March 2014, http://www.peranakanmuseum.org.sg/resources/pressRelease/20_doc1_TPM%20Celebrates%20Tan%20Tock%20Seng%203rd%20Reunion.pdf

² Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1991), pp. 90-91.

is represented and performed.³ As noted, the government provides support and funding to Singapore's museums, necessitating that curators be sensitive and receptive to the state's objectives. Therefore, these points pertain to the Peranakan Museum, a state-run institution that aims to present a particular conception of the "national" past.

Although the museum has a "Public Life" gallery that allows visitors to learn about stories and contributions of prominent Peranakans, such as Tan Kim-Ching, the main purpose of the museum is to showcase "everyday objects" that local visitors will be able to easily identify and resonate with in Singapore.⁴ In this way, the museum functions as a "powerful transformer," re-situating what were once objects of domestic utility in a carefully arranged heritage context by means of institutional authority.⁵

Peranakan Chinese emphasis

The term "Peranakan" is further explored in the museum's "Origins" gallery, which acknowledges the different Peranakan communities in Singapore.⁶ Chitty Peranakan refers to descendants of South Indian Hindu merchants and local inhabitants while Jawi Peranakan are the descendants of South Indian Muslim traders and women of the local community. Although the Peranakan Museum acknowledges these nuances of Peranakan identity in Southeast Asia, a large section of their collection focuses on the Peranakan Chinese. The Peranakan Chinese were the descendants of early Chinese traders and local Malay women in

³ Carol Duncan, p. 92,

⁴ "Peranakan Museum - Singapore's Newest Museum To Open On 26 April" *Asian Civilisations Museum*, 17 April 2008, accessed 24 March 2014, http://www.acm.org.sg/press_room/pressreleases/peranakan-museum-singapores-newest-museum-to-open-on-26-april.html

⁵ Carol Duncan, p. 95.

⁶ Wall text, *Who are the Peranakans?*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

creolized Chinese settlements in Melaka, Penang and Singapore.⁷ Despite the bans imposed by the Ming Emperor on private maritime trade and smuggling, the presence of Chinese traders in Southeast Asia can be dated as far back as five hundred to six hundred years.⁸ Following the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, an increasing number of Chinese migrants, particularly from Southern China, moved to the region. Trade in the region continued to flourish, with the growing presence of European traders—a factor which encouraged more Chinese migrants to entrench their roots in Southeast Asia.⁹ Within the context of the Malay cultural setting and early intermarriages, the Chinese migrants responded to the local environment and became an endogamous group with a unique cultural identity in terms of food, dress and a separate creole language of their own: Baba Malay, a mixture of Malay and Chinese (Hokkien) elements.¹⁰

The development of the Peranakan Chinese culture is inseparable from the broader history of Chinese migration between the early nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Since the founding of Singapore as a British colony in 1819, Singapore experienced a steady migration from the Chinese Mainland.¹¹ This trend continued until 1949, when the number

⁷ G. William Skinner, "Chinese creole societies in Southeast Asia," in *Sojourners and settlers: histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese: in honour of Jennifer Cushman*, ed. Anthony Reid (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 52–54. On the issue of intermarriage of Chinese migrants and indigenous women, Skinner states that the phenomenon was quite common throughout Southeast Asia. This was in part because women were not permitted to leave China prior to the nineteenth century. Skinner also notes that Chinese creole communities took shape in Manila, Batavia (Jakarta) and Melaka.

Mark Ravinder Frost, "Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1918," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* No. 10 (2003), p. 16, notes that the founding of Singapore by the British in 1819 saw the "immediate migration" of Hokkien-descended creolized Chinese from nearby settlements such as Melaka and Penang into this newly formed territory.

⁸ Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic life and traditions* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p. 20.

⁹ Mark Ravinder Frost, p. 5.

¹⁰ Peter Lee, Jennifer Chen, p. 22.

¹¹ For a history on Chinese migration to colonial Singapore, see Joyce Ee, "Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2:1 (1961), p. 33-51.

of Chinese migrants decreased markedly after the Communist takeover of China. The “closed-door” policy implemented by the Communists prevented anyone from leaving China. During this period, ties between China and overseas Chinese groups were severed to a significant extent. This allowed for the formation of a local identity among the Chinese diaspora since they were necessarily cut off from their native land.¹² As the majority ethnic group in Singapore, the Chinese community serve as an ideal case study for the historical negotiation of cultural retention and adaptation to their local environment.

A discourse of hybridity: Promoting a distinct national identity

During the museum’s opening, Prime Minister Lee proclaimed that “distinctive aspects of Peranakan culture will be captured in the museum.”¹³ Derek Heng notes that a “sense of ‘nation’ was arguably achieved through a process of hybridization, where certain traits introduced by the immigrants were retained and integrated into the dominant culture of the region.”¹⁴ The Peranakans stand as the most exemplary subjects of this process of hybridization described by Heng. Because Peranakan culture is itself a hybrid culture, uniquely shaped by Singapore’s historical and social circumstances, the museum can position this hybrid culture as representative of the multi-ethnic characteristic of present-day Singapore. Objects on display at the museum are meant for the visitor to draw lines of

¹² Liu Hong, “Transnational Chinese Sphere in Singapore: Dynamics, Transformations and Characteristics,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41:2 (2012), p. 43.

¹³ Lee Hsien-Loong, “Speech by Mr. Lee Hsien-Loong, Prime Minister, At official opening of the new Peranakan Museum,” *National Archives of Singapore*, 25 April 2008, accessed 24 March 2014, <http://archivesonline.nas.sg/speeches/view-html?filename=20080425980.htm>

¹⁴ Derek Heng, “From Political Rhetoric to National History: Bi-Culturalism and Hybridisation in the Construction of Singapore’s Historical Narrative,” chapter 2 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 32, notes further that “aspects of a social group that may undergo this kind of transformation include language, cuisine and the appreciation of artisanal crafts.”

connection between the multi-faceted culture of the Peranakans and the national self-identity promoted in Singapore today.

By focusing on this “distinctive” iteration of Peranakan identity, the national narrative is situated in terms of cross cultural contact through the circumstances of Singapore’s national historical trajectory. While the Peranakan culture represented in the museum pre-dates an independent nation-state, implicit parallels are being drawn here between this early cultural mixing and the hybridity of today’s Singaporean society.

As Ali Mozaffari has shown in his study of the National Museum of Iran, one of the important, if unstated, aims of a national museum is to situate the beginning, or origins, of the nation in terms compatible with the current political regime’s ideological vision.¹⁵ Mozaffari shows that, due to the extraordinary political circumstances of twentieth-century Iran, the National Museum of Iran incidentally projects two different narratives of Iranian identity: one tracing the roots of Iranian culture to ancient Persian civilization (the narrative supported by outgoing monarchy, the Pahlavis) and charting the progress of Iranian culture from the beginning of Shi’ite Islam (the national narrative favored by the theocratic state since the 1979 Islamic revolution).¹⁶ Hence, Iranians have markedly different, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, national narratives to select between.

This illustration serves to problematize for visitors the usual essentialism associated with national identity and narratives of national development. Within its local context, the Peranakan Museum does not offer such a strikingly dualistic vision of the nation. Instead, a

¹⁵ Ali Mozaffari, “Modernity and Identity. The National Museum of Iran,” in *Museum Revolutions. How Museums Change and are Changed*, eds. Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 91-92.

¹⁶ Ali Mozaffari, pp. 87-88.

singular vision of a hybrid national identity is performed within the space of the museum. One can imagine an alternate museum, similar to the Iranian example that traces the origins of Singapore to the Malay population that have lived on the island prior to the arrival of Chinese and Indian settlers. In contrast to this hypothetical museum, the Peranakan Museum locates the beginnings of the Singapore nation in the fusion of cultures that occurred when the British began a settlement in 1819.

Constructing Peranakan culture as multiculturalism

The emphasis on Peranakan culture as the genesis of Singaporean culture also reinforces the state's policies regarding the coexistence of different ethnic and racial groups. In its political form, Singapore is a Western colonial construct with no monolithic culture upon which to build.¹⁷ Since incidents of racial tension and violence during the 1960s¹⁸, the government has been discernibly anxious with regards to matters of perceived racial disharmony. The multicultural policy promoted by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), with its four official racial categories, is a consequence of Singapore's brief inclusion in the Federation of Malaysia (1963-1965). The United Malay National Organization (UMNO) sought to emphasize Malay privileges, leading to conflict with Singapore's PAP leaders and their divergent vision of multiracial identity.¹⁹ Subsequently, because the ethnic Chinese majority has retained dominance within the spheres of wealth, education and career

¹⁷ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *Sojourn* 10:1 (1995), p. 71.

¹⁸ In 1964, Singapore saw racial riots between Malay and Chinese communities that resulted in 22 deaths and 461 injured people. In 1969, Sino-Malay clashes surfaced again, a spillover effect of Malaysia's elections. See: "Countering Threats" *Internal Security Department, Ministry of Home Affairs*, accessed 28 March 2014, <http://www.mha.gov.sg/isd/ct.htm>

¹⁹ Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford, "Singaporean First: Challenging the Concept of Transnational Malay Masculinity," chapter 9 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 2009), p. 175.

prospects, the government was concerned that this could cause tension among other ethnic groups. For this reason, the government has sought to construct an authentic Asian character for Singapore, by building upon the ancestral origins of immigrant groups that have settled in Singapore.²⁰

The synthetic nature of the Peranakan culture makes it particularly well-suited for representing national identity. Peranakan culture can be considered as a simplified version of the Singapore's complex historical and contemporary hybridity—diasporic communal groups (de-territorialized Chinese and Indians) have been living under the influence of a Malay cultural environment and different ethnic groups since British colonial rule.²¹ While Singapore resisted characterization as a “Malay” state, the government also attempts to guard against the appearance that Singapore is a “Chinese state.”²² Hence, the government goes to great lengths to ensure that Singapore's four ethnic groups are equally represented within the cultural sphere—museums and heritage districts.

Given Singapore's historical and political context, one can identify the government's strategy in using the museum as a space to minimize ethnic tension and the purposeful selection of historical objects that speak to a culturally unified origin of the Singaporean nation. Working from Stuart Hall and David Lowenthal, Michael Rowlands raises the notion that “heritage is... selective and is concerned as much with the ability to forget as to

²⁰ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, pp. 74-75.

²¹ Emily Stokes-Rees, “‘We need something of our own’: Representing Ethnicity, Diversity and ‘National Heritage’ in Singapore,” (Paper presented at National Museums in a Global World, Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007), p. 26.

²² John Clammer, “Minorities and Minority Policy in Singapore,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 16:2 (1998), pp. 103-104. Clammer also notes that Singapore's efforts to project a multiracial society can be seen symbolically in its first three Presidential appointments—men from minority backgrounds: Malay, Eurasian and Indian respectively.

remember” and that the sense of tradition it evokes is “always mobilized around the issue of cultural amnesia and original acts of violence.”²³ The emphasis on the “harmonious” cultural fusion of the Peranakans illustrates the museum’s tendency to soften history of racial and ethnic relations, working within the state’s regulated management of ethnicity in present-day Singapore.

Curatorial strategies

When visitors enter the Peranakan Museum’s galleries, they are able to imagine, or “experience,” the everyday life of upper-class Peranakan of a bygone era and appreciate the ambiance of opulent surroundings. This curated environment creates what Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb liken to a type of “theatre set,” with the objects functioning as “props.”²⁴ In this conceptualization of the museum as a site of past-ness, present-day visitors are therefore historical “actors” in the dual sense of this term. Because visitors are free to move around in and feel as if they temporarily reside in this antiquarian space, they fill the void left by the absence of the previous owners of the objects on display.²⁵ For many visitors, the dominant effect of the experience will be a collapsing of past and present. This affect is in line with the phenomena that Dipesh Chakrabarty argues is the primary way that knowledge is produced and received within the present.

As opposed to the cerebral, mainly textual transmission of knowledge, this affect-based knowledge circulation relies on sensory engagement and a feeling more than a field of

²³ Michael Rowlands, “Heritage and Cultural Property,” in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers), p. 111.

²⁴ Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb, “Beyond Nostalgia: The role of affect in generating historical understanding at heritage sites,” chapter 20 in *Museum Revolutions. How Museums Change and are Changed*, eds. Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 267.

²⁵ Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb, p. 265.

factual information.²⁶ The “everyday objects” exhibited in the museum helps to generate this type of affective engagement with the past on terms that rely as much upon the evocative material surroundings as on the subjectivities of the time-travelling “historical actors.” This affect is facilitated by the narrative represented by the museum in spatial terms. To understand how this narrative flows in such a way as to engender the desired mentality among visitor, one needs to look carefully at the purposeful floor plan of the museum.



Figure 1.1: Recreation of a *Tok Panjang* (long table) setting, featuring the commissioned dinner service of the family of Kapitan Cina Yap Ah Loy. (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

A visitor to the Peranakan Museum will begin at the “Origins Gallery” on the first floor. Here, the visitor will encounter portraits of “Peranakans past and present”²⁷ lined around the gallery and highlighted Peranakan objects encased in the middle space of the gallery. Such objects include wedding heirlooms, clothes and jewellery, beadwork and embroidery

²⁶ Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb, p. 263.

²⁷ Wall text, *Peranakan Portraits: Digital Photography by Geoff Ang, 2008 and period archival images*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

and a Bible translated into Baba Malay. The narrative of the origins of Peranakan culture are explicitly connected to the primordial beginnings of the nation and region. The text panel accompanying the images reads, “The face of the Peranakan community is a mirror of Singapore’s and Southeast Asia’s diversity.”²⁸ While the portraits on display are of individuals who specifically identify as Peranakans, the text panel describes the “diverse cultural heritage” of the Peranakans as “a legacy which all of us, Peranakan and non-Peranakan alike can share and take pleasure in.”²⁹ This is a purposefully open-ended beginning to the national narrative, allowing Singapore’s ethnically diverse contemporary population a way to identify, in national terms, with a group which they may share no ancestral connection.



Figure 1.2: The showcase of present-day and historic images of Peranakans and enclosed casing with highlighted Peranakan objects in the Origins Gallery. (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

Once the visitor has finished viewing the entry-level Origins gallery, he/she will ascend the staircase to the second level of the museum. The theme that predominates on the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

second floor is “Weddings.” From the “Origins” Gallery’s highlights on the Peranakan community’s cross-cultural fusion, the emphasis on Weddings suggests further hybridization through the merging of cultures, communities and families in the ritual of marriage. Exploring the second floor, the visitor would also encounter an elaborate and ornate bridal chamber positioned in a particularly prominent location within the gallery. This impressive object is placed in the museum’s recreation of a wedding chamber, described as a “place of conception” for the next generation of the family.³⁰



Figure 1.3: Recreation of a wedding chamber that would have been used by the bridal couple during the traditional 12-day Peranakan wedding ceremony (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

Educational materials share that the previous owner was said to have given birth to seven out of her twelve children on this bed.³¹ Marriage and procreation are the most concrete examples of cultural mixing. During the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Peranakan weddings were held over a period of twelve days³², which explains the museum’s extensive collection of items related to these ceremonial rituals. However, the possible

³⁰ Object Label, *Wedding Chamber*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

³¹ “Top 10 Must-See at Peranakan Museum,” *The Peranakan Museum*, accessed 24 March 2014, <http://www.peranakanmuseum.org.sg/resources/file/Top%2010%20must%20see%20at%20TPM%20low%20res%20FOR%20CIRCULATION.pdf>

³² Ibid.

impression imparted by the pride of place bestowed upon the bridal chamber and other wedding-related material is that these objects are being emphasized to foreground the cultural hybridity that they represent.

After the museum's narrative charts the increasing diversification of Peranakan culture through marriage and procreation, represented through the wedding and birth rituals on the second floor; the third and final level looks at myriad manifestations of Peranakan culture that reflect its cross-cultural influences. A temporary exhibition gallery, spanning the second and third floors, often showcases exhibitions that fit these themes. For example, the negotiation of race and ethnicity, nationality and culture can be discerned in Peranakan Museum's temporary exhibition held in 2011, "Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan fashion and its international sources."³³ The exhibit traces the 500 year development and origins of the Sarong Kebaya (a blouse-dress combination), as a way of connecting Singaporeans with their cultural ancestors from ancient maritime trading communities in Southeast Asia.³⁴ The exhibition highlights how diverse cultures have contributed to the unique style of the Sarong Kebaya garment. The ancient Qaba, worn by rulers in the Middle East during the 9th century, was said to have inspired the Malay-styled Kebaya (blouse). Following the influx of Chinese migrants, Malay designs have been merged with distinctively Chinese motifs such as dragons and peonies. Indian textiles were also described as the cultural predecessors of the Javanese Batik Sarong (fabric wrapped around the waist). Colonial contact saw the integration of European lace and design techniques into local

³³ As a curatorial intern from June to August 2011, I involved in the rotation process for the *Sarong Kebaya* exhibition.

³⁴ Ingeborg Hartgerink-Granadia. "Tracing the Lineage of Peranakan Fashion. The new special exhibition at TPM shows just how international the sarong kebaya was," *PASSAGE. Friends of Museum Singapore*, May/June 2011, accessed 24 March 2014, <http://www.fom.sg/Passage/2011/05peranakan.pdf>

clothing, producing a white-laced high collar blouse that became recognized as a status symbol. The narrative of a garment piece acting as a medium of cultural contact reaffirms Singapore's cosmopolitan nature and harmonious race relations as a legacy of her early days as a trading port where cultures come into contact—local Malay communities interacting with traders from China, India, the Middle East and Europe.³⁵

Meanwhile, among the themes addressed in the permanent third floor galleries are “Religion,” “Language and Fashion” and “Food and Feasting.” The latter two themes, taken in conjunction with the ornate bridal clothes and jewellery on the second floor, implicitly privilege the private domestic domain, associated more closely with Peranakan women, over the public sphere that was mainly dominated by men.



Figure 1.4: The Weddings Gallery also features the largest known example of Peranakan beadwork, a visually striking tablecloth made during the early 20th century. The gallery also has a display of jewellery that were worn by Peranakan women during wedding ceremonies. (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

This gendered emphasis may also relate to the theme of cultural mixing. In traditional Peranakan culture, it was customary for young women to acquire beadwork, embroidery and

³⁵ Ibid.

cooking skills in order to enhance her prospects of a good marriage.³⁶ Thus, the domestic objects suggest a particular performance of femininity that enabled the transmission of Peranakan culture.

Another gallery on the third floor looks at the religions practiced by the Peranakans. As in other aspects of Peranakan life, the religious practices of this community were highly diverse and often syncretic in nature. An altar sideboard displayed in this gallery is particularly striking and representative of this tendency towards hybridity.

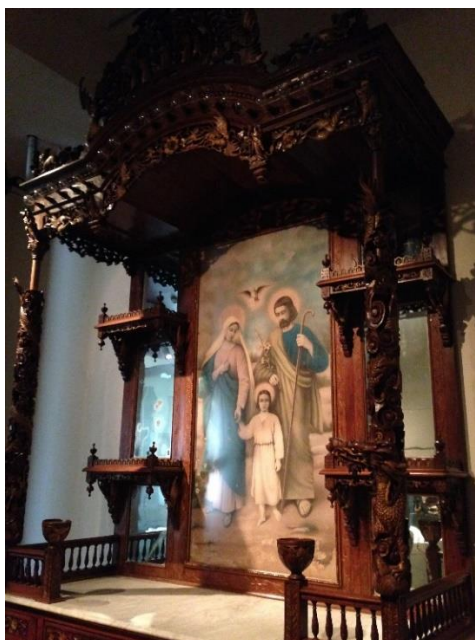


Figure 1.5: Altar sideboard that was used by a Peranakan Chinese family. (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

This altar had once belonged to a Peranakan family in Singapore that converted to Catholicism. However, as the object suggest, they did not wholly abandon their earlier religious traditions. Instead, they adapted their newfound religion to the Daoist Chinese altar. The altar retains its typical Daoist motifs, such as the three star Gods of good fortune, prosperity and longevity. Yet, in the centre of this Chinese altar is a painting of the Holy

³⁶ Wall text, *Becoming a Nonya: Mastering the Textile Arts*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

Family—Jesus, his parents Mary and Joseph and a dove, which is meant to represent the Holy Spirit.³⁷ In this respect, museum visitors of various Eastern or Western religious faiths can identify with the Peranakans.

While the museum's emphasis of Peranakan culture means to foreground the inherent cross-cultural influences that have shaped their identity, there is also a more direct connection that can be drawn between the Peranakans and those who are regarded as the political elite in Singapore today. This is most clearly exemplified in the "Public Life" gallery on the third floor. For instance, the current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien-Loong and his father, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan-Yew are of Peranakan ancestry.³⁸ Among the objects on display is a barrister's wig once worn by Madam Kwa Geok-Choo—the first Asian woman to attain a first class honours degree from Cambridge University.³⁹ In addition to this distinction, Madam Kwa was also the wife of Lee Kuan-Yew, the founding father of modern-day Singapore.⁴⁰



Figure 1.6: Madam Kwa Geok-Choo's barrister wig on display (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

³⁷ Object Label, *Altar Sideboard*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

³⁸ Hwei-Fen Cheah, "Nonya Beadwork and Contemporary Peranakan Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia." In *Asian Material Culture*, eds. Marianne Hulsbosch, Elizabeth Bedford and Martha Chaiklin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 88.

³⁹ Object Label, *Barrister's Wig*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

While this gallery does include some colonial-era public figures, it serves principally as a bridge between the colonial Peranakan culture and the involvement of Peranakans in the shaping of an independent Singaporean nation-state.⁴¹ The idea of the post-colonial nation, as suggested is closely connected to the figure of Lee Kuan-Yew. In addition to Madam Kwa's barrister wig, objects belonging to Peranakan ministers (in the early years of Lee Kuan-Yew's tenure as Prime Minister after attaining self-government from the British) are included in this gallery. For instance, Lim Kim-San's awards from the post-colonial government, such as the Order of Temasek medal⁴², were displayed alongside his embroidered bridegroom slippers that he wore at his wedding in 1939.⁴³ Hence, the visitor can discern both Lim Kim-San's Peranakan heritage and political stature—he was first appointed as Minister of National Development in 1963.⁴⁴



Figure 1.7: Next to the objects donated by Lim Kim-San's family, curators have set aside a space in this section to highlight former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng-Swee's contributions. A historical image of Goh surveying a drawing of reclaimed land in 1975 is accompanied by a label that credits him as Singapore's "social and economic architect." (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

⁴¹ Stephen Haggard and Linda Low, "State, politics, and business in Singapore," chapter 9 in *Political Business in East Asia*, eds. Edmund Gomez (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 309, notes that Peranakans dominated leadership positions in the ruling People's Action Party, including Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng-Swee and Toh Chin-Chye.

⁴² Object Label, *Darjah Utama Temasek (Order of Temasek)*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

⁴³ Object Label, *Wedding Slippers*, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

⁴⁴ See: Asad Latif, *Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore*, (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009)

Seen in this light, the implicit identification of Peranakan culture as the beginnings of the Singaporean nation functions as a justification for the current status-quo. Hwei-Fen Cheah aptly notes that, “Peranakan identity had become unique and prestigious because it is the only ethnic identification [that] link[s] to the foundation of Singapore.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the privileging of Peranakan culture functions as a means to support the official ideology of maintaining racial harmony, while celebrating the roots of some of the most prominent citizens.

⁴⁵ Hwei-Fen Cheah, p. 88.

II. GOING LOCAL, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL

The particular effectiveness of heritage displays such as the Peranakan museum can be better understood through the examination of the context of present-day Singapore. Since the late 1980s, the government has sought to position Singapore as a “global city” despite its limited geographical size and scarce natural resources.¹ The pursuit for economic growth came with other changes in the Singaporean landscape, such as rapid urbanization and high-rise architecture. These limitations have been fraught with the negotiation of preserving the sense of the past and identity while reinventing itself as a financial center that is open to free flow of goods, services, money, people, idea, tastes.² The general emphasis on cultural heritage and the “Peranakan origins” of Singapore serve dual purposes. This preservation and presentation of a fondly recalled past eases contemporary anxieties surrounding the rapid pace of infrastructural and social change. At the same time, this helps to position Singapore as the “natural” economic and cultural leader within its region, and a globally significant metropolis.

An endangered past

Due to its unique status as a physically small city-state, Singapore has faced frequent challenges concerning how best to use its restricted amount of space. An example of this is the tensions related to the state’s decision in 2011 to redevelop the historic site of Bukit Brown Cemetery for expanding the highway system and future housing projects.³ These

¹ Kenneth Paul Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), p. 227.

² Ibid.

³ See “Bukit Brown Cemetery,” 26 November 2011, Singapore Heritage Society, accessed 17 March 2014, http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=1352

developments align with C.J Wee's observation that "urban redevelopment became the social art form that nobody could escape."⁴ Consequently, many Singaporeans feel disoriented by these changes,⁵ and an increasing sense of urgency mixed with nostalgia for places and things that they associate with old Singapore. Working from Chua Beng-Huat, Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong contend that the "popularisation of nostalgia for *kampungs* [Malay villages] in the 1990s reflects an unease with the frenetic pace of life, high stress levels and new-found materialism characteristic of modern living driven by the logic of capital."⁶ Singaporeans fear that these objects and sites will not remain part of the national culture for much longer, or else have already disappeared.

Evincing a similar feeling of cultural nostalgia, *Old Places*⁷ was the highest-rated documentary on Singaporean television in 2010.⁸ Directed by Royston Tan, *Old Places* is structured around the reminiscences of ordinary Singaporeans, with on-screen images of places and material objects which they feel are slowly disappearing from the Singaporean city-scape.⁹ The places and things featured in *Old Places* function semiotically as

⁴ C.J W.-L Wee, "The Suppressed in the Modern Urbanscape: Cultural Difference and Film in Singapore," *positions* 20:4 (2004), p. 984.

⁵ These sentiments are reflected in the "Our Singapore Conversation" report commissioned by the government, which quoted a participant who desired "to see a Singapore, where buildings are not just commercial premises, like shopping centres. [He or She wants] Singapore to build and promote its traditions from 20 years ago, such as coffee shops (no air con please), mama shops, Malay barber shop, the old dragon design play grounds etc. [sic]" See: "A Singapore for Singaporeans," *Our Singapore Conversation Secretariat*, March 2013, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.reach.gov.sg/Microsite/osc/index.html>

⁶ Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, "The notion of place in the construction of history, nostalgia and heritage in Singapore," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17:1 (1996), p. 58.

⁷ See *Old Places*, DVD, directed by Royston Tan, Victric Thing and Eva Tang. (Singapore: Objectifs Films, 2010).

⁸ Tay Yek-Keak, "Royston Tan: 'Old Romances' isn't just about nostalgia," *inSing.com*, 14 December 2012, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://movies.insing.com/feature/interview-royston-tan-old-romances-isnt-just-about-nostalgia/id-b8673f00>

⁹ The title of Royston Tan's documentary is rather ironic due to the fact that the sites being examined are not, in relative terms, especially old. Most of these memories and the places or things remembered are from mid-twentieth century up till about the 1980s, only a generation or two ago. As mentioned in an interview with Tan, 40% of the sites featured in the film do not exist anymore. See: Tay Yek-Keak, "Royston Tan: 'Old Romances' isn't just about nostalgia."

representations of the Old Singapore constantly being revamped due to the government's desire to keep pace as a "global city."¹⁰ Although most Singaporeans have no true desire to return to the days of tough manual labor¹¹ (as shown in the documentary—coffee grinding, traditional bread making etc.), it is evident from the response to *Old Places* that many nevertheless yearn for the way of life that these trades represent and the physical sites where they were performed.¹² The positive response to Tan's documentary raises pertinent questions of how much a common culture and heritage, as opposed to economic or political status, determines bonds of citizenship and community in Singapore.¹³

Hence, nostalgia plays an important role in the midst of globalization as it provides a "temporal and spatial anchoring"¹⁴ when the places and things of the past feel particularly vulnerable to rapid change. As Singaporeans move through the various physical sites in the city, they cannot help but be affected by what Gaik-Cheng Khoo terms an "ever-expanding sense of loss" in terms of their "spatial (historical and cultural) identity and integrity."¹⁵ This context relates to Michael Rowland's argument about the effectiveness of "heritage revivalism" to "'cure' postmodern identity crises and to counteract late modernist experiences of rootlessness, rupture and displacement."¹⁶ Rowland also notes that heritage is "infused by a sense of melancholia and grief for lost objects and lost sense of identity."¹⁷ A

¹⁰ Kenneth Paul Tan, p. xxiii.

¹¹ Kenneth Paul Tan, p. 227.

¹² Tay Yek-Keak, "Royston Tan: 'Old Romances' isn't just about nostalgia."

¹³ Gaik-Cheng Khoo, "Of *Diminishing Memories* and *Old Places*: Singaporean Films and Work of Archiving Landscape," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 39:1 (March 2013), p. 34, notes that the sharing of social memory marks the difference between foreigners (including immigrants and naturalized citizens) and locals, who have a stake in Singapore's spatial past.

¹⁴ Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12:1 (Winter 2000), p. 36.

¹⁵ Gaik-Cheng Khoo, p. 34.

¹⁶ Michael Rowlands, "Heritage and Cultural Property," in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers), p. 106.

¹⁷ Ibid.

“growing fixation on memory” can also be discerned within Hong Kong, another city that shares a British colonial heritage and has shared a similar trajectory in navigating the developmental imperatives of globalization while maintaining anchors to the past.¹⁸ Lachlan Barber notes that within the “hyper-capitalist space” of present-day Hong Kong, heritage preservation has become a point of civic contention, presenting a comparison with Singapore’s “growing pains.” However, where Hong Kong, following the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, finds itself beholden to the People’s Republic of China despite its status as Special Administration Region from 1997,¹⁹ Singapore’s government possesses a greater ability to autonomously define its own desired post-colonial identity.

In *Old Places*, Singaporean participants in the documentary are discernibly wistful about the vanishing past. Yet, their laments are never explicitly linked to the state’s pragmatic attitude towards national development and planning. Circumstances in the recent past have made it clear to Singaporeans that the government maintains ultimate control with regard to heritage sites and the domain of collective memory.²⁰ In 2004, the old National Library at Stamford Road was demolished, despite the sentiments of many Singaporeans who wanted to preserve this building as a heritage site.²¹ The public consultation process was largely perfunctory and a grassroots protest to save the building proved similarly futile. While the old National Library building, constructed in 1960, may have been a site of

¹⁸ Lachlan Barber, “Locating Postcolonial Heritage in Hong Kong: The Star Ferry Pier as a Site of Politics, Memory and Encounter,” PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia, March 2009, p. 1.

¹⁹ Lachlan Barber, p. 4.

²⁰ Roy Jones and Brian J. Shaw, “Palimpsests of Progress: Erasing the Past and Rewriting the Future in Developing Societies—Case Studies of Singapore and Jakarta,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12:2 (2006), p. 136.

²¹ Roy Jones and Brian J. Shaw, p. 128. Lachlan Barber, p. 1, notes a similar conflict in Hong Kong concerning the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier in December 2006.

memorial significance for some Singaporeans, it may not have been old enough to be valued as a “heritage” property by the state.²² Conversely, many colonial-era structures, which are often more aesthetically grand and attractive, are preserved, suggesting that some pasts are worthier of the heritage distinction than are others.²³ At the same time, the old National Library, erected soon after attaining self-government from the British, carries with it a strong connotation of national identity and self-possession within the living memory of many Singaporeans who “grew up” with the nation. Although the government demolished this building, its leaders seem to understand that the endangered past, represented by sites like the old National Library building, must in other ways be counteracted by *strategic* and *purposeful* heritage preservation.

It is the postmodern void engendered by globalization and rapid redevelopment that the heritage of the Peranakans is intended to fill for Singaporeans. The remnants of this historical culture act not only as signifiers of a past “national” moment, but also as traces re-contextualized in the present as the foundations for a new national identity. Emily Stokes-Rees posits that the museum functions as a model, which determines “how its citizens can and should perceive the nation as a cultural entity.”²⁴ However, it is a sense of nostalgic longing brought about by globalization and changes in Singaporean society that allows the populace to readily accept the vision of the nation being performed through heritage at the site of the Peranakan Museum.

²² Roy Jones and Brian J. Shaw, p. 127.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Emily Stokes-Rees, “Making Sense of A Mélange: Representing Cultural Citizenship in Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum,” *Museum Anthropology* 36:1 (2013), p. 40.

Establishing a regional cultural capital

In addition to the local implications of the national narrative presented at the Peranakan Museum, this display of objects also makes a case for the cultural pre-eminence of Singapore within the Southeast Asia region. As Prime Minister Lee shared during his speech, the Peranakan museum is “presented from a pan-Southeast Asian perspective” and “will have the most comprehensive collection in the world.”²⁵ Upon close inspection of the museum’s collection, one will notice that the objects are not just sourced from Singapore, but also from other Southeast Asian states: Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar. Although the narrative of the Peranakan Museum is a national/local one, the heritage it draws upon is regional in character. The national boundaries that today separate Singapore from its neighbors within the region do not preclude the presentation of objects from those countries as belonging to a quintessentially Singaporean context.

A high proportion of the collection comes from Malaysia, as the cities of Penang and Melaka (part of present-day Malaysia), including Singapore, constituted the Straits Settlements. The Straits Settlements was officially constituted as a British crown colony in 1867 and became the traditional enclave of the Peranakan Chinese. The consolidation of British colonial rule in Malaya in 1867—Pinang, Melaka and Singapore officially constituted as the “Straits Settlements”—affected the status of Peranakans within the British colonial system.²⁶ They were recognized as British subjects, and this contributed to a shift in identification amongst the Peranakans from regarding themselves as Overseas Chinese to a

²⁵ Lee Hsien-Loong, “Speech by Mr. Lee Hsien-Loong, Prime Minister, At official opening of the new Peranakan Museum,” *National Archives of Singapore*, 25 April 2008, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://archivesonline.nas.sg/speeches/view-html?filename=20080425980.htm>

²⁶ Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 76-79.

locally entrenched sense of communal identity. With their leadership and control of rubber and tin industries, Peranakans were able to accumulate wealth and social capital. Their close association with the British and their role as mediators between the local population and colonial administration led to their reputation as the “King’s Chinese.”²⁷ These factors serve to explain the close association of Peranakans with these historic cities, and why there are many museums in these cities that are devoted to displaying Peranakan material culture today.

Some have questioned why objects of Malaysian provenance are being housed and presented in Singapore, particularly at a state-run museum. A discussion (September 2013) on the “Penang Heritage Trust” Facebook page reveals some of the tensions about Singapore’s possession of Penang’s cultural heritage.²⁸ The original post posted a link to the artefact drive collection by Singapore’s Indian Heritage Center. The author of the original posting expressed concerns that, “If Penang doesn’t do the same, all our Indian artefacts will end up in Singapore. This is what happened to our Malaysian Peranakan heritage. We have no one to blame but... [sic].”²⁹ This posting was followed by a lively exchange by other members of the group. One user, for example, commented that “It’s better to ended up in S’pore rather than here in M’sia. S’pore knows how to appreciate and value those artifacts and the future of those artifacts is certain in S’pore. The museum dept and govt only care about a single ethnic heritage and culture, they dont really appreciate... [sic].”³⁰ Another

²⁷ Peter Lee, Jennifer Chen, *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic Life and Traditions*, (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet), p. 21.

²⁸ “Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) Discussions,” *Facebook*, 15 September 2013, accessed 17 March 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/penangheritagetrust/permalink/547043062009527/>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

member of the group shared his views that “Singapore ‘appreciates’ these collections and has the resources and professionalism to care for them. Lets not be too nationalistic when as custodians the Archives here do not get enough budget (most of which is spent to staff salaries) and does not have the capacity to collect, document and exhibit these materials... [sic].”³¹ These comments suggest the conflicting viewpoints regarding the national, or regional, presentation of Peranakan heritage.

The perception among some Malaysians, such as those who responded to the discussion on the “Penang Heritage Trust” Facebook page, seems to be that Singapore provides a stable and secular setting for the presentation of Peranakan objects. This view stems from the Malaysia’s political context of *Bumiputra*, where Malays are given social and economic priority.³² Such a racial stratification is itself rooted in the religious aspect of Malaysian culture and law. While museums funded by the Malaysian government are able to present an official version of “limited pluralism,” the imperative for these institutions is nevertheless to keep Islamic culture firmly at the fore.³³ Laurie Beth Kalib observes that state-run museums create a “framework of historical continuity with a Muslim past,” by selecting the Sultanate era prior to European colonization as the “immemorial past from which to move forward.”³⁴ Not only does this shape the perception that state-run museums in Malaysia focus too strongly on Malay-Muslim cultural heritage, this may lead some donors

³¹ Ibid

³² Gareth Butler, Catheryn Khoo-Lattimore, Paolo Mura, “Heritage Tourism in Malaysia: Fostering a Collective National Identity in an Ethnically Diverse Country,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* (2012), p. 3.

³³ Laurie Beth Kalb, “Nation Building and Culture Display in Malaysian Museums,” *Museum Anthropology* 21:1 (March 1997), pp. 69-70.

³⁴ Laurie Beth Kalb, p. 78.

to conclude that Singapore is a more appropriate alternative for the housing of Peranakan material culture.

The flow of objects from other countries falls in line with the government of Singapore's endeavor to attain status as the "cultural capital" of Southeast Asia. This type of strategy can also be seen in the case of the Singapore Art Museum and the National Gallery Singapore slated to open in 2015.³⁵ The latter stands to be the world's most extensive collection of Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art. Through this project, the government will strategically use its recognized position as a global financial hub to expand its reach into the economically lucrative art market. In contrast to its regional neighbours, Singapore possesses the financial resources and political stability to professionally house important works of art.³⁶ Nonetheless, Can-Seng Ooi contends that Singapore lacks a sufficient pool of local artists and their works to fill the Art Museum.³⁷ Thus, rather than using its own national artistic corpus to demonstrate its regional pre-eminence, critics have noted Singapore has relied upon its economic clout to "buy" its way to attaining a leadership position in the regional art sphere.

The particular case of the Peranakan Museum's collection of objects of non-Singaporean provenance illustrates the concerns raised by Rustom Bharucha that economic disparities at present divide Asia among a few prosperous states and their less developed neighbours. Bharucha is concerned that metropolitan cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong and

³⁵ "About the Gallery," *National Gallery Singapore*, accessed 9 April 2014, <http://www.nationalartgallery.sg/about-the-gallery/>

³⁶ Can-Seng Ooi, "Identities, museums and tourism in Singapore: think regionally, act locally," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 31:89, p. 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Singapore are dominating the cultural construction of “Asia,” given that they are supported by funds from state agencies as well as wealthy patrons in the private sectors.³⁸ He is particularly wary that the result of these powerful interests will result in a limited and hegemonic representation of “Asia” that will inevitably leave out the mass of diversity that exists across the continent.³⁹ Using museums in India as a counterpoint, Bharucha shows that there are museums in Asia that continue to be largely excluded from the modernizing forces of globalization. Despite its high visitor levels, Indian museums suffer from poor infrastructure and low-quality exhibitions.⁴⁰ But, muses Bharucha, does the neglected state of Indian museums mean that Asia, of which the Indian subcontinent is a big part, should be represented instead in metropolitan cities where the financial resources for museums are more formidable? A similar question, on a somewhat smaller, but still pertinent scale, can be asked of Singapore’s museums in their attempt to speak for the rest of Southeast Asia, a diverse region of which Singapore is only a small and not especially representative part. Singapore’s re-working of Peranakan heritage as proto-Singaporean national culture is facilitated by the kind of economic power that Bharucha laments. While many of the objects on display at an institution like the Peranakan Museum are of broader regional provenance, Singapore’s assumed position as a cultural capital provides it with power to re-order narratives of the regional past according to the political and economic structures of the present.

³⁸ Rustom Bharucha, “Beyond the Box: Problematizing the ‘New Asian Museum’,” in *Over Here. International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, eds. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 123.

³⁹ Rustom Bharucha, p.130.

⁴⁰ Rustom Bharucha, p.126.

Cultural heritage and the “branding” of a global city-state

Returning to Prime Minister Lee’s speech at the opening of the Peranakan Museum, he states that “by focusing on a culture unique to this region, the Peranakan Museum will... carve out a niche for itself internationally.”⁴¹ This “niche” suggests the international representation of Peranakan culture as a commodity. Such an approach bolsters Singapore’s tourist branding as well as elevating its national profile as a global city for not only its economic sector but its emphasis on the arts and culture. In recognition of this trend, John Clammer observes that the Singaporean government is aware of the “value of this [multicultural] fabric as a cultural resource for its marketability and ability to draw tourists.”⁴² These objectives are inter-related, insofar as “world cities” are known for both their economic status and “branding” as must-visit destinations for those interested in taking in the best and most dynamic products of the creative economy.⁴³ As part of the government’s vision to bolster the cultural scene to attract global talent, the Peranakan Museum is part of efforts to put Singapore “on the map” and enhance the overall image of Singapore within a competitive neo-liberal global context. Lily Kong notes that the positioning of Singapore as a “global” city with much to offer culturally also serves as a means to attract “global citizens” or highly-skilled cosmopolitan workers beyond Singapore’s

⁴¹ Lee Hsien-Loong, “Speech by Mr. Lee Hsien-Loong, Prime Minister, At official opening of the new Peranakan Museum.”

⁴² John Clammer, “Minorities and Minority Policy in Singapore,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 16:2 (1998), p. 105.

⁴³ Andy C. Pratt and Thomas A. Hutton, “Reconceptualising the relationship between the creative economy and the city: Learning from the financial crisis,” *Cities* 33 (2013), p. 91.

borders.⁴⁴ (The efforts of Singapore's government to attract new immigrants to enhance the country's population and workforce will be discussed at length in chapter three.)

Given this current economic situation, the local and regional implications of Peranakan culture matter less than the aesthetic appeal of the objects on display and the attractiveness or heritage value of the museum building. While museums may be regarded as scholarly institutions, "objective" in their efforts to present material of cultural significance, these are also tourist sites that are expected to bring in revenue.⁴⁵ The state is aware of the need to self-orientalize, as part of attempts to sell Singapore as an "exotic" tourist destination.⁴⁶ The Peranakan Museum is packaging an essential "Asian-ness" that is hardly representative of a modern globalized city, such as Singapore, but rather speaks to a particular idea of Asia that continues to loom large in the Western imagination. Can-Seng Ooi notes that "many third world countries, including those in Southeast Asia, tend to market themselves as exotic, authentic and unspoiled places for visits... to enhance the uniqueness of the destinations, exotic images are selectively presented to attract the attention of tourists."⁴⁷ Due to the limitations of its physical geography, Singapore cannot sell itself in terms of a rugged, primitive landscape in the same manner as do other Southeast Asian countries. This reality makes an institution such as the Peranakan Museum all the more

⁴⁴ Lily Kong, "Cultural policy in Singapore: negotiating economic and socio-cultural agendas," *GeoForum* 31:4 (2000), p. 422.

⁴⁵ Can-Seng Ooi, *Orientalist Imaginations and Touristification of Museums: Experiences from Singapore*, Copenhagen Discussion Papers 1-2005, Copenhagen: Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and museums. Discourse about others in the age of globalization," in *Heritage museums and galleries: An introductory reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 176. Another article, Chris Hudson "Raffles Hotel Singapore: Advertising, Consumption and Romance," chapter 13 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 2009), p. 252, uses the Raffles Hotel as an example of the use of nostalgia to invoke a colonial past, thus, reclaiming orientalism as part of its charm and a key feature of the hotel's attraction.

⁴⁷ Can-Seng Ooi, *Orientalist Imaginations and Touristification of Museums*, p. 6.

important for positioning Singapore as a viable destination for the “lucrative long-haul Western markets.”⁴⁸

In the early 1980s, as Singapore began its infrastructural redevelopment efforts, the state recognized that tourism was suffering as “the country had removed its oriental mystique and charm symbolized in old buildings.”⁴⁹ The increasing popularity of heritage tourism coincides with emergence of the “New Economy” during the 1990s, which seeks to commodify the “often intangible cultural phenomena” of the past and sell an “authentic” experience rather than goods and services.⁵⁰ The reasons why this type of heritage tourism experience are appealing to visitors today is a matter of some historical contingency, not one of coincidence. As G. Waitt posits, the “fragmentary nature of postmodern society [means that] contemporary experiences are said to lack a sense of depth, originality and place.”⁵¹ Thus, the Peranakan Museum and “old building” in which it is housed, represent a conscious attempt to re-situate Singapore as “authentically” Asian in character. Singapore is not alone in recognizing the international appeal of Peranakan culture. In 2008, two historic cities in Malaysia—Georgetown, Penang and Melaka—were awarded the designation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These cities were cited as “bear[ing] testimony to a living multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, where the many religions and cultures met and coexisted.”⁵² Seeking to capitalize on its UNESCO designation, both Georgetown and Melaka

⁴⁸ Can-Seng Ooi, *Orientalist Imaginations and Touristification of Museums*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ “Information Note—Built heritage conservation policy in Singapore” *Hong Kong Legislative Council Secretariat*, 2007/2008, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr07-08/english/sec/library/0708in27-e.pdf>

⁵⁰ Orvar Löfgren and Robert Willim, *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), p. 12.

⁵¹ Joan C. Henderson, “Conserving Colonial Heritage: Raffles Hotel in Singapore,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7:1 (2001), p. 10.

⁵² “Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca,” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1992-2014*, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223>

have embarked on efforts in placing Peranakan culture at fore to attract visitors who wish to embrace the cities' multicultural origins. In restored historical buildings, the Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Georgetown⁵³ and The Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum in Melaka⁵⁴ provide visitors with an immersive experience of the past, carefully curated to recreate Peranakan life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In addition to these private museums, the Malaysian National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur curated an exhibition that showcases the *nonya kebaya*, a traditional blouse-dress combination worn by Peranakan women.⁵⁵ While Malaysia has more often focused on its Malay-Muslim heritage as noted above, this Peranakan exhibition received the support of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of then-Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.⁵⁶ The *nonya kebaya*s on display came from Datin Endon's personal collection, and this show later became a traveling exhibition.

Singapore utilizes a similar strategy of appropriating Peranakan culture to represent the country in international settings. An example of Singapore actively promoting its "exotic" Peranakan culture can be viewed in the 2009 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting held in Singapore. At this meeting, world leaders were presented with a shirt that drew inspiration from Peranakan designs for their photo-op.⁵⁷ Even though such dress is not representative of what Singaporeans would wear in a formal setting today, this instance of

⁵³ See: Chan Suan-Choo, *The Pinang Peranakan Mansion: A Museum of Straits Chinese Cultural Heritage*, (Penang: Pinang Peranakan Mansion Sdn Bhd., 2011)

⁵⁴ "Home - Baba & Nyonya House Museum - Home to a Peranakan Family Since 1861," *Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum*, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://babanyonyamuseum.com>

⁵⁵ Hwei-Fen Cheah, "Nonya Beadwork and Contemporary Peranakan Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia." In *Asian Material Culture*, eds. Marianne Hulsbosch, Elizabeth Bedford and Martha Chaiklin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 88.

⁵⁶ Ibid. See also: Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, *Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume*, (Singapore: Periplus editions, 2004).

⁵⁷ Larry Loh, "Peranakan outfits for APEC photo op -- No ponchos please, we're Asian," *CNN*, 10 November 2009, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://travel.cnn.com/singapore/none/peranakan-outfits-apec-890733>

self-orientalization was meant to enforce the idea that Singapore is an important modern business hub that retains its traditional Asian identity. Around the same period, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁵⁸ requested for the Peranakan Museum to embark on an exhibition partnership with France's Musée du quai Branly for the purposes of cultural diplomacy.⁵⁹ Unlike Datin Endon's travelling exhibition which was limited to three countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Malaysia, Singapore and Australia)⁶⁰, this partnership resulted in the first time that Peranakan objects were displayed in a European museum, thus demonstrating Singapore's superior positioning as a regional representative of Peranakan cultural heritage. The "Baba Bling" exhibition received extensive coverage in France, with then-President Nicolas Sarkozy making an appearance during the exhibition's opening in October 2010.⁶¹ Stephen Martin, the President of the Musée du quai Branly viewed Peranakan culture as an "overseas Chinese culture" which would provide an interesting contrast to the mainstream Chinese culture with which French museumgoers were more readily familiar.⁶²

Following the successful exhibition at France's Musée du quai Branly, the Peranakan Museum embarked on another travelling exhibition to South Korea in 2013. At the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, the aim for Singapore was to strengthen its cultural ties within East Asia and representing Southeast Asia's diversity by highlighting the multicultural

⁵⁸ In 2009, Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding with France to enhance cultural cooperation. See "Visit to France by Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs," *Embassy of France in Singapore*, 18 February 2009, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.ambafrance-sg.org/Visit-to-France-by-Singapore-s>

⁵⁹ Yunci Cai, "The Art of Museum Diplomacy: The Singapore–France Cultural Collaboration in Perspective," *The International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 26:2 (2013), p.136.

⁶⁰ Jackie Yoong, "A History of Peranakan Museum Exhibitions in Singapore 1985-2008," MA Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2009, p. 82.

⁶¹ "Baba Bling. The Peranakan Chinese of Singapore," *Musée du quai Branly*, accessed 17 March 2014, http://www.quaibranly.fr/uploads/tx_gayafeespacepresse/MQB_CP_BabaBling_EN_01.pdf

⁶² Yunci Cai, p. 134.

influences in the region that shaped Peranakan aesthetics.⁶³ Korean news coverage celebrated the Peranakan exhibition for “shed[ding] light on such a diverse community” and providing an instructive historical example to an “increasingly multicultural” South Korea.⁶⁴ This is due to the way how curators at the National Museum of Korea framed the Peranakan exhibition as a “future-oriented message about the way of accommodating diverse cultures without prejudice.”⁶⁵ With Peranakan culture standing in for Singapore, the government had successfully positioned itself to be the recipient of goodwill and admiration generated by the presentation of Peranakan cultural heritage. In the next chapter, Singapore’s conception of its national history as fundamentally multicultural will be seen as a strategy to persuade long-time residents that embracing necessary social and demographic change is a naturally Singaporean thing to do.

⁶³ Huang Lijie, “Museums go places,” *The Straits Times*, 23 May 2013, accessed 17 March 2014,

<http://www.straitstimes.com/the-big-story/case-you-missed-it/story/museums-go-places-20130523>

⁶⁴ Kim Hyung-eun, “Peranakan Singapore shuns bland conformity,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, 21 March 2013, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2968880>

⁶⁵ “Exhibitions | Special Exhibitions | Past Exhibitions,” *National Museum of Korea*, accessed 17 March 2014, http://211.252.141.1/program/show/showDetailEng.jsp?menuID=002002002003&searchSelect=A.SHOWKOR&showCategory1Con=SC1&showCategory2Con=SC1_1&pageSize=10&langCodeCon=LC2&showID=7183¤tPage=1

III. IN SERVICE OF THE GLOBAL CITY-STATE

At the beginning of the new millennium, Singapore's important role within the global economy was already apparent. In an interview published in *The Straits Times* George Yeo, the former Minister for Trade and Industry, observed:

We are seeing large numbers coming in now. I can give you one statistic you may not be aware of. For every two babies that are born in Singapore, we bring in one foreign permanent resident. Also among one of the four marriages among Singaporeans is to a foreigner. This has doubled in the last ten years. We have become a migrant society all over again.¹

Yeo's remarks illustrate the key problem that Singapore has attempted through various means to reconcile in the twenty-first century. Singaporean policy makers have been forced to balance the challenges of enabling the nation-state to adapt to the economic imperatives of globalization while simultaneously convincing a national populace that the changes are necessary and even desirable. Since Yeo's frank assessment of Singapore's socio-economic landscape, these concerns have only grown more pressing in the decade that followed.

Why immigration?

In the wake of 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Singapore faced new challenges such as the deregulation of markets, the rise of China and the decline of the manufacturing industry.² This has pushed the government to adopt a "world as hinterland" approach and cultivate Singapore's image as a cosmopolitan global city in order to better cope with the new

¹ George Yeo, "We have become a migrant society all over again," *The Straits Times*, 11 June 2000, as found in Leo Suryadinata, "Chinese Migration and Adaptation in Southeast Asia: The Last Half-Century," chapter 3 in *International Migration in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aris Ananta and Evi Nurvidya Arifin (Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2004), p. 86.

² Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), p. 86.

dynamics of globalization.³ The process of reinventing Singapore has centred on efforts to foster a “knowledge-driven economy,” which meant that Singapore needs to attract skilled migrants who can contribute to this new policy initiative.⁴

Furthermore, the declining birth rate in Singapore has alarmed the government and necessitated the need to bring in migrants as a form of “population replacement.” From Singapore’s independence in 1965, fertility rates have dipped drastically from 4.93 to 1.2 in 2009, which is significantly below the replacement rate of 2.1.⁵ With the government’s embrace of globalization, it is also inevitable that many Singaporeans will go abroad to seek new opportunities in the spheres of work or study. It is estimated that 180,000 Singaporeans live overseas, while an average of 1,000 Singaporeans renounce their citizenship each year.⁶

These factors have led to the government’s adoption of a liberal immigration policy for both skilled and unskilled workers that can contribute to the economy. While the former are essential for the cultivation of a “knowledge-driven” economy, the latter is needed to fill labour positions in the construction, manufacturing, service and domestic work industries⁷; as well as compensating for the declining birth rate. This immigration trend is set to continue in the, with the endorsement of “Population White Paper” by the People’s Action Party-majority parliament in 2013. This policy paper proposal projects a population increase by

³ Ibid.

⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 178.

⁵ Liu Hong, “Transnational Chinese Sphere in Singapore: Dynamics, Transformations and Characteristics,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41:2 (2012), p. 50.

⁶ Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, “Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22:1 (2013), p. 35.

⁷ Brenda S.A Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, pp. 41-42.

30% to 6.9 million by 2030 and recommends that citizenship should be granted to 15,000 to 25,000 young immigrants each year.⁸

The 'Sinicization' of the city

By June 2013, nearly forty percent of the population were foreign-born permanent residents of temporary residents, according to a government report. This statistic represents a striking contrast to demographic levels in 2000, wherein seventy-four percent of the populace were Singapore citizens; in 1980, Singaporeans numbered ninety one percent of the total population.⁹

Although policy directives do not explicitly state which ethnic groups the Singapore government aims to attract, it seems that China has been the main source of immigrants to Singapore. The presumable targeting of Chinese immigrants may be due to the government's desire for stability and the maintenance of current ethnic ratios which has been established since colonial rule (Chinese comprising of three quarters of the population). As Singapore becomes more economically developed during the 1980s, well-educated segments of the Chinese population have delayed marriage and parenthood, generally producing fewer children per household in comparison with Singapore's other ethnic groups.¹⁰ Hence, in Aihwa Ong's terms, the state's decision to bring in students and professionals from Mainland China may be accounted for by virtue of the fact that "beside their skills, [they] possess the

⁸ See: "A Sustainable Population For A Dynamic Singapore," *National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister's Office*, January 2013, accessed 12 March 2014, http://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/NPTD/news/jcr_content/par_content/download_98/file.res/population-white-paper.pdf

⁹ Chun-Han Wong, "Singapore Tightens Hiring Rules for Foreign Skilled Labor," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 September 2013, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303759604579092863888803466>

¹⁰ Aihwa Ong, p. 185.

‘right’ ethnicity.”¹¹ Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in the late 1970s allowed for greater mobility among Chinese citizens.¹² These socio-economic changes in Mainland China subsequently yielded an unmistakable impact on Singapore. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, there are no published official statistics on the exact number of mainland Chinese immigrants. Nonetheless, there are estimates that the numbers have exponentially increased from several thousands to nearly one million from the 1990s to 2010s.¹³

Hing Ai-Yun, Lee Kiat-Jin and Sheng Sixin’s research on Mainland Chinese “foreign talents” focuses primarily on skilled middle-class immigrants, but it can help us to provide some context regarding why Mainland Chinese choose to migrate to Singapore. Among the factors cited in this paper are the familiarity of potential immigrants with Singapore, due to the academic exchange programs between Singapore and Chinese universities; the positive image of Singapore presented by China’s state media, which has lauded Singapore as a “modern city”; the geographic proximity of the two countries (a flight between Singapore and Guangzhou is less than four hours); and policies promoting Chinese culture, such as designating Mandarin Chinese as one of its official languages and Chinese celebrations as public holidays.¹⁴ Given these attractive characteristics of Singapore, it is no surprise that mainland Chinese immigrants are gradually becoming an ever-present fixture in

¹¹ Aihwa Ong, p. 186. In addition, China’s rise as an economic power has attracted many East Asian states, including Singapore to establish investments with the emergent regional powerhouse. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan-Yew has urged Chinese-Singaporeans to draw on their ancestry to establish ‘guanxi’ [networks] in China for the ease of business. See: Brenda Yeoh and Kate Willis, “Singapore Unlimited: Configuring Social Identity in the Regionalization Process” (earlier draft presented at the University of Nottingham Department of Geography Seminar Series, January 1997), p. 9.

¹² Zhou Min and Liu Hong, “Changing Patterns of Chinese Immigration and Diaspora-Homeland Interactions in Singapore and the United States,” *Program on International Migration, UCLA International Institute*, 3 December 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7051501n>

¹³ Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, p. 35.

¹⁴ Hing Ai-Yun, Lee Kiat-Jin and Sheng Sixin, “Mainland Chinese ‘Foreign Talents’ in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009), p. 770.

Singaporean society. Brenda Yeoh and Lin Weiqiang aptly describe this phenomena as “the gradual ‘Sinicization’ of the public face of the city.”¹⁵

National identity and social tensions

Some controversial incidents involving new immigrants from Mainland China have resulted in a public outcry, contributing to the growing sense of unease towards this group of new immigrants. Many Singaporeans have complained about the displays of ostentatious cultural chauvinism by these mainland Chinese immigrants; the lack of tolerance to other ethnic groups; and generally poor behaviour in other instances. Mainland Chinese immigrants have borne much of the brunt of public discontent in terms of the more general social tensions regarding immigration and change.¹⁶ Given that ethnically Chinese people comprise a majority of Singapore’s population, one may regard this trend as ironic. However, it reflects a growing cultural divide separating these two groups within the ethnic Chinese community, while suggesting underlying anxieties about the government’s liberal immigration policies.

¹⁵ Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, p. 42. Yeoh and Lin, pp. 39-42, group mainland Chinese immigrants into four different categories: skilled migrants, students, study mothers and low and semi-skilled migrants. Skilled migrants from China are described in newspapers as “young dragons” due to their young age. They are typically well-educated, ambitious and possess the ability to converse in English. The second group, students, numbered around 36,000 as of 2008. Not only does the Singapore government disburse generous scholarships to talented mainland Chinese students, but Singapore’s status as an English-speaking country has made it a particularly attractive educational option for mainland Chinese students hoping to cultivate international connections with the West. The third group is linked to the second group, as “study mothers” accompany their children studying in Singapore on a student pass. These study mothers are given a long-term visitor pass. As of 2006, there were 7,800 such pass holders residing in Singapore and two-thirds are from China. Finally, the last group described by Yeoh and Lin are the low and semi-skilled migrants, who take low-paying employment positions that Singaporeans typically avoid, such as cashiers, cleaners, bus drivers etc.

¹⁶ “Singapore’s migration dilemmas,” *Asian Century Institute*, 22 February 2013, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.asiancenturyinstitute.com/migration/200-singapore-s-migration-dilemmas>

In order to understand these controversies, sources from social media will be utilized. While social media may not be an ideal source for factually reliable information¹⁷, it is a prime site for examining the discourses at work in Singapore today with regards to the immigration debate. Mainstream media in Singapore is state-sanctioned and viewed as “pro-government” in its stance, whereas social media allows for a wide range of perspectives that may deviate from the “unwritten parameters of political acceptability.”¹⁸ With 74 percent of Singaporeans engaging in social networks, social media is particularly important for studying contemporary Singaporean society.¹⁹ From discussions on the internet, Stephen Ortmann notes that “Singaporeans are increasingly disaffected with the ruling elite” and show “opposition to the growing amount of foreign talent, abbreviated as ‘FT’.”²⁰

The events examined here trace back to 2011 because the most recent General Elections occurred in May 2011. The immigration topic became a “hot-button issue” and was a significant factor in causing the ruling People’s Action Party to lose a sizeable share of its popular vote.²¹

August 2011: Cook a Pot of Curry Day

This “culinary anti-immigration” viral protest was triggered by the complaints of a Mainland Chinese family that their Singaporean Indian neighbours were cooking curry with

¹⁷ Commentators on online networking sites, and other new media platforms are not held to standards of state integrity and objectivity the way that journalists are expected to report.

¹⁸ Carol Soon and Tan Tarn-How, *Corrosive Speech: What Can Be Done. Report 2013*, (Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Institute of Policy Studies), p. 15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Stephen Ortmann, “Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28:4 (2009), p. 39.

²¹ “Singapore’s Election: A win-win election?” *The Economist*, 8 May 2011, accessed 12 March 2014, http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/05/singapores_election

a strong odour.²² When a mediator intervened and ruled that the Singaporean Indian family could only cook curry when their Mainland Chinese neighbours were away, many Singaporeans were outraged. In wake of this incident, a Facebook campaign²³ was organized by Stanley Wong and Florence Leow, both Chinese-Singaporeans. They stressed that curry was a “national dish,” with the strong implication that Mainland Chinese immigrants have to adapt to the localized culture.

2012: Table tennis team at the London Olympics

At the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, table tennis paddler Feng Tianwei won Singapore’s first individual Olympic medal in 40 years. Yet, despite this achievement, the fact that Feng was originally from Mainland China prompted a public debate²⁴ about whether Singaporeans should take pride Feng’s sporting success.²⁵ Critics pointed out that Feng was only naturalized as a Singaporean citizen in January 2008, spending most of her formative years in China.²⁶ With the state’s disbursement of financial incentives (\$250,000) for a bronze medal, many have questioned Feng’s true political loyalties²⁷, while also criticizing

²² Harry Suhartono, “Singaporeans’ culinary anti-immigration protest: curry,” *Reuters*, 21 August 2011, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/21/us-singapore-curry-idUSTRE77K0TB20110821>

²³ See “National Cook Curry Day,” *Facebook*, accessed 12 March 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/National-Cook-Curry-Day/133807273376971>

²⁴ Some Singaporeans such as Richardson Lau have gone online to express their views about Feng’s win, “what pride? She threw the flowers to PRC fans.....she definitely would be happier wearing the PRC crest than SG.... She’s just here because she cannot make it into the main team in China...hence her flight to Japan and then to Singapore..... She’s here for the money and table Tennis...not Singapore. [sic].” See: “The Temasek Review,” *Facebook*, 1 August 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=436423856402950&id=190806675782

²⁵ Jeffrey Oon, “A bronze medal, but at what cost for Singapore?” *Yahoo! Newsroom*, 2 August 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/a-bronze-medal-but-at-what-cost-for-singapore-.html>

²⁶ Leo Khaw, “Feng Tian Wei not ‘Singapore’ enough?” *theonlinecitizen*, 13 August 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2012/08/feng-tian-wei-not-singapore-enough/>

²⁷ After Feng Tianwei’s success in obtaining an individual Silver medal at the Olympics, some online commentators posted images of Feng throwing flowers to supporters from China. They voiced their strong dissatisfaction that Feng did not similarly acknowledge the Singaporean audience. See: “Outcry over Feng Tianwei throwing flowers at cheering PRC fans after her win at London Olympics,” *The Temasek Times*, 2

her poor grasp of English and inability to sing the national anthem in Malay as evidence of her insufficiently Singaporean identity.²⁸

2012: SMRT Chinese-language announcement controversy

From October to December 2012, Singapore public transit system (SMRT) introduced bilingual English and Mandarin announcements on its commuter trains. However, SMRT ended this trial program due to public outcry about the privileging of Mandarin.²⁹ Some online commentators saw this trial as a politically driven decision pandering to the increasing number of Mainland Chinese immigrants, noting the “PRC-accented” Mandarin of the announcements.³⁰ Additionally, there were no plans to make announcements in the other two official languages of Singapore: Malay and Tamil.³¹ While SMRT stated that the bilingual announcements were to assist elderly Chinese Singaporeans, some Singaporeans noted that older Chinese Singaporean commuters are more fluent in Chinese dialects and do not need Mandarin announcements after taking the train for many years.³²

August 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://temasektimes.wordpress.com/2012/08/02/outcry-over-feng-tianwei-throwing-flowers-at-cheering-prc-fans-after-her-win-at-london-olympics/>

²⁸ “Open Letter to Feng Tianwei: Pls prove your commitment to become real S’porean,” *The Real Singapore*, 2 August 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://therealsingapore.com/content/open-letter-feng-tianwei-pls-prove-your-commitment-become-real-s%E2%80%99porean>

²⁹ Some Singaporeans have gone online to voice their opposition to SMRT’s bilingual announcements. A petition on Facebook against Mandarin announcements attracted 3,932 “likes” as of 12 March 2014. A note posted by the moderator explains the Facebook page’s intentions, urging Facebook users to “contribute to our petition to Stop SMRT from translating Station Names by pressing LIKE on our page. The more “LIKES” the stronger our Voice.” See “Singapore MRT Station Name Announcements - Only in English Please,” *Facebook*, accessed 12 March 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SMRT.StationNameAnnouncements?ref=stream>

³⁰ Rongchen Zhou, “What’s In A Station Name? A Healthy Dose Of Identity & Pride!” *IPSCOMMONS*, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.ipscommons.sg/index.php/categories/society/120-whats-in-a-station-name-a-healthy-dose-of-identity-a-pride>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Commuter Nuraisha Ramlan shared her views that “Singapore is a multicultural country and I did not feel that it was fair or necessary to do Chinese translations. All my Chinese friends know the stations by their English names—it’s good that SMRT is scrapping this.” See: “SMRT ends trial on station announcements in Mandarin,” *Yahoo! Newsroom*, 9 December 2012, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/smart-ends-trial-on-mandarin-station-announcements-031739867.html>

Understanding the response from Chinese-Singaporeans

In its way, each of these incidents represents the growing tensions toward the new mainland Chinese immigrants in Singapore, especially from the Chinese Singaporean community. Taken individually, they are anecdotal, but viewed as related phenomena within a relatively short period of time, they demonstrate a growing divide separating “locals” from “foreigners.” The reactions to these events are especially telling and provide evidence for a discourse of “othering” *within* the ethnically Chinese population of Singapore.

Due to the rapid influx of mainland Chinese immigrants as well as the pace of economic and urban redevelopment, many Chinese-Singaporeans feel that their local identity is under threat and it is up to them to preserve and defend their identity. Furthermore, the apparent resentment of the mainland Chinese immigrants within the ethnic Chinese community of Singapore is also due in part to the fact that Chinese-Singaporeans and mainland Chinese immigrants share similar physical appearance. Thus, in order to express the sense of difference that Chinese-Singaporeans perceive of themselves, they must actively emphasize that difference in a manner other than physical appearance. Brenda Yeoh and Kate Willis contend that Chinese-Singaporeans rely on “cultural and moral markers” to distinguish themselves from the “unacceptable social and personal habits” associated with immigrants from China.³³ This strategy of differentiation—focusing on English language abilities, manners, cultural tolerance and respect for the law—and is readily apparent from the case-studies discussed above. Yeoh and Willis conclude that

³³ Brenda Yeoh and Kate Willis, “Singapore Unlimited: Configuring Social Identity In The Regionalization Process” (earlier draft presented at the University of Nottingham Department of Geography Seminar Series, January 1997), p. 17.

“Singaporean Chinese came from the same ‘stock’ [as the immigrants from Mainland China] but grafted on a different tree.”³⁴

With the sudden influx of mainland Chinese immigrants to Singapore, these migrants are presumed to fit seamlessly into the “Chinese” category within Singapore’s official CMIO racial framework, while supporting the country’s economic growth. However, these immigrants from China have been perceived to have caused social problem themselves, and the wider Chinese-Singaporean community considers them as “outsiders” that are unable to be fully assimilated. The most commonly vocalized criticism is that these Mainland Chinese immigrants are unable to fit into Singapore’s multicultural, law-abiding and English-speaking cultural environment.

This relates to Daniel Goh’s observation that Singapore’s post-independence ethnic relations continues to “revolve around the racial categories used by the British colonial state to enumerate the population in its census.”³⁵ This form of pluralism has become thoroughly ingrained in the fabric of Singaporean society. However, the latest wave of Chinese immigrants in the recent years has confounded Singapore’s established social categories, traditionally delineated along the lines of race.³⁶

Easing the tensions from the nation in-flux

As suggested above, this demographically necessary influx of Mainland Chinese immigrants has created certain tensions both within Singapore’s ethnically Chinese

³⁴ Brenda Yeoh and Kate Willis, p. 18.

³⁵ Daniel P.S Goh, “From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Sociology Compass* 2:1 (2008), p. 235.

³⁶ In addition, the first wave of Chinese immigrants came from the southern Chinese provinces, Fujian and Guangdong. However, the new mainland Chinese immigrants come from all parts of China, such as rural areas like Shandong, Sichuan and Zhejiang, another factor that has contributed to the lack of cohesion among Chinese-Singaporeans and more recent arrivals. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, p. 38.

community and within the city-state generally. This development is acknowledged by key government figures, such as President Tony Tan, who urged Singaporeans to “prevent a new fault line from forming between local-born Singaporeans and recent immigrants.”³⁷ Clearly aware of the controversies caused by the rapidly changing social dynamics, the government has developed creative strategies to ease tensions among its populace.

While the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) racial categories remain officially in place, this chapter will show that the government has more subtly sought to create a distinctly hybridized vision of the nation as a means to promote social cohesion and harmony. One of the primary tools employed by the state has been the conception of a useable past evincing Singapore’s cultural hybridism. With a strategic location as a regionally important port city, the island that would become Singapore had been shaped by new cultural practices and ideas long before the onset of globalization. The Peranakan culture serves this purposeful vision of a hybridized Singaporean past particularly well. While Peranakan descendants are classified as Chinese within the official racial categories, the narrative presented at the Peranakan museum shows why Peranakan Chinese are distinct from the wider Chinese community and quintessentially Singaporean according to their ancestry. This distinction creates a more nuanced sense of racial difference than the “CMIO” framework would seem to allow—corresponding with Hwei-Fen Cheah’s observation that the museum is “packaging Peranakan culture as one of un-problematic syncretism.”³⁸

³⁷ Joy Fang, “President: New Parliament reflects diverse voices,” *AsiaOne*, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20111011-304289.html>

³⁸ Hwei-Fen Cheah, “Nonya Beadwork and Contemporary Peranakan Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia.” In *Asian Material Culture*, eds. Marianne Hulsbosch, Elizabeth Bedford and Martha Chaiklin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 88.

National identity and governmentality

For Singapore, an “authentic national identity” has historically remained elusive, due to its rapid movement between city-state and global metropolis.³⁹ Working from Prasenjit Duara’s theory, Terence Chong has argued that Singapore has aimed to construct a “regime of authenticity” in order to “anchor the nation in the ferocious stream of capitalism and modernity.”⁴⁰ Chong acknowledges the unique challenges of attempting to locate this type of national vision for Singapore, noting that the “idea of a timeless and stable nation” is incongruous within the Singaporean context.⁴¹ Hence, the Peranakan Museum functions as a useful vehicle for evading some of these seemingly inherent problems.

For the majority Chinese-Singaporean population, the history on display at the Peranakan Museum is meant to act as a precedent to the current immigration situation. The openness embodied by the island’s proto-Singaporean historical inhabitants serves to demonstrate how new immigrants from Mainland China can gradually become “indigenized” like the Peranakans. Furthermore, the museum highlights the way that Chinese immigrants have responded and adapted to the dominant Malay cultural environment during the nineteenth century. What is thus on display is a distinctively “home-grown” Singaporean identity. The Peranakan community’s distinctiveness and longstanding presence in Singapore serves the state’s purpose of promoting a localized hybrid identity that allows all citizens (whether first or third generation) to claim ownership.

³⁹ Terence Chong, “Manufacturing Authenticity: The Cultural Production of National Identities in Singapore,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45:4 (2011), p. 877.

⁴⁰ Terence Chong, p. 878.

⁴¹ Terence Chong, p. 879.

The Peranakan Museum serves two simultaneous, interconnected purposes for the state. First, through the nostalgic appeal of heritage, addressed in chapter two, the museum instils in its local visitors a sense of rootedness and historical community. Yet, at the same time, because that “national” history is fundamentally hybrid and multicultural, the state can make the case that receptivity to social and cultural change is the patriotic and natural “Singaporean” reaction to the present-day changes brought about by globalization and migration. Utilizing Foucault’s famous notion of “governmentality,” Aaron Koh argues that the Singapore government has actively attempted to shape the disposition and behaviour of its citizens.⁴² The government has recognized that a new national consciousness reiterated daily through social practices and exchanges is essential to the domestic success of its economic ambitions.⁴³ Koh describes Singaporean governance as “tactical” in that it utilizes government policies in the social, economic and educational spheres and “translates them into national imperatives.”⁴⁴ He cites government statements (such as George Yeo’s comments quoted at the start of this chapter), policy papers, speeches delivered by political leaders and nation-wide campaigns as tools promoting a distinctly Singaporean governmentality.⁴⁵

In line with Koh’s argument, Lily Kong contends that Singapore’s cultural policy has melded together both economic and social imperatives. Kong’s paper examines the trends of cultural policy in Singapore from 1965 to 2000. As the primary aim throughout much of the earlier post-independence period was on economic survival, arts and culture were typically

⁴² Aaron Koh, “Living with Globalization Tactically: The Metapragmatics of Globalization in Singapore,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 22:2 (2007), p. 183

⁴³ Aaron Koh, p. 184.

⁴⁴ Aaron Koh, p. 186.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

relegated to the backburner.⁴⁶ It was not until the economic recession in 1985 that the government sought to diversify its economic strategies and identified the arts as a “potential growth area. However, the 1989 Report on Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts was a main turning point in the government’s approach towards cultural policy. This report shows the government recognizing the dual potential for art and culture to “strengthen our social bonds” and “contribute to our tourist and entertainment sector.”⁴⁷ Again, this illustrates the government’s desire to improve social cohesion at the domestic level so as to more solidly position Singapore as a *global* city in an increasingly competitive *global* economy. Kong concludes that the government regards cultural policy as an “arsenal” to build up resilience for social defence, while indirectly augmenting Singapore’s economic growth.⁴⁸

Learning to read the national narrative

The Peranakan Museum exemplifies such policy. Andrea Witcomb contends that museums are important tools for political instruction, “reforming newly formed populations into a modern citizenry.”⁴⁹ Based on my observations at the museum, it is clear that the majority of local visitors are students from local schools. Facilitated by the museum’s educational department and “Friends of the Museum” volunteer group⁵⁰, these school field trips are part of the Ministry of Education’s “Learning Journey” policy, first initiated in 1998. “Learning Journeys” are incorporated in the syllabus, giving students the opportunity to visit and reflect on key public institutions that have significant meaning in Singapore’s history.

⁴⁶ Lily Kong, “Cultural policy in Singapore: negotiating economic and socio-cultural agendas,” *GeoForum* 31:4 (2000), p. 413.

⁴⁷ Lily Kong, p. 414.

⁴⁸ Lily Kong, p. 419.

⁴⁹ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), p. 80.

⁵⁰ A comprehensive list of school programs is listed on the museum’s webpage, see: “Learning@Museum,” *The Peranakan Museum*, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.peranakanmuseum.org.sg/education/education.html>

This demonstrates the convergence of educational and cultural policy, creating in young citizens a fertile national consciousness.⁵¹

The National Museum of Singapore, another state-run museum, similarly projects a narrative of multiculturalism and Singapore's past as a "prototypical global city."⁵² The National Museum presents as exemplary "Singaporeans" bicultural historical figures such as Munshi Abdullah, Tan Tock-Seng and Syed Sharif Omar al-Junied.⁵³ These individuals straddled the line between the East and West, both in terms of their mentality and their actions. Thus, visitors to this institution will learn that to be a model citizen is to be a cosmopolitan and cultural polygot. In the present-day, this notion naturally translates as participation in the global economy as a representative Singaporean.

By targeting the next generation of Singaporeans, the state aims to engender new subjectivities conducive to its economic prerogatives. Many of these young visitors to the Peranakan Museum will not remember the Singapore of 1980 with its much smaller percentage of foreigners. For that matter, their memory of the Singapore at the turn of the new millennium may be a little more than an early childhood recollection. Instead, the "memory" of the nation that they will inherit is the hybrid vision of Singapore's history promoted through the museum and other state-backed initiatives. Derek Heng has perceptively noted that:

The national historical narrative has only recently appeared to be on the brink of a fundamental change in form to achieve several long-term objectives: to put forth to the people of Singapore the historical justification for the promulgation of the policies

⁵¹ Aaron Koh, "Imagining the Singapore 'Nation' and 'Identity': The role of the media and National Education," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 25:1 (2005), p. 83.

⁵² Teo Ee-Jun, "Re-enchanting the Singapore Story: an examination of the National Museum's representational strategies," unpublished B.A Honours Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2011/2012, p. 17.

⁵³ Teo Ee-Jun, p. 21.

and their effects, as well as to socialise the mindset of the population towards being predisposed to being an internationalized society.⁵⁴

Today, the idea that Singapore is such an “internationalized” society and has been for many centuries seems ordinary to many Singaporean citizens and amateur history students. For example, one would learn in elementary school that it was Sang Nila Utama, a thirteenth-century Sumatran prince that transformed the island into a focal point for the movement of people and goods in the region.⁵⁵ Some six hundred years later, Sir Stamford Raffles was instrumental in laying the economic foundations for Singapore as a British colony by bringing in external labour to satisfy insular needs.⁵⁶ In a similar manner, Singapore’s political leaders of the twenty-first century like George Yeo recognize the need for keeping Singapore’s borders open to talent and trade. These moments in time are separated by great temporal distance and are not inherently tied to one another. The fact that Singaporeans would instinctively read this narrative as a coherent myth of national progress speaks to the success of the state’s use of cultural tools toward economic goals in becoming a global city-state.

⁵⁴ Derek Heng, “From Political Rhetoric to National History: Bi-Culturalism and Hybridisation in the Construction of Singapore’s Historical Narrative,” chapter 2 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 2009), p. 22.

⁵⁵ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Derek Heng, “Introduction,” chapter 1 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 2009), p. 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

“In my lifetime I have seen experienced so many changes. We Straits-born Chinese are no longer a separate group, but instead we are all Singaporeans.”

- Mrs. Lee Chin-Koon (mother of Prime Minister Lee Kuan-Yew)¹

As a state-run institution, the Peranakan Museum has purposefully constructed a “heritage” from its pre-independence past that is relevant for Singapore’s post-colonial present and future. The museum collection that the visitor sees and interacts with is carefully curated to recreate the “Golden Age” for Peranakans.² This representation of Peranakans brings the visitor from the late nineteenth century through to the period before the Second World War. This is a relatively late glimpse of Peranakan history, given that this community had been established in the region since the first half of the nineteenth century or earlier.³

Historically, Peranakan culture was not synonymous with all of Singaporean society or even the Chinese community as a whole. Memories that do not fit neatly into the narrative of the historic site are forgotten. One prominent example is the intra-ethnic tension within the Chinese community, between the established Peranakan community and *Sinkehs*, the new Chinese immigrants that arrived in Singapore during the early twentieth century.⁴

¹ Lee Chin-Koon, *Mrs. Lee’s cookbook: Nonya recipes and other favorite recipes*, (Singapore: Eurasia, 1976) found in Jean Duruz, “Tastes of hybrid belonging: Following the laksa trail in Katong, Singapore,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25:5 (October 2011), p. 607.

² Jurgen Rudolph, “Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 28:2 (1998), p. 218. Kwa Chong-Guan, “The Colonial State in the Making of a Peranakan Chinese Community,” in *Peranakan Chinese in a Globalizing Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Baba House, 2010), p. 50, observes that the Peranakans are “increasingly remembered for their material objects... a bygone lifestyle highlighted in ‘food and feasting,’ a complex set of rites and rituals grounded in Chinese popular religion.”

³ G. William Skinner, “Chinese creole societies in Southeast Asia,” in *Sojourners and settlers: histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese: in honour of Jennifer Cushman*, ed. Anthony Reid (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 57–59.

⁴ See: Sharon W.Q Lim, “Becoming the Straits Chinese: Active Constructions of Identity in Singapore, 1890-1910s,” unpublished B.A. Honours Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2013.

Furthermore, Glen Peterson notes that the elaborate and intricate features of Peranakan material culture can be interpreted as a “cultural strategy for inscribing social boundaries and elite status.”⁵ During colonial rule, the Peranakan Chinese gained a reputation as the “King’s Chinese,” through their role as mediators between the local population and the British rulers.⁶ Decolonization saw the loss of economic benefits that the Peranakan Chinese once received during the colonial era and also resulted in the political dilution of the Peranakan community.⁷ Yet, while visitors today recognize the opulence and aesthetic beauty of the objects on display, their recognition of the Peranakans as an elite group in colonial Singapore is subsumed within a more democratic reading of Peranakan culture as proto-Singaporean culture.

Can-Seng Ooi argues that the “King’s Chinese” have been posthumously “rehabilitated” by the state and re-imagined as de facto Singaporeans.⁸ While the individuals who identify as Peranakan are given a forum to share their stories in the museum’s Origins Gallery (as discussed in chapter one), they otherwise blend into the multiracial landscape of contemporary Singapore. Many of the younger people profiled for their Peranakan ancestry have not personally witnessed the seismic cultural change that Mrs. Lee Chin-Koon attests to in the quotation above. While they may feel some special kinship with their celebrated

⁵ Glen Peterson, “Overseas Chinese and Merchant Philanthropy in China: From Culturalism to Nationalism,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1:1 (May 2005), pp. 105-106.

⁶ Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic life and traditions* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p. 21.

⁷ Bonny Tan, “Textualising the Baba Identity: Insights into the Making of a Bibliography,” chapter 7 in *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, eds. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 2009), pp. 150-151.

⁸ Cheong Kah-Shin, “Report on IPS Seminar: ‘Singapore’s Cultural Policy: Authenticity, Regulation and Stratification’ by Dr. Ooi Can-Seng,” *IPSCCommons*, 11 August 2010, accessed 31 March 2014, http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/Seminar_Singapore%E2%80%99s-Cultural-Policy_110810_report.pdf_e

forebears, the past on display is finally no more specifically theirs than it is that for another other present-day Singapore citizen.

As Margaret Sarkissian observes, Peranakans of the twenty-first century are in a unique situation compared to their forebears, as there is “no place for a colonial elite in a post-colonial world.”⁹ Looking at the Peranakan Museum’s “Visitor Guide”¹⁰, it is clear that the highlighted objects, such as the beaded wedding slippers and kebaya (blouse) reflect almost none of the political context in which the Peranakans participated during colonial period. The official re-imagining of the Peranakans as “less modern than they once were”¹¹ has resulted in simplifying of their complex history—downplaying their allegiance to the British Empire and privileges they received as colonial intermediaries.

The colonial Peranakans had to negotiate an identity that was at once racially Asian and politically British. This deft balancing act, so discernible from the written texts¹² many Peranakans left behind, is an important part of their historical legacy that is inadequately represented in the state version of Peranakan history. A few framed photographs in the

⁹ Margaret Sarkissian, “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Peranakan Musical Culture in Malacca, Malaysia,” *Musica e Cultura* 7:1 (2012), p. 63.

¹⁰ Brochure, Visitor Guide: Enter the world of the Peranakans, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

¹¹ Margaret Sarkissian, p. 52.

¹² Lim Boon-Keng and Song Ong-Siang founded *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1897. Having received the Queen’s Scholarship to pursue further studies in the United Kingdom, both men were respected and prominent members of the Peranakan community. Lim and Song’s intention was to have an Asian publication in Singapore where members of their community can contribute and voice their opinions on matters of the day. The main English publication in colonial Singapore was *The Straits Times*, a British-owned newspaper that was regarded as an avenue for serving European interests. *The Straits Chinese Magazine* remained in print until 1907, publishing a total of 11 volumes comprised of 4 issues each. As the inaugural issue of the Straits Chinese Magazine was published during the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, the editors chose to feature a patriotic tribute to the reigning monarch, while also celebrating the glory of the British Empire. See: Philip Holden, “Colonial Fiction, Hybrid Lives: Early Singaporean Fiction in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33:85 (1998). “Hail Victoria!” *The Straits Chinese Magazine* 1.2 (1897), pp. 58-59. George Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 1985), pp. 28-29.

Public Life gallery attest to the modernity and highly Western-styled cosmopolitanism of the Peranakans, but these images are largely overshadowed by the overall theme of hybridity expressed through the more visually appealing objects in the other galleries.



Figure 8: A section of the Public Life gallery features photographs of Peranakans in Western dress during the early twentieth century. Displayed top-centre is a framed beadwork design, modelled on the crest of Emmanuel College. This item was made by a mother for her son, Dr. Wu Lien-Teh (1876-1960) when he went to Cambridge University to study Medicine. (Photo by Sharon Lim, 2014)

In 1996, the Peranakan Association quoted Lee Kip-Lee's statement that "Peranakan culture is now at a cross-roads and it is timely to examine whether it can become a vibrant part of Singapore's cultural scene."¹³ Nearly two decades later, it is apparent that Peranakan culture has experienced a successful resurgence in Singapore. Efforts like the presentation at the Peranakan Museum have given the remnants of Peranakan culture with a contemporary context, albeit at a cost. First, the historical memory of the Peranakans has been carefully de-politicized in its deliberate application as national heritage. Second, as Mrs. Lee Chin-Koon's quote suggests, the Peranakans are not recognized as a distinct social group

¹³ Anthony Oei and Peter Lee, "A Successful Convention. Tremendous Support for the 9th Baba Convention," *The Peranakan: Quarterly Newsletter of The Peranakan Association* (December 1996-February 1997), p.2. http://peranakan.s3.amazonaws.com/1996/1996_Issue_4.pdf

and no longer enjoy the political and social privileges that they once enjoyed under British colonial rule. For instance, Peranakans were categorized as Chinese and subsumed under the dominant ethnic Chinese identity under the new CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other) racial framework enacted by the post-independent government.¹⁴ If the Peranakans are to stand as representative of an ideal for Singapore's present and future, this cultural egalitarianism consequently recasts the descendants of this elite colonial group as a rather more ordinary group.

The recognition of the Peranakans' potential as an egalitarian social model is not altogether new. As early as the late 1980s, noted Peranakan cultural enthusiast, William Gwee highlighted the Peranakans as an exemplary case of an "integrated culture of multi-racial origin."¹⁵ In the 1988 Committee of Heritage Report, Gwee used this justification to advocate for the state to take action on preserving Peranakan heritage.¹⁶ When the Peranakan Museum opened twenty years after Gwee's recommendation, it reportedly welcomed 50,000 visitors within nine weeks of its opening—compared to the Asian Civilisations Museum which took a year to reach that visitor level.¹⁷ This enthusiastic reception demonstrates the appeal of a home-grown national narrative that sought to encompass every ethnic group, while nevertheless showing the distinctiveness of Singaporean identity.

¹⁴ Emily Stokes-Rees. "'We need something of our own': Representing Ethnicity, Diversity and 'National Heritage' in Singapore," (Paper presented at National Museums in a Global World, Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007), p. 24.

¹⁵ Jackie Yoong, "A History of Peranakan Museum Exhibitions in Singapore 1985-2008," MA Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2009, p. 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Peranakan Museum draws 50,000 visitors in 9 weeks" *AsiaOne*, 8 July 2008, accessed 31 March 2014, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20080708-75386.html>

Such a unique national identity has been utilized to produce a stronger sense of locality in the midst of great social change. The Peranakan Museum has served to provide a remedy for this sense of displacement, as material culture is connected with the way how Singaporeans define their local identity. The museum's presentation of Peranakan cultural heritage has implications for different, though sometimes overlapping, audiences.

Within the local setting, the museum presents a narrative of a national identity that is distinctively Singaporean, accommodating of the different ethnic groups that reside in the country. By attempting to connect in the public imagination the culture of the Peranakans with contemporary Singapore, the state aims to gloss over the history of conflict that has sometimes marked racial and ethnic relations. Instead, a neat narrative of Singapore's national origins functions as a way to promote inter-ethnic harmony and generate pride among citizens in Singapore's national history.

Meanwhile, within the Southeast Asia, the display of Peranakan objects at the museum acts as a way to assert Singapore's role as the leading cultural capital in the region. Singapore has effectively utilized its economic clout to gain comparative advantages against culturally-rich but economically less developed neighboring states. Lastly, at the global level, the Peranakan Museum represents a concerted effort to self-orientalize the nation so as to make Singapore more attractive as a cultural destination for tourists. Singapore's recognition as an important cultural center would enhance its status more broadly as an economically competitive global city.

As the state seeks to repurpose its colonial history for various reasons,¹⁸ the institutional structure of contemporary Singapore remains implicitly informed by its earlier mode of British governance. Daniel Goh contends that Singapore's official system of multiracial segregation and its related conception of national identity are lingering traces of British colonial rule. Goh contrasts Singapore's multiracial socio-political strategies with the hybridized urbanism in present-day Penang. According to Goh, this is likewise a result of the different manner in which this city was governed during colonialism.¹⁹ While in Singapore, the CMIO racial framework remains firmly in place, suggesting that there is validity to Goh's argument, the state's use of Peranakan culture detailed here suggests a gradual shift towards hybridization in the official and popular discourses on race.

Due to the current economic imperatives facing Singapore as an ambitious global city-state, a hybridized, less racially delineated notion of national identity has become recognized as a necessity both for stronger social cohesion and the acceptance of newcomers. The colonial Peranakan subjects have proven tremendously useful as idealized multicultural proto-Singaporeans with a cosmopolitan outlook. However, the colonial model of racial segregation, which Goh maintains has persisted up to the present, cannot meet the socio-economic demands of the near future.

¹⁸ Roy Jones and Brian J. Shaw, "Palimpsests of Progress: Erasing the Past and Rewriting the Future in Developing Societies—Case Studies of Singapore and Jakarta," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12:2 (2006), p. 126, note that Singapore's built colonial heritage, such as the Raffles Hotel and CHIJMES complex (formerly the Convent of Holy Infant Jesus) are viewed by the government as commercial opportunities that support branding campaigns in attracting tourists.

¹⁹ Daniel P.S. Goh, "Between History and Heritage: Post-Colonialism, Globalisation, and the Remaking of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2:1 (2014), p. 98.

The policy aims that the Peranakan Museum means to satisfy are not explicitly addressed in the physical space of the museum itself. Nevertheless, they interact dynamically and carry with them powerful implications for the nation and beyond.

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