

# Appropriating hybridized cultures: Recreating Peranakan culture in Jonker Street



Gentrification involves the conversion of dilapidated residences and areas into refurbished units and locales through an influx of residents with a higher earning power. In some cases, gentrified spaces facilitate the local tourism needs and generate income for local proprietors and businesses. Very often, gentrification conforms to a selective interpretation of local history, culture and traditions. It fits the dominant narrative generated by local elites, national policies and political cultures.

Tai Wei LIM

BOTH SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA opted for multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity to characterize their post-independence histories. Ethnicity, or what was known as ethnic chauvinism, was subordinated to the national project of constructing harmonious post-war societies. Therefore, cultural reconstruction, heritage gentrification and recreation of ethnic and racial identities are shaped by the worldview of multiculturalism and the idea of the Malayan Peninsula as a cultural melting pot simultaneous with the indigenization of a hybrid culture.

In Singapore's case, meritocracy and identification with Singapore's value system became more important than ethnic identification in terms of social mobility and community acceptance. In the case of Malaysia, the *bumiputra* policy determined the pre-eminence of Malays in the Malay-dominated societal fabric that accommodates the cultural and religious nuances of its Chinese and Indian minorities. Into this multi-ethnic and multicultural mix, an ambiguous zone emerged that cannot be neatly boxed or categorized into either Malay or Chinese (or Indian) culture. This is the narrative zone that hybrid cultures like the Peranakan cultures inhabit, where they thrive and construct a historical narrative of their origins. Like the historical narrative, contemporary interpretations of Peranakan culture can be found in gentrified shop-houses in Malacca's Jonker Street. Other recreations of Peranakan culture include restaurants, culinary cuisines and museums where both real and imagined images and artefacts of Peranakan culture are housed and curated. The gentrification of Mr Tan Kim Seng's house is complementary to the post-colonial reordering of ethnic identities in Malaysia.

As a form of hybrid culture, Peranakan culture enjoys a high level of acceptability because the culture can be simultaneously identified with Malay, Chinese and Western cultures. In other words, it carries the flavours of all three sources of influences found within Malaysia (Malay, Western and Chinese) and matches the narrative of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Malacca was one of the venues I selected to examine the reconstruction of Peranakan culture. Due to its World Heritage status, acquired in 2008, there are now stricter rules in place to conserve heritage buildings and assets. I also chose this site because, along with Penang and Singapore, they make up the Straits Settlements where large Peranakan communities are found – another term often used to describe this community is the 'Straits Chinese'. The Straits Settlements were originally created by the British colonial authorities for administrative convenience in managing the major port cities and trading centres in the Malayan Peninsula.

Hybridized cultures also complement the idea of revitalization through tourism made possible by the commodification of heritage artefacts. In the case of Malacca's Jonker Street, tourism is a major revenue generator for the World Heritage site and Peranakan culture is one of the main attractions of the town. Peranakan culture in Jonker Street can be divided into tangible and intangible assets. In terms of tangible assets, one can find elaborately decorated shop-houses, museum display pieces and private museums recreating Peranakan culture to attract both local and overseas tourists through colourful and elaborate beadwork, quaint artefacts, beautifully-decorated houses and anecdotal narratives of gilded lifestyles of

days past. The Peranakan museum that I visited was guided by an energetic lady who claims she has partial Peranakan heritage and who was fully-decked out in a Peranakan outfit. She peppered her tour narratives with a strong dose of humour and body language imitating Peranakan household matriarchs. Her narrative is a good example of intangible interpretation of heritage, not found in physical form but equally important for understanding Peranakan culture and community.

In conserving cultures and physical buildings, while complementing the dominant national political narrative and local cultures, it is important to recreate authenticity so that visitors can experience and visualize the hybridized lifestyle of the Peranakan community. Each physical display is carefully calibrated to demonstrate the multicultural components that make up the unique Peranakan culture. A good example is that of a Victorian-style glassware piece displaying Peranakan *kuéh* pieces. The visual impact of a British colonial-era lifestyle product consumed alongside Chinese Hokkien *kuéh*s and Malay coconut-flavoured pastries powerfully portrays the cosmopolitan makeup of Peranakan culture. The material artefacts may be dated back to the pre-modern era in Malacca, but the visual message that they convey is contemporary and conforms to the post-independent narrative of multiculturalism and multiracialism in Malaysia.

Authenticity is also visible when the gentrification process utilizes either restored architectural materials, or accurate replicas, in their construction projects. Common design elements found in Jonker Street shop-houses that reflect authenticity include green Shiwan tiles from China, Japanese-made gaudy Peranakan-style tiles with stylized designs, terracotta tiles for the roofs, gilded lacquered wood work panels from Fujian, etc. One of the private museums in Jonker Street also dresses their staff members in Peranakan outfits to recreate authentic experiences for visitors. The challenge for recreating authenticity of Peranakan culture is the inherent hybridized nature of the culture itself. Peranakan culture is the result of the cross-pollination of cultures found in the Malayan Peninsula and those introduced to the region by migrants from India and China as well as colonial governments. Gentrifiers, restorers, conservationists and other stakeholders in preserving the Peranakan heritage of Jonker Street need to carefully navigate the cosmopolitan nature of this hybridized culture.

Tai Wei LIM, Senior Lecturer, SIM University (UniSIM); Research Fellow adjunct, East Asian Institute (EAI) at National University of Singapore (NUS) (twlim@unisim.edu.sg).

Left: Chee Mansion. The tower of this mansion was once the tallest in Malacca. It was built by Chee Yam Chuan, a prominent Peranakan merchant whose ancestors were amongst those that came to Malacca in the 1700s. The mansion is a fine example of hybridized Dutch, Portuguese, English and Chinese influences.

Top right: A chic restaurant in Malacca refurbished to resemble a Chinese clan association. It now serves gourmet Peranakan food. Pristine preserved architectural spaces such as this can generate enough funds for continued maintenance. The building incorporates Shiwan tiles, Georgian columns and a painted bas-relief.

Below right: Ornate Peranakan-style tiles featuring stylized designs such as English country roses restored on a Peranakan shop-house in Jonker Street.