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## **A Peranakan Paradox**

A study on how curatorial practice educates and  
reassesses the continuity of the Peranakan kebaya

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to study on how curatorial practice educates and reassesses the continuity of the Peranakan kebaya. The Peranakans are often associated with their vivid coloured kebaya decorated with machine embroidered motifs. This style of kebayas are seen as “traditional” today, which has stagnated since the 1950s as reproduction of it persists in the interest of preservation. Many are unaware that culture is not static, whereby doing that stultifies the evolution. The paper looks into the curatorial as a method to explore what it means to preserve the culture in a contemporary society. Using this approach allows different perspectives within the curatorial model, which can be educational. The research is based on oral interviews with Peranakans from different age groups, to find out their perceptions on the kebaya. The curatorial, prevalent in contemporary arts, is looked into and how it can be applied in this area of cultural heritage.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

Through the gradual process of adaptation and assimilation of other cultural aspects, the Peranakan community and their culture has been a fascination, often described as a culture of hybridity. (Leo 1) In Singapore, they are widely known as a mix of Malay, Chinese and other races. (Yew) When mentioned about the Peranakans, one of its cultural identity markers that comes to mind would be the intricately sewn kebaya, the dress worn by female Peranakan. The kebaya, in particular, signifies the apotheosis of Peranakan culture as it is typically characterised "unique" to them. (Hartgerink-Grandia) Today, most relate the Peranakan kebaya with clashing colours, usually with large machine embroidered motifs decorating the blouse. (Sung) In recent years, a resurgence of interest in the culture is evident, owing it to the anxiety felt by the Peranakan community as a need to preserve their culture for posterity. (Cheah) Despite this attention, the embroidery executed on kebayas is generally phasing out, contributing to the dwindling pool of kebaya makers in Singapore who still insist on using the 1950s style of free motion embroidery. (Shushan) This has been attributed to the emergence of industrial-scale sewing machines, capable of computerising the process and completing in a fraction of time. (The

Peranakan Association) Majority of young Peranakan women in current society do not wear the kebaya too, as it is deemed impractical.

However, with further examination into the development of the kebaya reveals a diverse history, such as its complex cross cultural networks beyond the shores of Singapore, thereby contending with the typical association of the Malay and Chinese combination. (Lee 30) In addition, the sense of loss and urgency to preserve the culture may in turn lead to cultural stagnation as it risks petrifying the very process of cultural transformation that characterise the dynamics of the Peranakan identity. (Cheah) Hence, there is a need to look into the purpose of preservation as well as what it means to preserve for the Peranakan contemporaries. The curatorial practice will be studied in relation to this matter due to its nature of forming critical thought through its manifestation. It is seen as a shift in curation, developed further from the practice of curating and is often used to define the curatorial praxis. (Curatorial)

## **Aims of the Research**

To some, the Peranakan culture may seem to be a museum topic today as well as seeing how many of their related artefacts are housed in the Peranakan Museum. Very often, it seems like by doing that it is fossilising the culture. (Leo 122) Another way to look at it is how they are being

preserved, and in the same vein, how the Peranakan kebaya is preserved because of how it is not progressing today since the 1950s. Therefore, the main intention of this research is to have a clearer understanding in the significance of preservation and also to determine in relation to which aspect of the culture. This is especially relevant to the younger generation, specifically the millennials, be it Peranakans and non-Peranakans as this to a large extent, apply to any cultures in a contemporary society. With different perspectives of what it means to preserve, this recent shift in curation can aid as a discussion platform. As the curatorial emerged around the times of how thinking and practice in the arts were emphasised and explored further, it is aligned with the idea of inquiry. It can then be seen as educational as sharing knowledge as compared to the conventional way of curating and learning. By introducing this concept, it hopes to propose alternatives in assessing the Peranakan culture and how it can be kept relevant in changing times.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a need to understand that to certain assumptions of the culture and traditions should be looked into, with the idea of change being an antithesis of tradition. Many fail to realise that culture is not static and the orthodox meaning of tradition can be seen as a modern product. Similarly,

how the kebaya is seen as a “traditional” costume when history has shown it was a daily dress. Hence, it is crucial for the Peranakan community to confront such misconceptions and to understand that change is necessary for the culture to progress. The study seeks to explore how curation can aid in this by looking at how knowledge is produced, or how one learns in an exhibition. With that, the curatorial, common in the field of contemporary art (Curatorial) will be looked into how it can be applied in an area of cultural heritage. How different or similar is educational value presented in an ethnographic setting, like the Peranakan Museum, compared to with an application of curatorial? It is also crucial to explore the extent of the curatorial and how it can be applied to provide an inquiry for this subject matter. In a broadest sense, curating can be seen as design such as how curators mediate, similar to designers translate information to visuals. Seen this way, the curatorial is treated as a medium of communication such as how an exhibition or the outcome of the curatorial is.

### **Key Research Inquiry**

The main angle of the inquiry is to study how the curatorial can be applied into this territory of cultural heritage that it is commonly used in the field of arts. It should not be assumed that preservation is restricted to a preconceived idea of how it should be done. Hence, the research will look



into how what makes the kebaya “traditional”, what the preservation of the Peranakan culture means today and how the curatorial provides an outlet for the continuity of the culture. It is essential to find out how the characteristics of the curatorial can aid the target audience engaging the culture.

## **Literature Review**

### The Peranakan Chinese and the kebaya

The word “peranakan” is of Malay derivation that means those who are locally born, referring to the descendants of intermarriage between native women and foreign men in the Malay Peninsula. (Eng-Lee 1) A Peranakan is not limited to the Chinese, and can be of Dutch, Arab or Indian ancestry as well. However, out of all the Peranakans, the Peranakan Chinese community has the greatest number. (Leo 2) This paper mainly focuses in this group and thus, will be referred to as “Peranakans” for brevity. The Peranakans were collectively known as “Straits Chinese” as their ancestors migrated to Southeast Asia and were mostly found in the ports of the former British Straits Settlements – Penang, Malacca and Singapore. (Eng-Lee 1) They are a distinct group of Chinese in Southeast Asia, usually portrayed as racially mixed. (Leo 27) Being widely represented as a Chinese-Malay identity, this can be attributed to firstly, the intermarriages between the

Chinese and the natives and secondly, how they have assimilated many respects of the Malay culture.

While such intermarriages may be true initially, in the later part of the 19th century, Chinese women became common and the Peranakans eventually married among themselves and with Chinese migrants. (Leo 32) This is supported by scholar Tan Chee Beng's research in the origins of this community where he concluded that it is thus largely inaccurate today to define that the Peranakans are a result of intermarriage while other Chinese is seen as racially "pure". (Leo 33) Despite this, the Peranakans are still described as such to brand them as unique, for the purpose of a multicultural national identity in Singapore context. (Leo 33) The Peranakans were influenced by the Malay culture, evident from their food, and material culture as well. One of the outstanding identity markers is their adaptation of daily dress. Today, the sarong kebaya is inherently tied with the image of a Nyonya (refers to a Peranakan woman), wearing brightly coloured embroidered blouse, and a batik skirt cloth. (Lee 27) This combination is then depicted to be the "traditional" costume of the Peranakans, a Malay manner of dress with Chinese influences. (Hartgerink-Grandia) Concerns are raised about how the craft of 1950s free motion embroidery can be perpetuated, which also leads to a larger issue about the loss of interest amongst younger Peranakans. (Tang) It maybe useful to first uncover how

this style of kebaya that is most recognised, became “traditional”, before looking into what it means and how to preserve this part of the culture. This is also necessary to contextualise the following chapters in the discussion of the apprehension felt by the Peranakan community for the viability of the culture. (Hulsbosch, Elizabeth, and Martha Chaiklin 75)

Art historian Peter Lee analyses the history of the Peranakan fashion and authored a book on the sarong kebaya’s origin in which this paper will largely reference to. Only the development of the kebaya will be delved into for the purpose of this paper. Despite showing the different types of kebaya, the trend of producing the 1950s style that consists of the machine embroidery is still evident. To change the preconception of how a kebaya should look today would be challenging as there is a false idea of how it is static and likewise, how the culture is perceived too. (Shushan)

### Negotiating between tradition and the present

There have been discussions as to whether the Peranakan culture is declining today although there is no doubt that certain practices and rituals have been abandoned by younger Peranakans. (Duruz, Gaik Cheng Khoo 168) Hence, the urge to preserve and transmit what still remains can be seen as a catalyst in view of the heightened interest in all things Peranakan, a

phenomenon in Singapore since the late 1970s. (Brandon Albert Lim) In that sense, the culture is progressively memorialised through their material objects (Leo 50) including state-sanctioned management and media promotion efforts. The occurrence of Peranakan revival has been evident in many academic or journalist's writings. An example would be anthropologist Jürgen Rudolph where he has detailed early examples of this resurgent interest in his research. It is also of no coincidence that during the same period, the Singapore government recognised the potential to promote the Peranakan culture as a multiculturalism identity, emphasising on its hybridity. Realising that Singapore had been placed much focus on the economic development since the Independence, resulted in a seemingly sterile landscape, state institutions were convinced of the worth in this heritage preservation. (Brandon Albert Lim)

Against the backdrop of the increased interest in of Peranakan culture as heritage and the anxiety about the survival of the community, the paper looks into how these inculcated a sense of need to preserve tradition in Singapore and in this context, the kebaya. The role of tradition has been a pervasive theme in contemporary society as pointed out by scholars, with varying definitions of what "tradition" mean. (Hulsbosch, Elizabeth, and Martha Chaiklin 70) Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger edited a collection of significant studies, which shed light on the concept of

invented traditions. This study echoed similar findings with sociologist Edward Shils' research as he was the first to explore the history, significance as well as the future of tradition. Both studies share similar ideas that even though tradition is ubiquitous in modern society, the understandings of the term is invariant as it dependent on how it is performed in the present (Cheah). According to Shils, tradition refers to something that is handed down from the past to present, regardless a physical item or cultural construction. (Shils 13) He further defined that for anything to be a tradition, its transmission and possession have to span over three generations. (Shils 15) This can be seen as an unorthodox definition but with the condition of three generations to differentiate tradition from trend, one would observe that many objects or practices are not considered "traditional". Due to processes such as evolution or secularisation, traditions are often broken or changed. (Kwok 67) In Hobsbawm's and Ranger's accounts, traditions are invented when a nation or a state sees a need to legitimise itself or certain cultural practices to promote a unified entity. (Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger 2) This is accomplished through establishing the continuity of a historical past into the present hence, a state invents tradition in order to create a sense of unity crucial for its survival (Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger 3) With these knowledge, it would seem that the Peranakan revival with the connotation of being a national identity ties in with the mentioned concepts

of traditions. Hence, this can be attributed and shown how the kebaya has been instilled to the community with the perception of being “traditional”.

### The relevance of the curatorial

Although it cannot be denied that the Singapore government has a role to play in fashioning the Peranakan culture as the “national culture” (Cheah), preservation efforts of the Peranakan community should not be disregarded. However, art historian Hwei-Fe’n Cheah has put across that it should be understood, culture preservation does not work simply by alleviating the longings of nostalgia, complying with the state narratives or commercialism. Instead, it requires the Peranakans to challenge assumptions of its identity, typically based on their external markers identity, and look for validity in times of change. (Cheah) This is especially true for the younger Peranakans that is the millennials being the next generation of the community. This in turn spurs self-reflexivity, allowing exploration and imagination, making way for new contexts in viewing the culture and recognising this as a form of evolution. This idea of questioning is aligned with the concept of the curatorial where it is made prominent around the 1990s. (Curatorial) In contemporary art, the curator’s role of a caretaker as with the mediating function has progressed into curating and having multidimensional roles. This is where the curatorial emerges, going on to