

translation underwent three levels: literal, grammatical and, with the help of someone knowledgeable in Tausug culture, a contextual one. This ensured that the subtext and other embedded meanings of the stories were not lost in translation.

These stories reflect the complicated history that the Tausug underwent. Their literature obviously reflects a syncretic idea of culture where the indigenous belief is intertwined with new (or foreign) ideas. The book is a testimony to the great colourful culture of the Tausug. Clearly, Gerard Rixhon made the voices from Sulu heard through this compendium.

Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements

Hwei-Fe'n Cheah

2010. Singapore: NUS Press

Review by M. C. M. Santamaria

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The book came in a brown Manila paper cover, occupied ten and one-fourth inches by eight and three-fourths inches of desk space, and weighed all in all about five pounds. Its bulkiness like all other coffee table books, at first, challenged this reviewer's coffee table book-jaded mind. Mercifully, as it emerged from its textured veil, the book design and title removed some of this reviewer's initial doubts. A careful reading of the text results in absolute conversion. Rarely does a coffee table book successfully combine the aesthetics required by the commercial aspects of production with the erudite texts expected of scholarly works. This tome does not disappoint. It invites its reader to travel back through time, and through its visual narrative of a hugely ignored art form (re)creates an important aspect of the art history of Southeast Asia. Through its scholarly and compelling narrative text and images, it embarks in nothing less than a seduction of the mind.

The author, Hwei-Fe'n Cheah, teaches Asian art and textile history at the Australian National University. This current work results from her doctoral dissertation on Nyonya beadwork. *Nyonya* is the term used to refer to women of the *Peranakan* Chinese communities in the straits area of the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra. *Peranakan* connotes being "locally

born,” and may refer to persons of Chinese, Arab, Indian or even Jewish ancestry born in the said region. Strictly, the term for persons of Chinese origin belonging to this group should be “*Peranakan Cina*.” The term Peranakan also implies a certain level of “acculturation” or adaptation to Malay ways such as the adoption of local attire, the chewing of betel nut and the like. Other alternate terms are “*Baba Chinese*” and “*Straits Chinese*.”

Cheah views Nyonya beadwork as a marker of Peranakan identity. She identifies its florescence between 1870 and 1920. This period, she points out, “coincides with the golden age of Peranakan Chinese society.” This review will focus on the following areas of concern: sampling of artefacts used in this book; photographs that were used to help move the narrative text of this work; commentaries on and narratives about the makers of beadwork; and techniques and methods in determining age and provenance.

The samples of beadwork artefacts contained in this book help illustrate the influence of traditional and contemporary forces that produce aesthetic vibrancy resulting from tensions between continuity and change. Comprising one category of beadwork samples found in the book are ritual implements such as *kiam tuah* or neck-tie shaped hangings and other objects that were used in weddings and other rituals. These samples show not only the incredibly minute design aesthetics of Nyonya beadwork, they also underscore their central role in Peranakan customs of conviviality. While basic shapes as well as functions remain relatively constant, variations of style in terms of colour and motif found in the samples from among communities across the Strait of Malacca belie a subtle differentiation that affirm the creative powers of both the culture of origin and local culture. Another category of beadwork is that of everyday objects. In this category, beaded slippers (*kasot*) appear to be the best represented among the artefacts in this book. The great variety of beadwork design combined with, among others, silver-work appliqué, metallic thread and bullion-knot embroidery imply a widely distributed or commonly shared aspect of luxury consumption that was sustained for a relatively lengthy period of time, which in turn indicate the political and economic stability enjoyed by the Peranakan communities. Yet another category of artefacts found in the book is that of allied objects or what may even be called “objects of the trade.” These are objects that comprise beadwork or serve to facilitate its production such as bead sample cards, embroidery frames, unfinished beadwork, and needle baskets (*rombong*).

By not limiting her sampling to beadwork artefacts alone, Cheah affords the reader a look at beadwork that goes beyond the final product. Sample cards speak of trading networks. Embroidery frames signify an alliance with woodworkers. Unfinished beadwork pieces speak of technical struggles and expressive proficiency, while needle baskets embed beadwork in the immediate and organic environment of the locale. Indeed, the non-beadwork items contained in this book speak as eloquently as the beadwork items themselves.

An added bonus to this book's already impressive sampling of beadwork is Cheah's careful selection of photographic images. Period or vintage photographs perform an important function of contextualising artefacts. In this scheme of things, Cheah's selection truly impresses. Numerous photographs of wedding couples, matriarchs, patriarchs and whole families striking formal poses in formal attire locate at the same time relate beadwork artefacts to one another. The extravagant display of beadwork "embodied" in a Peranakan bride's traditional costume from the beaded slippers (*kosot*) wrapping her feet, beaded brooches (*kerosang*) ornamenting her blouse (*baju*), the shoulder piece (*sangkot bahu*) hanging on her left shoulder, to the handkerchief (*sapu tangan*) in her left hand could then be appreciated as an ensemble of artefacts relating to each other with the body as its canvas. A photograph of a wedding chamber (Figure 43, p. 92) shows a bed that is draped with all sorts of beaded panels and ornaments including *kiam tuah* (neck-tie shaped hangings). Such a pictorial composition informs the viewer of the traditionally proper location and use of beaded artefacts. Studio photographs of Nyonya women wearing western style clothes, the popular cheongsam, document changes in the use of beadwork as well as the dynamism of Peranakan culture and its connectedness to regional and international trends.

Of special interest to this reviewer are the narratives of its creators, the inheritors of the artefacts of beadwork. These narrative accounts, though mostly restated by the author, add a personal dimension to the story of beadwork. Meanings and lessons may then be drawn from actual experience, such as follows:

"Chiang Yee, who grew up in Jiangsu in southern China, describes how his sister had to embroider household linens, her own clothes, shoes, and handkerchiefs as well as small items such as bookmarks as gifts for wedding guests. Her needlework would be shown to the bridegroom's relatives and friends the day before the wedding and Chiang described how his sister's embroideries were carried in a slow procession to the groom's

home, accompanied by bursts of fireworks that encouraged onlookers to view the works. The reputation of the bride could be enhanced or hurt by her needlework, so much so that Chiang's grandmother sent 'spies' to listen for criticism of his sister's handiwork." (p. 106)

Indeed, the above-mentioned stories surrounding beadwork add a very human quality of urgency, desperation, and distinction to the craft. Beadwork may now be directly linked to the pride or shame of a certain household. A Nyonya's reputation may therefore rise or fall according to the quality of her beadwork, a craft that functions to cultivate "a domesticated daughter and a dutiful wife." (p. 112) Domestication, in a sense, appears to be a function of the bead's minuteness. Alternately, beadwork pieces may be viewed both as source of individual expression and a technique of social oppression.

Stories from informants also reveal the "transnational" nature of Nyonya beadwork. This aspect has less to do with the crossing of actual territorial borders, rather it relates more to the inter-ethnic production and consumption as the following paragraph indicates:

"Non-Peranakan Chinese, Malays, and Peranakan Indians owned and used Nyonya beaded and embroidered slippers. However, Nyonya and Nyonya-style beadwork (as distinct from Malay beadwork in geometric and floral designs) was primarily associated with Peranakans. Samuel Doraisingham attributes the beaded slippers worn by Melaka Chitty women to the influence of the Peranakan Chinese with whom they had affinal bonds. Seventy-year-old Kamachee Pillay from the Melaka Chitty community also recalls that her grandmother used and made beadwork. However, Pillay suggests that this beadwork was a direct result of the influence of the Melaka Peranakan community since her grandmother worked in a Peranakan household and patronized the same craftsmen as the Peranakans. Making use of the beadwork thus carried a further implication—it allied the used with Peranakan culture and society, perhaps even reinforcing the association between beadwork and affluence." (p. 106)

With very little doubt, to scholars the most useful part of the book is chapter 4 which is titled *Towards a Chronology of Nyonya Beadwork*. In this chapter, the author details the challenges presented by the task of dating extant pieces. On the one hand, information about the provenance and production of beadwork hardly accompanies any of the extant artefacts. Scientific dating of actual beads, on the other hand, produces a very wide margin of error to be of any use for historical studies on beadwork. Clearly, compared to pottery, jewellery or woodwork, for instance, a different kind of sleuthing is needed in determining dates and provenance among Nyonya beadwork pieces. Beadwork pieces that

belong to families or those that were handed from one generation to another may be classified as those of "of known provenance." They are relatively easy to date as oral histories or journal entries regarding family events may still be extant or be retrievable from archival sources. The same may be said of museum collections where deeds of donations and accession records serve as important references for dating. A more indirect and therefore also less reliable method of dating is through approximation based on the examination of newspaper or print materials backing that may be found in some pieces. Used as support material placed in between or behind pieces of cloth used for beadwork, newspaper materials often contain dates that help determine the relative age of certain pieces. Another indirect method of dating that is shared by the author is that of dating through a study of fashions. This method compares the styles of extant beadwork with those in photographic sources and extant functioning objects whose respective milieus are known. Cheah, for instance, notes how the *kasot manek* slippers "changed in shape, as fashions changed." Other elements that showed changes are seed bead types as well as techniques and materials that may be differentiated through time.

Finally, the question where future research may proceed must be asked. This reviewer is particularly interested in how this piece of scholarship may be linked to studies about the reality(ies) of the greater community of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Do the "completely" assimilated Chinese communities in Southeast Asia such as the Chinese-Thai and the Chinese Cambodians possess the same or similar beadwork artefacts as well as processes of production and social contexts in which production is embedded? Indeed, the author is encouraged to breach the borders of her stated delimitation as she has done more than fine job in interrogating her object of inquiry in this present tome. On a different trajectory, how are Nyonya beadwork related to those created by Chinese Filipinos or non-Chinese Filipinos. Beaded slippers known as *chinelas* or *sapatillas* are, more often than not, part of Philippine traditional attire. Old paintings by Philippine masters such as Damian Domingo and Simon Flores point to this fact. Households that produce such slippers are still extant in some towns near Manila. A notable example of such a locale is Pateros, Rizal, a place known also for the production of salted eggs which is another industry derived from the Chinese. On a more specific point of inquiry, how is the *Peranakan* related to *Parian-non*? *Parian* are places where the Chinese live in old Philippine settlements such as Manila, Cebu and Ilo-ilo. Are the two labels linguistic

cognates of each other? Is it therefore possible that we are missing some points by simply following historical or colonial lines of distinction? Perhaps by asking such questions and by outlining a more expanded Southeast Asian “emporium” of artefact, design and corollary identities, strands of regional unity may once again emerge and be understood in creating new perspectives and insights that would be truly difficult to ignore, thereby making the idea of “Southeast Asia” more resonant or meaningful.

Cheah's bulky tome now sits in the reserve section of the Asian Center library, part of a reading list for a course on the Arts of Asia...on loan from this reviewer until the publisher obliges the library with a copy of its own.

Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor

Edited by Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen

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(Re?)Evaluating the China Factor: China in Fifteenth Century Southeast Asia

It is always a hard task to build a historical narrative around any region. There is a need to look for a period of convergence in each society's history. This is the period when they all shared changes or interruptions that maybe caused by one stimulus or by chain reaction. In the book “Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor”, the editors and contributors have showcased their new research about the importance of China in the historical events of the fifteenth century.

The book was successful in compiling the research of the current top Southeast Asian scholars. Numerous experts in history and archaeology have contributed their views on how different societies in Southeast Asia were before. This illustrious group was edited by both credible Chinese and Southeast Asian History experts: Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen. Wade is currently affiliated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and the University of Hong Kong. He specialises in Sino-Southeast Asian interactions. On the other hand, Sun is currently an associate professor at California State