

**CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF BABA-NYONYA  
ON ECLECTIC STYLE SHOPHOUSE,  
GEORGE TOWN, PENANG  
CASE STUDY: SUN YAT SEN MUSEUM**

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**CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF BABA-NYONYA  
ON ECLECTIC STYLE SHOPHOUSE,  
GEORGE TOWN, PENANG  
CASE STUDY: SUN YAT SEN MUSEUM**

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>ABSTRAK .....</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>xix</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Historical Background of Penang Island City .....	1
1.3 Architecture of Penang .....	2
1.4 The Architectural and Cultural Influence of Baba-Nyonya in Interior Design	5
1.4.1 Architecture and Characteristic of Baba-Nyonya.....	6
1.5 Cultural Influences on Buildings of Penang .....	7
1.6 The Theoretical Framework .....	9
1.7 The Baba -Nyonya Houses.....	11
1.7.1 Cultural Expression and the Baba-Nyonya House .....	13
1.8 Background of Baba–Nyonya Culture .....	14
1.9 Terminology of Baba–Nyonya .....	15
1.10 Ancestry of Baba–Nyonya .....	17
1.11 Historical Background of Baba-Nyonya .....	18
1.12 Baba Nyonya Culture .....	22
1.12.1 Religion .....	22
1.12.2 Language .....	23

1.12.3	Costumes .....	23
1.13	Current Status of Baba-Nyonya .....	24
1.14	Research Problem.....	27
1.15	Research Objectives .....	29
1.16	Research Questions .....	30
1.17	Research Scope .....	30
1.18	Significance of Research .....	31
1.19	Focus of Research .....	32
1.20	Summary of Chapters .....	33
 <b>CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>		<b>35</b>
2.1	Introduction .....	35
2.2	The Culture of Baba-Nyonya .....	35
2.3	The Heritage of Baba-Nyonya of Shophouses in Penang .....	35
2.4	Architecture Style of Baba-Nyonya (Eclectic Style) Shophouse.....	37
2.4.1	Features of Early Shophouses .....	38
2.4.2	Architectural Style and Components of Shophouses .....	42
2.5	Openings of Shophouses .....	42
2.5.1	Front Doors of Shophouses .....	43
2.5.2	Rear Doors of Shophouses .....	44
2.5.3	Windows of Shophouses .....	45
2.5.4	Vents of Shophouses .....	46
2.6	The Art of Baba-Nyonya Tiles.....	47
2.7	Ornaments and Detailing of Shophouses .....	48
2.8	Architectural Style of Baba-Nyonya Shophouses .....	49
2.9	Interior Space of Baba-Nyonya Shophouses.....	53
2.9.1	First Hall-Reception Hall (Ruang Tamu).....	53

2.9.2	Second Hall–Tiah Gelap .....	55
2.9.3	First Air Well.....	56
2.9.4	Thia Abu ( <i>Ancestral Hall</i> ).....	57
2.9.5	Second Air-Well (Family Area) .....	58
2.9.6	Dapur (Kitchen)–Dining Hall.....	59
2.9.7	First Floor-Bedroom.....	60
2.10	Baba-Nyonya and Victorian Furnitures .....	62
2.10.1	Chinese Ming .....	62
2.11	Summary .....	64
 <b>CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY .....</b>		<b>65</b>
3.1	Introduction .....	65
3.2	Research Process .....	65
3.3	Qualitative Research .....	68
3.3.1	Pilot Study & Observation .....	69
3.4	Cultural Study of Baba-Nyonya.....	70
3.5	Case Study–Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	71
3.6	Field Work–Armenian Street-George Town, Penang .....	72
3.6.1	Experts Interviews on Architecture and Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse .....	75
3.6.2	Museum Owners Interviews.....	75
3.6.3	Interviews with the Museum Guides.....	76
3.6.4	Experts on Local Culture of Baba-Nyonya .....	77
3.6.5	Interviews with Visitors the Museum.....	77
3.7	Duration of Fieldwork.....	77
3.8	Data Collection and Analysis .....	78
3.8.1	Secondary Data-Architectural Documentation.....	78

3.8.2	Primary Data: Direct Observation and Visual Data Collection.....	79
3.8.3	Primary Data: Interviews.....	83
3.9	Summary .....	86
<b>CHAPTER 4 – CASE STUDY .....</b>		<b>87</b>
4.1	Introduction .....	87
4.2	Historical Site Background of Penang .....	88
4.3	The History of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse George Town, Penang .....	90
4.3.1	The History of Owners Sun Yat Sen Shophouse Museum.....	93
4.3.2	Architectural Development Stage of the Museum .....	94
4.4	Dr. Sun Yat Sen - The International Revolutionary.....	102
4.5	Architectural and Cultural Influences Components of the Sun Yat Sen Shophouse Museum .....	104
4.5.1	Exterior Design Components .....	107
4.5.2	Interior Design of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	108
4.5.3	Sun Yat Sen Museum Furniture .....	114
4.5.4	The Ornamentation and Detailing of Sun Yat Sen.....	119
4.5.5	Cultural Influences of Baba-Nyonya in Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	122
4.6	Summary .....	127
<b>CHAPTER 5 - DATA ANALYSIS .....</b>		<b>129</b>
5.1	Introduction .....	129
5.2	Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse Architecture Components and Characteristics .....	129
5.3	Building Orientation of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	131
5.4	Natural Ventilation and Natural Lighting .....	132
5.4.1	Air Ventilation of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	133

5.4.2	Natural Lighting Analysis .....	134
5.5	Southern Chinese Eclectic Components of Sun Yat Sen Shophouse.....	135
5.6	Properties of Spaces in Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	137
5.6.1	Public and Private Area .....	137
5.6.2	Building`s Circulation .....	138
5.7	Exterior of Sun Yat Sen Shophouse Museum Shophouse .....	138
5.7.1	Façade of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	139
5.7.2	Five –Foot Way – Ceramic Tiles .....	140
5.7.3	Parapet Walls of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	142
5.7.4	Column Head, (Chi Tou), Capitals, Brackets and Consoles .....	143
5.7.5	Bressummer Beams .....	145
5.7.6	Corbels.....	146
5.7.7	Wall Tiles (Dado Panels) .....	147
5.7.8	Sun Yat Sen Museum Ornamentation .....	147
5.8	Openings of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	151
5.8.1	Main Entrance Doors, Half Door .....	152
5.9	Staircase and Floors of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	160
5.9.1	Winder Staircase of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	160
5.9.2	Balustrades of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	160
5.9.3	Floors Tiles – (Terracotta Tiles).....	161
5.9.4	Coloured Baked Clay–Tessellated Tiles .....	161
5.9.5	Granite and Granolithic Finish .....	162
5.10	Building Structure of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse .....	163
5.10.1	Roof Types .....	164
5.10.2	Wall of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	166
5.10.3	Beam and Floor (Timber).....	167
5.10.4	Gables and Gable Ends.....	169



5.11	Interior Elements of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse .....	170
5.11.1	First Hall.....	171
5.11.2	Second Hall–First Airwell.....	174
5.11.3	Dining Hall .....	175
5.11.4	Family Area.....	178
5.11.5	Second Air well .....	179
5.11.6	Kitchen of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse .....	180
5.11.7	Washing Room .....	182
5.11.8	First Floor of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	183
5.12	Summary .....	188

**CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.. 191**

6.1	Findings of the Research .....	196
6.2	Recommendations .....	197
6.3	Conclusion.....	197
6.4	Future Research Directions .....	199

**REFERENCES..... 201**

**APPENDICES:..... 207**

**LIST OF PUBLICATIONS..... 230**

## LIST OF TABLES

		<b>Page</b>
Table 2.1	Components to be Research in the Next Phase.....	64
Table 3.1	Information about Interviews.....	73
Table 4.1	Historical information about Sun Yat Sen Museum owners .....	94
Table 4.2	Summary of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse Exterior and Internal Components .....	128
Table 5.1	Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse (Eclectic Style) Variables and Factors .....	130
Table 5.2	Layout arrangement of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse in Armenian Street collected by researcher.....	188

## LIST OF FIGURES

	<b>Page</b>
Figure 1.1	Map of Penang Island, Core and Buffer Zone of UNESCO World .... 1
Figure 1.2	Outstanding Multicultural Architectural Landscape in Penang..... 2
Figure 1.3	The Fieldwork Site 120 Armenian Street, George Town World Heritage Site , ..... 3
Figure 1.4	The Penang Conference –Dr. Sun Yat Sen Speaking to His Fellow Revolutionaries ..... 4
Figure 1.5	Research Components ..... 5
Figure 1.6	Research Studies-The Architectural Style of The Baba Nyonya Shophouses ..... 7
Figure 1.7	The Uniqueness Architectural and Cultural Landscape ..... 8
Figure 1.8	The Theoretical Framework ..... 10
Figure 1.9	Map Place of Shophouses in Singapore 1846 ..... 12
Figure 1.10	Map of the Town and Environs of Singapore, 1846..... 12
Figure 1.11	Photo of Ancestry Baba–Nyonya ..... 17
Figure 1.12	Portrait of Baba and Nyonya ..... 19
Figure 1.13	Photo Penang Baba-Nyonya groom and bride in 1926 ..... 24
Figure 1.14	Focus of Research..... 33
Figure 2.1	Physical Appearance of Shophouse in George Town, Penang..... 36
Figure 2.2	Heritage Shophouses Features ..... 37
Figure 2.3	Baba-Nyonya shophouse plan in Malacca..... 39
Figure 2.4	The façade of Baba-Nyonya shophouse ..... 40
Figure 2.5	Five-Foot Walk Way of Shophouses ..... 41
Figure 2.6	Picture of the Six Main Eclectic Style of Shophouses ..... 42
Figure 2.7	Picture of main door and pintu pagar door from inside of Baba Nyonya shophouses. .... 43
Figure 2.8	Features of Shophouses Door ..... 45
Figure 2.9	Features of Façade ..... 46
Figure 2.10	Vents of Shophouses ..... 46
Figure 2.11	A Decorative Tiles Showcases the Front of the Shophouses ..... 48
Figure 2.12	Highly Decorative Carved of The Timber Screens ..... 48

Figure 2.13	The Entrance and Exterior of a Traditional Baba–Nyonya Shophouse .....	50
Figure 2.14	Continuous Row of Windows.....	51
Figure 2.15	Jack Roof of Shophouses.....	52
Figure 2.16	Round Marble Topped Table.....	54
Figure 2.17	Venetian glass Mirror and Ancestral Portraits.....	55
Figure 2.18	The area where young unmarried Nyonyas could peer out at male guests.....	56
Figure 2.19	Screen door with intricately carved and gilded gold leaf .....	56
Figure 2.20	Air Well Improves Ventilation of Shophouse .....	57
Figure 2.21	Thia Abu Ancestral Hall of Baba-Nyonya Style .....	58
Figure 2.22	Second Air-Well (Family Area) .....	58
Figure 2.23	Baya-Nyonya Kitchen Style in Shophouses .....	59
Figure 2.24	Bridal Chambers in Master Bedroom .....	60
Figure 2.25	Interior of Baba-Nyonya Features .....	61
Figure 2.26	Interior Features of Baba-Nyonya .....	61
Figure 2.27	Mother of Pearl Inlays .....	62
Figure 3.1	Research Methodology Flow Chart.....	67
Figure 3.2	Alvin (left) and Kenny Wong (right), the Guides of Sun Yet Sen Museum.....	76
Figure 3.3	Exterior Features and Interior Features .....	80
Figure 3.4	Inventory and Visual .....	81
Figure 4.1	Map of Sun Yat Sen Museum George Town, Penang.....	87
Figure 4.2	The period of Chinese immigrants to Straits Settlements .....	89
Figure 4.3	Map of Penang Island, Core and Buffer Zone of UNESCO heritage World .....	89
Figure 4.4	Spatial Organization of Ground Floor .....	92
Figure 4.5	Spatial Organization of First Floor .....	93
Figure 4.6	Stages of Development Museum.....	95
Figure 4.7	(A) The Alteration Design of Façade (B) The green colour scheme and some decorative features: Source: <a href="http://sunyatsenpenang.com/">http://sunyatsenpenang.com/</a>	96
Figure 4.8	Façade of Baba Nyonya Shophouse .....	97
Figure 4.9	Map Source: Kelly map 1893-1893, Survey Department .....	98

Figure 4.10	Alteration include kitchen, relocation of staircase area, cupboards facing air well and floors relay with patterned cement tiles source: (Khoo, 2008).....	99
Figure 4.11	Back Façade of the Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	99
Figure 4.12	The First Hall of the Museum.....	100
Figure 4.13	(A) The Air Well for Before and After, (B) The Door Source for Before and After: <a href="http://sunyatsenpenang.com/">http://sunyatsenpenang.com/</a> .....	100
Figure 4.14	(A) Before and After of The Open Air Terrace / (B) Before and After of the Winder Staircase .....	101
Figure 4.15	(A) Before and After of the First airwell / (B) Before and After of the Façade .....	101
Figure 4.16	Portrait of Dr. Sun Yat Sen as a young revolutionary .....	103
Figure 4.17	The First Hall of the Museum and Exhibition of Dr. Sun Yat Sen	103
Figure 4.18	(A) Early Penang Style with timber and attap (B) Sun Yat Sen/ Southern Chinese Eclectic /Source: <a href="http://penangshophouse.com.my">penangshophouse.com.my</a> , (2014).....	105
Figure 4.19	Front facade of the Sun Yat Sen, 120 Armenian Street is a shophouse of Penang (Khoo, 2009).....	106
Figure 4.20	Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse Connected To Several Other Shophouses .....	107
Figure 4.21	Ground Floor Plan of The Museum -Scale :1/100.....	109
Figure 4.22	First Floor Plan of the Museum- Scale 1/100.....	110
Figure 4.23	A hall after The Entrance Backlit by Courtyard.....	111
Figure 4.24	The Gilded wooden plaque with Chinese calligraphy and Carvings and lattice panel's decoration.....	112
Figure 4.25	The Timber Divider (Spirit Wall) Inside the Sun Yat Sen .....	113
Figure 4.26	Interior decoration from blackwood Straits Chinese Funiture and carved wooden screens decoration / Source: Taken by Author (2015) .....	114
Figure 4.27	First Courtyard of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	115
Figure 4.28	Vases at The Museum.....	116
Figure 4.29	Two Cabinets and Iron Safe At Museum .....	116
Figure 4.30	Staircase of The Museum .....	117
Figure 4.31	The Wooden Louvered Panels.....	117

Figure 4.32	Shuttered Walls and Louvered Windows .....	118
Figure 4.33	(A) the Rear Second (B) Water Tank .....	119
Figure 4.34	The ceiling height is up to the second floor.....	119
Figure 4.35	Over-Hanged Veranda of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	120
Figure 4.36	Glazed Tiles with Floral and Colourful Geometric Patterns .....	121
Figure 4.37	<i>Shou</i> featured by four bats and <i>Wu</i> .....	121
Figure 4.38	Kitchen filled with antiques at the back of the Shophouse (Reese, 2011).....	123
Figure 4.39	Ch'ng Teong Swee and his first wife Madam Quah Eng Suat. Portrait of his step-mother Madam Tan Ean Siew .....	123
Figure 4.40	Signboards from Ch'ng Teong Swee's businesses.....	124
Figure 4.41	(left) Nyonya pastry molds, (right) Tiffin sets.....	125
Figure 4.42	Kitchen with Antiques (a),.....	126
Figure 5.1	Orientation of Sun Yat Sen Museum Building.....	132
Figure 5.2	Louvered Windows at First Airwell .....	133
Figure 5.3	Air Ventilation Analysis Through Longitudinal Section .....	134
Figure 5.4	Natural Lighting Analysis Through Longitudinal Section .....	134
Figure 5.5	The Six Main Eclectic Style of Shophouses.....	136
Figure 5.6	Front Façade of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	136
Figure 5.7	Public ,Semi-Public and Private Areas of Sun Yat Sen Museum..	137
Figure 5.8	Buidling`s Circulation .....	138
Figure 5.9	Line Cutting Through Front Façade to Show Symmetrical.....	140
Figure 5.10	The Section Line through Ground Floor to Show Symmetrical....	140
Figure 5.11	Five -Foot way of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	141
Figure 5.12	Ground Floor plan indicating Five – Foot Way .....	141
Figure 5.13	Parapet Wall and Glazed Vents Tiles of Sun Yat Sen Museum....	143
Figure 5.14	Column Heads of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse.....	144
Figure 5.15	Column Head and Capital.....	145
Figure 5.16	Front Ground Floor Façade .....	146
Figure 5.17	Corbel and Timber Bressummer of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	146
Figure 5.18	Dado Panel of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	147
Figure 5.19	Parapet Wall Carvings .....	148
Figure 5.20	Bat Ornament, Book Carving, Peach Carving.....	148
Figure 5.21	Main Door, Sparrow and Peony Flowers .....	150

Figure 5.22	Main Floor, Sparrow and Peony Flowers.....	150
Figure 5.23	Phoenix and Kirin Statues .....	151
Figure 5.24	Front of External Main Door .....	152
Figure 5.25	Internal Door (Master Room) .....	154
Figure 5.26	External Rear Door (Second Floor open Air-Terrace) .....	155
Figure 5.27	Front Internal Main Door of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	155
Figure 5.28	Window As Seen From First Hall and Window Shutters.....	157
Figure 5.29	Air Vent Indicated at Elevation of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	158
Figure 5.30	Prefabricated Green Glazed Ceramic Air Vents.....	158
Figure 5.31	Air wall of Sun Yat Sen Museum Shophouse .....	159
Figure 5.32	Airwell Shutters and Windows of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	159
Figure 5.33	Timber Winder Staircase of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	160
Figure 5.34	Timber Balustrade of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	161
Figure 5.35	Terracotta Tiles of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	161
Figure 5.36	Tessellated Tiles of Sun Yat Sen .....	162
Figure 5.37	Granite Slab at Air well Area .....	162
Figure 5.38	Isometric Architecture of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	163
Figure 5.39	Double Pitched Roof Close-ups .....	164
Figure 5.40	Airwell Single Pitched Roof.....	165
Figure 5.41	Jack Roof and Jack Roof Close-ups .....	165
Figure 5.42	Descending Ridge.....	166
Figure 5.43	Roof Ridges .....	166
Figure 5.44	Loading Bearing Wall.....	167
Figure 5.45	Timber Material of Sun Yat Sen.....	168
Figure 5.46	First Floor Details .....	169
Figure 5.47	Different Types of Gable Ends .....	170
Figure 5.48	Gable Ends of Sun Yat Sen Museum .....	170
Figure 5.49	The View of Reception Hall .....	171
Figure 5.50	Ground Floor Plan indicating Reception Hall .....	171
Figure 5.51	Altar of Sun Yat Sen Museum.....	172
Figure 5.52	The Tables and chairs of (A)Queen Anne- style, (B) Chippendale, .....	174
Figure 5.53	The View First Airwell (Courtyard).....	175
Figure 5.54	Ground Floor Plan Indicating .....	175

Figure 5.55	The View of Dining Area and Long Dining Table.....	176
Figure 5.56	Ground Floor Plan Indicating Dining Area .....	176
Figure 5.57	The Marble-Topped Table / Source : Taken by Author .....	176
Figure 5.58	Curio Cabinets on the Wall .....	177
Figure 5.59	The View of Family Area .....	178
Figure 5.60	Ground Floor Plan Indicating Family Area .....	179
Figure 5.61	The View of Second Air well .....	179
Figure 5.62	Ground Floor Plan Indicating Second Air well .....	179
Figure 5.63	The View of Kitchen .....	180
Figure 5.64	Ground Floor Plan Indicating Kitchen .....	181
Figure 5.65	Sun Yat Sen Larder located in Kitchen .....	181
Figure 5.66	The View of Washroom.....	182
Figure 5.67	Ground Floor Plan indicating Washroom.....	182
Figure 5.68	The View of Master Bedroom .....	183
Figure 5.69	Ground Floor Plan Indicating Master Bedroom .....	183
Figure 5.70	Exit Routes From Master bedroom .....	184
Figure 5.71	The Traditional Surveillance .....	184
Figure 5.72	The View of Second Room.....	185
Figure 5.73	Exit routes From Second Bedroom .....	185
Figure 5.74	The View of Third Bedroom .....	186
Figure 5.75	First Floor Plan indicating Third Room .....	186
Figure 5.76	First Floor Plan Indicating Fourth Bedroom .....	187
Figure 5.77	The Open Air Terrace and Bathroom .....	188
Figure 5.78	First Floor Plan Indicating Bathroom and Open Air Terrace.....	188



## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CHAT	Cultural Heritage Action Team
GTWHI	George Town World Organization Inc
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OUV	Outstanding Universal Values
PHT	Penang Heritage Trust
SYS	Sun Yat Sen
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization
WHS	World Heritage Site

**PENGARUH BUDAYA BABA-NYONYA KE ATAS RUMAH KEDAI GAYA  
EKLEKTIK, GEORGE TOWN, PULAU PINANG KAJIAN KES : MUZIUM  
SUN YAT SEN**

**ABSTRAK**

Peranakan Cina ataupun Cina Selat lebih dikenali sebagai Baba Nyonya. Mereka memiliki budaya campuran di antara masyarakat Cina dan Melayu. Walau bagaimanapun, budaya masyarakat Baba-Nyonya mirip kepada gabungan budaya masyarakat Melayu (Jawa dan Batak), Thai dan Eropah (British, Belanda dan Portugis). Namun begitu, pencapaian seni bina yang tertinggi bagi golongan minoriti ini seperti rumah kedai–rumah kedai bercirikan eklektik kini berhadapan dengan krisis yang bakal menentukan kelangsungannya. Masalah ini menjadi lebih kritikal apabila kurangnya pengetahuan dalam memuliharkan rumah kedai–rumah kedai tersebut. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini dijalankan adalah untuk menerokai keunikan senibina dan pengaruh kebudayaan Baba-Nyonya terhadap rumah kedai – rumah kedai bercirikan eklektik yang boleh dirungkai menerusi tinjauan senibina dan rekabentuk dalaman. Rumah kedai sasaran di dalam kajian ini boleh ditemui di Jalan Armenian, George Town, Pulau Pinang. Kajian ini tertumpu kepada analisis aspek–aspek serta komponen-komponen senibina Muzium Rumah Kedai Sun Yat Sen (Baba-Nyonya gaya eklektik). Kaedah yang digunakan dalam kajian ini adalah bersifat kualitatif yang melibatkan pendokumentasian bukti, pemerhatian secara terus, tiga puluh temuramah yang melibatkan para pelancong dan lapan orang pakar serta data visual digunakan sepenuhnya bagi mengkaji nilai warisan budaya Malaysia ini. Keputusan–keputusan yang diperolehi lalu dikaitkan pula dengan falsafah kebudayaan, upacara ritual serta adat istiadat mereka. Dapatan dari kajian ini telah

menunjukkan bahawa budaya masyarakat Cina, Melayu dan Eropah begitu kuat pengaruhnya terhadap senibina, komponen ruang dalaman, perabot serta perincian Muzium Rumah Kedai Sun Yat Sen. Keputusan juga menunjukkan susunatur serta hiasan ukiran kayu, fasad bangunan dan perabot direka khas untuk mempamerkan imej-imej kerohanian mereka. Kepentingan rumah kedai ini disertakan dengan nilai sejarah global personaliti Doktor Sun Yat Sen dan gerakannya serta hubungan tanpa sempadannya dengan budaya kehidupan seharian Baba-Nyonya. Memandangkan George Town telah pun disenaraikan di dalam senarai warisan dunia UNESCO, adalah amat penting untuk mengkaji senibina Baba-Nyonya (gaya eklektik) demi memastikan kelangsungan pemuliharaan budaya yang wujud.

**CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF BABA-NYONYA ON ECLECTIC STYLE  
SHOPHOUSE, GEORGE TOWN, PENANG CASE STUDY: SUN YAT SEN  
MUSEUM**

**ABSTRACT**

China Peranakan or the Straits Chinese, is more well known as the Baba-Nyonya. They mainly revolve around Chinese and Malay cultures. However, the Baba-Nyonya culture features a hint of the people's cultures of the Malay (Javanese, Batak), Thai and European (British and Dutch, Portuguese) cultures. Nevertheless, the supreme architectural achievement of this minority group i.e their eclectic shophouses is now facing a crisis which may determine its survival. The problem is critical for there is an inconsistently lack of sound knowledge in conservation of their shophouses. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore the uniqueness of architectural and cultural influences of Baba-Nyonya on eclectic style shophouse which can be unfolded through inspecting their architecture and interior design. The targeted shophouse of interest of this research can be found in Armenian Street, George Town, Penang. This research analyses the architectural aspects and focuses on the architectural components of the Sun Yat Sen Museum shophouse (Baba-Nyonya-Eclectic Style). The methodology adopted herein is qualitative in which documenting evidence, direct observation, thirty interviews with visitors and eight with experts. Visual data was in utilised to fully conceive the value of this cultural heritage in Malaysia. The results are then being associated to their cultural philosophies, rituals and customs. The findings of this research have revealed that the culture of Chinese, Malay and European have strong influences on the architectural and interior space components, furniture and the details of the Sun Yat Sen Museum

shophouse. The results also display that the allocation and ornamentations of wood carving, building façade and furniture within this old building is designed in a way to exhibit their spiritual images. The significance of this shophouse is that it is associated with the global historical personality of Dr. Sun Yat Sen and his movement and also from its seamless connections with every daily lifestyle of Baba-Nyonya. Seeing that George Town, Penang has been listed under the UNESCO world heritage list, it is essential to study the Baba-Nyonya (Eclectic Style) architecture to ensure a continuous conservation of its cultural existence.

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background history of Penang, George Town, architectural and cultural of the Baba-Nyonya, research problem, objectives, research questions, research scope and research significance.

### 1.2 Historical Background of Penang Island City

The history of Penang goes back to the year of 1786 when Captain Francis Light established the first British trading post in the island for trade between India, China and the Archipelago. Penang Island or also known by the name of Pearl of the Orient is a small island located in the north-western coast of Peninsular Malaysia covering 285sq. Km and also a narrow strip comprising 760 sq. km over on the mainland known as Seberang Perai (Figure 1.1).

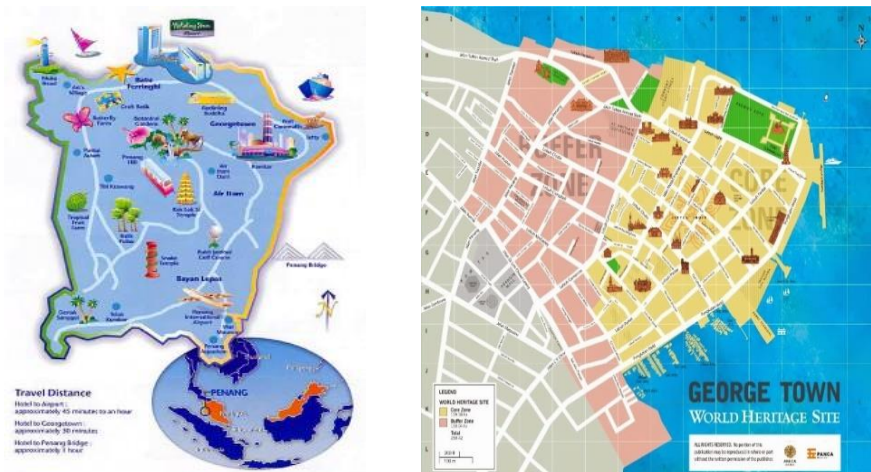


Figure 1.1 Map of Penang Island, Core and Buffer Zone of UNESCO World Heritage Site in George Town, Penang

Source: <http://heritagegeorgetown.blogspot.my/> (2008)

Accessed on 20/4/2014

In addition to be known as a melting pot for cultures and religions, Penang has an estimated population of almost 1 million with a healthy mix of all major races in Malaysia with the Malays 32%, Chinese 59% and Indians 7%. With the different cultures and religion, Penang is rich in culture and heritage which projecting a scope of festivals and a variety of celebrations throughout the year (Bastin, 1990). This makes Penang one of the most visited states in Malaysia for heritage shophouses spots. The shophouses are considered as one of the main mechanisms that drives the economy and brings in better yields for the state.

### 1.3 Architecture of Penang

Architecture of Penang is seen as an eclectic mixture of the European classical style, with Islamic, Malay, Chinese, Indian and later Art Deco motives (Figure 1.2). Interestingly, the different cultures, religions and architecture of the various groups co-exist in harmony. As a result, it is common to see mosques, churches, Buddhist and Hindu temples standing side by side on the same Street in George Town, Penang (Badaruddin, Abdul& Izzamir, 2001).



Figure 1.2 Outstanding Multicultural Architectural Landscape in Penang

Source : <http://penangshophouse.com.my/>, (2016)

Officially on 7th July 2008, Penang island has achieved its recognition as the UNESCO heritage status, where its uniqueness in architectural and cultural landscape in its towns make it so special compared to some other places (whc.unesco.org, accessed on 21/04/2015). The architecture of Penang is a durable testament of her history as a culmination of over a century and of a half of British's presence, as well as the confluence of immigrants and the culture they brought along with them (Rasdi, 2005). The Indian community built many elaborate temples such as the Mahamariamman temple, while the Muslim influence can be seen at the Kapitan Keling Mosque, the Aceh Mosque, and the Penang Islamic Museum. The P. Ramlee Museum is an excellent example of a traditional Malay stilt house. Siamese and Burmese architecture are shown on the Sleeping Buddha and Dharmikarama temples. Chinese influence is visible in many ornate clan houses, temples, shophouses, and mansions such as the Penang Peranakan Mansion. The Clan Jetties are a collection of water villages at Weld Quay.

The research was conducted in the Sun Yat Sen Museum shophouse which is located in the Armenian Street in George Town, Penang (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3 The Fieldwork Site 120 Armenian Street, George Town World Heritage Site,

Source : <http://sunyatsenpenang.com> (2013)



The Sun Yat Sen Museum has been chosen for this research because it is the Museum's most valuable and authentic artifact. The building itself, a townhouse or a dwelling house was built in the late 19th century.

Historically, it is associated with the global historical personality of Dr. Sun Yat Sen and his movement (refer chapter 4). In fact, the Sun Yat Sen Museum like any Penang shophouses, is recognized by the UNESCO and World Heritage Site (WHS) of George Town for its unique architecture style as well as its culture historical attributes. What makes the Sun Yat Sen Museum stands out from the rest is its historical attributes towards the second *Guangzhou* uprising, a turning point of China's revolution in 1911. This building is the place where Dr. Sun Yat Sen the leader of the revolution movements (Khoo, Hayes & Zimbulis, 2010) ran his movement's activities. Wherefore, there is an important relation between this building and the moment Dr. Sun gave a moving speech to mobilize support for the revolution in China in this building (Figure 1.4). On the other hand, according to Madam Khoo Salma the owner of Sun Yat Sen Museum there might not be China as of today if it were not because of this building.



Figure 1.4 The Penang Conference –Dr. Sun Yat Sen Speaking to His Fellow Revolutionaries

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Road\\_to\\_Dawn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Road_to_Dawn)

Accessed on 20/11/2015

The literatures on Baba-Nyonya cultural elements are emphasized as they contribute essential influences in the architecture design and interior arrangements of the Baba-Nyonya shophouse. Elements are the main focus in this research because they are closely interrelated in displaying the completeness of the Baba-Nyonya (Eclectic Style) shophouse. Therefore, equivalent efforts have been devoted to study these two subjects.

#### **1.4 The Architectural and Cultural Influence of Baba-Nyonya in Interior Design**

Architecture and interior design are forms of the cultural expressions. Architectural and interior design are parts of a culture. Albeit buildings are constructed from durable materials, they also provide invaluable, long-lasting information about the past. Through architecture, researchers can gauge information about Baba-Nyonya lifestyle, social structures and most importantly, their incomparable, unique artistic sensibilities that can only be bred under a great fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. The creation of architecture and interior designs are to suit owner's needs- where the space created will honestly inform us of almost-everything about the users.

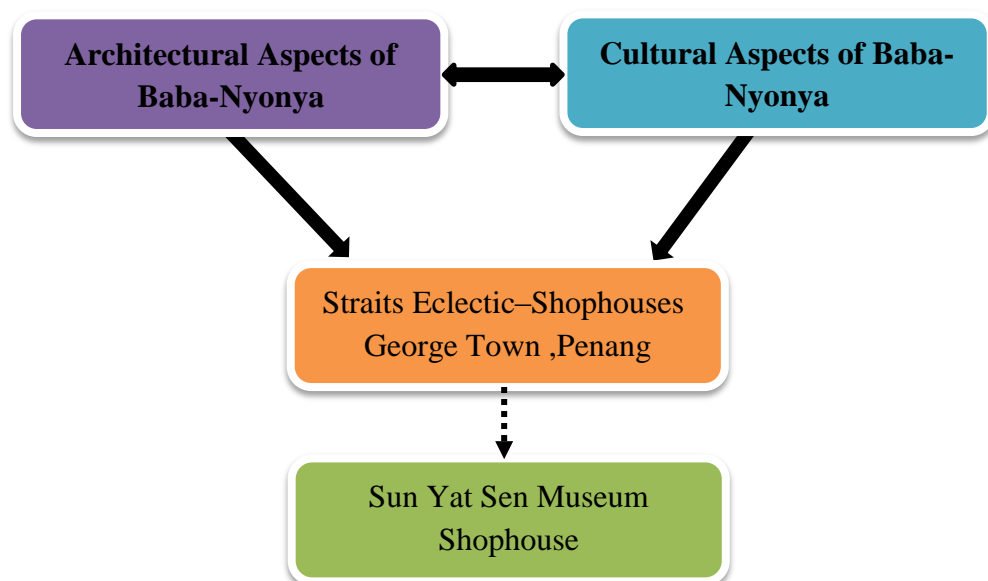


Figure 1.5 Research Components

(Figure 1.5), describes the investigation conducted to understand the relationship between the architectural and cultural influence of Baba–Nyonya shophouses. Expression of perceptions, changing values and ways of life can be illusively noticed through the intricate pieces of building decorations and layouts. Its uniqueness arises from the blend of multiple cultural elements, especially the combination of Malay and Chinese culture which have displayed well developed–acculturation process in the Malay Peninsula. It is a befitting activity of surveying the Baba-Nyonya shophouses in order to examine the products of cross cultures.

#### **1.4.1 Architecture and Characteristic of Baba-Nyonya**

There are few places in Singapore that one could easily find the shophouse of Baba-Nyonya which are Emerald Hill, the East Coast and Joo Chiat area. In these three areas, the architecture of the Baba-Nyonya houses are often beautifully ornated. A lot of Peranakans settled in the East coast but certain areas such as Emerald Hill are also popular with them. In the 1930s, 45 out of 115 houses in Emerald Hill were occupied by Peranakan families. The buildings successfully fused European designs with Chinese features such as raised floors, gabled walls and pier bases. Exteriors were painted in pastel shades inspired by the soft hues of Peranakan porcelain while plaster motifs were sculpted to resemble traditional embroidery (Lim & Catherine, 2003).

Design wise, Baba-Nyonya architectural and cultural has an interesting mix of inspiration from the Chinese origin, with the local ethnicity and the European influence that colonized the region at the time. This unique fusion style is known as Straits Eclectic (Figure 1.6). Baba-Nyonya (Straits Eclectic) style of architectural began to develop in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The style combines Eastern and Western components, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century introduced ceramic artwork

and elaborate plaster rendering. Such architecture includes Shophouses (Ahmad,1994).

According to accounts given by Song Ong Siang (1923), Clammer (1980), Rudolph (1998) and Ding (2004), the Baba prospered as a result of their skillful adaptation into the local culture and environment in Penang, Melaka and Singapore in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Clammer (1980), claimed that Baba culture was a rare and beautiful blend of the dominant elements of the Malaysian and Singaporean cultural traditions Chinese, Malay and English. But, the result of this blending was not simply a random mixture, a potpourri of bits and pieces. It was a genuine synthesis of something, which incorporated and transcended the component parts out of which it sprung.



Figure 1.6 Research Studies-The Architectural Style of The Baba Nyonya Shophouses

### 1.5 Cultural Influences on Buildings of Penang

Earlier, Penang had been ruled by the Sultan of Kedah and was populated by the Malays. After Penang became the British trade center, traders from various regions gathered and settled down in the island. Among them were two prominent groups, the Chinese and the Indian Muslims (Figure 1.7) who took Malay wives and became parts of the earliest permanent community.



Figure 1.7 The Uniqueness Architectural and Cultural Landscape

Source: [penangshophouse.com.my/](http://penangshophouse.com.my/)

Accessed on 12/05/2016

These two groups were urban elites with cultural hybrids and were more receptive towards European influence than other contemporary groups. The two communities were known as *Peranakan Cina* and *Peranakan Jawi* (Indian Muslim) and locally known as the *Baba-Nyonya* (Straits Chinese).

Besides these prominent groups, Penang had also attracted Europeans, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Burmese, Thais, Achenese and other Malay groups, Tamils, Gujeratis, and the Sikhs of India; Hokkien and other southern Chinese groups and later the Japanese and the Filipinos. Obviously, these people came from different backgrounds, cultures, religions and this contributed to making Penang Island into a unique place (Badaruddin, Abdul& Izzamir, 2001).

As observed from Togo-Bonatz (2000), the migration of various people from all over Asia constituted a society of multiethnic sojourners. Although this cultural pluralism is often highlighted, the degree of cultural assimilation has varied over time and ethnicity becomes the main criterion for cultural stratification.

## **1.6 The Theoretical Framework**

This research investigated the way in which Baba-Nyonya culture influences the architectural and interior design of the Baba-Nyonya (Straits Eclectic) shophouse in George Town, Penang (Figure 1.8). With special references to their architectural and interior design: *Case Study Sun Yat Sen Museum shophouse*. The theoretical framework specifies which key variables influence a phenomenon of interest and highlights, they are needed to examine Baba-Nyonya shophouse and how those key variables might differ and under what circumstances that they might differ.

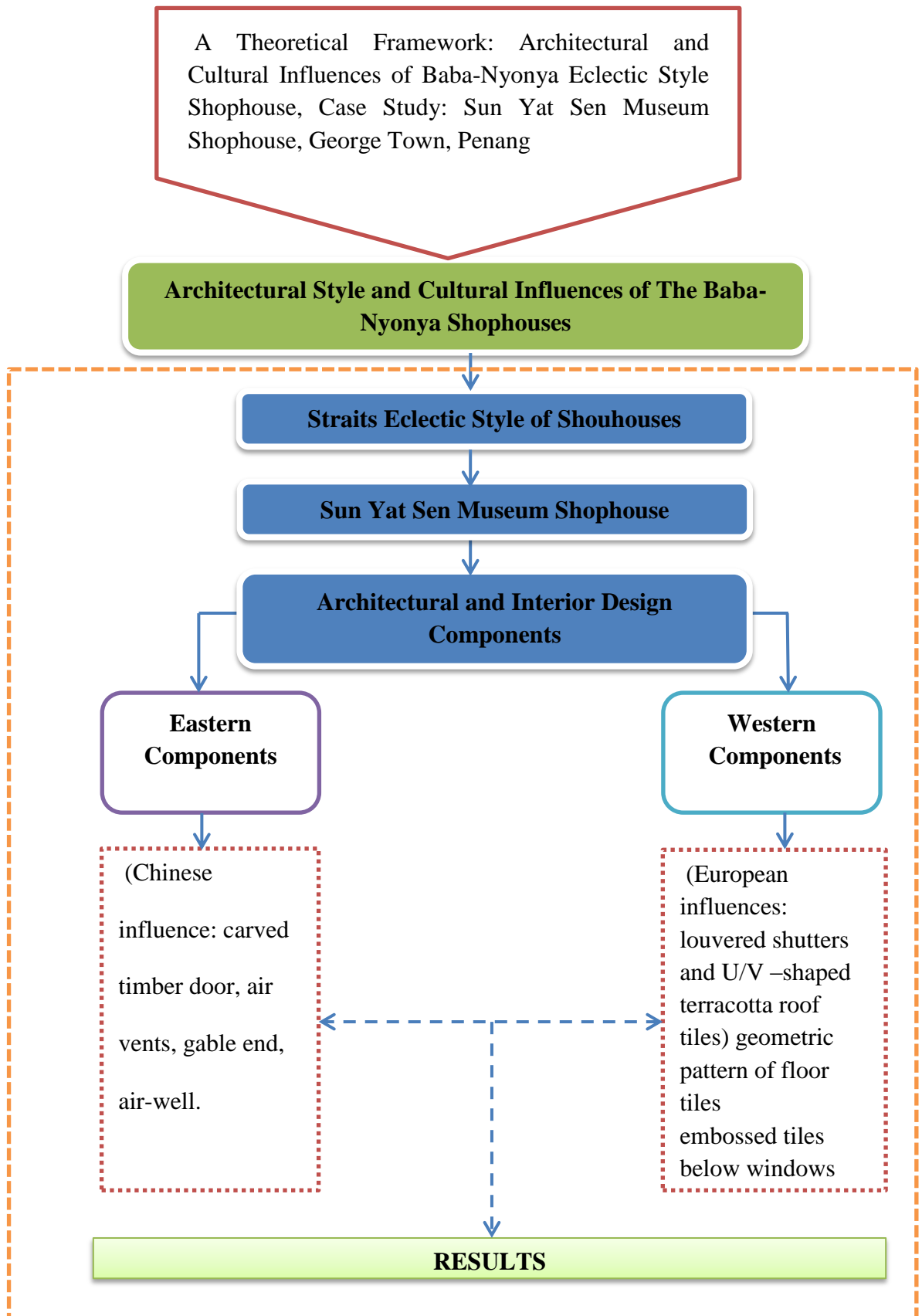


Figure 1.8 The Theoretical Framework

## **1.7 The Baba -Nyonya Houses**

There is an insufficient evidence to determine how Baba-Nyonya lived prior to the nineteenth century. In Penang, the Baba–Nyonya settled in shophouses along the Streets of central George Town during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Prosperous residents built mansions on Light Street. Towards the end of the century, many Straits Chinese tycoons built fabulous seaside villas in the old colonial enclave of Northam Road (Jalan Ahmad Shah), which then is known as 'Millionaires'Row'.

The earliest known residences were terraced houses along the old Heeren Street in Melaka city, which had narrow frontages but were usually very deep and included courtyards or air–wells. It is still uncertain whether the Babas built such houses or simply moved in to the existing residences.

What can be ascertained is that the lands on which the houses sat were acquired from Dutch or Portuguese owners. The arrangement of the houses was formal and followed strictly the conventions of Chinese interiors adapted to the limitations of Melaka terraced houses. The houses had a series of halls starting with the reception hall followed by a formal sitting room, a courtyard, an ancestor's hall a dining and the kitchen. The living quarters were all situated on the upper level with the most important bedroom being the one facing the street (Lee& Khoo, 2007).

Wealthy Babas of Melaka moved to Heeren Street now known as Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, from the late eighteenth century, seaside homes were built in Klebang and Tanjong, further north from the town . Less wealthy Babas lived in the outskirts of these zones or in suburbs such as Bukit Rambai.

In early nineteenth century Singapore, the Baba-Nyonya first settled in shophouses and terraced houses in vicinity of Telok Ayer Street and Amoy Street (Figure 1.9).





Figure 1.9 Map Place of Shophouses in Singapore 1846

<https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/conservation>

Accessed on 02/08/2014

These residences have not usually been as deep as their Malaccan counterparts, and naturally the use of space had to be modified. Several families moved into the terraced houses in River Valley Road, Mohamad Sultan Road and Emerald Hill Road in the late 1890s. From the turn of the century (Figure 1.10), wealthy Peranakans began to build colonial style mansions as well as villas in Katong and Pasir Panjang, while middle class Babas found new homes in the Siglap, Katong and Joo Chiat areas, where many Babas still reside todate.



Figure 1.10 Map of the Town and Environs of Singapore, 1846

<https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/conservation>

Accessed on 02/08/2014

Peranakan families with varying degrees attempted to maintain the traditional arrangements of their homes, no doubt with concessions to modern life. Colonial style living rooms, which were largely absent in their ancestors' houses, naturally became a modern and added the feature of Peranakan family life. The traditional elements of a Baba house are rare in modern day Malaysia, although they can still be easily found in shophouses in Penang and Malacca today (Lee & Khoo, 2007).

### **1.7.1 Cultural Expression and the Baba-Nyonya House**

The houses of the Baba-Nyonya up to the time of the Pacific War in 1941 were the sites in which the most important social, cultural and religious values of the community were articulated. Religious ceremonies, births, deaths, marriages and anniversaries were all solemnized or celebrated in the house. The wealthy Baba-Nyonya took lead in the lavish enactment of these rituals, which they observed strictly, despite the fact that other Chinese communities, influenced by the tide of modernization and revolution sweeping Baba-Nyonya from the late nineteenth century which in turn were gradually abandoning such practices.

One victim of the Babas campaign to lead the Chinese community in British Malaya was the loss of literacy in Chinese as the younger generation became schooled in English. The practice of traditions developed a greater importance and were held on to a more tightly, as they became the only link of a community to its heritage, especially against the alienating backdrop of rapid cultural changes in modern mainland China.

These strange anachronisms, typical in expatriate communities throughout history, are a feature of Peranakan culture. At the same time, contact with the colonial rulers exposed the ambitious community to the similarly revolutionary

changes in Western culture by which the Peranakans assimilated more readily. While observing every detail of the laborious, anachronistic twelve-day wedding ceremony, for example, the Peranakans were among the first to be seen in automobiles and to fly in airplanes. This juxtaposition of the old Chinese and the new western is mostly evident in the houses of the Baba -Nyonya and their lifestyle. This spirit remained until the Second World War, which was set into a motion of great political and economic changes and the subsequent decline in the influence, wealth and prestige of the Baba–Nyonya.

One of the primary casualties of change in the post world war period was the decline of ancestor worship. Dwindling family fortunes and changes in religion were partly to be blamed. This was because the most important element in a traditional Peranakan house had been the ancestral shrine, the use and function of the homes of Peranakans likewise evolved to suit the times. Today, with the deluge of cross cultural influences in Malaysia, Baba-Nyonya culture seems to have lost its place in this modern life , and it remains to be seen if the younger generation can redefine its identity and reassert its relevance (Lee& Khoo, 2007).

### **1.8 Background of Baba–Nyonya Culture**

Baba-Nyonya and Peranakan Chinese are terms utilized for the descendants of the 15th through 17th-century Chinese migrants to the Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore (Barbara, 2009). Members of this community in Malacca, Malaysia address themselves as Nyonya Baba. Nyonya is the term for the ladies and Baba for the men. It applies particularly to the Chinese ethnic populations of the British Straits Settlements of Malaya and the Dutch-controlled island of Java as well as other places who have adopted Nusantara traditions be it in partial or full to be fairly acclimatized into the local groups. Numerous of elites in Singapore are found to be more loyal to

the British than to China. Most have lived for eras along the straits of Malacca and most have an ancestry where intermarriage with the local Malays has taken place (Nasution, 1989). They were normally merchants, broker of the British and the Chinese, or could also be mixed of Malays were English oriented. As a result, they quite often had the ability to talk in two or more languages. In later generations, some lost the ability to speak Chinese as they got to be acclimatized to the Malay Peninsula's way of life and began to speak Malay easily as a first or second language (Daniels, 2008). While the term of Peranakan is mostly applied among the ethnic Chinese for those of Chinese descent which otherwise will be called Straits Chinese (named after the Straits Settlements; Tionghoa-Selat or Tionghoa Peranakan in Indonesian; Phuket Baba among Thais in Phuket, Thailand), there are additionally other, comparatively little Peranakan communities, for example, Indian Hindu Peranakans (Chitty), Arab/Indian Muslim Peranakans (Jawi Pekan) (Jawi being the Javanised Arabic script, Pekan a casual compression of Peranakan) and Eurasian Peranakans (Kristang) (Kristang = Christians of Portuguese and Asian family line). The gathering has parallels to the Cambodian Hokkien, who are descendants of Hoklo Chinese, and the Pashu of Myanmar. They kept up their culture of life mostly regardless of their local language slowly vanishing a couple of generations after settlement (Barbara, 2009).

### **1.9 Terminology of Baba–Nyonya**

Baba–Nyonya is considered as one of the minority races in Malaysia that stands out as the most unique ethnic group. Baba-Nyonya unique culture was found in Penang before the arrival of British in Malay Land. While seeking the ethnic character of Baba-Nyonya, there are a few unique and different terms are in use such as Baba-

Nyonya, Peranakan Cina, Straits Chinese and Straits born Chinese so as to address the same group. Community identity is essential in posting a better comprehension (Badaruddin, Abdul & Izzamir, 2001). Before further investigation as well as observation towards the subject of the research been carried out, all interviewees were identified and confirmed were came originally from Baba-Nyonya community.

In Malay language, the term Peranakan, which comes from the word anak or child, means those who are descendants of an inter-marriage between Malay and any other ethnic groups. Such term can be applied to local-born Peranakan India, Peranakan Orang Putih or Peranakan Cina (Bahauddin, 2011). Moreover, Malay uses the word Peranakan to mean (descendant), with no implication of the ethnicity of descent unless took after by a subsequent qualifying noun, for example Tionghoa/Cina (Chinese), Belanda (Dutch) or Jepang/Jepun (Japanese). Peranakan has the inferred meaning of alluding to the family line of awesome grandparents or of more-distant ancestors Baba, the Persian word loan borrowed by speakers as the Malay honorific all grandparents, and pointed out Strait Chinese males. The term originated along with Hindustani accents, such as vendors and traders which in turn became part of the common vernacular (Lee, 2008). Female Straits Chinese descendants were either called or styled themselves Nyonyas. Nyonya (commonly misspelled Nonya) is a Javanese word honorary loan from Italian Nonna (Grandmother). It means madam foreign married. It is also more likely than the word Donha, from the Portuguese word for the lady. At that time, the Javanese had a tendency to address all foreign women and those who appeared foreign as Nyonya made them applied the similar term for Straits-Chinese women too.

Thereafter, it gradually became associated more exclusively with them. Nona in Javanese means "lady". Straits-Chinese were defined as those born or living in the Straits Settlements: a British colonial construct of Penang, Malacca and Singapore constituted in 1826 (Nasution, 1989).

### **1.10 Ancestry of Baba–Nyonya**

Most of Baba–Nyonya are of Hokkien family line despite of the fact that a sizable number are of Teochew or Hakka plummet including a little minority of Cantonese. Initially, the Peranakan were blended race relatives, partly Chinese, partly ethnic Malay Baba-Nyonya are a subgroup of Chinese Communities (Figure 1.11), are the descendants of Sino-indigenous unions in Penang and Melaka.



Figure 1.11 Photo of Ancestry Baba–Nyonya  
Some sources claim that the early Peranakan inter-married with the local Malay  
Source: <http://www.penangmuseum.gov.my/museum>  
Accessed on 02/08/2015

It was not exceptional for early Chinese traders to take Malay ladies of Peninsular Malay as wives or concubines. Thusly the Baba-Nyonya had a blend of cultural attributes. Composed records from the 19th and early 20th centuries show that Peranakan men normally took ladies out of the local Peranakan people group.

Peranakan families infrequently transported ladies from China and sent their little girls to China to discover husband (Rudolph, 1998). A few sources asserted that the early Peranakan inter-married with the local Malay population by which a portion of the workers who settled in Bukit Cina that travelled to Malacca with the Admiral from Yunnan were Muslim Chinese (Wee, 2011). It has been stated that even the different specialists see a general absence of physical similarity, persuading that the Peranakan Chinese ethnicity has barely been weakened. One prominent example to back the case is the Peranakan community in Tangerang, Indonesia, known as Cina Benteng. Their physical look is indigenous, yet they obediently hold fast to the Peranakan traditions and majority of them are Buddhist. Some Peranakan recognize Peranakan-Baba (those Peranakan with part of Malay family) are from Peranakan community (those with no Malay lineage) (Lee & Kim,2008).

In these days, the intermarriage in Malaysia happens among the Peranakan and individuals of Indian as well as Kristang (Eurasian Peranakan) ethnicity as opposed to Malay due to Sharia related laws. These require non-Muslims proposing to wed Malay-Muslims to convert to Islam first. Peranakan are not continually ready to change their religious and cultural identity along these lines. Prior to hundreds of years before, Chinese and local Malays could wed without such changes, in light of the fact that such religious laws did not exist in Malaysia yet (Lee & Kim,2008). This is due to the enforcement and implementation of Sharia Law was not happened at that time yet.

### **1.11 Historical Background of Baba-Nyonya**

The first group of Chinese settlers in Malaysia came to George Town, Penang by the time Francis Light established the British port of George Town in the year of 1786.

As it came in to the year of 1800s, the Baba-Nyonya community started to grow in George Town. The Baba-Nyonya community in Penang was the main investors in the tin mines situated in Taiping (Long, 2014). Their arrival in this region predates the arrival of Francis Light and the founding of George Town as a British trading port. They lived in coastal villages in northern peninsular Malaya (a separate group of Hokkien seafarers settled the southern coast and become the Peranakan thereafter) until the founding of George Town by which a significant number of Baba-Nyonya community moved to live in Penang (Timothy, 2004).

Baba-Nyonya are the result of intermarriages between Chinese and local Malay women. There are no artefacts that recorded when the acculturated Chinese first identified themselves as Baba-Nyonya (Figure 1.12). The large number of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century gave rise to a consciousness in distinguishing between the early Chinese settlers and the new immigrants (Kwok, 2007).



Figure 1.12 Portrait of Baba and Nyonya  
Source: <http://www.penangmuseum.gov.my/museum>  
Accessed on 02/08/2015

The first Chinese immigrants to settle in the Malay Archipelago arrived from Guandong and Fujian regions in the 10th century. They were joined by much bigger



group of Chinese in the 15th through 17th centuries. This is in conjunction with the reopening of Chinese-Malay trade relations by Ming Emperor in the 15th century. In the 15th century, some of the small cities situated in Malay Peninsula would regularly give some tributes to the kingdom of China and Siam. Close relationship with China were set up in the early 15th century during the sovereign of Parameswara when Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho), a Muslim Chinese, went to Malacca and Java during his expedition 1405-1433(Lee, 2008).

As indicated by a legend in the year of 1459, the Emperor of China sent a princess, Hang Li Po, to the Sultan of Malacca as a token of thankfulness for his tribute. The nobles (500 children of clergymen) and servants who accompanied the princess at first settled in Bukit Cina which indirectly developed into a class of Straits-born Chinese known as Peranakans (Baba-Nyonya) in the long run (Lee, 2008).

Due to economic hardships in mainland China had made the immigrants from China decided to settle down in Malaysia. Some of them embraced the local traditions, while some would still hold some level of their ancestral culture which is known as the Peranakans. Peranakans ordinarily have a specific level of indigenous blood, which can be attributed to the way that during imperial China, most migrants were men who wedded the local ladies. Peranakans at Tangerang, Indonesia, held such a high level of indigenous blood that they are physically indistinguishable from the local population. Peranakans at Indonesia can differ between reasonable to copper tan in shading. Chinese men in Melaka fathered kids with Javanese, Batak and Balinese slave ladies. Their relatives moved to Penang and Singapore during British rule. Chinese men in colonial Southeast Asia likewise acquired slave wives from Nias. Chinese men in Penang and Singapore were supplied with slave wives of

Bugis, Batak, and Balinese birthplace. The British endured the importation of slave wives since they enhanced the way of life for the slaves and gave happiness to the male population. The use of slave ladies as wives by the Chinese was widespread. In previous years, this was part of the immense advantage in procuring a female population in Penang. It has been stated that about 300 female slaves solely from Assaban, a regency in North Sumatra, Indonesia alone were traded to Malacca and Penang just within a year. The ladies get easily settled as the wives of opulent Chinese traders, and live in the best comfort. As the condition of the slaves who were brought to the British settlements, was materially improved, and as they contributed so much of happiness to the male population along with the general prosperity of the settlement, that the continuance of the system here could not, under the benevolent regulations which were in force to prevent abuse, have been productive of much evil. The sort of slavery indeed which existed in the British settlements in this quarter, had only the name against it; for the condition of the slaves who were brought from the adjoining countries, was always ameliorated by the change; they were well fed and clothed; the women became wives of respectable Chinese; and the men who were in the least industrious, easily emancipated themselves, and themselves later had migrated to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, which resulted in a high degree of cultural similarity between Peranakans in those countries. Economic, educational reasons normally propel the migration between Peranakans of the Nusantara region (Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore). Their creole language is very close to the indigenous languages of those countries, which makes adaptations became much easier.

In Indonesia, a large population of Peranakans can be found in Tangerang, West Java. People of Chinese ancestry in Phuket, Thailand made up a significant population, many of whom having descended from tin miners who migrated to the island during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lee, 2008).

The Peranakans in there are known as "*Phuket Babas*" with the local tongue, constitute a fair share of Chinese community, particularly among those who have family ties with the Peranakans of Penang and Malacca. For political reasons Peranakans and other Nusantara Chinese are grouped as one racial group of Chinese, whereas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia becoming more adoptive of mainland Chinese culture, and Chinese in Indonesia becoming more diluted in their Chinese culture. Such things can be attributed to the policies of Bumiputera and Chinese-National Schools (Malaysia), mother tongue policy (Singapore) and the ban of Chinese culture during the Soeharto era in Indonesia. In old times the Peranakans were held in high regard by Malays. Some Malays in the past may have taken the word "Baba", referring to Chinese males, and put it into their name, when this used to be the case. This is not trailed by the more youthful generation, and the present Chinese Malaysians do not have the same status or appreciation as Peranakans used to have (Mohamed, Ahmad& Ismail, 2001).

## **1.12 Baba Nyonya Culture**

This research delves to investigate the Baba-Nyonya culture, including its religion, language, costumes where all are tightly related to the architecture and interior of Baba–Nyonya shophouses.

### **1.12.1 Religion**

Baba-Nyonya subscribed to Chinese beliefs: Taoism, Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, celebrated the Lunar New Year and the Lantern Festival, while adopting the customs of the land they settled in, as well as those of their colonial rulers. There

are traces of Portuguese, Dutch, British, Malay and Indonesian influences in Baba culture. A certain number of Baba-Nonya families are still Catholic. However, in this modern society, lots of young Peranakan communities have embraced Christianity (Clammer, 1980).

### **1.12.2 Language**

The language of the Baba Malay (Bahasa Melayu Baba), Peranakans Cina is a creole dialect of the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu), which contains numerous Hokkien words. It is a dying language, and its contemporary use is mainly limited to members of the older generation. Penang Baba-Nyonya community have a variation of the Hokkien vernacular referred to locally as Penang Hokkien. Though in Kelantan, the Baby-Nyonya are known not just talk their very own Hokkien variant additionally Kelantanese Malay lingo and Thai dialect as well. English has now supplanted this as the primary language talked amongst the more youthful generation.

Youthful Baba-Nyonya can in any case talk this creole language, in spite of the fact that its utilization is constrained to casual events. Youthful Baba-Nyonya particularly have lost a lot of their conventional language. Thus, there is ordinarily a difference in vocabulary between the older and younger generations.

### **1.12.3 Costumes**

The traditional Nyonya costume was the Baju Panjang which can be traced to Javanese origins. It consists of a long loose calf-length top with long sleeves worn over a batik sarong. The collar is Chinese and the dress is fastened by a set of kerosang (brooches). They were initially made of cotton but in 1910, French and Swiss voile and organdie became a fashion. At the end of the 1920s, young Nyonyas abandoned the old-fashioned austere baju panjang for the more modern Nyonya

kebaya. The word Kebaya is derived from the Portuguese word kobaya . The short Kebaya was more flattering, as it was figure-hugging and shapely, with intricate embroidery at the neckline, sleeves and hem. The use of lace on kebayas may have been an influence from Portuguese and Dutch women who wore blouses with lace trimmings during colonial times (Figure 1.13). The kebaya sulam with its elaborate embroidery used to take six months to make by hand in the past. The kebaya is worn with a batik sarung. Nyonyas preferred Pekalongan batik from Java because of its vibrant combination of colours, and motifs of flowers, birds, insects, and other animals (Wee, 2011).



Figure 1.13 Photo Penang Baba-Nyonya groom and bride in 1926  
Source: kwanjit Sasiwongsarot, (1999)

### **1.13 Current Status of Baba-Nyonya**

Baba-Nyonya culture has started to disappear in Malaysia and Singapore. Without colonial British support for their perceived racial neutrality, government policies in both countries following independence from the British have resulted in the assimilation of Baba-Nyonya back into mainstream Chinese culture. Singapore classifies the Baba-Nyonya as ethnically Chinese, so they receive formal instruction