Objective

During 19th to 20th century, the meaning of being a Peranakan was shaped by the fast-changing society. Peranakan men embraced an extremely hybrid identity when they were venturing into the world with local, Chinese and Western fusion. However, intriguing questions concerning Peranakan women’s identity raised. As they were physically confined to their houses and mentally constrained by the societal role as submissive wives, will they be “immune” to the outside influences? This educational guide examines the interesting patterns appeared in Peranakan women’s beadwork, a textile art commonly practiced by Peranakan women. By analyzing the subtle changes in beadwork patterns and functions, this guide also aims to utilize beadwork as a starting point to exploring their female makers’ evolving identity from 19th century to the contemporary world.

Background

Back to the 19th century, most Peranakan women known as Nonyas was confined to home with limited connections with the outside world. They lived in a patriarchy society where men were in charge of conducting business and were the single source of income of the family. Women were expected to fulfill domestic roles and behave like dutiful wives (Kandiyoti, 1988). The pervasive beadwork crafted during late 19th century and 20th century was used more than an ornament; it also served as an indicator of women’s “marriageability” (Tan, 2003). The well-executed beadwork objectified its maker’s virtues of diligence, patience, and gentility. Matchmaker was not the only one who judged the beadwork. During the wedding day, the beaded accessories will be worn by the bride in front of all the guests. It showcased the intensive training the maker received as well as the feminine virtues she possessed. To prepare for the big day, Nonyas have devoted countless hours...
to practice their beading skills since young. They learned the beading techniques and patterns from their elder female family members, and they continually passed on what they have learned to their daughters. Beadwork then became a unique Peranakan tradition practiced by several generations of Nonyas.

Living in the time where society has been continuously shaped by economic and societal environment, Peranakans have acquired an extremely hybrid identity which absorbed diverse influences. For instance, these Straits Chinese men or Baba, who receive English education while adopting Malay influences on food, dressing and language, also persistently practice Chinese traditions in ceremonies and religions (Chee, 1989). However, on the other side, unlike their well-educated brothers or husbands who were exposed to the fast-changing world, most of the Nonyas remained illiterate and lived in rather isolated conditions where their physical movement only limited to their houses. Day after day, Nonyas immersed themselves into the labour-intensive and time-consuming beadwork.

**The exquisite handwork**

**About the beads**

The most common material used in Nonya beadwork were glass beads or manek kacha imported from Europe (Panel 1). Because of their tiny shape resembles plant seed, they were also called seed beads. With an average 1 millimeter in diameter, glass beads required extremely skillful hands for both producing and manipulating.
Glass beads were not only favored by Nonyas. A record has showed in the early 17th century, glass beads produced in Java were exported regionally (Chee, 1989). That means the beadwork tradition was widely practiced by other Southeast Asian cultures as well. For instance, the Dayak community in Borneo was using glass beads to decorate their ceremonial objects. In many Southeast Asian communities similar to Dayak, the hard material and ritual function of the glass beads always associate with male ideology and responsibility (Cheah, 2007). Although beadwork in Peranakan shared certain similarities as they were also played an essential role in ceremonies, beadwork practiced by generations of Nonyas minimized the ritual protocol and masculine implications embedded in the beadwork. Thus, Nonya beadwork was able to gradually evolving into a unique art form specifically related to Nonyas themselves. Furthermore, the de-ritual format did not require beadwork to follow specific patterns or rules, which allowed Nonyas to explore freely with new techniques and designs in their beadwork.
Since then, Nonyas have developed three main beading techniques, naming stringing, threading and stitching. They strung beads to cloth edgings or personal accessories according to personal preferences as a finishing touch. To nicely arrange the faceted glass beads in desired orientation, Nonyas acquire dexterity threading skills. As they were aware of the different lighting reflections on different materials, Nonyas selectively incorporated some metallic beads or *manek pirigu* into their design to achieve a more complex and fine-looking effect in their works. Interestingly, Nonyas also demonstrated a very distinctive aesthetic trend. They were using different shades of colour beads to render a more lifelike image. Moreover, they created a “3-D” effect by stitching beads onto separate cardboard designs and later on paste upon the fabric base (Chee, 1989). These attempts were rarely appeared neither in traditional Chinese nor other Southeast Asian patterns.

**The anonymous artists**

Nonyas’ innovations were not limited to the technique and material. They were boldly drawing inspirations upon their imaginations and describing their fantasy world in the beadwork (Gwee, 1985). Besides the commonly employed Chinese animal patterns such as deer and butterfly, some marvellous creatures have been discovered in Nonyas’ work. For instance, a creature with wings and leaves has been identified as an imaginary animal-plant (Chee, 1989). Similar to the ubiquitous Chinese myth creature qilin (“麒麟”) or unicorn, a symbol of longevity and grandeur, combines body parts of deer, wolf, ox and horse, and has five colours in the skin (Williams, 1988), the animal-plant may also be invented by its creator as a personal interpretation of ideal values.

Although most of the Nonya beadwork were anonymous and their descendants were unable to identify the original makers after decades, the creativity continuously sparks in Nonyas’ work. As Vaughan (1971) was amazed by the great skill and originality displayed by ordinary Peranakan women. He argues these beadworks were already exceeding their beauty and domestic roles. Nonyas invented the new elements in beadwork as a way of self-entertaining. Their emerging self-awareness motivated them to embed implicitly or explicitly self-reflection into their creations. When
Nonyas started to sign off their works (Panel 2) and even traded them for extra income (Cheah, 2010), they were no longer confined themselves to those passive or subordinate roles. Instead, they became empowered individuals and regarded themselves not as proficient artisans but as artists who depict what they want.

The peephole of outside world

One interesting open secret about the Baba house where Nonyas used to live in is the peephole subtly embedded in some of the floorboards (Yap, 2013). As Peranakan wives and daughters were not allowed to venture into the wild world, the peephole was not merely served as a safety guard. It was the mysterious passage where Nonyas used to actively and curiously exploring the world outside their houses.

Similar to the mysterious peephole, beadwork has implications which also extended beyond its functional purposes. Even though with limited exposure to the changing environment, Nonyas' beadwork incorporates the European influenced patterns such as rose, swan since late 19th century. Back then, Western fashion magazines which introduce beading techniques and motifs were not widely circulated, Nonyas learned new fashion trends mainly from relatives and peers (Cheah,
Hence, beadwork as an activity played an essential role in Nonyas’ social connections. They were no longer limit themselves to the physical boundaries. Beadwork as an activity enabled Nonyas to disseminate and exchange new ideas on the changing fashion. Some young pioneers even pushed the boundary further by attending beadwork courses conducted by European Christian missionaries (Cheah, 2007). Nonyas were once again consciously using beadwork as a medium to embrace new knowledge.

Since the beginning of 20th century, Western companies started seeking for larger market by leveraging their own countries’ colonial powers. They quickly expanded to the Southeast Asian where their countries have established the colonial presence (Beng, 2013). These marketing drove efforts were indirectly stimulating a new way of thinking and stirring waves of changing identities in the targeted markets. For instance, gramophone company "His Master's Voice" (HMV) made dedicated efforts on localizing its publicity materials. It published music catalogues in diverse languages and made that information widely circulated among Peranakan communities. As the result of the concurrent forces of Cosmopolitan and emerging self-awareness, Nonyas cautiously incorporated Modernity motifs into
the traditional design (**Panel 3**). The personal choice in the symbolic beadwork mirrored a desire of individual emancipation. Some Peranakan journals also pointed out that Cosmopolitan is an inevitable trend. Parents should adopt a more encouraging attitude towards young girls’ development (Chan, 1995). Consequently, some young Nonyas regarded the empowered Western women as role models and re-defined their own identities accordingly (Cheah, 2010).

**The collective memoir**

After the Second World War, the harsh societal and economic conditions posed dramatic changes in women’s roles. Women in the workplace become widely accepted. Increasing numbers of Nonyas started stepping out of their houses and seeking job opportunities to support families (Cheah, 2010). Subsequently, the time-consuming beadwork turned to be less favoured practices. During the procedure of Modernization, the Baba Malay, a distinct language spoken by Peranakans was slowly vanishing. The essence of being a Peranakan is hard to be identified ever than before. The beadwork is now being considered as a “dying art” (Hulsbosch, 2009) and even the Peranakan community is becoming a vanishing existence.

However, the endangered situation triggered series of movement of Peranakan revival in recent decades. The longing of preserving rich tradition and retrieving family history urge modern Peranakans to re-construe their culture. Additionally, popular media productions which featured Peranakan culture such as *Emily of Emerald Hill*, *The Little Nyonya* and recent play, *The House of Bernarda Alba* have reached out to a larger public and contributed to the cultural promotion as well (Cheah, 2010). Moreover, the increasing exposure on Peranakan dressing and Nonya beadwork also draw collectors and educators’ attentions. Today, the aesthetic values and historical narratives embedded in these exquisite handworks have been recognized and well preserved in intuitions.

When appreciating the beadwork displayed in the museum, people may question how relevant they are in today’s context. Does the Peranakan essence has been further diluted when we are trying to
interpret them through the contemporary lens? As mentioned by beadwork artist Ms Bebe Seet, beadwork is an intimate activity which emphasizes on individual maker’s identity (Cheah, 2010). Both past time Nonyas and contemporary female practitioners devoted reflexive narratives into their works. Moreover, as an art form been practiced by generations, beadwork is also a visual reminder of many Peranakan families’ memories. Although there are no absolute answers to above questions, what Ms Bebe Seet explained may shed some light on our future analysis. The intriguing meanings behind a beadwork motivate us to move our appreciation beyond the artefact itself. Beadwork can also serve as a peephole for people in today’s society to peep inside the world nonyas used to live. When the beadwork has been put into the museum for display, the evolving identity and self-awareness it used to spark didn’t disappear. Instead, it continuously reminds people about the efforts Nonyas put into self-exploration and encourages modern women to reflect upon their own quests for identity.
Bibliography


