

THE MUSICAL CULTURE IN THE PERSATUAN  
PERANAKAN CINA MELAKA

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CULTURAL CENTRE  
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**THE MUSICAL CULTURE IN THE PERSATUAN PERANAKAN  
CINA MELAKA**

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# THE MUSICAL CULTURE IN THE PERSATUAN PERANAKAN CINA MELAKA

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the Baba Nyonya community in Melaka represent their cultural identity through musical activities. The Baba Nyonya or Peranakan are long-standing culturally syncretic minority group, resulting from the marriage of southern-China Hokkien migrants and local women in the Straits Settlements. The result of the union is an eclectic material culture, custom and practices evident in Chinese, Malay, Dutch, British and Portuguese influences. As a case study, the focus of this research is the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM, Peranakan Chinese Association of Melaka). The association played an important role to safeguard the political standing of the Peranakan in the pre-WWII days. However, in the present, located in what was once considered Peranakan core area of Heeren Street, the association acts as a focal point for the congregation of Peranakan community in Melaka where cultural expression take place in the form of musical activities and performances and this is done through the three groups: BaNya choir group, The Melodians band, and Bunga Rampay dance group. The three groups share the same song repertoire, which is a collection of songs cultivated through family genealogies that evokes nostalgia and collective memory. Using participation-observation as a research method and frameworks like Turino's (2008) *participatory performance* and Frith's (1996) concept on music and identity, this study explores how popular music draws emotional alliances that invokes collective identity. Besides that, this thesis also deals with the notion of continuity and reinvention of tradition. It explores how the Peranakan song repertoire and performance practice reveal links to the past and its implications on the future. Negotiation of identity is a constant theme throughout this study, evident in the song repertoire and performances.

Keywords: music, cultural identity, continuity, reinvention of tradition.

## ABSTRAK

Tesis ini meneroka bagaimana komuniti Baba nyonya di Melaka mewakili identiti kebudayaan mereka melalui aktiviti-aktiviti muzik. Baba Nyonya atau Peraakan adalah sebuah komuniti yang mempunyai kebudayaan yang sinkretik dan merupakan sebuah komuniti minority di Melaka. Kelahiran komuniti baba nyonya adaalah daripada perkahwinan antara pedagang (pendatang) Hokkien dari China selatan dengan wanita tempatan di pemukiman selat Melaka ( Straits Settelemtns). Akibat daripada perkahwinan itu adalah kelahiran kebudayaan material dan adat istiadat yang mempunyai pengaruh Cina, Melayu, Belanda, British, dan Portugis. Sebagai kes kajian, tumpuan penyelidikan ini adalah di Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM). Persatuan ini telah memainkan peranan yang penting demi melindungi hak dan hal-ehwal komuniti Peranakan sebelum Perang Dunia Ke-dua. Tetapi pada masa kini, Persatuan ini terletaknya di Heeren Street yang dulu dianggap sebagai kawasan teras komuniti Peranakan di Melaka telah menjadi tumpuan bagi Jemaah komuniti Peranakan di Melaka di mana aktiviti-aktiviti muzik dan persembahan dijalankan melalui tiga kumpulan, iaitukumpulan koir BaNya, kumpulan pancaragam The Melodians, dan kumpulan penari Bunga Rampay. Ketiga-tiga kumpulan ini berkongsi repertoire lagu yang sama, iaitu lagu-lagu yang dikumpulkan melalui silsilah keluarga yang merangsangkan nostalgia dan memori. Dengan menggunakan kaedah “participant-observation” sebagai kaedah kajian dan rangka kerja seperti participatory performance yang dicakan oleh Turino (2008) dan konsep muzik dan identity oleh Frith (1996), penyelidikan ini meneroka bagaimana muzik popular menarik pakatan emosi yang membentuk identity kolektif. Selain itu, tesis ini juga menerangkan tanggapan terusan dan “reinvention of tradition”. Ia meneroka bagaimana repertoire lagu serta persembahan Peranakan mengemukakan jalinan ke masa lalu dan implikasinya terhadap masa depan. Rundingan identity juga merupakan pemalar sepanjang tesis ini, jelas dalam repertoire lagu dan persembahan komuniti Peranakan.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines how the Baba Nyonya community in Melaka represent their cultural identity through musical activities. The Baba Nyonya or Peranakan are a long-standing culturally syncretic minority group, resulting from the marriage of southern-China Hokkien migrants and local women in the Straits Settlements. The result of the union is the birth of an eclectic material culture, custom and practices evident in Chinese, Malay, Dutch, British and Portuguese influences. As a case study, the focus of this research is the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM, Peranakan Chinese Association of Melaka). The association played an important role to safeguard the political standing of the Peranakan in the pre-WWII days. However, in the present, located in what was once considered Peranakan core area of Heeren Street, the association acts as a focal point for the congregation of Peranakan community in Melaka where cultural expression take place in the form of musical activities and performances through the three groups: BaNya choir group, The Melodians band, and D'Bunga Rampay dance group. The first two groups were formed in the early 1990s as a response to the self-realisation and self-rediscovery of their identity and the latter formed only in 2016. The dance group was the result of government influenced cultural shows for the promotion of tourism in Melaka. Members of the groups overlaps and the leaders come from two prominent musical families in Melaka. The three groups share the same song repertoire, which is a collection of songs cultivated through family genealogies that evokes nostalgia and collective memory.

Using participation-observation as a research method and frameworks like Turino's (2008) *participatory performance* and Frith's (1996) concept on music and identity, this study explores how popular music draws emotional alliances that invokes collective identity amongst the Peranakan community. Besides that, this thesis also deals with the

notion of continuity and reinvention of tradition. It explores how the Peranakan Chinese song repertoire and performance practice reveal links to the past and its implications on the future. Negotiation of identity is a constant theme throughout this study, evident in the song repertoire and performances.

The study of Peranakan Chinese can never escape its exhaustive explanation of terminologies. Before I go on any further, I would like to establish the terminologies used in this study to refer to the community. In this thesis, I choose the term 'Peranakan' and 'Baba Nyonya' to refer to the community because these are the terms used by the Peranakan community in Melaka when they refer to themselves. The explanation of the other terms to refer to the community is discussed in the Background of Research section below.

## **1.2 Background of Research**

In this section, I will discuss a few things that are essential to understanding this study. I will first introduce Melaka, the place in which this research is based and in reference to the birth of Peranakan culture; followed by the Peranakan Chinese community and the cultural markers they identify themselves with. Secondly, I will discuss about the terms and nomenclature used to designate the community because different terms are period appropriate. Thirdly, the discussion of the language used by the Peranakan community, its development and how the community express their identity through the Baba Malay. This is essential to understanding the composition of the song text by the BaNyass, which will be further discussed in Chapter 4. Next, a brief introduction to the formation and development of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka is discussed, and is followed by the musical groups I am examining: BaNyass, the Melodians, and D'Bunga Rampay dancers.

### 1.2.1 Melaka

Melaka (2.1944° N, 102.2491° E) was an important port city opened to dynamic cultural interactions and material exchange which occurred between people who belonged to various cultural, ethnic and religious groups. Its strategic location on the Straits of Melaka (see *Figure 1.1*), sheltered by the Sumatera island provided accessibility for ships travelling between the East and the West to avoid the annual monsoon winds. Melaka was promoted to a maritime entrepôt and attracted peoples from Malay Peninsula, China, Siam, India and islands of Indonesia, Arabs and Japan. Budding settlements from various people groups grew around the port of Melaka. One example is the Chinese merchants and sailor from Fujian Province in China, who married local women and would later form the minority ethnic Peranakan in Melaka. Melaka later came under the conquest of European colonizers, with the first being Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641, and the British in 1826. Melaka's past as a cosmopolitan trade centre and colonial rule left their imprints on the architecture, culture, politics, and townscape. This is evident in the tangible and intangible culture of the Peranakan in Melaka.

Presently, Melaka is one of the 14<sup>th</sup> states under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. It is declared as a UNESCO heritage site for its “historical and cultural influences arising from their former function as trading ports linking East and West”<sup>1</sup>. This declaration raised many implications for the State of Melaka which saw to efforts in promoting cultural and heritage tourism in Melaka by highlighting the three distinct minorities ethnic groups, one of them being the Peranakan in Melaka. This results in self-realisation and rediscovery of their identity and in the process formed or reinvented new ways to represent their ethnic identity. I explore this in the following paragraphs and demonstrate how the Peranakan find new ways to represent their ethnic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> From UNESCO website, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223>



**Figure 1.1**  
*Map showing the state of Melaka on Peninsula Malaysia outlined in red.*  
*(Taken from googlemaps.)*

### 1.2.2 The Peranakan Community

The Peranakan Chinese or Baba Nyonya is a long-standing minority community found in Melaka, Singapore and Penang and can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The community existed from the result of intermarriages between Hokkien-speaking settlers originating from Southern China (mostly from Fujian Province) and local women<sup>2</sup> in Malaya. These intermarriages resulted in acculturation that gave birth to what has become known as Baba culture. The Baba culture is an eclectic one, evident in its distinctive material culture exemplified by the trademark “kebaya Nyonya” outfit, beadwork, embroidery, Nyonya cuisine, architecture, and porcelain ware known as ‘Nyonya ware’.

<sup>2</sup> There are sources that pointed that the womenfolk were Malay. However, there is still no record of who womenfolk were. It is suspected that these women could be Indonesians migrants with Javanese or other ethnicities because there were similar Indonesian words and cuisine in the Peranakan culture.

It is widely believed (and even narrated by some of the community members) that the conception of Peranakan community in Melaka dates back 500 years ago resulting from the marriage of Sultan Mansur Syah<sup>3</sup> to the so-called Princess Hang Li Poh<sup>4</sup>. However, it is disputed if the princess ever existed as there was insufficient evidence to show otherwise. Nonetheless, whether this past was imagined or not, it serves, to some extent, the connection of Malay-Chinese heritage which constitutes the Peranakan culture. It is a simplistic way of searching and creating a starting point of Peranakan identity and culture.

However, the identification of Straits Chinese as Baba only came about in the nineteenth century. This is due to a few factors. Firstly, British colonialism exposed the Babas to English education through the establishments of mission schools. This in turn provided them the opportunity to enter employment in the Colonial Service where a knowledge of English is required (Clammer, 1980). Being fluent in English and Malay, the Babas were employed as the middle men and incorporated into the British colonial system as doctors, lawyers, and civil servants (Rudolph, 1998). Large numbers of Baba men were employed by the British Colonial government to fill high status employments in the Straits Settlements which later promoted the Babas to rise to social and political prominence. They were seen as Malay's indigenous political elite by the turn of the twentieth century (Rudolph, 1998).

Secondly, the influx of new migrants from China highlighted the internal sociological differences of the Chinese population which demarcated them culturally from the already established Straits Chinese community. With this separateness, the Babas distinguished themselves from the new migrant Chinese by calling them

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<sup>3</sup> Sultan Mansur Syah was the sixth Sultan of Malacca and ruled Malacca from 1459 to 1477. He ascended the throne after the death of his father, Muzaffar Shah.

<sup>4</sup> Hang Li Poh is one of the known figures associated with Malacca. *Sejarah Melayu* claims a Chinese official named Ling Ho sent her to Malacca as a bride for Sultan Mansur Shah, and with whom she had a son called Paduka Mimat. She was supposedly known to be the daughter of a Ming Emperor



‘*singkeh*’, a Hokkien term, meaning ‘new person’. Furthermore, Baba kinship has always been strongly preferentially endogamous and highly selective about drawing in marriage partners from the wider Chinese community (Clammer, 1980). Beside that, the Peranakan adoption Malay costumes, Malay cuisine, the Hokkien-Malay patois and the study of English were cultural markers that differentiated them from the new Chinese migrant (Hardwick, 2008).

Association with the British administration caused the Peranakan to be mostly anglophiles and they pledged allegiance to the British Crown. Vaughan (1879) observed, a Baba would claim to be of British subject, an ‘Orang Putih’ (caucasian), highly regarded themselves as the *King’s Chinese*. As they were British subjects (*The Straits Times*, 13 July 1900, Page 2), they absorbed many influences from the British in terms of material culture and adopted English leisure activities such as billiard, horseback riding and dinner parties as part of their lifestyle. However, the Babas also adhered to their Chinese customs and mannerism. They observe Chinese customs such as offering in ancestor worship, funeral and marriage rites. Tan (1988), illustrated that these practices are persistent until the 1980s and it is often accepted that the Babas are distinctive in preservation of “traditional” Chinese culture<sup>5</sup>. However, over time the elaborated *Kahwen Dua-Belas Hari* (12 days wedding celebration) is no longer practiced. In the past ten years, there have been a resurgence in portraying the Peranakan wedding culture, such as wearing the elaborated *baju kuah*<sup>6</sup>. Ancestral worship is still practiced elaborately in Peranakan homes in Melaka.

In what was known as the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore), the Peranakan in observes similar customs and practices. The perception of homogenous lifestyle in these three places permeates public perception of the Peranakan community.

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<sup>5</sup> See Tan (1988), *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of the Peranakan Chinese Community in Melaka*.

<sup>6</sup> *Baju kuah* is a bridal jacket cut in Chinese style with a mandarin collar. The cloth has a spread of peony and phoenix motifs. In the *kahwen du belas hari*, the *baju kuah* is worn during the *chiu-tau* (purification rite and initiation into adulthood) ceremony. See Cheo (1983).

This notion is also widely accepted by the Peranakan community. However, it would be careless to generalize by saying that the cultural dynamics of all Peranakan Chinese communities are identical. What differentiates the Penang Peranakan from the Malacca and Singaporean Peranakan is that the Penang Peranakan do not speak the Baba Malay like the Malaccans and Singaporeans do. They speak the local dialect known as Penang Hokkien and because geographically Penang is close to the Thai border, there are Thai influences in the Penang Peranakan cuisine and costumes. Penang Peranakan has close links with the Peranakan community in Phuket.

### 1.2.3 Terms and Nomenclature

When dealing with the Peranakan community, there are several terms and nomenclature that describe the community. They comprise a system of nomenclature to refer to the community and these terms are used at different periods of time. The term 'baba', 'baba nyonya', 'peranakan' or 'peranakan Chinese', 'Straits Chinese' and 'Straits-born Chinese' are often used interchangeably. However, these terms were adopted and dropped in different periods of time according to socio-political change.

The term 'baba', as mentioned by Vaughan (1879) is used by the natives of Bengal to designate the children of Europeans and it is probable that the word was applied by the Indian convicts at Pinang to Chinese children. Douglas' Hokkien dictionary however defined '*Baba*' as half-caste Chinese from the Straits. Clammer (1980) mentioned the term 'babas' is used to distinguished the Chinese born in the the straits from those born in China. Other sources (Dennys, 1894; Wilkinson, 1901; Shellabear, 1902) claims similarity in meaning and Tan (1988) summed up that it is generally used to refer to local-born foreigners, specifically the offspring of Chinese-Malay union. Today, the term 'baba' is used to refer to the male member of the community.

‘Nyonya’ is the term used for the womenfolk. Various pronunciations such as ‘*Nyonyah*’, ‘*Nonya*’ and ‘*Nona*’ came into existence and are traditional Malay forms to address non-Malay married ladies. They could probably be traced to the Portuguese word for ‘Grandmother’. It is thought that the term came from the Hokkien version of *niu-hia*. Tan (1988) mentioned that the non-Malay speaking Chinese were unable to pronounce ‘*nyo*’. Hence, it became ‘*niu*’.

The term ‘peranakan’ is derived from the Malay word ‘anak’. The term is used to describe the offspring or descendants of the foreigner-native union. Tan (1988) explained that it is used as an ethnic label to refer to the descendant of the immigrants who married the locals and these descendants speak in the language of the local people and are acculturated by them. By definition, ‘peranakan’ refers to those local born Chinese, Indians, Eurasians. Thus, a Baba is a Peranakan but not all Peranakan are Babas (Khoo, 1996).

The term ‘Straits Chinese’ or ‘straits-born Chinese’ is also used interchangeably to describe the community because it refers to those born in the Straits Settlements during the time of the British colonisation. The term was used to imply permanent settlement and self-ascription that distinguished the social classes of the immigrant Chinese and the Babas before the independence of Malaya (Rudolph, 1998). However, after the independence of Malaya, these terms were slowly abandoned.

Presently the term, ‘baba’ and ‘nyonya’ is used to address the community and as an honorific prefix to a Baba name, such as *Baba* Ong Kim Koon and *Nyonya* Lim Chye Neo. The terms ‘Peranakan’, ‘Peranakan Chinese’, ‘baba nyonya’ and ‘babas’ are used interchangeably to refer to the community. For this study, the term ‘peranakan’ and ‘babas’ will be used as synonyms throughout this research.

#### 1.2.4 Baba Malay

As this research deals with song text which is written in Baba Malay, I will give a brief explanation of the language, its development and the used of the language in musical activities and performances.

Most Peranakan in Malacca and Singapore speak a language known as the Baba Malay, which is generally an oral language. It is a Malay language which incorporates mainly Hokkien-Chinese loanwords, as well as a mixture of Dutch, Portuguese, English and Arabic (Shellabear, 1916). It is believed that the language developed in a natural way when the early Chinese settlers were learning the colloquial Malay in Malacca. It then became known as a language of business in towns and market place used in the Straits Settlements (Lim, 1887; Shellabear, 1916, Chelliah, 1948). Intermarriages with local women further reinforced the used of the language. As the primary speakers of the language are Peranakan and with the adaptation of Chinese loanwords, it helped express Chinese world-views and ethos through Baba Malay (Tan, 1988; Gwee, 1993). Besides the Babas, another minority community in Malacca, known as the Peranakan Chitty<sup>7</sup> also speak the Baba Malay.

Development of the Baba Malay language can be seen in the translation of Chinese literary works into the Baba Malay, such as translations of the popular Chinese novels and short stories (often incomplete). One example is *San guo yan yi* (三国演义) or “The Romance of Three Kingdoms”. There was also a translation of the *New Testament* English bible into Baba Malay by the missionary William Shellabear<sup>8</sup>. In 1894, the first Peranakan newspaper in romanized Malay, entitled *Bintang Timor* was

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<sup>7</sup> The Peranakan Chitty are the result of intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and Chitty Malacca families, who were the product of marriages between South Indian male immigrants and local/Malay women. The community share nearly identical language and similar aspect of the Baba culture such as the sarong kebaya. However, the Peranakan Chitty are mostly Hindu.

<sup>8</sup> William G. Shellabear published and translated many important text in Malay and in English. His publications include *Sejarah Melayu*, *Ramayana of Valmiki*, *Hikayat Abdullah*, *An Autobiography of Munshi Abdullah* and the translation of the English bible to Baba Malay.

launched by Song Ong Siang<sup>9</sup> with its aim to educate the Babas on general knowledge and the Malay language with the use of better Malay as compared to the daily usage by the Chinese (Tan, 1988; Salmon, 2013).

Beside literary works, Baba Malay is also employed in Peranakan performances such as the *dondang sayang* and the *wayang Peranakan*. *Dondang sayang pantun* employs Baba Malay or standard Malay. The *pantun* is the oldest Malay poetic form. Its first appearance was recorded in the 16th century *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*. The *pantun* consist of a quatrain, with the rhyming of the first and third line and the second and the fourth line (see Thomas, 1986). There are a few examples of *pantun* collection and one of them is the *Panton Dondang Sayang Baba Baba Peranakan* written by Koh Hoon Teck<sup>10</sup> in Singapore. The *dondang sayang* employs singing of the *pantun* accompanied by a small orchestra of violin, *gong* and two *rebana* (Malay handheld drums).

The *wayang peranakan* takes on the tradition of Bangsawan theatre or Malay Opera. Tan Sooi Beng (1993) in her book Bangsawan noted the involvement of Baba and Nyonya in Bangsawan theatre in Penang and Melaka in the early 20th century. A newspaper article (*The Straits Times*, 5 June 1986, Page 6) traces the development of *wayang peranakan* from its origin of musical bands, known as minstrels playing at social functions. The minstrel group put together short sketches that they performed for family members and private functions which later developed into full-length public performances. The dialogue of these plays was always in Baba Malay interspersed with English. Performers had no prepared script and often relied on their ability to improvise. In Malacca, the play '*Sapu Tangan Yang Putih*' (The White Handkerchief) was staged by

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<sup>9</sup> Sir Song Ong Siang was known for his contributions to the development of the Singapore civil society in the Crown Colony of the British administration. He was the first Chinese Malaya to receive knighthood (*Malaya Tribune*, 2 January 1936, Page 10-12)

<sup>10</sup> Koh Hoon Teck is a peranakan who founded the Gunong Sayang Association in 1910 which became the first to support the singing of *dondang sayang*. Prior to that, Koh was involved in performance with the Cornwall Minstrels, a group that emulated American riverboat entertainers with blackened faces and white lips (Rudolph, 1998; *The Straits Times*, 13 August 1906, Page 5).

the Victory Orchestra Concert Workshop in 1955 (see *Figure 1.2*), directed by a Baba known as the blind-musician, Tan Eng Ann.<sup>11</sup> ‘Putus Harapan’ (Disappointment) was staged by the Chinese Dramatic Association in 1963 and another play ‘Bunga Teratai’ in 1955. These plays were conducted in Baba Malay (personal communication with Robert Seet, who acted in ‘Putus Harapan’). In Singapore, the last full-length play was in 1965 named ‘Menyesal’. Then, there was a hiatus until the next known performance in the 1980s.

The hiatus of *wayang peranakan* was due to social-political changes after Independence of Malaya.<sup>12</sup> The status of the Babas were ambiguous during this period. They have lost their economic and political position and strived to fit into the greater narrative of the Chinese community as part of the “Malay-Chinese-Indian” ideal after Malaya’s independence. This period also saw decline of the Baba Malay. Many (Wee, 1989; Chia, 1980, 1983; Gwee in Rudolph, 1998) testified to being laughed at for being Chinese but unable to speak Chinese<sup>13</sup> and has caused the Babas to be ashamed of their culture. Besides that, speaking Baba Malay is seen as ‘uneducated’ while English-speakers were considered educated (Rudolph, 1998). Other factors that contributed to the decline of the language include adopting modernised lifestyle, out-group marriages, urbanisation and religious shift from traditional Chinese practices such as ancestral worship to Christianity (Pakir, 1993, xi-xvi).

Taking on Pakir’s (1993) notion of Peranakan being a “speech community”, the continuity of Baba Malay depended on daily social interaction and relations in the Peranakan community. This can be interpreted as having a sense of identity associated with the ability to speak the language. However, the dispersal of the community from

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<sup>11</sup> We can note that it is typical of Peranakan brochure to included English and Malay in the title. The Chinese wordings were included to also show their Chinese heritage. The word “victory” would imply their association with the British Colonial affiliation even after the Independence. The second staging was in 1960 in Penang.

<sup>12</sup> The Independence of Malaya from the British Colonial government came at 31 August 1957.

<sup>13</sup> Many Peranakan recounts being ashamed of being known as a Baba because they are nicknamed *OCBC*, acronym for *orang cina bukan cina* (Chinese heritage but not Chinese?). Other nicknames such as *Baba seow* (crazy baba) and *chap it tiam pua* (half past eleven) or *lap tiam pua* (half past six) were also used by the Chinese to refer to the Peranakan.

once demographically concentrated core Peranakan areas into wider society of Malaysia and Singapore saw the depletion of Baba Malay speakers. English, Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia have replaced Peranakan Malay as the main languages spoken amongst the younger generation. Hence, the Baba Malay became confined in a domestic domain spoken amongst the older generation.

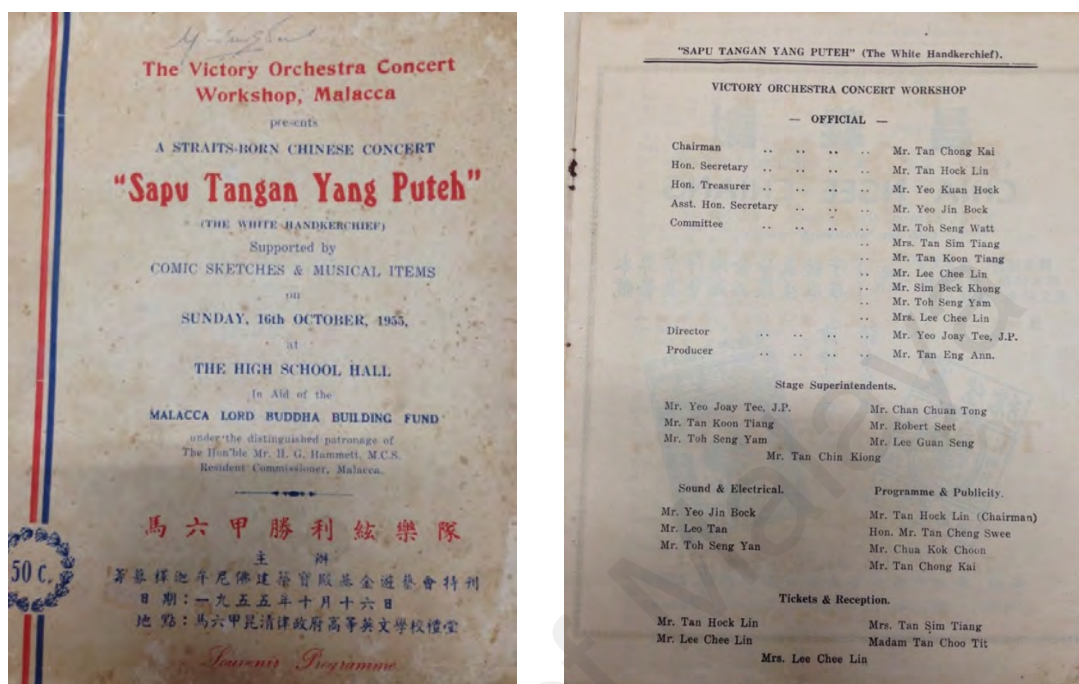
The 1980s saw to the significant publications of books and research on Peranakan culture (Chia, 1980; Clammer, 1980; Cheo, 1983; Thomas, 1986; Tan, 1988). Gunong Sayang Association<sup>14</sup> in Singapore started staging *wayang peranakan* annually. In Malaysia, the TV series, *Baba dan Nyonya*, starring Datuk Kenny Chan was aired on RTM TV1 ran 509 episodes. The series made it into the Malaysia Book of Records with the Longest Running Sitcom Award. The TV series and the *wayang peranakan* were in Baba Malay and colloquial Malay. These plays and television series reflected the Peranakan lifestyle in modern times laced with nostalgia but portrayed integration into the wider community of Malaysia and Singapore.

Despite these efforts, the vast changes to Baba culture and identity across generations result in the depletion of Baba Malay speakers. There is a generally held notion that the Baba Malay is dying out because it is not practiced amongst the younger generation anymore. However, this research will demonstrate how Baba Malay is still practiced today in the close-knit community of Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) through the songs repertoire and originally written lyrics with a borrowed tune from popular hit-songs of evergreens. I share Tan's (1988) sentiments that Baba Malay is a hallmark of Baba identity. In chapter four, I will demonstrate how the Baba Malay represents the Baba identity through song text and music; how this is indicative of the perceived value of Baba Malay as well as social relations in the community, bonded by

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<sup>14</sup> Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) is a Peranakan social club that aims to promote Peranakan performing art, specifically the *dondang sayang*. It was established in February 1910. "*Gunong sayang*" literally means "mountain of love".

the language and cultural norm for identification and self-assertion of the Peranakan community.



**Figure 1.2**

Booklet 'Sapu Tangan Yang Puteh' directed by Tan Eng Ann in 1955 organized by The Victory Orchestra Concert Workshop, Malacca. The names Yeo Kuan jin, Yeo Kuan Hock, Lee Chee Lin, Mrs Lee Chee Lin (Tan Kim Neo), Lee Guan Seng, Robert Seet are notable to understanding the musical culture of PPCM. (Collection of Robert Seet).

### 1.2.5 Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka

In this section, I give a brief historical account of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka looking into how it transitioned from a politically affluent association to merely nothing, and to so social club for the Peranakan community in Melaka. This account will be considered germane to the understanding of this research.

Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) was formerly known as The Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA). The association was initially formed in Singapore on 17 August 1900 (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 23 August 1900) and a month later in Melaka (*The Straits Times*, 22 October 1900). In 1920, a sister association was formed in Penang. Its purpose was to be a representative body of Straits-



born Chinese to the British Crown and to promote loyalty as subjects of the Empire, and to safeguard the interest of the Straits-born Chinese". (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 June 1900, Page 3). Although a small party, it was an elitist organisation dominated by English-educated professionals and intellectuals. They portrayed concern for humanitarian efforts and philanthropy. They contributed to the welfare of the Chinese in the port cities. For example, they raised funds for disaster relief in China; collected money for the building of club houses, hospitals, clan associations, schools and temples in the Straits Settlements. They congregate at their association clubhouse on Jalan Kubu, Melaka (see **Figure 1.3**).

The SCBA played an important role in political and socio-economical welfare for the Straits Chinese. Prominent Peranakan leaders from SCBA were appointed by the colonial government to serve on the Straits Settlement Legislative Council.<sup>15</sup> While being on the council, they actively pressed for political and educational reforms. They successfully persuaded the colonial government to open up the Straits Settlements Civil Service to non-Europeans British subjects. Their influence was large even within the Chinese community. As they were also the only voice for the Chinese Community recognized by the colonial government, their backing was sought after by Chinese parties, Chinese Chambers of Commerce and *huay-kuan* establishments.<sup>16</sup>

One of its leader, Tan Cheng Lock, who was later instrumental to the founding of MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), emphasized that the Straits Chinese were proud to be British subjects and will be loyal only to the British Government. However, Tan Cheng Lock's anglophilism also portrayed a sense of Malayan-centred patriotism. He urged the Colonial government to grant Malaya self-rule and advocated the implementation of

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<sup>15</sup> In his book *Chinese Politics in Malaya: A history of the Malayan Chinese Association*, Heng (1988) discussed the Peranakan community leaders' political stance and philosophy in the pre-war period (pp 26-30).

<sup>16</sup> During the British colonial rule, there were a number of secret societies and *huay-kuan* (translated from Mandarin to mean "association") or voluntary association. While secret societies were concern with facilitating the pioneering activities of the Chinese community such as tin-mining, clearing land for agriculture and fending off encroachment from rival secret societies. The later catered to general recreational needs of its members such as in the matters of ancestral and deity worship, overseeing burials and maintenance pf cemeteries. The first Chinese Chambers of Commerce (CCC) was introduced to Malaya in 1921.

policies which would generate a common Malayan consciousness among the various races. Later he made it his priority to represent the Chinese community collectively to fight for Independence alongside the Malays and other peoples in Malaya.

While Tan Cheng Lock was optimistic about the Independence of Malaya, SCBA (Straits Chinese British Association) did not share the same sentiment. With the decentralisation of the Malay states by the Colonial rulers into the Federated Malay State, fearing that the Straits Chinese status will no longer be a prestigious one, SCBA of Penang and Malacca called for secession from the Federation of Malaya to restore the former Straits Settlement, and in turn restore their colonial status. They felt the need to preserve their status as British subjects to avoid Malay political dominion against the rise of Malay nationalism. However, their attempt was unsuccessful.

#### **1.2.6 PPCM Post-Independence**

After Independence, the SCBA lost their political influence. From being an elitist group that enjoyed political and economic privileges by the colonial government, they no longer could have special privileges as they were integrated into the larger Chinese community. The name of the association became obsolete. The change in political landscape resulted in the name change of SCBA Penang to Penang State Chinese (Penang) Association in 1964 and open its membership to all Malaysian Chinese resident of Penang. SCBA Singapore changed its name to Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association, which was later renamed as The Peranakan Association of Singapore. Membership is open to all Singaporeans, Malaysian citizens and residents in Singapore. SCBA Malacca retained its name until 1981.

SCBA Malacca became Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) registered under the Registrar of Societies with the motto “*Bersatu Teguh*” or “Be Strongly United”

on 10 October 1981. The objectives of the association were amended and it was far different from the pro-British constitution of SCBA. The objectives are as follow:

- (a) To promote among the members a keen and intelligent interest in the affairs of the State of Melaka and also that of the Federal Government affecting Melaka State and to represent, express and give effect to their opinion.*
- (b) To promote inter-racial harmony and co-operation among the various racial communities of Melaka.*
- (c) To foster and propagate the ideals by which all racial communities may in the steady progress of time be welded into one community having a common national identity, respecting the retention and reservation of their culture, heritage, custom, tradition and religion.*
- (d) To communicate with the State and Federal Government on behalf of the Peranakan Cina Melaka on all questions affecting the rights, interest or privileges of the Peranakan Cina Melaka and to take any requisite lawful steps for the defence of the rights and privileges.*
- (e) To institute forums and intellectual discussions and to procure the delivery of lectures on the cultural, historical, scientific, political and other subjects relating to the objects of the Association.*
- (f) To promote dramatics, music, sports, language and culture amongst its members and to encourage social intercourse between members of the Association.*
- (g) To do all such other acts and things constitutionally for the attainment of the above objects.*

As a non-governmental and non-political affiliated association, the objectives in part (a), (b), (c), (d) reflects political aspiration in-line with the Malacca state and Federal government, which is stated in the Societies Act 1966 (In Malay: *Jabatan Pendaftaran*

*Pertubuhan Malaysia*).<sup>17</sup> The objectives also reflected goals of the association to integrate into Malaysian society and aligning its activities with the National Cultural Policy<sup>18</sup>. These changes took place under the 10-years presidency of Khoo Peck Wan, who was awarded many honorary titles and medals by the State government for his contribution to the state as a planter (See **Figure 4.16**). Nonetheless, it also reveals how the Peranakan Chinese finds a place in the plural Malaysian society while still asserting their distinctive identity.

In 1984, the association acquired a “Straits Chinese” house at no.149 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, also known as Heeren Street or locally known as *Kampung Belanda* (translated as Dutch Village) as its new clubhouse (see **Figure 1.4**, **Figure 1.5**). Previously, their old premise was at Jalan Hang Tuah. The new place was restored to a middle-class Baba house,<sup>19</sup> furnished with antique Chinese furnitures and all things typical of a Straits Chinese house. The idea was to transform the place into a mini museum and a clubhouse for the members of the association. In 1996, the association purchased the house next-door and proceeded with renovation works. At the end of 2007, the association extended the backyard to create extra space for the club’s social outreach. I will discuss the implication of the Baba house used as a cultural marker of the Peranakan in Chapter 4.

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<sup>17</sup> In section 2(A) of the Societies Act 1966, it is stated that “(1)It shall be the duty of every registered society in carrying out its activities and in conducting its affairs to ensure that they are in accord with, and conducive to the fulfilment of and adherence to, the provisions of the Federal Constitution and the State Con- stitutions, and where any of the activities or affairs of any society is in any manner violative of, or derogatory to, or militates against, or shows disregard for (a) the system of democratic government headed by a con- stitutional sovereign of Malaysia, and, in the States, by the respective constitutional Rulers or Yang di-Pertua Negeri; or (b) the position of Islam as the religion of Malaysia, with other religions being practised in peace and harmony; or (c) the use of the National Language for official purposes; or(d) the position of the Malays and of the natives of the States of Sabah and Sarawak; or(e) the legitimate interests of the other communities,”

<sup>18</sup> The National Cultural Policy can be defined in three main principles: 1)The national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region, 2) Suitable elements from the other culture may be accepted as part of the national culture, and 3) Islam is an important component in the formulation of the national culture. From <http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy>.

<sup>19</sup> The baba house is also known as a Straits Chinese house and can be found in Melaka, Penang and Singapore. The architecture and deco are an eclectic mix of Chinese and European arrangement and in furnishings. The baba house has now become a symbol of Peranakan culture. For more, see Lee; Chen (2006), *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic Life and Tradition* )



**Figure 1.3**  
The old SCBA clubhouse at Jalan Kubu in 1988.  
(Photo from PPCM collection).



**Figure 1.4**  
The back entrance of PPCM club house where members use  
as an entrance into the club house presently. (Photo taken by me).





**Figure 1.5**

The front-view of PPCM club house on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Heeren Street).  
(Photo taken by me).

### **1.2.7 PPCM in the Present**

Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (or SCBA then) was inactive after the Independence. Tan (1988) mentioned in his book that in the 1977, the association still retained its pro-British objectives and membership was only 524 people. The lack of social programs did not attract old and new members. Besides that, high membership fees discouraged many to join in the association.

My subsequent visits to the association, led me to discover their yearly compiled photo albums. These albums labels started from the year 1988. These photos revealed

social gatherings of association members that usually involved music-making, song-singing, food and laughter. Toward the 1990s, there were more photographs. For example, photos taken in 1992 were compiled into two albums. This was also true for 1993 and 1994. In these year, I found photos of a group comprised of middle-aged men and women, arranged in two rows, dressed to the nines. The ladies are in *baju kebaya* and men in *baju Cina* and black slacks. They sang for the annual Peranakan Conventions held in rotation between Penang, Singapore and Malacca. In 1993 was also the year where the choir group BaNya, which is the focus of this research, was formed. Photos of the Melodians band emerged from 1997 onward. They were actively engaged for Peranakan and non-Peranakan functions. Some of the photos showed the Melodians accompanying the BaNya.

Other activities that started in the early 90s were the formation of the Ladies Section which incorporated sing-along session accompanied by a few members who knew how to play musical instruments. The background of these members reveal a musical heritage and the family relations they have in the association. The profiles of these musicians will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Another weekly music activity organized by community members are the Tuesday Night Sing-along, which was birth out of the Ladies Section singing activity. As it is known that Peranakan enjoy singing and songs, they established a night for singing and merriment. Bingo night was on Wednesday. Other activities included the annual Chinese New Year dinner and dance, the association anniversary dinner and dance, fundraising dinner and dance, food fair and talks. Many of the association members are also active members in the Melaka Cancer Society, Seck Kia Eenh Buddhist temple, the Senior Citizen Association, Wesley Methodist Church, and Theresa Church. Many of the musical activity overlaps in these association and premises. One prominent example being that the Melodians are always engaged to play for events of the association

mentioned above. The uniqueness of the Peranakan community amidst this association lies in the members' genealogy. Almost all the members are related to one another either by blood or marriage. Many can trace their ancestor up to the seventh or eighth generation. Some of the members have family who have served in the association for two to three generations. Besides that, the musical groups developed from two main families, where music was very much part of the family genealogies. As this research focus on the musical culture of PPCM, the implications are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Externally, PPCM is also the public face and deemed as an official Peranakan association by the Melaka State. Apart from being invited to perform at Melaka State government events, the association of PPCM with state politics can be seen in government officials have officiated openings of new sections of the buildings and official guest at PPCM events. Two notable event are the opening of PPCM building by the Governor of Melaka on 1 December 1989 and the extension of the back building, in 2003 by the Chief Minister of Malacca (see **Figure 1.6**). Prior to 2013, 13<sup>th</sup> General Elections in Malaysia, in wanting to garner votes from the Peranakan community, the ex-Chief Minister of Malacca, Mohd Ali Rustam, who was in office for 14 years, made official visits to for PPCM events. As reported in the Utusan Malaysia, a local Malay language newspaper, the ex-chief Chief Minister of Melaka Office formed a unit named Baba dan Nyonya Affairs to arrest problems faced by the minority group in Melaka. Besides that, the unit also function to provide job opportunities to Peranakan community in Melaka (Ong, 2013).





**Figure 1.6**  
The plate depicts the opening of the back hall was officiated by the Chief Minister of Malacca, framed in the back entrance wall.  
(Photo taken by Peter Ong).

### 1.3 Problem Statement

In this section, I discuss the problem statement of this research which focuses on the musical culture in PPCM. The Peranakan had eclectic musical culture in the early 20th century. Social dancing and involvement in musical bands such as minstrel groups, orchestra and string bands that played to the latest American and European hits, *keroncong*, and *ronggeng* music, were part of their social life. Their taste in music reflected their cosmopolitan identity in the Straits Settlement. This period was between the early 1900s to before WWII in 1940s, where the Straits Chinese community flourished in terms of economy, politics, and lifestyle which saw to the production of distinctive material culture. However, their lives were affected during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya which saw the dwindling of their cultural heritage. After the Independence of Malaya, Peranakan culture further diminished when they were collectively assimilated into the larger Chinese community.

Beginning from the late 1970s, there was a surge of interest in the Peranakan culture. This was due to the effect of self-realisation and self-rediscovery of the Peranakan heritage amongst community members. There are two factors that affected this change.

Firstly, it was the widespread sale of Peranakan antiquities and material culture. The time leading up to the 1980s, Peranakan culture further dwindled from the time of WWII. As mentioned in the paragraphs earlier, the Baba felt displaced from their colonial-affiliated past after the Independence of Malaya, which caused them to assimilate into the larger Chinese community collectively. The Peranakan community became uninterested in the continuity of their heritage. Hence, many Peranakan antique furniture were put up for sale, which caught the attention of antique enthusiasts. Secondly, the Peranakan culture and heritage received recognition through the Melaka State's promotion of tourism, packaged as 'heritage tourism'.<sup>20</sup> In the 1990s, tourism became Melaka's leading economy sector, where heritage sites in the city centre were specially restored and preserved (Worden, 2010). As a result, this inspired the Peranakan community to be interested in their own cultural heritage. The community nostalgically looks to the past—to the time many Peranakan identify as the "golden age" when they enjoyed colonial privileges—for signs of how to perform their culture. Peranakan identity is represented through newly invented traditions with reference to the past. One example is through the performing tradition and new musical forms.

Reigniting their love for dance and music, the Peranakan community in PPCM put together a Peranakan choir group, popular ensemble band and dance group. This performing tradition has not only become a popular association of Peranakan culture, but a representation of the Peranakan identity. In contrast to the past, no such performing tradition existed. Peranakan choir groups seemed to have started in Melaka. Later, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Indonesia also developed their own Peranakan choir

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<sup>20</sup> Prior to the 1980s, Melaka's population had stagnated and there was high unemployment. The 1990's campaign 'Visit Malaysia', made tourism a leading sector in Melaka's economy. The identification of appropriate historic image were marketed, and preservation and conservation policies are applied in conformity with this image. The representation of Melaka heritage is rooted in a the Sultanate Malay past. However, the representations of non-Malay histories were significantly downplayed in the nation narratives. The representation of Chinese in Melaka were limited to the Peranakan, whom are Malayised in terms of dressings, food and language. This allows for some manipulation of history to suggest that all Peranakan originate from the intermarriage of Chinese, and to the extend Ming Emperor's daughter Hang Li Po to the Melakan Sultan (Worden, 2010). This narrative promoted Peranakan culture. As a result, instilled an interest in the community to look for ways to represent their cultural heritage.

groups. Besides that, a 5-6 piece popular band ensemble was formed to entertain Peranakan and non-Peranakan engagements. Peranakan dance groups emerged, too, over the years. The emergence of this performing tradition were the result of (1) their desire to express themselves musically but lack of many trained musicians as compared to the past; (2) to distinguish themselves as an “exotic” minority against the backdrop of multi-cultural Malaysia through their musical traditions; and (3) in search of ways to present themselves by reconnecting to the past through the lens of nostalgia.

Generally, the Peranakan community’s nostalgia for their lost past becomes a tool for the representation of Peranakan culture and heritage. This past is remembered through grandmother’s cooking, occasions that take place in the spaces in Peranakan houses, daily life, terms and language used, songs they sang and music that they listened to. This sentiment is also observed in PPCM, where it is manifested in the three performing groups: BaNya, the Melodians, and D’Bunga Rampay dance group. One common thread that unite these three groups is that they all draw from the same song repertoire, which is a collection of evergreen and folk tunes, a remnant of the performing tradition from the early 20th century. Newly written song texts emerged recently, but parodying old folk or evergreen tunes. The sense of nostalgia brings the community together to perform their culture which is translated as a continuity of the cultural heritage.

One issue identified in this study is how colonialism affected the Peranakan community. The Peranakan were forward-looking and cosmopolitan in the past. Their association and close relationship with the Colonial government allowed them to enjoy colonial privileges, which lead them to adopt a colonial-elite lifestyle. Leisure activities such as dinner parties, billiard and cricket; outfits such as ball-gowns and tuxedos were part of their life. The Peranakan owned modern equipment like the radio and gramophone and they actively sought out and listened to modern American and European hits of the

time, as well as popular music from Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the past, the Peranakan community in the present are backward-looking, singing and performing songs from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I use the term backward-looking here to refer to the community looking back at the past in search of reference to perform their culture. It does not connote a derogatory of backwardness in community. Post-colonialism saw to the community still incorporating the traditions left behind by the colonial heritage. The formation of choir, popular ensemble that still play American and European evergreens and folk tunes is evident of this. In the past, Peranakan involved in musical groups that contributed to philanthropic effort. This tradition were carried on by the Melodians ensemble (until they disbanded in 2017) by doing fundraising through dinner and dance parties, where social dancing, a continuation of *ronggeng* culture is still present. As the Peranakan look forward to the future, their performing tradition reflects how much of the colonial past heritage is still evident in the construction of Peranakan identity.

This research questions how these performing traditions conducted construct the Peranakan identity and why are these performing traditions used as a presentation of Peranakan culture? How did family genealogy and collective memory dictates the musical culture? It also seeks to demonstrate how the Peranakan position themselves in post-colonial Malaysia, looking to the past and at the same time to the future, finding new ways to express themselves to negotiate their identity and ensure the continuity of their cultural heritage through performing traditions.

#### **1.4 Justification of Research**

Research on Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia has typically focused on the history, culture and sociological aspects of the community. Until recently, only few works have been produced that highlight aspects of Peranakan performing arts and musical

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<sup>21</sup> On popular music and gramophone recordings in the first half of the 20th century in Indonesia, see Yampolsky (2013) on his PhD thesis *Music and media in the Dutch East Indies: Gramophone records and radio in the late colonial era, 1903-1942*.

activities (Chia, 1980; Cheo, 1983; Tan, 1988; Lim, 2011; Sarkissian, 2012; Tan, 2016). Most of whom have heard about the Peranakan typically associate them with the *dondang sayang*, which is a poetry-singing musical tradition in Malacca, Singapore and Penang. This performing tradition has been a popular practice of theirs since the early 19th century (Ahmah Usop, 1984; Thomas, 1986). However, other than *dondang sayang*, there is little documentation of Peranakan musical activities.

In my journey to better understand Peranakan musical culture, I generally encounter two types of reactions. The first is a pessimistic response from some members of the community that their musical activities were merely for entertainment and not worth looking at. I get remarks such as, “*Huh? Got Peranakan music one meh?*” (a type of Malaysian colloquialism that might be interpreted as “do the Peranakan really have any music-making going on?”). The second response is that *dondang sayang* is quickly disappearing, hence the need for a revival, and that I should be devoting my research to it. Since the 1960s, the Peranakan community has slowly lost interest in *dondang sayang* due to the lack of involvement by younger generations, and the dwindling numbers of community members who can converse in Baba Malay — the vernacular medium of this song genre. However, until today, *dondang sayang* still remains as a prominent cultural marker of the community, whether it is regularly performed or not.

Nonetheless, my inspiration to delve into the Peranakan musical culture grew as a result of a meeting between myself, a student, and her idol, the distinguished ethnomusicologist Margaret Sarkissian, at a conference in Bali. Her work greatly influenced my Bachelor’s Thesis, a study of Peranakan *seroni* music. It took me three days to muster the courage to introduce myself to her. We sat on the paving stones in the sunny and windy weather outside Bali’s Art Institute (ISI) during lunch break. Margaret was excited and astonished to learn that I am Peranakan, and we immediately started talking in between bites from our lunch boxes. I remembered being so overwhelmed with

excitement that I had to blink back tears. The one thing that started this study on the musical activities of PPCM was Margaret's friendly and casual advice to me (as being warm and friendly is her character) that I "should totally look into studying the Peranakan musical culture!". However, at that point I had only just completed two semesters of coursework for my MA studies, and I was still unsure of what to study. Perhaps I was looking for validation, or perhaps I wanted someone to tell me that there is definitely something musically worthwhile to study about Peranakan. Margaret's inspiring comment came at the right moment. Later, her article published in *Música e Cultura* on *The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Peranakan Musical Culture in Malacca, Malaysia* provides a basis for this study.

My subsequent visits to the PPCM clubhouse led me to the decision of focusing and limiting my research to this association. This association is a century-old that stood through different periods of times and revealed genealogy as a pillar in the formation of the musical groups and song repertoire. My visits to the clubhouse then began to reveal something new to me about Peranakan musical culture that had took root within the past two decades: several new in-house ensembles including a choir group named BaNya, which have been performing for Peranakan and non-Peranakan events, as well as official government events; a popular ensemble with an eclectic mix of repertoire named the Melodians, and a weekly Tuesday Night Sing-along. A common thread uniting these groups is that they all draw from the same song repertoire. I learned that these songs are performed at various functions such as dinner and dance parties, wedding, and fundraising events by the Melodians and the BaNya.

I also learned how the BaNya singing group has developed into a performing tradition and medium for showcasing Peranakan identity. Although the community do not acknowledge that their present musical activity is of any significant as compared to the well-known musical practice of *dondang sayang* and orchestra bands from the first

half of the 20th century, this study demonstrate the choral singing group has since become a cultural marker of the Peranakan community. This is reflected in the phenomenon of Peranakan choral singing groups found not only in Melaka but also in Singapore, Penang and the Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia and Australia. These choir groups are seen performing at annual Peranakan conventions to represent respective Peranakan association. However, looking back at old photographs I found at the association clubhouse, there were no group-singing that took place before 1993. I will further discuss this new development and the implications of the groups in the and Chapter 4.

The song repertoire of the choir group are a jumble of American and British evergreens hits from the early- to mid-twentieth century, Malay and *keroncong* songs, songs about Peranakan, top Chinese hits from the 1970s and '80s and a few others in Thai, Hindi, Tamil, Tagalog, and Japanese. Majority of the song repertoire have been around for decades and many still were picked-up over the years and only compiled into a file binder since the sing-along night was established. The song repertoire compilation was the effort of long-time PPCM choir coordinator, Ruby Tan. She took it upon herself to help with the singing at events which eventually became a regular sing-along night. The formation of the Melodians in 1997 provided musical accompaniment for the choir group. Since then, the Melodians and the BaNya have been performing together or on separate occasion.

Something else also caught my attention: familiar tunes but unfamiliar lyrics written either in English or the Baba Malay or a mixture of both were sung. I further learned that these song text are written by a few community members portraying Peranakan lifestyle, ideals and kinship. Contrary to what Peranakan and non-Peranakan belief that musically there is nothing “authentic” or “traditional” to research about, these efforts in music activities, whether it's the Melodians or BaNya, depicts cultural expression of the community presently.

The song repertoire collection reflects the cosmopolitan identity of the Peranakan. Tan (2016), in her article *Cosmopolitan identities: evolving musical cultures of the Straits-born Chinese of pre-World War II Malaya* discusses how “the Straits-born Chinese negotiated multiple identities as signified in the eclectic cultures they created”. By analysing newspaper articles and 78rpm records, Tan’s article reveals hybrid musical bands accommodated European, Malay and other elements, and adapted to the latest Anglo-American music and dance crazes. The Babas ability to understand the Malay language made Malay art form such as *Bangsawan*, *keroncong*, *dondang sayang* and *stamboel* part of their entertainment. In a separate article, Sarkissian (2012) writes of how the songs still remain the same even though the medium of how it is performed changes over time. This article will explore how the present performing tradition of the Peranakan is the remnant of the sedimentary performing tradition, taking on old ideas and translating it into new cultural expressions.

The musical activities in PPCM also embody part of the musical and social landscape in Malacca at a particular period of time. As with the Peranakan, their musical culture is expressed differently according to the lived-experiences of members of the community and at different periods of time. One researcher who writes on Peranakan musical culture told me ‘*Peranakan culture always evolving ma..*’ (which takes to mean that Peranakan culture is always evolving and ‘*ma*’ being an interrogative particle in Mandarin). Being a Peranakan, from what the community perceived to be the “younger generation”, *dondang sayang* and their song repertoire are foreign to me. I did not grow up with such musical activities. By looking at the musical activities in PPCM, with special emphasis on song repertoire from the time of the establishment of the choir group and the Melodian bands to the present, I will demonstrate how these music-making activities in turn articulate changing social patterns and cultural expressions of the Peranakan community. I will further discuss these implications in the Problem Statement and in



Chapter 4. In the Chapter 3 Methodology, I will discuss my role as a researcher as an inheritor of Peranakan traditions.

For this study, I draw inspiration from Ruth Finnegan's (2007) writing on amateur musicians in her hometown of Milton Keynes. "We all know about it — but fail to notice it for what it is" was the quote from the book which aptly encapsulate this research. Finnegan argued that studies of musicians are mostly of professionals and that local music has been so little noticed. It is not that their musical activities are hidden, but those who are involved in the local musical activities are mostly unaware of its extent and the structure work they put into sustaining it. Drawing on these sentiments, this study seeks to understand the musical practice (what people do) in PPCM, processes of music making, the community surrounding it and what it strives to portray. The song repertoire and performing groups will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

### **1.5 Research Objectives**

- 1) To examine the musical culture in Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka and the developments of the musical groups.
- 2) To investigate how the musical groups in PPCM influenced the collection of song repertoire.
- 3) To analyse the representation of the Peranakan identity through their musical activities in PPCM.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

1. What songs are the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka singing?
  - What era (year) were the songs made popular?
  - How did these songs enter into the repertoire?
  - What kind of songs are these? - language?

- Who puts together the repertoire list?
  - Are there original compositions?
    - Who composes these songs?
    - Why do they do a parody or tune borrow
    - How do they pick a certain tune to borrow?
2. Why are they performing these songs?
- What do these songs say?
  - Who are those who perform these songs?
  - Is it a rite of passage? movable age group?
3. How are they performing these songs?
- Do they dance with it?
  - What accompanies the songs? (dance? social dancing? dinner? )
  - Where do they perform these songs?
4. Who are the members of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka?
- What are the kinship and relation?
  - Are they an active community; sustaining themselves?
5. How do the songs reflect the community?
- What does it say about the community?
  - Is it the sense of nostalgia? Meaning for the community-what is nostalgic for them?
  - Who compiles this song? why does he/she compile it?
  - What type of songs?

## 1.7 Chapters Overview

This thesis consists of 5 chapters where each chapter focuses on different components that provides structure to this study. In Chapter 2, I review literatures that are considered germane to this study. I review them thematically such as cultural identity, music and identity, song repertoire, other similar studies in the region. These works are reviewed so as to gain ideas and information about the conception of Peranakan identity through their musical culture. Besides that, it also provides frameworks for this study.

Chapter 3 is where I discuss about the methodology of this research. This study employs qualitative analysis as its main research method and this includes participant-observation, interviews sessions, conversations and audio-visual recordings. As a Peranakan from Melaka whose parents are both actively involved PPCM, I find myself placed in the “field” which is also my “home” research on *my* own people and heritage. I discuss my positionality and intricacies of fieldwork at home in this section. This chapter also discusses conceptual frameworks employed in this study such as Geertz’s concept of “thick description” in doing ethnography, Turino’s (2006) participation performance and concept of iconicity is also adopted to look at Peranakan musical culture. Frith’s concept on music and identity is helpful in answering and framing Peranakan song repertoire. This chapter concludes with the writing style employed for this research.

Chapter 4 is about the field data and the readings of these data. I explore the musical activities in PPCM centred on the shared song repertoire through the three musical/dance group of BaNya, the Melodians and the D’Bunga Rampay dancers. Brief history of the groups and implications are discussed, how nostalgia and family genealogies influence the song repertoire.

Chapter 5 provides overview of this research, discussion of the standing and contribution of this research and how this research opens up other areas in Peranakan culture for exploration.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This research explores how Peranakan songs may be seen as a window into the community's cultural and ethnic identities, any existing studies that inform the socio-historical background, that help corroborate this study's findings, and provide theoretical frameworks may be considered germane. The following examines a selected number of works that address these areas, and is grouped into a few themes. Works that deal with, including those that directly relate to, and/or help explain, (1) Peranakan cultural identity; (2) music and identity, (3) works that explore musical repertoire and song texts of the Peranakan, and (4) works that similarly deal with song repertoire in the region.

### **2.2 Cultural Identity**

This research focus is about musical culture of the Peranakan Chinese but at the same time it also looks at how performing tradition is used to express the community's cultural identity. One of the main works that inspire the methodology framework for this research is Sarkissian's (2012) preliminary work on the musical culture of the Peranakan. In her article, she showed that the Peranakans are a musical community that always love music and dance. She revealed that although socially so much has changed, but one thing remains constant is that the community are still singing the same songs as they did 50 years ago. Old cultural markers such as the use of kebaya, take on new meaning as it is worn now to represent the Peranakan heritage when in the past, it was worn casually at home daily. Sarkissian also maps the musical culture of the Peranakan by examining old photographs of performance groups (minstrel groups, string bands and orchestra, theatre group), conducting interview sessions and participating and observing Peranakan events

and concluded that although Peranakan's elite-colonial lifestyle is long gone, the community still uphold the sentiments of the nostalgic past as the community find new ways to express it through performing traditions. This is one of the issues my study will be exploring and I will further examine what she has highlighted. I will go further in analysing the songs they sing, with a special emphasis on the newly written ones and demonstrate how the Peranakan choral singing was form to visibly portray their heritage. With that, my study seeks to explore cultural continuity.

Working on the same theme of the article is Sarkissian's (2000) book '*D'Albuquerque's Children*' which she explored themes of music, identity, tradition and tourism by looking at how culture is permeated in the performing tradition of the Portuguese- Eurasian community in Melaka. This book is helpful to my study because it looks at another minority ethnic group in Melaka, the Portuguese-Eurasian community, where the community share and face similar issues and challenges like the Peranakan. In this book, Sarkissian explored how traditions were invented to enhance ethnic identity against a post-colonial, post-independence and multicultural Malaysia. Besides that, as the settlement is nestled in a tourist attraction and a UNESCO heritage site, the community puts up cultural stage show performing their culture. All of this effort, including the internal politics at play within the community, shapes the construction of identity of the Portuguese-Eurasian community. In the Peranakan community in Melaka, similar trends are evident. As mentioned by Sarkissian (2012), The Peranakan culture has been reinvented as an essential part of the heritage package in UNESCO-listed 21st-century Malacca. They appear distinct and 'exotic' in order to claim a place in the modern Malaysian multicultural family. The community's choral singing group BaNyas and popular ensemble Melodians were engaged to play at Peranakans' and sometimes State functions. This book also provided part of the methodological framework for looking this research.

Peranakan negotiated mixed identities and are open to local Malay and transnational cultural influences, but still maintained some aspects of Chinese cultures and customs. Their musical culture transcended racial and class borders. This puts forward the idea of cosmopolitan identity adopted by the Peranakan as identified in this study. One work that reflect this idea is Tan Sooi Beng's (2016) article on Peranakan musical culture and performing tradition. She demonstrated that the Peranakan adopted a type of vernacular cosmopolitan identity that was transnational by examining newspaper reports, theatre and music prior to the War, selected 78 rpm recordings and printed scores. In her article, she highlighted the various performing tradition of the Peranakan such as *kronchong*, *dondang sayang*, *ronggeng*, minstrel music and Malay opera that asserts the cosmopolitan identity claim. These eclectic musical art forms combined Malay, Chinese and European elements which was influence by their English education and their association with the British. The Straits-born Chinese amateur bands emerged and were inspired by and constantly adapting to the latest modern dances. In the early 20th century, the Peranakan were modern and forward-looking—one issue identified in the problem statement of this study. Tan (1993) pointed out in her book on the Bangsawan (Malay opera) that Peranakan were involved in Bangsawan plays and also created their own theatre troupe, called *wayang peranakan* (Peranakan theatre). While Tan's article is generally focused on the Peranakan in Penang, Sarkissian (2012) through reviewing old photographs identified the same trend in the Peranakan in Melaka. These two works provided insight on the performing tradition of the Peranakan in the past, which is important for this research to trace its continuity and (re)invention in the present, and what it represents today.

Recurring themes like philanthropy and humanitarian effort noted in these two articles, Sarkissian (2012) and Tan (2016) —which was part of the motivation for these performing groups — is still evident today in the present the Melodians. The members of

the Melodians, one of the focus of this study, was also identified by Sarkissian (2012) to be descendants or have family relations to the performers identified in old photographs.

The theme of colonialism and post-colonialism are identified in this study's Background of Study and Problem Statement as a constant influence on the construction of Peranakan identity. Examples of such influence are evident in the adoption of lifestyle, social activities, and material culture of British colonial. Hardwick (2008) provides insightful historical contextualization and chronology on the construction of Peranakan identity in colonial and post-colonial Singapore politic. Her work demonstrated that Peranakan culture flourished during the colonial period and how it was considered "corrupt and doomed anti-modern identity weighed down by expensive tastes and archaic rituals" after World War II and post-Independence. The impact of World War II upon the social and political environment of British Malaya saw a drastic shift in the representation of Peranakan culture. After Singapore broke away from Malaysia in 1965, it adopted nationalist policy, a remnant of colonial rule, that sought to reify the diverse ethnic groups into three categories: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The first half of her article gave an insight on Peranakan place in Malaya (before Singapore broke away from Malaysia) and also specifically Singapore which is necessary for the background of this study. Understanding what took place in Singapore is essential to understanding the construction of Peranakan identity in Melaka because as the two state are close to each other, they share many similarities in Peranakan practices and family relations.

Other works that identified the impact of colonialism and post-colonialism on Peranakan identities are Clammer (1980), Tan (1988), Rudolph (1998), where Clammer and Tan both focus on the development of the Peranakan community, practices, and identity, and the latter on Singapore. Vaughan's (1974) account of the Chinese living in the Straits Settlement shed light on the customs and mannerism of the Peranakan or Baba. He noted that the Peranakan associated themselves as 'a British subject, an *Orang putih*

(white man)’. These works demonstrated how the construction of Peranakan identity has been influenced by colonial and post-colonial political influence. Examples of such influence are the names with which the Peranakan associate themselves, and the flourishing of the culture during the colonial period.

As these works paint the picture for the background of understanding for this study, it is also interesting to note that substantial ethnographic work appeared only from the late 1970s, a time when the resurgence of interest in Peranakan identity attention took place. Since the 1980s, many books and newspaper articles were published on the Peranakan material possessions, religious ceremonies, heritage and social history. The understanding of colonial influence on Peranakan identity and heritage is important for this study because it influences their musical forms and performing tradition back then and the reinvention of the performing tradition presently, which is the focus of this study.

The Baba Malay or Baba patois is important to the Peranakan conception of their ethnic identity. However, the review will not be on the origins or the developments of the language. There are many exhaustive works that discuss on the two points. In Chapter 4 of this study, there will be an analysis of the Baba Malay used in song text. Mentioned earlier in the background of study, the Baba Malay saw a steep decline in speakers due to the many factors discussed earlier. By looking at the newly written song text, my aim is to examine what the community is saying through the song text; what is represented; and why these songs only exist recently as compared to the past. Of course, I am not the first to examine the used of Baba Malay in the Peranakan performing tradition. Lim (2011) traces the used of Baba Malay to promote “Peranakan-ness” in *wayang Peranakan* (Peranakan theatre). By examining the theatre scripts, he identified that the Baba Malay, along with wit and Peranakan humour is an integral part of Peranakan identity, which promoted an image of the Peranakans as a “song-and-dance people who enjoy life to the fullest”. As Baba patois provides a memorable theatrical experience in wayang



Peranakan, it is the language that reaffirms certain supposedly ‘Peranakan’ qualities. The songs I analyzed in the following chapter possess this same element. Hence, Lim’s (2011) study affirms the sentiments I share in this study.

### 2.3 Music and Identity

Besides works that inform of Peranakan cultural identity, I also look at works that deal with music and identity. Two works that assert the topic on music and identity are Frith (1996) and Turino (2006). The musical culture of the Peranakan involves music-making and dance. These activities involve social interaction which invites group participation amongst community members with no distinction of artist-audience. The unifying thread of the three aspects is in the Peranakan song repertoire. Turino’s *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participations* (2006) provides a conceptual framework to look at these musical activities. In a chapter of his book, he suggested that performance where there are no artist-audience distinction, where everyone can participate in the sound and motion performance as *participatory performance*. Such events usually involved active dancing, singing, clapping and playing musical instruments which are integral part of the performance. He went on to explain that participatory occasions are founded on the ethos that everyone can participate in the sound and motion of performance and that the primary attention is on the activity, what Turino calls “the doing”, and on other participants. This special kind of concentration on the other people one is interacting with through sound and motion and on the activities, creates a strong force for social bonding. Thus, leads to diminishing self-consciousness as everyone present is (ideally) similarly engaged in the activity. Through these heightened concentration of interaction with others, the Peranakan community also find solidarity with one another on their identity.

Social bonding through musical activities in the community creates social identity based on some kind of iconicity. This forms a recognition of similar habits and

features that allow individuals to group themselves and others (Turino, 2006). When the Peranakan come together for their dinner and dance parties, Christmas parties or Tuesday Night Sing-along, one profound feature of these events is music and dance. These musical activities indexed the iconicity of 'nostalgia' through their song repertoire. However, these song repertoire were global and regional top hits in the first half of the 20th century that were once indexed as 'modern', which corresponded to the modern and forward-looking, colonial-elite lifestyle of the Peranakan. Another feature of the song repertoire indexed the idea of 'cosmopolitan', 'urban', and a community open to adaptation. Over the years, these songs are still sung by the community but are indexed as 'old' and 'evergreen' which corresponded to the nostalgia the community have of their 'good old days'. The signs or iconicity changes over the period of time. Turino's book also explores on this idea through art for signs of identity which aptly describes the signs that follow the identity construction of the Peranakan community. Turino gave examples of 'iconicity' of a community through music culture of a Peruvian popular music that indexed 'modernity' through inclusion of electronic studio audio art-like sounds; a highland identity through the use of certain musical elements, and a urbanity through the use of cambia rhythm. These indices grew out to express complex identities of fans. Through a process he calls 'semiotic identity', which refers to the number of potential signs occurring simultaneously, he demonstrated how music and dance are combined in new ways to create decent indices of social identity. Turino's work is helpful in reading the social identity of the Peranakan community in PPCM for this study.

Another work which is helpful in looking at music and identity through social group activities is Frith's (1996) writing on *Questions of Cultural Identity*. The Peranakan song repertoire are regional and global pop music that many of the community members identify with as songs of their youth and reminder of the 'good old days'. To look at this, in his article Frith suggest that music, like identity is both performance and story that

describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social. Musical experience If music is a metaphor for identity, then the self is imagined but can only be imagined as a particular organisation of social, physical and material forces. This symbolises and offer the immediate experience of a collective identity.

The experience of pop music is an experience of identity where emotional alliances are drawn with other fans (in this case, other Peranakan). This experience describes both a social process and a form of interaction where ethical codes and social ideologies are understood. These songs obey to a more of less familiar cultural logic and that musical identity not only idealises the social world one inhabits but it is also real and often enacted in musical activities. Frith argues how a particular piece of music or performance produces the people, creates and construct experience by taking on both subjective and collective identity. Peranakan song repertoire comprised of a mixture of American and European top hits, Malay regional pop and folk songs, and songs in other languages such as Chinese, Tamil and Tagalog. As these songs are performed, they exhibit a kind of openness of the community, receptive and embracing of different culture.

## **2.4 Song repertoire**

The unifying element of Peranakan musical culture is their eclectic mix of song repertoire. The song repertoire are a collection of different genre of music such as western popular music, regional popular music, folk and Chinese music mostly from the period for 1920s to 1970s. The accumulation of song repertoire reflected the Peranakan as an ethnically mixed people group, highlighting their Chinese, Malay, Anglophilic heritage; an urban, cosmopolitan, modern community in the early 20th century. However, fast-forward 50 years, these song, considered 'old' are still sung and performed by the community. This phenomenon has since become a cultural marker of the community. Presently, the song repertoire are still played by the Melodians band for *ronggeng* or social-dancing sessions, performed by the BaNya, and used as dance music for the

D'Bunga Rampay dancers. In this section I will examine works that help explain the collection of Peranakan song repertoire by looking at topics of popular music in non-western world and regional music, the role of mass media, dance-music, musical parody, and the relation of music and text. Other similar works that explore musical repertoire and song texts of their regional neighbours will also be included.

The repertoire performed by the Peranakan in PPCM is popular music from the early 20th century to the 1970s. These songs are grouped into the categories like the Anglo-American “evergreens”; compilations of Malay songs such as keronchong songs, songs about Peranakan, folk songs, and original compositions. Songs that were added later after the 1970s are Chinese songs—in Hokkien, Mandarin, and Cantonese; a few songs in Tamil, and Tagalog. The 21st century saw parody tunes and translated songs by the association members. The Peranakan community in the earlier half of the 20th century were an urban class and cosmopolitan in character living in a developing port city of Malacca. It is no doubt that they identify with popular hits of the time. Although the Peranakan still upheld Chinese customs and ceremonies that involved Chinese “traditional instruments” such as the Seroni, their musical influence and musical culture was highly influence by western pop music. Like what Manuel (1988) in his book *Popular Music of the Non-western World* suggested, popular music is seen as a symbol of identity, providing an avenue for expression by creating common meanings and shared cultural ideologies. He added that because traditional “folk” forms and western styles may not express social identity in city dwellers, new music which syncretise and reinterpret old and new elements became distinctive metaphor for expression. Manuel’s book gives an introductory survey of popular music addressing it continent by continent. His book also discuss the dissemination, commercialisation and localisation of global popular musical trends which is helpful in understanding the collection of song repertoire.

The topics in Manuel’s book on the origins and dissemination of *salsa*, Hawaiian

music and *kronchong* are especially helpful in this study. While salsa and music infused with Hawaiian guitar are from the west, Manuel demonstrated that *kronchong* music, being part of the Peranakan song repertoire, is the perfect example of acculturated traditional style that became a popular genre. *Kronchong* music was developed by the Portuguese seafarers in the sixteenth century along the port cities of Batavia and Malacca. It has been associated with maritime, racially and ethnically mixed proletariat as it is with the Peranakan social status.

*Kronchong* is identified with the regions of Indonesia or Malaysia and recognised as respective country's national or regional identity (Chopyak, 1986). These songs, were adapted in the Bangsawan theatre (previously known as *komedi stambul*) and Malay films in the 1930s-1940s. Tan (1993), like Manuel (1988) also demonstrated how social and political change could ignite new art forms and musical styles to articulate these changes through her book on *Bangsawan : A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. She noted the involvement of Peranakan in Bangsawan and even started their own groups. This was because Bangsawan was conducted in Malay and Peranakan could understand it as they were Malay speakers. Tan traces the musical changes in Bangsawan troupe, particularly where Peranakan are involved, the music that accompanied Bangsawan were played by an orchestra comprised of western instruments such as the violins, cellos, flutes and piano. Later Hawaiian guitar made its way into Bangsawan music. This is in line with the orchestra groups the Peranakan were involved in in the early 20th century. It also explains the use of Hawaiian guitar in the Tuesday Night Sing-along session in the club house. The popularity of Bangsawan was also due to its non-European version of a western theatre and it suited local taste. But mostly, Bangsawan's popularity was due to mass media.

Mass media undeniably played an important role for the dissemination of popular music in Malaya and Indonesia and it started from the introduction of gramophone to the

region. Those who heard gramophone records were only the rich who were able to afford gramophone and gramophone records, to which Yampolsky (2013) also added, “and their neighbours and servants”. Gramophone made its way into Peranakan homes when it was first introduced. This results in their taste in music being highly influenced by what they heard on the gramophone, which were Anglo-American top hits. As the gramophone became cheaper and affordable, more local music such as *ronggeng* music (social dancing music derived from the Malay folk music of *joget*, *inang*, *asli*, and *zapin*), as well as *keronchong* music were produced on the gramophone. Gramophone music was eclectic and appeal to a wide range of audiences from different ethnic groups. Tan (2013) in her article *Negotiating 'His Master's Voice': Gramophone Music and Cosmopolitan Modernity in British Malaya in the 1930s and Early 1940s* provides insight that would help explain the compilation of Peranakan song repertoire. Her article demonstrated gramophone music was played almost everywhere —amusement parks, live Bangsawan theatre, shops, talkie, ronggeng, keronchong shows and singing competition. By looking at the 78RPM recordings and other sources, she demonstrated that gramophone music was fusion and localised, it borrowed elements of commercial Anglo-American popular music where the lyrics are in Malay. Local musicians used western technology, media and music to create a new musical idiom which was 'modern' (In Malay: *moden*) and is seen as a way to advocated change, progress and agency. Her article also traces the used of western music instruments such as the violin, trumpet, trombone, flute, piano, double-bass, guitar, and drums in the typical Malay orchestra (*orkes Melayu*). New instruments were constantly being incorporated into the ensemble. When Hawaiian-style dance music became popular, the ukulele and Hawaiian guitar were added in the ensemble; when the Latin-American dance rhythm —rumba and tango—became popular, percussion instruments such as maracas, claves, woodblocks and so on were incorporated into the ensemble. Through the reading of this article, I come to understand the influences of

music in the Peranakan string bands and minstrel music, and the music instruments used. Some instruments, such as the Hawaiian guitar, the congas, the accordion and saxophone are still incorporated into the Melodians band presently. Through the notion of nostalgia, as identified by Sarkissian (2012) in the article reviewed earlier, the Peranakan in the present represent their cultural heritage with the song repertoire and musical instruments.

Social dancing is evident of Peranakan's love for music and dancing. I discuss about social dancing because the songs used are part of the song repertoire discussed in this study. Social dancing, or like the Peranakan calls it "ronggeng" or "joget" has become part of their musical heritage. I look at Tan's (2005) article '*From folk to national popular music: recreating ronggeng in Malaysia*' to trace the "ronggeng" place in Peranakan musical culture. Tan started her article describing a Peranakan wedding party entertained by an ensemble of Chinese and Malay ethnic group playing the accordion, *rebana*, violin, and a *gong*. The ensemble was led by a singer. Among the songs that the ensemble played were *dondang sayang*, *Bunga Tanjung*, *Inang Cina*, and *Loi Krathong* (Thai popular folk song). The wedding party she described drives home the point that it appealed to various ethnic group, and certainly the Peranakan, as they were Malay speakers. She described the popularisation and evolution of ronggeng songs was first through the Bangsawan theatre. Later, through *pentas joget*, and gramophone recordings played in public spaces, it gained popularity across a range of classes and ethnic group. Western instruments were adopted in the new ronggeng ensemble, which was later known as *orkestra Melayu* playing *rumba*, *foxtrot*, *tango* and *mambo*. The second half of Tan's article focuses on the development of ronggeng from a folk form to a national dance known as the "joget". The first half of her article is helpful for this study because it traces the reception of ronggeng and the influences it adopted along the way which helps to explain song of the Peranakan song repertoire, such as *joget* and *asli*. These musical genres are still performed

today in the Peranakan dinner and dance events. Typical social dance song, or *ronggeng* songs the Peranakan dance to today are *dondang sayang* and *Loi Krathong*. This shows continuity of this social-dancing heritage and song repertoire by the community. Besides that, the song repertoire reveal how the Peranakan community is receptive to new syncretic music and dance, which reflects their cosmopolitan identity.

One aspect of the Peranakan song repertoire is its shared musical heritage. Mentioned above is the Thai popular folk tune “Loi Krathong”. Another popular tune among the community members is the song “Jinkly Nona”. This song is sung in Kristang, a creole ethnic group known as the Portuguese- Eurasian based in Malacca. This tune is also popular amongst the Peranakan Chitty. Like the Peranakan, the Portuguese- Eurasian and the Peranakan Chitty community is one of the minority people group in Malacca. Their musical culture is eclectic and syncretic. The popularity of this tune is due to its fast and livelier tempo that resembles the “joget”. Sarkissian’s (1996) article on “*Sinhalese Girl*” meets “*Auntie Annie*”: *Competing Expression of Ethnic Identity in the Portuguese Settlement, Melaka, Malaysia* traces the connectedness of the *Jinkly Nona*<sup>22</sup> tune that spans the Portuguese diaspora from Goa to Macau to Southeast Asia and the differing interpretation of the piece. While the Portuguese heritage is not much of a concern for this study, the song heritage in Malacca is. The song forms a bridge between the two minority communities—the Peranakan and the Portuguese- Eurasian—that celebrates their mixed heritage and social standing in Malaysian society. Besides that, through the analysis of this song, her article demonstrated the long-standing musical interaction between the Malay form of *joget* and *dondang sayang* to *branyo* (the Kristang term for the social-dance known in Malay as *joget*) and that the Portuguese influence on Malay music is widely accepted. As the Peranakan Malay speakers and highly receptive of *ronggeng* or *joget* music, *Jinkly Nona* became popular among the Peranakan community.

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<sup>22</sup> See appendix for lead-sheet.



Another aspect of the Peranakan song repertoire are newly written lyrics to borrowed tunes. These songs only emerged since the formation of the BaNya. The lyrics written to popular tunes was so the community members are familiar with the tune but yet singing new songs that reflected their community and their identity. As Manuel (1993) puts it, this practice is known as parody, with “no pejorative or satirical connotations, but merely denotes the setting of a new text to a borrowed tune,”. By examining the practice of tune-borrowing in popular and folk music in India, he showed that songs parodied in local language affirms identity and brings a sense of belonging to the community. Lyrics were changed to appeal to different audiences. The idea is that it represents or symbolises different groups of people or sets of ideas and associations. Besides that, when folk performers perform parodies through different genres and performance context, they affirm community values. In most of these performances, Manuel showed that the text is more important than the melody as the text remains original and community-based in origin. As a result, community members feel that the performers are creatively empowering their community by “turning a product of commercial....into a vehicle for their own texts, sentiments and values.” This is evident in the Peranakan parody songs, where texts were replaced from the original tunes and these texts often reflects community practices, values and custom.

Threading on the same sentiment, Yampolsky (1998) exemplify in his article *"Hati Yang Luka", an Indonesian Hit* that the different re-workings of the one particular song into genres were meant for different audiences. While the aim of his paper is to look at how popular culture industry manipulates its material to appeal to different audiences, and how the reworking of Hati Yang Luka made its way into Indonesian National music genres, my study does not deal with the varying genres of parody. I share Yampolsky's take on how Hati Yang Luka is sung in the Indonesian national language, and promotes national unity. My study looks how the songs are sung in Baba Malay, promotes a feeling

of collective identity between Peranakan community members. On examining *Pop Daerah* (regional pop), Yampolsky showed that regional language is retained while musical idioms are discarded. In the case of the Peranakan song repertoire, their musical accessibility is limited. Hence, the songs are mostly played on an electronic keyboard, simulating the sound of different instruments and rhythm. Because they love songs with Latin-American rhythms, such as rhumba and merengue, these are incorporated into their parodied songs. Thus, making it “Peranakan” in their own right.

These parodied songs are sung with newly written song texts. The song texts clearly reflect the Peranakan community and the changing trends of how the songs are written. The song texts of the Peranakan repertoire to these parodied tunes reflected kinship, community values, practices and customs. The songs also reflect the celebration of festivities by the Peranakan community. I look at Merriam (1964)’s *The Study of Song Text* from his book *The Anthropology of Music* to understand the function of song text. Merriam (1964) states that song text in connection with music is a source for understanding human behaviour. In this chapter, he reviewed works and gave examples of researchers who explore community behaviours through song text. Through this review, he draws a conclusion that music and song text are interrelated and have special significance and function in special ways. For example, songs give the freedom to express thoughts, ideas and comment which sometimes cannot be expressed in normal language situation. Through song texts, community expressed deep-seated sentiments, thoughts and comments about a situation in the community. Besides that, another aspect of song text is the creation of ideals. Merriam gave an example of a researcher named Hayakawa who studies this aspect of music. He notes that popular music has a tendency to create a false or misleading impression of life would-be. For example, popular songs often depict the impossible ideals of love. This ideal of love is evident in the older songs about Peranakan songs and those written by the Peranakan. The songs more than often portray

a demure, domiciled, powdered-face, small-waisted Nyonya lady clad in kebaya swooning the Baba men at the sight of them. While this idealisation of Peranakan men and women may contain some truth in the past, it is now an ideal that only exist in the imagination the community.

Finally, the Peranakan song repertoire was put together with the feeling of nostalgia and to evoke nostalgia when performed or sung. I review two articles that discuss different aspect of the study of nostalgia. First article is by Batcho (2007) on Nostalgia and the Emotional Tone and Content of Song Lyrics. In her article, Batcho explored the notion of personal nostalgia and the perceived affect in songs through nostalgia surveys in which participants have to rate 6 sets of lyrics for happiness, sadness, anger, nostalgia, meaning, liking, and relevance. She noted that “nostalgia was associated with changes that enhance continuity across time, connectedness to others, affiliation, identity and belonging”. Nostalgia also promotes psychological well-being that leads to the strengthening of community. Her article provides interesting findings and deals mainly with methods of empirical investigation on personal nostalgia, but for the purpose of this research, I will focus more on her research findings in general. As a summary, her article suggested that nostalgia promotes psychological well-being. It does not enhance continuity across time, connectedness to others, affiliation, identity and belonging, that leads to the strengthening of community. This clearly reflects the Peranakan song repertoire, which when sung and performed evoke a feeling of connectedness to other Peranakan who could also relate to the songs nostalgically. Hence, in a way, it promotes collective identity. The second article reflects the relationships between music, history and nostalgia with the case study on Neapolitan songs. Plastino (2007) explored the concept of ‘porosity’, taken from architecture to show how Neapolitan songs, being a famous landmark in geography of nostalgia, became another ‘space’ for expression through song text and distinctive vocal styles. By looking at two prominent Neapolitan

songs, Plastino borrowed ideas to explain how restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia explains the interrelationship between individual and collective memory. Nostalgia, through music is a site of memory which opens to interpretation or narration. As Peranakan song repertoire reflects and evokes a sense of nostalgia of the past, it is also a place for collective memory. The songs are added to the repertoire by community members who remembers how, with whom, and where these songs were sung in the days of their youth. It also reminded them of their joyous family gatherings where these songs are sung.

## 2.5 Other similar studies in the region

Besides works that directly explain the construction of Peranakan identity and their repertoire collection, I look at works that similarly discuss song repertoire in relation to other ethnic community life. *Ronggeng* as discussed earlier, is one of the popular social dance found not only in the Malay-speaking world (Malaysia and Indonesian), it is also found in the Thai-Malay speaking world in the south of Thailand. Ross (2017) in his article *Across Borders and Genres in Malaysia and Thailand: The Changgong Rhythm of the Andaman Sea Coast* discussed how the Changgong rhythms are found across a few performing traditions focusing mainly in the Southern Thai regions. He demonstrated in his article that the social dance and music of *ronggeng* forms a continuum that stretches northwards from Penang, known as *ronggeng*; to Perlis, known as *changgong*; and to Krabi in Thailand, known as *tanyong* (or *Rong Ngeng Tanyong*). Departing from the same source, *tanyong*, like *ronggeng*, drew its repertoire from the musical theatre of the early to mid-twentieth century. During the pre-war era, the repertoire drew influences and borrowed from American Tin Pan Alley theatre tunes into dance hall music. Like any musical repertoire, it was then reworked by local musicians to local tunes, rhythm and musical instruments. *Tanyong* overtime became distinctly “Andaman” in character. This trend is similar in the Peranakan song repertoire. *Ronggeng* music enjoyed by the

Peranakans were similarly enjoyed by the Malays because as Malay-speakers, Malay songs appealed to them. However, the *ronggeng* known to Peranakan is the *joget*, which is also adopted as a national dance. Popular *joget* and *dondang sayang* tunes were borrowed and newly-written song texts were fitted in by the community where the music performed on contemporary western instruments. Such trends definitely give us a better understanding of the social dynamics and the transformation of community lives and identity.

In a separate article, Ross (2010) examines the melodic hybridity and textual repertoire of Southwest Thailand's *Rong Ngeng Tanyong* where two principle styles prevails: one resembles an idiomatic style of northwest Malayan *ronggeng* (from which it derives its name, and a second that developed as a new Thai-language style, modified and expanded by the locals, known as *tanyong* songs. He categorised the repertoire in terms of language and context in which it is performed and offered an analysis of the repertoire. His article presented a few similar songs as the Peranakan and it offers a framework to categorise and analyse the songs. The *Rong Ngeng Tanyong* repertoire are more localised in musical styles and text. Similarly, the Peranakan added verses and transliteration to the original songs in the repertoire and applied the tune-borrowing methods to newly written song text. This phenomenon reflected the localisation of popular and globalised trends.

Another work that similarly looks at the popular music culture is Weintraub's (2010) *Dangdut Stories: A social and musical history of Indonesia's most popular music*. Chapter two of his book relates most to my studies. In this chapter, he gave a discursive overview of the category "Melayu". The term can be understood within a flexible framework of cultural hybridity, where he explored different terms of "Melayu" being applied to different style of music. He traces the roots of *dangdut* to the diverse sources it drew from, such as *Bangsawan*, Western pop music, India, and the Middle east and

Latin rhythms. The similarity with Peranakan song repertoire are from the sources it drew from, especially from *Bangsawan* theatre. The music is widely disseminated through film and radio to reach the wider audience of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Although the Peranakan very rarely have original composition, like the precursor to *dangdut*, Latin rhythm permeated through the music, western dance music, and *ronggeng* or *joget* music was largely incorporated into the repertoire and enjoyed widely by the Peranakan community. One statement that Weintraub made which applies to my study is that “musical practices are given meaning when people connect them to specific places during particular historical moments.” Musical practice of the Peranakan in the pre-war era involved jazz and string bands, *keronchong* and *dondang sayang* performances. Although its performance context have changed over time, the continuity of this musical tradition lies in the song repertoire that PPCM have collected in a file-binder, sung every Tuesday nights at the Tuesday Night Sing-along sessions and performed during Peranakan annual dinner and dance parties by the BaNyas. The song repertoire evokes a sense of nostalgia of the “golden age” and creates an alliance with other Peranakan of the same generation, which then leads to the idea of a collective identity.

## **2.6 Chapter conclusion**

The literature reviewed in this chapter is considered germane to this thesis. It provides a background study and conceptual framework to the study of Peranakan musical culture. The works not only deal with musical performance to assert ethnic identity; it also looks at song repertoire that drew from diverse sources. These works reflect the inclusive and syncretic nature of song repertoire that were adapted and localised. Hence, it creates alliances amongst urban community and asserts a cosmopolitan identity.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

This research employs qualitative analysis as a research method and it is in the field of Ethnomusicology. In this chapter, I first give a brief explanation of what Ethnomusicology research constitutes. This is followed by the methodology used for this research which is divided in sub-sections of participant-observation, interviews, audio-visual recording, secondary materials, fieldwork at home, my positionality as a researcher, conceptual framework, and writing style.

### 3.2 Ethnomusicology

This study is in the field of Ethnomusicology, which is an area of study that gives special emphasis of music in its cultural context<sup>23</sup>, in Merriam's (1960) words "the study of music in culture. It was initially known as "comparative musicology" but later coined "ethnomusicology" by Jaap Kunst in the 1950s. It can be traced back to as early at 1880s-1890s. Ethnomusicology research calls for fieldwork methods which constitute an organised way of collecting data that involves the epistemological problem of finding, verifying, and knowing the truth within the frames of reference (Rice, 2008). It is also the understanding of others, when in close contact, of their environment, rituals, language and social relations (Nettl, 1964; Barz, Cooley, 2008; Van Maanen, 2011). Historically, fieldwork is viewed principally as observing and collecting. However, it has been accepted that fieldwork in ethnomusicology is about experiencing and understanding music; that it deals with the products of human behavior (Merriam, 1968; Titon, 1992).

### 3.3 Participant-Observation

In conducting this research with the Peranakan community in the Persatuan

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<sup>23</sup> Refer to Myers, Helen (1992). *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*. London : Macmillan, 1992.

Peranakan Cina Melaka, the method of participant-observation is employed. Participant-observation is one of the fundamental methods of ethnomusicology fieldwork. It is a qualitative method used across many discipline in social sciences and it calls for the researcher to be actively involve in society's cultural practices, on in-person observation and on data gathering through interviews. This method is derived by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) when he was conducting his studies in the Trobriand Island. It is through observation and participation that the researcher becomes a student of the culture he or she is studying.

In this research, participant-observation includes participating in events, informal observation and conversations, keeping in contact with regular informants. In the period of one and half year, I have participated and observed events at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka such at the Tuesday Night Sing-along sessions, Wednesday Bingo nights, dinner and dance parties, Peranakan conventions, and small gatherings. I observed the way events are organised and conducted, social structure and as Malinowski (1922) described "to take personal interest in the gossip and developments". I listened and watched the songs they sings and participated in the sing-a-long session, songs performed by the BaNyas, songs performed by the Melodians, and songs used by the D'Bunga Rampay dancers. These three performing groups are the focus of this study and the unifying element is the song repertoire. By 'participation' I mean that there are accepted roles which I could fit in or already being fitted in, such as a member of the association, my parents' daughter, a student, a musician, an admirer and an audience.

The process of participant-observation includes the practice of hanging-out with community members. By hanging-out, I built my rapport and trust amongst the community members through conversations. I learned when to question and when not to question, what questions to ask, and to whom the appropriate questions are directed to. I got to understand cultural behavioural patterns and common practices of community



members. In Tuesday Nights Sing-along sessions, I was often invited to play the Ukulele with the in-house band as they lead the community present for their song-singing session. When observing PPCM events and musical performances, I made notes of the flow of events, repertoire, conversations, people and highlights of the events.

### **3.4 Interviews**

Ethnographic fieldwork requires meaningful face-to-face interaction with other individuals which leads to the quest of locating an informant and interviewing them. Most of the interview sessions lead on from conversations I had with the members of PPCM. Sometimes, these deliberate interview sessions arranged in advanced with regular informants would last up to an hour or two. And some of these sessions are also extended over WhatsApp and Facebook messages. Sometimes, I have to meet my informant for a few more times to get the information that I need. This leads to friendship being forged and up to a point, one of the members calls me their “god-daughter”.

My interviews are conducted in a semi-structured fashion. Although I have prepared questions in advanced, I realised that structured interviews did not always give me the best results. I start asking descriptive questions in my interview and conversations. I find that the establishment of rapport with the community leads to trust and openness with the community members. Exchange of information is more free and people are ever-willing to share. Besides that, being able to speak the Baba Malay makes it even easier for me to have conversations with the elderly association members.

### **3.5 Audio-visual recordings**

During interview sessions, I jotted down short notes and an audio recording of the conversation which I transcribed them later. Along with these events, I took visual recording in a form of video and photography. Besides that, (with permission) I also

collected videos and photographs from the association members for the purpose of this research. This is all done with my previous iPhone 5 and the present iPhone 6s. Scanners, printers and photocopy machine are also used for this purpose.

### **3.6 Secondary Sources**

Secondary material is valuable in research. Sources such as journal articles, books, local newspaper articles, magazines, published and unpublished sources such as booklet and brochures, compilation of song books, online materials and YouTube videos are considered germane for this research. Books and articles relating to the subject of the socio-political structure, entertainment, performances, and the community of the Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia and Southeast Asia were being looked into. In doing so, I have a better understanding of the historical background and current issues and trends regarding the Peranakan Chinese community in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Books on social sciences theories were looked-into so that these theories can be applied for the analysis of this research work. After spending a few months delving into these reading materials, appropriate references were selected for used in this research. These references are organised in alphabetical order in the Bibliography section in this thesis.

### **3.7 Fieldwork at Home**

Historically, “fieldwork”, as proposed by Malinowski, requires a fieldworker to spend an extended period of time in the field, progressing from the role of an “outsider” to an “insider. The process would sometimes take on a few months to years. However, in recent years, there have been a large number of researchers who conducts ethnographic research in their hometown or home -country. Therefore, there arose new perspectives on fieldwork methodologies of fieldwork at home. The term “home” is constructed as a “field” for research. Over the years, a few terminology has emerged such as “in-sider”,

“backyard researcher”, and “native researcher”. Some examples of ethnomusicologist studying their own musical culture are Nketia (1988), Berliner (1994), Pian Chao, Rulan (1992) and Chou, Chiener (2002).

In my case, my research is based in my hometown, Malacca and the subject of study is my own culture which is the Peranakan community. Some advantages of doing research at home is that there is a sense of shared linguistic and interactive codes between me and the subject of my research. For example, when it comes to communicating with the Peranakan community, English language is the primary language of communication but additional knowledge of the Baba Malay is a bonus. My shared heritage with the Baba Nyonya community and my ability to converse in the Baba Malay helps me relate to the people whom I am speaking to. Many older generation Peranakan would be surprise that I, considered the younger generation could converse in the Baba Malay. This brings about a sense of gladness and relief to them that the Baba Malay language is still passed on to the next generation. This also shows them my genuine interest to understand the practices of the Peranakan community. In addition, people are more open to share stories, and information with me.

Besides that, the recognition of common cultural values, expressive norms and local knowledge predates an otherwise effort from an “outsider” to and “insider”. As explained by Stock and Chou (2008), the home-worker is already emplaced in home and in a pre-existing social web, where the people that we are researching may well be relatives and friends. The fieldworker is not a stranger but regarded as part of the community. In this study, I had to interview my parents, who are active participating members in the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. I also had interviews and conversations with relatives and friends. Being a home field worker also provides me the reflexivity, flexibility to carry out fieldwork and the privilege to observe interventions over a period of time.

In terms of music, as Rulan Chao Pian (1992) wrote, “a native researcher is probably quicker to sense the function of music in the culture that they are studying. They would be able to have a better understanding of musical concepts and folk evaluation such as the sources from which music is drawn and the musical ability of individuals”.

Although being a home-fieldworker presents many advantages to conduct research, these advantages are also coupled with disadvantages. As Rulan Chao Pian (1992) states, researching at home also mean that the researcher may form their prejudices by personal experience in the community. This holds true to what I have experienced when I was conducting pre-fieldwork. When I first decided to base my research on my own cultural heritage, I was faced with many negative remarks and vibes by the community. As I spoke to people, I was told by many that the Peranakan culture is dead. “No such thing as Peranakan music”, they said and, that I was wasting my time. Other remarked that I should look into the musical culture of *dondang sayang* or *seroni* music. The art of *dondang sayang* was performed vigorously by the community through a good amount of banter. However, the art of spontaneous *pantun* exchange and bantering is lost with the older generation. Presently, *pantuns* were composed in advanced leading up to an event and was staged instead. The latter, the art of playing *seroni* music died with the master teacher and only old recordings of the music is left behind. I was turned away by many who do not wish to share. Coupled with the stories I hear from my relatives and friends, I resorted to my long held prejudice and self-loathing notion that the Peranakan are arrogant and selfish people. Perhaps that could also be the reason why many younger generations are not interested in identifying themselves as a Peranakan or are ignorant about their cultural heritage. Nonetheless, my journey began with researching the Peranakan musical culture started when I encountered a preliminary research article on the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) written by Sarkissian (2012). I did what every ethnomusicology student did: I listened and I asked questions. I started to pay

attention and realised there was something worth documenting. Encompassed in the songs the members of PPCM sing, I saw how this speaks and reflects the progression of the community through independence and toward a modern Malaysia. This finally lead me to identify the research topic for this masters project. I definitely was put through the whole process of deconstructing and altering my view and perception of my culture, constantly juggling between the role of an “insider/native” and “outsider”. As Turnbull (1986) observed, while doing fieldwork, one has to “reach inside,” to give up the “old, narrow, limited self, discovering the new self that is right and proper in the new context.” By using field experience, “to know ourselves more deeply by conscious subjectivity.”

### **3.8 Positionality**

Doing research at home brings about its many intricacies. In my case when doing research with the Peranakan community in PPCM, my role as a native researcher, I believe, shortens the period of becoming an “insider” to the community. My relationship with the members of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka was established by my constant visits and frequent involvement in their association activities and by being a daughter of an active member in the community. Being an insider to the community allows me to take on a “native” researcher role. By “native”, I am referring to a shared ethnicity with the community that I have selected to base this research on. Chiener (2002) differentiate herself from Rulan Chao Pian (1992) as someone whom is already an experienced musician within the tradition in which she was investigating ethnomusicologically in contrast to Rulan Chao Pian's take on the word “native” as having a shared ethnicity.

My first encounter with the members of Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) in the year 2013 when I did a case study of the *seroni* music during the Chap Goh Meh celebration in Melaka for my undergraduate thesis. Although I am a Peranakan,

I was not welcome in the activity back then. This was because, one, I only had brief contact with a few members of the association. Two, I joined the Chap Goh Meh celebration carrying a handheld recorder and camera as if I was a journalist or reporter. This gesture did not receive friendly vibes. However, after a year and the half I embarked on another journey of conducting this research with the community once again. I started by attending Tuesdays Sing-along night and Wednesday bingo night held at the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. Being a younger person in their midst (most of the association members are elderly folks), I was the subject of curiosity. Across the room I can hear whispers of “*who is she?*”, “*Whose daughter is that?*”. The Baba Nyonya community identify others by their genealogy and geographically. For example, who your grandparents or parents are and where do/did they live/lived helps them make references to their own genealogy and geographic placement of their family. Most of the time, you will find that someone is somehow related to someone either by blood, marriage and rarely, through adoption. As many knew my father, who is now the vice president of Persatuan Peranakan Cina Association (PPCM), I was readily accepted and warmly received this time.

A “native” researcher always have to deal with the dilemma of how much should one becomes an “insider” or “native” but still finding the balance of being a detached observer and looking at things objectively (Finnegan, 1989; Rulan Chao Pian, 1992). Similarly, my positionality as a “native researcher” is a complex one. This does not mean that I know everything about the culture. It is very much a learning process for me, as I take the role of a student, and in this case, as younger person who is interested to know more about the Peranakan culture, about my own culture. I have to constantly remind myself to shift roles from an “insider” to an “outsider” to better understand different viewpoints and conduct my research unbiasedly.

### 3.9 Conceptual Framework

In analysing this study on Peranakan musical culture, I have adopted a few conceptual frameworks to best describe my findings and organisation of ideas. Firstly, I look at Geertz's idea of *thick description* and how writing my ethnography in that style paints a better image of the social relations in regards to the musical activities in PPCM. Secondly, I adopt Turino's work on *performance participation* to describe the Peranakan social aspect of musical activities and the *indexes and iconicity* of pop music to look at their song repertoire. Thirdly, I adopt Frith's work on how identity is created by experiencing music and drawing alliance from the songs we listen to.

To understand the rich social tapestry of the Peranakan musical life in PPCM, I take on Geertz's explication of „thick description“ for this research. Before I explain how this applies to my research, I will briefly explain what is „thick description“—a term which he borrowed from Gilbert Ryle. In his book, Geertz equates ethnography to thick description because—apart from establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing text, and so on— doing ethnography is a kind of intellectual effort that includes an elaborate venture, with the object of ethnography having a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures. An ethnographer is often faced with a “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures” which are “superimposed upon” one another, where he/she must be able “to grasp and then to render” (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, doing ethnography is describing and interpreting these description. These description can be „thick“ as to portray fieldwork at its best in text and followed by an analysis in sorting out the structures of significance and determining their social grounds and import.

In this research on Peranakan musical culture in PPCM, I deal with the social relations that revolves around the musical activities. As Geertz also stated ethnography is “what practitioners do”, I identified social hierarchies in the musical groups, performance context and performance style, members' participations, song choices in the repertoire,

the dynamics of the choir group BaNya, the Melodian band and the D'Bunga Rampay dance group, the genealogies of the members that influenced the makeup of these music and dance groups. All these are best described as “thick” as to give the best portrayal to understand the musical culture at of the Peranakan in the present and its development from the past. This is evident in the fieldwork analysis in Chapter 4.

Peranakan musical activities involve social interaction which invites group participation amongst community members. Turino’s framework on *participation performance*, which suggests that performances where there are no artist-audience distinction, where everyone can participate in the sound and motion performance describes aptly the dynamics of the PPCM musical group. For example, the Tuesday-Night Sing-along invites any association member to get-together for fellowship through singing songs of they like such as the “evergreens”, *keronchong* songs, Malay folk songs. This sing-along session is always lead by an amateur band, comprised of anyone who can play musical instrument. Besides that, in their dinner and dance events, which is the highlight of the year, the contemporary-pop ensemble the Melodians plays, the community members come together for social dancing.

Music in this context is a representation of a celebration and social interactions realised in a specialised way through playing music and dancing. Turino stated that the primary attention is on the „activity, or about the “the doing” and social interaction than about creating an artistic product or commodity. Through sound and motion and on the activity, social bonding is created through this special kind of concentration on the other people one is interacting with. Thus, it leads to diminishing self-consciousness as everyone present is (ideally) similarly engaged in the activity. When the Peranakan community come together for these activities, a solidarity of enjoying the dance, music creates a sense of collective identity through these heightened concentration of interaction with others.



Apart from Turino's concept of participation performance, I also adopt his concept of iconicity. Additionally, social bonding through musical activities in the community usually creates social identity based on some kind of iconicity. This iconicity is often the recognition of similar habits and features that allow individuals to group themselves and others. The profound features of a Peranakan event—dinner and dance parties, Christmas parties, Tuesday Night Sing-along—is music and dance. One feature of these musical activities is that they indexed the iconicity of 'nostalgia' through their song repertoire. These song repertoire were global and regional top hits in the first half of the 20th century and were once indexed as 'modern'. This corresponded to the modern and forward-looking, colonial-elite lifestyle of the Peranakan in the early 20th century. Another feature of the song repertoire indexed the idea of 'cosmopolitan', 'urban', and a community open to adaptation. Over the years, these songs became dated but are still sung by the community. They are then indexed as 'old' or 'evergreen' which corresponded to the nostalgia the community have of their 'good old days'. Through a process Turino calls 'semiotic identity', which refers to the number of potential signs occurring simultaneously. He demonstrated how music and dance are combined in new ways to create decent indices of social identity. Turino's work is helpful in reading the social identity of the Peranakan community in PPCM for this study.

Another work that describes music and construction of identity through social group activities is Frith's (1996) writing on *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Here, I focus on Frith's argument that emotional alliances are drawn with other fans (in this case, other Peranakan) when experiencing pop music.

The Peranakan song repertoire are regional and global pop music that many of the community members identify with as songs of their youth and reminder of the 'good old days'. To look at this, Frith in his article suggest that music, like identity is both performance and story that describes the social in the individual and the individual in the

social. If it is a metaphor for identity, then the self is imagined but can only be imagined as a particular organisation of social, physical and material forces. This symbolises and offer the immediate experience of a collective identity.

The experience of pop music is an experience of identity where emotional alliances are drawn with other fans (in this case, other Peranakan). According to Frith, music with its qualities of abstractness, by nature is an individualising form. We hear things as music because their sounds obey a more or less familiar cultural logic. Therefore, it offers the immediate experiences of collective identity. This experience describes both a social process and a form of interaction where ethical codes and social ideologies are understood. Musical identity not only idealises the social world one inhabits but it is also real and often enacted in musical activities. The Peranakan song repertoire comprised of a mixture of American and European top hits, Malay regional pop and folk songs, and songs in other languages such as Chinese, Tamil and Tagalog. The repertoire exhibit a kind of openness of the community in accepting different cultural features. This is also due to the fact that the Peranakan community were centred in the once bustling cosmopolitan Straits Settlement where constant cultural exchange and socialisation took place. Although these songs are drawn from various sources and languages, they are compiled as a repertoire by the Peranakan community and sung and performed at Peranakan events. The Peranakan community sing and dance to these songs. Hence, bring a sense of a collective identity.

### **3.10 Writing Style**

The writing style I used in this research is one of a realist-confessional and sometimes, an impressionist one. The ethnographic writing of a realist is the most popular and recognised form. Van Maanen (2011) describes that the realist writing is in a documentary form and sees the complete absence of the author from the finished text.

The “I” is taken out of ethnographic report to show an enhanced authority of the narrator so that to eliminate the worries of readers from debatable and biased personal subjectivity of the author. On the contrary, confessional ethnographic writing establishes an intimacy with readers, portraying personalised authority to show how the research came into being. For example, a realist writing is seen as “The musician play...” whereas a confessional writing is seen as “I saw the musician playing.” Clifford (1983), described two conventional ways of confessional writing would appeal to audience: One for the ethnographer to take the role of a simple student of the observed group and two, to take the role of a translator or interpreter of an indigenous text made available to the ethnographer in the field. Confessional writing constitutes the field experience of the author. The impressionist writing is often constructed in a form of essay and represented like a novel with striking stories, filled with metaphors, phrasing, imagery and like what Van Maanen (2011) calls it “expansive fieldwork experience”. It is of dramatic form, encompassed the most memorable and notable tales regarded by the author in the field. Its aim is to keep both subject and object in constant view, drawing an audience into an unfamiliar world through which they may experience what the fieldworker experienced as closely as possible.

The realist-confessional-impressionist ethnographic writing has been popular with the field of ethnomusicology. As Titon (2008) countered that music is to be understood as a lived experience, in contrast to it being read strictly as a text, I stand by this statement. My reason for choosing such style of writing of ethnographic writing is that a realist tales helps to present the data collected in the field in an organised and neutral manner. The confessional writing allows me as a fieldworker to narrate and appear relatable to my reader. Some form of impressionist writing in this research would allow the reader to see, hear, feel what is experienced during the research with the Baba Nyonya community in PPCM.

### **3.11 Chapter conclusion**

As an overview, this chapter discussed the research methods employed in this study. Qualitative analysis constitutes much of the research method with discussion of the implications as a “home” field research studying about my own heritage and people. Geertz’s concept of ‘thick description’ in writing ethnographic accounts is employed as a method in this research. The results can be seen in Chapter 4.

University of Malaya

## **CHAPTER 4 FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The fieldwork findings in this chapter discusses social aspect of the musical groups in Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka by examining the development and implications of the three musical/performing groups – the BaNya, The Melodians and D'Bunga Rampay through examples of their activities. These groups developed from family genealogy within the association, which in turn influenced the shared song repertoire performed by these 3 groups. I illustrated this through the readings of field notes of two main events of the year: the Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance, and PPCM Anniversary Dinner and Dance, in which these events portrayed the performances by the BaNyas, The Melodians and D'Bunga Rampay dancers. This is followed by background and the implications of the groups' formations, genealogical data relevant to the groups' development, how the genealogy influence the shared song repertoire compiled and performed by the community and what it reflects and articulates. Lastly, I discuss the musical styles and a section about song text with particular examples on lyrics composed in the Baba Malay.

The fieldwork findings demonstrate two things: (1) the reinvention and the representation of Peranakan identity through their newly developed musical activities provides the Peranakan a way to continue their musical heritage, rediscovery and maintain their cultural identity and (2) the song repertoire reflects genealogy as a strong pillar in terms of reproducing their identity through the connection of two families which is interpreted as a way to construct their identity through narrative memories of songs.

### **4.2 PPCM as a social club**

The Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) functions not only as a social club for fellowships amongst the Peranakan community in Melaka, but it is also a place where

collective identity of the Peranakan is visible. The Baba Malay, which is one of the marker of Peranakan identity, is often heard spoken by community members here.

The majority of PPCM members are mostly 50 years old and older and many are retirees. They join the association activities as a way to have fellowship and past time. Singing and performing becomes a way for them to express themselves and their identity, and nostalgise about the ‘good old days’ of their youth through the song repertoire. The community comes together weekly for Tuesday Night Sing-along and a Wednesday Bingo night. One of the main events of PPCM is the Chinese New Year, and anniversary themed dinner and dance events. Other PPCM events are fundraising food fair, cooking demonstration, festive celebrations like Christmas parties, Mooncake festival; New Year Countdown, and sometimes State-sanctioned cultural events. Any Peranakan events—weddings, dinner and dance — is never complete without music and dance, where the BaNya choir group would sing a medley of songs and the The Melodians band would provide the music for dancing throughout the event. A dance group called the D’Bunga Rampay dancers was formed recently to perform Peranakan “cultural” dance for events. There is a popular saying that “Peranakan like to jolly”, which translate from a Malaysian-Peranakan-English into “Peranakan love a good song and dance”. This is profoundly depicted in the two of the annual dinner and dance event of PPCM association – Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance and Association Anniversary Dinner and Dance. I give a brief historical background of the dinner and dance tradition followed by a reading of the 2017 dinner and dance events.

#### **4.3 PPCM Dinner and Dance Tradition**

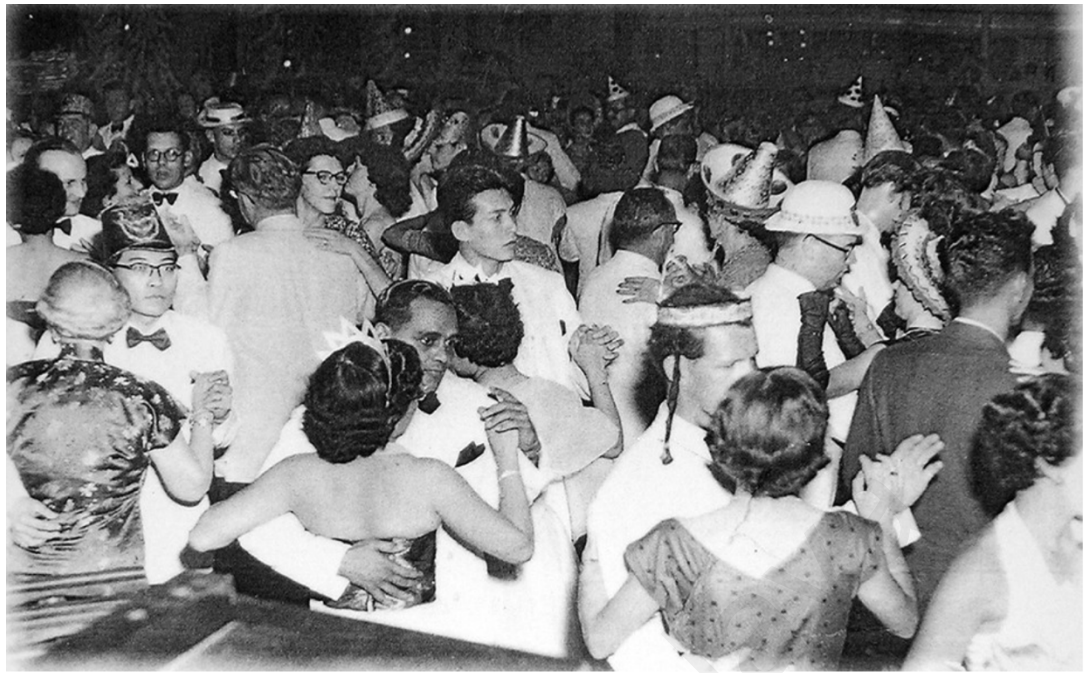
The dinner and dance has been a long-standing tradition of the Peranakan community since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition is a result of their working relationship with the British Colonial government. Since the Peranakan were awarded

British citizenship, they adopted an anglophilic lifestyle. Dinner and dance parties or themed dinner and dance parties became part of their lifestyle, where ball-gowns and tuxedos were normal dinner attires (see *Figure 4.1*). In the present, these are replaced by colourful *sarong kebaya* worn by the Nyonya while men wore *baju Cina* for Peranakan events.<sup>24</sup> This change in outfit demonstrates their search for a representation of their identity through a “traditional” costumes. However, the *sarong kebaya* was only made popular in the 1920s.

Besides organizing dinner and dance in Chinese restaurants, the dinner and dance is alternatively held at PPCM club house on Heeren, catering to a smaller, and more intimate crowd of 15 tables; 10 persons for each table. For Chinese New Year dinner, the committee members would come together a week before to put up Chinese New Year decorations. A food caterer company is called to cater the food for the night. Another occasion that they come together for a dinner and dance is during the PPCM anniversary club house anniversary celebration. As of 2017, PPCM has celebrated their 117<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Similar to what described in the field notes above, the dinner is held at L.T.P. Restaurant catering to a bigger crowd when PPCM members invited their friends, family and members of other associations they are part of. As always, in both of this dinner and dance, BaNya and Melodian band never fail to make a presence. The night would end with a lot of dancing with Melodians providing the music.

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<sup>24</sup> This is the case for Melaka. In the other two settlement states in Penang and Singapore, the *baju panjang* (translate as long dress which is a loose, calf-length tunic with sleeves that tapered at the wrists, worn with *kerongsang* and a high bunned hair) is a choice of “traditional” dress to represent Peranakan culture. Peranakan men would dress in *baju cina*, the Malaysian and the latter, men wear Indonesian batik shirts to represent the “Peranakan costume”.



**Figure 4.1**  
Theme dinner and dance party (not sure of date and event).  
(Photo from PPCM clubhouse).

The dinner and dance parties are held for members to congregate for a celebration. However, it is also the main source to generate funding for the maintenance of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka clubhouse on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (locally known as Heeren Street) through the sale of ticket at dinner and dance parties. The committee members of PPCM is charged with the duty to look for funding for the association.<sup>25</sup> Besides being a member of PPCM, the Peranakan community in PPCM are also members of different associations and bodies in Melaka, such as the Melaka Cancer

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<sup>25</sup> For the dinner and dance, about certain percentage from the sale of ticket goes into the association building and maintenance funds. For example, each table (10 person for 1 table) is sold at RM600 and 20% goes to the association fund. However, each committee member of PPCM is charged at RM1000 per table where they will invite family members or friends to join the dinner and dance. According to Peter Ong, who is the Vice President of PPCM (exchange of Whatsapp messages on 4 April 2018), anniversary dinner will normally be held at restaurant as they can cater for more, in his words “more tables, meaning more money,” If the dinner and dance is held at the PPCM clubhouse, they can only cater to a maximum of 15 tables because of limited space. Besides that, funding was also collected from the annual food fair held at the clubhouse, and from the weekly Wednesday Tombola “bingo” Night when members and their friends get-together for a game of bingo, and membership renewal in PPCM.



Society, Buddhist societies, line-dancing classes, ballroom dancing and so on. This allows them to create their own network for fund-seeking.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.3.1 Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance**

PPCM's Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance is held after the fifteen days of the Lunar New Year so that the get-together did not interfere with family celebrations of the Lunar New Year during the fifteen days. The dinner and dance is usually held at a Chinese restaurant or alternatively at the PPCM clubhouse at no. 149 & 151, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. If it is held in a Chinese restaurant, Lim Tian Puan (L.T.P.) restaurant is always PPCM's choice for hosting their dinner and dance. Locally known by its acronym L.T.P., the restaurant is preferred by the association because of the centrality of the location in Melaka and the big space it provides. Most importantly, it serves a practical purpose: it is one of the few banquet halls in Melaka which is located on the ground floor, and this provided convenience for the elderly members of PPCM who find it a challenge to climb up flights of stairs. The dinner and dance guest are usually members of the PPCM association with extended invitations to their friends and family. People come to have a "Peranakan" get-together, enjoyed with a lot of music and social dancing.

The subsequent sub-sections below are a snippet from my field note of 17 February 2017 Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance titled "Taon Baru Combine Dinner and Dance" accompanied with readings that provided representation of their identity.

#### **4.3.2 "I am not a cina gerk": Celebrating Chinese Heritage**

*The restaurant did not conceal its flair of Chinese-ness even if the Chinese New Year celebration was over. I was greeted by big red Chinese lanterns hanging*

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<sup>26</sup> For example, members of PPCM would extend the invitation for the annual dinner and dance to their fellow friends and members from the respective associations they join, and vice-versa if other associations have their fundraising dinners or events. The support of each other is vital to the survival of these associations, such as PPCM.

down from the ceiling and smaller ones lined from ceiling to the floor creating a curtain of red lanterns on both sides of the entrance. An old 1950s white Austin of England was displayed at the entrance, draped with a red cloth across the hood, (the kind you find over door frames during Chinese New Year), knotted in the middle, seems to quietly speaks of the British colonial heritage leftover in Malaysia. Pink Chinese Meihua or 梅花 (plum flowers) made out of cloth were stuck on dry branches stood beside the entrance door. We walked through a floral arch which felt misplaced for the Chinese New Year theme. But thought that it was probably a multipurpose decoration used for many occasion including wedding banquets. Behind the entrance door was a huge banquet hall, left and right side of the entrance was more Chinese New Year decorations of red and fake firecrackers made out of polystyrenes. On the sides of the door were a pair of 对联 or “dui lian” (Chinese couplet of well-wishes idiom) written on red paper. One thing that stood out was an old pulled-rickshaw incorporated as part of the restaurant decoration. In front of the hall was a stage with a backdrop in red with huge words spread across “Taon Baru Dinner and Dance”. The stage was crowded with the set-up of musical instruments such as a drumset, a pair of conga, the keyboard, lead guitar, bass guitar and the accordion. Mics were set up.

Described in the snippet from my field note above, hosting the dinner and dance in a Chinese restaurant like L.T.P., boastful with red Chinese lanterns and Chinese New Year decorations reflects the Peranakan community’s pride in celebrating their Chinese heritage (see **Figure 4.2**). If the dinner and dance is held at the clubhouse, members from the committee and Lady’s Section would set-up Chinese decorations the week before. Although the Peranakans were mostly English educated and anglophiles but at the same

time, they observe all Chinese celebrations - Chinese New Year being the main celebration of the year - and upkeep their ancestral customs and practices more diligently than their Chinese counterpart. Yet, they do not identify themselves as “Chinese”, instead nicknamed the larger Chinese community as “gerk<sup>27</sup>” or “cina gerk” amongst themselves. Discussed earlier in the background of study, the Peranakan identity in Melaka proved problematic after the Independence of Malaya. This is because they had to integrate collectively into the larger Chinese community because politically they are considered “Chinese”. The adoption of the “Chinese” identity is further enforced in official documents, when a Peranakan would have to state their race as “Chinese” out of the four options of “Malay”, “Chinese”, “Indian”, and “Others” because they have Chinese names. Before the 1980s when the Peranakan culture gained popularity, many from the Peranakan community were ashamed to be known as a “Peranakan” or “Baba nyonya”. They were ridiculed for being an “OCBC” an acronym of *orang Cina bukan Cina*, which translate to “Chinese descent but not unable to speak the Chinese language”. In contrast to pre-war days, the Peranakan were British subjects and they differentiate themselves from the Chinese migrants by calling them “sinkhek”, meaning “new guest”.

The get-together of Peranakan for dinner and dance events also further asserts their identity, as Baba Malay is naturally and sometimes deliberately spoken when otherwise only remains in the domestic domains and spoken amongst the older generation. This is seen on the stage banner of the event titled “Taon Baru”. The term is a transliterated spelling from the Baba Malay pronunciation of “Tahun Baru”, a standard Bahasa Malaysia spelling, which means “New Year”.

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<sup>27</sup> The term “gerk” to the Peranakan denotes a non-baba person and is seen as lower class and less “refined” person. By using the term, Peranakan show their superiority in class and culture. I believe this term is synonym with “sinkhek” which refers to newly immigrated Chinese from mainland China in the early 20th century. I also believe that this notion is somehow brought forward to the present, although economically and politically there really isn’t much a difference between the Chinese and Peranakan.



**Figure 4.2**  
Taon Baru Dinner and Dance, photo taken on 17 February 2017.  
(Photo taken by me).

#### 4.3.3 BaNya: An Opening Act

*To “open” the dinner and dance, the BaNya walked single-file into the centre of hall where the dance floor is. This time, the BaNya have more ladies as compared to men. A total of 14 ladies, mostly dressed in cheongsam and a few in sarong kebaya, stand two rows in front while seven men, dressed in batik shirt and baju cina stand one row at the back. The pre-recorded music blasted through the speakers, the ladies were unsure how to sway. Some started swaying left, some started swaying right. Some looked clueless. Auntie Anita, who stood in the middle gave a cue and everyone followed her direction. They started singing to the song “choo sin nian”, a parody of the popular Chinese New Year tune “贺新年” (translated as “wishing you happy new year”). The song lyrics was in Baba Malay depicting how Peranakan celebrate Chinese New Year. Then the English version was sung. I knew through my interviews that the song lyrics was written by Daniel*

*Ang and Ruby Tan. The song transition into the tune of She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain but this time the lyrics went "Happy, Happy New Year Gong Xi Ni" The medley went on for about five minutes, accompanied with a choreography of hand movements and dancing on the spot. It was quite coordinated. I later learned that Mummy and aunty Siok Hoon choreographed the dance move to go along with the singing. The crowd sang along and clapped along. After that food was served one dish at a time - an eight-course meal typically served in Chinese restaurants.*

The dinner and dance always includes a choir performance from the BaNya for the opening, usually a medley of popular "evergreen" tunes or parody of popular songs (see **Figure 4.3**). The songs are selected accordingly to the theme of the event by the present choir leader, Chin Siok Hoon. For example, as described in the field notes, popular Chinese New Year tunes are borrowed for the medley but replaced with words describing the Peranakan community way of celebrating Chinese New Year. The music is arranged by Daniel Ang (who is also a member of the Melodian band) and song lyrics for "Choo Sin Nian" was written by him. Following the medley, "Happy Happy New Year" is a tune borrowed from "She'll be coming round the mountain". The lyrics were written and arranged by Daniel Ang. The community borrows popular tunes because it is easily sing-able for the community members. The lyrics are written in Baba Malay and reflected the Peranakan life and is seen as a way for them to assert their identity as a Peranakan. In the sections below, I will provide an analysis of the selected song text.

Besides that, to make it visually enjoyable, simple movements were choreographed by Chin Siok Hoon and Julie Wee, were added along while the BaNya sings. The movements included swaying their body gently from side to side to sing along to the music; both hands waving; turning on the spot and move on their feet from side to side.

The ladies usually put on the sarong-kebaya when they perform; and men will

wear the batik shirt. But as it was a Chinese New Year event, the Cheongsam and a *baju Cina* were also worn to suit the theme of the event. Coupled with the song that they sing, the performance portrays the negotiation of the Peranakan identity and their Chinese heritage.



**Figure 4.3**  
BaNya performing a medley at the Taon Baru dinner and dance.  
(Photo taken by me).

#### 4.3.4 Joget and Be Jolly

*After the performances, The Melodians-Sweet Memories band took the stage to a few dance numbers such as waltzes, cha-cha and rumba and a joget number. This time it was a combined group of members from The Melodians and Sweet Memories who provided the music for the whole night. You would think we were only into the second dish and everyone was hungry, but as the music started playing, a few couples took to the floor, showing off their well-rehearsed ballroom*

*dance steps. After going through a few more dishes, more people went to the dance floor. A group of ladies started doing line-dancing. The atmosphere was merry. I got up to join the line-dancing, trying to imitate the steps of the crowd. By this time, I see that some tables are enjoying the whiskey they had brought to share. Some had beer served to them. Other music that was played were “jinkly nona”, a tune popularly associated with the Portuguese-urasian community. This was sung with flair by the lead singer, Tony Franco who is of Portuguese-urasian descent. Helena Hay took over for some Chinese 1980s pop number and mostly sang in Hokkien and Mandarin. The bassist Zakariah took turn to sing joget numbers and one of them being “joget burung tiong”. The crowd on the dance floor whipped up their joget style dancing moving their left legs forward then they switched legs; arms open, with the wrist twisting in and out.*

*When the music stopped after a medley of a few tunes, everyone got back to their seat and continue eating. When the music started again, people got up to dance again. It went on like that throughout the night. Later in the night, Sweet Memories band took over the stage while The Melodians took a break to enjoy the dinner and dance. Tony Franco and Helena took turns to sing. After dessert was served at 10pm, one by one people started leaving but the dance floor was still crowded with people doing ballroom dancing with their partner, line-dancing, and a lot of twisting and shaking. In between, some members took turn on the stage to croon over Chinese numbers and evergreens. Toward the end of the evening, the atmosphere was so hyped up people started creating smaller dance space by dancing their respective circles. And then members of the circle took turns to show their dance move. Then a conga line was formed and literally everyone joined in the parade around the hall. The dinner and dance ended when the band stopped*

*playing at 11pm. People said their goodbyes and left with high-spirit for the weekend.*

The most important part of the dinner and dance event is always the *joget* session led by the contemporary pop ensemble The Melodians combined with the Sweet Memories as they provided dance music throughout the night. The idea was that the dinner guests would come and “jolly”, a word which is used interchangeably with the Malay word ‘joli’ to mean “to have fun and have a good time”. Food quality is important too but not as important as a spacious dance floor for everyone to join in for a good *joget* or social dancing (see **Figure 4.4**). This is the time when dinner guests start doing line-dancing, ballroom dancing with their partners or simply just shaking and twisting. (see **Figure 4.5**). The band played a mix of “evergreen” tunes in the musical style of rumba, waltzes, cha-cha, quickstep, foxtrot, *joget*; sang songs in English, Malay, Chinese and Kristang.<sup>28</sup> Examples of songs were the “Jinkly nona”, “poco-poco”,<sup>29</sup> “Achy-breaky heart”, “Bésame mucho”, “Before the next teardrop falls”, “Bunyi guitar” and so on.

The eclectic mix of song repertoire reflects the community’s openness to embrace songs in different languages which reveals their negotiation with different identities—western-centric and anglophilic, Chinese, and Malay—which constitutes what one would call a “Peranakan”. Their preference of “old” popular tunes from the 1920s to the 1970s reflects an aging community who reminisces about their youth through music from that era. Evidently the majority who joins the dinner and dance event are mostly people who are 40 years old and above. This dance culture is transmitted from their parents’ generation and dates back to the British colonial period where dinner and dance parties were a part of Peranakan lifestyle, and ballroom dancing was the dance style. However,

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<sup>28</sup> Kristang is a Portuguese creole spoken by the minority Portuguese- Eurasian group in Melaka. It is mostly an oral language.

<sup>29</sup> “Poco-poco” is a Indonesian pop-song that made its way into Malaysian line-dancing scene. As the Peranakan community enjoy dancing, they are also members of line-dancing groups in Melaka.



the incorporation of *joget* or social dancing was probably due to the influence of Malay films such as P. Ramlee films in the 1960s to 1970s that were propagated through night clubs throughout the nation.



**Figure 4.4**

PPCM association members and their guest enjoying the joget session, music provided by the Melodian and Sweet Memories Band.

*(Photo credits to Raymond Mah).*



**Figure 4.5**

PPCM association members and their guest enjoying the joget session, music provided by the Melodian and Sweet Memories Band.

*(Photo credit to Raymond Mah).*

#### **4.3.5 Dancing Peranakan Culture: D'Bunga Rampay dancers**

*After the BaNya finished performing as the opening act, a group of 10 ladies, all dressed in sarong-kebaya, dispersed from the BaNya and hurried to the middle of the dance floor. They form the D'Bunga Rampay dancers, which were the next performance. They stood in two rows in single-file, five people in each group facing each other. They stood in position: left hand on their hips; right hand holding a sequin-covered cloth fan against their chest. When the music started playing (I recognised it to be R. Azmi's Memikat Hati), the ladies walked toward each other with hips swaying and fans flapping towards and away from their chest. They formed two rows facing each other and started with their dance choreography that involved creating a circle, moving in interlocking movements on the dance floor.*

#### 4.3.5 (i) D'Bunga Rampay dancers and the implications of its development

The snippet of field notes above was from PPCM 117th Anniversary Dinner and Dance that took place on 29 September 2017. After the BaNya, the D'Bunga Rampay dancers were next to showcase a dance item (see **Figure 4.6**). D'Bunga Rampay dance group started in 2016 to perform for PPCM's anniversary dinner and dance. This all-women dance group, led by Julie Wee and Chin Siok Hoon performed as opening acts in the 2016 and 2017 PPCM anniversary dinner and dance which usually takes place in September, and at Lillian Tong and Peter Wee's book launch event in 2017 held at the Straits Chinese Embroidery & Beadwork Museum Melaka. The song repertoire used for dance are Malay pop hits from the 1950s-1970s.

The formation of this group was encouraged by the previous president of PPCM, Datuk Phua Jin Hock with the motivation that PPCM has its own dance group. This was seen as (1) a response to the indirect peer pressure from the other two existing Peranakan associations in Melaka -Persatuan Peranakan Cina Malaysia and Badan Kesenian Baba Nyonya Melaka (KEBAYA) - who respectively have their dance group, and 2) to represent the Peranakan identity in a form of a dance group. However, there were no such groups prior to the 1980s.

Peranakan dance groups made its appearance in the late 1980s in Government organised cultural show or government event to portray a multicultural Malaysia by showcasing dancers in "traditional" ethnic costume dancing together with the same choreography, igniting a sense of "multicultural co-existence, an image far from the established reality".<sup>30</sup> As a result, one-off Peranakan dance groups were formed to perform at these cultural shows. It was not until 1996 when a group named Badan

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<sup>30</sup> Sarkissian's article on *Tradition, tourism, and the cultural show: Malaysia's diversity on display* addressed the implications of these cultural dancing groups by doing a case study in the Melaka case in the early 1990s. Her article demonstrated the Peranakan dancing group as "Baba Nyonya Dance".

Kesenian Baba dan Nyonya (KEBAYA) was formed by a (retired) school teacher, a Peranakan from Bukit Rambai named Koh Kim Bok, to solely perform dances and mock-weddings for State-organised events and cultural shows. The dance choreography was then mostly taught by Briged Seni in the past and presently by Jabatan Kesenian dan Kebudayaan Negara (JKKN or National Department for Culture and Arts) open to the acceptance of KEBAYA members to add or leave out certain choreography movements.

The brief introduction to KEBAYA here is vital in understanding the formation of PPCM's D'Bunga Rampay Dancers. This is because Julie Wee (my mother), who was previously a long-term active member in KEBAYA, organises the dance choreography of D'Bunga Rampay dancers. The dance choreography is mostly influenced by the dance that she learned during her time in KEBAYA. The song repertoire was also taken from KEBAYA. However, these songs were also popular amongst the Peranakan community and is part of the BaNya song repertoire. Examples of songs are the Indonesian "Gambang Semarang", "Memikat Hati", "Pakay Kebaya", and "Nyonya Pakay Bunga". It is interesting to point out that the song repertoire consists mostly of Malay songs. As this research focuses more on the shared song repertoire, the further discussion of this dance group will be left out. Nonetheless, it is note-worthy to point out that the leaders of the D'Bunga Rampay dancers, Julie Wee and Chin Siok Hoon, who have inclination and interest in dancing, were elected as leaders based on the consensus of PPCM members.



**Figure 4.6**

D'Bunga Rampay dancers performing for PPCM 117<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Dinner and Dance Group leaders Julie Wee in yellow kebaya; Chin Siok Hoon in dark green kebaya further back.

*(Photo taken by me).*

#### **4.4 The makings of BaNya and its implications**

The BaNya started out from the sing-along sessions in PPCM association. Mentioned earlier in the Background of Study, photos compiled in albums revealed the start of sing-along and music playing activities in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. This was also the birth of Tuesday Night Sing-along, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

The BaNya are made up of women and men who are older than 50 years old. They are active members of PPCM who attend the weekly Tuesday Night Sing-along and Wednesday Bingo Night. The BaNya made its appearance at the 1994 Peranakan convention. What started as a humble gathering to enjoy a session of song-singing became an expression to represent and showcase the Peranakan community in a form of performance. The group performs medleys of popular Anglo-American evergreen tunes, song parodies, Chinese, Malay, Indian songs. The group receives invitations to perform at association dinner and dance parties, association members' birthdays, weddings, and

state function. These engagement requests for BaNya's performances were received by Susan Chin, who is the chairperson of the Ladies Section (the Ladies Section oversees the organization of Tuesday Night Sing-along and BaNya choir group). Susan Chin would then inform Ruby, and Ruby would call the BaNya to set up practice sessions leading up to the event they are supposed to perform.

The name "BaNya" is an abbreviation and combination of the word "Baba and Nyonya". According to Ang Geok Keng (father of Daniel Ang, Interview, 13 March 2017), "You know... how the BaNyas got its name. Who gave the name to the BaNyas? We had a meeting, so there is a group, there must be a name to it. So everybody starting thinking then uncle Lee Juan named it the Baba and Nyonya. That time we named it Baba and Nyonya. Then, we call it BaNya.". They decided on a name for the choir group and the name stayed with them for twenty-four years now.

The BaNya was led by Ruby Tan, whom naturally filled the role of a choir leader because no one wanted to lead and Ruby was also interested in doing it. She expressed excitedly in an interview (13 March 2017),

"So actually how do I get this choir? This choir, it all just that...

I don't choose anybody. I don't say "you can sing,

you can sing" (pointing with her index-finger into space to imaginary people)

No. My own objective is...actually I help. I don't want. Actually,

I automatically, I sort of become the head of the thing (choir group), know?"

She also emphasized it once again in the same interview saying how she loved doing it.

"The most important thing is that .... I love doing it. And if they love it, I love it.", referring to the BaNya's enjoyment of performing as a group.



#### 4.4.1 BaNya's negotiation and representation of Peranakan identity through song repertoire

As the choir leader, Ruby Tan decides on songs which she deemed appropriate for the audience and the event. When she received phone calls from Susan to request for BaNya's performance, the first question she would inquire is about the background of the audience and the kind of event they were going to perform. For example, the BaNya was engaged to sing for an open-air Chinese New Year celebration in 2002 organised by Melaka State Government, held at Melaka's touristic spot of Jonker Walk, the street next to Heeren Street (see **Figure 4.7**). As it was Chinese New Year, she decided to choose Chinese songs. One of the songs is a popularly known Hokkien-dialect tune from the 1970s-1980s, called "Ai Piah Cia Eh Yia" (爱拼才会赢) translates as "work hard and you'll win". Instead of singing the original Hokkien version, Ruby did a translation into Baba Malay for the BaNya to sing.<sup>31</sup> The reason behind this is because it is sung for a Malay audience, it is so that they can understand. Another example is that when the audience are Chinese, she would select Chinese songs for the BaNya to sing. Although the Peranakan at large enjoy singing Malay folk tunes and keronchong songs, they have to learn to sing Chinese songs through transliteration of the pronunciation for a Chinese audience. Ruby insisted on this because many times the Peranakan have been mistaken as being a Malay because of the songs they sing. This sentiment is reflected in her words from the same interview on 13 March 2017,

"because why Melayu punya audience, nyanyi lah ni..

*(because of Malay audience, we will sing (Malay songs)...)*

at least dia boleh tau sikit lah..you have to plan lah..what I do is that I have to plan..

*(at least they can understand, you have to plan..)*

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<sup>31</sup> I later found a few other Indonesian versions, similar musical style with interpretation of the original Hokkien lyrics. This is popularly sung by the Indonesian Chinese and Peranakan community there.

so that..the audience will feel happy because Melayu ada...abi..Cina kalu ada...dia tak mo dengah Melayu banyak....

*(the audience will be happy because they can understand Malay...but if it's Chinese audience, they don't want to listen to a lot of Malay songs)*

and then I try to have Chinese songs, you know why?

every now and then kita nyanyi Melayu mia ...real Melayu mia songs.. real Keronchong mia songs...no wonder they said we all Melayu..

*(every now and then we sing Malay songs, "real" Malay songs, "real" Keronchong songs, no wonder they think we're Malay)"*

With BaNya I have to think a lot ah...about how to make that..we are more Peranakan..and then this Cina gerik will say... "aiyo diorang Melayu, know". That's why I have the Chinese song.

*(I have to think of the songs for BaNya about how to show we are Peranakan, or else the Chinese will say "aiyo, they're Malay, you know?" That's why I have the Chinese songs)*

\* bracketed characters are my translation.

Ruby's words above also reflected how the Peranakan community is often a misunderstood minority community. The Peranakan are Chinese in appearance, have Chinese names, practice Chinese customs but the majority cannot speak any Chinese. They generally speak English and the Baba Malay, and incorporates a lot of "Malay" ingredients in their cuisines (such as spices and chili). This is something difficult for the Malay and Chinese community at large to grasp. As Malaysians are political conditioned to think in the compartmentalised terms of three majority ethnic races of "Malay",



“Chinese”, “Indian”<sup>32</sup>—a notion starting from the British colonial rule to the agreement terms of Independence signed by the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and implemented in school textbooks—there is little room of understanding toward minority groups in Malaysia and one example is the Peranakan in Melaka.

Apart from that, another example of BaNya going out of their way to learn songs of a different language is when they were requested to perform at a wedding reception of a Peranakan and an Indian. Ruby picked a Bollywood tune titled “Dilbar Jani Chali Hawa Mastani”, made famous by the critically acclaimed, box office movie “Haathi Mere Saathi”. Other songs that were included in the song repertoire were also popular tunes such as the 1972 Ceylonese-Tamil (also known as Baila) song “Chinna Mamiyeh”<sup>33</sup> and a newer tune from the 1998 award-winning Bollywood film “Kuch Kuch Hota Hei” with the exact same song title. Although the BaNya had to learn the pronunciation through transliteration of the song text, these songs are not foreign to them. The Peranakan community enjoys watching Bollywood films, too. In the 90s, one of Peranakan families’ past time on a Sunday afternoon (especially the nyonya ladies), is to gather in front of the TV from 3pm-6pm, to enjoy 3 hours (inclusive of many advertisements in between) of Bollywood film. These films are well-liked by the Peranakan community as it centres around the theme of romantic love, family, and friendship.<sup>34</sup>

Other notable performances by the BaNya were at the annual Peranakan conventions from 1994 until the late 2000s, the Piala Mesra Piala Perdana 2003 (Badminton tournament) where Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah was the invited VIP; World Youth Assembly in Melaka, and numerous State functions.

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<sup>32</sup> Out of the estimated 28 million population in Malaysia, Bumiputera (Malay, Sarawak and Sabah) make out 68%, Chinese 23.2%, Indian 7% and others 1%. Data taken from Department of Statistics Malaysia Press Release 2016-2017.

<sup>33</sup> Chinna Mamiyeh is also a popular tune amongst another minority ethnic group, the Peranakan Chitty community in Melaka. I suspect it is popular amongst the Peranakan community in Melaka because of the close living proximity of the community and that the Peranakan chitty also speak the Baba Malay.

<sup>34</sup> This was when Malaysia had no Astro cable TV and local television channels were limited to only a few channels. When Astro started in 1996, it was something only the wealthy could afford. Later, Astro is made affordable for almost everyone.



**Figure 4.7**

BaNya with their children/nieces/nephews/grandchildren performing at Jonker Street's Year of the Horse Chinese New Year performance.  
(Photo from PPCM collection).

#### 4.4.2 The collection of PPCM song repertoire

Besides song selection for specific events, Ruby occasionally selected songs to include into the BaNya repertoire, which also became the Tuesday Night Sing-along repertoire. Ruby would actively look for songs. She included many songs that she liked singing and also songs which her mother likes. She would then replay it over and over on her cassette player so that she is able to transcribe the lyrics, and then she would type it out professionally on the typewriter. When Michael Chin started to work as a clerk at the PPCM clubhouse, she would get Michael to type the song lyrics in Word Document to be printed out. She would then photocopy these and distribute it for the sing-along nights or for BaNya performances. With the help of Michael Chin and Robert Seet, they compiled song booklets, half the side of an A4 paper for sing-along sessions. These books were titled "Sing-along with the BaNyas" or "Sing & Be Happy with the BaNyas" (see **Figure 4.8**). The efforts that go into making these included photocopying lyrics sheet, cut and

paste to rearrange them and photocopying and binding multiple copies.



**Figure 4.8**

Song booklets compiled by Ruby Tan, Robert Seet and Michael Chin. The left side is the older one while the right side is the newer one, with photos of BaNya and the Melodian band.

Sometimes, PPCM members would bring a few songs to be included into the song repertoire. In 25 years, the collection of song repertoire transformed from a small booklet to an A4 file-binder filled with lyrics sheet, indexed according to languages, tagged with page number. This is used for Tuesday Night sing-along and it is further discussed below.

The Chinese language songs were included with the help of a sing-along group member and member of PPCM, whom is non-Peranakan but enjoyed singing oldies and performing them. Ruby sought the help of Johnny Tan, fondly and jokingly nicknamed as “ah long” (meaning loan shark in Hokkien) because he helped the ladies buy lottery tickets. Ruby got cassette recordings from Johnny and selects one to two songs from the ones that she got. As she cannot read or write Chinese characters, she would write the

transliterations lyrics of the Chinese pronunciation by rewinding and playing multiple times on the cassette player. She then would bring the song and the transliterated lyrics to the BaNyas to sing-along. Johnny would help the group with the pronunciation. However, he needed the Chinese characters to teach the BaNya the proper pronunciation. He then sought his friend, who owned a record shop called Chong on Jalan Bendahara, Melaka, to get the song lyrics in the Chinese characters, only then he could teach the BaNya the proper pronunciation. The Chinese songs included popular tunes from the 1970s-80s in Hokkien, Mandarin, Cantonese.

#### **4.4.3 The Makings of “Peranakan Songs”**

In the song repertoire, many popular tunes “became” Peranakan songs as Ruby borrowed the melody and rewrote the song lyrics in Baba Malay, reflecting the Peranakan community. She expressed that she had sleepless nights thinking of new song lyrics. “I tell you, I can’t sleep. At night in bed, if I hear whatever words suitable for the lyrics, I quickly get it and started writing. And then I go back to bed. Or else tomorrow I would have forgotten them”.<sup>35</sup> She then seeks Ang Geok Kheng’s (her relative, also Daniel Ang’s father) opinion on the song lyrics she has written. They would together change a few words to suit to the music. The newly written song lyrics would then be brought to the sing-along members (also BaNya members) to have an open discussion if they preferred certain words to be replaced in the lyrics. If everyone agreed, then they would replace the word. However, Ruby mentioned that sometimes she would have the final say on certain song lyrics. Two examples of new song texts will be explored and discussed further in the sections below.

The BaNya sang to live music. When it started, Robert Seet and Daniel Ang would provide the music on the keyboard and guitar. Later, when Victor Yeo joined and formed

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<sup>35</sup>In baba Malay “Tau..gua cakap lu tak tidur tau...malam malam tidur...dalam tidur gua dengah apa words cepat cepat tulis tulis...pi tidur...tak leh besok dah lupa”.

the Melodian band along with Robert Seet and Daniel Ang, they provided the accompaniment music for BaNya. The Melodian band will be discussed in the sub-sections below.

The organization of the choir group was headed by Ruby. Her role as a choir leader includes choreography of movements when the BaNya sings, creative stage entrance and exit and collaborating practice sessions for the BaNya. She is known as a strict choir teacher by PPCM members. She did not allow the BaNya to look at their lyrics sheet when sing. Instead, she made them all memorise the song lyrics (see **Figure 4.9**). One of the BaNya member recalled “Eh she will tell everybody “Next week, no papers!” That is her favourite word.” Although Ruby admits that she is a fussy person, she was well-liked by everyone. Anybody could join the choir group. It does not matter if you have a nice voice, or if you are a professional, as long as you enjoy singing with everyone. As Ruby said in the same interview on 13 March 2017,

“I don’t care if you are a professional, lu ada suara...

*(I don’t care if you are a professional, if you have a nice voice...)*

most.. to tell the fact.. honestly, some of my BaNya pun tak suara..

*(most, honestly, some of the BaNya do not have good voice to sing).*

Nang ada cough...nang ada ini.. never mind.

*(Some have cough, some have this and that, but never mind).*

They are happy, they sing together, the audience happy, oklah..

*(So as long as everyone is happy)*

not really a choir mo ada alto, soprano lah...tenor lah..abi mo this lah..mo that lah... you see or not?



*(This is not a “real” 4 part choir group with soprano, alto, tenor and so on)*

My objective is everyone is happy, after the function everybody happy, they also happy.. it is enjoyable lah”.

After 21 years of leading the choir, Ruby decided to resign in 2014 with the reason being that she is tired and that leading the choir is time- and cost-consuming. The new leader now is Chin Siok Hoon, sister to Susan Chin who is the long-standing Chairperson of the Ladies Section in PPCM. Some of the older BaNya members remained, but newer faces joined the BaNyas as the rest were either too old or have passed on. The songs remained the same but the BaNya no longer sing to live music but a playback recording made by Daniel Ang. On a side note, Ruby is still actively attending PPCM events, along with the older BaNya members. Occasionally she joins the Tuesday Night Sing-along.



**Figure 4.9**  
Ruby leading the BaNya (in casual clothes) during the Mooncake festival in year 2000. *(Photo from PPCM collection).*

#### 4.5 Tuesday Night Sing-Along

Besides the annual dinner and dance, members put away their sarong-kebayas and dressed in casual outfits of blouse and khakis to gather at the association club house at no.149 & no.151, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, known locally by its former name, Heeren Street or *Kampung Belanda* (translated as Dutch Village in Malay) for a sing-along session on Tuesday nights.

The sing-along session's officially starting time is 8.30pm, but members usually start arriving from 8.30pm onward. The sing-along will only begin at 9pm and goes on until 10pm or 10.30pm, depending on the members eagerness and enjoyment of the session. The sing-along session takes place in the back hall of the PPCM club house. Members usually park at the back of the club house and enter through the back door because there are ample parking spaces as opposed to the narrow, one-way street at the front entrance. Robert Seet, who served as the long-time secretary to the association would arrive earlier to open the club house and prepare it for the sing-along session. The field notes from Tuesday night, 21 March 2017 describes:

*Even though it's a relax Tuesday night get-together, people were decently dressed in nice collared-shirts and tops; long black pants or slacks. At about 9pm onward, people took their seats at the row of chairs placed facing the stage, a thick file-binder containing a compilation of song lyrics lay on their laps. By then, the musicians, also members of PPCM were already on stage, they were arranged in a sort of semi-circle, There was Robert Seet on the keyboard, Tay Kim Swee, nicknamed Captain Tay (because he was in the army before) was on the guitar, tuning and strumming away, Harry Ong would play on the custom-made Hawaiian guitar. He sometimes took turns playing the harmonica too. Occasionally the band is joined by singer or singers, but sometimes the guitarist*

*will lead the song as he strummed the chords (see **Figure 4.12**)*

*The session started when there was an agreeable number of people seated in front of the stage, then one of the members would say “let’s start”. Starting from the first row, someone would raise their hand to request a song from the file-binder, followed by the page number. The sound of flapping sounded across the room and on the stage as members start flipping through their file-binder to the said page number. When the musicians start playing to the requested song, everyone joined in to sing. After the song ended, the next person requested another song and the page number. Songs are requested from one person to the next, and it goes on from the first row to the back. This will usually go on for 1.5 hours to 2 hours. Sometimes, the musicians do not know some of the songs that was requested. So the person who requested it will try to sing a few verses before the musicians try to get the key of the song and the chord progression to match up. If that fails, then another song is chosen. When some songs have too many verses with the same melody, the singing would evenly fade out as people got tired of singing the same tune over and over again. After everyone had their chance of requesting a song, the session continued with random song request across the room. Some songs were requested twice throughout the sing-along session.*

*The melody and musical style was usually lead by Robert Seet on the keyboard. Following the song request, he would select on the different presets for dance music rhythms on the electronic keyboard. For example, drum rhythms for cha-cha, rumba, mambo or waltz. As he was familiar with the song repertoire, he switches rhythms and tempo from song to song swiftly. Occasionally, he would discuss quickly with the rest of the musicians about the rhythm or tempo before*



*proceeding with playing the melody. The guitars would come in strumming on chords. The harmonica plays occasionally according to songs and switches to the handmade Hawaiian guitar to add fillers to the songs. One of the guitarist would sing into the microphone as he played. Sometimes, one or two association members would lead the crowd for the sing-along session. Whenever I join the sing-along night, I am given the ukulele to play along.*

*There is always a non-verbal cue for when the session ends. There will always be a "closing" song before everyone got up to have lights snacks. The closing song could be anything. Once, the song "terang bulan" was sung. On another occasion, it was the Thai number "Loy Krathong". Throughout the closing song, PPCM association members got up and queued for some snacks. These snacks are voluntarily brought by the members who are also present for the sing-along session. Sometimes there are fried noodles, some variety of nyonya cakes or home-made cakes and cookies. Other times, there were fruits, roti jala<sup>36</sup> with chicken curry, jelly and so on. Snack time or supper is always served with hot coffee. The members sat around the table with their food and started chatting as they ate. The musicians, high from playing for the past one hour or so, still continued singing either on stage or off stage. Some members, would join along with the song book. The atmosphere in the PPCM association club house is a lively, carefree and joyful one. As this went on, some members would go for second helpings at the food. Some took their plates to wash them and started packing up to leave. The ladies would help with arranging, cleaning and packing the leftover food for whoever who wants to bring it back. Slowly, one by one, the members bade*

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<sup>36</sup> *roti jala*, literally meaning "net bread", is a traditional Malay tea-time snack, usually served with chicken curry which can be found in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

*goodbye and left. Some will say “See you tomorrow!” as they come again the next day to meet up for Wednesday Bingo night.*

This snippet from my field note above describes the scene from the start of the Tuesday Night Sing-along session. Before the start of the session, PPCM members would sit around and chat about life, holidays, their children, cooking recipes and about other members. On another occasion, members sit around a table to indulge in a game of cherki.<sup>37</sup> The sing-along session is one of the fellowship activities of PPCM and it is open to anyone who wishes to join. The session attracts an elderly crowd, mostly of retired Peranakan members who love to sing. Apart from that, the clubhouse functions as a focal point, a magnet for the dispersed community to get-together.

Mentioned above, the street, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (or Heeren Street) is lined with old Peranakan houses that once housed wealthy bourgeoisie Peranakan community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> This street, along with Jalan Tengker, Jalan Hang Jebat (or locally known as Jonker Street), are known as traditional Peranakan area<sup>39</sup> and also the town centre of Melaka. However, due to factors such as urbanisation, modernisation, and out-group marriages, the community disperse from this concentrated Peranakan core-area. Many Peranakan live away from town centres which were once considered as rural areas. But as Melaka town centre expanded over the years, these areas grew to become suburban.

When PPCM acquired one of these houses in 1981 to be used as their club house, their sole purpose, as mentioned in the Background of Study, is to transform the place into a mini museum and a clubhouse for the social activities of the association. This effort

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<sup>37</sup> *cherki* is a card game enjoyed by the Peranakan community. It is mostly popular among the elderly nyonya ladies where they would gather around the cherki table to gossip, chew beetle nut leaf as they play the game. The game requires one to be familiar with Hokkien and Baba Malay terms. It can allow 2 to 6 people to play at the same time. There are 60 cards in a deck (30 different patterns, each one repeated twice). The aim of the game is to form **three sets of three cards of the same or identical patterns**. The first player to complete three sets is the winner.

<sup>38</sup> Presently the Peranakan houses along Heeren Street are converted into heritage hotels and being used as ancestral homes known as *rumah abu* (literally meaning “house of ashes”) where tablets of deceased ancestors are placed for remembrance and worship.

<sup>39</sup> Other Peranakan concentrated areas are in the outskirts of Melaka such as Bukit Rambai, Kandang and Batu Berendam.

is in line with the revival of Peranakan culture in the 1980s, which saw the community gaining the notion of self-rediscovery and self-realisation of their heritage. The club house not only acts as a focal point of the Peranakan community in Melaka, but also a representation of their identity and a place of nostalgia of the bygone “golden age” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The house next door was acquired to create bigger space for the Peranakan events.

As the Tuesday Night Sing-along is open to all members of PPCM, anyone who could play an instrument joins in as accompaniment. As I joined in as an observer, I was asked occasionally to participate to play the ukulele. In the past, members like Rodney Tan, the late Allen Goh, the late Chee Hood Bok actively played for the sing-along sessions. On some occasion, Peranakan who were also band members from Seck Kia Eenh Buddhist temple<sup>40</sup> accompanied the sing-along session for PPCM special events (see *Figure 4.10, 4.11*). The four-piece band consisted of a keyboard, drum-set, electric guitar, and bass guitar were added. When the Melodian band was formed in 1997, they used to fill in for the Tuesday Night Sing-along.

After 30 years, sing-along sessions are still going on until today. People come and go, some new faces were added; musician changed (deceased, moved) and songs remained the same with a few new songs were added to the repertoire. What started out as a humble get-together for enjoyable sing-along sessions became a choir group called the BaNya. They performed at the annual Peranakan conventions hosted in rotation between Melaka, Penang and Singapore. As Ruby puts it “I automatically became head of the choir group”, referring to the many times Susan Chin would call her up to organise the choir group for performance when there was a request.

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<sup>40</sup> Seck Kia Eenh Buddhist temple started by a small group of Straits-born Chinese in the 1920s. Since then, the temple has been a patron of the Peranakan community in Melaka. Some of the management board members are also members of PPCM.



**Figure 4.10**  
Sing-along in 1996 with booklet compiled by Ruby.  
(Photos from PPCM collection).



**Figure 4.11**  
Sing-along in 1996 with Seck Kia Eenh band.  
(Photo from PPCM collection).



**Figure 4.12**

Sing-along on March 2017 – Robert Seet on the keyboard, Tay Kim Swee (Captain Tay) on guitar, Harry on his modified Hawaiian guitar and Peter Ong who took turns to lead the song. (Photo by me).

#### **4.6 The Melodians (with Sweet Memories)**

The Melodians have been playing for the past 21 years (until they disbanded in 2017 while I was conducting this research). This band was put together by Victor Yeo in 1997 out of his desire to continue his father's legacy after his passing in that same year. This sentiment is reflected in his words that "the music still need to carry on" (Interview, 19 November 2016). Victor's father Yeo Kuan Jin was an active musician in Melaka for many years. He came from a musical family where all seven of his siblings could play one to two musical instruments. Kuan Jin played in minstrel bands like *The Nightingales*, *Chahaya Bulan Radio Minstrel*, *dondang sayang* groups, *Billy Hok and His Commando*, *Victory Orchestra*, and *Chahaya Bulan Orchestra*. After he retired from playing at night clubs, he started a band named Melodians in 1960s. This is not to be confused with the

one formed in 1997 by his son Victor Yeo. He later renamed his band as The Highlights and mostly performed at Seck Kia Eenh Buddhist temple charity and fundraising concerts and at other engagements. Out of his seven siblings, only Victor took an interest in his father's musical activities and followed his father for concerts and performances. He learned to play the drum set at the age of 10. After the passing of his father, at his father's wish, he donated all of his father's instruments to PPCM club house such as the amplifiers, a drum set, guitar, keyboard and a pair of congas.

When Victor formed the band the Melodians in 1997, he recruited members from PPCM. The members were the late Robert Seet on the keyboard, the late Allen Goh on lead guitar, Jeyes Cheah on vocals, Rodney Tan played the accompaniment guitar and Daniel Ang filled the role of the bassist and vocalist at times. Daniel sometimes played as bassist while Jeyes played percussion and sang. When some members left, new members were then recruited: Zakariah Hashim, fondly known as "Zak" as the new bassist, Haji Idris on the accordion and Haji Dollah as the saxophonist. Like any other bands, members come and go; some deceased, some moved. The core members remained: Victor Yeo, Daniel Ang, Robert Seet and Zakariah. The band members are/were Malaccans and they are/were based in Melaka and they enjoy playing music and perform as a leisure activity. They are/were amateur musicians, where "amateur" meaning the members come together to play musical instruments, and perform on a part-time basis mainly for purposes of entertainment. For 21 years, the Melodian performances have taken them to Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Singapore (see *Figure 4.13*)

In the past few years, the Melodians started performing with another band named the Sweet Memories. The members are Tony Franco as the vocalist and Eddy Ong on the keyboard and vocals, occasionally with an addition of Helena Hay on vocals to sing Chinese covers. However, the Melodians disbanded in 2017 when Victor Yeo decided to "retire" from playing with them and also with the passing of Robert Seet (d. 2018). Daniel



Ang and Zakariah Hashim are still actively performing with the Sweet Memories, forming a band of their own.



**Figure 4.13**

Melodian performed at the Peranakan Museum First Year Anniversary Festival 2009 held at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. From left Allen Goh (d), Haji Idris, Zakariah, Victor Yeo, Grace (joins occasionally), Robert Seet (d. 2018), Daniel Ang and Singapore President Lee Hsien Loong.

#### **4.6.1 Philanthropic endeavours and inter-ethnic interaction as part of a performing tradition**

The Melodians' role was mainly to provide background music and accompaniment music for events. They started out by performing for PPCM sing-along sessions and Peranakan events such as the music accompaniment for wayang Peranakan.<sup>41</sup> They also used to provide music accompaniment for the BaNya when they sang.

Most of their performance were in aid of fundraising and charitable cause. One of

<sup>41</sup> "Miang Miang Keladi" in Singapore (2000) and "Dah Sa-chupak Tak Boley Sa-Gantang" (2001) a combined play by PPCM and The Peranakan Association of Singapore (formerly known as SCBA Singapore).

their notable performance organised by them was called “Melodians Charity Outreach - Dinner and Dance” in 2004, where they donated RM10,000 respectively to Catholic Senior Fellowship and Seck Kia Eenh Cancer Fund (see *Figure 20*). They organised similar charity outreach in 2006, 2009 and 2014, changing its name Melodian Charity Outreach from 2,3 and 4 for respective years (see *Figure 4.14*).

The tradition of performing in aid of charitable causes and fundraising dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Peranakan projected a concern for humanity where philanthropy remains central focus of the musical and dramatic groups.<sup>42</sup> Although the musical instruments, musical styles, music group formations had changed, the Peranakan still held on to their forefather’s philanthropic sentiments, evident in Melodian band performances. Seemingly that this trend has been a practice of Peranakan musical groups, it becomes a Peranakan cultural marker that shaped their identity. I will demonstrate in the genealogy section below on the Peranakan musicians, tracing their philanthropic sentiments through the genealogy of the Melodian band members.

Besides their philanthropic efforts, The Melodian band were inclusive and mingled interracially. They included non-Peranakan musicians such as a Malay and Portuguese-urasian.<sup>43</sup> They were Zakaria the bassist, Haji Idris the accordionist, the late saxophonist Haji Dollah, Tony Franco as lead vocalist, the late saxophonist Francis Theseira and the vocalist Helena Hay. This is nothing new for the Melodian. Sarkissian (2012) noted in her work that the minstrel and string bands in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “intermingled across racial lines” where Peranakan played music alongside Chinese, Malays and Portuguese-urasians. Two notable musicians who played in several of these bands are no other than Melodian band leader Victor Yeo’s father (Yeo Kuan Jin) and

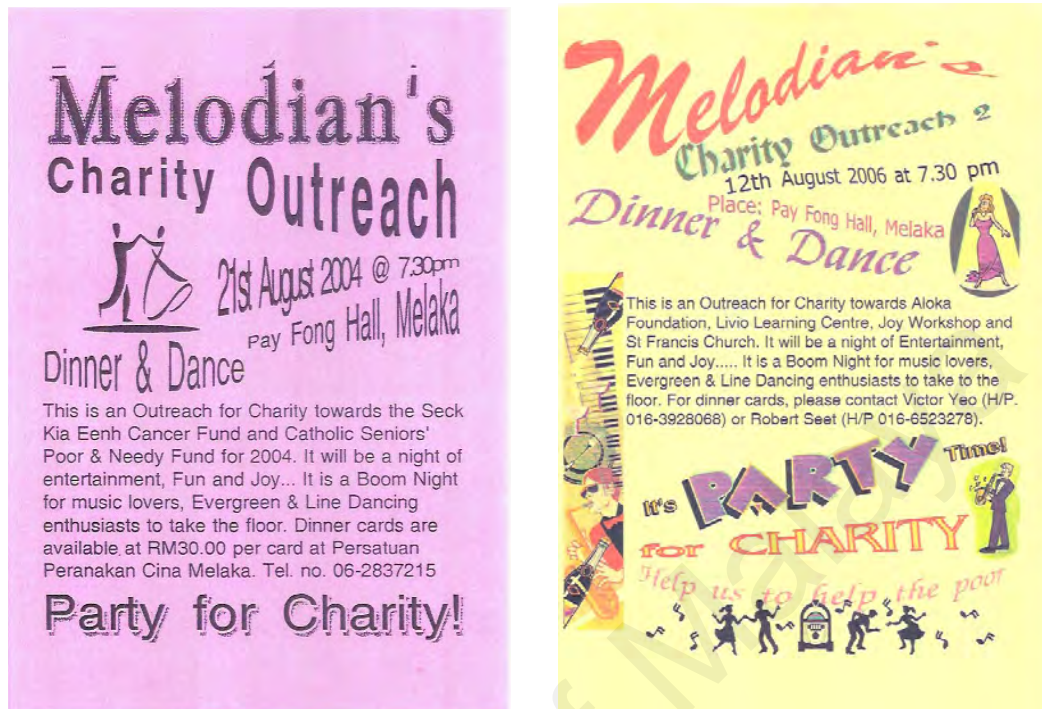
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<sup>42</sup> Both Sarkissian (2016) and Tan (2016) identified whom respectively research on Peranakan musical culture in Melaka and Penang highlighted that Peranakan music and dramatic groups performing for charitable cause. One notable event identified by Sarkissian is The Malacca Hotspur Association performing in aid of the Shandong Relief Fund; while in Penang Peranakan organised and performed in stage plays to raise funds for China Flood Fund, build local schools, as well as to help the unemployed in Penang.

<sup>43</sup> The majority races in Malaysia such as the Malay, Chinese and Indian are segregated across racial lines and this is often influenced by race-based politics and religion.



uncle (Yeo Kuan Hock). This reflected the open-ness and inclusiveness of the Peranakan musicians and community.



**Figure 4.14**  
Melodian Charity Outreach posters from 2004 and 2006



**Figure 4.15**  
Melodian donated RM10,000 respectively to Catholic Senior Fellowship and Seck Kia Eenh Cancer Fund at their 21 August 2004 Melodian Charity Outreach. (Photo from Daniel Ang's collection).

#### 4.6.2 Songs of Nostalgia

In the Melodians portfolio, they profiled themselves as specialising in “oldies”. This “oldies” consist of a mix of “evergreen” tunes (traditional American-pop) that included musical style such as rumbas, foxtrots, chacha, waltzes, other ballroom-dancing music, Malay folk songs and *keronchong* songs. The song repertoire were mostly Daniel Ang’s family’s favourite tunes. Daniel explained that the Melodians performed “more of a local folk songs” (interview on 17 March 2016). By local folk songs he meant songs from the 1950s to 1970s, such as songs by Johnny Tillotson, and Russ Hamilton. Popularly sung songs are Bobby Vinton’s “Roses Are Red”, Marie Osmond’s “Paper Roses”, Cliff Richard’s “Travelling Light”, Russ Hamilton’s “Rainbow and I Still Belong To You”. These songs were included because they were songs Daniel’s family sang. This is reflected in what he said,

D: I used to sing all these songs because when I was young, right...we have like house gatherings all that, so we will sing all these songs.. I grew up with all these songs. So my family members used to sing these kind of songs. One of the song they sing is Little One. You know Little One? That one my mother used to sing for me...

R: Oh your mum (Alice Lee Kuat Neo) also like music?

D: Yes yes...the song Little One ah..this song the tune ah.. \*starts singing \* “Kiss your ma..and kiss your pa..then you can pray..to Him afar, your father..close your eyes, go to sleep, little one..”

R: Oh, no wonder she sings that to you.

D: “If you are good from day to day, I will bring you games to play...And I will come just to sing you to sleep..” See this ah..the old song..sang by...ah (Russ Hamilton)

R: So you grew up listening to a lot of Russ Hamilton!

Besides that, Daniel revealed that the Chee family (another Peranakan family who are also members of PPCM), who lived on Heeren Street, enjoyed singing these songs at family gatherings. When the families got together, they would play and sing these songs.

Since the Melodians started playing with Sweet Memories, the song repertoire expanded and mainly depended on Tony Franco’s selection, which was also not foreign to the Peranakan community. As a lead singer, Tony’s song choices of songs centred mainly around Engelbert Humperdinck and Tom Jones. Songs that he usually sings to entertain his Peranakan guest during Peranakan events are Green Green Grass of Home, After The Loving, My Way, Quando Quando Quando, ’Till, Sweetheart and Delilah. The community get down to the dance floor to do social dancing.

Apart from these favourite tunes, joget numbers such as *joget burong tiong*, *joget Pahang*, *jinkly nona* are Peranakan favourites and are usually sung by Zakariah, only *jinkly nona* is sung by Tony Franco as the song is in Kristang. P. Ramlee’s film music like Bunyi Guitar, Madu Tiga is also played. Sometimes sung by Daniel, Tony or Zakariah.

#### **4.7 Community organisation and musical genealogy**

In this section I illustrate how these groups were organized in regards to family relations and according to certain community hierarchy. I will illustrate the genealogies of two families that are considered stalwarts to the music-making activities in PPCM.

The formation of these groups is done by consensus of the association members based on their judgment if the promoted leader of each group – the BaNya, the Melodians and the D'Bunga Rampay dancers – could contribute and lead the groups. In the case of BaNya, Ruby naturally became the leader for the many times she volunteered to lead the choir. Whereas, Victor Yeo started the Melodian by playing on the drum-set for sing-along sessions and “recruited” Daniel Ang and Robert Seet who were already playing the guitar and keyboard respectively for the sing-along sessions. They were engaged to provide entertainment for PPCM association events. Both Victor and Robert were committee members, where Victor held the vice-president post while Robert held the assistant secretary post. Daniel Ang is still part of the PPCM committee presently. Besides that, Robert Seet, Ruby Tan, Daniel Ang and Victor Yeo are related either by blood or marriage.

In the case of the D'Bunga Rampay dancers, Julie Wee was “elected” to teach and lead the group on dance choreography where she performs, too. This is because of her background in dancing in another Peranakan association where she learned dance choreography taught by the JKKN. Apart from that, as the wife of the vice-president<sup>44</sup> of PPCM (Peter Ong), there is a non-verbal understanding by PPCM committee members that she should be more involved in the association with anything she could contribute. In the last two years, Chin Siok Hoon, sister to long-term Secretary for PPCM was elected to oversee the BaNya and D'Bunga Rampay dancers, which is under the purview of PPCM Ladies Section.

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<sup>44</sup> The role of the vice-president in PPCM is to organise and oversee social events that take place in the association.

#### 4.7.1 The Lee and Yeo family genealogy

The musical figures mentioned such as those involved in the BaNya, and members of the Melodian are respectively from the Lee and Yeo family. I will begin by describing the Lee family and the musical connections before moving on to the Yeo family.

The kinship diagram of the Lee family (see **Figure 4.18**) starts from Lee Keng Liat, which I refer to as the first generation to be involved in PPCM. The Lee family lived in No.81, Heeren Street (Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock) and stories from Robert Seet (born Robert Lee)<sup>45</sup>, his siblings, his cousin Ruby Tan, and his nephew Daniel Ang recounted many family gatherings that included sing-along and music-making sessions. However, the music-making did not start there. Moving one generation before, Robert's father, Lee Chee Lin (see **Figure 4.18**, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of from Lee Keng Liat) acted in plays, sang and played the *rebana* for *dondang sayang* groups. His mother, Tan Kim Neo (wife of Lee Chee Lin) played the piano which was where he learned how to play the piano by hearing. Besides that, Robert also played the guitar. He grew up with six other siblings (see **Figure 4.18**, 4<sup>th</sup> generation from Lee Keng Liat) who enjoyed singing very much, and two of which could play musical instruments: Dorothy Lee played the piano and accordion; Alice Lee (Daniel Ang's mother) plays the piano and ukulele.

Lee Chee Lin's sister Mary Lee Bee Eng (3<sup>rd</sup> generation from Lee Keng Liat, Ruby Tan's mother) enjoyed singing very much. Being a nonagenarian, she was the member and one of the oldest member in PPCM until her passing in 1994. She was also actively involved in the sing-along at PPCM. Ruby's father Tan Teng Watt played the piano.

Besides that, their family has a long history of involvement with PPCM. Their great-grandfather, Lee Keng Liat was the first president of Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) which was what PPCM was formerly known as (**Figure 4.16**). Lee

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Seet was born as Robert Lee. He was adopted by his maternal grandmother family whose surname was Seet. The practice of adopting sons from another family was common in the past if the family could not produce an offspring or a son to carry on the family name.

Chee Lin served as a Honorary Secretary in SCBA in the General Committee of 1955/1956 (see **Figure 4.17**). Most of his children (Robert Seet, Alice Lee, Daisy Lee, Roland Lee, niece (Ruby Tan), and grandchildren (Daniel Ang) were/are all members of PPCM and were/are involved in playing music or singing (see **Figure 4.18**, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation).



**Figure 4.16**

Plate on the wall of past president in SCBA/PPCM, the association clubhouse on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. Mr Lee Keng Liat is the first president from 1900-1903.  
(photo taken by me).





**Figure 4.17**  
 Lee Chi Lin, seated 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right.  
 Photo displayed on the wall of PPCM clubhouse.  
*(photo taken by me).*

The Lee family is somewhat related to the Yeo family by marriage of Lee Chee Sin (Lee Chi Lin's youngest brother, see **Figure 4.19**, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, continuation from Lee Chee Sin's connection) to Victor Yeo's third aunt, Yeo Geok Kheng (sister to Victor's father, Yeo Kuan Jin). She and her 7 other siblings (see **Figure 4.19**, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation) could all play at least one music instrument and out of the 8 of them, only Kuan Jin, Kuan Hock and Geok Hean could read music notation. Their father (Victor's grandfather) Yeo Soo Leong (first generation of Yeo family, see **Figure 4.19**), a Peranakan who liked music, did not know how to play music but bought music instruments for his children to play and entertain guest. Out of all the 8 siblings, only Kuan Jin and Kuan Hock were actively involved in the music scene in Melaka from 1930s until they died. From young they played in the Nightingale, the Cahaya Bulan Radio Minstrel, Cahaya Bulan Orchestra, Victory Orchestra and Capitol Caberet. Yeo Kuan Jin

later started his *dondang sayang* group and his band called the Melodian. Young Victor Yeo (see **Figure 4.19**, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation) then followed his father around for performances and later learned to play the drums at the age of 10. He eventually started the Melodian in PPCM. However, Victor's father Kuan Jin was never a member of PPCM. Only his sister Geok Kheng was a life member of PPCM until she passed away in 1995. This was perhaps due to her husband's family's (The Lee family) involvement in the association.<sup>46</sup>

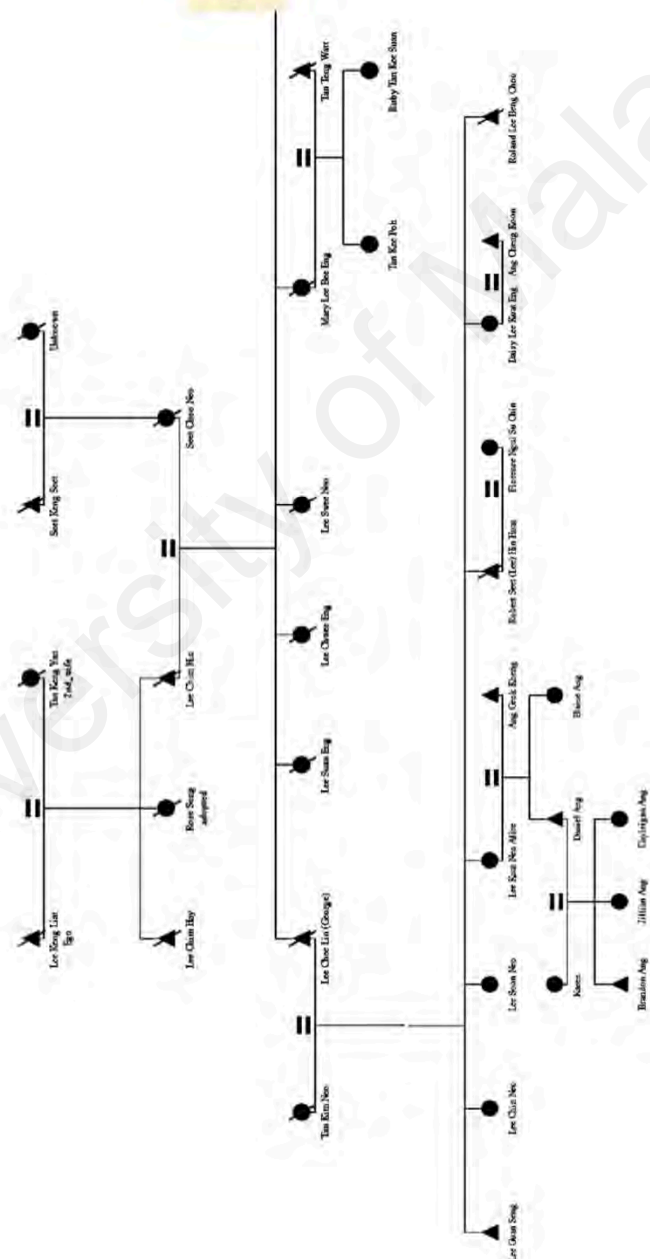
Below is a kinship diagram of the Lee family (see **Figure 4.18**) and the continuation of Yeo family (see **Figure 4.19**).

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<sup>46</sup> Members from the two families were active in the musical theatre scene or wayang Peranakan in Melaka. Those involved were Robert Seet and his parents (Lee Chee Lin and Tan Kim Neo), Lee Chi Sin and his wife Yeo Geok Kheng, Yeo Kuan Jin and Yeo Kuan Hock. These musical plays such as "Putus Harapan", "Sapu Tangan Yang Puteh" and "Bunga Teratai" were staged in aid of charitable cause such as Malacca Lord Buddha Building Fund and St. Nicholas Home for the Blind.



Continue  
on the next  
page.



**Figure 4.18**  
Continuation from Lee Chim Hin's youngest son, Lee Chee Sin married to Yeo Geok Kheng (yellow box, to the next page).

Continuation from Lee Chim Hin's youngest son, Lee Chee Sin married to Yeo Geok Kheng (yellow box, to the next page).

Continuation  
from the  
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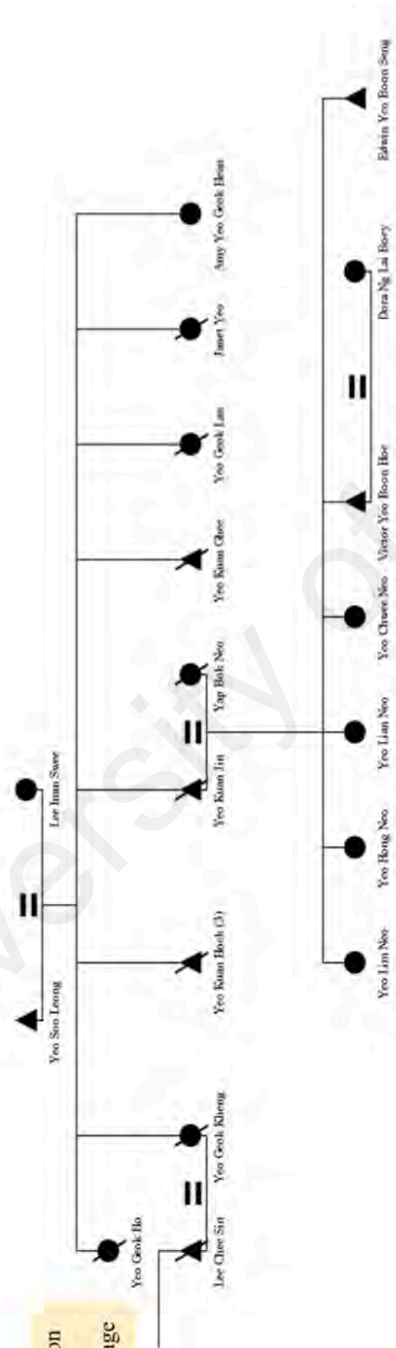


Figure 4.19

Continuation from Lee Chim Hin's youngest son, Lee Chee Sin married to Yeo Geok Kheng (yellow box, to the next pag

#### 4.8 The Peranakan Song Repertoire

The song repertoire performed by the BaNya, Tuesday-night sing-along, D'Bunga Rampay dancers and the Melodians are briefly mentioned and discussed above. In this section, I will recapitulate on the song repertoire collection and analyse two parodied songs – songs sung with borrowed tune with newly written lyrics.

The Peranakan song repertoire consist of “evergreen” songs, *keronchong*, *dondang sayang*, *joget*, Malay folk songs. Many of these songs were also adopted from film music, musicals and *Bangsawan* theatre. It not only reflects the musical taste of the Peranakan, but becomes a repository of their favourite tunes over two generations. The song repertoire also reveals the negotiation of identity by the Peranakan as a cosmopolitan and open community just as Frith (1996) stated, “the experience of pop music is the experience of identity.” The songs ignite the feeling of nostalgia, transporting the Peranakan community (majority are elderly) back to the “good old days” of their youth. It also helps us to reflect how nostalgia, through music allows for interpretation and narration for site of memory<sup>47</sup> that creates collective identity. Besides that, these songs make them custodians of past popular tunes when their neighbours (the Malays and other ethnic community at large) has left these tunes in the past and explored music respectively in their own language. For examples, Malay and Arabic-influenced music such as nasyid became identifiable amongst the Malay-muslim community in Malaysia. While in the past, this eclectic-mixed of music emanated from cabaret centres, nightclubs, film, fun-fair was enjoyed by the vast Malayan majority.

Tune-borrowing is part of the new song repertoire and only emerged when choir leader, Ruby Tan put together “new” songs for the BaNya. Beside Ruby, other members such as Daniel Ang contributed to the song repertoire. This is done so

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<sup>47</sup> Oliver (2003), p292 as cited in Plastino, G. (2007). “Lazzari felici”: Neapolitan Song and/as Nostalgia. *Popular Music*, 26(3), 429-440.

that people will not get bored about singing old songs over and over again, like what Ruby said, “then you know lah...everytime we sing for the Peranakan, we sing same same songs ..mengantuk...” (everytime we sing for the Peranakan, we sing the same song, will make everyone sleepy). These songs are written in transliteration of the Baba Malay. A general overview of these song lyrics is about gendered images of the Baba men and Nyonya ladies, flirtatious love between baba men and women, kinship, customs and practices. Most of these songs reflect a community that is happy, high-spirited, and knows how to enjoy themselves. By singing these songs, the Peranakan community not only gets to reminisce about the days of their youth, and have a good time but also asserts their identity as Peranakan.

The ideal of a happy fun-loving community permeates Peranakan songs and those written by the Peranakan. The songs more than often portray a demure, domiciled, powdered-face, small-waisted Nyonya lady clad in kebaya swooning the Baba men at the sight of them. While this idealisation of Peranakan men and women may reflect some truth in the past, it is now an ideal that only exist in the imagination the community.

#### 4.8.1 “Choo sin nian”

Song lyrics in Baba Malay	English Translation
Choo sin nian, choo sin nian Tarian naga dan singa Sama-sama bising rio rendah Main tambol, pukul gendang, Masuk rumah ‘Chai Kee Merah’ Ucapkan Selamat Tuan rumah	Wishing you happy new year Dragon dance and Lion dance Together we celebrate joyously Play the tambol, and gendang Enter the house with auspicious red cloth Wish the owner a very happy new year
Chorus: Muda-muda tua sama gembira Bagi angpow ketawa ha,ha,ha	The young and elder celebrate joyously Distributing angpow and laughing ha-ha-ha
Encek-encek sama enchim Cik kong cik kong sama cimpoh Mari dudok, kita moh sojah Makan kueh dulu-dulu	Uncles and aunties, Granduncles and grandaunties, Please have a seat, we want to wish you Eat olden days cake

Kueh bakul, kueh bolu, Mari minum, makan dan gembira	Glutinous sticky cake, fluffly egg cake, Let's drink, eat and be merry
Chorus: Choo sin nian, choo sin nian Sambut Tahun Baru Cina, Sama-sama kita bersuka Mintakan murah jerki, Badan sihat macam ubi, Panjang umor kita jumpa lagi	Wishing you a happy new year Welcome the Chinese New Year Together we be merry Wishing for prosperity, Body as fit as a cassava tuber, Long life so we may meet again.

**Table4.1**

*“Choo Sin Nian” original lyrics with English translation.*

The song “choo sin nian” is a parody of a popular Chinese New Year tune zhu xin nian (贺新年) where “he” means “wish” and “xin nian” means “new year”. This tune<sup>48</sup> is adopted because everyone knows the melody; it is heard blasting from malls to shops annually on weeks leading to the Lunar New Year. However, as the majority of PPCM members are English educated and could neither speak, nor read and write Chinese, new lyrics were written to fit the tune. These lyrics portray on the theme of kinship, custom and practices of the modern Peranakan family during the Lunar New Year. The translation of text below is the closest to the meaning and sentiment portrayed in Baba Malay.

The first stanza of the lyrics opens with wishing everyone a happy new year. During the Lunar New Year, dragon dance and lion dance can be seen and heard. Along with that, people gather to celebrate joyously, playing the ‘tambol’ and the ‘gendang’<sup>49</sup>. House-visiting is a common practice amongst the Chinese in Malaysia. Most of the houses has red “chai kee” or auspicious red cloth hung over door frames during Chinese New Year. First and foremost, the visitor would wish the owner of the house a happy new year.

<sup>47</sup> See appendix for lead-sheet.

<sup>49</sup> The tambol is a Chinese handheld drum while the gendang is a Malay music instrument used in Malay Asli music.

The chorus talks about how the young and old are happy and joyous during this season why the elderly (must be married) will hand out angpow (red auspicious packet containing money) for good luck to the young (or unmarried) persons. The thirds stanza reveals kinship relations amongst the Peranakan and how they address the elderly. Respect and filial piety is an important aspect of Peranakan custom. The act of ‘sohjah’ is when a younger person goes down on both their knees to wish the seated elderly person good wishes and usually takes place during Peranakan New Year celebration and wedding tea-pouring ceremony. It is considered an act of respect. The next few lines talk about the typical cakes being served by Peranakan during Chinese New Year. Cakes such as kueh bolu (Malay: Kueh bahulu) is a popular Malaysian snack while Kuih Bakul (basket cake)<sup>50</sup> is eaten steamed with coconut or fried in batter with sweet potatoes. The mood during Chinese New Year is high-spirited when family and friends come together to eat, drink and be merry.

The last stanza is about wishing everyone a happy new year and with the new year with prosperity, good health and longevity. It is typically Peranakan to wish “panjang umur” (Malay: Umur), or “long life” when people meet one another, during birthday celebrations and Chinese New Year. The description of “badan sihat macam ubi” is also a popular Peranakan saying.

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<sup>50</sup> Kuih bakul (Chinese: Nian Gao 年糕) is glutinous rice cake, made out of glutinous rice, palm sugar (gula Melaka) and water is used as an offering to the Kitchen God before Chinese New Year. In Chinese folk religion, and Taoism, the Kitchen god is also known as the Stove God (Baba Malay: Datuk dapor) and is one of the Chinese domestic gods that protects the family. It is believed that a few days before the Chinese New Year, he returns to Heaven to report on the activities of the household in the past year to the Jade Emperor (Yu Huang). The result is The Jade Emperor may see to the punishment of the household based on the report. In regards to that, it has become a Chinese practice to make an offering of glutinous rice cake to the Kitchen God so that when the He eats it, the chewiness and stickiness of the rice cakes will prevent him from opening his mouth to report on the household.

#### 4.8.2 “Hello, hello”

Song lyrics	Translation
Hello, hello, nona nona, mahu kemana pakay sarong kebaya Muka solek, oh nampaknya Kasut manik warna warnilah pulak Kalu takda, jadi salah Bolehkah kita semua ikut sama Adohai nona nona oh yang gembira	Hello, hello, nyonya nyonya, Where do you go in sarong kebaya? I see your beautiful made-up face, Colourful beaded slippers, If it's okay with you, Could we join you, Oh joyful nyona nyonya
Hello hello, oh oh baba, yang memang Sungguh chantek tamblahlah lawah Pakaian suit dan bergaya Bertali leher yang lebar nampaknya Memang takda jadi salah Kalu mahu ikut kita bersiar Sudi sudi ya adohai yang semua.	Hello hello, oh oh baba, So handsome and good-looking, Wearing a suit and stylish With a wide necktie If it's okay with you If you'd like to join for a stroll Please all join
Hello hello, nona nona Kita semua sungguhlah rasa suka Hello hello, oh oh baba Kita semua jugak rasa gembira Hello, hello, mari kita Bergandingan tangan berjalan sama Hari ini memang hari yang gembira	Hello hello, nyonya nyonya, We are all very happy, Hello hello, oh oh baba, We are also very happy, Hello hello, let us all Hold hands and walk together Today is indeed a happy day

**Table 4.2**  
*“Hello, hello” original lyrics with English translation.*

The song “Hello hello” is a parody from the tune “Oh Papa Dja” made popular by the 1960s Dutch singer Anneke Gronloh. This song is up-tempo; the melody is memorable. The lyrics were written by Ruby Tan and it reflects the gendered images of Peranakan men and women. It depicts the women dressed in *sarong kebaya* which is a trademark of Peranakan culture, along colourful beaded slippers, and the men are dressed in western suits and necktie. The song text portrays flirtatious nuances but yet friendly vibes from people who sees a *nyonya* all made up in her kebaya and baba men suited-up. Such get-up implies that the wearer is going to attend a special Peranakan event be it a wedding, a dinner and dance party, or birthday parties. The mood of the song reflects a happy community, holding hands celebrating a joyous day.

#### **4.9 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter paints a picture of formal and informal Peranakan occasions in the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) that involves musical activities. The formal occasions are the annual dinner dance events such as the Chinese New Year Dinner and Dance and the association anniversary dinner and dance. Informal occasions are the Tuesday Night Sing-along sessions. These occasions share the same repertoire that invites PPCM members' participation. The song repertoire, the formation of the BaNya and the Melodians developed through nostalgia in reference to past traditions such as dinner and dance, playing music for charitable cause, singing songs of their youth in a choir. Besides nostalgia, the musical activities also developed through family genealogy and collective memory of the Lee and Yeo family. These occasions help us to understand the past and the continuity of past traditions, and the role of nostalgia in representing the identity through collective memory.



## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This is the final chapter of this thesis. In this chapter, I provide an overview of my study and discuss if the research objectives and research questions set out in chapter one has been met. Besides that, I discuss the connection of my study to the field of Ethnomusicology and the benefits it provides, how this research opens up new areas for future explorations, and lastly, I discuss some of the learning outcomes while working on this study.

As I have proposed in the research objectives in Chapter 1, this research explores the representation of Peranakan identity through musical activities. It is a case study looking at the development of musical groups in Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) in Melaka and how the community express their identity through performances and their collection of song repertoire. These groups started in the 1990s and each has its respective implications. The BaNya was birth out of Peranakan love of song singing, which is traced back to family gathering and song-singing traditions, specifically from the Lee and Yeo family that lived on Heeren Street. Dressed in sarong kebaya and the men in baju cina, the BaNya take to the stage medleys of favourite and parodied tunes ranging from English “evergreens”, Malay folk songs, 70s Chinese pop-hits to popular Bollywood tunes. What started as a small sing-along sessions turned into a way for the Peranakan community in Melaka to express themselves and represent the Peranakan identity through performing their favourite tunes, BaNya thus became a public face of the Peranakan community in Melaka, performing for Melaka State functions representing the Peranakan community. The music was often provided by the Melodians, who are members of the Lee and Yeo families. Apart from providing accompaniment music for the BaNya, the Melodians also performed for birthdays and wedding parties, and charitable cause. Philanthropic endeavours is evident in Peranakan bands since the 1930s.

Although the performing traditions has changed over time, these two groups still reflect the notion of continuity of past musical expression and social dynamics of Peranakan community.

The people who are/wee actively involved or led in these group are Ruby Tan, leader of BaNya; Daniel Ang, Robert Seet (Lee) and Victor Yeo who were musicians of The Melodian band and also occasionally played for PPCM sing-along sessions. They came from the Lee and Yeo families where many family members were actively involved in the Melaka's music scene in the past. The song repertoire of Peranakan reflects the nostalgia of the days of their youth and songs their elders sang, while some newer songs were added in the repertoire list. To give it variation, Ruby Tan borrowed popular tunes like "She'll be coming around the mountain", and added lyrics about Chinese New Year celebration, sang in Baba Malay. This song repertoire was also shared with The Melodians when they accompanied Peranakan events and dinner and dance parties, and the newly formed D'Bunga Rampay dance group. The formation of the D'Bunga Rampay dance group was the result of a series of events stemmed from the encouragement by the Melaka State government for the purpose of tourism promotion. When Julie Wee, who was actively involved in dancing in another Peranakan association that solely focused on performing for government event joined PPCM, she was asked to form the BaNya on the reason that 1) the former president thought it was a good way to promote Peranakan culture, and 2) as the wife of the vice-president who is in charge of social events in PPCM, it is communally consensus that she should take up a role in the association, along with Chin Siok Hoon. Until today, the dance group has only been performing for Peranakan events.

The song repertoire of the Peranakan reflects a cosmopolitan, open and adaptable community. They are dated pop-hits of Anglo-american traditional pop, Malay folk songs, keronchong and film music, Chinese, Bollywood music ranging from the 1930s to

1970s. As Turino (2008) discussed about music and indices, the song repertoire indexes 'cosmopolitan', 'forward-looking' and 'modern' community in the past. In contrast to the present, the song repertoire now indexes the 'old-fashioned' and the 'backward-looking', reflecting a community looking to the past for ways to represent their identity in the future. Besides that, the song repertoire also draw emotional alliances, like what Frith (1996) had suggested the "experience of pop-music is an experience of identity... (because) we are drawn into emotional alliances with performers and with the performers' other fans", which in this case, other Peranakan. The song repertoire invokes the feeling of nostalgia and reminisces the days of their youth which in turn construct space for them to negotiate their identity. Their memory of these songs makes them custodians of past popular tunes when the Malaysian community at large has abandoned these tunes for music in their respective ethnic language and popular music from USA became a staple sonic diet for the younger generation.

Initially, this research aimed to look at only BaNya social and musical aspects but as I progressed further into my study, the data and findings revealed that by including the other two groups, the Melodians and D'Bunga Rampay dance group for this study, I would provide a more holistic view of the Peranakan musical culture in PPCM and give a better understanding of the social dynamics in organizing this group, its link to the past and its implication on the present and future. Hence, the research objects and questions set out in Chapter 1 had to be revised to include exploring the musical culture in PPCM, the developments of the musical groups, their influence on the collection of song repertoire and analysing the representation of their identity through their musical activities.

This research is in the field of Ethnomusicology at its core. As explained earlier, this study deals with the social aspects of the musical groups discussed throughout this study. Among the research methods employed in this study is participant-observation. I

also discuss the implication of doing fieldwork at “home” in my hometown, looking at my own Peranakan heritage. There are many advantages in doing fieldwork at home such as sharing similar customs, practices, speaking the Baba Malay and having family relations, but the disadvantages are also numerous such as the struggle in straddling the role of being a researcher and being part of the community. Being an insider, certain things became a norm that I might have missed these if it is not for my supervisor, Dr. Lawrence Ross who pointed out some jarring facts or details in writing this thesis.

This research stands to provide a documentation of the musical culture of the Peranakan community in the present, which is important because the music and performance culture is period specific that changes according to social, political, and economic factors. This is demonstrated in the musical culture of the Peranakan in the pre-WWII days. The Peranakan were wealthy and could afford to take music lessons and own instruments. They played in string bands, big bands, *keronchong* and *dondang sayang* group, performing for different purpose such as cabarets, night clubs and family gatherings. The instruments used were catered to the music of the era. Post-independence saw the Peranakan community abandoning their heritage and simultaneously integrating collectively into the greater Chinese community in Malaysia, looking forward to the building of a new nation. The sentiments of revival in Peranakan culture came about in the 1980s, and in effect sparked the formation of the musical activities in PPCM discussed in this study. As mentioned above, the songs are “evergreens” and dated pop-hits, and younger Peranakan generations could not relate to the songs and performance practices of their elders discussed in this study. Most of them are uninterested in their family heritage and culture and prefer to adopt the latest global trends, where smartphone companies outdo one another, and mainstream pop music is part of their everyday life. Thus, this thesis documents a musical practice that might disappear or evolve over time.

In addition, this study maps part of the musical and performance heritage in

Melaka that includes the BaNya, the Melodians and D'Bunga Rampay dancers are a part of. They each revealed implications of how internal (community) and external factors (political, social, and economy) affect the formations, involvement and development of these three groups. Other than providing entertainment, these groups strongly represent ethnic identity in Melaka, which has promoted the Peranakan culture as part of its tourism scheme. D'Bunga Rampay dance group demonstrates how politics can be a driving force in creating performance tradition within an ethnic community, to promote the image of multiethnic tolerance and harmony in Malaysia. This has become, as Sarkissian (2008) exemplified, "stolen opportunities" for ethnic minorities to display differences and disseminate knowledge about who they are. As the Melodians was part of the contemporary ensemble music scene in Melaka, their performance also reflects the musical tastes of their audiences at wedding receptions, birthday dinners, and anniversary events. Hence, this research opens up new areas for future exploration such as gender studies (For example, looking into the all-women dance group, and the role of women in Peranakan music and community), or implication of government's involvement in the formation of these groups, and the relationship to minorities.

As a final summary, the Peranakan community performs their culture with references to the past through their collective memory. As Victor Yeo stated, and I quote "the music must carry on", meaning that the community must continue to represent their cultural identity through their musical activities.

## Appendix A

### Choo Sin Nian



## Appendix B

### Jinkly Nona



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### **List of Papers Presented**

#### **1. “*Negotiating identities through contemporary pop-music: The Peranakan Case*”**

Paper presented at the IASPM-SEA Workshop 2018, from 12-14 January 2018 at Discovery Room, Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur.

### **Abstract**

The Peranakan of Melaka song repertoire is drawn from contemporary popular music from the early 20th century. This repertoire consists of Anglo-american top hits, Malay songs drawn from Malay theatre and folk tunes, Chinese songs, a few songs in Tamil, Japanese and Tagalog. In the past, this song repertoire was indexed as ‘modern’ and ‘urban’, portraying a ‘forward-looking’ community adopting the latest musical trends. However, in the present, this song repertoire reflects contrary indices such as ‘old-fashioned’, reflecting a community that is ‘backward-looking’, nostalgising of the past. By adopting the framework of how contemporary popular music evoke dicent indices that offer the experience of collective identity, this study discusses how the Peranakan community represent their identity with song repertoire through their musical activities.

#### **2. ‘*Baba Nyonya Dance*’: A preliminary survey on the social history of Peranakan dance groups in Melaka”.**

Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM) Study Group on the Performing Arts of Southeast Asia (PASEA) held from 16 – 22 July, 2018 in Sabah Muzium, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

### **Abstract**

Peranakan dance, known as ‘Baba Nyonya Dance’, emerged in the 1980s in cultural shows organised by the Melaka State Government as part of the national cultural policy to create the image of multiethnic tolerance and national unity. This in effect led the Peranakan community to form one-off dance groups, which later saw the formation of an association acting as a cultural body solely to perform and showcase Peranakan culture for State functions and tourism events in light to promote Peranakan culture and publicly represent their identity. However, this representation of Peranakan identity through dance was only adopted by one association. This is because the Peranakan community in Melaka is partially segregated across demographics and association affiliations with different ideas of representing their cultural heritage and identity. After the declaration of Melaka as a UNESCO Heritage Site, Peranakan culture received promotion through tourism and more State-sanctioned activities. Such publicity on Peranakan culture lead the community at large to adopt dance performance as a way to represent their culture and identity publicly. ‘Baba Nyonya Dance’ has since become a cultural marker for the community. By incorporating participant-observation as a research method, this article provides a preliminary survey on the social-history of the formation of Peranakan dance group and discusses the impact of tourism and government influence on the formation of Peranakan dance groups. The idea of ‘invention of tradition’ is also briefly discussed in this article focusing on how disparate elements are brought together to create a new synthesis of representation for the Peranakan community.

### **3. “The image of Peranakan women in songs performed by the Peranakan community in Melaka, Malaysia”.**

Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> ICTM Joint Symposium of the study Groups Music and Minorities and Music and Gender held from 23 – 31 July, 2018 in University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

#### **Abstract**

Peranakan women, locally known as *nyonya* are often portrayed in Peranakan songs as a young and beautiful lady wearing the traditional costume—the sarong kebaya, flowers in bun-hair, strutting the streets with her umbrella, leaving the aroma of her perfume trailing behind her, melting hearts. The song text also reflects a sexualised image of a *nyonya*—sheer-kebaya, small-waisted, walking with hips swaying. These portrayals are only idealised in songs about Peranakan written from the 1960s onward. On the contrary, a simple, cotton *sarong-kebaya* is mostly worn by elderly women as a daily outfit and a more stylish *kebaya* for special occasions such as weddings and Peranakan events by the rest of the community. Before the 1950s, unmarried *nyonya* ladies were not allowed out of the house alone. *Nyonya* ladies are the ‘gems of their mothers’. First and foremost, they are expected to be a respectful daughter-in-law, a good homemaker, with the measuring standard of their ability to embroider, sew beaded slippers, and mastering the art of cooking Peranakan dishes. As the community progressed with modernity after the post-war era, such practices are left behind. Although the idealised image of a *nyonya* was never a reality, these songs are still sung and used as dance music by the Peranakan community in the present. Besides that, the community adapts popular contemporary tunes with new song texts that still portray the idealised image of a *nyonya*. By incorporating personal interviews, participant-observation and analysis of selected song text from the Peranakan community song repertoire, this article contrasts selected images of *nyonya* in songs with the image of *nyonya* in reality. In addition, this paper then traces the social-status of Peranakan women with a discussion of how these idealized image of Peranakan women came to be included in the song text.

### **4. “The music must carry on”: Continuity and reinvention in the musical culture of the Peranakan community in Melaka, Malaysia.**

### **Abstract**

The 'Peranakan' or 'Baba nyonya' community is a culturally syncretic minority group, resulting from the marriage of southern-China Hokkien migrants and local women in the Straits Settlements. The community had an eclectic musical culture in the early 20th century. Social dancing and involvement in musical bands such as minstrel groups, orchestra and string bands that played to the latest American and European hits, keroncong, and ronggeng music were part of their social life. But all this vanished during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya. The Peranakan identity and culture further diminished post-Independence when they were collectively assimilated into the larger Chinese community. However, in the recent years, there have been a surge of public interest in the Peranakan cultural heritage which resulted in the notion of self-rediscovery and self-realisation within the community. Through collective memory, the community nostalgically looks to the past for signs of how to perform their culture. By incorporating participant-observation and interviews as a research methods, this paper explores the continuity of past musical traditions through newly invented performing traditions, focusing on the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Peranakan Association of Melaka) as a case study. In addition, this paper also analyses how the expression of cultural identity is represented through their musical activities.