

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Babas

Historically, Malaysia encompassed a number of territories in the Malay Peninsular and in Borneo which were once ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. The colonial powers enriched the culture of the population of Malaysia, which comprises mainly the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. However, among the minority races, the Babas stood as the most unique and colourful ethnic group and was described as the rare and beautiful blend of the dominant elements of the Malaysian and Singaporean cultural traditions – Chinese, Malay and European, or more specifically English (Clammer, 1980). This blend is only found in this part of the world and their culture has evolved into something unique.

This study attempts to explore two of the Babas most interesting cultural aspects, their language and literature. Although works authored by the Babas were not many, numerous variety of literature had emerged through the years. They include newspapers, magazines, poems and translation works of Chinese classics. After the decline of Baba literature since 1950, it has reemerged, as reflected in the literary works of Chia. Felix Chia (1984; 1985) has written a play entitled *Pilih Menantu* (1984) (Choosing a daughter-in-law) and a Baba fiction, entitled, *Laki Tua Bini Muda* (1985) (Old Husband, Young Wife). Very few people are aware of the existence of Baba literature, even among the Babas themselves. The Baba culture

has enriched the Malaysian culture and it is the concern of this dissertation to document and describe all identifiable Baba literature that can be located.

1.2 The Babas

To have a clearer picture on the Baba culture, an explanation of some terms are necessary. In the Malaysian context, the *Baba* and the *Peranakan* terms are used synonymously. Originally, Chinese born in the Straits are called Babas to distinguish them from those born in China, *Sinkeh* (Tan, 1993). Today, Baba refers to the descendents of the Straits born Chinese. The female Straits born Chinese are called *Nyonyas*. The term *Peranakan* is simply the Malay designation for locally born people of mixed parentage. In other words, a Baba is a Peranakan but a Peranakan is not necessarily a Baba. In Tan Chee Beng's *Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore* (1993), the Babas of Malacca and Singapore are claimed Chinese Peranakan. Although Chinese born in the north east states of Kelantan and Terengganu may also be described as Chinese Peranakan, they are rarely referred to as Babas. They experienced a different acculturation compared to the Straits born Chinese. They are more influenced by the Malay, Chinese and Thai culture instead of the English.

The Penang Babas and the Malacca Babas came from different roots, although governed under the Straits Settlements after 1826. According to Purcell (1967) and Vaughan (1897; 1971), the children of the Penang Babas were always brought up in accordance to their fathers' ways, even though their fathers died young and the children were left to their local mothers. In Malacca, where the Malays were the majority, the women played essential roles in parenting. It is clear that the fathers

bore more influence on the Penang Babas while the Malacca Babas were more influenced by their mothers. This influence and dominance shaped their present day traits. The Singapore Babas are the offshoot of the Malacca Babas. After becoming the capital of the Straits Settlements in 1832, Singapore enjoyed a trade boom that resulted in the relocation of many Malacca Straits Chinese to the new capital.

The same influence and dominance is prominent in their spoken language. The Malacca Babas speak in a Malay accent juxtaposed with Chinese words of Hokkien dialect, whereas the Penang Babas speak Hokkien with Malay language influences. Today, the Babas are more widely referred to Malacca or Singapore Babas. For the purpose of this study, the word 'Babas' denotes the Malacca and the Singapore Babas.

1.3 The Origin of the Babas

The Babas have their root from three different races, Chinese, Malay and English. From the historical perspective, the early Chinese immigrants came as fortune seekers and eventually settled in the Malay Archipelagos. They later formed their own society. They were influenced by the English only after they were sent to English schools or studied overseas. Today, the identity of the Baba is obscured, partly because of the changed structure of society (Khoo, 1996). However, the origin of the Babas remained an arguable issue.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the Babas due to the gradual and unnoticeable acculturation process. The popular belief is that the Babas in Malacca were the descendents of Princess Han Li Bao's, who married the Sultan of Malacca's

subjects. It was believed that these subjects subsequently married females from the local community. The fusion of Chinese blood and the blood of other races did not convince many historians. An opposing viewpoint is that the culture of the Babas was more dominated by the Chinese. If they were descendents of Princess Han Li Bao's subjects, they would have converted to Islam and were more dominated by the Islamic way life. However, today the Baba culture is more entrenched in the Chinese tradition.

A number of scholars strongly believed that the ancestors of the Babas were Hokkiens from Fujian Provinces. They were all adventurers who came to trade or to make a fortune. They did not bring along their women because they never thought of staying in the Straits permanently. Eventually, these early Chinese migrants married the Malay women and this gave rise to the Baba society (Chia, 1980; Vaughan, 1971; Purcell, 1967).

These Chinese Peranakan exhibited certain local cultural characteristics. The nyonias wore Malay-styled dresses (*sarong* and *kebaya*), cooked food that combined both Chinese and Malay cuisines and stayed in Straits eclectic-type building. According to Khoo (1996), the hybrid building style of the Babas has been given several other names, such as Sino-Malay-Colonial buildings, Sino Malay Palladian, Tropical Renaissance, Towkay Italianate, Chinese Palladian and Chinese Baroque. They also possessed several unique characteristics of daily life – combined with their own interpretation of certain aspects of Chinese culture especially religion, kinship and formal organisation. In addition to these, one that captured the interest of this study is, the language of the Baba. The Baba language is not the

standard Malay that is recognised as the national language in Malaysia. The language is colloquial Malay (*Melayu Pasar*).

It was initially developed as a spoken language. A number of literary works were published in this spoken language which enriches the national literary heritage of Malaysia.

1.4 The Language of the Babas

The Baba Malay is colloquial Malay. It has been studied since the early 20th century by William G. Shellabear (1913). He had distinguished between the High Malay language, the language of classical literature of the Malays and the Low Malay language, defined as the mixed multitude of various tongues of those who lived in Malaysia. He categorised the Baba Malay as the Low Malay, which was largely used as trade language. Shellabear's work contained an appendix, which listed Baba words. He mentioned in the same article, the evolution of the Baba Malay and the differences between Baba Malay and the colloquial Malay. Shellabear identified four main unique features of the Baba Malay:

- a. The use of words typical of Chinese origin;
- b. The use of the Chinese equivalents for unfamiliar Malay words;
- c. Mispronunciation of Malay words which produced new Baba Malay vocabularies; and
- d. Baba idioms which is an adoption of Chinese language rather than Malay language.

Although Shellabear was not the first person to provide a list of the Baba Malay vocabulary, his contribution towards the study of the early Baba Malay is unquestionable. The status of the Baba Malay was placed in prominence by him, resulting in more academic studies on Baba literatures by later scholars.

Png Poh Seng (1963) was also one of the pioneers who compiled a list of Chinese loanwords in the Malay language. It was found that there were nearly 350 known Chinese loanwords. Many of these words were typically Chinese having no exact Malay equivalents. Png further elaborated that there are only ten percent of Baba usage of the Chinese loanwords in Malay language. His study did not focus on the Baba Malay, but it did highlight the relationship between Baba language and Baba literature.

Another scholar that has studied the Baba Malay is Tan Chee Beng (1980). He has a different viewpoint compared to Shellabear and Png who agreed that the Baba Malay is a corrupted Malay language. Tan analysed the main linguistic features of Baba Malay and has proven it to be a distinctive Malay dialect. According to Tan, Baba Malay has a consistent linguistic structure. There are definite patterns of variation from the Standard Malay and the Malacca Malay, as well as the Baba Malay. Definite Chinese loanwords are used in Baba Malay. Tan proposed that linguistic acculturation does not necessarily mean that the Babas have to speak the same dialect of language of the 'host' group. In fact, a new dialect may develop, giving the people a distinct dialect which also serves as a crucial symbol of ethnic identity. The new dialect should not be judged as corrupted or not proper. He concluded that the so-called Baba patois is a respectable dialect in its own right.

Later in 1981, he wrote another article regarding the Baba literature. He stressed that to study the Baba literature in-depth one has to learn the Baba language.

Anne Pakir wrote a thesis entitled, *A Linguistic Investigation of Baba Malay* in 1986. Her major concern is the linguistic identity of the Baba Malay vis-à-vis other Malay and the extent of Hokkien Chinese influence on the dialect. In the past, Baba Malay is recognised as a Malay dialect. This study investigated the similarities and differences between Baba Malay, other Malay and Hokkien and clearly established Baba Malay as a unique dialect of the Malay language. The study therefore concurs with Tan's.

Recently, William Gwee Thian Hock (1993) compiled a comprehensive list of words, phases, sayings and idiomatic expressions from the Baba language, which were more commonly used in the past than in the present. He attempted to trace as far back as possible the original Malay and Hokkien words in his collection. Although not an academic piece of work, it contributed to the literary heritage of the Baba Malay.

A more recent work was done by Thurgood (1999) who analysed not only the language of the Babas but also two other groups of Peranakan Chinese: Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and Peranakan Chinese of Java. The study provided a detailed analysis of Baba Malay nouns, phrases, and sentence patterns. It also provided evidence that the Hokkien features in Baba Malay structures represented, not only the result of Creole formation, but also the expected influence of Hokkien speakers shifting to Baba Malay. Although a new viewpoint, it did not explain why the

Hokkienese who were Chinese educated did not write Baba literature, as the Baba literature was written mainly in Baba Malay.

1.5 The Sociological Evolution of the Baba Language

Most Babas today speak English or Malay fluently as a result of the education system in Malaysia. Their predecessors were seldom Chinese educated. In the early stage, the Chinese immigrants who sought fortune in the Malay Archipelagos only used the Malay language as the medium to trade merchandize with the local community. These immigrants were mostly petty merchants or poor peasants who possessed little knowledge of written Chinese. As such they assimilated easily into the Malay language even though they were practicing the colloquial Malay.

Inter-marriages between the early Chinese settlers with the Malay and Indonesian women forced them to communicate in the Malay language at home. Therefore, the early Chinese settlers gradually created a new language that is, the Baba Malay. Shellabear (1913) was the first person who named this language as the Baba Malay. As the name suggests, Baba Malay is not a corrupt form of the Malay language but a dialect which has developed out of a particular kind of historial process and belongs to the Babas (Tan, 1980).

The Baba Malay possessed several characteristics which differentiate it from the standard Malay language. Five differences between the Baba Malay and the standard Malay are identified below (Tan, 1980):

- a. Loanwords and loan translations;

- b. Phonetic differences;
- c. Lexical differences;
- d. Semantic differences; and
- e. Syntactic differences.

If there was a lack of appropriate Malay words to express particular aspects or concepts in religion, kinship, business affair and social activities, the users will naturally adopt words from Hokkien. In the course of its historical development, Malacca first fell to the Portuguese, later to the Dutch and finally the British. This subsequently led to Portuguese, Dutch and English loan words being added to the Baba language either directly or indirectly besides Hokkien.

Later, the Baba language attained wide and popular usage even outside the community and became the *lingua franca* in the Straits Settlements in the 19th century up to the first few decades of the 20th century. It is the Baba Malay rather than the standard Malay that was used among the people of different nationalities in the Straits Settlements. Shellabear (1913) described this phenomenon as, "Baba Malay is the language of the man on the street."

The popularity of the Baba Malay language was because the Babas played active roles in the Straits commercial world. It was the language of commerce (Tan, 1993). Shellabear mentioned that Baba Malay was the *lingua franca* not only in the Settlements but everywhere. This is reflected in the distribution of Baba publications beyond the settlements to other towns in Malaya. In fact, the Baba was the pioneer among the Chinese to publish in the Malay language. They were also

among the pioneers in Malaya to use romanised Malay. The Babas had published newspapers, magazine, poems and translated works of Chinese stories. These publications boomed only up to the late nineteenth century and became extinct in the mid twentieth century. The reasons will be described in the later part of this study.

1.6 Objective of the Study

This study attempts to compile a union list of all Baba translation works. The list being prepared is based on the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) of the University of Malaya Library (UML), Library of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBPL), University of Science Malaysia Library (USML), National University of Singapore Library (NUSL), National Library of Singapore (NLS) and the British Library (BL). However, only the collection of UML and DBPL were examined physically due to the time constrain afforded for this study.

This study on the Baba literature is an attempt to supplement other studies on national literary heritage. Definitely, the existence of the Baba literature as part of Malaysian literature has been neglected.

Although the Babas declared themselves as Peranakan or local-born, their translated works are basically stories from the Chinese classic. During its popular years, the Baba publications were owned by mostly every Baba family. However, the demand for these publications slowly declined with the introduction of English education in the Settlements. As a result, the Baba language itself began to be affected and the popularity of the Baba Malay and literature declined drastically after the 1950s.

This study aims to survey the Baba publications in romanised Malay with particular reference on the Babas translated works – from Chinese to Baba Malay. According to Tan (1981) there are two general categories of Baba publications. The first category are publications of the Baba's own writing which comprised newspapers, magazines and poems. The other are translated works of stories and fictions from the Chinese classics. The latter is the main focus of this study. The focus is on works solely in romanised Malay and exclude English publications. The Babas have published English newspapers as well, for example, *Straits Chinese Magazine* in March 1897 till September 1907 and *Malacca Guardian* 2 January 1928 till 1940. This study will emphasis on translated works of Chinese stories such as *Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, etc.

1.7 Summary

The political, economic, social and cultural background has resulted in the uniqueness of this community, especially their language and literature. During the colonial period, the Babas spoke Baba Malay and had created their own literature, the Baba literature. This literature had flourished and is an example of early Malay literary works in Malaysia, which is explored in more detail in chapters two and four of this study.