

Sustaining Baba-Nyonya Cultural Heritage Products: Malacca as a Case Study

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The Baba-Nyonya people have contributed immensely to the culture, cuisine, fashion, and arts of Malaysia. This study aims to identify strategies to sustain the market for cultural heritage products of the Baba-Nyonya in Malacca. Qualitative research in the form of face-to-face interviews was conducted at the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum and Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum in Malacca. Data were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Results showed that the key to sustainability lies in promoting interest in and appreciation for the culture of the Baba-Nyonya among local visitors, tourists, and especially the next generation. Their unique products should be displayed in museums and antique shops, as well as advertised on social media platforms. Other venues for marketing include traditional Baba-Nyonya celebrations featuring performances, games, and food tasting events, which can be organized and supported by Peranakan associations.

Key words: *Baba Nyonya, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable, Peranakan.*



Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Malacca state government has been successfully developing tourism as its primary economic sector (Razali, 2003). Its capital, Malacca city, has been called a model “tourist historic city” (Ashworth & Turnbridge, 1990) and was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. Though Malacca does not boast beautiful beaches or other natural attractions, it has a vibrant history and culture as an entrepôt for over the past five centuries. Portuguese, Chetti, and Baba-Nyonya influences have all shaped the dynamic culture of this city (Dollah & Che Akob, 2014).

“Straits Chinese,” “Straits-born Chinese,” “Baba Chinese,” “Peranakan,” and “Baba-Nyonya” are all used interchangeably in Malaysia to talk about the Baba-Nyonya people, descended from Chinese settlers who made the Malay Archipelago their home between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the Dutch colonial era, “Peranakan” was used to identify anyone of mixed racial ancestry. Today, the term refers to those individuals of Chinese descent who no longer feel culturally affiliated with China and do not speak a Chinese language. The appellation “Peranakan” comes from the root word *anak* or “child” in Malay. It means “a child of local descent”; one who traces their ancestry to the early Chinese, Indian, or Portuguese settlers who married local Malay women. The term “Baba-Nyonya” is made up of “Baba,” a Persian-influenced Hindustani title of respect for men, likely introduced with the arrival of the British East India Company in the Malay Peninsula, and “Nyonya” (along with its variants Nyonyah, Nonya and Nona), which originates from the Indonesian word for a non-Malay married woman of some socio-economic standing (The Nyonyas Kebaya Book, 2012).

“Peranakan” often automatically refers to the “Peranakan Cina” (Chinese-descended Peranakans or Baba-Nyonya) since this is the largest such community in Malaysia. Other Peranakan communities include the “Peranakan Jawi” (Indian Muslim-descended), “Peranakan Chitty Melaka” (Indian-descended), and “Peranakan Seranee” (Eurasian-descended). What they all have in common is that their women traditionally wear the *Baju Panjang* and *Sarong*. The Baba-Nyonya are spread out throughout the Archipelago in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Borneo (The Little Nyonya, 2009). Additional European, Indonesian, Burmese, Thai, and Vietnamese cultural influences on the Chinese-descended Peranakan can be attributed to the historical mixing of many different peoples in former straits settlements like Malacca where the first Baba-Nyonya community took root (The Nyonyas Kebaya Book, 2012).

Based on preliminary site observation as well as secondary literature, it was found that Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage products can be mostly located in two districts of Malacca: Jalan Hang Jebat and Jalan Tun Tan Cheng (Yunus, Samadi & Omar, 2014). This paper will focus



on identifying the socio-cultural characteristics of these products, and put forth proposals as to how to make merchandise more attractive to tourists visiting the city.

Literature Review

Sustaining Baba-Nyonya Cultural Heritage Against the Odds of Modernization

Thanks to the British colonisation of Malaya, most Peranakan were English-educated. Many had converted to Christianity by the middle of the twentieth century. Administrative and civil service posts were often given to prominent members of the community that came to be known as the “King’s Chinese”, due to their perceived allegiance to the British Crown. The Peranakan grew in influence economically, especially in Malacca and Singapore, working as merchants, traders, and business intermediaries between China, Malaya, and the West.

The impetus for conducting this research may be questioned by those who would argue that a traditional Peranakan identity is on the decline, and has been since as early as the 1900s with its increasing assimilation of Victorian cultural norms. Today, a nationalized educational system that privileges instruction in English and Malay means that the Baba Malay language remains alive mostly among the older generation of Baba-Nyonya and is generally not passed on to the next generation. In post-independence Malaysia, when a Peranakan marries a Malay, the Chinese-descended spouse will be legally required to convert to Islam. His or her children will thereby identify not as Peranakan, but as Chinese Malay Muslims. Traditional Peranakan attire is seen by many in the community as old-fashioned and not suitable for modern living.

On the other hand, many others believe Peranakan culture is currently undergoing a major revival in Malacca. Traditional food, fashion, language and art are all starting to become popularized thanks to the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum and Baba-Nyonya Restaurant, as well as localities such as Jonker Walk and the street stretching from Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock until Jalan Hang Jebat. The role of museums and exhibitions in preserving and highlighting what has survived of Peranakan culture through the ages cannot be understated. Neglecting the opportunity to commercialize the rich cultural heritage of the Baba-Nyonya will not only facilitate its disappearance, but also impede the raising of revenue to support preservation efforts (Tieng wie, 1988).

A Brief Understanding of Challenges

Experiencing local cultural heritage sites and products is a primary motivation for tourists to travel to a particular destination (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Here, “products” can refer to a wide range of natural attractions, architecture, arts, crafts, music, food and drink, agricultural goods, and cultural activities. Challenges involved in promoting and sustaining these

products include establishing a strong brand, ensuring continuous availability, engaging tourist interest, and competing with similar items in the market. Stakeholders have a responsibility not only to market existing products, but also explore opportunities for new potential products that have been previously undervalued. Another obstacle to capitalizing on cultural heritage lies in tourists' own lack of knowledge and experience about products, which can impair their ability to choose what to purchase (Yaakob, 2013).

The Social and Cultural Characteristics of Baba-Nyonya Heritage Products

Cultural heritage is a collective community resource, defined by its traditions, beliefs, and accomplishments (Ashworth, 2009; Aziz & Abdullah, 2011). While tangible heritage refers to such cultural properties as monuments, buildings, and archaeological sites, intangible heritage includes the oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, and collective knowledge and wisdom passed down from generation to generation (UNESCO, 1999). As noted in a study by Hughes and Carlsen (2010), there are inherent moral conflicts related to the preservation, authenticity, and commercialisation of products that emerge from cultural heritage tourism. Such conflicts are certainly relevant to the Baba-Nyonya community who saw some of their historical buildings and sites destroyed by the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonizers between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This loss of physical cultural space has led to an erosion of their own cultural capital. Nonetheless, traditional Baba-Nyonya culture is being kept alive through street names, family heirlooms, museums, antique items, jewellery, and clothing such as Baju Panjang (long dress), Kebaya Nyonya (short dress), Batik Sarung (wraparound skirt) and Kasut Manek (beaded slippers).

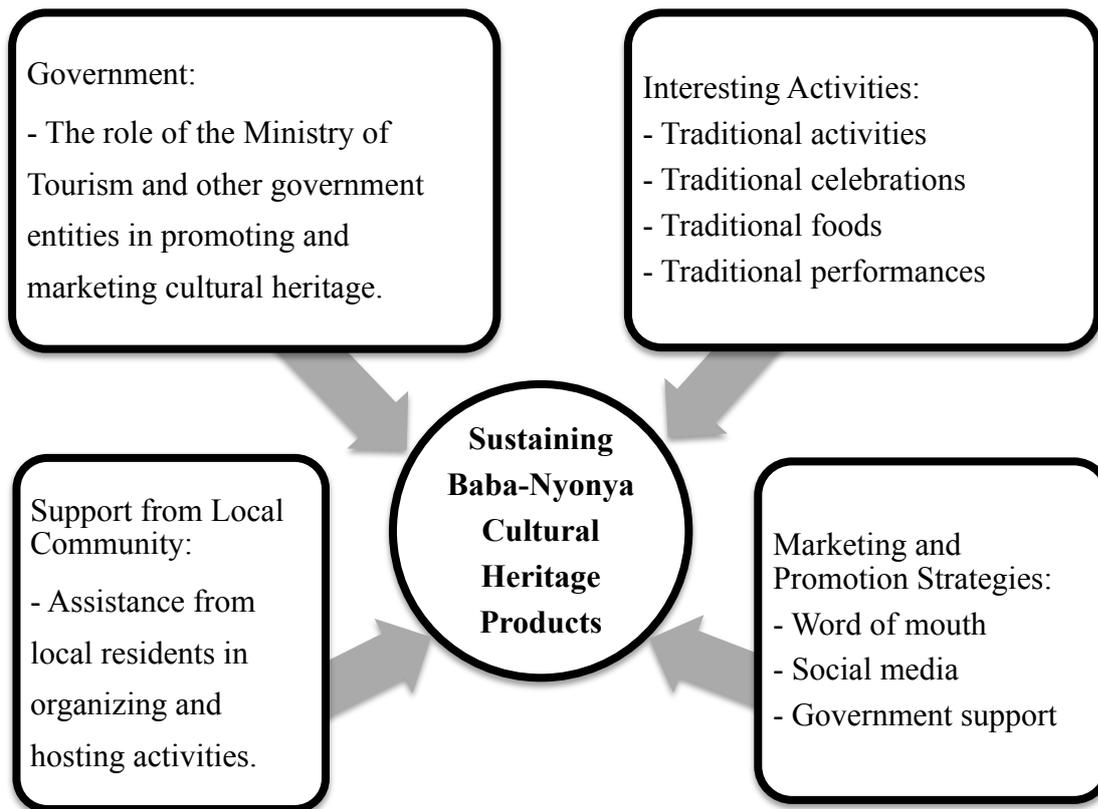
Locations Relevant to this Study

- 1) Jalan Hang Jebat: Jalan Hang Jebat, or “Jonker Walk” as it is more commonly known, is a street in Malacca’s Chinatown, which begins just across the river from the Dutch Square. Both sides of the road are flanked with heritage houses belonging to wealthy Baba-Nyonyas dating back to the seventeenth century.
- 2) Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock: The Tun Tan Cheng Lock (TTCL) Centre for Asian Architectural and Urban Heritage is a unique resource of the National University of Singapore’s Department of Architecture. It is responsible for advancing the study of historical architecture and urban environments in Asia using Malacca as a case site. The Baba-Nyonya restaurant is located at the Centre.
- 3) The Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum: Established in 1896, the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum comprises three exquisitely restored townhouses arranged to look like a conventional Baba-Nyonya residence from the nineteenth century. It includes excellent

examples of Chinese-Palladian style in the form of hand-painted tiles, carved teakwood doors, and other period features (Wikipedia, 2015).

- 4) Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum: The Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum offers a glimpse into what the typical home of a wealthy Baba-Nyonya a hundred years ago would have looked like. There are nearly a thousand antique and collectible artefacts on display.

Research Framework



Source: www.malaysiandigest.com (Syareen Majelan, 2016)

Research Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers decided to utilize qualitative methods of analysis to help understand satisfaction as well as sense of belonging (Creswell, 2003; Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). The population for this study was made up of operators at the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum and Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum (located at Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Heern Street in Malacca), selected via the convenient sampling technique (Paul, 2008). Interviews took place at both locations and took around three hours. Verbal and visual results were subject to thematic analysis techniques, which dynamically summarize the informational content of data (Altheide, 1987; Morgan, 1993).



Interview Questions

- 1) What kind of Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage products do you have in this museum?
- 2) What media do you use to promote Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?
- 3) Are there any special promotions used as a marketing strategy by this museum?
- 4) What kind of activities are offered to tourists at this museum?
- 5) How was the general response from local people? Are they supporting the sustaining of Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage products?
- 6) In your opinion, what are the advantages to sustaining Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?
- 7) Nowadays, how do people view Baba-Nyonya culture?
- 8) In your opinion, what can we do to prevent Baba-Nyonya culture from disappearing?
- 9) Has the government provided support for preserving Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage? How has it done so?
- 10) At the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum, what efforts have been made to sustain cultural heritage in Malacca, especially that of the Baba-Nyonya?
- 11) How can we promote awareness and interest among the young generation about traditional Baba-Nyonya culture?
- 12) Ten years from now, do you think people will know about Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?
- 13) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Data Analysis and Findings

The interviews with operators at the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum and Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum were conducted in April 2017.

- 1) What kind of Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage products do you have in this museum?

“Basically household items, for example, furniture, photos, accessories and traditional outfit.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Baba-Nyonya culture heritage product do we have in museum is a culture book and tourist book. The book more about Baba Nyonya heritage.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museums offer locals and tourists the same products, mostly from the descendants of the Baba-Nyonya.

2) What media do you use to promote Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?

“We use are internet and social media to promote our museum.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Media do we have use to promote Baba Nyonya cultural heritage is Facebook to introduce about Baba Nyonya.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museums use social media to promote their items and encourage more locals and tourists to visit.

3) Are there any special promotions used as a marketing strategy by this museum?

“Special promotion as the marketing strategy from museum is price for student is RM 10. We give special price.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Special promotion as the marketing strategy from museum is prices for student, the normal price RM 16 but for student we give special price RM 10 for student and if you came with group 5 to 6 we also will give special price.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museums use a basic promotion platform. Each offers a discounted price for students.

4) What kind of activities are offered to tourists at this museum?

“Basically we have are half and hour trip to our visitor and tourist.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“In the museum we provide a tourist guide to take them around the museum. Besides the tourist guide will give a little information about this museum.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

The purpose of these activities is to teach locals and tourists about Baba-Nyonya culture.

5) How was the general response from local people? Are they supporting the sustaining of Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage products?

“I am very disappointed people just make it money. Just use the name to make it money rather than helping to sustain the cultural.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)



“Sometime response from local people is very good and positive.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Some locals support the museums by helping to welcome tourists and show them around. Others are less interested in preserving the culture and instead just want to make a profit.

6) In your opinion, what are the advantages to sustaining Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?

“The sustaining the culture in this case it will be the unique culture in Malaysia to prote[ct] for benefit to preserve it.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“What can we do to sustain the Baba Nyonya cultural heritage is we can talk about a lot Baba Nyonya heritage and visit to any museum about Baba Nyonya.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Preserving traditions is very important because they remind us that we are part of a history that includes our past, shapes our today, and determines who we can become in the future.

7) Nowadays, how do people view Baba-Nyonya culture?

“They are fine with the culture and no rejection. The level of interest depends on people for example the material or fashion.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“How do people to accept the Baba Nyonya cultural the most respond are very good.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museums receive a positive response from locals and tourists regarding the promotion of the unique Baba-Nyonya culture.

8) In your opinion, what can we do to prevent Baba-Nyonya culture from disappearing?

“My opinion is to teach about The Baba Nyonya culture in university.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“My opinion is to teach about The Baba Nyonya in school and universities example in subject ethnic to make the young generation know about Baba Nyonya.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)



Both museum operators expressed their desire to see Baba-Nyonya culture taught in schools and universities. They said the younger generation needs to learn about this culture to make sure it does not disappear in the future.

9) Has the government provided support for preserving Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage? How has it done so?

“Good help to promote this place to the local and international tourists.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Yes, the government provide and support example big banner about Baba Nyonya and media in television to visit Malacca.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

The government has a responsibility to help finance the preservation and sustaining of Malaysian cultural heritage, especially that of the Baba-Nyonya.

10) At the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum, what efforts have been made to sustain cultural heritage in Malacca, especially that of the Baba-Nyonya?

“As the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum to sustain Baba Nyonya in cultural we have more promotion in museum and still remains all the items in this museum.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“As the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum to sustain Baba Nyonya in cultural we have more promotion in museum and still retains the old stuff.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museums have made considerable efforts to preserve the traditional heritage of the Baba-Nyonya for future generations.

11) How can we promote awareness and interest among the young generation about traditional Baba-Nyonya culture?

“Educated them to know better about the culture and accept the culture. Either we are old or young.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Tell them a lot history about Baba Nyonya and also told about wonderful Baba Nyonya.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)



It is important to let young people know about traditional Baba-Nyonya culture since they are the ones who we hope will continue to preserve and promote it going forward.

12) Ten years from now, do you think people will know about Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage?

“Maybe because we did not know if this culture may or may not survive the ravages of time. We can only hope that our beloved cultural heritage will survive the passage of time but ultimately that is all we can do, to hope for the best and let the future take care of itself.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“Yes of course, generation to generation example if I told about Baba-Nyonya for you and of course you told to your children about Baba-Nyonya.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museum operators expressed the sentiment that if the young generation ignores the meaning of the traditions of the Baba-Nyonya, then there is a danger of losing the vibrant heritage of this community, which is a part of Malaysia’s collective identity.

13) Is there anything else you would like to add?

“Last word is are more people will learn more about the culture and known better about our culture and marriage between Malay and Chinese. Be more respect each other among the Malaysian citizen.” (Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum)

“My last words I hope generation to known about this unique cultural and hoping they will keep sustain this Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage, especially the product. Baba-Nyonya cultural is very wonderful and unique.” (Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum)

Both museum operators hope that people will learn more about the Baba-Nyonya and develop a greater appreciation for the value of its contributions to Malaysian society.

Conclusion

One of the things that makes Malaysia unique is its tapestry of different ethnic groups that have not only coexisted peacefully for centuries, but also learned from and enriched one another. Yet this multitude of diversity is at serious risk if nothing is done to sustain cultures like the Baba-Nyonya. The collective culture might disappear if steps are not being taken to sustain them or to record them for posterity. The loss of cultural heritage over time is not



inevitable, but rather can be prevented and indeed reversed if the right steps are taken. The results of this study show that sustaining Baba-Nyonya cultural heritage requires promoting awareness about their traditions and marketing their products on a wider scale, particularly through word of mouth, social media, government-sponsored touristic promotional material, and cultural events.



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