

# BRIDGING THE PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH FOOD HERITAGE AMONG PERANAKAN CHINESE OF THE STRAITS OF MALACCA<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the ritual role of specific types of food and drink amongst the Peranakan Chinese of the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia. Food, in this context, is not merely for consumption but functions also as ritual apparatuses. These rituals, performed by the caretaker of a Peranakan Chinese family, invoke the unseen spiritual realm during a ritual event. The Peranakan Chinese community acknowledges the significance of specific food and drink as essential to these ceremonial proceedings. Food and drink function as a bridge between the realms of the seen and the unseen, and signify a metaphysical link between ritual practitioners and the supernatural world. The Peranakan Chinese, or commonly known as the Baba-Nyonyas of the Straits of Malacca, are descendants of 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese immigrants from the Indonesian archipelago and British Malaya who adopted Nusantara customs and assimilated into local communities. Food and drinks offered to the ancestors and spirits form a major community-wide series of offerings performed a few times a year by family members who continue to maintain the tradition. Typically, the rituals coincide with events of the Chinese calendar such as Chinese New Year and the Hungry Ghost Festival. These series of rituals involve every household of the Peranakan Chinese community.

*Keywords: traditional food, invoke, bridge, unseen spiritual, Peranakan Chinese, Baba-Nyonya, Straits of Malacca*

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## **Introduction**

The Peranakan Chinese, or commonly known as the Baba-Nyonyas of the Straits of Malacca have a unique and fascinating history and culture. The people of this community are descendants of 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese immigrants from the Indonesian archipelago and British Malaya who adopted Nusantara customs, and assimilate into local communities of Malay and Chinese cultures. Three terms are commonly used to describe this community: the Peranakans, the Straits Chinese, and the Babas and Nyonyas. The word Peranakan is derived from the Malay word 'anak' which means 'child'. The term refers to the local born, as well offsprings of foreigner-native unions. Frank Swettenham explained that the term Baba was used for Straits-born males, whether children of English, Chinese Eurasian parents or of Hindustani origin (Tan Chee Beng, 1988: 89-103). Baba is the term for males and Nyonya, females. The word Baba may have been derived from the word *bapa*, which means father in Malay. Some historians think that it was an honorific title equivalent for a *tuan* or a *towkay*. The word Nyonya is said to have originated from Java (Lee, 2008: 162). This hybridity resulted from interactions and intermarriages with the local community such as the Chinese immigrants who arrived in the Malay Peninsula. Some of the commonly attributed examples of hybridity include language, food, and clothing. While their culture stimulates curiosity and has undergone a resurgence of interest in recent decades, defining their heritage and what it means to be Baba Nyonya evades simple definition. Further development among the Peranakan Chinese, especially Babas in the 1800s and early 1900s, established businesses and traded profitably with the British. Some scholars posit that they could have been the ancestors of current Peranakan Chinese in Malacca (Suhaila Abdullah, 2013: 143-149). They gained wealth through businesses and spent in on great collections of art, enjoying extravagant celebrations and food while Nyonyas within were keepers of the home. Nyonyas are very well known for excellent skills of home cooking and craft. They combined Chinese and Malay food preparation techniques and ingredients to create unique fusion food.

## **Worldview and Custom of Peranakan Chinese of Malacca**

Peranakan people speak Malay, consume Malay food, dress in Malay-style attire, and adopt terms of Malay kinship in life (Clammer, J. 1980). However, most of the customs practiced is based on Chinese customs. As discussed by Tan, the Baba in Melaka (Peranakan Chinese), with the exception of a very small number of them, practice Chinese folk religion (Tan Chee Beng, 1988, 161-163). Since most Peranakans are of Hoklo (Hokkien) ancestry, although a sizeable number are of Teochew or Cantonese descent, they generally subscribe to Chinese belief systems such as

Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Respect to the parents (filial piety) is a very important and worship of ancestors is the core of their culture. Thus, in many homes of Peranakan families there are altars for worship and memorials to the ancestors. The Peranakans also celebrate Lunar New Year, Lantern Festival and other Chinese festivals, while adopting the customs of the land they settled in, as well as those of their colonial rulers. The Chinese New Year celebration is a celebration that has become a major festival among the Baba and Nyonya. However, some traditional festivals like *Cheng Beng*<sup>2</sup>, *Tang Chek*<sup>3</sup>, *Wangkang*<sup>4</sup> etc have begun to disappear as a result of social changes experienced by this community, especially in modern lives and many of young Peranakans who have embraced Christianity.

Chinese folk religion, which Tan calls the Chinese religion, is a rather syncretic system which comprises Taoist, Buddhist and confusion elements; ancestor worship forms a crucial part of the system. It is polytheistic and most of the deities worshipped reflect the Baba way of life. Like all Chinese worshippers, the Baba not only worship at home but also worship at Chinese temples now and then or when there is a need to do so. The most popular domestic deities among the Baba are *Hood Chor* (called as *Datuk Uco*) and *Kuah Teh Yah*, the former being Guanyin in Mandarin and is popularly known as the Goddess of Mercy in English. On *Jalan Hang Jebat*, where Straits Chinese houses can still be located, the main domestic deity popularly worshipped is the Goddess of Mercy. Those who do not keep any deities at home do, in fact, pray to other deities and ancestors at their ancestral homes or at the home of an elder sibling during festivals (Tan Chee Beng, 1988: 144-154). Not all Peranakan Chinese know the names of the deities that they worship and some even designate wrong names for them. This happened to an informant of this study as well. She always referred the unknown name of the

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<sup>2</sup> Cheng Beng better known in Hokkien means bright and sunny, also called Qing Ming in Mandarin is an important day in the Chinese culture and tradition to honor the ancestors and relatives who died each year. Prayer and the celebration is done to those who died even though not his own family. Cheng Beng Day falls normally in the month of April and the prayer can be done 10 days earlier or 10 days later than the date.

<sup>3</sup> The Tang Chek Festival known as Dōngzhì Festival or Winter Solstice Festival is one of the most important festivals celebrated by the Chinese and other East Asians on or around December 22. Its origin related to the yin and yang philosophy of balance and harmony in the cosmos. There will be days with longer daylight hours after this celebration therefore an increase in positive energy flowing in. One activity related to these happening is get together and eating of *tangyuan* or balls of glutinous rice, which symbolize reunion.

<sup>4</sup> The Wang Kang Festival is of Hokkien origin which celebrated in two large districts of the Hokkien Province, Chiang Chew Hoo and Chuan Chew Hoo. Outside of China, Malacca is the only place that this big event take place which also held in Manila and Sarawak in the early days.

deity as “God (Datuk), although she can recall few Datuks i.e *Tikong*, *Datuk Quan Yin*, *Datuk Buddha* and *Datuk Dapor* (Deity of the Kitchen) (Madam Grace, Bandar Hilir Melaka, February, 2014).

Peranakan Chinese or Baba discussed by Tan Chee Beng has two systems of ancestral worship, “invite the ancestor” (*chia abu*) system and “keep the ancestor” (*piarah abu*) system (Knapp, 2010). For Chinese Peranakan *ccia* (*chia*) *abu* and *piarra* (*piarah*) *abu* distinguishes between those who have ancestral altars at home and those who do not but still pray to ancestors on festivals (Tan Chee Beng, 1988: 150-154). Both systems include placing the altar facing the graveyards, and this comprises one or two tables placed with two candle sticks and a joss-stick holder that can be a glass filled with uncooked rice.

During prayers, normally done by the wife, burning joss sticks invite the ancestors back to the house for the occasion. By placing the joss sticks in the holder and lighting the candles, it marks that the wife has invited the ancestors to return to the house, to be worshipped and celebrated. It is believed that the invited ancestors and deities will occupy and stay in the house to celebrate the festival by consuming food and drinks offered to them during particular rituals. They will leave the house when they are requested to in a separate ritual by burning incense and ritual papers called *Kerte Perak* (*silver paper*)

### **Traditional Food of Chinese Peranakan**

Peranakan food, sometimes called Nyonya Food, is a wonderful combination of Malay and Chinese cuisine with influences from Indonesia and food cultures. Nyonya food, according to Tan (1993), is clearly unique and Malaysian/Singaporean in identity. Using ingredients such as *lengkuas* (galangal), *serai* (lemongrass), *lada* (chillies), *kunyit* (turmeric), *halia* (ginger), *tau cheow* (*cheo*), *asam jawa* (tamarind), *air limau* (lime juice), *shrimp paste* (*belachan*), *buah keras* (candlenut), *gula melaka* (*palm sugar*), spices (*rempah*) such as star anise, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg, leaves such as *daun kesum* (*laksa leaf*), *daun kaduk* (*wild betelnut leaf*), *daun cekok* (*galangal leaf*), *daun limau purut* (*lime leaf*), *pandan leaves*, the Nyonyas concoct unique cuisines, predominantly spicy and piquant in flavour. A Nyonya’s cooking ability could be assessed in the old days from the rhythm of how one pounded spices (*rempah*) to make *sambal belachan*.

Some of the basic and well-known Peranakan traditional food of Melaka are *Otak Otak*, *Ayam Pongteh*, *Assam Laksa*, *Roti Babi*, *Itik Tim*, *Buah Keluak* (*babi bush keluak*), *Perut Ikan*. *Achar* (*pickled chillies*), *Sek Bak* (*stew pork*), *Hong Bak* (*roasted pork*), *Cheng Chuan Hoo* (*fish cooked in fermented soybean paste*), *Cincalok Omelette* (*preserved shrimp*), *Pork Liver Balls* (*hati babi bungkus*). To some Peranakan Chinese who still practice feeding food and drinks to the ancestors, basic traditional food needs to be

prepared and served during specific occasions. These include *Pongteh*, *Buah Keluak*, *Babi Sayur Asin (Itik Tim)* and *Chap Chai*. Preparation of food must incorporate the correct ingredients, and follow the right methods of preparing it as listed below.

*Pongteh* – ingredients include shallots, garlic (just a little), *tau cheo*, paste (fermented bean paste), potatoes, chicken, *sam chan* (pork belly), soy sauce/thick soy sauce. *Pongteh* is prepared by following this sequence: first, sauté chopped shallots and garlic until crispy and fragrant; second, add in black soy or thick soy sauce; third, add in chicken and *sam chan*; fourth, add in water (up to preference) and potatoes, and leave to boil.

*Buah Keluak* – the main ingredient for *Buah Keluak* is pork ribs, although it can be replaced by chicken for non-pork eaters, making the dish halal. Main ingredients for *Asam pedas* paste are *lengkuas* (galangal), *serai* (lemongrass), garlic, shallots, *belacan* – dried shrimp paste, dried chili, red fresh chili, *buah keras* (kemiri), *kunyit isi* (turmeric) and *asam jawa* (tamarind). *Buah Keluak* is prepared by following this sequence: first, blend the ingredients for the *asam pedas* paste; second, sauté (*tumis*) the paste until oily, then add in *buah keluak*, pork ribs and/or chicken into the cooking and finally add in *asam jawa* juice, salt and *ajinomoto* (MSG) to taste. Bring to boil.

*Babi Sayur Asin* (or *Itik Tim*) originally pork is its main ingredient, but it is sometimes replaced by duck and called as *Itim Tim*. The ingredients of the sauce are *buah kana*, *asam keeping* (dhania), *belimbing kering* (dried star fruit) and tomatoes. Brandy (wine) is optional, adding flavor to this recipe. *Babi Sayur Asin* (or *Itik Tim*) is prepared by boiling water, adding in *buah kana*, *asam keeping*, *belimbing* and tomatoes. Boil until the smell of *asam* is fragrant. Add pork/duck and leave it to boil. Wine is added a minute or two before it is completed.

*Chap chai* is the simplest food prepared for ancestral worship and it is also a regular food consumed by the community in the daily life. The main ingredients are cabbage, *kimchan bokji*, tofu skin, *sengkuang* (turnip root-optional), *tau cheo* paste (fermented bean paste), garlic, soy sauce and *suhoon* (glass noodles). It is prepared by sautéing *tau cheo*, garlic with water and soy sauce till it boils. It is followed by adding *kimchan* and the rest of the ingredients until it boils. *Soh-un* is added later.

## Traditional Food and Drink as Bridge of Chinese Peranakan

Traditional food as discussed above is not merely for consumption but functions also as ritual apparatuses. These rituals, performed by the caretakers of a Peranakan Chinese family, invoke the unseen spiritual realm during a ritual event. The Peranakan Chinese community engaged for this research was the family of Madam Grace (an informant), who acknowledged the significance of specific food

and drink (as discussed above) as essential to these ceremonial proceedings. Food and drink function as a bridge between the realms of the seen and the unseen, and signify a metaphysical link between ritual practitioners and the supernatural world.

Food and drink offered to deities and ancestors form a major community-wide series of offerings performed few times a year by family members who continue to maintain the tradition. Typically, the rituals coincides with events of the Chinese calendar such Chinese New Year, Hungry Ghost Festival etc. These series of rituals involve every household of the Peranakan Chinese community. The ritual observed and performed by Madam Grace is likewise practiced by other Peranakan Chinese in Malacca. The deities that are worshipped include *Datuk Tikong*, *Datuk Uco* (*Quan Yin*), *Datuk Dapur*, *Datuk Tanah*, *Datuk Buddha* and *Datuk Monyet*. Madam Grace explained that one has to kneel to worship *Datuk Tanah*, as “*Datuk Tanah*” is the groundkeeper. *Kuih Baluh* (*In Malay and Baba Nyonya also called as kuih bahulu*) is served as an offering during worship as a “mouth sweetener”.

For ancestral worship, Madam Grace explained that food is prepared as an offering to the spirits of the deceased ancestors. The specific dishes that must be authentic are *Buah Keluak* cooked with chicken or pork-ribs, *Asam Pedas* cooked with *ikan Tenggiri* (Mackerel), *Chap Chai* (mixed vegetables with glass noodles and tofu skin), *Pongteh* (cooked with chicken or pork), *Itik Tim* or pork cooked with *sayur asin* (fermented cabbage). Sometimes there will be additional vegetable and fish dishes are prepared as offerings in worship. Alongside the main dishes, other cakes such as *kuih bahulu*, *Bangkit* etc. Each type of cake has to be presented in five (5) pieces. These array of dishes are usually presented for ancestral worship during the Chinese New Year period, specifically one or two days before the first day of Chinese New Year.

Dishes presented during ancestral worship include eight (8) bowls of rice, eight (8) cups of *arak putih* (white wine) or Brandy, 8 sets of *sirih* (betel leaves) with 2 pieces for each set or 5 pieces that are combined with *kapur*, tobacco and *pinang*. All these are laid on the altar table for worship.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Process**

On the eve of the prayers, usually in the evening, the act of inviting the deceased ancestors and family members (sisters, nieces and nephews) are done through prayers. “*Esok hari baik, datang jemput minum teh*” (tomorrow is a good day, please be invited for tea) are uttered to *Datuk Luar* (*Quan Yin*) and *Datuk Dapur*, informing

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the family serve 9 sets, because they trace back out ancestors to the 1st or 2<sup>nd</sup> (plus their wives), generation to the grandfather's generation which is the fifth.

them to “*Jemput malaikat masuk rumah*” (inviting deceased ancestors spirit to the home). Prayers are made to *Datuk Jaga Pintu* (door keeper/guardian) on the right and left of the house to allow the “*malaikat*” (deceased ancestor spirits) to enter the home for tea. The act of inviting ancestor spirits for tea and dishes for ancestral worship right is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Inviting and offering food and drink to the deities and ancestors before Chinese New Year, 2014

Date	Day	Acts Performed
29 January 2014, Wednesday	2 days before Chinese New Year	<i>Jemput</i> (Invitation) in the evening, the offering for worship is served with tea and fruits only.
30 January 2014, Thursday	Chinese New Year Eve	Serve dishes for prayers. At 10am or 11am, ancestral worship is done and the dishes (mentioned above) are served as an offering for worship. This act of worship is done before the reunion dinner in the evening.
31 January 2014, Friday	First day of Chinese New Year	All living family members enjoy the festival

Source: Fieldwork, January 2014

The sequence of prayers comprises prayers to *Tikong*, *Datuk Quan Yin*, *Datuk Buddha* and *Datuk Dapur*. Preparations are made in order to invite the spirits of the deceased ancestors into the house. Chinese tea is prepared. Candles are lit on the *kaki lilin* (candle stand). After tea is brewed, it is poured into three small cups before *Quan Yin*. The joss sticks are lit, and brought to the main door of the house, to be placed at the joss stick holder following the recitation of prayers. Back at the *Quan Yin* altar, three (3) joss stick are lit. A teapot and joss stick is then taken to the back of the kitchen, to the altar of *Datuk Dapur*. Two candles are lit at the kitchen altar and one tea cup is placed on it. The tea and joss sticks are then brought upstairs, candles lit. Altogether, eight tea cups and a handful of joss sticks are used.



Photo 1: Prayer (Madame Grace) in front of the altar – informing the deities and inviting for tea  
(Photo: Hanafi Hussin)



Photo 2: Offering tea by Madame Grace to the spirit of the kitchen, Datuk Dapor  
(Photo: Hanafi Hussin)



Photo 3: Tea is serve for to the ancestors, spirits of dead family members  
(Photo: Hanafi Hussin)

The *bunga rampai* (pronounced as *bunga rampe*), fragrant flower, and is usually presented on the ancestral altar during Chinese New Year. *Huat Kue* (or steam cake), presented in white, as one of the offerings offered for prosperity. *Keledak* (sweet potato) is also used as an offering for worship. As part of the presentation, of *daun bawang* (onion leaves) in a bowl, rice in bowls, tea and wine are used. In the olden days, ancestral worship incorporated sugar cane, *pisang raja* (banana) and noodles with dried squid (*mee basah dengan sotong kering*).

There is no ritual in the preparation of dishes for offering, as long as it is cooked with sincerity and filial piety. As the dish is being served on the ancestors' altar table, invitations are then recited to the spirits of the deceased family members and ancestors. The joss sticks are used to pray three times in the time span of two hours. The first time is to invite the spirits of the deceased family members for the feast; second time is to ask whether all deceased family members are present, and lastly is to ask if the spirits are satisfied with the food that had been prepared. It is a belief of the Baba Nyonya community that such practice is go on for two hours so that the spirits of the deceased family members and ancestors are able to enjoy the food for a longer period of time during the Chinese New Year season.



Photo 4: Food and drinks served for the ancestors and spirits of deceased family members (Photo: Hanafi Hussin)

After two hours, a pair of 20cent coins or (chopouey) a wooden block is used to ask and seek a response from the deceased spirits of the invited ancestors. This is called “*pak pui, so poi*”. The pair of coins or wooden blocks is clasped in both hands, raised to the chest in a gesture of prayer. While asking the deceased spirit of the ancestors and family members, the hands are shaken back and forth and the coins or wooden block is left to fall to the floor as the hands open. A few possible results are then interpreted. If coins are used and both coins’ heads are facing upwards, it is interpreted that the spirits are angry. The same interpretation is given if both wooden blocks are closed with the protruding side up. If both coins are opened in tails, it means that the deceased ancestor spirits are laughing. This is similar for the wooden blocks with the flat surface facing upwards. If the coins are opened to a head and a tail, it means that the deceased spirit of the ancestors and family members are appeased. A similar interpretation is given if the wooden blocks open to one protruding side and another with the flat surface facing upward.

If the spirits are appeased, the prayer session ends with the burning of *kerte perak* (paper money offering). Tan interprets this as a sending offerings to the ancestors and spirits from the house. The *daun bawang* in the bowl, tea and white wine from the altar table is then splashed unto the fire. This act symbolizes the cleansing of the house. This ceremony highlights the importance of food and drink

as a bridge that connects living family members to their ancestors and deceased members of the family.



Photo 5: Kerte Perak



Photo 5 & 6: Sending back the ancestors and cleansing  
(Photo: Hanafi Hussin)

Continuity and change of traditional food and Drink among Peranakan Chinese Babas have gradually become more scattered throughout Malaysia and the Southeast Asian region, and with interactions with other groups taking place, much of their distinctiveness and exclusiveness might soon be lost (Lee, 2008, 166). Intermarriage between Straits Chinese and non-Straits Chinese has led to a dilution of Peranakan Chinese and Baba Nyonya culture. Many customs and rituals are less frequently practiced, and language is transmitted even less from one generation to the other because of more dominant languages such as English and Malay. Food today has also shifted to restaurant businesses. This commercial move has changed the socio-economic status of the Peranakan. While capitalizing the unique flavours and cultural heritage of the Baba Nyonya, as some scholars

view this as a form of commercialization or commodification. The commodification of Peranakan Chinese food appeals to locals and to tourists in Melaka (Malacca). It has also spread to the other parts of Malaysia and Singapore where Baba and Nyonya can be found. This commercialism can be traced 1970s, just before the Malaysian government's promotion of tourism in the 1980s, which has made tourism "the most vibrant sector of Melaka's economy" (Worden, 2003). The resulting increase in Malaccan tourism has greatly benefited the Nyonya restaurants, perceived as exotic and therefore a prime destination for cultural tourism.

## **Conclusion**

Food and drinks are very important in human life. Many other cultures also use food and drink as tools for engaging the spiritual world, deities, ancestors and deceased spirits of family members. Its function as a bridge between the realms of the seen and the unseen, and signify a metaphysical link between ritual practitioners and the supernatural world like other sacred performances which deals with ancestral world (J. Pugh-Kitingan, Hanafi Hussin & JJ Baptist. 2009). Favourite food and drink of the ancestors and spirits serve as a bridge among living family members and ancestors and spirits of the deceased family. These sacred practices are a sign of continuity between the ancestors and living generations, which can be observed in the practices of Peranakan Chinese during festival such as Chinese New Year. These ritual practices require an understanding of beliefs that are used fulfil the sacred functions. These practices can also be seen as a symbol of unification among living family members, securing family ties.

Maintaining the authenticity of food served to the ancestors is a challenge for the younger generation as such sacred rituals need to be performed correctly. Sustaining these cultural practices among the younger generations will not easy as food culture among the Peranakan Chinese community has changed. In the near future, if food for rituals are prepared by restaurant operators, less concern for authenticity will be taken because food for commercial uses will be more focused on profit making. Main ingredients and its high cost could be replaced by ingredients that are cheaper but similar in taste. This will make food culture among the Peranakan Chinese less authentic, and will not be recognised as Nyonya food in the future.

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