MODEMN PERANAKAN HYBRIDITIES:
RENEGOTIATING CHINESE PERANAKAN IDENTITY THROUGH BABA MALAY LANGUAGE CLASSES

SIM GEK THENG, DANIELLE

Capstone Final Report for BA (Honours) in Anthropology
Supervised by: Assistant Professor Zachary Howlett
AY 2018/2019
Yale-NUS College Capstone Project

DECLARATION & CONSENT

1. I declare that the product of this Project, the Thesis, is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic, or personal, in accordance with the academic regulations of Yale-NUS College.

2. I acknowledge that the Thesis is subject to the policies relating to Yale-NUS College Intellectual Property (Yale-NUS HR 039).

ACCESS LEVEL

3. I agree, in consultation with my supervisor(s), that the Thesis be given the access level specified below: [check one only]

✓ Unrestricted access
Make the Thesis immediately available for worldwide access.

Access restricted to Yale-NUS College for a limited period
Make the Thesis immediately available for Yale-NUS College access only from ____________ (mm/yyyy) to ____________ (mm/yyyy), up to a maximum of 2 years for the following reason(s): (please specify; attach a separate sheet if necessary):
_____________________________________.

After this period, the Thesis will be made available for worldwide access.

Other restrictions: (please specify if any part of your thesis should be restricted)
_____________________________________
_____________________________________
_____________________________________
_____________________________________
_____________________________________
_____________________________________

Sim Gek Theng, Danielle (Elm)
Name & Residential College of Student
4 April 2019
Signature of Student

Zachary Howlett
Name & Signature of Supervisor
4 April 2019
Date
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, a massive thank you to Assistant Professor Zachary Howlett for being such an encouraging supervisor, and for diving into sociolinguistic theory with me since the days of Language, Culture, and Power. To Associate Professor Erik Harms, thank you for sharing so much on ethnographic writing, modernity, and Southeast Asian culture in your accessible, candid way. Finally, many thanks to Assistant Professor Nala Lee for chatting with me about your research interests and recommending me relevant literature on language revitalisation.

I dedicate my capstone topic to Mama, who introduced me to Peranakan culture even before I knew how to walk or talk. Gua selama-lama boleh jadi lu mia little kutu. Satu hari, kita mesti sama-sama masak pongteh, ok! Nanti kempunan.

Much love to my parents for being extremely encouraging and listening to my various emotive monologues whenever I was overwhelmed by school (or prospects of life after school). I promise I will take care of myself so you don’t have to worry!

To my suitemates Huilin, Elysia, Shich, Marc, and Xun: thanks for the support, the laughs, and the daily antics. Ching, Narayani, Woon, Flora, and Chris: thanks for keeping me sane during the entire process. Andris, Leane, Nichole, Mick, Tingwei, and Nhien: thank you for waiting for me while I did this thing; let’s catch up soon!

Special mentions to Jielin, Hui Min and Jerome for helping me proofread my draft.

Last but not least, this paper could not have been written without the contributions of GSA members Jacqueline, Ken, and Amelyn, and my MKCB classmates. Thank you for welcoming me to the community and for the minom teh sessions. I have found such good friends in all of you, and here’s to keeping in contact even after this writing process is over; that’s the beauty of community, isn’t it?
Abstract

The Chinese Peranakans, also known as the Babas, are a community commonly featured in the Singaporean national narrative. Yet, their language – Baba Malay – has fewer than 1000 fluent speakers today. This ethnography on individuals’ experiences in the Mari Kita Chakap Baba (MKCB) course organised by the Gunong Sayang Association examines how community language revitalisation movements are complicated by the differing generational conceptualisations of Peranakan identity. The two generations, which I demarcate as young and old, negotiate Peranakan identity through each conceiving a type of modernity that is shaped by various social and historical factors. Relating observations of MKCB participants’ learning of Baba Malay to each generation’s contextualised modernity, I suggest how, in the same way that the beginnings of Peranakan culture were founded upon the unique hybridity of Malay and Chinese cultures, the future of the culture similarly underscores a common syncretism within the multiplicity of contemporary modernities.

Keywords: Peranakan, Baba Malay, Singapore, intergenerational transmission, language revitalisation, modernity, hybridity, identity
Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
  Syncretic Nature of Peranakan Identity ............................................................................ 5
  Sociolinguistic Background of Baba Malay ................................................................. 11
Context and Methods: Mari Kita Chakap Baba (MKCB) Course ............................... 13
  Self-initiated Content Curation: Textbooks and Class Syllabi ................................. 15
  Politics of Language Revitalisation .............................................................................. 17
Peranakan Identity to the Older Generation ................................................................. 18
  Search for Nostalgia, Aversion to Shame .................................................................... 18
  Connections to a Community ....................................................................................... 22
  Reification of Dominant Peranakan Narratives ............................................................ 25
  Intergenerational Woes .............................................................................................. 26
Peranakan Identity to the Younger Generation ............................................................ 28
  Familial Influence ........................................................................................................ 29
  Job Perks ...................................................................................................................... 31
  Simple Curiosity ........................................................................................................... 33
  Reclaiming Hybridity ................................................................................................. 34
Conclusions ...................................................................................................................... 36
  A New Modernity ........................................................................................................ 36
  Crossroads, or Full Circle? ......................................................................................... 39
References ...................................................................................................................... 41
Abbreviations

CEFR. Common European Framework of Reference.

CMIO. Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others.

GSA. Gunong Sayang Association.

MKCB. Mari Kita Chakap Baba.

PA. Peranakan Association.
Introduction

About twenty-five of us were gathered in the cozy Joo Chiat shophouse on a bright Saturday afternoon, wedged among antique wooden furniture, plastic chairs, and the long ceremonial dining table known as a *tok panjang* which displayed various homemade snacks we had brought for the potluck lunch. Group photographs of elaborately-dressed individuals lined the interior walls of the space, and books on Peranakan culture graced the bookshelves. I had never been to the Gunong Sayang Association’s clubhouse before, yet I was with familiar company: I had been spending the past two months with them at the Peranakan Museum taking Baba Malay language classes.

Affectionally named “Hari Jolly,” the gathering was a semi-regular potluck organised by the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) to welcome new members to the association. This time around, however, it also commemorated the end of yet another successful iteration of the twice-yearly Mari Kita Chakap Baba course run by its executive committee members.

One of my classmates, an editor in her forties named Esther, sat down next to me holding a plate of food. “Apa khabair?” she began: “How are you?” I eventually responded, but not before frantically trying to recall the relevant vocabulary from all that I had learnt in the past eight weeks. Strangely, despite us having successfully completed the course on Baba Malay, we did not use much of it during the Hari Jolly celebration; most of us students ended up speaking in English. As Esther continued our conversation in Baba Malay, other classmates, mostly in their forties and fifties, complimented us for bravely trying to apply what we had learnt in class. Their
comments clearly signified that this language was not one that was ubiquitously spoken, even if today’s occasion was one that precisely celebrated its usage.

The afternoon’s agenda, apart from sampling the sumptuous food, involved readings of Baba Malay texts. Two executive committee members in their late fifties, Tina and Fred, read a script of a play – commonly called a wayang — about the astrological incompatibility between a man and his prospective bride. In recent times, wayangs put on by the GSA often highlighted the tensions between tradition and modernity; the plays emphasised the hybridisation of Chinese and Malay elements within the culture to highlight the latter’s uniqueness. The members read the excerpt with zeal in fluent Baba Malay. At the end of the dramatic reading, the audience applauded enthusiastically.

Tina then addressed the crowd in amusement: “Probably half of that – or three-quarters of that – you don’t understand, right!?” Everyone laughed sheepishly. Although the gathering involved individuals who attended the intermediate-level language class, few could fully follow the fast-paced wayang script. My observations during Hari Jolly show that while the interest in Baba Malay and Peranakan culture appears sustained, the actual usage of the language in day-to-day life is still lacking.

The current predicament surrounding Baba Malay is something that two executive committee members, Ken and Amelyn, have been trying to ameliorate through their facilitation of Baba Malay classes. The Mari Kita Chakap Baba (MKCB) course, which in English means “Let Us Speak Baba,” has been running twice a year since 2017 (Hong 2017). The course is now in its fifth intake of students (GSA 2019). When it was first piloted, the course was structured informally and taught by individuals from the GSA passionate about sharing this language. In 2018,
Ken, an educator by profession, took over the reins. He revised the syllabus according to international models of second language learning and wrote an accompanying textbook.

Although the initiative garnered high public interest at first, the number of students joining the course has decreased since its pilot intake of twenty-six students (GSA 2017); there were twenty sign-ups in the latest intake in February 2019 (GSA 2019), and an average of eighteen attendees per session during the time that fieldwork for this paper was conducted. Additionally, many of the participants were retirees or semi-retirees who had already been involved with the GSA or Peranakan Association. During my time at the MKCB classes, only four of us students were under forty years old, implying that the bulk of Baba Malay learners remained concentrated within the older Peranakan community. The interest, although still maintained at present, raises questions of sustainability, especially among the younger generation. Hence, it is more important now than ever to take a step back and examine the factors behind these language developments at this point of Singapore’s national narrative.

In this paper, I argue that the challenges within the community in reviving the Baba Malay language result from differing motivations of students from two successive generations: the older, semi-retired or retired generation; and the younger, working generation. As each generation negotiates their Chinese Peranakan identity in today’s modernity differently, I show how these motivations are tied to their reified or cosmopolitan constructions of modernity respectively. Considering that the culture was itself historically borne out of hybridity between Malay and Chinese culture (Chew 2013), these new modernities prompt the need to conceptualise a new
equilibrium – and a new syncretism – when it comes to defining Peranakan identity in contemporary Singapore.

To elucidate the tensions between modernity and tradition within the Baba Malay context, I will first outline the syncretic nature of the Singaporean Peranakan identity and the relationship of Baba Malay to this identity. Next, I will examine the motivations for learning Baba Malay language in the older and younger generations of the Chinese Peranakan community, to show how each group’s perception of Baba Malay use reflects their conception of Peranakan identity in today’s modernity. Specifically, semi-retired or retired individuals who experienced first-hand Singapore’s struggle for independence construe the modern Peranakan identity in terms of replicating a reified cultural narrative symbolic of nationalism (Anderson 1983). In contrast, young adults today who were born in the post-independence era define their Peranakan identity in terms of a new cosmopolitanism and linguistic superdiversity characterised by Vertovec (2007). Lastly, I will contextualise the modernity that each generation has constructed within larger themes of hybridity in Peranakan culture, and its implications on understanding Peranakan identity for the future.

This inquiry into the sociolinguistic aspects surrounding Peranakan identity will help us better understand the role that language plays in the formation of cultural identity in Singapore, provide another avenue into understanding Singaporean heritage and state narratives in the context of globalisation, and allow for a greater understanding of language revitalisation movements in general.
Syncretic Nature of Peranakan Identity

“Today we have already generally classified Singaporeans as Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others, but this is a very discrete level of categorisation. Peranakan is something quite analogue, actually: ‘it’s not really Chinese, but why is their Malay so fluent?’”

- Ryan, 20s, MKCB student

The Peranakan identity incorporates elements from multiple cultures, as noted in Ryan’s observation above. I preface my exploration into this identity by first clarifying the various interpretations of “Peranakan,” as the term is one often loosely used. As Felix Chia (1980, 10) writes in The Babas, “Peranakan” translates as “locally-born,” a broad category which applies to children from the marriage of indigenous women and immigrant men. Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew (2013) affirms the complexity of the identity; going by literal definitions of “Peranakan,” there is a multiplicity of Peranakan groups such as the Jawi Peranakans, Chetty Melakans, and Arab Peranakans, the latter of which arise when local women marry Indonesian, Tamil, and Arab traders respectively. Peranakan communities therefore share a collective history of how their cultures were historically established through the syncretism of multiple cultures through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade and migration patterns (Lee, forthcoming).

However, despite the diversity and hybridity within the larger Peranakan population, Singapore has focused their interpretation of the Peranakan identity within a specific subgroup: the Chinese Peranakans, also known as the Babas (Chia 1980). This hegemony has been mainly bolstered by colonial path dependency and post-independence state policies on race and ethnicity (Chew 2013). Historically, the
Baba community was a recipient of preferential treatment during the colonial era due to their success within the local trade economy, positive social relations with the British, and willingness to learn English (Ansaldo, Lim, and Mufwene 2007, 210; Skinner 1996). This privilege led to the increase of the Peranakan community’s wealth up till World War II, where the community splintered due to the fear of persecution by the Japanese (Rudolph 1998). The post-war period further marginalised the Babas as it marked “concerted state efforts to openly marginalise the community” through sinification (Yoong 2009, 9; Rudolph 1998); Lee Kuan Yew’s personal relationship with the Peranakan identity in relation to anti-Communist politics during the time was key in further complicating the institutional legitimacy of the Babas (Chew 2013), as the post-independence bid to unify dialect groups and implement nationwide multicultural policies resulted in the assimilation of the Peranakan community under larger racial categories. The subsequent preservation of the colonial-era Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others (CMIO) model “fabricated ethnic divisions that did not exist in the minds and lives of the people themselves” (Chun 1996, 118). These historically-based divisions still exert structural power on the community’s lived experience and construction of identity today, consequently de-emphasising the Peranakan community’s hybrid origins.

While the state employs institutional categories to downplay the multiplicity of Peranakan identities, it also simultaneously portrays the Peranakan community as an integral part of Singaporean culture. The Peranakan community is held as the model immigrant community and is promoted on a national level as a unique,

1 Lee Kuan Yew downplayed his Peranakan identity to accommodate the interests of the significant Chinese immigrant population. Their participation was crucial in his plan for Singapore’s independence, but he would not have been able to gain their trust if he identified with the British-supporting Peranakan community (Chew 2013).
significant part of Singapore’s history (L. Lim 2015; B. A. Lim 2011). Much of popular culture within the community has also often been bolstered by the state hegemon. Consider, for example, the popular Chinese-language drama “The Little Nyonya,” and the curation of artefacts within the Peranakan Museum (Yoong 2009; Shetty 2008; Kwok 2015). Having the basis of their identity shaped through state apparatus has made the community define their identity in the context of larger state narratives – rather than through the people themselves – resulting in a reification of a hegemonic identity by the community (Chun 1996). More importantly, historicising this identity raises the question of whether the “Peranakan” identity is defined by ethnicity, political orientation, or the cultural practice of individuals (Ansaldo, Lim, and Mufwene 2007; Rudolph 1998; Pakir 1986).

Although much of the construction of the Chinese Peranakan identity continues to be shaped by definitive categories historically imposed by institutional structures, how individuals actualise this identity as Peranakan today suggests the increasing relevance of once again acknowledging the hybridity of the culture’s origins. Although the negotiation of a Peranakan identity is a dialectical relationship that is in part a result of the institutional structures described above, individuals’ agency in choosing which aspects determine their own relationship to the Peranakan culture is, in fact, equally influential (Chew 2013). In a conversation that I had with Claire, a Peranakan lady in her twenties, she felt that actions like “wearing a kebaya” or “eating chilli” indicated that she was Peranakan. Alice, a retiree on the other hand, mentioned the ownership of Peranakan objects as crucial to displaying her Peranakan

---

2 “小娘惹” is a Chinese drama serial on Mediacorp’s Channel 8 following the domestic affairs of a Chinese Peranakan family.
3 The Chetty Melakans, another Peranakan subgroup, are represented at the Indian Heritage Centre instead.
identity. Across generations, individuals sometimes recognised their Peranakan identity through these more visual means. At the same time, they also acknowledged the presence of ingrained habits, such as speaking Baba Malay, that were equally important in establishing their Peranakan identity.

Claire and Alice’s thought processes on the many possible markers of Peranakan identity invoke Bourdieusian notions of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977). On one hand, possessing material objects is one way one can belong; on the other, having proficiency of embodied, intangible aspects of the culture such as its language can also constitute one’s identity. The latter is what Bourdieu (1977, 95) calls “habitus,” and it is an often-overlooked aspect outside of possessing the necessary material or visual culture in order to belong to the Peranakan community.

Baba Malay is one element of cultural capital that defines Peranakan identity and is subject to the dynamism of modern hybridity and identity in contemporary Singapore. The construction of Peranakan identity is moving from a state-mediated, immutable one, to one that is more contested. All my interviewees believed that one would not be fully Peranakan if they could not speak Baba Malay, which was why they decided to take up the classes: to build upon their own cultural capital of the Peranakan community in order to belong.

However, students from different age groups believe their relationship with Baba Malay classes influences their identity differently. The older generation, which I have defined as those in their fifties and older, desire to replicate traditions they grew up with, hence reifying conventional practices from the past that have de-emphasised the active role of hybridity within the community. Conversely, for the younger generation of those under fifty, their participation was influenced by a more
cosmopolitan outlook on Singaporean society, which reintroduces hybridity within Peranakan culture. I have sorted these individuals into these two large generational groups because they each embodied pertinent differences during my observations, especially in relation to historicity and language policies. At the same time, I am cautious of essentialising the two groups as not all individuals fall neatly into the ideal types I describe. Yet, the larger generational trends are significant enough to productively analyse; individuals from the two generations do not necessarily agree on how to identify themselves according to the monolithic Peranakan identity as described above, and therefore resort to a plurality of ways to reconcile identities with social conditions.

The importance of hybridity is hence continually referenced. An extension of Edward Said’s postcolonial ideology that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous” (Burke 2009, 51), cultural hybridity can be likened to local cosmopolitanism that moves “in-between cultural traditions … revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language” (Bhabha 2006, xiii). Thus, hybridity is the formation of a new, unique culture from the amalgamation of two or more different cultures, which creates linguistic hybridisation as well (Burke 2009, 26). The Peranakan community is characteristic of this hybridity as the creole rose through peaceful interactions between two cultures of relatively equal power (Chew 2013; Ansaldo, Lim, and Mufwene 2007). Lim (2015, n.p.) has termed them “multilingual mediators” because their “position straddling two different cultures has enabled them to flourish as a unique culture in their own right, influenced by Chinese, Malay and Western elements.” Indeed, many loanwords are present in Baba Malay from Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian, Tamil, Dutch, and more recently, English
origins (Pakir 1986, 93; C.-B. Tan 1980), emphasising the compositeness of the identity.

However, because of this very hybridity, individuals find it hard to pin down exact characteristics that make them Peranakan in their present lives. This difficulty, negotiated in today’s day and age, hence relates to conceptions of modernity and seeing the community in context of current social conditions rather than relegating Peranakan culture to the past. Defined by Barker, Harms and Lindquist (2014, 15), modernity is a product of “the constellation of forces that define the contemporary moment in at least one region of the world” such as capitalist expansions, changing influences of the nation-state, scientific and technological development, and self-transformation. Modernity remains a complex product of multiple factors happening within society today, and is not an “absolute condition or quality” (Merrifield et al. 2013). In the same way, it can be said to impact the negotiation of Peranakan identity as the latter is continually shaped by geopolitical, cultural, and historical factors.

Hence, hybridity is situated within the relative nature of modernity as “modernity is both a top-down discourse riven with hegemonic ideologies and a product of everyday tactics through which individuals and collectives manipulate the social possibilities available to them” (Merrifield et al. 2013). As demonstrated in this section, the very negotiation of state- and individual-imposed constructions of identity in context of the Peranakan community’s cross-cultural, diasporic background today brings the themes of hybridity and modernity in conversation with one another. Therefore, an examination of attitudes towards the Baba Malay language from both the older generation and younger generations’ perspectives reflects the existing forms of identity construction from both temporal (through modernity) and spatial (through hybridity) perspectives. Introducing further nuance
on Merrifield et al’s (2013) review, modernity manifests differently across
generations as well, not just between cultures. Where my ethnography is concerned,
the observation of the Baba Malay language classes will help us elucidate this notion
of identity with regards to negotiating this new modernity and hybridity.

**Sociolinguistic Background of Baba Malay**

A creole related to the lingua franca of Bazaar Malay in precolonial Singapore, Baba
Malay is the language spoken by the Chinese Peranakan community in Singapore
and the focus of my project (Chew 2013; Ansaldo, Lim, and Mufwene 2007). It is
constructed through the combination of Malay, which is the lexifier contributing the
vocabulary; and Hokkien, the substrate which provides the grammatical structure
(Lee 2014, 366). The language has declined in usage over the years due to British
colonial-era promulgation of an English-medium education (Chew 2013), post-
independence governmental language policies promoting national languages at the
expense of dialects (Chew 2013; Pakir 1989), and the lack of community expansion
through intra-community marriages (Lee, forthcoming). Irrespective of the reasons,
the fact remains that there are fewer than 1000 fluent speakers in Singapore today
(Hong 2017; Lee 2014), with a significant proportion comprising the older
generation. The language is therefore considered to be severely endangered (Lee
2014; Lee and Van Way 2016).

Baba Malay is historically a spoken language and little of it remains in
orthographical form (Lee, forthcoming). Despite the lack of written sources, the
language remains embedded within cultural practices due to the performative usage

---

4 Bazaar Malay is a creole consisting of Malay and other Chinese dialects. Compared to
Baba Malay, which is a more “refined” variant used by Peranakan Chinese, Bazaar Malay
was used mainly for transactions in the wider market (Zhiming and Aye 2010).
of the language, such as in *dondang sayang*, a musical exchange where speakers engage in quick-witted banter on domestic aspects of Malay culture through the improvisation of *pantun*: rhyming quatrains sung to a tune (Thomas 1986). The intricate connection between language and culture is echoed by Ahearn (2017, 3), who references Mikhail Bakhtin in saying that language is “socially charged”; it cannot be divorced from social contexts. The language therefore lives through the sociocultural aspects of Peranakan life, but the latter is itself limited due to the lack of fluent Baba Malay speakers in the twenty-first century.

Native speakers of Baba Malay, who are today in their eighties and nineties, have been dwindling over the years (Pakir 1986), which compromises the spontaneous nature of *dondang sayang* as lines do not come as naturally for second-language learners as they do for native speakers. Additionally, even fewer people engage in Baba Malay poetry and literature such as the recitation of *pantuns*, thereby putting the language further into disuse. It is unsurprising, therefore, that much of Peranakan culture in recent times has focused less on the linguistic aspects in favour of more material aspects.

Nevertheless, work has been done on the linguistic documentation of the language, notably by Anne Pakir in 1984 and Nala Lee in 2014. Pakir’s (1986) work is a synchronic study focusing on the relationship of Baba Malay to other languages present in Singapore at the time, while Lee (2014) works on the technical aspects in the grammar of Baba Malay based on conversations among native speakers. Lee also develops language endangerment theory pertaining to Baba Malay from a linguistic perspective (Lee and Van Way 2016), charting the language’s level of endangerment through rubrics. Hence, Baba Malay will not be forgotten entirely as there are both archival and linguistic records. However, these academics engage with the topic from
more technical and quantitative angles, which focus less on the social milieu in which the language is spoken. I complement their academic engagement with the language by providing a much-needed contextual backdrop to the largely quantitative work that has been done, contextualising the sociolinguistic aspects of Peranakan culture through the ethnographic site of the classroom.

The resurgence of interest in Baba Malay is a recent phenomenon stemming from popular culture as Peranakan cuisine becomes widespread, television programmes are released, and museums open (Lam 2017b; Yoong 2009; Ghosh 2018). The revitalisation efforts by university students of another minority language, Kristang, have also played a large role in spurring the Peranakan community to promote the Baba Malay language through a more formalised platform (Zaccheus 2017). These factors, along with the timely entry of individuals such as Ken and Amelyn into the GSA who are actively interested in community language education, has resulted in the launch of Mari Kita Chakap Baba classes in 2017.

Context and Methods: Mari Kita Chakap Baba (MKCB) Course

I first learned of the GSA and Mari Kita Chakap Baba course through Jose Hong’s (2017) Straits Times article, which detailed the recent resurgence of interest in Baba Malay through language classes run by the GSA. From an online search, I found out that the class would run again in the second half of 2018, and quickly got in touch with Jacqueline, the programme coordinator for the GSA, to sign up for them. I then met the instructor of the class, Ken, and his co-facilitator, Amelyn, to chat about the course and its relationship to my project.

Kristang is a Portuguese creole spoken by the Portuguese Eurasians in Malacca and Singapore. Fewer than 500 people speak it today (Zaccheus 2016).
Growing up in a Peranakan family, I had always been curious about how this identity played out beyond the familial setting. Although my mother and grandmother identified as Peranakan and said the same of me, I did not personally feel a strong sense of belonging to the larger community. Save for the occasional home-cooked *babi pongteh*, my family did not outwardly engage with Peranakan material culture; as often mentioned, the lack of visual cues makes the Peranakan community indistinguishable from other Chinese groups (Lee, forthcoming; Pakir 1986). My family’s Peranakan identity was instead defined through embodied, intangible practices such as language. My mother, grandmother, and I speak Baba Malay daily at home, which has led me to question how far the language is important in defining a Peranakan identity. From this examination of my own interest in the language, attending the class therefore would not only be academically meaningful, but would also answer some questions regarding my own identity as a Peranakan. As I already knew how to speak Baba Malay and was rather proficient (though not completely fluent), my fieldwork focused more on other students’ relationships with the language as opposed to my own personal learning journey.

The fourth iteration of the MKCB course, which I participated in, was geared towards independent Baba Malay learners. Most of the people attending this session had already completed the eight-week beginner course held in the earlier half of the year. The two-hour classes, held for two months on Saturday afternoons at the Peranakan Museum, included speaking, reading, and writing activities. Each class centred around a theme related to Peranakan tradition. Ken would begin the session by reading out a vocabulary list of about twenty to thirty words, the application of which would then be reiterated throughout the lesson through listening and speaking

---

*A Peranakan dish of stewed pork with bean paste.*
exercises. The learning process is supplemented by a textbook customised for the course containing questions and thematic conversation prompts. Towards the end of the class, there would be a scheduled opportunity to apply the language more contextually. Sometimes, this segment would take the form of a presentation on Peranakan culture by a member of the wider Peranakan community; other times, it would involve group activities like cherki (a traditional Peranakan card game) or online vocabulary quizzes. This segment was often the time when the most laughter and banter ensued.

After getting to know the students over two months, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight students each lasting thirty minutes to an hour to discover their motivations for studying the language. Students are referred to in this paper via pseudonyms. I also interviewed the two course co-organisers, Ken and Amelyn, focusing the discussion on their involvement in the GSA and their opinion of language sustainability. They also granted me access to anonymised survey data on the demographics of the students. Through participant observation, interviews, as well as anonymous survey data, I aim to present a more holistic perspective in elucidating the relationship between Baba Malay and the Peranakan identity.

Self-initiated Content Curation: Textbooks and Class Syllabi

The MKCB classes are taught at two levels of proficiency following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an existing model of second language learning used in the teaching of over forty languages (GSA 2018; Council of Europe). The beginners’ class corresponds to A1 and A2 levels of this framework, and the intermediate class corresponds to B1 and B2 levels of the CEFR. Having had expertise in applied linguistics (Lee, forthcoming), Ken and Amelyn produced a textbook specifically for this course to accompany their implementation
of the CEFR framework. The introduction of a textbook was an attempt to standardise the learning of the language and progress of the students according to criteria set by contemporary pedagogical models. Samuel, a student in his early thirties who had attended the earliest iteration of the class, mentioned that the revised structure was instrumental in influencing him to continue learning Baba Malay. Before Ken’s involvement in the MKCB classes, the GSA’s course syllabus was much more activity-based. Although the format entertained Samuel and the other students, it was not as effective in enabling them to attain their desired language proficiency. Hence, the ability to map one’s progress to international standards in the later iterations of the course enabled students like Samuel to understand their progress better, therefore increasing the utility of the revamped course.

The lesson content within the textbook was centred around tradition more so than contemporary issues. This move enabled students to contextualise the culture as well as learn relevant vocabulary more systematically. Yet some saw such content as fast losing relevance to modern lifestyles. A student in his twenties, Ryan, noted that the term for grinding chilli (specifically using a mortar and pestle) in Baba Malay was to “tumbok chilli.” He points out, however: “Are we going to tumbok chilli in twenty, thirty years? I don’t think so, you know. But the word ‘tumbok’ exists, so it will get faded away [sic] as technology comes in.” Hence, despite highlighting important traditions within Peranakan culture, the themes described by the book also implicitly suggest the eventual obsolescence of language in discussing contemporary life outside of tradition and heritage. Therefore, concerns surrounding tradition and modernity are already introduced through the discussion surrounding the course syllabus and themes, and the tensions of which are not lost on the students.
Politics of Language Revitalisation

The fact that these classes were initiated and maintained by individuals in civil society shows the bottom-up approach that minority language learning in general has taken in Singapore (Lee, forthcoming; Zaccheus 2017, 2016). Baba Malay is not formally taught by vendors outside the GSA such as the People’s Association (People’s Association 2019), making learning it rather inaccessible. Language revitalisation is instead kept going by Ken and other individuals’ efforts in grant application, language archival, course facilitation, and content creation.

Language, no matter how moribund (Ahearn 2017, 260), is inevitably embroiled in various politics, both among speakers of the language as well as within the larger Singaporean state. Much controversy exists over what is grammatically or syntactically correct in Baba Malay, because different individuals are influenced by regional linguistic variations within Peranakan communities in Malacca and Singapore (Lee 2018). Having been socialised with different varieties of the language, individuals sometimes disagree on the use of certain expressions in the textbook. Moreover, with the lack of an established corpus in Baba Malay literature (Lee 2014), there is no way to prove if any one syntax or grammar is acceptable over another. Therefore, Ken has had to ensure that his curriculum and textbook content fairly represented the diversity of expressions within Baba Malay, while still finding a coherent enough narrative for students to follow.

Baba Malay’s status as a minority language is also a topic of contention in relation to state politics. There is little state intervention in the preservation of the language despite its increasing involvement in other more material aspects of Peranakan culture (L. Lim 2015; Kwok 2015). Because much of Singapore’s development underscores the importance of the national languages English, Malay,
Mandarin and Tamil, the recent interest from the grassroots regarding minority languages could be symptomatic of modernity as it marks the shift from a nationalistic narrative ideal for establishing a stable independence-era collective identity, to one that is more attuned to present diversity.

**Peranakan Identity to the Older Generation**

In this section, I highlight how my observations in the Baba Malay class exemplify the older generation’s emphasis on the stable replication of culture as characteristic of their Peranakan identity in modernity. Three factors influence their contemporary construction of identity: their personal relationship to the language, the “community of practice” as created through classroom interaction, and the location of the Peranakan community within a larger nationalism-driven narrative.

**Search for Nostalgia, Aversion to Shame**

“And what I enjoyed was that, in class, when Chekgu [teacher] is telling us this, telling us that... I will have these flashbacks. I will remember my grandmother saying this, and saying that. So it’s actually all these memories in your mind, really way back, and when the word comes out it triggers... you know?”

- Esther, 40s, MKCB student

The MKCB course was attended by mostly middle-aged individuals, many of whom already had longstanding, established careers and were semi-retired; some were already retired. The overrepresentation of this demographic and their ease of interaction with each other made my presence as the only twenty-two-year-old in class rather obvious.

However, my self-consciousness did not last for long. The more we participated in group activities, the more comfortable I was with making small talk.
with my classmates about their interest in Baba Malay and their motivations for
taking the class. Many of them based their interest and engagement with the
language on a sense of nostalgia and the desire to reconnect with a “culture long
lost”, which pointed to their penchant for stable authenticity and reification of
cultural practices that they once participated in. Cecilia, a medical practitioner in her
fifties, commented that “the language helps bring [the culture] to life, just by how it
sounds ... I remember us seated around the table, preparing vegetables for some big
makan [feast], everyone chatting away.” The familiarity of the language and the
association of the language with childhood memories, especially among those
reminiscing about the past, shows the significance that Baba Malay held for these
students in stirring up visceral emotions on their lived social life while they were
growing up.

Not all students were in the class to improve their language skills; some
already possessed a working proficiency of the language. Rather, they spent much of
the class trading anecdotes and facts about their childhood, which piqued everyone’s
interest as the stories were all so varied. Cecilia, who could already converse in Baba
Malay, told us stories about her family heritage from Malacca. She also brought
recipe and fortune-telling guides in Baba Malay written by her grandmother for us to
practice translating. I eventually found out that Cecilia and many of the other
students were already members of the GSA and have been for several years. They
used the class as another opportunity to share some of their existing knowledge about
the culture and reminisce upon similar experiences.

Similarly, another student in her seventies, Alice, found the class empowering
in validating her childhood. She grew up hearing Baba Malay but after her family
passed away, her unsuccessful attempt to use it within the public sphere made her
feel alienated. She recalls not being understood by Hokkien acquaintances when she used words like “tuala” [towel], which is a Baba Malay word derived from Malay. She was now, as with many Baba Malay speakers, relieved to find out that the language that she grew up with was neither bastardised Malay or Hokkien (Pakir 1986; C.-B. Tan 1980). It was Baba Malay, and in fact, there was a community who understood her perfectly. An affinity within the culture is therefore built out of connecting to this sense of nostalgia and sharing with one another common sentiments of their past.

The older generation, having grown up with the changes in national language policy discouraging minority dialects in favour of the four official languages (Kuo and Chan 2016), are aware of how their relationship with Baba Malay – and by extension, the Peranakan identity – has diminished over time. Esther, for example, notes the prevalence of English being spoken within her own household. She decided to reintroduce the language into her life through taking the class because “maybe you have to have the language to make you feel that you are.” Here, she recognised the need to regain that proficiency in Baba Malay in order to concretise her Peranakan identity, which is something that she had previously not thought about until the class was advertised. Cecilia found the Baba Malay language significant on a communal level. To her, language is “a part of [Peranakan] culture which is intangible and has to be lived. The material culture can be collected and displayed, the food can be cooked by anyone, but language must be spoken and listened to.” Hence, her statement emphasises the embodied nature of language as theorised by Bourdieu and Bakhtin. Unlike museum artefacts or cuisine, language cannot be as easily visualised, which is why to them, learning the language was important in preserving this intangible aspect of Peranakan identity.
Despite the nostalgia and happiness at being able to once again experience familiar motifs from their past, many of the older generation were equally concerned with their current relationship with the culture. They expressed guilt that they were not able to have a firmer grasp on Baba Malay now that it was time to pass down such knowledge to their children. The older generation took it upon themselves to understand their heritage such that they can situate their children within their familial cultural identity. Alice, for example, continually mentioned that she “[has] nothing to give them” and that she “[feels] guilty” when she could not answer her children’s questions about Peranakan culture. Hence, this is also another motivation for many individuals from the older generation to attend the class: to regain a sense of agency in being able to participate in their culture today in the same way that they were able to absorb it in their youth, and to be confident enough to pass that embodied knowledge down to their children to ensure the continuity of Peranakan culture.

There is therefore an internalised responsibility on the part of the older generation to be experts on the culture, and many of the retirees or semi-retired individuals I met at the class attended it to reclaim a piece of their past that they felt was neglected. The fear of shame, in tandem with the sense of nostalgia, were major reasons for why they found themselves greatly benefitting from the MKCB classes. To them, therefore, modernity took the shape of reintroducing old memories of Peranakan traditions and rituals together with others who had similar lived experiences, and this was mediated through themes addressed in MKCB class.
Connections to a Community

“Once you learn [Baba Malay], so what? You’ve done the class, wonderful; what now? If you don’t use it at home, you’ll forget. And the language comes along with community.”

- Ken, instructor

As someone who was not acquainted with anyone in the GSA prior to attending the course, I saw how classroom dynamics established the Peranakan community as a relatively tight-knit one with a high barrier to entry for the uninitiated. Few non-Peranakans attended the class, although efforts are being made in more recent iterations to promote the class outside of the existing community. Hence, as Lee (forthcoming) has argued, the lack of expansion of the community may have also contributed to the current decline of the language. Yet, each individual felt a strong bond to others in the group, suggesting the importance of community within the Peranakan identity.

The observations within the classroom regarding Baba Malay can be viewed as symptomatic of the dynamics within the larger Peranakan community. Such communities, where identity is “established through interaction rather than existing in some abstract way prior to any action,” are called “communities of practice” (Blum 2017, 335; Ahearn 2017). A community is created from the overlap of common experiences of Peranakan culture as well as in learning Baba Malay.

The usage of Baba Malay is limited to within the community of practice. As seen in the opening anecdote, students may have used the class to learn and speak Baba Malay, but usage seems to be confined to that space. Esther observes that “if you don’t belong to a group like Gunong Sayang, there is nothing in your normal life
to… you know what I mean?” The socially-determined restrictions of where the language is used suggests the presence of different domains in which it is appropriate to speak Baba Malay. Coined by Joshua Fishman (1965, 73, 1991), domains are “major clusters of interaction situations that occur in particular multilingual settings,” which, supplementing communities of practice, indicate the spaces in which these communities of practice occur. Two domains exist within the MKCB classes: that of the classroom, and that of the home. The GSA provides an opportunity for the community of practice to gather in the classroom domain. Were it not for the association or the class, use of the language would be severely diminished, as home domains are nuclear and contained. Communities of practice are hence limited in their reach. If these domains do not intersect—and at present, they are struggling to—Baba Malay cannot transcend the current community.

The problems surrounding the limited domains in which Baba Malay is spoken are further exacerbated by the established community of practice. By attracting students who are already involved in the Peranakan community, the classes cater to a self-selecting group of interested individuals, therefore preventing the language from reaching wider society. Individuals have to possess a pre-existing amount of cultural capital in order for them to understand what is being said, thereby affecting their participation in the community of practice.

Additionally, the attendees of the class are also tight-knit in a way that highlights the exclusivity of the community. Esther admitted that “a lot of them know one another… But I’m not one of them. I don’t have like, a kaki [pal] yet, you know. So you just think ‘oh, okay, it’s going to be very difficult,’” highlighting the social barriers to attending MKCB classes for those outside the community. The inability for the language to permeate domains and expand its community of practice
is supported by the fact that a basic knowledge of Baba Malay was required to understand the class properly, thus raising the bar for “outsiders” (Pakir 1989, 385). With students learning thirty to forty new words a week, starting from scratch was “almost impossible,” according to Esther. This may be why few are incentivised to learn outside of those already within the community. Hence, implicitly, the Baba Malay language attracts those who already have some connection with the culture.

Some interviewees shared a fear of taking the language out of the domains of the home and classroom. My exchange with Olivia on speaking Baba Malay in other domains was as follows:

Olivia: My Hokkien, I use it in the market, happily!
Danielle: So does this mean you can use Baba Malay in the market also?
Olivia: Boleh, boleh [yes, yes]… except will they understand though? When you go and say, “berapa ini? [how much is this?]” And he tells you and you go, “mahair! [expensive!]” And he will ask, “why is this woman slanging away? Mahair, mahair…? Oh, you mean mahal [expensive]! Chakap la [Just say so!]”

As articulated by Olivia, the fear among the older generation of using Baba Malay in external domains is linked to the concern that the language will not be legitimised because the community of practice is too limited. For now, much of the interest seems to remain within the domain of the Chinese Peranakan community. This reticence to take the language out of its usual domains becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Learning a language creates a community of practice, but if this community remains siloed in a singular domain, then it will be hard for it to grow, resulting in the decline of the language in contemporary society.

---

7 This locution shows the slight differences between standard Malay and Baba Malay: the word for “expensive” is very similar but is pronounced differently, hence confusing speakers of Standard Malay.
Baba Malay has come a long way from being an esteemed *lingua franca* within the Peranakan community in the nineteenth century, to a language that is spoken only within the home, to finally being spoken sporadically within the classroom during the MKCB course. Nevertheless, individuals within the older generation still seek to preserve culture as they have known it through their participation in the MKCB sessions.

*Reification of Dominant Peranakan Narratives*

From speaking with Alice who, in her late seventies, was the oldest participant in the MKCB class, the larger Peranakan narrative often propagated by the older generation was something that she benefited from and wanted to retain. Having come from a historically well-off family, she prioritised the ownership of items connected to the culture over the language itself. She also had more absolute expectations of ascertaining Peranakan identity – that one could not be part of the community if they married into a Peranakan household without first possessing Peranakan blood. This suggests reified material ties to the “Golden Age” of Peranakan culture in the older generation’s psyche, which leads to less flexible interpretations of Peranakan culture (Rudolph 1998, 218; B. A. Lim 2011). The static definition of Peranakan identity could potentially have posed a problem in passing down the culture to new generations, as assimilation and a shrinking Peranakan community already are obstacles to preserving the “purity” of the culture (B. A. Lim 2011, 63; Pakir 1986, 12).

The old generation rationalises development of the culture today through this reified narrative. Such dominant narratives are tied to their first-hand experience of post-war and independence-era events. Hence, their form of modernity involves historicised, normative replications of culture (Blommaert 2013), keeping intact old
practices as much as possible to relive the experiences of the collective past. The dominant narrative is hence one that is synonymous with their childhood, which leaves little room for compromise especially when the younger generations deviate from that preferred narrative.

In many ways, the older generation’s concerns align with nationalistic state narratives of Peranakan culture where material culture dominates over language. A concept advanced by Benedict Anderson (1983), nationalism and the imagined community were pervasive angles to explain narratives happening at the time of Singapore’s independence. Nationalistic narratives are supported by politicised endeavours such as museums and the “museumising imagination” (Anderson 1983, 178). The conceptualisation of ideal “Peranakan” identity markers, along with state influence on a hegemonic, materially-based Peranakan identity through the curation of artefacts, results in the blend of historicity contextualised with contemporary feelings on this topic in individuals. Today, as nationalism gives way to a more neoliberal governance characterised by scapes more so than national boundaries (Appadurai 1990), these categories are challenged, leaving a dissonance among the old in deciding how they want to approach the Peranakan identity. Modernity for them relies less on that hybridity than it does on reified narratives, and this manifests in the older generation’s motivations in joining the MKCB classes.

Intergenerational Woes

“To be fair, they are too busy doing other things that are actually more economically important. Fact of life, huh.”

- Olivia, 60s, retiree, MKCB student
In sum, for the older generation, attending the language classes seemed to serve relatively straightforward goals: to regain a sense of Peranakan identity as remembered from their childhood which they thought they had lost, as well as to accrue sufficient knowledge to pass on to the younger generation. On a larger scale, their generation prioritises the reification of existing narratives about the Peranakan community. However, despite accomplishing the first ideal, these individuals are far less optimistic about the sustainability of their endeavour regarding the younger generation. Alice, for example, comments that her children are too absorbed in their careers to want to explore their heritage. She is sceptical about their initiative to learn more about their culture, instead seeing herself responsible for introducing her children to Peranakan culture before it is too late. As of yet, she has not ascertained it the “right time” for them to want to care about Peranakan culture and heritage.

Additionally, the profiles of current Baba Malay speakers also suggest how the language may not be propagating as successfully as intended because of the contained domains in which it is practiced. It is more likely for the older generation who know Baba Malay to speak it with their family and friends of the same age. Cecilia speaks the language with her Peranakan friends and with her mother, and not so much with the younger generation; MKCB classes and community meetups are the only other spaces where conversations with individuals outside her immediate circle occur, but these interactions are not frequent enough to warrant daily use of Baba Malay. Hence, communities of practice are both boon and bane, as they facilitate the use of the language yet limit it. These established ideologies surrounding participation result in the gatekeeping of the Peranakan identity in the form of language use by the older generations, posing a difficulty in moving forward with the language.
Regardless of the mode by which one is introduced to Baba Malay, the older generation believe in a dominant Peranakan narrative that is closely reminiscent of their childhood, and view modernity as the replication and upholding of these traditions. The reification of such narratives could contribute to such feelings of guilt and nostalgia, and the older generation’s scepticism in the younger generation stems from the impression that the latter does not view the significance of this language in the same way or with the same weight that they do.

Peranakan Identity to the Younger Generation

“Now, we have the ‘what my grandmother used to talk about.’ There will come a time when there’ll be no more grandmothers— and this is the time.”

- Ken, instructor

I now provide a counter-narrative to the above section by analysing the younger generation’s engagement with Baba Malay. Through leveraging intergenerational familial connections, applying the language outside of the classroom, and wanting to explore heritage, the young generation ground their Peranakan identity more in cosmopolitan identities instead of the reified ideals of the older generation. The sentiments of the older generation, as discussed above, were based off having experienced first-hand the decline of reified Peranakan culture; current working adults born after the tumultuous independence era, however, are a step removed from this experience (B. A. Lim 2011). They instead conceptualise Peranakan identity in tandem with other personal responsibilities within the twenty-first century, and are more willing to deviate from the dominant, reified narrative established by the older generation.
Familial Influence

“Since Ryan was also doing it, and he’s making an effort – he’s not Peranakan at all, but he’s making an effort to learn about my culture – so I thought it’s a good time for literally everyone to spend more time and learn it together. It’s more fun, then you can practice it at home, then your learning is a bit more continual.”

- Claire, 20s, nurse, MKCB student

Familial influence was a major factor in the youth’s decision to join the class. Claire, who is in her twenties, joined the class together with her husband, Ryan. They were encouraged by Claire’s mother, who grew up with the culture and knew some Baba Malay, to learn the language. The family of four attended the classes together. Ryan had no prior knowledge of Peranakan culture before marrying Claire. However, he enthusiastically participated in class and managed to pick up the grammar fairly quickly, suggesting that social influence, rather than definitive Peranakan lineage and identity, was more salient in cultural transmission among younger generations.

Baba Malay eventually became a regular presence in Claire and Ryan’s family. Neither had intentionally learned the language till joining the MKCB classes; Ryan had never spoken it, while Claire had only picked up simple phrases growing up. However, through the language course, Baba Malay facilitated a greater connection between the young couple and Claire’s parents. The family would bond over learning the language together, engaging in friendly rivalry to see who would be able to memorise vocabulary or construct sentences the fastest.

Claire and Ryan’s relationship to Baba Malay shows how intergenerational transmission, an element of Lee and Van Way’s (2016) language endangerment index, is an important consideration for the survival of Baba Malay. A language must
have intergenerational continuity to remain relevant and sustainable (Fishman 1991); here, the young use Baba Malay to communicate with family members of different generations. The usage of language across generations keeps the language relevant; in turn, the language then strengthens the family domain in which it operates. Otherwise, if no intergenerational transmission occurs, likely because of the lack of overlap of social domains, the language will eventually fall into disuse and be “little more than a relic of bygone days” (Fishman 1991, 363). The presence of the contemporary familial domain therefore catalyses intergenerational transmission while also making language learning more enjoyable and concrete.

However, cases like Claire and Ryan’s seem to be rare. In the course of my fieldwork, their family was the only one who attended the class as a household; the rest of the students, including the (underrepresented) youth, signed up as individuals. Paradoxically, although a community of practice is built from these speakers, the lack of familial involvement because of the individualised nature of the endeavour makes intergenerational transmission unlikely. The young, at best, would speak Baba Malay only to their elders, while the old would speak it with others of the same generation. Language use is hence either confined to their respective demographic strata (as with the older generation) or is relayed from the younger to the older generation, impeding continuity.

The formalised classroom setting is a related factor in the lack of language acquisition. Pakir (1986, 44) states how Baba Malay was initially passed down through vernacular social situations instead of formal channels like the classroom, hence facilitating intergenerational transmission. Claire’s case is an example situated in contemporary times, as she found it was “a good opportunity if you already have the interest” and if “you have family support,” emphasising the value of vernacular
transmission of the language, as compared to the engineered formal channel of the classroom that provides little room for real-life application. Ken has mitigated the underuse of language outside the classroom by organising monthly chat sessions for MKCB alumni, which although is helpful to a large extent, is still not enough compared to daily familial use. Therefore, due to competing contemporary social factors of individualism and familial influence in the language learning process, the young have rationalised new ways of learning and internalising the language.

**Job Perks**

Another way that the younger generation engages with Baba Malay in their modernity is through applying elements of the language to domains outside the classroom and home. Baba Malay and standard Malay are partially mutually intelligible (Pakir 1986, 212). Claire, who works in the healthcare industry, uses her proficiency in Baba Malay to communicate with people she otherwise could not have, such as elderly Malay patients who could not speak English. Hence, to her, Baba Malay also value-added to her professional life in a pragmatic way, independent of her personal exploration of heritage. She is able to directly link her learning of Baba Malay to other aspects of her daily life in the economic and occupational spheres.

Claire is also aware of the potential confusion that may arise when using Baba Malay at her workplace, yet embraces it. She recounts:

*My colleagues will always say, ‘eh you know, sometimes you talk but I don’t understand you. It’s different, but I still know what you’re talking about.’ To me, it’s like, ‘oh, my pronunciation is not good’… but it didn’t occur to me until I went to the CC [Community Centre] and there were like, real differences [between Malay and Baba Malay].*
Her readiness to apply the language when communicating with others outside the Peranakan community indicates an ability to unconsciously integrate such heritage languages in daily conversation, as compared to Olivia who was more reticent in using Baba Malay in the market with those who she could not determine were Peranakan. The younger generation ascribes new meaning to the language and repurposes it in their own hybrid way by using Baba Malay in conversations not directly tied to cultural practices: in this case, the language becomes a practical tool for cross-cultural communication. The younger generation’s lack of self-consciousness in using the lesser-known language shows their normalisation of hybridity within language; to Claire, “no one quite corrects [her] at home, no one tells [her] the correct thing so to [her] it’s just… cham [mixed].” Throughout her life, she has learned to live with hybridity and has embraced it.

Cognizant of the fact that Peranakan identity is manifest differently to the public compared to within the Peranakan community, Claire insightfully notes how language, when she “[speaks] in the hospital right, then it’s something more significant because they don’t see [her] in a kebaya, or they don’t see [her] eating chilli.” With the increasing de-emphasis on Peranakan identity as one that is visual, presenting oneself as Peranakan takes on more flexible forms for the younger generation. Their identity is more likely to be self-defined by embodied practices in the twenty-first century, thereby transcending the previous limitations in domain manifest by the older generation.

Contrary to the apathy that the older generation assumes the younger generation to have, the anecdotes shared by Ryan and Claire show that some in the younger demographic are still optimistic about keeping Baba Malay relevant, just in a different way. This generation hence focuses less on basing their Peranakan
identity on a historicised experience of culture. Instead, they situate that experience within contemporary socio-economic expectations, such as familial obligations and their jobs, weaving the language into their day-to-day lives more so than viewing it as monolithic tradition.

**Simple Curiosity**

Of course, despite these new ways of negotiating the Peranakan identity through their flexible usage of the language, the younger generation does not completely disregard heritage either. Young adults are also interested discovering culture (as opposed to the older generation’s rediscovering it) in its historical context. Samuel, for example, learned of the class unintentionally. Originally attending a minority language festival he saw advertised online, he chanced upon the GSA booth promoting the first MKCB intake. At the time, his main intention for signing up was to understand the gossip between his aunt and mother. He was then mocked by his mother for taking the classes, recounting her remark that he “got nothing better to do is it” when he told her of his involvement with the GSA. She did not think that he would have anything pragmatic to gain from engaging with heritage, corroborating the older generation’s negative impression of the younger generation’s interest in heritage as well as modern, contemporary concerns of neoliberal behaviour (Teo 2011). His sourcing of information related to culture online also shows the relevance of the technology and social networks in individuals’ lives today, which is yet another increasingly pervasive aspect of modernity.

Similarly, MKCB organisers Ken and Amelyn were first acquainted with Peranakan culture because of casual interest. Being in their thirties, their involvement with the language classes before they took over teaching them was equally serendipitous:
Ken: We did the Mari Chakap Baba class with Fred and Alvin [GSA representatives] – they were the teachers. We were very excited. I don’t know why we signed up for it. I think because -

Amelyn: Process of discovery.

Ken: Yeah, we were discovering our roots.

Amelyn: At the time, we still didn’t know the full story.

Ken: In fact, at the time I didn’t even identify myself as Peranakan at all. It was only until later when I was like, ‘oh, like that one ah?’

Amelyn: When we were taking the course, when we come home we’ll be using [Baba Malay] and then I’ll ask my mum, and then I’ll ask my dad, and they are like ‘yah, yah, yah!’

Ken: I mean… Why didn’t [they] tell us about it?!

Their search for identity was self-initiated and their subsequent actualisation of identity facilitated through social and familial means, suggesting that the youth may not have a conscious goal in mind when navigating their heritage, but are still keen on exploring new cultures to satisfy their curiosity. This cosmopolitan mindset in approaching Peranakan culture and language learning is hence indicative of the younger generation’s modernity.

**Reclaiming Hybridity**

These anecdotes regarding intergenerational transmission and locating Baba Malay within larger global processes suggest that Peranakan culture is assuming a new, adapted form with the younger generation in contemporary Singapore. Claire reflects:

> There’s really a lot of things [in Peranakan culture] that are quite forgotten; not many people practice it anymore. And unless you really have a lot of money, then you will actually have all the kamchengs [ceremonial pots] and everything to actually properly practice the culture. Nowadays, we just adapt. Everything is just… adapt.

The young generation recognises that their conception of culture is more casual and flexible. Their identity is informed by cosmopolitan ideals stemming from
globalisation, and is continually in conversation with their day-to-day experience in online and offline spaces.

The erosion of boundaries between tradition and culture is related to the idea of superdiversity, that is, a “tremendous increase in the texture of transnational social, cultural and economic diversity in societies” (Blommaert and Rampton 2017, 488; Vertovec 2007), resulting in complexity associated with the phenomenon. Globalisation has paved the way for scapes to take precedence over more static structures like national boundaries (Appadurai 1990), resulting in “new cosmopolitan orientations and attitudes” (Vertovec 2007, 1046).

The younger generation’s openness to cultural hybridity, contrasting with the previous generation’s reified notion of authenticity within the Peranakan identity that follows from nationalism, is symptomatic of a new cosmopolitanism driven by “mobility, complexity and unpredictability” in a post-state era (Blommaert 2013, 6; Chun 1996). Interviewees draw on the fact that “if you are Peranakan, the cultural identifier is open-mindedness because yours was a culture that was happy to take from others and learn and create fusion.” The historical origins of Peranakan culture are complementary to contemporary notions of cultural hybridity, and the younger generation’s way of dealing with Baba Malay brings that aspect out clearly.

Still, identity is still a controversial subject, and either generation might take offense at the other when their definitions of modernity clash; a recent feature on using batik print as fashion pieces within the Peranakan community drew some controversy about what it meant to authentically represent culture (Lam 2017a). Hence, highlighting the concerns from each generation on how to define culture, I
conclude by juxtaposing both generations’ views on modernity to propose a common solution for understanding Peranakan identity as one contingent on hybridity.

Conclusions

A New Modernity

“The entire Baba culture is about embracing other cultures and defining what you are. So like, as long as you embrace it and you own it, I think that, moving forward, it is a more meaningful way for us to survive as a culture.”

- Ken, instructor

In this ethnography, I have highlighted the contrasting ideals of modernity between two generations of Peranakans, which influence each group’s understanding of the Chinese Peranakan identity and subsequently their attitudes towards Baba Malay. I have also unpacked the relationship between reified, state-mediated narratives and cosmopolitan hybridity in maintaining cultural identity.

For many interlocutors, the only way that the language and the culture can grow is through state intervention and imposing institutionalised categories much like those demonstrated by Anderson in Imagined Communities (1983). Some members of the community have recently suggested introducing “Peranakan” as a racial category to the current CMIO markers (J. Chia 2018). My interviewees from both generations harbour similar opinions, stating that

if you could get hold of somebody influential in the government, and put in all these forms your race… And you put in the usual, [but] after ‘Others,’ put at the bottom, ‘Peranakan.’ So you can tick ‘Chinese’ and tick ‘Peranakan,’ or tick ‘Indian’ and ‘Peranakan.’

This move, as meaningful to the community as it is in acknowledging the hybridity of culture, is still state-mediated. Despite the agency that globalisation enables for
individuals, the state is still instrumental in concretising the identity for Peranakans old and young, highlighting the power the institution has over the community in legitimising identity.

Outside of state influence, I have also argued that it is the evolving views of what it means to be Peranakan from the older to the younger generations that brings about a new modernity in defining Peranakan identity – whether one can be Peranakan with or without the language. Lee’s (forthcoming, n.p.) survey data that all respondents believed that one need not be able to speak Baba in order to be Peranakan. Yet, my ethnography speaks differently; language is intricately tied to culture and is essential, even if indirectly, in helping individuals seek out their Peranakan identity.

Relating to the modernities of the old and young that have shaped their attitudes towards the language, both conceptions have their merits. Although some may assume that tradition as conceptualised by the old is too rigid, their generation has still successfully established a tight-knit community and are keenly aware of the historicity of their heritage; Cecilia’s recipe books, for example, are a treasure trove of linguistic and cultural material. On the other hand, the young, having been socialised into a globalised world, are able to adapt the culture to keep it relevant to present-day needs, despite their sometimes decontextualised treatment of cultural material. For Peranakan culture to successfully navigate these modern contexts, both generations must find a common ground.

Invoking Merrifield et al.’s (2013) theory of modernity, I propose that one solution to reconciling the contradictions between the new modernities that each group has constructed is to embrace hybridity as the culture has done at its
beginning. Both generations can rediscover the same culture from a different lens that takes into consideration the plurality of modernities today, which is already starting to show through sharing Baba Malay-related information online and contextualising wayangs in contemporary topics. By being more attuned to the generational differences that may influence each group’s engagement with their Peranakan identity, the Peranakan community would be able to devise more targeted, sustainable programmes to cater to the needs of different age groups.

The Peranakan community is characterised as culturally open-minded, as Esther highlighted to me in an interview, but hybridity also has its disadvantages. She observes that “being open-minded also allows [your culture] to then just veer off and get assimilated elsewhere. If your numbers are not large enough, you’ll get assimilated into all these other communities and there is nothing left that is your own.” This fear, also addressed by Lee (forthcoming) as a threat to the Peranakan community, is what Burke (2009, 7) terms the “price of hybridisation”: the “loss of regional traditions and of local roots” as a result of assimilation. Yet, as dangerous as it sounds, it is a risk that the community must be willing to take.

Lastly, the MKCB course invites even bigger, perhaps more abstract questions regarding the status of languages within the nation-state’s history. Is there value in keeping this language, which can be said to have been constructed out of a pragmatic necessity to bridge two separate cultures? Although it does quintessentially represent the Peranakan identity, considering contemporary renegotiations of hybridity, the evolution of Baba Malay is something that we can learn from and apply to newer languages. The language shift of Baba Malay over time is relevant to Singlish, the lingua franca in Singapore today, as the latter is currently instrumental in constructing a similar collective cultural identity (Y.-Y. Tan
Much like Baba Malay and other similar contact languages, Singlish lies outside of state-sanctioned languages, is constitutive of many loanwords, and follows similar structural patterns (Zhiming and Aye 2010; Ng 2011; Y.-Y. Tan 2017).

Drawing parallels between such themes, in the same way people find new lingua francas to accommodate for modernity at different times, Baba Malay too could have been a necessary addition in the past that is now overshadowed by a more relevant hybrid language in a phenomenon known as language shift (Pauwels 2016). It is this continually changing modernity that determines whether languages come or go. We may just be entering a new modernity that justifies the language shift of Baba Malay; but that also does not mean that we should not document and use the language while we still can, as it does still represent an identity that resonates with the community.

_Crossroads, or Full Circle?_

Anne Pakir predicted back in 1984 that “within the next generation or two there will no longer be a language called [Baba Malay]” (2). This is currently our lived reality, and her concerns are as salient as ever. However, I conclude my paper by suggesting that we are not so much at a crossroads as we are coming full circle in renegotiating hybridity within the Peranakan culture in modern Singapore.

In one of my interviews with Ken, he mentioned that the Peranakan culture was borne out of the syncretism of multiple identities. He said, “We are all the same even though we are different, perhaps it’s because we are somewhere in-between that defines us as Peranakan.” Unique aspects of Peranakan culture, both historical and contemporary, bind the community in a way that is found nowhere else in society. Over time, through assimilation and other policies, such identities have been more clearly emphasised, or conversely, erased. However, in that same way, the very hybridity and flexibility that culture was built on could also present the potential for
the language to be revitalised in today’s modernity. This is a dynamic and dialogic process that continually needs to be revisited as national narratives change.

More importantly, the idea of a modern Peranakan identity can be better elucidated when contextualised with hybridity rather than outright purity, much like the collective identity that Rudolph (1998) advocates for. The GSA and Peranakan Association have recently become more open in their determination of Peranakan identity, as Ken confirmed: “You don’t need to say you are quarter-Peranakan, or half-Peranakan lah… Just say you’re Peranakan!” In linking the sociolinguistic aspects of language with shifting modernities, such discourse is one that is pertinent in a country as diverse as Singapore. With the continual influx and outflow of people, it is no surprise that demographics are shifting rapidly and more languages are moving in and out of the fray.

No one is able to say for sure what the future of the language is, although prospects for minority languages are usually bleak (Fishman 1991). Yet, this expectation of re-interpreted Peranakan modernities resulting from re-embracing hybridity is one that can be reassuring. Rather than seeing Peranakan culture as degenerating, the culture looks to continually be situating itself in new ways, in a new era, and in a new context.
References


Cambridge University Press.


https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137012340.


https://www.facebook.com/GunongSayangAssociation/posts/175363376466621
1.

https://www.facebook.com/GunongSayangAssociation/posts/210339994302292
3.

https://www.facebook.com/GunongSayangAssociation/posts/256874600648831
2.


Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Straits Times Press.


