

Popular imaginary and cultural constructions of the *Nonya* in *Peranakan* Chinese culture of the Straits Settlements

Ethnicities

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Abstract

The *Peranakan* Chinese is a Chinese diasporic community with a unique hybrid culture of Chinese, Malay, and European influences concentrated in the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang, and Singapore) of Malaya (before the independence of Singapore). It has inherited the Chinese patrilineal system but *Nonyas* within the *Peranakan* Chinese (also known as *Baba-Nonya*) culture fill an interesting space in Chinese patriarchy. This article explores the world of the *Nonyas* and identifies three cultural constructions of the *Nonya*: *garang/li hai* (feisty/crafty and manipulative), *poonsu* (resourceful), and *toh tiap* (victimized), specifically drawn out from the television serial, *The Little Nonya*; but these constructions have also been widely represented and documented in the arts and cultural expressions, particularly through the existing literature and portrayal of *Nonyas* in popular culture. We explore the cultural meanings of the *Nonya* through gendered patterns and identities which come out of a specific historical context of the Straits

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Settlements at the turn of the 20th century—the *Peranakan* Golden Age, where colonialism, wealth, and education shaped its matrifocal *Peranakan* culture. We employ Sylvia Walby's theoretical framework of private and public patriarchy, specifically through the structures of household production and culture to analyze the situation of the *Nonyas*, arguing that *Nonyas* were not so much oppressed by men but by women; and yet, they were also privileged and valued in the *Peranakan* culture. Their privileged position allowed them to negotiate and challenge Chinese patriarchy.

Keywords

Chinese patriarchy, gender construction, matrifocal, *Nonya*, *Peranakan* culture

Introduction

The *Peranakan* Chinese (or *Baba-Nonya*) are considered descendants of the overseas Chinese, particularly those who settled in the Southeast Asian region (Tan, 1988). *Peranakan* is a Malay word whose root word is *anak*, which means child; therefore, *Peranakan* means locally born. The term refers to a community which formed out of mixed ethnic ancestry, predominantly with the Chinese, Europeans, Indians, and Arabs who intermarried with local women. Hanapi Dollah (1986), Tan Yao Sua (2011), and Pue Giok Hun (2012), in their work, deal with acculturation and assimilation of the *Peranakan* culture (in Kelantan and Terengganu); however, this is not the focus of this article. This article focuses only on the *Peranakan* Chinese culture of the Straits Settlements, namely Malacca, Penang, and Singapore. There are many *Peranakan* communities across Southeast Asia, and Pue (2016) charts nine *Peranakan* communities in Malaysia. Out of all the *Peranakan* communities in Malaysia, the *Peranakan* Chinese of the Straits Settlements have been the most documented, and this article focuses on this region. Many *Peranakan* Chinese of the Straits Settlements became wealthy with British colonization, as they took full advantage of the commercial opportunities that were available during this time. And, according to Ronald G Knapp, 1870s to 1920s is considered “The *Peranakan* Golden Age, which was a time of political prominence, economic ascendancy, and materially elegant lifestyles. . .” (2012: 11). We believe that these cultural constructions of the *Nonya*¹ were engendered during this period.

The *Peranakan* Chinese inherited the Chinese patrilineal culture, and therefore, upholds traditions of patriarchy. Yet, John R Clammer (1980), whose work is one of the earliest anthropological studies on the Straits Chinese *Peranakan* society notes that they contradicted the normal patrilineal and patrilocal pattern of Chinese kinship relationships. *Adat Perpatih*² and *Adat Temenggung* are binary oppositional customs found in Malaysia: where the former is based on “principles of matrilineal inheritance of property”; and the latter, “patrilineal Islamic law

which came to the Peninsular in the thirteenth century” (Bank, 1983: 52), whose bilateral kinship patterns are similar to the *Peranakan* Chinese. Clammer not only points out the possible assimilation of matrifocal or cognatic aspects of Malay culture, particularly as a result of proximity to the matrilineal *Minangkabau* (who occupy the north-eastern part of the State of Malacca); but he also admits that this is speculative and that “there is no specific historical or sociological evidence that this is so” (1980: 36). More importantly, Clammer explains and points out the Chinese practice of *Chin Choe*, which are *Hokkien* uxorilocal marriages; although this is not commonly practiced (except in the Straits Settlements), the very existence of the term in *Hokkien* acknowledges the recognition of this practice in Chinese culture (24).

Historically as well, *Babas* used to travel for trade and were dictated to by the monsoons; their local wives, therefore, were left behind to mind their businesses and homes. Such cultural bearings would have significantly shaped the *Nonya*. But, more imperatively, the *Nonyas*³ adopted Chinese ancestral worship,⁴ upholding patriliney which is central to *Peranakan* culture. The establishment and maintenance of the *rumah abu*⁵ with prominent *Peranakan* families was an evident manifestation of this, in which the eldest son traditionally inherited and maintained; and with the affluence that they enjoyed during the *Peranakan* Golden Age, the *Nonyas* developed their own unique domestic culture. Studies on Chinese women have focused on women struggling within the long tradition of Chinese patriarchy under the subjugation of their male counterparts (Jaschok and Miers, 1994). But no significant studies have been done on the *Nonyas*. As well, the domestic *Peranakan* culture is a unique diasporic permutation, as it is a hybrid Chinese sub-culture. Zuo Jiping’s (2009) “Rethinking Family Patriarchy and Women’s Position in Presocialist China” argues that, despite Chinese patriarchy, patterns of male dominance are incomplete, inconsistent, and even countervailing through his research where he interviewed 73 individuals. But the *Peranakan* domestic culture is unique and different from mainland Chinese culture, as the *Nonyas* are either equal to or more domineering than the *Babas*.

Walby (1990) has shown that the concept of patriarchy is important to a feminist understanding of society and theorizes six patriarchal structures (paid employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and state) which restrain women and perpetuate male domination. She also highlights two distinguishing forms of patriarchy, namely the private and public. This study will focus on the structures of household production (domestic *Peranakan* culture) and culture (the socialization of *Nonyas*), to explore the popular imaginary and cultural constructions of the *Nonya*. It will also discuss the private form of patriarchy through *Peranakan* Chinese patriliney, showing that *Nonyas* were not so much oppressed by men but, rather, by women, and yet were also privileged and valued. The *Babas* clearly occupied the masculine gendered public sphere or public patriarchy (Yoong, 2015), actively shaping the Straits Settlements, as the *Babas* were compradors who greatly assisted the British.⁶ Daphne Ang discussed and reiterated the clearly demarcated gendered space of the public with the

Babas and private with the *Nonyas*.⁷ Khoo Joo Ee (1996) maps out the public sphere of the *Babas* in her description of “Men’s Social Lives.” Aside from politics and commerce, the *Babas* created and participated in social clubs and associations indulging in sports and even hunting (mimicking the British), and later the cabarets; whereas the *Nonyas* were confined to the private space of the home indulging in *cherki*,⁸ sewing, embroidery, and cooking. *Nonyas*, as Yoong (2015), Ang (2013), and Khoo (1996) have observed, were indeed cloistered in the gendered feminine domestic realm where they observed private patriarchy (Chinese patriarchy); yet, they also ruled the roost. Contrary to popular perception, the influences and contributions of women in the *Peranakan* culture are more significant than previously described.

Despite the lack of scholarly focus on female empowerment in the *Peranakan* culture, there is much discussion of the *Nonya* and her significance particularly in the arts, fashion, and culinary aspects. The main objective here is to explore the significance of the *Nonya* in the context of *Peranakan* Chinese culture and their negotiation and challenge to Chinese patriarchy. The question asked is how *Nonyas* negotiated and wielded power within the entrenched patriarchal system. In trying to theorize some typical images of the *Nonyas*, particularly through the constructions of gendered identities and the “powerful” *Nonyas* that were prevalent in the pre-war period, a mixed method was employed to look at the cultural constructions of these women documented in the arts and cultural representations, particularly through the existing literature and portrayal of *Nonyas* in popular culture. This article identifies three constructions of the *Nonya*: *garang/lihai*, *poonsu*, and *toh tiap* repeatedly seen through the female characters (*Nonyas*) that spanned several generations in the television serial, *The Little Nonya*. These descriptions are from *Baba Malay*, a patois that is spoken in the southern *Peranakan* communities of Malaya (Malacca and Singapore), which is interestingly Malay, but with *Hokkien*⁹ loan words and often Malay constructed in *Hokkien* syntax. *Garang* is a Malay word that means feisty and fierce, and *li hai* is a *Hokkien* word that means shrewd, crafty, and manipulative; when used in *Baba Malay*, malice is implied with *li hai*, but in Chinese, it does not necessarily have a negative connotation. *Poon su* is also a *Hokkien* word that means resourceful. And *toh tiap* is another *Hokkien* word that means being bullied or victimized. With these identified constructions of the *Nonya*, we interviewed nine *Nonyas*—exploring the significance of these gendered constructions in *Peranakan* Chinese culture of the Straits Settlements within its specific history and development. The interviews were conducted from October 2016 to February 2017. These nine *Nonyas* come from *Peranakan* families in the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang, and Singapore) whereby both their parents were *Peranakan*; however, most of them currently reside in metropolitan Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Their ages range from 30 to 90 years, and the respondents have been numbered consecutively from the youngest to the oldest accordingly. We have, at times, used local words in this article, to capture the essence of the culture and its expression, as often there are no

equivalent translations of these words in the English language that capture the subtle nuances.

Gender construction and popular culture: The significance of *The Little Nonya*

Gender is socially constructed and has always been associated with one's biological constitution (Butler, 2006). Therefore, the notion of gender is constructed and reinforced, not only through the process of socialization but also manifested in art, culture, and history (Walby's structure of culture). It is important to distinguish sex and gender in order to facilitate the discussion of inequality within patriarchal societies. In other words, examining gender roles in any specific form reveals the power structure of a culture. Borrowing from Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer's (2012) work, *Gender and Popular Culture*, our purpose here is to explore and expound the cultural meanings and constructions of the *Nonya* by identifying gendered patterns, identities, and discourses. Popular culture often enforces hegemonic patriarchal ideology and the construction of gendered identities; and in this article, we will particularly be focusing on female identities in the three constructions of the *Nonya*.

The Little Nonya, as its title suggests, is really a "women's series" focusing on, not so "little" *Nonyas*; thus the domestic culture (household production) of the *Peranakan* Chinese. The serial very clearly shows the private space *Nonyas* occupied and the public space of the *Babas*; but both forms of private (patrilineal system) and public patriarchy are at play. And, although the *Babas* are nominal in the serial, their function propels the larger narratives of the *Nonyas* (as love interests, marriage prospects, and scandals). It was only during the Second World War, and thereafter, that we see *Nonyas* emerging from the private spaces of the home to sell *kueh* (cakes) for survival, later engaging in larger businesses, and eventually in studying abroad and entering the corporate world. Therefore, the serial shows that *Nonyas* were able to navigate both private and public spheres. The serial is an empowering account of "little" but *poon su* and capable *Nonyas* who rise above their unfortunate, and often *toh tiap* circumstances to become matriarchs seen predominantly in the characters played by Jenette Aw: Juxiang, who was deaf and mute; and Yueniang. Both of these characters played by Aw, embody the *toh tiap*, *poon su*, as well as the *garang Nonya*, who bravely fought their circumstances for survival, who were victimized by the *garang* and *li hai* principal wife, seen in the characters of Lin Guihua/*Tachi*¹⁰ (Lin Meijiao) and *Tua Koh*¹¹ (Guan Xuemei). The other female characters, to a lesser extent, would manifest parts or combinations of the *garang/li hai*, *poon su*, and *toh tiap Nonya*. The serial ends with Yueniang's granddaughter, Angela (Felicia Chin), who returns to Malacca to discover her roots. *The Little Nonya*, therefore, is a tale of empowered *Nonyas* (and not *Babas*) who found a window out of Chinese patriarchy.

This 34-episode Mandarin-language TV serial was produced by MediaCorp TV Channel 8 in Singapore and released in 2008. Its 2-hour finale attracted 1,672,000 viewers. It is the station's highest rated series in 15 years and was also aired in Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Shanghai, China, France, and US Direct TV (Duruz and Khoo, 2015). In 2009, three actors of the serial were nominated by the Star Awards (Singapore) for the best actor and actress awards with Joanne Peh, winning the best actress award. It also won the most popular newcomer, best director, best screenplay, best set design, best theme song, and best drama serial awards. The serial was a resounding success in Singapore, Malaysia, and Southeast Asia. Although many in the *Peranakan* community are critical of the serial, it undoubtedly brought much attention and publicity to the *Peranakan* culture and certainly has become part of the popular culture of Singapore and Malaysia. When *Peranakan* culture is evoked, often *The Little Nonya* will come to many minds, as Respondent 6 attests:

So for *The Little Nonya*, I have a lot to thank because I don't have to go around explaining to taxi drivers anymore. In the same taxi situation, I explained I'm from Melaka and they would say, "Oh, macam itu [like the] *Nonya*. . . *Cerita banyak bagus* [great story]. . ." These are KL and Penang people.

They would know Peranakans in Penang. . .

You would be surprised, even young shop girls in Penang don't. All referenced *The Little Nonya*. Don't assume everyone's been to Melaka and Penang. Even if they did, they don't know about the culture. But it's amazing how they bring up *The Little Nonya*.

From 1980 to 2000, Radio Televisyen Malaysia produced over 500 episodes of the *Baba Nonya Comedy*¹² serial that was quite popular—but with time (this serial is fading in the collective memory of Malaysia and Singapore); and the release of *The Little Nonya*—has certainly superseded the *Baba Nonya Comedy* serial. In 2004, MediaCorp TV Channel 12 Singapore, aired *Ways of the Matriarch*, a sitcom which also brought *Peranakan* representation to the media; however, it did not make a lasting impression like *The Little Nonya*. *Ca-bau-kan*¹³ (2002), an Indonesian film directed by Nia Dinata based on Indonesian writer, Remy Sylado's novel, *Ca-bau-kan: Hanya Sebuah Dosa (Only One Sin)*, is a story of an Indonesian *Peranakan* concubine. Although a decent and interesting film, it was not well circulated to the Malaysian-Singapore public—many would not have heard of the film. Although Indonesia has a longer and more diverse history of *Peranakan* cultures, the Straits Settlements is its own unique branch of *Peranakan* culture that developed and flourished under British colonialism (whereas Indonesia was under the Dutch). Malaysia and Singapore, which at one time were one country, also share closer, similar media cultures; Indonesia, however, has the largest population in Southeast Asia and is linguistically distinct (*Bahasa Indonesia* is

different from *Bahasa Malaysia*; although both are Malay languages), has historically catered to its own domestic market. Norman Yusoff (2017), who has written on films of the “Chinese Nanyang” in the 1950s and 1960s, lists a number of films with *Peranakan* themes and focus—*Nyonyah* (Yue Feng, 1952), *Rainstorm in Chinatown* (Yan Jan, 1956), *Nonya and Baba* (Yan Jan, 1956), and *Love with a Malaysian Girl* (Lui Kei, 1969) are mentioned from that period. However, they are no longer easily accessible and none of us has been able to see any of these films. The general public, therefore, would be less familiar with these titles and, therefore, they are no longer part of the collective memory of Malaysia and Singapore.

Before concluding this section, it is necessary to briefly discuss the stage productions that have focused on *Peranakan* culture. However, it is not the intent of this article to study these stage productions; although these productions have also indelibly shaped the popular imagination of the *Nonya*. The Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) in Singapore has been producing *wayang Peranakan* (plays) annually since 1984 with *Pileh Menantu* written by Felix Chia. GT Lye, a female impersonator, has been playing many of the roles of the *Nonya* matriarch in these plays. There is quite a large body of plays that have been produced and performed in *Baba Malay*¹⁴ by GSA through the years and, therefore, we believe studies on them should be other, separate, projects. Nevertheless, the three constructions of the *Nonya* that we have identified in *The Little Nonya* are also prevalent in *wayang Peranakan*. And concerning the plays, we cannot forget Stella Kon’s award-winning *Emily of Emerald Hill*, written and performed in English (Kon, 1989). This one-woman show (appearing in 1982) has been frequently (almost annually) performed in Singapore and Malaysia; with international performances in Scotland, France, Australia, India, and China. It has also been translated to Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, Kannada, Icelandic, and French. The larger-than-life protagonist, *Nonya* Emily Gan, embodies all of the three *Nonya* constructions that we have identified; beginning with Emily telling how she was married off at the tender age of 14, surviving under her *Neo* (mother-in-law) until she became a controlling matriarch herself.

Nonyas in literature and *Peranakan* culture—privileged and valued

While the public domain was dominated by the Baba, the home was more often than not run and ruled by a strong-willed Nyonya who had been trained to cope with a great variety of household and social tasks. She was managing director par excellence and the supreme boss of the palatial Baba Nyonya residence. Upon marriage, the demure young Nyonya, still a child, found herself thrust into a responsible position which increased in difficulty as she embraced motherhood. Added to the family duties were social obligations befitting her status in society. By the time she became a mother-in-law and grandmother, she would have acquired some confidence in social matters. When she rose to the position of matriarch in charge of running an

extended family under one roof, the Nyonya would have emerged as an assertive, sometimes even bossy, woman. The mature Nyonya ladies who gaze confidently from old portraits have a commanding air, and also convey an impression of sound common sense. The matriarchs assumed precedence over their sons upon the death of their own husbands. While wielding their authority, Nyonya mothers doted upon their sons, and the result was that many a mature Baba, though he had status and was respected in the outside world, often continued to submit to an uncompromising mother at home. (Khoo, 1996: 123)

The above quote quite succinctly captures the matriarchal *Nonya* and how she would have been socialized into the gendered role of a *Nonya* matriarch. Felix Chia, in *Ala Sayang!* gave insight to the privileged and valued position of the *Nonya* (Chia, 1983). According to Chia, “Most Baba homes were matriarchal—the Baba held the purse strings in the office, but in the house the Nonya gripped more than just the apron string” (Chia, 2015: 22). She quite clearly controlled the domestic realm. Few husbands interfered and *Nonyas* had the last say in the household. Chia’s ideas of the *Nonya* are in agreement with Khoo’s quote. Bonny Wee expressed similar sentiments: that *Bibiks*¹⁵ are highly revered and respected matriarchs of *Peranakan* families and that

They would single-handedly run and control the family household with immaculate ease and is as strict and firm as a nursing matron, if not worse. The Bibiks brood no nonsense and would beat the daylights of anyone who is stubborn, offensive or bel-ligerent. (Wee, 2015: 87)

Likewise, Wee also noted that when the husband dies,

Bibiks would take over the household responsibilities and rule with an iron fist. Almost everything will be dictated by the Bibiks and according to their terms. They would discipline and delegate duties to the children and every one [sic] in the family and run it like a well-oiled machine. The Bibiks were noted for being *garang* (fierce) and many were petrified of them. (Wee, 2015: 87)¹⁶

Wee also notes that husbands would largely leave household matters to wives while they attended to their work or businesses. Queeny Chang (2016) in *Memories of a Nonya* was one of the first to write a memoir from a *Nonya* perspective. As her name (Queeny) suggests, her privileged upbringing is unquestioned as we read her autobiography. In the book, Chang’s mother, a strong-minded, fastidious, and flamboyant lady certainly fits these descriptions, ideas, and constructions of the *Nonya*. Chang’s portrayal of her father also confirms the gendered male public role that Khoo noted. And last, but not least, Stella Kon’s protagonist, Emily Gan, in the popular play, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, also fits into the gendered domineering *Nonya* mold. These general, and perhaps even stereotypical, gendered patterns,

ideas, and identities are very much part of the discourse surrounding *Nonyas* and the *Peranakan* culture.

Thus, it was no surprise that, during our interviews, many questioned whether *Peranakan* Chinese culture is patriarchal or matriarchal. Nevertheless, it follows the Chinese patriarchal form. Traditional *Peranakan* genealogical records follow the Chinese patrilineal system and inheritances were also usually passed down according to this system. Therefore, tracing ethnic and historical information of the *Nonyas* (particularly before the 20th century) is often a difficult task. *Nonyas* commonly assumed their husband's name, such as Mrs. Lee Choon Guan (whom we will return to at the end of this section) making it difficult to trace the background of the *Nonya*. Peter Lee's fascinating chapter, "Slave Girls and Heiresses: Mothers of all Peranakans" attests to this, and he was able to unearth a few historical records of significant *Nonyas*. He argues that the identities of the indigenous mothers of *Peranakan* communities were of "slave women of heterogeneous origins" (Lee, 2014b: 80). They came from Bali, Sulawesi, Papua, Thailand, Burma, and coastal India. Lee collected a few interesting accounts and one of the earliest and most empowering was a Balinese wife of the Chinese *Kapitan* Gan Jee. After his death in 1648, his widow, Madame Ba Lee (*Hokkien* transliteration of Bali) was appointed *kapitan* for several years. She was the first and only female *kapitan* in Batavia's history. In this chapter, Lee also constructed what the *Nonya* world might have been like. It was probable that the *Nonya* enjoyed more independence than her sisters in other cultures and other parts of the world. Many of the merchants in the *Nanyang*¹⁷ traveled frequently and their travels were dictated by the monsoons, which meant that they were probably away for as long as six months of the year; they were, therefore, frequently absent and some even returned permanently to their wives and homes in China. Their wives in the *Nanyang*, therefore, had to be, of necessity, independent. Apart from this and although *Peranakan* Chinese culture is patrilineal, whereby the son(s) or grandson (s) would traditionally inherit the family estate, it was not uncommon from Lee's accounts that *Nonya* widows and daughters often became heiresses inheriting exorbitant wealth as well (Lee, 2014b). This added to the mobility and independence of the *Nonya*.

In the 20th century, one of the earliest writings of a *Nonya* is Lee Choo Neo's article, "The Chinese Girl in Singapore,"¹⁸ which appeared in *The Queen, the Lady's Newspaper* on 27 September 1913 (Lee, 2014a). Lee was the first female Queen's scholar and the first female physician in the Straits Settlements. Her achievements and Chang's memoir attest to the fact that *Nonyas* in Southeast Asia were probably the first privileged females to have access to Western education.¹⁹ Lee's article verifies the cloistered life of the *Nonya*, which she finds intolerably monotonous. She describes a carefree existence in childhood until age 13 or 14, whereby girls were trained to cook and sew. Most girls during that time were provided "adequate education"—some might argue that it was minimal as the thinking during that time was that too much education was unnecessary and might impede the *Nonya's* domestic duties. Marriages then were "match made"

and Lee poignantly entitled a section, “The Unknown Bridegroom,” whereby most brides were not consulted and would only meet her husband for the first time on their wedding day. Neither does she paint an optimistic view of married life when she wrote:

The life of the newly-made wife would be rendered far happier if there were no mother-in-law, who makes her lead a wretched existence by behaving tyrannically in the house. This tyranny and unjust treatment of the daughter-in-law is a special privilege of the mother-in-law, who exercises it without compunction or mercy. The poor wife becomes the drudge of the household and must be ready to wait on her mother-in-law at all hours. Of course there are exceptions, but these are few indeed. (Lee, 2014a: 313)

Chia and Wee verify the above reality as daughters-in-law were at the constant beck and call of their mothers-in-law. Wee explains that there are endless and tragic tales of long-suffering daughters-in-law being ill-treated and bullied by manipulative matriarchal *Bibiks*—often pitting their sons against wives (Wee, 2015). Chia writes that “When mothers-in-law hosted parties... the daughters-in-law they were to serve the guests” (Chia, 1983: 27). Oppressive *Nonya* mothers-in-law were culturally accepted and a norm; in fact, there is a saying in *Peranakan* patois: *maki anak, sindeh menantu* (scold your daughter to insult your daughter-in-law). The reasoning for this is that, because the mother-in-law did not bring up her daughter-in-law, she had no right to scold her; so she scolds her daughter in order to get to her daughter-in-law. In doing so, the mother-in-law also criticizes her daughter-in-law’s lack of proper upbringing (*tak seronoh* which will make better sense when this is later explained). Another saying: *sedap sampay Neo lalu pun tak sedair* is used when something tastes so good that a daughter-in-law becomes oblivious that her mother-in-law has walked by. These sayings reveal the cultural constructions and imagination of the formidable, tyrannical, and matriarchal (*garang* and *li hai*) mother-in-law in *Peranakan* Chinese culture. Although mothers-in-law may be cruel to their daughters-in-law, it does not negate the fact that *Nonyas* were privileged and valued as daughters. Respondent 7 tells us:

From my own experience of my own clan and circle of *Babas* and *Nonyas*, they were very loving towards their daughters... They were seen to be, not to say no value, but of value, has to be protected, sheltered, chaperoned. Very precious daughter, stay behind the curtains in the house, learn family aspects of household management, and get married off, hopefully to a good man. They were precious, much loved by parents.

Clammer (1980) confirms that there is little doubt that Chinese traders took on local wives and maintained “business houses” throughout the Nanyang. But, more interesting is Clammer’s observation and findings concerning the high status of *Nonyas* and the *Peranakan* system of uxori-local marriages which vary from the

normal pattern of patrilineal and patrilocal nature of mainland and other overseas Chinese kinship relationships; he explains that the shortage of marriageable females meant that the *Peranakan* community exercised stringent control over access to its daughters. There was no shortage of prospective husbands from the *Peranakan* community or *singkeh*²⁰ (newcomers); and the later Chinese immigrants were happy to marry into *Peranakan* families because, aside from acquiring wives, such marriages ensured stability and status. Clearly, *Nonyas* are privileged and valued. Clammer emphasizes the matrifocality of the culture, in terms of its matrilineal marriages and matriarchs presiding over the households, confirming Khoo (1996) and Wee (2015) that elderly widows would usually become the heads of households rather than allowing the position to fall to her eldest son, which was a Chinese tradition; even in many cases where the son was the breadwinner. William Gwee Thian Hock (2013) in *A Nyonya Mosaic* gives an interesting account of his maternal grandmother, who came to live with her son-in-law (Gwee's father). Upon the death of Gwee's mother, his maternal grandmother, Mdm Low Tuan Neo, took full charge of the household with her son-in-law financially supporting the household. And since Gwee's father deeply respected and loved his mother-in-law (Mdm Low), she inherited the family jewelry; which she resourcefully (*poon su*) enough, made a business of. This is another example enforcing Clammer's idea of the matrifocality of the culture.

We would like to also highlight Clammer's footnote on concubines and further expand this discussion. While principal wives were *Nonyas* and would *kahwin sam kai*,²¹ secondary wives or concubines do not usually go through such ceremonies and were usually non-*Nonyas*. *Peranakan* families would usually not allow their daughters to be secondary wives; however, there were exceptions during the dire years of the Second World War. In certain special cases, called *ganti tikair*,²² a sister may take the place of her deceased sister as a wife to her *Baba* brother-in-law, so that she will look after her actual nephews and nieces—the reasoning behind this is that (even as a step-mother) she will likely not ill-treat her sister's children; and even in such cases, the *Nonya* is usually still the principal wife (in the absence of her sister). Many concubines, however, were Cantonese actresses and singers recruited from the entertainment world or servant girls (*cha-bor-kan*); and the former was preferred for obvious reasons (Clammer, 1980).²³ According to Chia (2015), concubinage was a silent and mutual marital agreement between the *Nonyas* and *Babas*. It was an exchange for the *Nonya's* total authority in the household. Chia supports Clammer that there were few *Nonya* concubines—which was an unthinkable and offensive idea to *Peranakan* families, further establishing the privileged and valued position of the *Nonya*. Therefore, it was not uncommon for *Nonyas* to bully (*toh tiap*) the non-*Nonya* concubines and often their children as well.²⁴ As mentioned earlier, before the advent of Cantonese actresses and singers, many concubines were at one time, *cha-bor-kan*; hence, becoming a concubine (*gundek*) was often the *cha-bor-kan's* only means of upward mobility. Unlike Chinese culture where female infanticide was practiced or they would sell their daughters if they were destitute as daughters were

considered liabilities (such daughters often became *cha-bor-kan*); *Peranakan* families' social status allowed them to value their daughters; although sons were considered more important than daughters. During the traditional *Peranakan* wedding, *duit tetek*²⁵ is usually given to the bride's mother, but often this is returned or only a small token amount is taken and the rest returned because many *Peranakan* families do not believe or practice the "selling" of their daughters. Respondent 5 related that when she married, her mom insisted on certain things, stressing the fact that "*gua tak juair anak* [my daughter is not for sale!]" Quite often *Nonyas* also wanted their daughters close to them, which also explains matrilineal marriages, whereby *Peranakan* families were wealthy enough to *kheok* or *priara kia sai*, "rear" sons-in-law and prevent the bullying of their daughter (Chia, 2015).

To end this section, we thought it would be appropriate to look at the privileged life of socialite, Mrs. Lee Choon Guan (better known as the Diamond Queen in Singapore as her diamond collection rivalled that of the Sultana of Johor). She has been described as "the Grand Old Lady of Singapore and her parties were legendary. She was the leading light of Singapore society for more than five decades" (Davis, 2015: 29). What was interesting about Mrs. Lee was that her presence was not confined to the domestic private space but she lived in the public sphere, which was often, especially during her time, dominated by men. She, therefore, quite easily and comfortably glided in and out of private and public patriarchy. Her grandson, Herbie Lim, distinctly remembers the grand parties where Mrs. Lee quite often out-drunk and out-danced many younger than she. He also remembers the *Peranakan* rituals of *sembayang abu* or ancestral worship at Mandalay Villa where they resided. According to him, grandma was the indomitable, "undisputed matriarch." Her life and achievements are documented in the recently published book, *Chinese Women's Association: 100 Fabulous Years*, as she was the founding president:

She was a woman who achieved many firsts. She was one of the first Straits Chinese women to be educated in English, and also the first Chinese woman to drive a car in Singapore; no ordinary car but a sleek Daimler. She was the first Chinese lady to be awarded the Member of the British Empire in 1918. (Davis, 2015: 25)

Unlike many *Nonyas* whose backgrounds cannot be traced, Mrs. Lee was born, Tan Teck Neo, in 1877, the third daughter of Tan Keong Siak, a wealthy Malaccan business man who moved to Singapore. He was enlightened enough to engage Miss Blackmore, a Methodist missionary, to educate his three daughters (Davis, 2015: 27). During the Second World War, Mrs. Lee evacuated her family to India and lived to the ripe old age of 101 years old, outliving her two children. Quite obviously, Mrs. Lee was certainly managing director *par excellence* and supreme boss of her palatial residence, Mandalay Villa, as well as a public figure.

Clammer (1980) also points out that *Nonyas* are often well-educated, especially if they came from wealthy families, she "was thus likely to be as well-educated as her husband; and if her husband was a *singkeh* she might very well be better

educated” (40). The *Babas* foresightedly realized the importance of western education; and apart from contributing much to the schools that were already established then (which were predominantly for boys), they also helped set up schools for girls.²⁶ The *Nonyas* were, therefore, the first girls in the Straits Settlements (and probably Southeast Asia) to receive western education, stepping out of their previously cloistered lives in the 20th century. And many have been further educated in the West, enjoying illustrious careers across the globe. We would like to conclude with a response from Respondent 7, whose grandmother insisted that her daughters must be educated and she related her mother’s and her friend’s educational opportunities:

She [mom] had opportunities. She was educated, spoke very good English, quotes from Shakespeare. She was educated till Form Five. Because of the war, she couldn’t pursue her education. . . She was working as the secretary to Girl Guides Association, to Lady Henry Gurney. Her generation born in 1923, she already had opportunities. . .

If talking about *Nonyas* of today, baby boomers born in 50s and 60s, had so many opportunities. I have a *Nonya* friend born in Kelantan, she’s today, president of a company based in Washington dealing with genetics and fighting cancer; she is on the brink of finding a vaccination for malaria. . . She did science, went on to do her PhD, she was a good scholar, she published internationally. Got offers from MIT and Havard, so she went to Havard.²⁷

Nonyas interviewed: being *seronoh* (propriety)

The idea of the garang/lihai Nonya—is this something you can relate to in the series and real life?

I’d say there’s truth to it. I see it in myself, I guess. . .

Is that cultural?

I think my Mom was the domineering one over my Dad in general with matters in the household. I grew up in that kind of a household. To think why my Dad would have chosen a woman who takes the need in those areas, it could be something he was used to in his household. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 1, who is the youngest of the *Nonyas* interviewed, said that being feisty, *garang* and *li hai*, “is kinda like a birthright. You are allowed to *pantang* [to be fastidious], be feisty as a *Nonya*. . . non-*Peranakans* can’t associate with that. It’s like a birthright.” Respondent 9, who is the oldest said, “we [*Nonyas*] were brought up to speak up, fight for what you think is right. . . More with girls, mothers ensured that. . . Generally, *Nonyas* won’t take nonsense.” She also told of her mother who had burned the ancestral tablets of her husband’s family (which is a prominent family in Singapore), epitomizing the *garang Nonya* as ancestral

worship and filial piety are central to *Peranakan* Chinese culture. Respondent 9 herself, in an argument with her German mother-in-law, threw a chair out of an apartment window in Germany and told her neighbors that they can call the police if they like, but nobody did. Interestingly, some of the nine *Nonyas* that we interviewed were reluctant to accede to the constructions of the *Nonya* that we have identified; particularly to what many thought was the stereotype *garang/li hai Nonya*—yet even in their denial, we found that this particular construction would emerge at some other points in the interviews with narratives of their mothers, aunts or grandmothers who were feisty. Most of the respondents mentioned that most matters of the household were left to the *Nonyas*. The main researcher, who grew up in a very *Peranakan* environment, agrees and witnessed the manifestations of these constructions of the *Nonya* in both his maternal and paternal female relatives. He, like Respondent 8, thinks that the narratives found in *The Little Nonya* were not far-fetched but were stories that one would have heard growing up in *Peranakan* homes. Respondent 6 said,

They [*Nonyas*] intimidate through fear. But *li hai*—you can be sweet, you don't see it at all, before you know it, you have done their bidding. Manipulative, devious, and cunning. *Nonyas* are champions of both [*garang* and *li hai*].

Respondent 2 admitting and observation (as in the epigraph to this section), Respondent 1's use of the word "birthright" to be *garang* and *li hai*, the examples cited from our interviews, our discussion in the previous and this section only confirm these cultural and social constructions of the *Nonya*. We believe that the three constructions are culturally shaped by three themes that we have noted in our analysis of all the interviews. These themes are wealth, the idea of *seronoh*²⁸ which means propriety in *Baba Malay*, and education (much of this has been highlighted in the previous section); which all contribute to being the *Nonya seronoh* that *Nonyas* are socialized into from a young age (glimpses of this can be seen in Lee's article mentioned earlier).

According to Farish Noor (2014), a political scientist and historian of Southeast Asia, *Peranakan* cultures emerged out of the colonial (Portuguese, Dutch, and British) context.²⁹ And Kwa Chong Guan writes that "the Straits-born Chinese rose to positions of influence and power within the Chinese community because they were compradors and collaborators of the British" (Kwa, 2010: 50). Colonialism, therefore, provided opportunities for the *Peranakans* to amass substantial wealth. Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar, David Neo, and Antoon De Rycker (2016), in *Chinese Culture and Customs in Peranakan Funerals in Malaysia and Singapore*, argue that status and wealth were very much part of the *Peranakan* social identity. Respondent 6 gave a glimpse of the indulgent lifestyle of some *Peranakans* when she related:

My aunt told me, somebody's father was a strange man who inherited so much money. He owned huge lots at Bukit China and Air Leleh [in Melaka]. He wine

and dined every night, had drinking and gambling sessions, threw huge parties, dressed colonial style—squandered his entire fortune. He did it because he enjoyed life, and to him, what good is it to enjoy alone? So he invited all his friends. Everyone knew he threw very lavish parties, best food, liquor. In his later years, he lived like a normal person. . .

And Respondent 8 said that:

During that time [in Penang], wealth was part of *Peranakan* culture—you are not considered a *Nonya* or *Baba* unless you are rich; if you don't belong to the elite society rubbing shoulders with *Mat Sallehs*³⁰ or businessmen, you're not considered *Baba* or *Nonya* lah. . . how you were brought up, how you appreciate the finer things in life, you got the means to buy and employ. . . So it's a kind of lifestyle where men will work hard to have finances. Women are scared because if they have gone through depression and different stages of life—the dread of the unknown fate, you would want to protect your family. Like I always say, why do women have jewelry? Not because just something pretty to be shown, but to flaunt your husband's wealth—wear to show off your husband can afford it; on your own, the non-working women can't afford to buy. At the same time, you want more and more, just in case anything happens to husband, or marries second or third wives; you hide and hoard these things.

During colonial times, the *Peranakans* were an elite society and, as explained by Respondent 8, the *Peranakan* lifestyle was prone to excesses. *Nonyas* and their jewelry were part of the indulgence, and aside from flaunting the jewelry as Respondent 8 said, jewelry was also a form of security and insurance for *Nonyas* which was why significant jewelry was given at marriage. Many during the war years and in dire straits had to sell their jewelry; yet, instead of realizing how fortunate they were that their jewelry saved them, many *Peranakans* constantly lament these losses as losing a part of themselves, heirlooms, and heritage.

Wealth, thus, is very much part of the culture. And often, the wealth shapes the *garang* and *li hai Nonya* causing them to scheme and fight for the family estate, jewelry or to look out for their children's interests. Respondent 9 told us of her *Koh Sair*³¹ who *bolot*³² the family wealth and at a family reunion some 50 years later, she and her cousin were asking each other what happened to the family wealth, which neither of them saw any of. Respondent 6 gave an animated description of her *garang* maternal grandmother who fought for her husband's share of his inheritance, and through the war years having to raise seven children, was resourceful (*poon su*) enough to sell *chendol*³³ to survive. The respondent's mother inherited the *garang* trait:

My mother was the youngest and fiercest. . . She got my grandmother's *garang*.

I heard she [grandmother] was very, very resourceful. . . Also the face thing, cannot lose face, she gave all her daughters jewelry when they got married. She had a bit, and

would set and reset. Her friends came to *main cherki*, so she cannot lose face. She has that one set of jewelry. Her jeweler comes every week to reset her jewelry to make them look new. Looks like she's got new stuff all the time but it's the same stuff. She's resourceful.

It was because of their wealth and elite status, and particularly wanting to distinguish themselves from the *singkhehs*,³⁴ that the *Nonyas* (in fact most *Peranakans*, but more often than not, enforced by *Nonyas*) were preoccupied with being *seronoh* and *simpan/jaga muka* (guarding one's image and reputation).³⁵ This can be seen when Respondent 6 said,

the control/perfection, *seronoh* (propriety) phrases were: *jangan malukan gua* [don't embarrass me] in front of friends/society. Never mind if you fight at home every day, but to all and sundry, I have a perfect daughter, sister or child. *Simpan muka* [cannot lose face].

Although Respondent 6 specifically referred to family squabbles, keeping a good (if not perfect) public image extended to all aspects of life. She further explores the idea of the *Nonya* and how she identifies with *The Little Nonya*:

I can only identify with the way *Nonyas* bring up daughters with the strictness of the household. How they would enforce knowledge of the culture. It came through clearly, how one would have to be able to do beaded slippers, cook extremely well, embroidery. . .

I don't know if it's *toh tiap*. . . *Nonyas* have certain expectations. It upsets my mother to know that I wasn't completely obedient. Daughters were shaped, molded, and beaten into submission, to fit a certain mold. Probably that's the way they were brought up. We have to fit a certain mold. So you treaded softly, spoke softly, move[d] softly. There were big dinners; I was forever serving Daddy's many guests, serving drinks, cakes. But I wasn't allowed to sit there and voice opinion with adults. Whereas my children from a very young age were allowed to sit and debate with adults.

In an earlier quote from Respondent 9, she also mentioned how *Nonyas* were brought up a certain way. It is interesting to note that none of the *Nonyas* interviewed mentioned any specific expectations that were expected of boys. This strictness was all to conform to being *seronoh*, marking a refined *Nonya (alus)*. A *Nonya* decked out with her jewelry was part of maintaining a *seronoh* (proper) and *alus* (refined) image. There are many tales of *Nonya* matriarchs who would be helped to dress by their entourage of daughters, daughters-in-law and maids (some absconded with the matriarch's jewelry). It is not easy pinning *kerosangs* (diamond brooches that hold the *kebaya*) and *Nonyas* were very fastidious that they were either straight or *serong* (slanted at a certain angle). *Nonyas* sun-dried their

sarong a certain way—with sticks slung in them so that they would be straight, and when worn, would display the full beauty of the *batik* designs. *Nonyas* paid meticulous attention to details to ensure that they were *Nonya seronoh-seronoh*, reflecting their breeding, pedigree and refinement. And, as pointed out by Respondent 6, and as seen in the serial, *Nonyas* had to present their embroidery, beadwork, and cooking skills to be judged by prospective mothers-in-law to see if they were *seronoh* (proper) enough to marry their sons. Respondent 8 also admits, “I’m still stuck in the generation that we do things correctly. But it is something that is not practical anymore” and Respondent 3 confirms this when she says “very *cerewet* (fastidious),” “*Nonyas* always *bikin benda betul-betul* (do things properly),” “*Tak boleh tak seronoh* (cannot be sloppy).” This is also extended to *Nonya* cooking, where everything had to be finely done. And as Respondent 7 points out, “when it comes to food, very proud. . .” According to Respondent 5, “They are strict, how they want to cook their food, how they pound, how *alus* [fine] it must be.” The same meticulous attention to detail is observed in *Nonya* cooking where herbs had to be sliced hair-fine and the food had to achieve a certain quality, color, and taste. Respondent 4, who cooks *Nonya* food professionally professes that she’s a “modern *Nonya*,” but testifies to the truth of the *pantang* (taboos) and superstitions of *Nonya* cooking, to achieve the fragrance and taste of good *Nonya* food. She also explains that much of the cooking techniques were ways to ensure that the food would keep without refrigeration in the old days. *Nonyas* and *Peranakan* families would try to outdo each other in their cooking skills, as well as how they dressed with their colorful, beautifully embroidered *kebaya*, *sarong*, and jewelry.

This code of being *seronoh* exacts certain behavior, often leading to *Nonyas* being impatient; particularly in the kitchen where *Nonya* cooking is laborious. Therefore, when something is not done a certain way, kitchen helpers are badly reproached—and for many generations, this was how *Nonyas* learned—from being reproached. Respondent 6 related how she “was chased out of the kitchen by mom because of cutting chicken or garlic badly, I cried and vowed not to walk into the kitchen anymore.”³⁶ After she got married, she refused to enter the kitchen for six months, until she felt guilty for not helping her mother-in-law, who was gentle and shielded her from her husband’s and father-in-law’s potential negative remarks. Respondent 6 also alluded, in an earlier quote, to the fact that she thinks *toh tiap* (bullying) behavior stems from the code of being *seronoh*. Respondent 8 provides a rather interesting perspective on *toh tiap* behavior with:

History repeats itself. Women—we are our worst enemies. I believe women are bullying each other. The *Babas* left home to the women to run. As far as my family is concerned, the *Babas* were breadwinners, they don’t care what you do—if you want to play *cherki*, you play lah. . . These marriages were match made, so women’s role is to reproduce—to have and look after children, to bring up sons. If you talk about love as what we have now where there is care and mutual respect, I don’t believe that was something that was featured in their lives. The woman is there to be the mother, to make sure the surname goes down. At the end of the day, the men left all to women

at home, it's the women who are their worst enemies. The mothers-in-law will do exactly the same thing to their daughters-in-law. They suffered because their mother-in-law gave them hell. They are doing the same. So, I believe it has to stop with me. But I had a good, beautiful mother-in-law. In life, many times, it's the women who are their worst enemies. You can see the women who are creating hell. Two sisters [in the series] who are cheating... always the women. The men couldn't care less.

All family dynamics are different but there was an obvious hierarchy in the traditional *Peranakan* households where daughters-in-law were subservient to mothers-in-law. But family dynamics become very complex when concubinage was part of the culture which can also be seen when this was discussed in the previous section. The principal wife was often the rightful one in control, unless she had lost out to concubines who have produced sons—such complex situations then create a complex hierarchical power structure according to seniority, legitimacy, favoritism, and manipulation. Thus, we witness what Respondent 8 said and narratives found in the serial on bullying (*garang/li hai*) and bullied (*toh tiap*) *Nonyas*.

The manipulation of *Nonyas* can be inherently seen in the many of the examples cited, but Respondent 8's response below, verifies the veracity of what was portrayed in *The Little Nonya*:

As to what I know, many things seem unrealistic for this generation—how could these types of abuses happen? Actually, I know worse had happened. My great grandfather had a China and a local born wife. There was jealousy in the house between the two women. The local wife tried to poison the China wife. She was hemorrhaging—I don't know why? Great grandfather thought the second wife tried to poison the first wife. Great grandfather moved out of the house and left the local wife and children behind. Moved out! He suspected... He was still loyal to the China wife and eldest son [my grandfather] from her... This local wife with two daughters and a son, she was vying for property...

In the above instance, we see traits of *garang/li hai*, *poon su*, and *toh tiap* in both women. Respondent 3 intimates about her half-Cantonese grandmother who was integrated into a *Peranakan* household, illustrating the complex power structure within a *Peranakan* household:

My grandmother was a servant in the household. My paternal grandfather brought her into the house to help out, but later married her at 17 years old. She was the second wife. The first wife had children older than her and bullied her. She was much younger than the first wife.

The first wife's children bullied grandma?

Only my aunts talk about the bullying grandma suffered. It's because they were much older than her and she was treated like a servant girl... I'm sure they treated her badly

since some of the children were older or same age—the eldest son was 15–20 years older.

Stereotype or archetype?

Archetype. I don't think all *Nonyas* have this experience. However, I do think that it's an archetype because you see in rich families those days. . . . But my grandfather not rich, only a poor station master with two wives and 15 children. . . . *Ada duit pun jadi tak duit* [rich became poor]! Got cheated because not smart. Can you imagine *yang kaya-kaya* [the rich]—Tun Tan Siew Sin, etc.? *Kaya-kaya* [the rich] with mansions, those days it's ok to have a few wives and sons. The archetype of the family with a certain class is quite typical, not stereotype but an archetype. During that time, why be monogamous when you are rich? I think monogamous marriage only came in my father's generation. Third generation *mana ada duit* [has no money].

The plight of Respondent 3's grandmother quite poignantly brings out the *toh tiap* situation which is also seen in *The Little Nonya*.

Quite often, it is difficult to separate the three—*garang/li hai*, *poon su*, and *toh tiap*—as they overlap; and often combinations of two or all of these traits/characteristics will work together in certain situations. Respondent 1 distinguished *garang* from *li hai* and shared manipulative but clever advice that she received from her grandmother:

Feisty is different from manipulation. I do see how my grandma knows how to emotionally manipulate/blackmail people. When I was young, she told me when you get married—it's important for you when you have a husband, whatever you tell your husband, make sure your husband believes it is his idea. Then he will do what you want.

My grandma used to say that grandpa had a temper. She knew how to manipulate him. He got upset with someone borrowing money and not returning it. Grandma knew he had a temper but was really a nice and helpful man. So she would play on his kind-heartedness, scold the borrower as a terrible guy, and grandpa would cool down. He would think the guy was not that bad. He would calm down. At times, she would tell him to take a shower. I thought that was really clever of her.

Garang and feisty are different. Feisty means you don't care what other people think. You just pursue what you want.

Any family members feisty?

Plenty. My Mom. . . . My Dad was the worst example of a *Peranakan* man/human/father/husband. He was a gambler, liar, womanizer, conman. . . . But she has the tenacity to overcome, raised me and my sister as a single mom; believes in finding love, had a boyfriend for many years, dated after it ended with Dad. To me that was the

strength I associate with feistiness. I admire Mom, I could see it wasn't easy, she fought back bankruptcy, had a job to bring us up. But I think when she was retrenched, and lost her long-time boyfriend, it hit her, made her feel like a victim despite what she achieved. So I think yeah, I respect her for being such a strong woman.

In terms of what Respondent 1 related, we can see the traits and characteristics of *garang/li hai* and *poon su* in both her mother and grandmother. Similarly, Respondent 8 said:

I think it is just women for survival. We hear of old ladies hiding money under the pillow/tin, because whatever it is, if they lose their husbands, they will do anything to bring up their children—cook, wash clothes for other people. They don't just give up, beg or rely on charity. They are *poon su* enough. They were already trained from young. Why did parents give you lots of jewelry when you get married before leaving the family home to enter your husband's family? Your parents will make sure you come equipped. Anything happens, you will survive. As I know, many *Babas* die young, so the women bring up a large brood of children. You become *poon su*, you do anything to bring them up and protect them like a mother hen. Women are brought up right from young to be *poon su*. We will survive. My mother told me to learn even if you have maids, you make sure maids don't take advantage of you, you must know more and order the maid to protect yourself, with all the skills. Then you will always be the Mistress of the house with all these skills. . .

When women become widows, they become business-like. Most of the time, when you find business-like *Nonyas*, they don't have their men anymore. They took on the role to survive. My mother's grandmother, she was the only daughter and when her father died she was young. They were very rich, but being a young widow, she was cheated by clan members of their properties. My *Ah Chor* had to learn how to survive without inherited properties after her husband died, so she opened her house to *cherki* sessions. Every round, she collected money. She taught my grandmother cooking that way. Those women busy gambling, don't stop for lunch. So *Ah Ma* comes up with all kinds of things to eat, she became a good cook to survive.

We see here first-hand narratives and examples of what Khoo said in terms of *Nonyas* being taught to be managing directors par excellence of the household. Lastly, as we mentioned in the previous section, *Nonyas* were probably the first Southeast Asian women to have access to western education. And as Respondent 8 rightly points out, the *Peranakans* “. . .made sure daughters were educated. It was only rich girls who went to school” at the turn of the 20th century. We believe education also had much to do with the *garang/li hai* and *poon su* constructions of the *Nonya*, in terms of sharpening their minds, as well as taking advantage and providing career opportunities that Respondent 7 pointed out and also seen in Respondent 1's mother surviving bankruptcy. We also believe that education and with women entering the workforce in the post-war years, entering public

patriarchy and coming out of the confines of the private domestic realms, have further empowered the *Nonya* and also phased out the *toh tiap Nonya* construction in modern times. The wealth, being *seronoh* and education, therefore, shaped the cultural and social constructions of the *garang/li hai*, *poon su*, and *toh tiap Nonya*.

Conclusion

We have explored the cultural meanings of the *Nonya* through gendered patterns which have not been studied before. The social and cultural constructions of the *Nonya* seen in the gendered identities of the *garang/li hai*, *poon su*, and *toh tiap Nonya* come out of the specific historical context of the Straits Settlements during the *Peranakan* Golden Age, when colonialism, wealth, and education shaped the matrifocal *Peranakan* culture. Where privileged and valued *Nonyas* were trained and also expected to be managing directors par excellence of the *Peranakan* household. Post-war *Nonyas* began to maneuver around public patriarchy—especially seen in Mrs. Lee Choon Guan and the many *Nonyas* who were forced, of necessity, to survive and provide for their families. Ironically, as we have seen through this paper, the *Nonyas* were oppressed more by women than men, who upheld hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Trapped in this conundrum, these empowered and powerful *Nonyas* also provided a way out of Chinese patriarchy as seen in *The Little Nonya* where Yueniang fights unfortunate odds to survive—but she not only survives, she saves her *rumah abu* (ancestral home) and the family's prestige—symbolic tenets and tropes of Chinese patriarchy, to bequeath it to her granddaughter, Angela. The *Nonyas* tenaciously fight household production and the cultural structures of patriarchy and often prevail. Woefully with the Second World War and modernity, much of *Peranakan* wealth and culture have been ruptured; and hence, as we enter the millennium, the reality of these social constructions of the *Nonya* are eroding but we believe they are still very much part of the *Nonya* imaginary, as evidenced through the interviews.

There is a paucity of research on *Peranakan* cultures, and as Pue (2016) has shown, just in Malaysia, there are nine *Peranakan* communities; so far, the *Peranakan* Chinese of the Straits Settlements are the most documented, followed by Javanese *Peranakan* Chinese in Indonesia. But there are also many more such communities scattered throughout Southeast Asia; and many, like the *Chetti Melaka* community are endangered cultures. The adaptability and multicultural aspects of *Peranakan* cultures are fascinating; but more importantly, the matrifocal aspects the *Peranakan* Chinese culture of the Straits Settlements are truly unique. This study contributes to the understanding of different forms of patriarchal structures and exploitation of women through the interesting perspectives of *Nonyas* themselves. In other words, the women's voices are heard and the three gendered constructions summarize the complex power manifestation between women and particularly within private patriarchy.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. *Nyonya* is another variant spelling; however, in this article, we will be using *Nonya*. *Nonya* refers to *Peranakan* women, and *Baba* refers to *Peranakan* men.
2. Essentially practiced by the *Minangkabau* people who reside in Negeri sembilan, next to the state of Melaka (Malacca).
3. In the Malay language, the plural in the simplest form is usually an addition of the same word, thus *Nonya-nonya* is an example; however, the Malay plural form of *Nonya-nonya* is hardly used in English and the “English pluralized” *Nonyas* has been used instead, so we have adopted the use of *Nonyas* in this article.
4. The *Nonyas* oversaw this (rather than the *Babas*), which was often an elaborate cooking affair to offer food to the ancestors; depending on the family, as many as 12 dishes might have been prepared; and some families may honor many ancestors that the *sembayang abu* (ancestral worship) ritual may become a monthly event.
5. *Rumah abu* directly translated would be house of ashes. A *rumah abu* would house the ancestral tablets of the family; therefore, a section of the house would be dedicated to the ancestors where the ancestral altar would be set up. The idea of ashes come from the incense that is burned in veneration of the ancestors as the Chinese believe that their ancestors will in the afterlife protect and bless their offspring.
6. Many roads in the Straits Settlements have been named after the *Babas*.
7. In her presentation on portraiture of the *Peranakan* culture at the 26th Baba Nonya International Convention 2013 held in Kuala Lumpur from 29 November to 1 December.
8. A card game that mostly *Peranakan* women played.
9. *Hokkien* (or *Fujian* in Mandarin) is a Chinese dialect that is spoken in southern China. The earliest Chinese diaspora were mainly from the Fujian Province; hence, the *Peranakan* Chinese community are predominantly *Hokkien*.
10. *Baba* Malay corruption of the *Hokkien* word *Tua Chi*, which means elder sister.
11. *Hokkien* term for eldest paternal aunt.
12. *Baba Kenny Chan* from Melaka, who cross-dressed and played the *Nonya* matriarch, has just recently passed away on 12 June 2018.
13. *Cha-bor-kan* is a variation of this term used in *Baba* Malay. This is a *Hokkien* term referring to bondmaids that were part of the *Peranakan* Chinese households mostly in the 19th century. Quite often *cha-bor-kan* became sexual playthings to the *Babas* and

their only upward mobility was to become a *gundek* (concubine) of the *Baba*. Many learned to wield power within the households (usually by producing sons to continue the family name) and some even became formidable *Nonya* matriarchs.

14. *Baba* Malay is a patois used by the southern *Peranakans* (Malacca and Singapore); whereas Penang *Peranakans* speak a form of creolized *Hokkien*.
15. *Bibik* is a term used for elderly *Nonyas*.
16. Wee has also captured some expressions in *Peranakan* patois that exemplify the severity and colorfulness of the *Nonyas* that were often heard in *Peranakan* homes:

Gua paling takut sekali kat Bibik Hong Neo tu—sampei jantung gua naik kecut dan nyawa gua pun moh tercabut! (I am most frightened of Bibik Hong Neo, till my heart shrank and I felt as though my life was going to end!); Oh lu takut sama bini lu ehh. Sama Mak lu bukan main brani skali. Lu sudah masuk bawa kain bini kah? Tak guna punya anak jantan! (Oh, so you are afraid of your wife? But with your mother, you dare to be insolent! Are you hiding under your wife's skirt? You useless son!) (80).

17. The literal translation of *Nanyang* is Southern Ocean. It is the sinocentric term that refers to the warmer and fertile geographical region of South China, referring to Southeast Asia.
18. Note that there are some earlier writers who do not distinguish Chinese, Straits Chinese, and *Peranakan/Baba/Nonya* and use them interchangeably; therefore, when quoted, “Chinese” cannot be avoided and is used rather than *Peranakan/Baba/Nonya*, such as in Lee Choo Neo’s article; but we have made sure that the Chinese women and men discussed in this article were certainly *Peranakans*.
19. Singapore was one of the earliest places to open schools for girls and many early photographs of these schools showed *Nonya* girls dressed in the *baju panjang* (traditional *Nonya* attire preceding the *kebaya*) (Lim, 2008).
20. There are variations to the spelling of this *Hokkien* word: *singkek*, *sinkhek*.
21. Go through the 12-day *Peranakan* wedding whereby the *sam kai* altar was set up; hence, such weddings were considered sacred and performed before the Jade Emperor (*Ti Kong*).
22. The direct translation of this is replacing the mat.
23. Quite often concubinage was legitimized to produce male heirs to continue the family name, especially when the principal *Nonya* wife was unable to conceive a son.
24. The main researcher remembers his grandmother disrespecting her “mothers-in-law,” concubines (*gundek*) of her father-in-law. She should rightly address them as *Neo* (mother-in-law), but she refused and simply addressed them as *Bibik* (elderly *Nonya*) because they were concubines.
25. The direct translation is breast money; so the bride’s mother is given an *ang pow* (red packet) by the groom’s family for raising the bride.
26. One example is the Singapore Chinese Girls School which is now an elite school, founded by *Babas*: Dr. Lim Boon Keng and Sir Song Ong Siang.
27. This respondent at some point in the interview, also mentioned (*Nonya*) Tan Sri Lim Phaik Gan, more popularly known as PG Lim, who was one of the first female ambassador of Malaysia.
28. The actual word in Malay is *senonoh*.
29. Noor explains this at the first *Peranakan* Indian symposium, entitled: *The Lost Tribe of Chetti Melaka—Who Are We?* (4 October 2014) held at the Asian Civilisation Museum (Singapore).

30. This is a colloquial term referring to white Caucasians.
31. *Koh* is the *Hokkien* term for paternal aunt; *sair* is short for *besair* or *besar* (big) in Malay. Hence, this would be referring to the eldest paternal aunt. *Koh Sair* and *Tua Koh* mean the same thing and are used interchangeably.
32. This is a Malay word which means to acquire everything or to monopolize.
33. *Chendol* is a *Peranakan* iced sweet dessert of green jelly made from green bean flour, served in coconut milk and *gula Melaka* (palm sugar).
34. The *Peranakans* have a derogatory term for *singkheh* and non-*Peranakan* Chinese, they are referred to as *China gherks* or *China tok tok*.
35. This is a Chinese value, *ai bin* (*Hokkien*) or *ai mian zi* (Mandarin), which literally translates to “love face”—thus to worry about losing face or to save face.
36. The main researcher’s sister went through a similar experience.

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