

BOOK REVIEW

Waterfront Heirlooms: Reflections of the Kampong China Peranakan by Rosita Abdullah Lau. Kuala Lumpur: My Viscom Editions Sdn. Bhd., 2019, 288 pp.

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To enthusiasts of Peranakan heritage, this book *Waterfront Heirlooms: Reflections of the Kampong China Peranakan*, provides a window to the world of the Peranakan Chinese in a location that may surprise many – Kuala Terengganu. Imagine Terengganu, a state with more than 94% Malays, yet, in the heart of the capital city, Kuala Terengganu, a vibrant community with a distinctive culture and lifestyle survived the test of time and rapid development.

The first half of this book's title, *Waterfront Heirlooms*, is a quaint yet apt caption for a riverfront-cum-landscape that is fast disappearing in Kuala Terengganu. Added to this, the second half of the book title, *Reflections of the Kampong China Peranakan* unravels the rich heritage seen through the eyes of a community that has not received much public visibility in Malaysia in particular. We have heard of Peranakans and Baba Nyonyas of Pulau Pinang, Melaka and Singapore (Leo 2015; Tan 1988), Cina Peranakan *kampung* of Kelantan (Tan, Kamarudin and Sezali 2017; Teo 2003), Jawi Peranakan in Penang (Omar and Jamaluddin 2010; Khoo 2002), Peranakan Punjabi in Sabah (Sarjit 2001) and Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka, aka Chitty Melaka (Paramasivam and Narayanasamy 2017; Dhoraisingam 2006). There have been several publications on Terengganu Peranakan Chinese but these are all concentrated in rural areas especially Kampung Tirok.

Indeed, this book is a treasure trove depicting a community surviving and sustaining through time and space, in the midst of a Malay majority population, a

non-peranakan Chinese community and rapid development from a port and royal capital to being declared as a “Waterfront Heritage City” on 1 January 2008.

Rosita and her team has managed to unearth many “Peranakan heirlooms” – undocumented practices, even long forgotten customs. Ever heard of *kuay pang*, a Hokkien phrase, which literally means “cross room” – given to another family for adoption (p. 47)? Or the rice dumpling, *chang* in Hokkien, which is cylindrical in shape and wrapped in banana leaves instead of the conventional pyramid shape wrapped in bamboo leaves (pp. 224–225)? Or *kay* (pp. 122–123) – *budu* sauce and *kaychiap* – sweetened *kay* sauce, which is a unique combination of the raw *kay* filtrate brewed with various herbs and *gula nisan* (coconut palm sugar) (pp. 124–125)? Or the *kebaya* unique to Terengganu Peranakan women called “*potong coat*” (pp. 164–165)?

Indeed, with six chapters (including the introductory chapter), each covering rites de passage of the Kampong China Peranakans from womb to growing up in the world and finally to their resting place – the tomb, this book offers gems of history, insight into cultural practices and customs as well as nuggets of wisdom through the Peranakan patois and religious practices.

In terms of methodology, the book stands above many academic works in that it employs both primary sources and secondary sources to augment the narratives. Although Rosita’s book cannot be seen as a strictly academic book, the methodology and the richness of data gathered put many so-called academic books to shame. Elderly Peranakans were solicited to share their memories of their childhood and growing up years. Peranakans who are masters in their own right – be it in cuisine, attire, history, rituals, customs, crafts – were encouraged to give first hand accounts and share their experiences, knowledge, talent and recipes. Secondary data were collected from documents kept in libraries, museums and archives, both within and outside Malaysia, as well as personal collections of the Kampong China Peranakans.

This book is also pleasing to the eye, with many hand-drawn illustrations and old photos strategically placed to substantiate the stories told. The pages come alive with all these illustrations and history could be easily visualised with first hand accounts of Peranakans who “were there, heard it, seen it, did it”. Many Peranakans who would otherwise go about their daily lives, invisible to the outside world, found a place in the book with their voices, knowledge and talents being recorded for posterity.

So it is with this book. It is about the cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, of a community not much known outside of Terengganu. Culture is ordinary, it is part of the everyday life of the people and hence, it is taken for granted. Rosita’s book has made this ordinary culture somewhat extraordinary, principally to make sure it will not be forgotten by generations to come. This book will make the Terengganu Peranakans’ past extant for the future.

And it is also heartening to note that, in the face of commercial heritage tourism, where heritage is being commoditised and vulgarised, Rosita's book is devoid of the impression of "selling" the Kampong China Peranakan heritage. This book is about heritage, period. Rosita's ability to encourage her informants to share their priceless recipes and invaluable skills and have them recorded is testimony of her sincerity to leave the footprints of her Terengganu Peranakan legacy in print.

The introductory chapter is titled "Narratives of Nostalgia – Growing Up in Kampong China" (pp. 10–19). Narratives inform us of the when, where, why, who, what and how. Through this introductory chapter, readers will get to know and learn what it means to be a "riverfront or waterfront" community. Almost all of the photos in this chapter has water in them. This is so because Kampong China is located in the vicinity of Terengganu River (Sungai Terengganu). Water seemed to be the lifeline connecting the villagers among themselves as well as with the outside world. Rosita calls it "the river of joy and abundance" (p. 13). This chapter introduces readers to the heterogeneity of the folks in Kampong China itself and the surrounding population. Gazetted by the State Government as a heritage site of Terengganu in 2005, Kampong China, known as *Teng Lang Poh*, or Chinese Village in Hokkien, is marked by two rows of houses, with the odd-numbered houses located on the riverside, and the even-numbered houses located across the road. The houses by the riverside were called *oua hai* while the houses across the road were known as *oua sua*.

One significant narrative portrayed in this introductory chapter is the quality of relationships between the Kampong China Peranakan and the other inhabitants, in particular, the Malay population, comprising ordinary Malay villagers and the Malay royalty. With such meaningful and life-affirming intra- and inter-ethnic relationships forged over the years, this chapter captures the nostalgia of growing up in a well-loved home: "your feet may leave but your heart will always be" with home.

Chapter 1 "Footprints to a Legacy" (pp. 20–108) is indicative of the commitment of the author and her team to produce a heritage book with a difference. The methodology employed is quite robust, from engaging with surviving local villagers who lived through the era and making them primary informants where their narratives are recorded and documented, to collecting data from sources outside Malaysia, for example, the British Museum. The author and her team spent some time at the British Museum in London to gather information from colonial records. Their painstaking efforts resulted in retrieving original court documents in the 1850s with references to Terengganu from the "vaults" of the British Museum (p. 26).

This 88-page chapter is by far the longest chapter in the book. It includes events that happened before the colonial era, when maritime trade flourished in this part of the world to the coming of the colonial powers, in particular the British.

The Japanese Occupation, as experienced in much of Malaya and Borneo at that time, etched an indelible memory in the minds of the Kampong China's villagers that the length of the occupation was calculated to the exact time – *sar nee pek kor guek* (three years eight months).

This chapter also further enlightens readers of the heterogeneity of Kampong China Peranakans. Earlier, it was mentioned that the Kampong China Peranakans were divided into those who resided alongside the river (houses with odd numbers, known as *oua hai*) and those who resided across the road (houses with even numbers, known as *oua sua*). Besides this distinction of location of residence, either facing or not facing the riverfront, the Kampong China Peranakans can also be distinguished from the location of residence along the one kilometre main road, separated by a bridge. That is to say, whether “upriver” (*poh thau*) towards the Seri Malaysia Hotel, or “downriver” (*poh thei/poh boi*), near the Payang market. In terms of identity and cultural markers, the Kampong China Peranakans distinguished themselves from local-born Chinese who are not peranakan, and overseas-born Chinese who have settled in Kampong China in particular and Kuala Terengganu in general. The Kampong China Peranakans see themselves as local-born Peranakans, or *cheng mua lang* (sarong-clad people) vis-a-vis the non-Peranakan Chinese or *sinkheh* (newcomers). This term, *cheng mua lang*, is officially introduced in this book and used as a label to refer to the community in print (Pue, Ong and Loo 2019, 34–37). Distinct cultural markers include clothing (Peranakan women wore *sarong* and *kebaya*, while Peranakan men wore *sarong pelikat*), food (Kampong China Peranakan cuisine) and language (Kuala Terengganu Chinese peranakan patois).

Chapter 2 is titled “Recipes to a Culture” (pp. 109–160). From footprints of the past to recipes of a culture, this Chapter 2 describes the sustainability and well-being of a community as defined by its cuisine. From ricefields to the Terengganu River, and from their proximity with the Thai and Malay communities, the Kampong China Peranakan villagers have adapted these rich resources to produce a distinctive plethora of dishes and sauces uniquely “Kampong China peranakan”. Traditional tools of the hearth such as the wooden mortar and pestle (*lesong kayu*), stone mortar and pestle (*batu lesong*), stone hand mill (*chiok boh*), coconut grater (*kukuran nyior*), flat grindstone slab (*batu giling*), ingredients to produce the distinctive character of Kampong China Peranakan cuisine, such as fresh aromatic roots and herbs and condiments, and special home-made sauces such as *kay* (*budu*) and *kaychiap* (sauce made from *budu* and *gula nisan*) are indispensable to Kampong China Peranakan cuisine.

Chapter 3 offers a captivating title, “Defining Stitches of a Unique Identity” (pp. 161–202). Sociologists talk about social fabric when they want to examine the nature and quality of social institutions and relationships within a particular community. This chapter on Kampong China Peranakan's attire connects the

stitches that go on to weave a unique Peranakan identity in Kampong China. Some of the older women and men of Kampong China Kuala Terengganu still adorn the *sarong* in their everyday lives. One distinctive attire for their womenfolk is *potong coat*. The Terengganu Chinese Peranakan called their *kebaya potong coat*, which means “cut like a coat”. The history of the *potong coat* was closely linked to trade and kin relationships with Singapore. It is not clear when the *potong coat* arrived in the Chinese Peranakan community in Kuala Terengganu. It was not until the late 1930s that the *potong coat* was tailored in Kuala Terengganu.

Chapter 4 “Homage to Heaven” (pp. 203–242) deals with the Kampong China Peranakans’ relationship with beings in the three spheres of existence – celestial, terrestrial and the underworld. All three spheres are accorded due respect with the performance of respective rites and rituals transmitted from generation to generation. This chapter covers auspicious events in one calendar year in the lives of the Kampong China Peranakan. Starting with the Lunar Chinese New Year at the beginning of the year, to Thnee Kong Sneh (birthday of the Jade Emperor), the most significant day of the Chinese New Year (9th day) for Hokkiens, to *Cheng Beng* (tomb sweeping day in early April), to *Gor Guek Chek* (Rice Dumpling or “Chang” festival, sometime in May), to *Chit Guek Pnua* (Feast of the Hungry Ghosts, in mid-July), to *Tong Chew* or *Puek Guek Pnua* (Mid-Autumn Festival, in mid-September), to *Tang Chek* (Winter Solstice Festival, in December), and *Sang Sin Jit* (Sending Off the Stove Deity, before the Lunar New Year). In addition, there is the ancestral remembrance day, involving paying respects to departed relatives on the dates of their respective death anniversaries. Indeed, this culture holds a dear place in the hearts of Chinese, whether Peranakans or non-Peranakans, in terms of paying homage to the deities in Heaven, paying respect to the beings in the underworld, and in particular, remembering their departed ancestors (*cheng beng*).

Chapter 5 “The Cycle of Life” (pp. 243–283), brings readers to the concluding chapter. This chapter begins with marriage and wedding ceremonies, marked by the rites de passage, *chniaw thau* – “becoming an adult” through marriage (p. 247). One is upgraded from child to adult status upon marriage. With this transformation in status, the married adult would be bestowed with responsibilities and rights, befitting his/her married status. The Terengganu Peranakan has a unique way of inviting relatives and friends to the wedding banquet. They would say “*chnia lu chiak bak*”, which literally means “inviting you to eat meat”. In Melaka, the Chinese, whether Peranakan or non-Peranakan, would say “*chnia lu dhim chiu*” (inviting you to drink wine). With marriage, comes the “small feet, big footprints” – birth rites (p. 254). It is interesting to observe how the birth of a baby is celebrated and the rituals thereof from confinement to the baby’s progress through time. In time to come, death will come knocking on the door, and so it is the time for death rites. As in the various customs associated with

ancestors, death rites of the Kampong China Peranakan, and Chinese in general, are elaborate with a long mourning period. Rosita is right to point out the deeper meaning to these ancestor worship and remembrance rituals as well as death rites. It has to do with filial piety, a value deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy. Death does not mean termination of relationship with the ancestors or departed relatives. Memories of them are transmitted from generation to generation through *cho kee*, commemoration of death anniversary and *cheng beng* (tomb sweeping day or All Souls' Day).

This book is Rosita's third publication and it has taken eight long and challenging years (p. 286) for it to see the light of day. It is undoubtedly a monumental feat, achieved with much perseverance, dedication and commitment. It is a labour of love. For her perseverance and painstaking research undertaken by Rosita and her team, we express our gratefulness. It is a delight to weave through the pages of the book seamlessly.

This book is all about heritage, and one indication of this fact is the adherence to old spelling. Kampong China is spelt as it was in the old days before the government introduced standard Malay. The liberal use of Hokkien words and phrases as well as reproduction of idioms in Hokkien bring back memories of a dialect used by our grandmothers and grandfathers.

With the transformation of Kuala Terengganu into a Waterfront City Centre, massive development is taking place in Kuala Terengganu (East Asia Global Alliance n.d.; Majlis Pembangunan Wilayah Ekonomi Pantai Timur 2017), in particular the waterfront area as well as Kampong China. The waterfront of yesteryears would be unrecognisable in years to come, and Kampong China, with a new name of "Jalan Bandar" might also lose much of its "Peranakan" facade and heritage. Rosita's book, *Waterfront Heirlooms: Reflections of Kampong China Peranakan*, might be the only way future generations of Peranakan families in Kampong China would get to know their ancestors' way of life, customs and cultural practices. This book, in itself, is a priceless heritage heirloom.

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