

Nonyawares of Phoenixes and Peonies

By Margaret White

Have you ever wondered about those brightly-coloured – some would say gaudy – porcelains on view in the Peranakan Museum or the Baba House in Singapore? My interest was sparked many years ago after a visit to Malacca, where I purchased a small bowl.

The Peranakan or Straits Chinese communities of Singapore, Penang and Malacca (*former British Straits Settlements*), whose ancestors had arrived from China as early as the 14th century, assimilated and adopted many customs of the local Malay people. Their descendants developed a particularly flamboyant style of decoration for attire, household furniture and ceramics, employing specific colours and motifs. Hot pinks, lime greens, blues, brown-olives and coral-reds characterised the *nonya* (named for the honorific title given to Peranakan women) palette but were not typical of export wares made in China. The bright and often-clashing colours and



Peranakan ceramics treasures
Photo courtesy of National Museum of Singapore

an absence of empty space resulted in Peranakan wares achieving a distinctive, lively style.

During the early 18th century, Jesuits from Europe introduced rose enamel to China and the Straits Settlements, which gave rise to the development of the beautiful and highly prized *famille rose* enamels made from gold chloride and tin that was applied to an opaque white surface. This permitted mixing and shading that created new colourations and a three dimensional effect different from previous *wucaï* or *doucaï* enamels. *Famille verte* (green enamels) were also very popular. In fact, this shade of green was so popular that many Peranakans painted their homes' exterior green.

From the 13th century onwards, Jingdezhen in the Jiangxi Province of China was famous for producing porcelain export wares, which were an important part of China's overseas trade. Fully enamelled porcelain was a luxury item that indicated the status and wealth of its owners. By the 19th century, prosperous Peranakan traders and community leaders were commissioning highly decorated polychrome enamelled wares, often placing their orders through middlemen in Canton.

Perhaps the most common motifs of Peranakan decoration were the phoenix and peony. The phoenix symbolised the south and peace and prosperity. The frilly-petalled peony bloomed in spring. Together, they indicated marriage and fertility and were the central design seen on nearly all *nonya* porcelain. The phoenix and peony could also be interpreted as representing the history of the Straits Chinese culture which prospered as a result of the Chinese immigrants whose hard work, perseverance and intermarriages exerted great influence.

Despite integration into the local Malay communities, the Peranakans preserved many Chinese customs such as ancestor worship; the tenets of Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian philosophies; 12-day wedding ceremonies; and Lunar New Year observances. Leading Peranakans commissioned extensive dinner services for these festivities, large sets that were too expensive for any but the wealthiest members of the community. The shapes were typical of those used by Chinese communities everywhere and were essentially functional: bowls, spoons for soup and for serving, teacups, teapots, lidded *kamchengs* and *katmaus* (to hold ceremonial dishes for the bride and groom and for cosmetics), altar incense burners and vases.

The auspicious eight Buddhist symbols of the *chakra*, flaming wheel, conch shell, umbrella, canopy, lotus, vase, paired gold fish and the endless knot were often depicted as border designs. Motifs of peacocks, the peaches of longevity and the four flowers of the garden – plum for winter, peony for spring, lotus for summer and chrysanthemum for autumn – were also popular decorations.



*Small bowl that sparked author's interest
Photo courtesy of Margaret White*

It is interesting to note that some pieces show the influence of western taste on Peranakan culture. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the *Baba* (Peranakan men) adopted the British education system and became proficient English speakers, thus playing significant roles during British colonial times as intermediaries in business dealings within the Straits communities. Tea sets are one example of pieces made in Western form but decorated in Chinese style.

Many of these ceramics were handed down from generation to generation as valued heirlooms. Although for many years they received little attention from serious collectors, those of Peranakan heritage and others who appreciate ceramics are beginning to acknowledge the unique aesthetic influences of these pieces on porcelain design. If you examine some of the colourful pieces in the Peranakan Museum, the Baba House or the antiques shops of Singapore and the other Straits communities, you will understand why it is said that the Peranakan aesthetic is one of 'more is truly more'.

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