

# The Missing Peranakan Motifs

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch



Since the vast majority of the designs shown on Peranakan textiles, jewellery, furniture and porcelain were drawn from classical Chinese art, it's easy to forget that many were never included in the Peranakan palate of decorative motifs.

Butterflies, flowers, insects, birds, the Eight Daoist Immortals and symbols from traditional Buddhism appear endlessly. But because the Peranakan *Babas* were originally traders and merchants, they employed almost no motifs from the world of the Chinese literati (who, for example, used such decorative themes as the grouping of a classical musical instrument, the *qin*, together with a crane to represent 'an incorruptible official').

Peranakan wares have virtually no designs wishing success in imperial examinations. No Peranakan wife stitched the rebus picture of a monkey crouched on the back of a horse (which translates into the wish for rapid promotion to a government job), nor embroidered a scene with three halberds in a vase (expressing the desire for three official promotions) onto her husband's *daun nipah* (cigarette paper) case.

There are additional factors that have limited the appearance of many popular and classical Chinese motifs on Peranakan objects – the role played by the *Nonyas*, for example. Transmission of culture is traditionally the domain of women and many Peranakan wives were Malay married to Chinese men. Although they did their best to raise their children to respect their husbands' Chinese ancestry, there were often misunderstandings or misinterpretations. For example, one traditional Chinese motif is squirrels, which are known in Chinese as 'pine tree mice' (*songshu* 松鼠) and used as a substitute for pine, a recognised longevity symbol. When depicted with grapes (which are a homophone for peaches, another longevity symbol), the symbolism is unambiguously longevity. One often finds squirrels with grapes on Peranakan objects, but most Peranakans see them simply as fertility symbols, grouping them together with rats and mice.

The blend of Chinese and Malay cultures also resulted in new combinations. Peranakan ceramics utilised traditional Chinese designs, but in a colour palette of soft pastels and

shades of brown that were never used in mainland China. It is more likely that the Peranakans chose their commissioned porcelain colours from the beautiful *batiks* of the Malay world.

When the women of the Peranakan households did their beadwork, they chose designs that had auspicious meanings, but they also needed to be aesthetically pleasing. They would have considered such lucky symbols as toads, spiders and cicadas to be unattractive. Crabs (*xiè* 蟹), however, made the transition, perhaps because of their abundance in the coastal waters near Peranakan communities. A homophone for harmony (*xié* 谐), crabs can be seen on the lacquered bamboo (*bakul siah*) baskets in the Peranakan Museum. A pair, of course, represents marital harmony.

And because relatively few Peranakans spoke the northern Chinese dialect that gave birth to so many of China's visual and verbal puns such as bats (*fú* 蝠) to represent good luck (*fú* 福), many rebus puns died for lack of understanding (although I hasten to add that the bat rebus did make the leap into the Peranakan world). Peranakan motifs express desires for marriage, harmony, prosperity, offspring and longevity through the representation of coins, flowering plants, melons and pomegranates ripe with seeds, longevity gods with long white beards and others.

Happily for us, however, the array of motifs and designs employed by the Peranakan *Babas* and their *Nonyas* is so broad in scope and rich in colour and flavour that few will miss those classical Chinese motifs that didn't survive the cultural journey.



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- ① Jade carving of a monkey seated on the back of a horse; photo courtesy of the author
- ② *Bakul Siah* (Wedding Baskets); China 1937. On loan from the Mariette Collection; Note the pair of crabs at the bottom centre of the basket; photo courtesy of the Peranakan Museum