

# Peranakan Wedding Beds

By Dinesh Sathisan

The ornately decorated Peranakan wedding beds displayed at the Peranakan Museum invariably make visitors gaze in awe and ask, “Why is the bed so colourful?” I have been asked this several times. My light-hearted answer has always been simple: the wedding bed typifies the culture of the Peranakans in Singapore – it is rich and vibrant.

Typically part of a bride’s trousseau, Peranakan wedding beds were usually made of namwood, lacquered in auspicious red and also gilded. They were often made in China for well-to-do Peranakans living in the British Straits Settlements and were the quintessential symbol of the wealth and status of the bride’s family. The wedding bed previously on display and belonging to one Mrs Quah, was not Singapore-made. It came from Penang and was possibly made in China, but it remains an intrinsic part of Peranakan history and culture in Singapore. These wedding beds shed light on the interesting marriage practices of Peranakans living here and the fascinating rituals and superstitions associated with marriage. Peranakan weddings were extravagant affairs, with a typical traditional wedding going on for 12 days. It is believed that the last 12-day Peranakan wedding took place in Singapore in 1958.

Wedding beds were often lavishly decorated with silk curtains, beadwork and embroidery, a reflection of the Peranakan’s love of ornamentation. Beyond the façade, however, the beadwork and embroidery, which featured motifs such as insects and birds, embodied the concepts of fertility and wealth. The Peranakans believed that, like butterflies and magpies, the wedded couple too would reproduce successfully and quickly. To bless the bed, some Peranakans kept a comb of banana, lemongrass and yam together with three lit joss-sticks in an earthen pot underneath the wedding bed, because these items symbolised wealth, longevity and fertility. As practised even today amongst the Chinese in Singapore, a young boy would be asked to roll over the wedding bed three times as a blessing to ensure that a male would be the first-born.

Mrs Quah’s wedding bed comes with an interesting story. It had to be left in Penang when she moved to Singapore in the 1920s with her husband. She strongly believed, however, that she had to give birth



*The Peranakan wedding bed currently on display at the Peranakan Museum.  
Photo courtesy of the Peranakan Museum*

in the wedding bed in which the marriage had been consummated. So she returned to Penang each time her delivery date drew near – a good seven times (she had 12 children in all). The bed was eventually brought to Singapore by Mrs Quah’s children.

Some beds, such as the one currently on display in the Peranakan Museum and belonging to the family of Sharron Chee Guek Kee (the Chees are one of the oldest documented Peranakan families in Singapore and Malacca), were also carved with auspicious motifs such as phoenixes, peonies and scenes with the eight Daoist Immortals since these were believed to protect the newlyweds from evil spirits and enemy curses. This bed was used for at least five weddings over three generations.

---

**Dinesh Sathisan** is a weekend volunteer docent at the Peranakan Museum.

---