

Book Review

Bibik-ni Mak Nenek, by Rosie Tay. Singapore: Wolf et al, 2021, xi + 275 pp. ISBN 978-981-1820-82-3.

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This is one of the very few books written in *Peranakan* (mixed descent) Malay patois often referred to as Baba Malay. Once a lingua franca (Yoong and Zainab 2004, 180), Baba Malay is now a critically endangered language assessed by the Language Endangerment Index (Lee 2019, 123–124). It is estimated that there are only 1,000 speakers out of Singapore’s population of 5.61 million (Lee 2019, 127). Nala H. Lee, a linguist, discussed the predicament and documentation of Baba Malay in Singapore in her article, “Peranakans in Singapore: Responses to Language Endangerment and Documentation”. But no such work or studies have been conducted in Melaka,¹ Malaysia, the provenance of the Southern *Peranakans* of the Straits Settlements from which most Singaporean *Peranakans* also hailed from. Regardless, I doubt that the numbers of fluent Baba Malay speakers would be any more optimistic.² But original literary work in Baba Malay in the Straits Settlements is negligible.³

At the turn of the 20th century up to 1950, there were significant publications in Baba Malay with a peak of 39 publications from 1930 to 1939 (Yoong and Zainab, 181–183). S.K. Yoong and A.N. Zainab discussed these publications that were mostly translations from Chinese classical stories – none were original creative work. W.G. Shellabear also first published *Perjanjian Baru* in 1913, a Bible translation of the New Testament to Baba Malay – however, it was not in everyday spoken Baba Malay. Sporadic plays were written and staged in Baba Malay in the 20th century, but it was not until the 1980s that the Gunong Sayang Association in Singapore began to actively produce *wayang peranakan* (plays).⁴ According to Lee (2019), language endangerment of Baba Malay in Singapore was also only recognised in the 1980s (ibid., 128–130) and since then revitalisation

efforts have been made (ibid., 130–138). However, it is no easy trying to revitalise a dying language that has been overtaken by English.⁵ In 2019, Kenneth Y.K. Chan published *Chrita-Chrita Baba: A Collection of Short Stories in Baba Malay*, which is written in both Baba Malay and English.⁶ He also published *Mari Chakap Baba: A Comprehensive Guide to the Baba Nyonya Language* (2018) and *Baba Malay for Everyone: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peranakan Language* (2020) with Thompson, as well as taught learning Baba Malay classes. Chan's efforts to revitalise Baba Malay are laudable.

Chan's *Chrita-chrita Baba: A Collection of Short Stories in Baba Malay* is probably the first original creative work⁷ in Baba Malay until Rosie Tay published *Bibik-ni Mak Nenek*. I was first told of Tay's book by a friend who read me parts of it as we chuckled over the graphic nature of the patois; but it was not easy acquiring a copy of the book as limited copies were printed. I am not sure that I expected much but I was pleasantly surprised. Tay's book consists of 14 chapters, which begins with "Ayam Samah Itek" – an idiom used to capture communicating in different languages as it directly translates to chicken and duck. Tay relates the reality of her generation to marry a *Chinagerk*, a derogatory term used by the *Peranakans* for non-*Peranakan* Chinese and how she had to adapt to Chinese when she grew up in a predominantly Malay-speaking environment in Melaka; and her jocular attempts in learning Mandarin that her daughter is seemingly competent in, having to learn it in school (as a consequence of the educational language policy in Singapore). Tay captures the realities of postwar Melaka and Singapore. The second chapter "Anak Jantong Ati" relates the story of Ah Chye, who is the favourite son as it translates to "child of the heart". *Peranakan* wedding photos from 1939 of the author's sister and cousin are included suggesting that the story is set during that time. And the third chapter "Kaki Mahjong" tells of a group of close friends who meet weekly to gamble, a favourite pastime of the Chinese! The *bibiks* (elderly *nyonys* – female *Peranakans*) used to play *cherki*, a *Peranakan* card game – so the fact that Tay relates to *mahjong* indicates the shifting gambling culture of the postwar context.

"Mak Kaypoh" translates to the quintessential gossip monger. This chapter opens with a delightful *panton* (poem) and rants at the antics of a *Mak Kaypoh* playing on the word *pantat* meaning "derrière" (metaphorical for unsavoury gossip!). The rambling style of a *bibik* (throughout the book) qualifies its title, *Bibik-ni Mak Nenek* (this rambling, naggy old lady – suggestive of dotage), and loosely connects ideas to Gek Neo's (the *Mak Kaypoh*) mother and young *nyonys* at that time, who were quickly married off at a young age because of the impending news of the advancement of the Japanese (WWII), as a hopeful measure to safeguard them

from rape. The chapter provides glimpses of WWII and also explains the death of the author's father from kidney problems due to the lack of medicine during those dire times. Chapter 5, "Ayeh Ada Pasang Ada Surut" meaning the ebb and flow of life, is probably my favourite chapter that tells of Alice's childhood. Orphaned at a young age, Alice and her sister were both brought up by their grandparents. Alice's bravura is sensitively portrayed that captures an acute sense of abandonment.

Chapter 6, "Kongsi-Kongsi", in middle of the book centres and covers Nonya food where Tay shares a couple of recipes and how to make the ubiquitous and essential *bunga rampeh* (*Peranakan* potpourri) that is widely used for all special occasions. The following chapter, "Retak Charek Belah", meaning a crack that will split further, follows the marital relationship of Shirley and Tim. And "Bukan Peranakan Chelop" meaning a true-blue *Peranakan*, is really an extension of Chapter 6, where Tay relates the *Peranakan* fastidiousness over cooking and entertaining guests albeit in the current context without *kaki-tangan* or help. In the past, all the women folk (a few generations under one roof) would band together and cook communally, which is no longer a reality as the author now lives alone – so entertaining with Nonya food becomes a back-breaking event.

"Mak Jantan", Chapter 9, tells of Tay's childhood. Like chapter five, it captures the idyllic kampong life of yesteryears in Melaka. "Mak Jantan" translates to tomboy, which all ended when Tay reached puberty. Chapter 10, "Sekoh Ulat Tak Mati Lapair", means "all is not lost as everyone will be provided for (by God)" (Gwee 1993, 243). Like Chapter 7, it also narrates the marital life of Mary and Hock with a different outcome. While Chapter 11, "Tamahak Kuluair Kodok" which means avarice will rear its ugly head, assesses extramarital affairs notably through Li-Lin. Throughout the book, Tay's characters are independently contained within each chapter and we are never told how or if they relate to each other (i.e., to the other chapters); with the exception of the chapters relating to her own life told from a first-person's perspective.

Unlike the other chapters, Chapter 12 is essentially written in the form of a gossipy conversation about Bibik Pisang, who has been described as "Mat-Salleh-Chelop", a wannabe white person. Hence, she has been given the nickname⁸ *pisang* or "banana", which is white in the interior and yellow on the exterior. Likewise, the next chapter "Diam Diam Lepu" meaning seemingly good and honest on the surface but in reality, evil and dangerous, also opens with a gossipy conversation about Swee Tin. Tay's final chapter "Dunia Tak Dua" (one of a kind) is an homage to her mother, who single-handedly raised the author and her siblings.

Unexpected when I began reading this book, I have thoroughly enjoyed the way it has been expressed in our almost forgotten Baba Malay with the wit, sharp, sarcastic and judgemental tongue of a *nonya* bantering and rambling in seeming dotage (I think the book is well written and skilfully structured); reminiscent of my *mama-mama* (grandmothers), *eepoh-eepoh* and *kohpoh-kohpoh* (grandaunts), *mak* (mother) and aunties. Tay shares a wealth and depth of experience that is rarely matched in literary works on *Peranakan* culture (predominantly in English in the Straits Settlements). Most importantly, it is the historical significance of the marginal cultures of *Peranakans* (particularly in Malaysia) that the book documents and archives for posterity (apart from the *Peranakan* Chinese and the Eurasian communities, none of the other *Peranakan* communities have produced literary work). Sketches of Melaka (where Tay was born), Singapore and even Kuala Lumpur are captured. While presently there is a deep nostalgia for the golden age of *Peranakan* culture (1850–1920), Tay captures a time less opulent from the 1930s through to WWII and the Japanese occupation to the present – nonetheless, the *Peranakan* privileged position was and still is evident in Tay’s narratives. And Tay captures Melaka’s fading significance as well, to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur’s (and Hong Kong’s) increasing importance in Southeast Asia as well as the affluent community’s movements to Western countries such as Australia for education, investment (and migration). Her historical reference to the double murder and suicide in Melaka (p. 162–163)⁹ and emasculation incident in Singapore (p. 42–43)¹⁰ also support the book’s historical veracity.

Tay’s book is an imperative contribution particularly at the twilight of a disappearing language – one cannot help but wonder if it were written earlier that it might have better helped with the preservation of the language? In this sorry state of affairs, we should not be bickering – but it is important to recognise that most preservation and revitalisation efforts of *Peranakan* cultures are done in Singapore where the government strongly supports these initiatives, which frustrates me when Malaysia has more and deeper histories and diversities of *Peranakan* cultures (let me reiterate that Tay was born and bred in Melaka). But perhaps it is more crucial now that we acquire a more optimistic approach – to generate (and pray for) more of such productions. Tay opens the book with:

Dia ada banyak ladang pokok getah, jadi tu, bila “Rubber Boom”, wah, jadi chek kayah lagi – jadi millionaire tau!! Tapi ada lain chritah pulak bilah sumah terlokop lepair Ngkong mati. Itu nanti gua chritah lain kali. Akan datang... tunggu lah! (p. 1)
(Essentially her grandfather’s rubber estate is another story – wait for it!)

Kita harap kita tak tunngu sampay buah tak jatoh! (We hope we will not wait forever!)

Notes

1. Melaka is the decolonised name for the previously colonised name of Malacca (of the British Straits Settlements).
2. Although it may be said that Malay as a national language in Malaysia is not under threat, but Baba Malay is on the decline. As pointed out by Lee in Singapore, Melaka's *Peranakan* community is also dwindling with *Peranakans* marrying non-*Peranakans* and many are sending their children to Chinese schools, whereby they learn Mandarin and Malay (Malaysian) language at the expense of Baba Malay.
3. Unlike Indonesia, whose *Peranakan* cultures are more diverse and have deeper histories with some distinctive authors contributing to its language and literary achievements.
4. Less *wayang peranakan* were staged in Melaka.
5. Lee (2019, 125–127) identified three factors for the endangerment of Baba Malay: (a) dominance of British culture and English language among the *Peranakans*, (b) the educational policy from the 1960s in Singapore for the Chinese to learn Mandarin in school and (c) the shrinking and dilution of the *Peranakan* community.
6. See Neo's review (2020, 104–106).
7. While memoirs, plays and other creative work on *Peranakan* cultures have been written in English since the 1980s.
8. Nicknames were pervasive in *Peranakan* culture – so much so that quite often we never learned the actual names.
9. Ho Kim Toon murdered two women and shot himself. I could not find any public records of this (probably well hushed up as they were wealthy *Peranakans*) but a few independent sources corroborate that it was Ho Kim Toon and that it happened in the 1960s (possibly 1950s) in Melaka.
10. It is not clear which it is referring to – although I do remember learning about one incident through the media while living in Singapore until the 1990; but emasculations in Singapore seem to be common enough that more recent records can be found online.

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