

vanishing point' (p. 63). If this was so, why did the hill people need to elaborate all kinds of escape practices? Scott does not address this question well enough in my opinion. These practices might very well have the effect of being state evading. Still, Scott is unclear about the link between the deliberate design on the one hand and the effect of state-evading practices on the other. It is a considerable weakness of the book that Scott comes close to committing the familiar fallacy of deriving cause from effect. The bold statement that the cultural practices of hill people are consciously designed as a political strategy to evade the state, even down to the choice of what crops to grow, seems to me to lack sufficient empirical evidence. Again, this does not take credit away from Scott's point that the best way to understand hill societies and valley states in mainland Southeast Asia is through a relational perspective where positionality vis-à-vis each other is important for their mutual constitution. Overall, I think it is beyond dispute that this book will contribute significantly to establishing this perspective as the dominant one within the field of Southeast Asian studies.

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*Phoenix rising: Narratives in Nyonya beadwork from the Straits Settlements*

By HWEI-FE'N CHEAH

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This is a very well-researched book that is richly illustrated. The term 'Chinese Peranakan' is the English transcription of the Malay label *Peranakan Cina* or *Peranakan Tionghoa*. In English writing these localised Chinese communities in the Malay world, most of whom speak their version of Malay among themselves, are also described as Peranakan Chinese, which the author Hwei-Fe'n Cheah uses. The women are called *nyonya*, hence the use of the term Nyonya beadwork, just like Peranakan Chinese food is often referred to as Nyonya cuisine. Taking note of up-to-date research, Cheah ably describes the complexities and development of the Peranakan societies in chapter 2. She sees Peranakan culture appropriately as 'culture in formation, appropriating, adapting, and transforming external influences as its way of negotiating past, present, and future' (p. 81). This reflects her approach of study that analyses Nyonya beadwork as a lens for studying cultural exchanges, culture formation and changing gender identity as well as Peranakan Chinese identity, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Nyonya beadwork became an 'independent genre of textile decoration' (p. 55) with Chinese, European and local influences.

The detailed description of the Peranakan Chinese women and culture in chapter 3 provides readers with a good understanding of the social roles of Nyonya beadwork.

Women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were confined to homes where they learnt and perfected their art of embroidery and beadwork. Needless to say, this enhanced young women's marriageability. Opportunities for education allowed the *nyonya* to learn new things and negotiate for liberation. The author uses the popularity of *kasot manek* or beaded slippers, especially popular since the 1920s, to symbolise the mediation of tension between cultural expression and liberating from the constraints of tradition. The use of the beaded slippers, which could be put on and taken off at will, expressed traditional culture and linked to the past, while also 'allowed the Nyonya in search of liberation to remove symbolically, even if temporarily, the constraints of tradition' (p. 129).

Chapter 4 provides a chronology of Nyonya beadwork, discusses dating, bead types and imports of beads as well as techniques and materials. Interestingly, the use of newspapers pasted on the reverse of embroidered panels provides a way of dating. Unlike netting, which involves the creation of a mesh of beads, bead embroidery involves 'attaching beads to a base fabric with needle and thread' (p. 170), hence the use of newspapers in the latter. Chapter 5, entitled 'Embroidering culture: Early Nyonya beadwork from 1870 to 1900', describes Chinese culture and embroidery, characterised by the use of such designs as peony, chrysanthemum, peach, pomegranate, lotus, phoenix and others. However, by the 1920s, the Nyonyas increasingly incorporated non-Chinese-inspired designs. This is well analysed in chapter 6 on Nyonya beadwork from 1900 to the 1970s, highlighting change and negotiation of identities. One significant change is the popularity of embroidering rose, morning glories and lilies. In the words of the author, the Nyonya had sought 'a bridge to modernity through the rose' (p. 249). Another example of modern change was the application of bead and metallic-thread embroidery to high-heeled pumps (photographs on pp. 294–5).

Chapter 7 brings the study to the present, when Nyonya beadwork is one of the public faces of Peranakan material culture (p. 313). Beadwork was used in wedding and other happy occasions, and a wide range of items were made, including those used for purses, pillow cases, shoes, footstools, mirror covers, mattress panels, belts, handkerchiefs, curtain ties, table covers, food covers, all kinds of bead embroidery on velvet and ornamental panels, even spectacle cases, magnifying glass covers and bookmarks. But the most popular must be beaded slippers, which can still be bought today from some shops in Malacca and Singapore, and some Nyonyas still wear them on special occasions. In fact, it is an important visual expression of cultural revival in Singapore.

Overall, this book not only describes Nyonya beadwork but shows that the Nyonyas were 'active players in an unfolding story of Peranakan cultural transformation as they navigated their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers' (p. 332). It may be a long while before another study can match this comprehensive study of Nyonya beadwork and Peranakan culture, which also discusses issues of gender and modernity.

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