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THE (ALMOST FORGOTTEN) PERANAKAN CULTURE OF SINGAPORE

By Asif R. Chowdhury

In describing 'Singapore culture', one would have to say it is, in fact, a unity of three. The majority of Singaporeans hail from either a Chinese, Malay or Tamil ancestry, and yet all three races coexist peacefully, maintaining their own customs and cultures. However, the Peranakan ethnic group that subsequently developed after these groups settled on this island is singularly Singaporean. Traces of this rich heritage is scattered all around Singapore, from the unique colorful, two-story shop houses to some of the great local culinary delights, and yet visitors and expats likely enjoy them without being aware of their Peranakan origin.

Peranakan history goes back over five hundred years. In the 15th century, when the Chinese Ming Emperor reopened Chinese-Malay trade relations, large numbers of mainland Chinese traders, primarily from southern Chinese provinces, started to migrate to the Malay Peninsula and parts of Indonesia. Most of these traders settled down permanently in The Straits Settlement, primarily in today's Singapore, Penang and Melaka, and almost all of them married local women. Their children grew up in households that were neither fully Chinese nor Malay, almost all speaking both of their respective languages. Over the next decades, a unique culture emerged which was essentially a cocktail of Chinese and local traditions, practices and cuisines. The offspring of these Chinese traders and local Malay women are known as the Peranakans. The word 'Peranakan' is an Indo-Malay word which means 'descendent', 'native-born' or even 'cross-breed'. Anak, which nestles in the middle of the word, means 'child' in Indonesian Bhasa.

Over the centuries, the Peranakan retained most of their ethnic identity while assimilating with the culture of the local Malays. Peranakans are also known as Baba-Nyonya, especially in Melaka and Penang. The word 'Baba' means 'the father' or 'the head of

household'; 'Nyonya' means 'bride' or 'the local wife'. In certain areas, such as Melaka, they are still known by this name. In Singapore, they are commonly known as the Straits Chinese.

The Peranakans introduced unique blends of local and Chinese customs, architecture, clothing, furniture and food, adding color, quite literally, to the local Malay culture of the Straits Settlement area, including Singapore. Peranakan dresses, still worn by Straits Chinese, are as vibrant as everything else that is Peranakan. The Nyonya's dresses include a top that is adopted from the local Malay traditional dress. These tops are colorful and embellished with bright, intricate designs of various kinds, many of them floral and are accompanied by a sarong in an Indonesian Batik design. Perhaps the most unique are the slippers known, as *kasot manek*. These are handmade slippers embroidered with decorative glass beads. The Nyonya ladies today, wearing these Peranakan dresses and similar-looking traditional slippers, look particularly striking at local wedding ceremonies.

The Peranakans also introduced unique furniture which is also a mixture of Chinese and local design. Traditional

Peranakan furniture is made of solid wood, often with inlaid mother-of-pearl patterns. Some of the Peranakan restaurants around Singapore are decorated with these beautiful Peranakan style pieces of furniture.

One of the most delightful contributions of the Peranakans is the delightfully colorful architecture of the local shophouses. These are rows of continuous two-story buildings comprising of shops at street level with living quarters on the second floor. One of the key features of these buildings is the long windows on the second floor with wooden shutters painted in contrasting shades from that of the next unit.

Finally, the most precious contribution of the Peranakan culture perhaps lies in many of the local culinary delights. The Nyonya laksa, a spicier version of the local laksa, the fried chicken known as *inchi kabin*, fish soup called *pindang bandeng*, and a dry chicken curry dish known as chicken *kapitem*, are some of the more popular Peranakan dishes. One can try all of these, and many more Nyonya dishes, in local Peranakan restaurants.

There is a strong will to keep Peranakan history and roots in Singapore and a visit to the island would be incomplete without a glimpse of this rich Singaporean past. The best place to experience the Peranakan heritage, culture and cuisine in Singapore is around the East Coast Park area. Towards the turn of the twentieth century most of the Peranakan traders



were doing well financially, and these traders bought land and built homes by what was then Katong's seaside to the east – at the time, these properties were closer to the ocean, but now, due to reclamation of land to increase Singapore's landmass, this is no longer the case. Architecture and culture is particularly well-preserved around the Joo Chiat area of Katong.

One way to experience Peranakan culture is to spend a weekend in Katong, ideally staying at a Peranakan hotel, to enjoy this unique Peranakan heritage, the architecture, and some of the Nyonya cuisines. There are a number of hotels in the area, both boutique and international chains, which boast Peranakan designs while offering modern amenities. The rooms are furnished and designed using Peranakan themes and are adorned with traditional furniture. Most of these hotels also have in-house Peranakan restaurants. Many of the colorful shop houses have been turned into trendy bars, restaurants and art galleries, making it a pleasant area to walk around.



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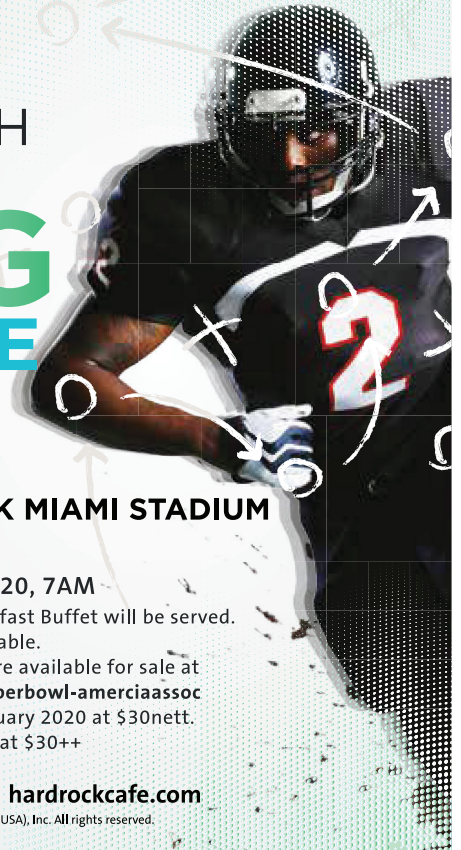
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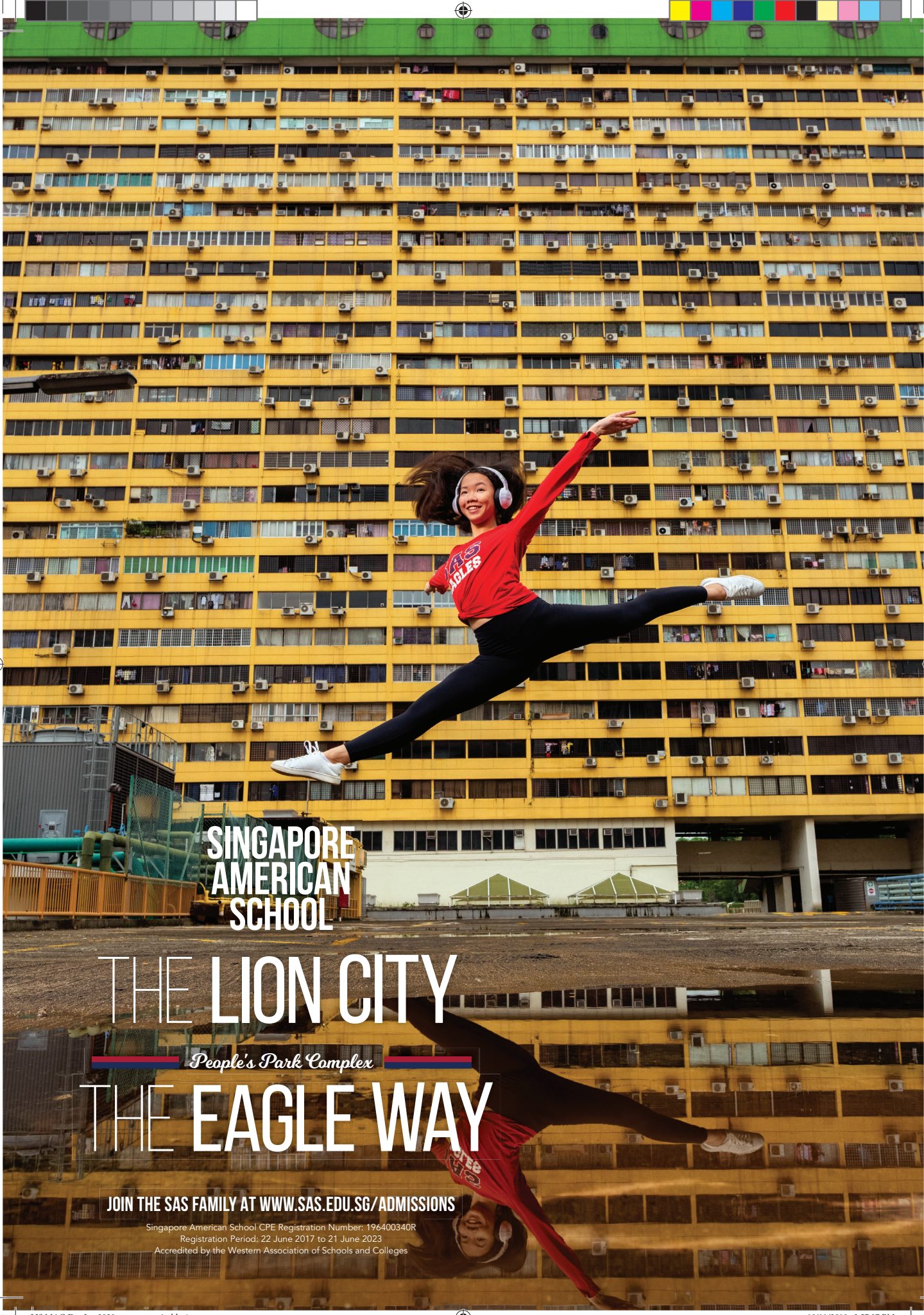
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