

Defining the Aesthetics of the *Nyonyas*' Batik Sarongs in the Straits Settlements, Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

The Javanese way of decorating textiles using batik techniques was popular among the *Peranakan* in the Malay Archipelago, largely because the range of batiks produced by the Javanese *Peranakan* incorporated Chinese aesthetics. A whole new range of batik, known as *Batik Peranakan* or *Batik Cina* (Chinese Batik) was produced for a largely *Peranakan* Chinese market, including the Straits Chinese in the former British Straits Settlements. This paper examines the *Peranakan* Chinese aesthetic values that are revealed in these batiks, focusing on three different aspects – motifs, colour schemes and applications. Examination of the batik sarongs worn by the Straits Chinese women, or *Nyonyas*, however, shows different criteria in relation to these three aspects. The differences in aesthetic values made the batik sarongs used by the *Nyonyas* in the former Straits unique, and showcased their distinct identity.

KEYWORDS

Batik; *Peranakan*; Straits Chinese; aesthetics; *Nyonyas*; Straits Settlements; society; fashion; female clothing; Penang; Singapore; Malacca; Java

Introduction

This paper presents research on the dress choices of “Straits Chinese” women, who are known variously as *Nyonyas*, *Babas* and *Peranakan* Chinese. More precisely, it focuses on one of their daily garments, the batik sarongs that they wore as hip-wrappers. This is a field that is complicated at a superficial level by the very loose, imprecise and constantly changing terminology used to describe the people and communities under study, to the extent that an explanation of the shifting terminology is useful before we turn to the main point of the paper.

The Straits Chinese were the pioneer Chinese settlers in the former British Straits Settlements, whose male ancestors came mostly from Southern China; the female ancestors were usually local indigenous women of the Malay Archipelago, although some came from mainland Southeast Asia. The Straits Settlements, comprising Penang, Melaka and Singapore, were formed in 1826 as a British political unit and ceased to exist in 1946.

As the Straits Settlements no longer exist as a political unit, the term “Straits Chinese” is not used to address the current descendants of the Straits Chinese, who are now more often

referred to as “*Peranakan Chinese*”. Although the term “*Peranakan*” has been used among the Straits Chinese in Melaka and Singapore who speak *Baba Malay* (a variant of Malay), it has only recently gained currency in Penang. Along with two other terms – *Baba* and *Nyonya* – *Peranakan* is generally used to signify the Straits Chinese communities, despite semantic drift over many decades. However, “*Peranakan Chinese*” is not an exclusive term for the Straits Chinese, as it usually includes what Cheah calls “the acculturated descendants of Chinese migrants to the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago” (Cheah, 2010, p. 1). Acculturation is an important aspect in the usage of the term “*Peranakan Chinese*” (often abbreviated to *Peranakan*, as it is in this paper).

“*Baba*” refers to the *Peranakan* men in the former Straits and other parts of Peninsular Malaya. It is a word used almost exclusively for men, although some writers have used it as a gender-free term. “*Nyonya*”, or its variant “*Nonya*”, is a wider term used, although not exclusively, for *Peranakan* women. In the distant past, from at least the late seventeenth century, the term indicated married and “free” women – including indigenous women – who were married to foreign or mixed-descent men of some standing. In the late seventeenth century, in the Dutch version of *Genesis* (1697), the term “*njenja*” appeared, and Collins refers to it as “*nyonya*” for married women in the modern Indonesian language (Collins, 2004, p. 97). The designation of “married woman” was important at that time because many indigenous slave women were set “free” and gained social standing through the men who acquired them as spouses; hence, in many instances “married woman” signified “free woman”.

In the eighteenth century, Sydney Parkinson noted that the “free women” of Java “are called Noonga Cabaia” (Parkinson, 1773, p. 179). By the term “Noonga Cabaia” Parkinson probably meant *Nyonya Kebaya*. At least from the nineteenth to around the mid-twentieth century, *Nyonya* referred to the female descendants of these “free women” of some standing, including *Peranakan* women but also including other mixed-descent women (e.g. Eurasians) who were locally born and had settled in the Malay Archipelago. In the former Dutch Indies, the Dutch spelling “*Njonja*” or the abbreviation “*Nj*” was frequently used as “Mrs”, followed by a woman’s married or husband’s name. This usage appears in many signatures on batiks made by the *Peranakan* (Veldhuisen, 1996, p. 80). Today, it mainly refers to *Peranakan* women, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, regardless of their marital status. The term “*Nyonya*” is most likely derived from the Portuguese “*Dona*”, a title used as a prefix to a respectable woman’s given name, like the English “Lady”. It was probably brought to the Malay Archipelago by Portuguese Eurasian women. It is in fact not surprising that “*Dona*” would become “*Nyonya*” over time, because of the difficulty in pronouncing “d” experienced by speakers of some native Chinese dialects (such as Hokkien and Teochew) that have no “d” sound.

The terms “*Baba*” for Straits Chinese men and “*Nyonya*” for Straits Chinese women are used in this paper, unless otherwise stated. The term “Straits Chinese” is used for both genders, as this research is based in the former Straits Settlements where the term “Straits Chinese” was used. It offers a clear geographical division that “*Peranakan Chinese*” does not provide.

This paper discusses the aesthetic of the *Nyonyas*’ batik sarongs produced primarily on the North Coast of Java by the *Peranakan*, known as *Batik Cina* or Chinese Batik. The term “*Batik Peranakan*” (Duggan, 2001, p. 90) is also used; this paper prefers the latter to commemorate the makers and users who were *Peranakan* rather than *Totok* or pure Chinese. Another kind of batik, *Batik Nyonya*, is not to be confused with *Batik Peranakan*

(Kerlogue, 2004, p. 33; Van Roojen, 2001, p. 22). It refers to a specific kind of batik design that was favoured by the *Nyonyas*, including the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. Kerlogue describes these designs as “European style”. This style was initiated by the Eurasian batik workshops but was later produced in the *Peranakan* workshops too. Due to the difficulty in dating these garments precisely, the research period is roughly between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, which covers the period when the production of *Batik Peranakan* and *Batik Nyonya* reached its peak.

I begin with a discussion of the making of batiks by the *Peranakan*, and then examine three aspects of the Chinese aesthetic that appeared in the batiks they produced. An examination of the bulk of the batik sarongs that were imported and used by the *Nyonyas* follows. Further variation is shown through the choices of batik sarongs made by the *Nyonyas*.

The Making of the *Batik Peranakan* in Java

The *Peranakan* learned the skills of batik making and began their batik industries on the North Coast of Java. Batik is a decorated textile made using the wax-resist method. Wax can be used to create intricate designs using an instrument called a *canting*, and batik that is made using this vessel is called *batik tulis*. The *canting* is a small copper vessel attached to a pen-sized bamboo stick that functions like a fountain pen, except that instead of ink it uses wax. Although we have no precise date for the invention of the *canting*, we know it is an indigenous Javanese device. However, this is a very time-consuming way to decorate cloth, and as demand grew, the limitations of this labour-intensive technique became apparent, leading to the production of European-manufactured imitation printed batiks in the first half of the nineteenth century. These imitations appeared on the Indonesian market, putting pressure on Javanese manufacturers to speed up the batik-making process. The copper stamp or *cap* was developed, probably around 1840–50 (Veldhuisen, 1996, p. 42), enabling intricate designs to be stamped with wax onto the cloth. This is a much faster process, especially for repetitive patterns, significantly reducing the production time. Some writers, including Veldhuisen (1996), suggest that the invention of the copper stamp can be attributed to the *Peranakan*, but there is no hard evidence for this claim. Nevertheless, the *Peranakan* Chinese involvement in batik making did increase significantly following the introduction of the *cap*.

Being on the coast, North Coast Java – like the Straits Settlements – was a maritime hub for Southeast Asia. It was active in international trade and the place where the early Chinese settlers made their first homes. In such an environment, most scholars agree that batik makers in North Coast or *Pasisir* Java were open to many foreign influences, including Chinese, and that they integrated them into Javanese aesthetics. This of course happened frequently, but I argue that in this instance the interaction was reciprocal: when the Javanese *Peranakan* batik producers started to produce batik incorporating Chinese aesthetics, they made this Javanese textile appealing to the *Peranakan*. Thus, a whole new range of batik was produced for a largely *Peranakan* market, sometimes with little regard for the Javanese aesthetics that dominated the Javanese batiks.

Peranakan batik workshops became more numerous after the widespread adoption of the *cap*, particularly in Cirebon, Lasem, Semarang, Pekalongan and Kedungwuni, due to the denser concentration of *Peranakan* in those centres. Even before this, *Peranakan* traders had been actively involved in organising batik production and sales, a situation that is well

documented and need not be recapped here.¹ We know that by the second quarter of the nineteenth century Eurasian women had taken the next entrepreneurial step by hiring batik makers to work in their compounds.² The batik workers, who had previously worked at home, were now gathered under one roof and worked for wages, marking the beginnings of factory-made batiks. A few decades later, the *Peranakan* followed suit and started their own cottage industries, producing their own lines of commercial batiks.

The North Coast approach to batik making was essentially commercial and entrepreneurial compared to that of Central Java, where batik making used to be exclusive to the court. Batiks produced in the Principalities of Central Java, especially those created during the eighteenth century at the Surakarta and Yogyakarta *kratons* (courts), are generally considered to be classic batiks. The princely families of Mataram Kingdom were the great driving forces behind the development of these designs, some of which could find their roots in the stone sculptures of the ancient Javanese Hindu-Buddhist deities in Java's historical temples. They are characterised by a narrow colour range usually dominated by deep blue or indigo and a sombre brown known as *soga*. Combined with the original cream hue of the cloth, this gave us the three distinctive colours of Central Javanese batik – cream, indigo and brown.³

The popularity of the central court designs did not extend significantly to the North Coast batik, however, including those made by the *Peranakan*, who had little affinity with Central Javanese court tradition. Nevertheless, the Central Javanese court designs were still used but in less significant contexts, sometimes only as background designs. Having placed the emergence of *Batik Peranakan* in context, we now move on to examine the three aspects of aesthetics in *Batik Peranakan*.

The Motifs, Colour Schemes and Applications of *Batik Peranakan*

Indian textiles were one of the earliest and most important sources of inspiration for the decoration of the North Coast batiks, in terms of their colour schemes, designs and layouts. Indian goods – particularly textiles – were mainly traded for spices. Rouffaer reports that, as early as the fifteenth century, large quantities of textiles from the Coromandel Coast of India were exported to Java, where they were referred to as *serasah*, *kumutir* or *sembagi* (Veldhuisen, 1993, p. 20). This heavily traded textile was multi-coloured long cotton, decorated with the *chintz* technique with the *tumpal* design at both ends.⁴ *Tumpal* is a modern term for a saw-tooth design (a row of elongated triangles) that was used widely in the Indian textiles. This design, also known as *pucuk rebung* or bamboo shoots, became an important feature and was eventually known as the “traditional” batik design on the North Coast.⁵

There are many different types of batik applications but the most commonly produced batiks on the North Coast are the two types of hip-cloths, meant to cover the lower part of the body: *kain panjang* and the sarong. *Kain panjang* is the rectangular long cloth, and the sarong, although the term is misused in the English language, is actually a rectangular garment with both ends sewn together to form a tube. Unlike *kain panjang*, the sarong was and to a certain extent still is the characteristic dress of North Coast Java. One interesting development in North Coast batik sarongs that drew on outside influences and experiments is the invention of the *kepala* and *badan* sections on the sarongs. *Kepala* is a small, distinct section of a sarong, about a third of the total length. The remaining larger part of the design is called the *badan*, or body. This development has been observed by many scholars, including Heringa, who has identified this format as occurring on the “North

Coast only” (Heringa, 2010, p. 127). The most “traditional” *kepala* design in North Coast batik is the *kepala tumpal*, consisting of two rows of *tumpal* or intersecting sets of triangles facing each other. It derived from a modified version of the textiles of the Coromandel Coast mentioned earlier, in which both ends (right and left) of the *tumpal* design joined up to make the section of the *kepala tumpal* design. Over time, the designs for the *kepala* section slowly expanded to create a much larger repertoire, moving beyond Indian textile influences and eventually including *buketan* or bouquets of flowers, which derived from Dutch or European influences. By the end of the eighteenth century, use of the imported Indian textiles had declined due to the loss of sales to the European printed-textile industry (Veldhuisen, 1996, p. 39). North Coast batiks filled much of this gap, gradually replacing the Indian textiles and in the process kick-starting industrial batik production.

The batiks produced by the *Peranakan* had their own specific character, distinctive for its Chinese influence as well as its assimilation of Chinese, Javanese and European cultures. These batiks were produced mainly for the consumption of the *Peranakan* in this region of Java as well as for the export market that reached the Straits Chinese. As mentioned above, the involvement of the *Peranakan* in batik making came at a time when mass production was possible using the *cap*, and there was high demand for *Peranakan* batik in the regions, resulting in a significant escalation in production in the period leading up to World War II. As we shall see later, many designs were borrowed from Chinese textiles, embroideries and even porcelain ware.

Genevieve Duggan (2001) examines the symbolism of Chinese motifs found on *Peranakan* batiks. Duggan exhaustively considers the many Chinese-inspired motifs including swastika, lozenge, coin, mythical animals (*kilin*, dragon and phoenix), birds, centipedes, fish, butterflies, flowers and plants, and grains and seeds. There is, therefore, no reason to recap the symbolic meanings of those motifs here. Concerning her field research on the symbolism of *Peranakan* batik, Duggan (2001, p. 91) says:

[D]uring fieldwork it was not possible to establish if past *Peranakan* batik entrepreneurs or their customers had been aware of the exact symbolism of the patterns in Chinese culture or of their origin. Today most of the original meanings seem to have been lost. The motifs underwent a transformation of meaning and in most cases became simply carriers of a good luck or prosperity message. Although some of the informants could not explain the different interpretations of the ornamentation, they consider them as part of their culture.

Thus, Duggan’s research tells us that it is not certain whether the *Peranakan*, both the makers and the users of the batik, understood the symbolism of those ancient Chinese-derived motifs. My approach therefore unfolds the aesthetic values rather than the symbolic values of the *Peranakan* batiks, which might not have any meaning to them. This requires an understanding of the aesthetic factors that motivated the production of the *Peranakan* batik. I use the word “aesthetics” here in the sense of inner positive responses that provoke feelings of pleasure, precisely as expressed by Howard Morphy (2006, p. 302):

An aesthetic response concerns sensations or feelings that are evoked or caused in the viewer looking at a painting – a positive emotional response, one that can be associated with feelings of pleasure, but which is not necessary to be interpreted as pleasure. An aesthetic effect may be additional to some other kind of property of an object, for example in communicating functions or practical properties. The aesthetics may be complementary to some other kind of property of an object or necessary to its fulfilling some other function. For example, an object may be aesthetically pleasing in order to draw a person’s attention to it so that some other function may be fulfilled or message communicated.

In order to apply this aesthetic concept to batik sarongs, the positive emotional response that can be associated with the feelings of pleasure has to arise in the person looking at them. That is, the design needs to be aesthetically appealing to the viewer so that its practical function, whether as a daily or a special events garment, is achieved. Morphy (2006, p. 302) adds: “Aesthetic properties are often properties of objects which require them to be seen in a particular way by viewers who, because of their background or personality, are able to appreciate them”. Thus, the designs on *Peranakan* batik were used to produce beautiful cloths in the eyes of the *Peranakan* who, because of their backgrounds, were able to appreciate them. To increase the level of *Peranakan* appreciation of batik, the batik producers employed a whole new system of aesthetic values in their range of batiks. I argue that there are three distinctive “aspects”, or in Morphy’s words “properties”, of Chinese aesthetics that are needed in *Peranakan* batik for the *Peranakan* to use or wear them. These are the motifs, the colour schemes and the applications, and I will examine each of these in turn in the following sections.

Motifs

It goes without saying that popular Chinese-inspired motifs such as dragons, cranes, lotus, fish, peacocks, bats, phoenix, *kilin* (mythical lion dog), butterflies, peonies, chrysanthemums and so on are abundant in *Peranakan* batiks. There are some striking similarities between motifs found on Chinese paintings, ceramics and textiles and those on *Peranakan* batiks. For example, two confronting Chinese dragons often appear on *Peranakan* batik baby-carriers (see, for example, Duggan, 2001, p. 95), and these can be found on many Chinese arts and crafts including ceramics (see, for example, Khoo, 1996, p. 225). Chinese dragon motifs obviously appealed to Chinese users, but probably appeal less to the Javanese due to the fact that the Islamic culture discourages the portrayal of animals, particularly as the main motif. It is typical for *Peranakan* batik to have very clear flora and fauna motifs, including all sorts of mythical creatures, in contrast to their Javanese counterparts, where the depiction of animals, mythical or otherwise, was usually subtle and abstract. The complex variations in the aesthetics of batik need to be explored in the specific cultural contexts that would induce particular aesthetic effects and evoke feelings of pleasure. Obviously, in this case, the aesthetic values of the *Peranakan* would be perceived differently by the indigenous Javanese.

During my own field research on the North Coast of Java, I found, as did Duggan, that there was no need for the *Peranakan* to know the origin or the symbolism of an ornament for them to appreciate it. Other writers who have researched *Pasisir* batiks and reached a similar conclusion include Knight-Achjadi et al. (2006) and Heringa (2010). Duggan also realises that the *Peranakan*, being unable to speak or read Chinese, could not explain the different interpretations of the ornamentation but nevertheless considered these motifs to be part of their culture. We should not, of course, use present-day research to judge the past, but my point is that whether these symbolic motifs are understood properly or not is irrelevant, as long as they have been part of the culture, something the *Peranakan* grow up with and see in their everyday lives. It will eventually serve as an aesthetic agent that becomes something pleasing to the eyes of the *Peranakan* and evokes positive emotional responses from them.

Although these designs probably did not appeal to the Javanese, there are some Chinese symbolic motifs that were successfully incorporated into the Javanese aesthetic, which is

not surprising in a cosmopolitan environment such as *Pasisir* Java. For example, one of the popular North Coast batik designs, *banji*, owes its origins to the Chinese. The basis of the pattern is a swastika, a simple cross with arms of equal length, each arm bent at right angles pointing in the same direction. The use of the swastika dates back to the Hindu-Buddhist period in India, and the word means “well-being” in Sanskrit, but it must have been the *Peranakan* who made it popular in batik designs, since the Chinese word “*banji*” is used and not the Sanskrit “*swastika*”. The word “*banji*” is from Hokkien, a localised Chinese dialect, and means “ten thousand things” – thus, abundance. It could probably be interpreted as an abundance of happiness, longevity and wealth, which derive from a Chinese proverb, *wan shi ru yi*. “*Wan shi*” is a Mandarin word which is pronounced as “*banji*” in Hokkien dialect. The *banji* design can be found in many variations in Chinese batiks, both as the main field and as background decoration. But the *banji* design is not just used in Chinese batik, as it often appears in North Coast Javanese batik as a less prominent background. The *banji* design could easily have been adopted as part of the Javanese aesthetic due to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions in the Javanese past.

One other motif that clearly owes much to the Chinese influence but that was popular among Javanese is the gradation of different hues of clouds, the *megamendung* or heavy clouds. This motif, which was made popular in Cirebon, is an adaptation of the clouds in Chinese landscape painting. The influence of the gradation of different hues can be seen not just in Chinese landscape paintings but also in embroidered textiles, particularly court robes. *Banji* and *megamendung* motifs suggest a perfect integration of motifs from one culture into another, a result of a cross-cultural aesthetic appearing in a cosmopolitan environment such as North Coast Java.

The development of a cross-cultural aesthetic is not usually a one-way process. Apart from the Chinese-inspired motifs, the *Peranakan* also adopted many ornamental motifs from Central Java, such as *kawung* and *parang*, into their batik designs, although in a less significant way. As noted above, the *Batik Belanda* or Dutch Batik also had a great influence on *Peranakan* batiks, particularly the *buketan* or floral bouquet designs. Bouquets of flowers made their first appearance as the main motifs in Dutch workshops in Pekalongan around 1910, and “Eliza van Zuylen has been credited with originating this motif with lasting impact for batik design” (Lee, 2014, p. 198). This motif had a major impact on the *Peranakan* batiks at the beginning of the twentieth century, overshadowing other floral patterns such as potted flowers, intertwined flowers and flower arrangements. This European-style bouquet design eventually became known as “*Batik Nyonya*”, a reference to its popularity with the *Nyonyas*. Hence, this name does not commemorate the makers, rather, it relates to the users.

The Europeanised *buketan* design was taken up by batik workshops in Pekalongan in particular, and sometimes the term *Batik Pekalongan* was used interchangeably with *Batik Nyonya*. The *Batik Nyonya* produced in the *Peranakan* workshops became increasingly complex in the early twentieth century, with the filler motifs (*isen*) based on patterns including dots, lines, *banji*, lozenges, rosettes or foliage occupying all of the empty space in the background. The idea of filling spaces with a variety of *isen* motifs is a characteristic derived from some of the batiks made in the Principalities of Central Java. On the North Coast, however, the filling in of every available space became something distinctively *Peranakan*; this was a move away from the typical Chinese aesthetics, which often included empty or “negative” space to offset the main motif, a principle embodied in traditional Chinese paintings. This *Peranakan* feature was described by Edmond Chin as “*horror vacui*” or “fear of emptiness”

(Chin, 1991, p. 29). The origin of this aesthetic is not very clear, although in the batik context it could have been derived from the batiks made in the Principalities. This feature consistently appears in other *Peranakan* artefacts such as silverwork, woodwork and ceramics.

The *Peranakan* batik workshops in Pekalongan were relatively “new”, having started in the early twentieth century to produce batik with designs that were intended to sell well. The older *Batik Peranakan* centres such as Cirebon, Lasem, Semarang and Surabaya seem to have gradually reduced their production in the early twentieth century. As a result, the typical Chinese-inspired motifs, such as the mythical *kilin* and the phoenix, became noticeably less common in *Peranakan* batiks, even though they did not totally disappear. Replacing them was the *Batik Nyonya* made in Pekalongan, with its *buketan* motifs that were usually accompanied by naturalistic butterflies and birds such as swallows and storks.

Many batik scholars notice the significant difference between the batiks produced by the *Peranakan* in the late nineteenth century and those in the early twentieth century. Many attempts have been made to investigate the reasons for this, and Iwan Tirta (2006, pp. 13–14) offers this explanation:

Was it because of the equal status accorded the “Asian Foreigners” with the Europeans by colonial law in 1910? It is true that of these “Asian Foreigners” the Chinese began to discard many vestiges of their original culture and adopt a more European approach to life, and this is definitely reflected in the art of batik. Prior to that year, much of the batik produced by Chinese-owned workshops had included almost the entire lexicon of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist symbols...

According to Suryadinata (1981, p. 11), “In 1910, the Dutch Nationality Law (*Wet op het Nederlandsch Onderdaanschap*) was issued, under which the *Peranakan* Chinese were regarded as Dutch subjects”.⁶ Heringa (1996, p. 55) also asserts, “Both men and women belonging to the leading classes among the *Peranakan* Chinese adopted European dress for certain public occasions, especially after 1920, when they had been *gelijkgesteld*, or declared equal to the Dutch before the law”.⁷ Heringa continues, “Soon the *buketan* style was adopted by *Peranakan* Chinese in an effort to express their position as legally equal to the Dutch” (1996, p. 66). These writers suggest that when the *Peranakan* were given equal rights to the Dutch coloniser, the process of mimicking the coloniser was set in motion. In other words, the *Peranakan* as equals to the Dutch mimicked the European dress code to express their “new” identity, as they were “legally” allowed to wear what the coloniser was wearing, including the Europeanised *buketan* batik sarongs, the lace *kebaya*, and beaded or embroidered shoes that began to imitate the shape of the mules that had been worn by Eurasian women in the Indies since at least the eighteenth century.

Prior to this, an 1872 statute compelled all people living in the Dutch East Indies to wear their own ethnic dress when appearing in public (Knight-Achjadi et al., 2006, p. 29). In a way, the 1872 statute served as a way of countering the desire of the colonised to mimic the coloniser by compelling all inhabitants in the Indies to wear their own ethnic dress in “public”. In postcolonial studies “mimicry” is considered to be unsettling imitation, where colonised societies imitate the language, dress, politics or cultural attitude of their colonisers. Bhabha (1994, p. 122) suggests that colonial mimicry is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite”. Hence, it is an unwelcome aspect of colonial discourse for the coloniser, as “mimicry is never far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 139).

This code was not strictly observed, however, as we know from numerous European visitors that, from at least the nineteenth century, women with European status were wearing the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* in public spaces.⁸ As such, “equal status” can only have had an indirect effect, since the Dutch law did not restrict the imitation of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, which was “supposed” to be worn by women with European status in private.⁹ Either the codes were poorly understood or the *gelijkgesteld* may have made it socially acceptable for the *Peranakan* women to wear them.

Colour Scheme

The original natural dyes of North Coast batik consisted of gradations of indigo blue in combination with shades of bright brownish *mengkudu* red. On the North Coast, batiks dyed in blue, red or a combination of both on a white background are known as *batik kelengan*, *batik bang-bangan* and *batik bang-biru* respectively. These ranges of colours sometimes serve as an indication of the wearer’s age. *Batik bang-bangan* was meant for young girls; *bang-biru* for women with children; and *batik kelengan* and *irengan* for older women. This limited range of colours expanded when the vivid colours of chemical dyes became available in Java, and North Coast batik makers, especially the *Peranakan*, adopted chemical dyes from around 1890.

The cosmopolitan North Coast batik makers often chose colours for their batiks as an expression of their cultural affiliations. There are certain colour schemes that were favoured by the *Peranakan*, and these formed another aspect of the Chinese aesthetic in *Batik Peranakan*. One good example is the highly symbolic red colour, associated with celebrations and prosperity, which made its way strongly into *Batik Peranakan*.

The *mengkudu* red was popular on the North Coast, especially in Lasem, which was at one time famed for the quality of the red colour it produced on batik cloths – a shade of red known as *abanggetikpitik* or chicken blood red (Ishwara et al., 2012, p. 137). In fact, each town or region had its own recipes for colours, and differences arose due to slightly different recipes and differences in the local water and soil. According to Heringa (1996), the high salinity and iron content of the water and soil in the eastern part of the *Pasisir*, where Lasem is located, resulted in the bright red hue of *mengkudu* dye. It seems that this red colour was produced nowhere as beautifully as in Lasem, a town whose batik making was almost exclusively in *Peranakan* hands. Batik made in Lasem as well as batik that was made elsewhere but had similar characteristics came to be known as *Batik Laseman*. These characteristics include auspicious Chinese motifs in Lasem red on a white or cream background. Many of these batiks were made into ceremonial cloths such as baby-carriers or bridal bedspreads, as the auspicious motifs went hand in hand with the celebratory red colour.

The recipe for the characteristic red colour was well guarded by the *Peranakan* batik makers in Lasem. This possibly constitutes one of the contributing factors to the production of batik known as *Batik Tiga Negeri*, or three-region batik, which seems to have been the initiative of the *Peranakan*, who had interregional connections reaching into Central Java. The production of this type of batik was probably motivated by the traders’ desire to save on costs, but it resulted in a type of batik that combined the top craftsmanship and regional characteristics of three batik centres. The main drawing was applied and dyed in *mengkudu*

red in Semarang, Pekalongan or (most commonly) Lasem; this was passed on to another North Coast town, such as Kudus or Demak, where part of the drawing was applied and dyed indigo blue. Finally, another part of the pattern was applied and dyed *soga* brown in one of the batik centres in central Java such as Surakarta. This process marked the beginning of the reciprocal influences between the batik centres of the North Coast and Central Java. Having said that, many batik workshops could actually make these three colours, and could therefore produce batiks that looked like *Batik Tiga Negeri* in the one workshop. In fact, *mengkudu* red had always been popular in all kinds of North Coast batik, but the “chicken blood red” probably took the red colour to new heights.

During my field research, I visited one of the workshops that used to produce “chicken blood red” organically in Lasem. It is owned by Sigit Watjaksono (Njo Tjoen Hian), who is now in his eighties. According to Sigit, his ancestors came to Java in around the 1740s and his batik workshop has been operating for four generations. According to him, earlier generations used to produce red colours organically, but chemical dye is now used to produce them. The *Peranakan* grew up in an environment that saw red colours as festive or prosperous, and thus found batik dyed red with typical Chinese symbolic motifs aesthetically pleasing. The importance of red as a celebratory colour for the *Peranakan* can be seen in this *pantun* or poem in *Baba Malay* patois:

*Kain sekayu sudah di-beli
Kain merah di buat chai ki
Taon baru se-taon se-kali
Mari-lah kita hiborkan hati*

English translation:

A yard stick of cloth was bought,
Red colour cloths for doorframes,
[Chinese] New Year once a year,
Let us all celebrate heartedly.

Apart from refining the red colour, the *Peranakan* also made one of the biggest contributions to batik making with their ready acceptance of the synthetic colours that became available in the late nineteenth century. Initially, in a more conservative approach probably designed to secure the existing client base, synthetic dyes tended to imitate the natural dyes. However, in the early 1930s or so, a wider range of unconventional pastel shades came to be used more prominently, such as softer and lighter blues, turquoise, pinks, greens, yellows, purples, pinks, oranges and so on. Thereafter, the batiks made in the *Peranakan* workshops embraced multi-coloured designs, which became an important characteristic of *Batik Nyonya* made by the *Peranakan* from the twentieth century onwards. The softer and brighter pastel palette is an obvious difference from the deeper organic shades of blue, red and brown that continued to be used in the Eurasian workshops. The origin of these pastel colours is hard to determine; Chin hypothesised that this colour palette was “ultimately derived from the sophisticated colour combinations favoured by the Chinese during the Qing dynasty” (Chin, 1991, p. 30). It is likely that this pastel colour palette was influenced by the Manchus, who were the nomadic tribe that ruled over China in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), as this colour scheme can be observed in the formal and semiformal dresses of the Manchu court, particularly those of the women. It is unlikely, however, that this is a direct influence from the Manchus – perhaps the *Peranakan* batik makers were inspired

by the pastel-coloured ceramics imported from Qing China that became so popular that they were eventually made for the *Peranakan* market.

For a clearer picture of the *Peranakan* preference for bright pastel colours, it is worth noting another colour scheme, the sombre colours of *batik kelengan* – blue-black on white. These dark-coloured batiks were given new meanings by the *Peranakan*. Unlike red and other bright pastel colours, these sombre colours were not used for their aesthetic appeal but were worn during mourning periods after close family members had passed away. The ancient colour of bereavement in China is white, but over the years black and other dark colours have also come to be used.¹⁰ Although we are not certain of when these dark colours in batiks began to be associated with mourning, we know that Rouffaer and Juynboll observed that in 1914 *batik kelengan* was used by the Chinese during mourning periods (Lee, 2014, p. 268). Cheah Cheang Lim (1875–1948), an influential businessman from Perak (part of the Federated Malay States) who was born to a Penang Straits Chinese family, considered bereavement an important expression of filial piety, and re-introduced the ancient Confucian tradition of mourning armlets in the aftermath of the 1911 Chinese revolution. Cheah colour-coded these armlets according to the relation and gender of the deceased – black armlets with white stripes for parents, and blue stripes for siblings and other relatives (*Peking Post*, reproduced in *The Singapore Free Press*, 1916; quoted in Khoo, 2015, p. 83, p. 131). Perhaps that was when blue was established as one of the mourning colours. Hence, *batik kelengan* that were commonly worn by older women in Java were used for mourning purposes by the *Peranakan*.

Applications

Another aspect of aesthetics in *Batik Peranakan* was the use of batiks in applications other than the daily garments commonly used by the Javanese. The *Peranakan* batik makers introduced new sizes and new applications for batiks, such as bedspreads, wall hangings, *tokwi* or altar cloths, as well as *muili*, cloths hung in doorways or on bridal beds. These types of batik were mostly meant to be used for celebrations or ritual purposes so their designs frequently drew on auspicious Chinese motifs, and some are still being produced and used today. These ceremonial batik cloths were possibly made as cheaper alternatives to the embroidered brocades. These batiks were produced for their specific functionality and would have had no appeal to the local Javanese even though they were made of batik cloth. However, as both batik cloths and Chinese ceremonial cloths were part of the *Peranakan* lifestyle, a combination of the two was natural and would have evoked an aesthetic response to those ceremonial cloths made in batik. This confirms Morphy's claim that "Aesthetics imply the existence of a scale of judgment or at least a standard that has to be achieved or properties that have to be created in an object if it is to be successful" (2006, p. 303). These Chinese applications of batik cloths successfully appealed to the *Peranakan* as they had achieved a certain standard that the *Peranakan* were able to appreciate because of their background.

The use of batiks in indigenous applications such as *selendang* (shoulder cloths), *gendongan* (baby-carriers), *kain panjang* and sarongs reflects Javanese practices that became popular among the Javanese *Peranakan*. This shows the acculturation process that had taken place in the *Peranakan* way of life that made using *gendongan*, and wearing *kain panjang*, sarongs and *selendang* seem natural to the *Peranakan*. As such, these indigenous applications also possess "aesthetic properties". We have thus far examined three aspects of aesthetics in

Batik Peranakan – motifs, colours and applications. In my argument, these three aspects, or “aesthetic properties”, need to be “right” in order for the batiks to be aesthetically appealing to the *Peranakan*. However, what constitutes “right” can differ from place to place, and we now proceed to examine how these aspects of aesthetics differed in the Straits.

Imported Batik Sarongs in the Straits Settlements

In this section we examine the different aesthetic values in the batiks worn by the *Nyonyas* that were mainly produced on the North Coast of Java. As Chin noted, “the *Peranakan* did not buy indiscriminately but with particular ideals in mind” (1991, p. 29); hence, aesthetic judgment began with the selection process. These aesthetic values should be related directly to what was chosen by the *Nyonya*. By that, I mean that the batik sarongs that were bought by the *Nyonyas* can be considered to have been aesthetically appealing to them. However, there is far less scholarship devoted to the batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits than those in Java, and we lack statistics on sales or any significant catalogues of the batik sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas*. Although the origin of the batik sarongs that are in public collections is usually recorded, unfortunately the users are not always identified. This makes it incredibly difficult to prove which types of sarongs possessed aesthetic value to the *Nyonyas*. Fortunately, I have managed to examine a significant number of batik sarongs in private collections in which the users could usually be identified. We also have an abundance of photographs from published and unpublished sources that show *Nyonyas* in batik sarongs. Unfortunately, though, we cannot determine the colour schemes of the *Batik Nyonya* from the black and white photographs. Given this shortcoming, we need to rely on the batik sarongs that survive as well as a number of portrait paintings in order to determine the colours that were used.

Due to the lack of critical studies on the batik sarongs used by the *Nyonyas*, there is a tendency in current literature to assume that the *Nyonyas* in the Straits wore the same batik sarongs as the *Nyonyas* in Java. Khoo, for example, writes: “The characteristic hip-hugging skirt which the *nyonya* wears with her *Kebaya* is called *batik cina* (Chinese batik)” (1996, p. 210). “*Batik Cina*” seems to be too broad a term to use here as it implies that the entire range of *Batik Cina* was favoured by the *Nyonyas*. Such statements seem to assume that the batik sarongs preferred by the *Nyonyas* in the Straits and the *Peranakan* in Java were identical. Although this does seem to be a logical generalisation, as both groups shared similar backgrounds, differences in aesthetic values could be expected to occur across the then Dutch East Indies and the British Straits Settlements. And that would certainly lead to different criteria in the respective “aesthetic properties”.

During my field research, I examined a significant batik collection owned by Peter Wee, the President of the *Peranakan* Association in Singapore. Wee is a prominent collector as well as an occasional consultant for the *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore. Some of the batik sarongs and *kebayas* from his collection were featured in *Timeless Peranakan Legacy: A Pictorial Celebration* (2004). All of the batik sarongs in this book are claimed to be pieces from Pekalongan, either entirely hand painted (*Batik Tulis*) or block-printed (*Batik Cap*). From my observation of these pieces, the motifs are mostly floral, *buketan* in particular, accompanied by small creatures such as birds and butterflies largely in synthetic pastel colours.

Khoo, a *Nyonya* from Penang, features some of her own private collection of batik sarongs in her book. Her collection is similar to that described above. The *Peranakan* Mansion in

Penang, a museum of Straits Chinese Cultural Heritage, also houses a similar range. Some Penang *Babas* and *Nyonyas*, as well as the Penang State Chinese Association, generously invited me to examine their private batik collections. In addition to the sarongs of Singapore and Penang's private collectors, I also examined some batik sarong collections from my *Nyonya* relatives and others in Melaka. All of these collections consistently reveal the typical range of motifs described above.

What I did not see much during my field research on the *Nyonyas'* batik sarongs were the auspicious Chinese motifs such as dragons, phoenix, *kilin* (lion dog), bat and so on that were produced and used by the Javanese *Peranakan*. It is, of course, possible that the *Peranakan* batik with such auspicious Chinese designs that were popular among the Javanese *Peranakan* simply did not survive in the Straits or have not been studied or featured much in published collections. However, it would be very surprising if the *Batik Peranakan* featuring auspicious Chinese motifs that were used by the *Nyonyas* were not included in the batik sarong collections in the former Straits if they were common there.

While the batik collections I examined were impossible to date precisely, they do appear to be from the early to mid-twentieth century. Indeed, that was the time when *Batik Nyonya* with *buketan* designs was in vogue. It therefore seems logical to conclude that batik sarongs with floral motifs – *buketan* with bright pastel colours – were popular among the *Nyonyas* from the early twentieth century onwards. This material examination matches the visual evidence derived from the portraiture photographs and paintings from the early twentieth century in which the *Nyonyas* were mostly seen in batik sarongs with floral motifs.

The portraiture photographs and paintings taken in the mid to late nineteenth century, however, show that the sarongs worn by the *Nyonyas* were more frequently made of a type of hand-woven plaid, known as *kain cheleh*, or its variant *kain chaylay*; as well as geometric patterned batik with the *kepala tumpal*.¹¹ The older *Nyonyas* seemed to retain this preference, even in the early twentieth century when the younger *Nyonyas* had switched to the *Batik Nyonya* with floral patterns. It is only occasionally that we see photographs of *Nyonyas* wearing batik sarongs with Chinese-inspired motifs with *kepala tumpal* or the *kepala gigi balang* designs (the *tumpal* design in which large and small triangles appear alternately and the space between the rows of triangles is filled with a row of diamonds) that were probably developed by the Eurasian batik makers but were copied and remained a feature of *Batik Peranakan* for a longer period.

These examinations definitely show the *Nyonyas* required different criteria in their batik sarongs from the Javanese *Peranakan*. Some scholars have referred to such differences in passing, for example Robyn Maxwell:

The Chinese communities who have become a permanent feature of Southeast Asian society have taken diverging paths, and the costume of the Baba Chinese of Malacca and Singapore, for example, has become closer to that of Islamic courts than to the *kain kebaya* cultures of the Peranakan community of north-coast Java (Maxwell, 2003, p. 263).

Maxwell does not elaborate further on the “Islamic court”, but she probably meant that the non-figural motifs were preferred by the “Baba Chinese”.

In sum, the *Nyonyas* certainly favoured a smaller range of motifs in their batik sarongs than was readily available in the *Batik Peranakan*. The colour schemes the *Nyonyas* favoured, on the other hand, appear to have been similar to those used by the Javanese *Peranakan*, with mostly synthetic pastel colours and the celebratory red colour. Although they were not as popular, there was also some continued use of the darker organic dyes or their synthetic

equivalents, such as indigo blue, *mengkudu* red and *soga* brown, in the batik sarongs used by the *Nyonyas*, especially among the elderly of the time. Another colour scheme, the *batik kelengan*, was similarly used by the *Nyonyas* for mourning purposes and came to be known as *batik tuaha* in *Baba Malay*. The Straits Chinese obviously placed significant emphasis on mourning colours, as did the Javanese *Peranakan*.

In the Straits, there were hardly any ceremonial cloths such as *tokwi* or *muili* or *gendongan* made in batik that were used by the Straits Chinese. In fact, some ceremonial cloths such as *tokwi* were made in embroidered brocade either imported from China or made locally in the Straits. The *Peranakan* Museum in Singapore held an exhibition on *batik tokwi* in 2014, entitled “Auspicious Designs: Batik for Peranakan Altars”. However, few of the *Batik Tokwi* featured were identified as having been used locally. Even if these *Batik Tokwi* were made as a cheaper option, they were also absent from humble Straits Chinese households. Garments other than sarongs, handkerchiefs (sometimes called *selendang* by the *Nyonyas*, probably because they were similarly draped over the shoulders) are occasionally seen in photographs, either draped over the shoulders or held in the hands of the *Nyonyas*. *Kain panjang* and proper *selendang* are rarely spotted in the old photographs or collections or mentioned in written texts as being used significantly by the *Nyonyas*. Despite the fact that batik *selendang* were in demand and were imported to the Straits Settlements in bulk, it is unlikely that they were intended for the *Nyonyas*.

Conclusion

The Javanese way of decorating textiles by using batik techniques was popular among the *Peranakan* in the Malay Archipelago, largely because the range of batiks produced by the Javanese *Peranakan* incorporated Chinese aesthetics. With the three right “aesthetic properties” – i.e. the right motifs, colour schemes and applications – the *Batik Peranakan* appealed to the *Peranakan* in general. However, what constituted “right” for the Javanese *Peranakan* and the *Nyonyas* in the Straits was not quite the same. This paper shows that the complex variations in the aesthetic values of the batik sarongs need to be explored in the context of the particular societies and specific local cultural conditions.

Javanese have generally been firm believers in the mystical qualities of certain textiles. Textiles have been associated with traditions, festivals, religious ceremonies and mythical qualities. One of the reasons the Javanese *Peranakan* continued the deeply rooted symbolism in their adopted batik culture must have been because they lived on land where people firmly believed in the importance and symbolic significance of textile designs. When these Chinese motifs were overshadowed by European floral motifs in the early twentieth century, the Javanese *Peranakan* continued to use auspicious Chinese motifs in the ceremonial cloths that were made in batik. As Duggan (2001) rightly points out, “The *Peranakan* and the Javanese share the need to surround themselves with protective and good luck messages in their everyday life. Those messages are to be found on the batiks they wore”. Javanese *Peranakan* produced and used batiks with symbols deeply rooted in Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism; although the symbols may have lost their religious and philosophical connotations, they became an aspect of the “aesthetic properties” of the batik, in which an understanding of the symbolic meanings was irrelevant.

Moving towards the twentieth century, the European *buketan* designs were dominant in *Batik Nyonya*. It is clear that the *Peranakan* in Java mimicked the colonisers’ way of

dressing, as suggested by many writers and evidenced by the popularity of not just the Europeanised *Batik Nyonya* but also the lace *kebaya* and mule shoes that became popular at the time when the *Peranakan* were given “equal” status with the Europeans under Dutch law. Photographs show the popularity of this Europeanised batik among Javanese *Peranakan* women, regardless of age, by the 1920s. This way of dressing was identical to the way Eurasian and European women dressed before they opted for other Western clothing that was equally well suited to the tropical climate.

Nevertheless, we should also not ignore the concept of fashion that was beginning to emerge in the Archipelago. According to Veldhuisen, one of the factors that led to the great success of the batik industry during that period was that “the idea of fashion, which in the West had encouraged consumers to cast off wearable items, was introduced into Java by European women at the end of the nineteenth century” (Veldhuisen, 1996, p. 43).¹² Veldhuisen may have a point, but ironically the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was not actually considered “fashionable” by European women in Java at the time it became part of the *Peranakan* wardrobe. The popularity of the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* was in decline among European and Eurasian women and it had disappeared from their wardrobes by the first quarter of the twentieth century. Therefore, the factor that motivated the *Peranakan* to adopt the Europeanised sarong *kebaya* worn with mules is unlikely to have been “fashion”, as the style had in fact gone “out of fashion” among European and Eurasian women. Certainly, the concept of “fashion” cannot account for the adoption of mules by the *Peranakan*, as they had been worn by Eurasian women in Java for centuries! The fact that all of these dress items became popular at the same time must have been due to the Dutch law that had indirectly suppressed the *Peranakan* women’s desire to mimic the Europeans until that time.

It is evident that batik was never accorded the same status in the Straits that it had in Java. Batik was relatively new to the Peninsula and played no significant role in official court attire in Malaya. There is also little evidence to suggest that the Malay people in the Straits believed in any significant way that textile designs incorporated mystical qualities. The Chinese practice of displaying their symbolic beliefs was not significantly continued by the *Nyonyas* in their selection of batik sarongs. Before the *Batik Nyonya* came into vogue, materials and visual evidence shows the *Nyonyas* using woven checked and geometric batik sarongs. The *Nyonyas* were obviously influenced by the Islamic context of Peninsular Malaya, where textiles in general and batik in particular had never played an important role in displaying mystical or spiritual meaning; this may be one reason the *Nyonyas* favoured geometric batiks and woven checks for their sarongs in the period before the twentieth century.

In the early twentieth century, the *Nyonyas* favoured the Europeanised *Batik Nyonya* with *buketan* motifs and the vivid pastel colour schemes like the Javanese *Peranakan*. The sombre colour schemes for mourning were also adopted by the *Nyonyas*. In contrast to the Javanese context, “fashion” may well be a valid explanation for the Europeanised *Batik Nyonya* that also became popular in the Straits in this period. The idea of mimicking is not relevant in the Straits, as the British and European women who lived there did not adopt the local dress style and there was no British law prohibiting the imitation of European women’s style of dress. The *buketan* batik sarongs from Java were a fashionable accompaniment to the Europeanised lace *kebaya* and mules, and this trend was taken up mostly by the then-young *Nyonyas*. According to fashion theorist Barnard, “context must be used to determine whether a garment is being referred to as fashion” (1996, p. 17), and that is exactly why this trend functioned as fashion in the context of the Straits. The fact that this

dress style was favoured by the younger *Nyonyas* in the Straits shows another characteristic of fashion: fashion does not affect everyone, only certain people have an interest in fashion and can afford to be “fashionable”. Obviously, the affluent young *Nyonyas* chose batik sarongs on fashion grounds.

The *Nyonyas*’ appreciation of batik cloths was effectively limited to sarongs. The use of batik in applications such as Chinese ceremonial cloths like the *tokwi* or *muili* with auspicious Chinese-inspired motifs is rarely seen in the Straits. The production of ceremonial cloths in batik by the Javanese *Peranakan* could have been due to economic factors, but it also shows that they were more acculturated to the local customs. The indigenous batik applications such as *selendang*, *gendongan* and *kain panjang* possessed “aesthetic properties” for the Javanese *Peranakan* but not for the *Nyonyas* in the Straits. This is because wearing *gendongan*, *selendang* and *kain panjang* did not come naturally to the *Nyonyas*, even though the motifs, colour schemes and sometimes the materials, such as silk (many *selendang* were produced in silk and often referred to by the Chinese name, *lokcan*), would have appealed to them. Hence, the complex variations in the aesthetic values of batik need to be explored in the specific cultural contexts that are likely to produce particular aesthetic effects and evoke feelings of pleasure. This is evident in the smaller range of batiks used in the Straits compared to the range produced and used by the Javanese *Peranakan*.

In the Europeanised sarong *kebaya*, the *Nyonyas* appeared as the fashionable Straits Chinese women. It is in the context of the early twentieth century that young *Nyonyas* began to receive an education (mostly English) and were no longer confined to their homes as much; they could thus relate to themselves as modern “Straits Chinese” women, the “British subjects” instead of just “*Nyonyas*”. In other words, their modernity invoked by the English education was negotiated through “fashion”. This manifestation of modernity was in stark contrast to the image of the *Nyonyas* prior to the twentieth century who were clad in their woven checked or geometric batik sarongs with the *baju panjang* or long blouse. During the nineteenth century, the *Nyonyas* were confined to their homes and received no education, which made it difficult for them to relate to their colonial masters. Nevertheless, during that period the *Nyonyas* were grounded on the local soil and their dress essentially showcased their local origins.¹³

Notes

1. See McCabe Elliot (2004); Maxwell (2003); Veldhuisen (1993; 1996).
2. Carolina Joshephina von Franquemont is the first known Indo-European batik maker, and began manufacturing batik in 1840 (Veldhuisen, 1993, p. 38, p. 39).
3. In the palaces of Surakarta and Yogyakarta the eight renowned *larangan*, or forbidden, motifs were designed and produced exclusively for court use, following decrees announced in 1769, 1789 and 1790. The generally accepted eight *larangan* motifs in use on *kraton* batik were *Kawung*, *Parang*, *Parangrusak*, *Cemukiran*, *Sawat*, *Udan Liris*, *Semen* and *Alasalasan* (McCabe Elliott, 2004, p. 68). Each design contains a large variety of visual elements drawn from nature, religion, local myths and other cultural sources. Some incorporate Hindu and Buddhist religious references; under Islamic court rules they also inherited the tradition of limiting anthropomorphic representation.
4. The *chintz* technique implies that one side of the white cotton is painted with mordants, which, after soaking in a chemical bath, produces wonderful colour-fast colours. See Veldhuisen (1993, p. 19, p. 20).

5. Although this triangle design has been widely referred to as *tumpal* in Java, it is most likely a recent term introduced by the Europeans. For the etymology of *tumpal*, see Gavin (2010, pp. 226–239).
6. According to the Dutch Nationality Law, any person born of parents residing in the Netherlands or its colonies was a Dutch subject. The law did not provide people with the right to repudiate one nationality or the other, and it was also impossible for an alien (for instance, a foreign-born Chinese) to be naturalised as a Dutch subject (*onderdaan*) unless he was first assimilated and became a Nederlander (Suryadinata, 1981, p. 27).
7. Lukman et al. (2013) argue that the Europeanised lace *kebaya* that was adopted by the *Peranakan* women when they achieved “equality” was a product of the “phenomenon of mimicry” in the Dutch East Indies.
8. This is particularly well documented during the 5-year British interregnum from 1811 to 1816.
9. The eighteenth-century code by Jacob Mossel entitled “Measures for Curbing Pomp and Circumstance”, issued in 1754, is an immense piece of legislation that paid particular attention to dress. The last section of Mossel’s code permitted VOC employees and their wives in outlying offices to dress “according to native customs”, but when any of these officials came to Batavia they and their spouses had to observe the code (Taylor, 1983, pp. 66–68).
10. The mourning period usually lasted for three years, and mourning dress was divided into three periods: for the first year only black and white would be worn, followed by shades of blue and green in the second and third years respectively (Tahir, 2008, p. 150).
11. “In the Straits Settlements, this type of cloth was known as *kain cheleh*, after *chelas*, the old trade term for a range of checked cloths and the supply included handloom versions from Makassar (south Sulawesi), Sumatra, South India, Burma and elsewhere, as well as machine-made versions from Europe” (Lee, 2014, p. 128).
12. The term “fashion” has a specific meaning here, and denotes a system of dress that is arguably found in modern Western societies. Entwistle summarises: “Fashion is understood as a historically and geographically specific system for the production and organisation of dress, emerging over the course of the 14th century in the European courts, particularly the French court of Louis XIV, and developing with the rise of mercantile capitalism” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 44).
13. Largely because the Manchu government of China deemed female emigration illegal throughout the greater part of the Qing dynasty, female Chinese immigration to the former Straits Settlements did not occur until around the middle of the nineteenth century, and only took place on a large scale in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the first generation of *Nyonyas* could not possibly have been Chinese women before the mid-nineteenth century. Rudolph lists seven possible backgrounds for these early *Nyonyas*: they could be (1) Malay women prior to Islam’s dominance; (2) nominal Muslim; (3) Malay slaves; (4) women, occasionally slaves (Baba Malay: *teman* or *Cha bo kan* for female slaves) from different parts of present-day Indonesia including Batak, Bugis, Balinese, Siamese and Orang Asli; (5) daughters of Melaka Chitties; (6) Indonesian *Peranakan* Chinese; (7) over the course of time, the offspring of male Chinese settlers and non-Chinese women (Rudolph, 1998, pp. 83–85).

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