

Peranakan 'chic'

The blend of Chinese and indigenous cultures from colonial days is thriving in Indonesia

Yenni Kwok in Jakarta



Photo: Dapur Babah

A retro trend is definitely “in” among Indonesian urban youths these days. It isn't the swinging 1960s or the trashy 1980s style but something older. The taste of Peranakan Chinese – the mix of Chinese and indigenous cultures that thrived during the Dutch colonial era – is making a comeback.

In recent years, cafes, restaurants and hotels with the nostalgia chic have been booming in Jakarta and other cities and towns.

Dapur Babah, or Babah's Kitchen, opened last year and specialises in the cuisines of Javanese-Chinese Peranakan families. Located in refurbished colonial shophouses on Jakarta's Jalan Veteran, the restaurant is elegantly furnished with the antique collection of its owner Anhar Setjadibrata.

These pieces include reclaimed teak furniture, signboard advertising of Hap Liong Tailor (once the tenant of the shop houses), photos of sugar baron Oei Tiong Ham and his favourite concubine, as well as stone statues of Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist gods.

A couple kilometres away, the two-storey Kedai Tiga Nyonya, serves a Peranakan menu amid the nostalgic decor of the early 20th century Batavia, as Jakarta was known during the Dutch period.

Bakoel Koffie cafe franchise has become a favourite hang-out in Jakarta. Siblings Hendra and Syenny Widjaja – Peranakan Chinese and descendants of the legendary Warung Tinggi coffee manufacturer – instil their heritage into the cafés.

The outlet is often housed in an old colonial building and furnished with old photographs of Tek Soen Hoo (the original name of Warung Tinggi) and vintage-style colonial furniture.

The term Peranakan generally refers to the Chinese of mixed ancestry. Prior to the mass migration in the early 20th century, Chinese descendants had resided in Southeast Asia, including in the Indonesian archipelago, for some centuries. The early migrants were predominantly men, and many of them intermarried with the local women. The Peranakan men are called babah, while the women are nyonya, probably the Malay corruption of the Portuguese word *doña*. In recent decades, however, Peranakan has also come to include the descendants of later migrants who have become established.

“All this time, we tend to hear more about the Peranakan culture in Singapore and Malaysia, but in fact, it also exists in Indonesia,” said Mr Anhar, whose boutique Tugu Hotel in Malang also features a Babah room and an old Chinese coffee shop.

Indeed, while the neighbouring countries have long taken pride in this amalgam culture – also known as the Straits Chinese – and even used it as a tourist attraction, Indonesia neglected it largely due to the repression of Chinese culture during former president Suharto's authoritarian rule.

The anti-Chinese riots in 1998, the horrific effects of which shocked the whole nation, gave the impetus to the Chinese to assert their identity and historical contribution, while the indigenous Indonesians became more interested in Chinese culture.

It is now fashionable for young brides to wear nyonya or encim kebaya, a translucent, figure-hugging embroidered blouse worn with a colourful batik sarong. *Ca Bau Kan*, a lavish period film that tells a love story between a Chinese merchant and his Javanese lover, might have also

boosted the revival of Peranakan culture when it was released in 2002.

The variant of Peranakan culture in Indonesia was more diverse than in Singapore or Malaysia, partly because of the vast territory and diversity of local cultures. The Peranakan tradition was also greatly influenced by the colonial powers: first the Portuguese and later the British in the Malay Peninsula and the Dutch in Indonesia.

“Most people used to think that foreign or modern cultures were better,” says Lucienne Anhar who helped her father design Dapur Babah. “This started to change after we made a beautiful, chic and elegant representation of our old tradition.”

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