

Leadership, Values and the Peranakans

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Abstract

In this qualitative paper, the academicians-practitioner researches the leadership qualities, style(s) and ways of the Peranakans, an indeed dwindling community in Singapore. Based on the author's interviews with a small group of Peranakans' professionals, the paper is also boosted and enhanced with the author's cultural background as a Peranakan himself, and his own impressions and perceptions of the Peranakan leadership in Singapore; in brief, the paper is examined in the light as what the interviewees and the author see it.

Keywords: Leadership; Peranakans, Straits Chinese; Babas; Nyonyas; values, Singapore; Wee Kim Wee; Goh Keng Swee; Toh Chin Chye; Tan Tock Seng

Introduction

The idea to write this leadership cum anthropology paper goes back to the year 1998 when he, during his Ph.D. studies, then realized that there were clearly not many Peranakans left. "Peranakan culture has started to disappear in Malaysia and Singapore." (<http://thehistoryofmalacca.blogspot.sg/2013/07/culture-of-peranakan-of-baba-and-nyonya.html>; Chia, 1980). Even in terms of education, Chinese Singaporeans have to opt and learn Mandarin Chinese as second language; Singapore categorizes the Peranakans as ethnically Chinese, so they receive formal instruction in Mandarin Chinese as a second language (in accordance with the "Mother Tongue Policy") instead of Malay. And then again in 2008, a Singaporean television drama series *The Little Nyonya* was aired in Singapore, and was in Mandarin. Of interest, the Chinese community can afford to ease up on the use of dialect(s), but Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (cited in Ong, 2014: 1) in the Speak Mandarin Campaign, highlighted that it would not be practical to do so, and there is a need to 'stick to Mandarin' "to maintain good standards" and to unite the Chinese.

That being the case, the Baba patois ["a Malay patois with Chinese words and phrases of the Hokkien dialect" (Chia, 1980: 9) (Hokkien is a Southern Chinese dialect)] would, it seems, soon be lost and not be remembered; further, without a written language, any culture would slowly die off and eventually disappeared.

Paper's Objectives

It is the key intention, aim and objectives of this paper to examine various cultural features and even common Peranakan proverbs or sayings and apply them to Peranakan leadership qualities, style and ways in Singapore. Note that the Peranakans "are fond of quotations (or sayings)", and most of them are understandably in Baba Malay (Chia, 1980: 50). The study is also based on the author's interviews with a small group of Peranakans' professionals and his cultural background and his impressions as well as perceptions of the Peranakan leadership in Singapore as they and the author see it.

This study is apt after all, the Baba culture right now is being disintegrated, even back in 1980, Chia (1980: viii) then wrote, "I did not marry a Nyonya and my children speak only a little and faulty Baba Malay, the patois first Babas spoke. It is a corrupt form of the Malay language which includes words and phrases of the Hokkien dialect".

Literature Review

What Is Leadership?

Leaders ordinarily influence their people (Low, 2013; Achua and Lussier, 2010; Maxwell, 1993). And they are guided by the values they hold; “values are significant because they subconsciously shape our behavior on a day-to-day basis. People find it hard to go against their values.” (Price and Price, 2013: 59; Low, 2013; 2008). “It’s (also) not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are.” (Roy Disney, cited in Price and Price, 2013: 59).

What is a Value?

A value, an element of a culture, is a core belief (*of a group of people or a community*) and what one (*members*) strongly believe(s) in (Low, 2009; 2002; *italics author’s*). Of significance, a value is comparable to the seed without which one cannot have any fruit; a value leads to ‘signpost’ (author’s word: marker) or guiding feeling, thinking and action or behavior. Values are principles, standards, or qualities one considers worthwhile or desirable (<http://www.providentplan.com/2036/the-importance-of-values/>). To paraphrase the words of Marcus Aurelius (cited in Peale, 1993: 58; the Roman leader who lived from AD 121 – 180), “Our life is what our thoughts make of it” – one can thus say – our leading ways and/or behaviors are what our values make of them.

Who are the Straits-Chinese or the Peranakans?

Peranakan Chinese and Baba-Nyonya are terms used for the descendants of the 15th through 17th-century Chinese immigrants to the Indonesian archipelago and British Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore) (West, 2009: 657). Yeap (1975: 14), however, spoke of “Malacca (or Melaka)... as the nucleus of this unique ethnic group, for the Chinese had arrived as early as 15th century. Branches of the group had spread to Singapore and Penang. They were the offsprings of early Chinese immigrants, mostly Hokkiens who looked upon the Peranakans as the upper class of ‘blue blood’, since they were socially and economically established”. Members of the Peranakan community in Malacca, Malaysia address themselves as the Nyonyas and the Babas (Chia, 1980; Yeap, 1975). Nyonyas is the term for the women and Babas for the men. Peranakan is a Malay word that means “born locally” (The Peranakan Resource Library, 2003), applying particularly to the ethnic Chinese populations of the British Straits Settlements of Malaya and the Dutch-controlled island of Java and other locations, who have adopted Nusantara customs – partially or in full – to be fairly assimilated into the local communities. Many were the elites of Singapore, more loyal to the British or anglophile than to China. Most have lived for generations along the straits of Malacca: Penang, Malacca and Singapore, “The Straits Settlement” as well as Sumatra/ Java; and most have a lineage where intermarriages with the local Malays have occurred.

In the early days, most of the Peranakan men were seafarers who traded between the ports of southern China and those of Southeast Asia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Babas were involved in opium, nutmeg and liquor cargoes, cultivation of pepper and Gambier (an extract of the *Uncaria* plant native to Indonesia that is used in tanning and dyeing and as an anti-inflammatory Chinese medicinal herb), tin mining, commodity trading and property development. In the early 1900s, many Peranakans invested in rubber plantations. Most became very rich and spared no expense in housing, furnishings, dress, schooling, ceremonies, recreation and houses of worship (primarily Buddhist). (Hilary, 2012).

Western Education, Peranakan Upbringing, Their Leaders, and Their Leadership Qualities, Style(s) and Ways

True, there might and may be lazy, lacking ambitions or irresponsible Peranakans around, but upholding certain values, the Babas are quintessentially taught to be, among other things, hard-working; and they should not take the credit or belittle the work of others. Chia (1980: 52) wrote that “the Babas do not believe in heavy bones” and they ‘don’t eat the drops of someone’s sweat!’ or ‘jangan makan titik perloh orang’ a Baba may admonish you. Shame on you for exploiting the labour of others!”

Additionally, brought up in a “fine or polite” (“halus”; Chia, 1980: 23) cultural setting and through child-rearing practices, the Peranakans are taught to uphold the value of high integrity (“lien” as in the Confucian teachings) and to avoid being of “loose conduct” or “getek” (Chia, 1980: 47).

The late Dr. Toh Chin Chye (a Peranakan and Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, 5 June 1965 – 2 August 1968), for example, insisted that his grandchildren “should be sincere, and above all, it is important to be upright in our dealings with others” (Channel News Asia, 2012).

The Peranakans prefer to be “berat mulut” or heavy mouth instead of indulging in gossiping and spreading rumors (Chia, 1980). They must simply not have leaky mouths or “mulot bocho”, from which will flow secrets (Chia, 1980: 52). Each person – any Baba or Nyonya – must also not “buat sial” or “buat suay” (bring or do ill-luck; “suay”: bad luck in Hokkien) (Chia, 1980: 47), and in essence, they are taught to bring honor to the family.

Interestingly, most non-Peranakan Chinese in nineteenth-century Singapore continued welcoming plans to return to China: statistics from 1881 up to the 1960s show not only a continuous stream of Chinese immigration but also return emigration (Kwok 2000: 200). Where the Peranakans were concerned, however, while the early Chinese may have returned regularly to China to ship more goods, and the sons of the wealthier ones (a minority) to receive education. (Lim, 1917: 876), they always returned to the Straits; in fact, the Peranakans considered Malacca and Singapore their home.

Many Peranakans sent their children to English schools (Yeap, 1975) instead to China and this gave them “the opportunity of learning the language which both the Baba trader and the Baba worker needed if they were to succeed in their respective fields” (Chia, 1980: 71). (As leaders,) most of the Straits Chinese served as compradores of banks, the East India Company and big mercantile companies or Kapitan China where they acted as intermediaries between the Chinese community and the British (Okto, 2014; Hilary, 2012; <http://scoopingsingapore.blogspot.sg/2012/02/peranakan-culture-in-singapore.html>); they were what is today called business development managers (Okto, 2014).

Some prominent Peranakan leaders include Tan Tock Seng (1798 -1850) and Dr. Lim Boon Keng (1869 to 1957) (Singapore Tatler, 1992) who had also a road named after him. Others include: From rags to riches, Tan Tock Seng was well-known for contributing money to build a hospital called Tan Tock Seng Hospital as he saw many poor and sick people; he simply wanted to care for them. After Tan's death in 1850, his son Tan Kim Ching carried on the family support for the hospital which continues as one of Singapore's most prominent medical centers. (<http://singaporepioneers.blogspot.sg/>). Lim Nee Soon (1879 - 1936), Tan Kim Ching (Tan Tock Seng's eldest son) (1829 - 1892), and Seah Eu Chin (1805 - 1883) and Gan Eng Seng (1844–1899) were some of the wealthy businessmen who had earned the respect of the British authorities for their wealth, their command of English and political loyalty.

It is worthy to note that in the 19th and early 20th century Singapore, outspoken and eloquent in the English language, these leaders indeed helped the British to maintain law and order while promoting social harmony (The Peranakan Resource Library, 2003a). Take Tan Kim Seng, a wealthy Straits Chinese merchant and a philanthropist for example, in 1857, donated S\$13,000 towards the improvement of the town's water supply (Singapore Infopedia, 2004) and this donation helped in the building of Singapore's first impounding reservoir (National Parks Board, 2014). And interestingly so, although he had little education, Gan Eng Seng realized the value of education as he prospered and became wealthy; his dream to build a school for the poor (which taught both English and Chinese, probably Cantonese or Hokkien, as Mandarin was not commonly used in Southeast Asia then) was fulfilled in 1885 when he built the Anglo-Chinese Free School for boys in some shop-houses in Telok Ayer Street (not related to the Anglo-Chinese School founded a year later by Bishop W.F. Oldham). In 1923, in Gan's honor, the school was renamed to Gan Eng Seng School (GESS) (GESSOSA, 2006; Song, 1984).

In present-day Singapore, the late Singapore President Wee Kim Wee (1915 - 2005) himself was also a Baba or a Peranakan who in his younger days was a passionate journalist. He was also a diplomat for many years as well as the Chancellor of NTU from 1991-1993 (The Peranakan Association, 2012). Wee Kim Wee was also noted to be humble (The Peranakan Association, 2012). Kind and big-hearted, Wee donated half a million Singapore dollars (in royalties received from his autobiography, *Glimpses and Reflections* and other donations) to eight charities in Singapore. (<http://singaporepioneers.blogspot.sg/>). Other Baba leaders include “Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye and Goh Keng Swee... publicly described as English-educated Babas, (who) worked tirelessly to remove the separate political identity of the Baba... All Chinese children are learning Mandarin at school. Emphasis is being placed on Chinese identity as a merit.” (The Peranakan Association, 2011). Note that Lee Kuan Yew (Minister Mentor), Dr. Goh Keng Swee, Toh Chin Chye and S. Rajaratnam are generally considered as the founding fathers of modern Singapore; they contributed much, helping to lead Singapore during the Republic's formative years.

Research Methodology

The paper relies on a series of interviews – each time approximately 35 to 45 minutes though a few interviews with breaks stretched to an hour plus – with seven (7) professional/ Peranakan experts on old Peranakan culture and ways and interviewing them as well as the personal observations of the author himself as a Peranakan. The key task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say or express (Kvale, 1996). Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a respondent’s experiences and interpretations. Using open or probing questions, the interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic.

In this research, the interview research method was used, and key informant interviewing was applied. The interview period was from 7 Jan 2010 till 16 Sep 2013 – a period of 2 years and 9 months. Since he was working in Brunei, the researcher took advantage of his leave trips back to Singapore to access interviewees to collect data. It was difficult to get interviews since many were busy, but also there were difficulties in locating Peranakan professionals or any present-day Baba-Nyonyas who are au fait with the Peranakan culture, and most if not some were rather busy running their careers or businesses and can afford very little time.

Key informant interviews differ from other forms of interview principally because respondents are chosen because of their idiosyncratic, specialized knowledge instead of being randomly chosen to sample the issue the researchers are investigating, and this has important consequences for design (Jankowicz, 2005: 276 -279).

The technique is believed to be useful since:

- o Defining the basic characteristics of some issue by drawing on the personal experiences and understanding of the people and practices involved. The way in which such concepts as ‘Peranakan culture/ ways in Singapore/ the Malaysian Peninsular’ or ‘Old Peranakan key beliefs or values’, for example, are understood and interpreted in practice(s) in the given environment or setting.
- o Identifying the boundaries, constraints and extremes within which these definitions are seen to apply.
- o Increasing the researcher’s knowledge of the leadership and the Peranakan culture.

This interview method is really useful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from these practitioner-interviewees, being leaders themselves. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); and they were crafted as follows:

1. What do you think is the leadership traits or ways of the Peranakans (Straits-born Chinese)?
2. What are your perceptions? Is there such a style of leadership among the Babas or Peranakans (Straits-born Chinese)?

If so, what is the basis or reasons for such perceptions? If not, why not?

3. Are there any lessons or benefits to be gleaned from here?

Findings

Several interviewees mentioned the family-oriented style of leadership in which the leaders cared for the followers, and it also generated “all-in-the-family feelings” (the words used by, at least, five of the interviewees) among the members. Father leadership is used with much care and concern from the father.

Table 1: The Interviewees and their Comments on the Leadership Ways of the Peranakans

Interviewees' Comments	Number of interviewees/ Percentage (%)
The interviewees perceived that the leadership Style and ways of the Peranakans as:	
Applying Father Leadership	
"It is quite a characteristic that the father-leader Cares and shows concern." "Being paternalistic, Wanting to care for their followers – who are seen As family members"	7 (100)
Practicing Family-oriented Leadership Way	
"The family is very important to us all, to the Peranakans. All of us come together when There are gatherings, praying sessions and Celebrations" "There is "all-in-the-family feelings"; and "leaders showed care and concern for the followers".	7 (100)
Accommodating	
"Being refined is considered as good". "They are gentle people and they would, in most instances, be accommodating and attend to the needs of their people"	7 (100)
Respecting the Old	
"Most Peranakans 'hormat' (respect) the old or seniors and address them well and I guess these all apply to the Peranakan leaders." "They treat the older workers well and ageism is thus non-existent". "There's care for one's parents and filial piety was practiced then."	7 (100)
Being Compassionate	
"They show respect to the old", "often showing care and concern for the people or the poor". "(Often the leaders display) gentle ways of 'never mind, sharing and caring'; and "look at, for example, Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kim Seng and the other Chinese pioneers".	6 (85)
Planning and Having a Prepared Style of Running Things	
"The late Goh Keng Swee who died in 2010... was a good planner"; "English or Western education perhaps made the Peranakan leadership of the planning sort ". "They want(ed) to be systematic... ada kepala ada buntut" (Hokkien: Oo Tow Oo buay) (literally or organized translated as 'having both head and tail').	6 (85)
Living Gentlemanly/ ladylike	
"Leaders must be polite and gentle". "The Peranakans often spoke of good upbringing and children are raised to be refined or 'halus'".	6 (85)

“Their socialization or child-rearing at home enables character-building.”

Being Humble

“The Peranakans are taught or went through socialization to be humble... as leaders, they are not boastful or show-off.” 6 (85)

Being Of Positive Frame of Mind

“They prefer to look forward, letting bygones be bygones”; “the leaders tend to see ‘the positive side of things’” “...(they are) optimistic”. 6 (85)

Being Multi-cultural

“English-educated, the Babas are multicultural, and as leaders, they know English, and have knowledge of Chinese people and the Malay people as well as their language” 5 (71.4)

Being Friendly & Warm and Relationship-centered

Baba leaders are “warm-hearted”, and they are “relationship-based”; “Peranakan leaders dealt with their people, customers and others in a personable way” 5 (71.4)

Analysis and Discussions

Applying Father Leadership

Like the Penang’s Baba counterpart (Yeap, 1975), “the family is very important to us all” “(And) it is quite a characteristic (of Peranakan leadership) that the father-leader cares and shows concern.” “Being paternalistic, wanting to care for their followers (employees) – who are seen as family members especially in family run businesses” (several interviewees’ inputs).

Perhaps this ‘applying father leadership’ by the Peranakans can truly be said to be an Asian, if not in particular, a Singaporean characteristic especially of the political setting. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the father of Modern Singapore has indeed left the running of Singapore to his younger PAP colleagues; and the Confucian influence (as argued by Low, 2006; 2008; 2013), the times and/ or the environment – are now changing or evolving. A benevolent leadership style, caring for one’s employees, is adopted. One interviewee spoke of, “My ah kong (grandpa) was very considerate to his workers, but my granduncle (kukong) was autocratic, but benevolent.”

Practicing Family-oriented Leadership Way

“The family is very important to us all, to the Peranakans. All of us come together when there are gatherings, praying sessions and celebrations”, one interviewee intimated to this researcher. These are further affirmed by Chia’s (1980: 44), “The Chinese’s love of kinship extending to relatives related through marriage is also inherent in the Babas”. “Peranakan leaders are warm, friendly and personable” (several interviewees’ inputs).

And interestingly, several other interviewees also spoke of the family-oriented style of leadership in which the “leaders showed care and concern for the followers” (several interviewees’ inputs), and it also engendered the “all-in-the-family feelings” (the words used by, at least, five of the interviewees) among the employees in the company. Here again, as a young child, the authors often heard another popular saying, that is, “tetak ayer, tetak darah, tak bolih putus”, literally translated as one cannot chop up water or blood; like water, one cannot cut off blood ties. Or more or less, similar to Chia’s (1980: 74) point of the Babas’ “blood is thicker than water”. Chia (1980: 26) also highlighted that “the force behind family love manifested itself clearly in those days as it was common to find married children who lived by themselves paying their parents weekend visits”, and such familial bonds really “bound families, kindred and friends together in those days before the Second World War”.

This reflects the all-in-the-family feeling that exists or pervades among the Peranakans, and that, in a way, can be said as familial leadership as exemplified among the Peranakans when they run family businesses or as depicted by Chinese businesses ala the Towkay corporate culture (Low, 2002; 2009).

Accommodating

One interviewee intimated these to this researcher; he expressed that, “Yes, I have fantastic family friends that are ‘Peranakans.’ My understanding of them is that... (due to) the merging of two worlds: the ‘finesse’ soft, respectful, clean, accommodating... polished culture of the Chinese and the friendliness, co-operative-ness of the kampong style Malays”. [The Malays are considered as gentle, hospitable and cooperative; often, they are very polite or “berbudi” (Abdullah, 1996.)]

“Being refined is considered as good”. “They were or are gentle people and they would, in most instances, be accommodating and attend to the needs of their people (customers, and those they come into contact).” (several interviewees’ inputs). These coincide with what Chia (1980: 83) highlighted, that is, the Babas “generated a prominent identity for themselves, bearing in mind the respect they held and the understanding and appreciation they had for the culture of other races, and even fusing some of those cultures with their own”.

Respecting the Old

This is related to the Confucian concept and practice of filial piety (“xiao”). Yeap (1975: 140) indicated that “ancestral worship... was an important occasion for the family... (they, family members and servants) woke up early, as four o’clock to prepare the food that was to be offered to the departed ancestors. There were no less than ten varieties of dishes...” The Babas might have also merged such values or borrowed them from the Malays. As in most Asian culture, the Malays indeed have this respect for the old (Abdullah, 1996). In the past ancestral worship was practiced by the Peranakans though it “is fast disappearing today and most Babas are now Christians” (Chia, 1980: 22).

“Most Peranakans hormat (respect) the old or seniors and address them well and I guess these all apply to the Peranakan leaders.” “They treat the older workers well and ageism is thus non-existent” (several interviewees’ inputs).

Being Compassionate

Closely connected to respecting the old or seniors, the Peranakan leaders are “kind-hearted” and “often show... care and concern for the people or the poor.” (several interviewees’ inputs). One interviewee emphasized that, “(the roles and contributions of) Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kim Seng and the other Chinese pioneers” of Singapore; they were driven to meet the needs of the society and community they served.

Indeed this researcher reckons that indeed many plus points exist in having such a caring or compassionate leadership. While ego-driven ‘leaders’, on one hand, have a harder time to keep their staff; they may also even refuse to see their staff’s potential and a lot of that potential goes untapped, Menter (2003: 182-183) wrote that “caring leaders”, on the other hand, “respect their staff and are often rewarded with the kind performance and loyalty money can’t buy”.

Interestingly, during the funeral service of the late Dr. Toh Chin Chye, his eldest grandson, then 15-year-old Matthew Ng (cited in Channel News Asia, 2010), spoke of “his grandfather or ‘Kong Kong’ being caring and how his grandfather always reminded him and his siblings to study hard and to uphold certain values”; “family members remember Dr. Toh as caring person”.

There are always the Baba leaders’ “gentle ways of ‘never mind, sharing and caring’”, “relationship (guanxi) is stressed, and sharing and exchanges are valued” (several interviewees’ inputs). These, to the author, can be conceivably analyzed as being attributed to the Peranakans’ key values, strongly influenced by Confucianism (“ren ai”) and Buddhism and/ or even Christianity (Low, 2013; 2008; Ueda, 2013) and combined with the Malays’ gentleness and values (Abdullah, 1996) of strong hospitality, and kindness which indeed emphasize care and compassion for one’s fellow beings.

Planning and Having a Prepared Style of Running Things

A Baba let alone a leader must not have “mulot gatal” or itchy mouth to say or commit something without thinking things over carefully, and regrets later what he has said (Chia 1980: 52).

Several interviewees indicated these: “I respect Peranakan Singaporean leaders – for example, the late Goh Keng Swee who died in 2010. He was the Second Deputy Prime Minister and also Ministers for Education, Defence and Finance... he had a good mind, sharp and systematic... a good economist... he was a good planner.” Goh was a key member of the PAP’s Central Executive Committee, and later became its vice-chairman (The Straits Times, 2010). Goh’s contributions to Singapore were “wide, deep and incisive. Among the most notable were the creation of Jurong as an industrial hub, the formation of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the Economic Development Board (EDB), the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), and the Government Investment Corporation (GIC). All these key pillars of Singapore’s success bear the imprint of Dr. Goh.” (<http://www.nlb.gov.sg/blogs/highbrowsonline/general/dr-goh-keng-swee-passes-1918>

2010/#sthash.oWUfLJMU.dpuf). Dr. Goh indeed built up the foundations of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) which was based on a concept of a combination of conscription and a professional military on the Israeli Army model (Asiaone News, 2010). And Kwa (2010: 6) wrote that Dr. Goh “will (indeed) be remembered more as a backroom strategist, planning Singapore’s long political futures to complement the economic growth he was planning”.

Generally speaking, “with no last-hour rush”, the Peranakans “want(ed) to be systematic... ada kepala ada buntut” (literally translated as ‘having both head and tail’ or in Hokkien, it is ‘Oo tow oo buay’). Perhaps influenced by the British or Western ways, “the Peranakan leadership seemed to be of the planning sort or organized” (several interviewees’ inputs), they disliked or avoided panicking, choosing rather to be prepared, systematic and planned well. Here, often as a child, I heard the common admonitions by my parents that one needed to be better prepared. The author’s mother often urged, “Bikin kerja jangan kalang kabut. Buat kerja mesti ada kepala ada buntut. Selalu bersiap-siap” literally means, one must not do a rush job; be systematic. Always be prepared; plan well. She often urged me not to get caught, unprepared and panicked; “jangan kalang kabut macham ayam hilang anak” (don’t go helter-skelter).

Living Gentlemanly/ Ladylike

A person must not be “jahat” (evil) or cruel. (Chia, 1980). “Their socialization or child-rearing at home enables character-building.” (several interviewees’ inputs). “The Babas’ conversation is always halus (fine or polite).” (Chia, 1980: 23). They spoke, for example, of going to the toilet to pass motion as going to “the bank”. (Chia, 1980).

And in the Baba culture, children are taught to be polite and “greet everyone they met. ...If they did not know who was who, they were to ask their elders for guidance. To be branded as tak tau teriak orang or ‘ignoring to greet others’ was a slight to the family.” (Chia, 1980: 26). The Peranakan Association (2012a), in fact, added that, “The Babas have managed to maintain the refined 19th century customs and traditions of the Hokkien Chinese. (Also, mentioned in <http://scooponsingapore.blogspot.sg/2012/02/peranakan-culture-in-singapore.html>) (Many of these practices no longer survive in China or in local Hokkien communities.)”

By the same token, “leaders must be polite and gentle”, “tak kasar” (translated: not crude). “The Peranakans often spoke of good upbringing and children are raised to be refined or ‘halus’” (several interviewees’ inputs). Here, the author reckons that this is perhaps the influence of Chinese, that is, Confucianism, a person must be a gentle-person (“jun zi”), practicing “ren” (humanism) and upholding his or her integrity (Low, 2013; 2008).

Besides, being English educated, and learning from the English, the Babas were or can be considered as strongly influenced by “the sense of fair play” (Chia, 1980: 74).

Being Humble

“We learnt in our childhood to emulate the humble rice paddy”, highlighted one interviewee. These aptly fit with Low’s (2010: 90) “unlike the long grass (*lallang*) the paddy, though bent low, is loaded with rice grains... ..don’t brag, be quiet. But make your own achievements, and let your results and how good you are, speak for themselves.” “Jadi orang, jangan jadi sombong” (translated, as a person, one should not be proud or arrogant) expressed another interviewee.

The late Wee Kim Wee, a Peranakan, is said to have led and shown an “inspiring leadership, humility and humanity during his tenure as President of Singapore” (The Peranakan Association, 2012). “The Peranakans are taught or went through socialization to be humble... as leaders, they are not boastful or show-off.” (several interviewees’ inputs). This can, in part, be attributed to the Peranakans’ subscription to Chinese Buddhism.

[Overall, the Peranakans subscribed to Chinese beliefs: Taoism, Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism (Chia, 1980: 19), and they celebrated the Lunar New Year and the Lantern Festival; <http://thehistoryofmalacca.blogspot.sg/2013/07/culture-of-peranakan-of-baba-and-nyonya.html>]; after all, Buddhism undeniably encourages people to cooperate and live in harmony through eliminating their egos (Ueda, 2013; Low, 2013).

Besides, it should be noted that the Peranakan culture is really enriched by its adoption of some Malay songs, proverbs, poems or “pantuns” (Chia, 1980). “Pantuns” significantly show the terseness and wit of sayings while affording pleasurable insight into precepts and shrewd observations of the Malay race (Hamilton, 1987) and truly that of the Baba-Nyonyas too. And interestingly too, humility can also be seen in the Dondang Sayang which “is popular among the people, especially the Peranakan Babas and Nonyas”, and Hudi (2002) wrote that the old Malay music genre “reflects courtesy and humility, characteristics of the Malays”; and indeed the Babas and Nyonyas “(acquire) the merging of two worlds: ...the Chinese and... ..the Malays”. (one interviewee’s inputs).

Being of Positive Frame of Mind

Although Chia (1980: 50) referred to the fact that “most Babas are fatalists”, this author would differ and maintain that overall they, in fact, had and have a high sense of optimism. Here, optimism is defined as “a positive, upbeat attitude toward the world that sets you up for success in school, relationships, career, and life in general. It enables you to overcome life’s difficulties – to bounce back and thrive. (MacDonald, 2004: 14). Chia (2003) himself offered a good positive saying when he talked about “Kalu tak ah kledek, makan lah ubi kayu!” (If there is no sweet potato, then satisfy yourself with tapioca!). Indeed the Baba leaders ordinarily look at the bright side of things; and that they “were optimistic”. “They prefer to look forward, letting bygones be bygones or what they most times call, ‘buang keroh ambil jernih’”. (several interviewees’ inputs).

The late President Wee Kim Wee, for example, was noted to be “a courageous man who took his illness in stride (he was then having prostate cancer). His emails described his declining health in an extremely matter-of-fact way, without any self-pity or despondency. He last wrote to me on April Fool’s Day last year, a month before his passing, enquiring when my brother’s binjai tree would fruit again, as he had not had buah binjay for some time” (Lee Kip Lee, 2006, President of The Peranakan Association Singapore till 2010 cited, in The Peranakan Association, 2012).

To add, the author, of Straits Chinese (Peranakan) descent/ background and as a young child and teenager, often heard his late grandmother, late uncles, aunts and even his widow mother (she became a widow at the age of 35, the author was then eight years old; and his widow mother single-handedly raised her three young children) spoke of “Buang keroh ambil jernih”. These are literally translated as scooping or throwing away the scum while retaining the clear soup – particularly so when boiling beef stock, reflecting the optimism or forward-looking that exists among the Peranakans. And that too can indeed be said to be attributed to one of the style/ ways of the Peranakan leadership.

Being Multi-Cultural

Interestingly, the late President Wee Kim Wee was once cited (in The Peranakan Association, 2012) as saying, “Not many people realise that Peranakans have acted as a bridge to bring about understanding and harmony over more than a century and we are still continuing to do that job today.” The Peranakan Resource Library (2003a) in fact stated that many of these leaders had helped to promote law and order as well as social harmony even back in the days of British Singapore.

“English-educated, the Babas were multicultural, and as leaders, they know English, and have had knowledge of Chinese people and the Malay people as well as their language”. These coincide with what Chia (1980: 27) indicated of the Babas, “(their) most conspicuous characteristic... is their multicultural influence”.

It is also said that the Peranakans “tolerate the beliefs (religions) of others. The Baba is willing to take part in others’ religious events. The Baba is willing to offer coconut milk in the Hindu festival or to join in the Novena processions of the Catholics or to find spiritual guidance from the datok mediums with the understanding that they have the best of everything. In other words, the Baba’s outlook is not negative as far as others’ practices are concerned” (Baba Cedric Tan, 2001 cited in The Peranakan Association, 2011a).

Being Friendly, Warm-Hearted and Relationship-Centered

Price and Price's (2013: 137) study indicated that good and successful leaders are warm, affable and friendly. Baba leaders are "friendly", "warm" and "relationship-centered"; "Peranakan leaders dealt with their people, customers and others in a personable way" and "relationship (guanxi) is stressed". (several interviewees' inputs). And this point, in fact, reaffirms and bolsters the Peranakans' practice of family-oriented leadership as discussed above.

"Warm-hearted people" (several interviewees' inputs), the Peranakans socialized and at parties, they "joget" (danced) while parleying in "pantuns" (poems) (Tan, 2004). They would find or seize every opportunity and occasion to celebrate. (Tan, 2004; Chia, 1980). Chia (1980: 48) spoke of the Nyonyas referring to such a person as celebrating "Tahon Baru Monyet" or "The Monkey's New Year"; and he is then having a fine time ("Apa lagi, dia seh jit lah!").

Figure 1 shows the key characteristics of the Peranakan leadership (based on the various values and cultural practices) as examined above.



Limitations and Benefits of the Research

One of the key limitations of the study is that it focuses on only selected respondents' interview outcome only. It would be good to hear and know of what other races and/or ethnic perceived of the Peranakan Singapore leaders. And in carrying out this study, the author also deems that another key limitation is the time and costs constraints – there were little funds – even for publications and sponsorships for the study yet the researcher self-financed and supported it himself. It is worthy to note that the paper should and could be better off with more interviews made with several more interviewees. However, it should be noted that the interviewees were not readily available, and the study was made more difficult with the number of Peranakans dwindling or fast disappearing. Several interviewees added that what was more, when contacted, their cousins or contacts rejected the interviews, citing that "(they were) rather busy doing business, making a living or surviving in Singapore".

Another limitation or caveat of the research is that culture is always evolving (or dying). Like any other cultures, the paradigms are shifting; and the thinking as well as the values too are changing; it is also difficult to indeed isolate particular cultural traits or characteristics which influence Peranakan leadership in metropolitan and multicultural Singapore.

In any case, the benefits of the study are to create or give a snapshot of the Straits Chinese or Peranakan leadership in Singapore, and to show their style(s) and ways. In a way, it also shows how their leadership ways may have been influenced by the culture of their community and the environment in a given period of time or history of the Republic of Singapore. The study was also aided by the fact that the researcher is a Peranakan and a Singaporean, and that, nonetheless, really helped in understanding the Baba-Nyonya culture as well as in writing this research paper.

Nonetheless, the study has more or less created a basis to think further, extend more reflections on or in fact, serve as a platform for further exploration and study of analyzing, even leadership characteristics and/ or cultural values of the various ethnic groups as well as of Singaporeans as a whole.

Concluding Remarks

From this paper, a snapshot is being made and much has been learnt of the style(s) and interesting ways of the leadership of the Peranakans or the Baba-Nyonyas in Singapore. But of course because of modernization and influence of other cultures within and without multicultural Singapore, their ways are indeed ever changing.

And it can also be truly said albeit sad that the Baba culture is “fast disappearing with each generation... a minority race which keeps dwindling cannot hope to survive.” (Chia, 1980: 193). Indeed not many people speak the faulty Baba Malay, the patois first Baba-Nyonyas spoke. “There are very few monolingual Peranakans left – and they are very old – and fewer than 5,000 people in Singapore now speak the language at all.” (Journal of Thoughts, 2009). One interviewee spoke of “(the Peranakans let alone the Peranakan leadership style and ways are) kind of fading away. All because of the new lifestyles of this present age.” And he continued that, “In reference to leadership... that is a huge question mark, as the traditional days and behavior of the old versus the new, is definitely no more the same... (besides,) Singapore for example has made it very tough for the commoners to survive, due to the high cost of living, and the competitiveness (of businesses). The gentle ways of ‘never mind, sharing and caring’ is just not possible, as one has to be rough and tough in the present rat race.”

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