

STEPPING THROUGH HERITAGE: SYMBOLISM AND MEANING OF BABA NYONYA BEADED SHOES

MELANGKAH MELALUI WARISAN: SIMBOLISME DAN MAKNA MANIK KASUT BABA NYONYA

NUR EMYLIA NATASHA MUCHAMAD IMRON^{1*},
LIZA MARZIANA MOHAMMAD NOH²

College of Creative Arts,
Universiti Teknologi MARA,
Cawangan Melaka, Malaysia

Corresponding email: emylianatasha79@gmail.com, lizamarziana@uitm.edu.my

Received: 16th June 2025 Accepted: 3rd August 2025

Abstract

The Baba Nyonya beaded shoes, or *kasut manek*, are more than decorative items; they are cultural symbols of the Peranakan Chinese community. Hand-sewn with colorful glass beads, these shoes reflect the fusion of Chinese, Malay, and European influences, showcasing the unique multicultural heritage of the Baba Nyonya. The intricate motifs, often featuring flowers, birds, or butterflies, carry deep meanings linked to femininity, prosperity, and tradition. Historically, *kasut manek* were worn during weddings and festivals, symbolizing elegance and social status. Their creation also served as a form of domestic education for Peranakan women, teaching them patience, artistry, and cultural values. This article examines the cultural significance of *kasut manek* through its historical context, artistic design, and its role in preserving identity. By examining visual elements, artisan interviews, and relevant literature, the study reveals how these shoes serve as vessels of cultural memory, transmitting Peranakan values across generations. Despite modern changes, the craft remains a living tradition, highlighting the enduring role of *kasut manek* as both an art form and a symbol of identity. Through this lens, the beaded shoes are celebrated not only for their beauty but also for their role in maintaining the legacy of the Baba Nyonya community

Keywords: Kasut Manek, Peranakan Chinese, Cultural Heritage, Symbolism, Traditional craftsman

Abstrak

Kasut manek Baba Nyonya bukan sekadar hiasan semata-mata, tetapi merupakan simbol budaya yang penting bagi komuniti Peranakan Cina. Dijahit tangan dengan manik kaca berwarna-warni, kasut ini mencerminkan gabungan pengaruh Cina, Melayu, dan Eropah yang unik, serta memperlihatkan warisan budaya yang kaya. Motif-motif halus seperti bunga, burung, dan rama-rama membawa makna mendalam yang berkait rapat dengan kewanitaan, kemakmuran dan tradisi. Dabulu, kasut manek dipakai dalam majlis perkahwinan dan perayaan sebagai lambang keanggunan dan status sosial, malah proses pembuatannya menjadi sebahagian daripada pendidikan wanita Peranakan, mengajar mereka nilai seperti kesabaran, ketelitian dan seni halus. Kajian terhadap kasut manek melalui reka bentuk artistik, temu bual artisan dan literatur berkaitan menunjukkan bagaimana ia menjadi wadah memori budaya yang meneruskan nilai-nilai Peranakan merentasi generasi. Walaupun berdepan arus pemodenan, seni pembuatan kasut manek masih hidup dan kekal relevan sebagai lambang identiti serta warisan yang harus dihargai.

Kata Kunci: Kasut Manek, Peranakan China, Warisan Budaya, Simbolik, Seni Tradisional

INTRODUCTION

The Baba Nyonya, also known as the Peranakan Chinese, form a unique cultural group with roots in the intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and local Malays in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. One of the most distinctive and culturally rich artifacts of this community is the *kasut manek*, or beaded shoes. These handcrafted shoes, traditionally worn by Nyonya women, showcase not only intricate craftsmanship but also deep symbolic meaning embedded in their colors, patterns, and designs. More than functional footwear, *kasut manek* reflect the fusion of Chinese and Malay aesthetics and provide insight into the values, roles, and identities of Peranakan women (Lee 2014).

The designs and motifs of *kasut manek* are not merely decorative; they carry symbolic meanings that represent ideals such as femininity, fertility, prosperity, and social status. Common motifs, such as peonies, phoenixes, butterflies, and birds, were carefully chosen for their cultural significance, often rooted in traditional Chinese symbolism. The process of creating these shoes also served as a rite of passage for young Nyonya women, reflecting their patience, skill, and readiness for marriage (Khoo 2010). As such, the making and wearing of *kasut manek* were intimately tied to personal and cultural identity.

In addition to their symbolic elements, *kasut manek* play a vital role in the preservation and transmission of Peranakan heritage. They are featured in traditional ceremonies, such as weddings and religious festivals, and are often passed down through generations as heirlooms. In contemporary times, the revival of interest in Peranakan culture has led to renewed appreciation for these shoes, both as works of art and as living traditions (Gwee 2018). This resurgence reflects a growing awareness of the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage amidst rapid modernization.

This research aims to explore the more profound cultural meanings and functions of *kasut manek* within the Peranakan Chinese community. By analyzing their design motifs, symbolic significance, and role in cultural continuity, the study will shed light on how these beaded shoes serve not only as a form of artistic expression but also as vessels of identity, memory, and heritage. Through this lens, *kasut manek* can be understood as stepping stones through which Peranakan culture continues to walk into the future.

Problem Statements

The cultural heritage of the Peranakan Chinese community is a unique blend of Chinese, Malay, and Western influences, expressed vividly through traditional clothing, customs, and handicrafts. Among these, *kasut manek*, or Baba Nyonya beaded shoes, stand out as one of the most iconic and intricate symbols of Peranakan identity. However, despite their rich cultural and symbolic value, these handcrafted shoes have received limited academic attention, particularly in terms of their deeper meanings, aesthetic symbolism, and role in preserving cultural identity (Lee 2014; Khoo 2010).

In recent decades, the rise of modern fashion and mass production has led to a decline in the traditional practice of making and wearing *kasut manek*. With the passing of older generations and the increasing assimilation of younger Peranakans into contemporary lifestyles, the traditional knowledge surrounding the historical significance, craftsmanship, and symbolic motifs of Baba Nyonya beaded shoes faces the risk of gradual erosion and cultural marginalization (Gwee 2018). Furthermore, existing studies often focus on shoes as decorative art or heritage items, with insufficient exploration of how their designs encode cultural narratives and values.

This research seeks to address this gap by investigating the symbolic meanings embedded in the design of *kasut manek* and how these meanings reflect the values, identity, and traditions of the Peranakan Chinese. In the absence of such studies, there is a risk that these cultural expressions will be reduced to mere fashion accessories, thereby stripping them off their historical and cultural significance. Understanding the symbolism of *kasut manek* is crucial not only for preserving this form

of heritage but also for appreciating how material culture can serve as a living medium for storytelling and the transmission of identity within a multicultural society.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- I. To explore the role of kasut manek in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across generations.
- II. To study the characteristic design features and motifs of Peranakan kasut manek and their cultural significance.
- III. To investigate the symbolic significance of beaded shoes in conveying the cultural identity, values, and traditions of the Peranakan Chinese.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Background of the Peranakan Chinese and Kasut Manek

The Peranakan Chinese community, commonly known as Baba Nyonya, originated from Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago from the 15th to 17th centuries. Over time, these immigrants intermarried with the indigenous Malay population, resulting in a unique hybrid culture that blended Chinese traditions with Malay customs. This fusion was further influenced by European colonial powers, especially the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, who controlled parts of Southeast Asia. This complex socio-cultural environment gave rise to a distinct Peranakan identity, marked by its language, culinary style, and artistic expressions (Lee 2014). The community's cultural practices reflect this diverse heritage, with an emphasis on preserving their distinctiveness through various forms of material culture.

One of the most iconic manifestations of Peranakan heritage is the kasut manek, or beaded shoes, traditionally crafted and worn by Nyonya women, the female descendants of the Peranakan community. These shoes, which became prominent in the 19th century, are more than mere footwear; they are significant cultural artifacts that symbolize the wearer's social and ethnic identity. Typically worn during weddings, religious ceremonies, and festive occasions, kasut manek showcase exquisite beadwork, created by stitching thousands of tiny glass beads into detailed floral and animal motifs (Khoo 2010). This craft requires immense patience, skill, and dedication, highlighting the artisan's artistic ability and attention to detail.

The beadwork on kasut manek is renowned for its complexity and vibrant colours, which serve as markers of social status and cultural pride within the Peranakan community. The designs often incorporate symbolic motifs such as peonies, butterflies, and phoenixes, which are deeply rooted in Chinese and Malay symbolism (Gwee 2018). These motifs communicate blessings, prosperity, and feminine virtues, making the shoes not only beautiful but culturally meaningful. The colours used, often reds, greens, blues, and golds, enhance the symbolic messages and contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of the shoes. Such intricate craftsmanship underscores the wearer's connection to her heritage and reflects her family's social standing.

The tradition of making kasut manek was usually passed down through generations, often taught by mothers to daughters as part of a broader domestic education. This transmission of skills was essential in maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of identity among Peranakan women (Lee 2014). The meticulous process of crafting these shoes was also a form of cultural preservation, as it embodied the community's commitment to handmade artistry and heritage. As such, the kasut manek serves as a living symbol of the Peranakan Chinese's enduring cultural legacy, bridging traditions with contemporary identity bridging traditions.

Symbolism and Motifs in Kasut Manek Design

The decorative motifs found on kasut manek are more than ornamental; they carry rich symbolic meanings that reflect the Peranakan community's core values, beliefs, and aspirations. Many of these motifs draw from Chinese symbolism, which has been adapted and blended with local Malay cultural elements to create a unique visual language. Among the most common floral motifs are peonies and lotuses. The peony, often referred to as the "king of flowers," is widely regarded as a symbol of wealth, honour, and beauty. Similarly, the lotus represents purity and spiritual enlightenment, conveying messages of hope and virtue through the shoe's intricate beadwork (Khoo 2010).

In addition to floral designs, kasut manek feature animal motifs such as the phoenix, birds, and butterflies, each carrying its auspicious meanings. The phoenix is a particularly significant symbol in Peranakan culture, representing femininity, elegance, virtue, and renewal. It is often associated with the bride in wedding ceremonies, symbolizing rebirth and new beginnings. Butterflies, on the other hand, are emblematic of love, joy, and transformation, reinforcing the shoes' role in celebratory and matrimonial contexts (Lee 2014). These carefully selected motifs function as visual blessings, imbuing the footwear with layers of cultural significance and storytelling.

The vibrant colours used in kasut manek designs further amplify their symbolic meanings. Red, a dominant colour in many designs, is universally associated with good luck, happiness, and protection against evil spirits. Green symbolizes fertility and growth, often reflecting hopes for future generations. Gold, meanwhile, represents prosperity, wealth, and high status within the community (Gwee 2018). The interplay of colours and motifs creates a visually striking and culturally meaningful artifact, where every element is deliberate and rich in significance. This intricate symbolism transforms kasut manek from mere decorative objects into powerful cultural statements.

These motifs and colours highlight the intercultural synthesis that defines the Peranakan identity. The blending of Chinese auspicious symbols with Malay artistic styles demonstrates how Peranakan culture is both hybrid and cohesive. Rather than simply copying Chinese traditions, Peranakans adapted and localized these symbols to create a unique cultural expression embodied in their material heritage (Khoo 2010). This fusion exemplifies how Kasut Manek not only celebrates cultural roots but also communicates a dynamic, evolving identity that bridges multiple ethnic and cultural influences (Gwee 2018).

The Role of Kasut Manek in Peranakan Identity and Femininity

Kasut manek, beyond their exquisite aesthetic qualities, hold profound significance in defining gender roles and social values within the Peranakan community. Traditionally, beadwork was an essential part of a young Nyonya woman's upbringing, taught as a necessary skill in preparation for marriage and adulthood (Gwee 2018; Lee 2014; Tan 2009). This craft was viewed as more than a pastime; it was a rite of passage, symbolizing the virtues of patience, precision, and dedication that were deeply esteemed in Peranakan society (Lim 2012). Mastery of beadwork was not only a demonstration of individual discipline but also a reflection of the woman's readiness to assume her role in the family and community (Carstens 2005; Lee 2014).

The wearing of kasut manek signified much more than fashion; it was an outward expression of femininity, respectability, and social standing. These beaded shoes were commonly worn during weddings and other ceremonial occasions, where they symbolized the bride's cultural heritage and her family's social status (Khoo 2010; Tan 2010). The shoes represented a symbolic affirmation of tradition, heritage, and the continuity of family lineage. Through this practice, kasut manek functioned as cultural artifacts that conveyed social messages about a woman's identity, virtues, and place within Peranakan society (Lim 2012; Peletz 1995).

Moreover, Kasut Manek fostered intergenerational connections within the community. The skill and knowledge required to produce these shoes were typically passed down from mother to daughter, creating a strong lineage of cultural transmission (Khoo 2010; Gwee 2018). This

intergenerational teaching reinforced community cohesion, allowing Peranakan women to maintain a shared cultural identity across generations (Smith 2006). The act of crafting these shoes was both a personal and collective expression of cultural continuity, emphasizing the importance of heritage preservation through practical engagement (Henderson 2011).

In essence, Kasut Manek encapsulates the intersection of personal identity and collective cultural values. They serve as tangible representations of femininity and social order within the Peranakan community while acting as vessels for the transmission of cultural knowledge and tradition. As symbols of both individual accomplishment and communal belonging, these beaded shoes highlight the unique social status and cultural contributions of Peranakan women (Lee 2014; Gwee 2018; Peletz 1995).

Preservation and Transformation of Kasut Manek in Contemporary Culture

In contemporary times, the tradition of making and wearing kasut manek faces considerable challenges brought about by globalization, industrialization, and changing cultural practices. Mass production and modern fashion trends have reduced the demand for handcrafted beaded shoes, especially among younger generations of Peranakans who often feel less connected to traditional customs (Khoo 2010; Lim 2012). This shift threatens not only the everyday use of kasut manek but also the survival of the intricate beadwork craft itself, as fewer artisans possess or pursue the specialized skills needed for their creation (Tan 2010).

Despite these challenges, there has been a noticeable resurgence of interest in preserving and revitalizing Peranakan heritage, including kasut manek. Museums and cultural institutions have played an active role in documenting this craft, organizing workshops, and curating exhibitions to raise awareness about the cultural and historical importance of these shoes (Gwee 2018; National Heritage Board 2015). Such initiatives aim to rekindle appreciation for kasut manek and encourage the transmission of beadwork skills to new generations, thereby safeguarding this unique art form from extinction.

Contemporary artists and designers have also contributed to the transformation of kasut manek by blending traditional motifs with modern aesthetics. This creative fusion has helped the shoes maintain cultural relevance while appealing to contemporary tastes and fashion sensibilities (Lee 2014; Chong 2016). By innovating within the tradition, these designers ensure that kasut manek remain dynamic cultural symbols rather than static relics. Their work reflects broader trends in cultural sustainability, where heritage practices evolve in response to modern contexts while retaining core cultural meanings (Smith 2006).

Overall, the preservation and adaptation of kasut manek exemplify the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity within multicultural societies. These efforts not only protect an important element of Peranakan identity but also stimulate conversations about cultural continuity, identity politics, and the challenges of maintaining heritage in a rapidly changing world. Through such endeavors, kasut manek continue to serve as vibrant, living symbols of Peranakan culture (Gwee 2018; Khoo 2010; Tan 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the rich symbolism and cultural significance embedded in Baba Nyonya beaded shoes, known as kasut manek. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to this research because they enable an in-depth understanding of complex cultural meanings, craftsmanship techniques, and community values that cannot be easily quantified (Creswell & Poth 2018; Denzin & Lincoln 2018).

By focusing on detailed visual analysis, semi-structured interviews with artisans, and a comprehensive literature review, the research aims to uncover how these shoes serve as important cultural artifacts that express Peranakan identity, tradition, and heritage (Lim 2016; Tan 2010). The

use of semi-structured interviews enables participants to share personal narratives and cultural knowledge, which adds depth to the study's interpretive framework (Braun & Clarke 2022).

Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative approaches facilitate the examination of the kasut manek not only as physical objects but also as symbolic texts embedded with cultural narratives (Hall 1997). This methodology enables the capture of nuanced perspectives from both visual and human sources, providing a holistic understanding of the shoes' artistic and social roles within the Peranakan community. The combination of visual data and interview insights, supported by existing scholarly literature, ensures a robust and triangulated analysis that highlights the enduring relevance of kasut manek as both heritage and living tradition (Yow 2014; Lee 2014).

Data Collection Methods

1. Literature Review

Data collection for this study will incorporate multiple qualitative approaches that seek to understand the social meanings, culture, and artistry associated with kasut manek. First, visual data will be collected through the examination of physical specimens and photographs of Baba Nyonya beaded shoes held in museum collections and private stores. This form of visual examination will provide insight into the intricate motifs and colour patterns, as well as the techniques used in beadwork, which will prove to be important documentary evidence of the shoe's embedded symbolic design constituents.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with practitioners, cultural scholars, and other relevant individuals from the Peranakan community. These interviews aim to collect rich, actual narratives regarding the processes involved in making kasut manek, as well as their cultural meanings and values. Artisans will discuss their views on beadwork, including traditional methods and the meanings behind some of the motifs. Community members will discuss the social and cultural functions of the shoes. This method will help in coming up with answers, while still providing the opportunity to add and adapt new ideas not directly related to the research questions.

Additionally, a relevant literature review will be conducted to integrate other scholarly works, ethnographic research, and historical documents related to Peranakan culture and beadwork with the primary data collected. This combination of data sources, including visual analysis, interviews, and a literature review, will help provide greater accuracy and understanding of the study by verifying information from different perspectives and offering more profound insights into Kasut Manek.

2. Fieldwork

Fieldwork for this study will involve direct engagement with the Baba Nyonya community, with a particular focus on experienced artisans who specialize in crafting kasut manek. This hands-on approach allows the researcher to observe the beadwork process in real-time, gaining practical insight into the techniques, materials, and craftsmanship involved. By visiting workshops and artisan studios, the study will document not only the physical production of the shoes but also the social and cultural contexts in which this craft is practiced.

Additionally, field visits will include participation in cultural events and ceremonies where kasut manek are traditionally worn, such as weddings and festivals. This immersive experience will provide a deeper understanding of the symbolic role the shoes play in Peranakan identity and cultural expression. Engaging with community members during these events will also help capture the contemporary relevance and meaning of the beaded shoes within everyday life.

Audio and video recordings, photographic documentation, and detailed field notes will support the field work. These records will complement the interviews and visual analysis by offering a rich, contextualized view of the craft and its cultural significance. This immersive field research is

crucial for uncovering the lived experiences and evolving traditions surrounding kasut manek in the modern era.

3. Interviews

In addition to observations, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected participants to gather qualitative data. Interviewees will include:

- I. Artisans who handcraft kasut manek
- II. Cultural custodians or heritage experts knowledgeable in Peranakan traditions
- III. Members of the Baba Nyonya community, especially those who wear or collect these shoes

Semi-structured interviews are chosen to provide flexibility while maintaining a focus on key topics, such as the artisans' creative process, the symbolic meanings of the motifs, the evolution of design, and its current relevance. Interviews will be recorded (with consent) and transcribed for thematic analysis.

As part of the fieldwork for this study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather rich qualitative data that complements the observations made during site visits. These interviews are essential for capturing personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and artistic insights that are not always visible through direct observation alone. Participants will be carefully selected based on their relevance to the study and their expertise in the Peranakan tradition, particularly in the area of kasut manek.

Among the interviewees will be artisans who specialize in the traditional craft of kasut manek, offering firsthand insight into their creative processes, techniques, and the challenges of maintaining this intricate art form in a modern context. Additionally, cultural custodians or heritage experts with deep knowledge of Peranakan customs and material culture will be included to provide broader perspectives on the historical and cultural significance of the shoes. Members of the Baba Nyonya community, particularly individuals who wear, collect, or inherit kasut manek, will also be interviewed to understand the emotional and symbolic meanings these shoes hold in personal and communal contexts.

The semi-structured interview format is chosen to allow a balance between guided inquiry and open-ended discussion. This approach enables the researcher to explore key topics such as the symbolism embedded in the beadwork motifs, the evolution of design over time, and the shoes' continued relevance in contemporary culture while also allowing participants the freedom to share unique stories and experiences. All interviews will be conducted with the informed consent of participants and will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. The resulting transcripts will be analysed thematically to identify patterns, meanings, and insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of kasut manek as both a craft and a cultural symbol.

4. Sampling Method

This study employs purposive sampling as its primary sampling strategy, which involves selecting participants and artifact samples based on their relevance to the study's objectives. This strategy captures relevant information on the craft and cultural heritage of Kasut Manek. This approach guarantees that the selected individuals and items have substantial participation and contain rich information that articulates the craft and cultural heritage of Kasut Manek. The selected samples will reflect the depth and diversity of Peranakan traditions, along with their artistic craftsmanship and cultural bearers.

The selection of kasut manek artifacts will rely on authenticity and variation criteria. The shoes should also be handmade and acknowledged as original pieces of Peranakan heritage. It is also necessary to select samples that represent various design features, such as differing motifs, colour schemes, sizes, and styles. For studying historical continuity and change, the sample will comprise

shoes from different eras. These can include artifacts from museums, private collections, cultural heritage institutions, or from Peranakan families who still practice this craft.

Along with the selection of artifacts, purposive sampling will determine the selection of interview participants. Community members, master artisans, and heritage experts will be purposively sampled due to their relevance and expertise in understanding Kasut Manek and Peranakan culture. This focus strategy captures precisely what is needed, allowing for thorough examination of the meanings, stories, and techniques of the craft.

Cumulatively, sampling as described above works well with qualitative cultural research that does not seek statistical representation but rather rich, contextual representation of traditions and practices. With the understanding that the research is capturing the complex interplay between people and their heritage, by selecting the objects and the individual who embodies and safeguards the legacy of Kasut Manek, the study includes the most diverse ethnic group. This approach provides a multidimensional understanding that encompasses culture, knowledge, and artifacts.

5. Sample Size

In the scope of this research, a total of 10 pairs of Kasut Manek will be selected for visual and material analysis. This sample size is deemed appropriate for making a meaningful comparison across different design elements, such as motifs, colours, and styles. It also enables the researcher to examine both the similarities and differences within the craft while still maintaining focus and depth.

The choice of working with 10 pairs is also influenced by time and access to resources for the research. It helps provide a reasonable framework for thorough documentation and analysis without compromising the scope and depth of the study. Each pair will be analysed for the techniques applied, the symbolic details, and the historical context relevant to the item and its use or wear.

When physical access to the shoes is limited due to preservation restraints, geographical distance, or private ownership, photographic archives or digital collections will be utilized for further analysis. Together with interview data, field observations, and primary data collection, this sample size and methodology will provide a holistic analysis of Kasut Manek as a material object and a heritage relic of the living Peranakan culture.

6. Data Analysis


The third phase of the research project will focus on systematically analysing the data gathered from the literature review, interviews, and observations. This process will focus on identifying patterns, themes, and meanings associated with the symbolism, craftsmanship, and cultural significance of kasut manek. Handcrafted motifs and colour schemes will be complemented with narrative explanations given by the artisans as well as community members.


Cultural identity, culture, and the transmission of knowledge of beadwork traditions will be the focus of the coded key concepts analysed through interview transcripts. The analysis will adopt a “within case” approach, informed by the research questions within the data, to provide complete insight into how kasut manek are constructed as cultural artifacts and part of Peranakan heritage.

The combination of different types of data, including visual, textual, and observational, facilitates triangulation and enhances the validity as well as the depth of the conclusions. This will utilize symbolic explanations and the expertise of artisans, as well as practitioners’ observations, to provide a rich description of the cultural value of Baba Nyonya beaded shoes.

To further support the analysis, the following are examples of kasut manek sourced from four different stores, with each store contributing one unique design. These visual examples provide tangible references that reflect the diversity in design motifs, colour preferences, and beadwork techniques found in different artisan workshops.

7. Visual Analysis and Meaning

Beaded Shoes Picture	Motif Design	Meaning
	<p>Floral with Geometric Background</p>	<p>The floral design indicates nature, beauty, femininity, and grace. The vibrant colors portray brightness and liveliness. The background patterns, which are usually geometric and in the shape of diamonds, indicate balance, order, culture, and form. This balance is what is captured in the works of Peranakan beadworks, an indivisible blend of tradition, culture, and art.</p>
	<p>Phoenix and Peonies</p>	<p>The phoenix, an influential figure in mythology, embodies rebirth and renewal, representing grace and virtue. In Chinese culture, it is associated with the Empress and signifies the highest feminine ideals. Peonies, which are viewed as the 'kings of flowers' symbolize wealth, honor, and good fortune. This motif portrays a desire for prosperity, elegance, and noble character, making it popular for ceremonial or festive occasions.</p>
	<p>Checkerboard Pattern</p>	<p>The checkerboard design is a modern and minimalist pattern that symbolizes balance, duality, and order. The alternating black-and-white squares can represent the coexistence of opposites such as light and darkness or tradition and modernity. This motif appeals to contemporary tastes while still echoing the structured designs of traditional beaded footwear. It may also</p>

		signify a grounded and practical nature.
	<p>Abstract Floral in Black & White</p>	<p>This shoe features an abstract floral motif in black and white, giving it a sophisticated, monochrome aesthetic. The absence of bright colors suggests elegance and simplicity. Black often symbolizes strength, mystery, or protection, while white represents purity, peace, and clarity. The intricate floral-like patterns reflect a connection to nature and heritage while embracing a more subtle and modern interpretation of tradition. This design is versatile and dignified, suitable for both formal and refined casual.</p>

8. Documentation and Archival Research

Documentation and archival research form a critical component of this study, providing historical context and supplementing primary data gathered through fieldwork and interviews. This phase involves systematic collection and examination of archival materials such as museum records, historical photographs, traditional patterns, old manuscripts, and previous exhibition catalogues related to kasut manek and Peranakan culture. These sources offer valuable insights into the evolution of beadwork techniques, design motifs, and cultural practices over time.

Accessing archives from local museums, cultural institutions, and private collections enables researchers to trace the historical significance and transformations of Baba Nyonya beaded shoes. Archival documents also help to validate information obtained from artisans and community members by providing documented evidence of the shoes' role in traditional ceremonies and social status indicators.

This research stage also involves reviewing visual documentation, such as photographs and illustrations, which aid in analysing changes in artistic styles and craftsmanship across different periods. By integrating archival data with contemporary observations, the study gains a longitudinal perspective on kasut manek, highlighting how heritage is preserved, adapted, or challenged through time. This comprehensive approach ensures a well-rounded understanding of the cultural and historical dimensions of the beaded shoes.

FINDINGS

This findings section presents the key insights uncovered through visual analysis, interviews with artisans, and a review of literature concerning kasut manek, the beaded shoes of the Baba Nyonya community. The research reveals how these shoes are more than decorative items. They are powerful cultural artifacts that reflect identity, tradition, and symbolism. The findings are organized into four central themes: the use of symbolic motifs and colors in the beadwork; the role of craftsmanship in

shaping Peranakan identity and femininity; the preservation and modern adaptation of the tradition; and the inter-generational transmission of cultural knowledge. Together, these findings demonstrate the enduring cultural significance of kasut manek and their vital role in preserving the heritage of the Peranakan Chinese community.

Symbolic Motifs and Colors in Kasut Manek Design

The beadwork motifs on kasut manek are far more than decorative patterns; they carry deep symbolic meanings integral to Peranakan culture. Commonly used motifs include peonies, phoenixes, and butterflies, each selected for its cultural significance. The peony, often associated with wealth and beauty, symbolizes prosperity and social status. The phoenix represents femininity, virtue, and renewal, while butterflies signify love and joy. These motifs are deliberately chosen to communicate positive blessings and cultural values, reinforcing the wearer's identity and status within the community.

Colour choices in kasut manek also play a critical symbolic role. Red beads are frequently used to attract good luck and ward off evil; a belief rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. Gold beads symbolize wealth and prosperity, while green signifies fertility and growth. The deliberate use of these colours amplifies the shoes' auspicious meanings, especially during significant events like weddings and religious ceremonies. Together, the motifs and colours form a visual language that reflects the hybrid identity of the Peranakan people, blending Chinese symbolism with local Malay artistic influences.

Moreover, the intricate arrangement of beadwork serves as a testament to the community's dedication to preserving cultural narratives through material culture. These artistic choices embody collective hopes and values, acting as a bridge between generations. As such, kasut manek functions not just as fashion items but as cultural artifacts that tell stories of identity, tradition, and intercultural synthesis.

Craftsmanship as Cultural Education and Identity

The creation of kasut manek is more than an artistic endeavor; it is a vital cultural education process for Peranakan women. Interviews with artisans revealed that learning beadwork is traditionally considered a rite of passage, equipping young Nyonya women with virtues like patience, diligence, and modesty. This craft is often taught within the family, emphasizing the importance of meticulous skill and cultural knowledge. Through beadwork, women internalize social expectations and prepare for their future roles within the community, especially marriage and family life.

This craftsmanship represents a tangible expression of femininity and social status the time-intensive and delicate nature of beadwork signals refinement and respectability, qualities highly valued in Peranakan society. Wearing kasut manek during ceremonies such as weddings is a public affirmation of these values, showcasing the wearer's cultural rootedness and family pride. Moreover, the shoes symbolize continuity, linking personal identity to the broader community through shared customs.

In this way, kasut manek functions as a cultural marker that embody both individual accomplishment and collective heritage. The craft preserves traditional skills while reinforcing gender roles and social cohesion, highlighting the disconnectedness of artistry, identity, and cultural education within Peranakan society.

Kasut Manek as Living Cultural Heritage

Despite modern challenges such as globalization and changing fashion trends, kasut manek remain vital symbols of Peranakan cultural heritage. Fieldwork revealed that, while everyday use has declined, concerted efforts by cultural organizations, museums, and artisans have helped revive interest in this traditional craft. Workshops teaching beadwork and exhibitions showcasing kasut manek highlight

their artistic and cultural value, drawing renewed attention from both community members and the public.

Contemporary artists have also played a crucial role in preserving this heritage by reinterpreting traditional motifs and styles within the context of modern fashion. These creative adaptations make kasut manek relevant for younger generations and new audiences, fostering a living tradition that evolves while honouring its origins. This dynamic cultural resilience underscores the shoes' significance as symbols of identity that adapt to contemporary realities without losing their historic meaning.

The continued preservation and transformation of kasut manek reflects broader cultural sustainability concerns within multicultural societies. They exemplify how traditional crafts can survive and thrive amid rapid social change by striking a balance between respect for heritage and openness to innovation.

Inter-generational Transmission and Community Cohesion

A key finding of the study is the important role kasut manek plays in fostering inter-generational bonds within the Peranakan community. The skills and knowledge required to produce these beaded shoes are traditionally passed down from mother to daughter, serving as a crucial means of cultural transmission. This process not only preserves the technical craftsmanship but also reinforces family ties and community identity.

This inter-generational exchange helps maintain continuity in cultural practices, ensuring that the meanings and values embodied in kasut manek are preserved across time. It creates a sense of belonging and shared heritage, strengthening the social fabric of the Peranakan community. Moreover, the act of making and wearing these shoes fosters pride in cultural roots, promoting collective cohesion.

Ultimately, the transmission of kasut manek craft and symbolism highlights the importance of material culture in sustaining community identity. Through this enduring tradition, Peranakan cultural heritage remains vibrant, linking past, present, and future generations in a shared cultural journey.

CONCLUSION

Investigation of kasut manek, or Baba Nyonya beaded shoes, exposes a tapestry of history, culture, and craftsmanship in the story of the Peranakan Chinese. The beaded shoes stand far above mere ornamental accessories; they encapsulate extensive cultural meanings intertwined with intricate motifs, colours, and refined craftsmanship. Every detail of a design serves not only an aesthetic purpose, but also a symbolic one, honouring traditions and inspiring hopes that have been cherished over time.

This research, consisting of visual analyses, interviews with the artisans, and literature reviews, has sought to highlight the role of kasut manek as cultural artifacts and has shown how they help define family and community identity, perpetuate a particular set of values, and reinforce gender roles in the context of the Peranakan culture. The art of shoe-making is often passed down from mother to daughter. It serves as a powerful tool for intergenerational education and social bonding, signalling a young woman's acceptance of traditional roles.

At the same time, wearing kasut manek is still a living tradition that contemporary artists and cultural advocates have trademarked in this time of rapid advancement and globalization. The attempts to document, conserve, and revive this heritage highlight its significant importance in both historical and modern contexts. Whether displayed in modern fashion or worn on the feet as a sculpture, kasut manek inspires countless individuals, demonstrating the enduring strength and richness of the Peranakan identity.

As mentioned above, these beaded shoes are not merely remnants of history. In my opinion, they are a vibrant embodiment of cultural resilience. Their artistry and cultural significance need to be recognized, along with supporting innovation and preservation measures, to ensure this tradition continues to motivate and educate future generations. The intention is not solely to safeguard a craft, but rather to protect a community's cherished tales, skills, and spirit, which add profound value to Malaysia's cultural diversity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further protect and revitalize the use of kasut manek, the steps outlined below need to be followed. Firstly, public awareness and appreciation of these beaded shoes and their historical value need to be increased. This can be achieved through the development of all-inclusive educational programs in schools, cultural institutions, or community centers that showcase the skills and cultural values. Such programs would teach students the importance of traditional crafts, thereby fostering appreciation for their culture.

Secondly, more assistance, both in terms of funding and institutional support, is required from both non-governmental and governmental organizations for local artisans involved in the production of kasut manek. These artisans lack both financial means and support. Partnerships stemming from cultural tourism projects, alongside grants and subsidies, could ensure a steady income while helping to save heritage. Moreover, establishing training centres or apprenticeship programs could aid in more active participation of the youth in this traditional art form.

Third, documenting and preserving traditional methods of beading, as well as oral histories and personal stories related to kasut manek, should be undertaken. Developing an online archive or a digital museum with interviews, photographs, and multimedia content would greatly aid professionals, educators, and the public. That ensures that the knowledge and the cultural meanings, even when the physical craft becomes scarce, will not be lost. This also helps conserve the wider heritage and serves as an example for the preservation of other forms of intangible cultural heritage.

Lastly, it is advisable to collaborate with artisans and designers to develop new concepts while respecting traditional patterns and meanings. Adapting the beadwork to bags, accessories, and modern footwear are examples of contemporary kasut manek that can help popularize the tradition. Such bold transformations would expand the popularity of kasut manek while allowing the tradition to evolve and continue to mark the identity of the Peranakan people in a modern, globalized world.

REFERENCES

- Arkib Persatuan Peranakan Melaka. 2022. Dokumen pameran.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2022. *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Chong, T. 2016. *The state and the arts in Singapore: Policies and institutions*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. 2018. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Carstens, S. 2005. *Histories, cultures, identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese worlds*. Singapore University Press.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.). 2018. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Gwee, J. 2018. *Peranakan heritage: A cultural legacy*. Singapore Heritage Press.
- Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE/Open University Press.
- Henderson, J.C. 2011. Conserving heritage in Southeast Asian cities: The significance of the intangible. *Tourism Geographies* 13(3): 425–440.
- Khoo, J.E. 2010. *Straits Chinese beadwork and embroidery: A lost art*. Peranakan Museum.
- Lee, P. 2014. *Straits Chinese porcelain: A collector's guide*. Areca Books.
- Lee, P.Y. 2014. *The Peranakan legacy*. Editions Didier Millet.
- Lim, P. 2012. *Chinatown journeys: Women and the cultural politics of mobility and identity*. University of Washington Press.

- Lim, C.Y. 2016. *Peranakan culture in transition*. National Heritage Board.
- Lim, C.Y. 2016. *Peranakan Culture in Transition*. Singapore: National Museum Board.
- Lim, S. 2012. *Preserving the past: The future of traditional arts in Singapore*. National Arts Council.
- National Heritage Board. 2015. *The Peranakan Museum: Celebrating a vibrant culture*. National Heritage Board Publications.
- Peletz, M.G. 1995. Kinship studies in late twentieth-century anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 343–372.
- Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.
- Tan, M. 2010. *Baba Nyonya heritage: Rediscovering the past*. Marshall Cavendish Editions.
- Tan, M. 2010. *Symbols of the Straits: Motifs in Peranakan art*. Kuala Lumpur: Heritage Press.
- Tan, M. 2009. Peranakan Chinese identities in Singapore. In T. T. Chang & J. C. Henderson (Eds.), *The Asian heritage: Conserving heritage in Asia's developing cities*, pp. 103–118. Eastern Universities Press.
- Yow, V.R. 2014. *Recording oral history: A guide for the humanities and social sciences* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.