

## The Malaysian Baba Pantun Database

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### ABSTRAK

*Adalah menarik untuk mengetahui bahawa baba nyonya di Negeri-Negeri Selat telah mengembangkan kesusasteraan dengan menggunakan bahasa Melayu huruf Rumi pada penghujung tahun 1880-an. Dengan berbuat demikian, mereka telah memulakan semacam pergerakan sastera Cina-Melayu, beberapa tahun selepas sepupu mereka di Java berbuat demikian. Kertas kerja ini ingin memperkenalkan pangkalan data Pantun Baba yang terdiri daripada 11,204 rangkap pantun, syair dan dondang sayang yang sudah dihasilkan dan diterbitkan dalam 35 buah buku dan akhbar baba terbitan antara tahun 1899 dan 1940-an.*

*Kata kunci: Negeri-Negeri Selat, pantun, baba dan nyonya, pergerakan sastera Cina-Melayu, Na Tien Pit, Baba Kim Teck, pangkalan data, dondang sayang*

### ABSTRACT

*It is interesting to note that baba nyonya in the Straits Settlements managed to develop a body of literature using Romanized Malay by the end of the 1890s. In doing so, they independently started a Sino-Malay literary movement, a few years after their cousins in Java had done the same thing. This paper introduces the Baba Pantun database, comprising 11,204 pantuns, syairs and dondang sayang written and published by them in 35 books and newspapers from 1899 to 1940s.*

*Key words: Straits Settlements, pantun, baba and nyonya, Sin-Malay literary movement, Na Tien Pit, Baba Kim Teck, databases, dondang sayang*

### INTRODUCTION

ATMA, has created a pantun database comprising 11,204 *pantuns*, *syairs* and *dondang sayang* written by Malaysian *babas*. This has been available on the Internet at [www.atma.ukm.my](http://www.atma.ukm.my) since early March 2002.

The pantun, the syair and the dondang sayang are different types of Malay poetry, each of which has a distinctive structure, style, rhyme and formula. They are unique to Malay culture. Originally, they were folk poetry in the sense that

they were passed orally from person to person and from generation to generation. Thanks to this process, we are today able to disseminate them and keep them preserved in a comprehensive collection, in printed and in digital form.

With the coming into being of a sufficiently large Straits-born Chinese community (hereafter referred to as *babas*, descendants from the intermarriage between Chinese men and Malay women), a unique literature arose based on the use of their evolved mother tongue, *baba* Malay. This is sometimes considered a Malay dialect in its own right (Shellabear 1913; Tan Chee Beng 1980). According to accounts given by Song Ong Siang (1923), Clammer (1980) and Rudolph (1998), the *baba* prospered as a result of their skillful adaptation to the local culture and environment in Malacca, Penang and Singapore in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Clammer (1980: 1) claimed that '*Baba culture is a rare and beautiful blend of the dominant elements of the Malaysian and Singaporean cultural traditions – Chinese, Malay and English. But, the result of this blending is not simply a random mixture, a potpourri of bits and pieces. It is a genuine synthesis – something which not only incorporates but also transcends the component parts out of which it springs*'. Further information on this community may be found in works by Tan Chee Beng (1993) and Ding Choo Ming (2002).

A fondness for Malay pantun, syair and dondang sayang led *babas* to try their hands at composing, rewriting and improvising their own versions of poetry writing. These were recited and sung in ceremonies and festivals, often accompanied by musical instruments and some were even published in books and newspapers. Colored by Chinese folktales and characters, these poems became their means for expressing love, romance, faith, hope, sorrow and other powerful feelings. Well-written pantuns with good rhyme and form gave as much pleasure to the audience then as to us now. They are now the *babas*' unique cultural heritage and can be found no where else except in Malaysia and Indonesia. These poems had in time become the condensation of local stories and values, reflecting the popular culture of *baba* community, while involving the Malays and the British.

#### THE VITALITY AND POPULARITY OF BABA PANTUN

It is interesting to note that *baba* in the Malay Peninsular had by the end of the 1890s managed to develop a body of literature using Romanized Malay, providing an alternative to the Jawi verses created by the Malays. In doing so, they independently started a "Sino-Malay" literary movement, merely a few years after their cousins in Java had done the same thing. So far, *baba* writings in themselves have not provided any clue as to when, why and how the two separate movements were initiated. Some of the works were so well received that they were reprinted almost every two years. Claudine (1987: 446) suggests that

the two movements were connected. In any case, *baba* culture is normally perceived as a product of the historical contexts within which the community lived. The period concerned was one of vigorous multilingualism and multiculturalism, and the places involved – Malacca, Singapore and Penang – were towns where Malay, Chinese and English cultures met, and thus produced a rich cultural and ethnic mosaic. Such a mixture of cultural conditions contributed strongly to the rise of *baba* literature. Malay and Chinese cultural interaction can be perceived clearly in *baba* literature, especially in the *pantun*.

Though the *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* are formulaic compositions, *baba* authors such as Na Tien Pit, Baba Kim Teck, Siow Hay Yam, Lee Eng Seng, Lim Hock Soon and Koh Hun Teck exhibited exceptional talent and intelligence, and were highly successful. Their skill in handling the *baba* Malay tongue is beyond doubt. Showing enormous lexical ability and linguistic virtuosity, they could compose and recreate poems, keeping to the rules and structures of the Malay *pantun*, *syair* or *dondang sayang*. Masterful play with language patterns kept a healthy competition between them alive. Consequently, they managed to describe their life, experiences and visions in leisurely and enchanting ways. Thus, we have poetic songs of praise, friendship, love, romance, sorrow and joy. Na Tien Pit, for instance, was a Christian *baba* born in Bencoolen (Indonesia) in 1836 and later lived for a while in Riau, traded in Aceh and later at Deli and eventually settled in Singapore with his family. While in Singapore, he wrote for Malay newspapers in Java, particularly *Pemberita Betawi*, under the pseudonym of Kalam Langit, a translation of the meaning of Tien Pit in Chinese. His most famous work was *Shaer Almarhoean Beginda Sultan Abu Bakar*, which provides not only an insight into the possible links between *babas* and Malay sultans, but also gives vital information about the pomp and the taste surrounding Malay princes and princesses at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Johor. Siow Hay Yam, first acting secretary of the Chinese Directory and Press Ltd, and later associated with the publication of *Kabar Ucapan Baru* (1926) and *Kabar Bintang Timor News* (1930), was also a respected translator and writer of many *pantuns* and *syairs*. In general, all the *baba* authors, numbering about 60, were highly respected personalities, and are considered by many as superb examples of inspired secular poets of the highest standard. Their *pantun* are still marveled at for their ingenuity and creativity, for being individually expressive and for being perceptive documentaries of local tales and history. The variety of themes and the beauty of the language made their poems among the most highly valued pieces of literary work, appreciated in particular by *babas*, and in general by Malays who are fluent only in their mother tongue.

To them, writing a *pantun* or *syair* was not a mechanical process, although emphasis is given to the following three stringent points:

1. Formula – recurring line and phrase,

2. Structure – specific relations between the lines,
3. Rhythm – recurring word order.

In the *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang*, the rhythm is as important as the structure. The power and beauty of the *pantun* reside in the rhyme, structure, word order and in the experience of the work as a whole. Skillful and creative authors were not only able to compose new poems, they could also transform familiar material. This they did by expressing their own personalities and views within the rules of the poetic forms involved. Points of analysis involve the degree of variance (between different genres) and the degree of individual variation permitted (within a genre). Apparently, they were fully acquainted with style, structure, rhyme, and language norm, which does suggest that their use of formula was far from being a mechanical process, but was instead something which must have taken a long time to master. Formulas helped them to implement rhythmic discourse and acted as mnemonic aids in different ways. The result was not a mere drumming of a beat, but an outpouring of inspiration and creativity.

Undoubtedly, the rich cultural diversity that existed in Malacca, Penang and Singapore in those days played a central role in inspiring these *baba* poets. They spoke passionately of rights, obligations, loyalties, virtues, morality, ideas and sentiments, and described individual experiences philosophically and poetically. In truth, their verses poetised their life and visions, articulating a moral-philosophic view of the world that is always difficult to capture in words. It was principally the Malay *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* as poetic forms that inspired them during an intensive period of literary production between the 1890s and 1950s. They used poems for all purposes, leading to the publication of a considerable number of collections of *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang*, in addition to those published regularly in *baba* newspapers. Today, these works of art are important historical documentations of the emotional life of the *babas*.

A closer examination reveals many traces of influence that Malay *pantun* in general had exerted on *baba's pantun*. Some hypotheses on this issue are given below:

1. Many *baba* authors recreated old expressions that they remembered,
2. They tended to make use of earlier material, or bits of Malay *pantun*,
3. Standardized formulas were grouped around standardized themes,
4. A group of words is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea,
5. Formulaic thought and expression were deeply imprinted in them,
6. Tradition and innovation were complimentary forces, which together assure meaningful communication,
7. They combined earlier materials by following the style, structure, rhythm and language norms of the *pantun*, *syair* or *dondang sayang*,

8. The audience for *baba's* literature was essentially a mixed one – *babas*, Chinese and Malays – which made it natural for the authors to combine multiethnic themes and methods.

Thus, within a relatively short period between 1890s and 1950s, thousands of *baba pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* on various subjects were published. Like Malay *pantun*, the universal themes of love and romance dominate *baba's* *pantuns*.

## DATABASE

The history and significance of the tremendous activity among the *babas* in producing *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* have yet to be studied in depth. What I have been involved in since I was seconded from the Faculty of Information Science and Technology to ATMA in April 1999 is a documentation project. With the intention of producing the first catalogue of such materials for easy reference and to aid further research, I attempted to include the whole gambit of *baba's pantun* including *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* produced its heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Straits Settlements. Like Chinese novels translated into *baba* Malay, many original *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* were published serially in newspapers such as *Kabar Slahu*, *Kabar Ucapan Baru*, *Bintang Peranakan* and *Sri Peranakan*.

Over the years, many people have helped me tremendously at various stages in preparing this inventory. At first I used sources compiled by Claudine Salmon (1977), Tan Chee Beng (1981) and Ian Proudfoot (1993), along with lists of books published in the *baba* newspapers and books to locate materials. Finally I searched the shelves of many libraries, both institutional and personal, in Malaysia and Singapore, made photocopies of them, and requested photocopies of others not available in Malaysia and Singapore. Mr Che Ross Raimy from Australia, Ms Myra Sidharta from Indonesia, and Ms Annabel Teh Gallop from England and Ms Claudine Salmon from France, Mr Yang Quee Yee from Singapore and Mr Koh Kim Bok from Malacca, Tan Chee Beng from Hong Kong and Salmah Khoo from Penang have all been of great assistance. Altogether, I made use of 35 sources. Although this figure exceeded my earlier estimation, the inventory does not pretend to be exhaustive, since five known *pantun* books have still not been located.

Although these *pantun* were the major creative writing of the *babas*, they had for various reasons received little scholarly attention. To date, standard Malay *pantun* books include only Malay *pantun*, and omit *baba* ones. One simple reason may be that the latter are often considered by conservatives to be of poor taste, “adulterated” by many loan words from Chinese dialects, particularly Hokkien and Teochew, unlike pristine Malay *pantuns*. Whichever the case,

this situation is regrettable especially when the tradition of creating and composing *pantuns* has now almost become a thing of the past, passing away with the once prosperous *baba* community. Collecting and documenting their *pantuns* is the best way to preserve them. ATMA decided to make them accessible on the Internet to arouse global interest among scholars and the general public. We hope that the availability of these works will stimulate serious research that will fill a large and painful gap in our knowledge about the Malaysian *baba's* literary creativity.

This inventory is very much a product of modern information technology, relying as it does on digital inputting and search engines. Assuming that the majority of readers conduct searches by author, title, keyword, category and subject, these multiple access points are provided for access to the database. By using any of the accesses provided, readers can easily locate verses of their choice. Readers are advised to search by category for added approaches to the subject. Since many of the *pantuns* can be placed in more than one category, some arbitrariness in categorization is to be expected. The keyword search has been provided to compensate for this. We acknowledge the contributions from Alina Mazwin bt Mansor, Rekha Maryanne Louis, Leong Tack Wei and Tan Oi Yen in designing the search engine as their final year project in the Department of Information Science in the Faculty of Information Science and Technology in 2001/2002.

## CONCLUSION

Profound changes over the last decades have affected the *baba* community. Only occasionally does one hear recitals of *pantun* or catch a glimpse of a *dondang sayang* performance, and when one is lucky enough to do that, it is often at annual *baba* celebrations in Penang, Malacca or Singapore. Recently, *baba's pantun* and *dondang sayang* have been brought to the television screen and onto the radio, bringing a wave of nostalgia with it and introducing newer tunes and habits. Nowadays, it is difficult to find *babas* who can compose *pantun*, *syair* or *dondang saying*. Other media for expression, often based on modern technological innovations such as the Internet, have become infinitely more popular.

Our database is first and foremost a practical reference guide. By bringing together 11,204 *pantun*, *syair* and *dondang sayang* written by *babas* over 100 year from 35 sources, it is hoped that an impressive reference tool and a inspiration for innovative research has been created that will promote a better understanding of this unique *baba* literary heritage. Besides this database, there is no known major collection of *baba* pantuns. To preserve the originality of the materials, we have not tampered with the texts, accepting inconsistencies in spelling, capitalization and formatting.

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