

primary sources on the subject matter, it is disappointing that the publisher, Africa Direct, was unable to budget for professional photography or rigorous editing. Little inaccuracies (such as using the now obsolete *Northern Transvaal* instead of *Limpopo Province* on p. 20 or the spelling of *intsimbi* [not *insimbi*] on p. 53) and the disregard for any coherence in the captions and attributions of the illustrations diminish the success of the publication. It is hoped that future editions will have corrected these errors, thus giving *Zulu Beadwork: Talk with Beads* the respectful attention it deserves.

Carol Kaufmann
Curator of African Art
Iziko South African National Gallery
Cape Town
South Africa
E-mail: ckaufmann@iziko.org.za

Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery: A Collector's Guide.

Ho Wing Meng. Times Books International, Times Centre, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. 2003. 176 pp., 88 color figs., 9 B&W figs., glossary, index. ISBN: 981-232-480-1. \$38.50 (hard cover).

Straits Chinese Beadwork and Embroidery: A Collector's Guide was first published in 1987, and reprinted in its hard-cover format in 2003 and 2006. In 2008 it was published in a paperback version by Marshall Cavendish (ISBN: 9789812616647). As neither the 2006 nor 2008 editions could be procured, this review is based on the 2003 printing.

This volume is one of a set of four books on Straits Chinese works of art – porcelain, silverware, furniture, and needlework. Its author, Ho Wing Meng, was a professor of philosophy at the National University of Singapore. The publication of Ho's series in the mid 1980s coincided with a rise in the popularity of Straits Chinese material culture as collectibles. Although it was prefigured by Ho's (1976) *Straits Chinese Silver* and a catalogue of an exhibition on porcelain at the University of Malaya by William Willetts and Lim Suan Poh (1981), the series forms one of the earliest sustained efforts to document and contextualize a body of artifacts associated particularly with the Straits Chinese.

"Straits Chinese" is a potentially confusing term which deserves clarification, especially as current emphasis on the

connections between acculturated Chinese communities in Malaysia and Singapore, southern Thailand, and Indonesia has now rendered the term "Peranakan Chinese" a commonplace, although not uncontested, appellation. Historically, the term "Straits Chinese" is derived from "Straits-born Chinese" and refers to Chinese born in the Straits Settlements – primarily the port cities of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore – which had been founded or taken under British jurisdiction between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Strictly speaking, not all locally born Chinese were part of the "Peranakan Chinese" (or "Baba and Nyonya") communities for whom Chinese and Malay practices were incorporated into daily and ceremonial life. Ho's (1983) use of the term "Straits Chinese" relates to the Peranakan Chinese, for he reminds readers of the "Sino-Malay" elements of their "hybrid culture."

Although some Nyonya needleworkers may have carried out both beading and embroidery, Ho's two-part division of his book into beadwork and embroidery gives recognition to the distinctions between each of these practices and the materials they employ. He organizes the content in each part according to wider contexts of beadwork and embroidery elsewhere in the world, as well as origins, materials, techniques, and typology according to function.

Examples illustrated in the book were drawn primarily from four important private collections: Mrs. Grace Saw, whose family was involved in the provision of wedding equipment and whose collection was formed largely in Penang; Mr. Peter Wee, owner of Katong Antique House in Singapore and grandson of a prominent Straits-Chinese family with roots in Singapore and Melaka; Mr. Don Harper, a longtime resident and collector in Indonesia; and Mrs. Ho Wing Meng. A number of pieces from the Harper collection were subsequently acquired by the then National Museum of Singapore and have been published in Eng-Lee Seok Chee's (1989) catalogue.

In his opening, Ho stresses that beadwork and embroidery are works of Straits Chinese women themselves and therefore typify their unique aesthetic (pp. 13-17). In the first part, a review of the value of beads and beadwork as items of prestige in the ancient world precedes his presentation of Straits Chinese beadwork and its association with wedding tradition in Chapter 3. Ho reiterates the "hybrid" nature of Straits Chinese culture, arguing that their beadwork conforms to a distinct aesthetic. After examining the characteristics of beadwork, he concludes that Straits Chinese beadwork "owes its form and functions to old Hindu-Malay customs and practices, its decorative designs to ancient Chinese

motifs... and its techniques and craftsmanship to Malay and other cultures of ancient vintage” (p. 36). Unfortunately, this oversimplifies the sources of inspiration for beadwork which can be misleading given his unequivocal style of writing.

A brief discussion of the manufacture of drawn glass beads and sewing equipment in Chapter 4 is followed by an explanation of beadwork techniques in the following chapter. These are divided into stringing, stitching (by which he means the attachment of beads to a base fabric with thread), and threading or bead-netting. Ho does not go into the variety of stitches or techniques and his illustration of netting on p. 56 is puzzling as it does not show the precise path of threads through beads. It is also rather different from the more detailed explanation provided by Valerie Hector (1995), an experienced beader herself, of the multiple-thread technique for one example of Straits Chinese netting which she examined. Some of the patterns Ho shows do not appear to correspond either to Malay or Straits Chinese examples I have seen. Furthermore, a number of examples of bead embroidery (Figs. 1, 4, 17, 34, 39) are erroneously described as threaded panels.

Ho develops a categorization for beadwork by function: personal ornaments such as belts and slippers, and decorative ornaments such as panels and hangings. This is not only a useful typology of the forms, but also shows the variety of objects which were beaded and facilitates comparison with similarly embroidered articles in the second part of the book. While Ho does not focus on regional styles, he observes that Penang beadwork is dominated by motifs of rose-like peonies and most of the larger netted beadwork has a Penang provenance. He also includes a separate chapter on Indonesia that usefully highlights some of the similarities and differences between Peranakan Chinese beadwork from Indonesia and the Straits Settlements. For example, the *tempat surat* or holder for wedding documents (pp. 80-83) is not common in the Straits Settlements and suggests regional variants in Peranakan Chinese culture. A number of the items (e.g., Figs. 41 and 43) attributed to Java are, however, from Sumatra (see Eng-Lee 1989:71 and Ee et al. 2008:220-221). Most of the beadwork from the Harper collection was acquired from Sumatra (Don Harper 2006: pers. comm.).

The embroidery section of the book is broad in scope and encompasses metallic-thread and silk-thread hand embroidery as well as machine-made embroidery. In contrast to Ho’s focus on the local nature of beadwork, Straits Chinese embroidery includes work not thought to have been made by them. Ho places Straits Chinese embroidery firmly within a Chinese needlework tradition based on techniques and materials and notes that this presents a difficulty in distinguishing between embroidery imported from China and locally made examples. He supposes that the latter were

dominated by smaller examples although he also asserts, based on style, that some smaller pieces were not Nyonya handwork but does not explain this further. Whereas Ho’s caveats on origin need to be heeded, he tends to dismiss the Nyonya’s own embroidery as “at best, an amateur pastime” (p. 98) that produced items less sophisticated than Chinese output, rather than to investigate the works closely. This renders the second part of the book less satisfactory.

A variety of basic silk-thread stitches (including knot, chain, satin, and voided satin stitches) are reviewed in Chapter 9. Surprisingly, Ho does not place his discussion of the techniques of raised silk-thread and metallic-thread embroidery and the use of cardboard cutouts here, relegating the description instead to two paragraphs in Chapter 10 under the sub-section “Items of Malay or Indonesian Origin” (p. 120; see also the unfinished panels illustrated in Figs. 19 and 51). Oddly, in the last part of this sub-section, his comparison of Straits Chinese and Malay embroidery states confidently that the Straits Chinese motifs and “techniques of stitchery” were derived from traditional Chinese sources based on a comparison with the limited repertoire of stitches in Malay needlework (p. 128). Yet Straits Chinese raised metallic-thread embroidery and the application of cardboard cutouts can be compared with techniques of Malay raised metallic-thread needlework (*tekat timbul*).

Embroideries are categorized first by size (which the author relates to origin) or dependence on local forms, and then by function in Chapter 10. This makes the flow of his discussion awkward, which moves from smaller personal to room ornaments, then back to smaller personal accessories of local forms and soft furnishings, only to be interrupted by information on *kebaya* or short blouse embroideries, before moving on to large altar hangings, wedding costumes, and rank badges. Ho deserves credit for including *kebaya* embroideries within the scope of Straits Chinese embroidery. Yet, with its history closely tied to the development of Indo-European “fashions” in the Netherlands Indies, this topic would probably have been better served by a separate chapter that could have included a more thorough discussion of the types of laces and embroideries, particularly machine embroidery.

Chapter 11 presents some generic information on needles, threads, dyes, and silk and Chapter 12 briefly discusses Chinese sericulture. A final but unnumbered chapter highlights the difficulties of dating works and the care with which one must approach dealer-supplied information. The glossary consists entirely of definitions of various gemstones which seems an odd focus as such materials have a tenuous relationship to Straits Chinese beadwork and embroidery. A glossary of Straits Chinese terms would have been much more relevant.

Ho admits he has “interwoven... statements of fact, fiction and conjectures... to arouse [the reader’s] interest and imagination” (p. ix). Although endnotes are provided, the lack of notes concerning oral sources makes it difficult to follow up on some of his assertions. Furthermore, his largely “factual” tone of presenting information is not conducive to distinguishing between informed speculations, genuine errors, and deliberate fictive creations. It is difficult, for instance, to understand the extent to which Straits Chinese beadworkers themselves may have regarded the facets of *manek potong* or “cut glass beads” as “accidental effects of polishing” (p. 45) since subsequent research on beadmaking highlights the deliberate production of beads with these characteristics. Attribution of a panel of metallic-thread embroidery (Fig. 77) to “old Malay workmanship” is unexplained and deserves clarification. There are also a number of minor errors. For example, the lotuses in Fig. 59 are described as peonies and the beaded collar in Fig. 33, described as a collar for the flower girl, is of a form generally worn by boys (*see* the boy’s dress in Fig. 82).

With the benefit of more recent research and subsequent publications, it is all too easy to be critical of Ho’s work and we must acknowledge that Ho’s discussions reflect, in part, the state of knowledge in the 1970s and early 1980s. In attempting to document and categorize information on Straits Chinese beadwork and embroidery, Ho’s book provided a framework for enthusiasts wishing to further their knowledge and develop their collecting agendas. It served a generation of museum curators and researchers. Importantly, Ho’s book also brought to the fore the manifold forms and significance of beadwork and embroidery for Straits Chinese culture and society at a time when hardly any literature on the subject was available. As the several reprintings suggest, the book has become essential reading for anyone interested in Straits Chinese needlework and it can only be hoped that future versions will address some of the shortcomings. Much more than just a collector’s guide, it stands as a major contribution to the study of Straits Chinese beadwork and embroidery. Even in its present form, some 20 years after it was first released, Ho’s work (and his conjectures) can still suggest avenues for further research.

REFERENCES CITED

Ee, Randall et al.

2008 *Peranakan Museum A-Z Guide*. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

BEADS 20:86-87 (2008)

Eng-Lee, Seok Chee

1989 *Festive Expressions: Nyonya Beadwork and Embroidery*. National Museum, Singapore.

Hector, Valerie

1995 Prosperity, Reverence and Protection: An Introduction to Asian Beadwork. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 7:3-36.

Ho, Wing Meng

1976 *Straits Chinese Silver*. University Education Press, Singapore.

1983 *Straits Chinese Porcelain: A Collector’s Guide*. Times Books International, Singapore.

Willetts, William and Lim Suan Poh

1981 *Nonya Ware and Kitchen Ch’ing: Ceremonial and Domestic Pottery of the 19th-20th Centuries Commonly found in Malaysia*. Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, West Malaysia Chapter, Selangor.

Hwei-Fe’n Cheah

Australian National University

AD Hope Building # 14

ACT 0200, Australia

E-mail: cheahhf@gmail.com

Chinese Sewing Baskets.

Betty-Lou Mukerji. AuthorHouse, Bloomington, IN. 2007. 202 pp., 71 color figs. Order from Betty-Lou Mukerji, c/o Wolf Run Ranch & Studio, 375 Wolf Valley Drive, Umpqua, OR 97486. ISBN: 978-1-4389-1523-4. \$49.98 (soft cover).

Combining nostalgia and exhaustive research, collector Betty-Lou Mukerji has produced a volume that will be indispensable to all with an interest in Chinese baskets and the “Peking” glass beads and bangles that adorn them. Her love for these 20th-century artifacts, fast becoming antiques, is apparent throughout the book.

Her investigation into the baskets’ origin refutes the often-encountered myth that they were shipped from China already ornamented and filled with exotic wares or delicacies. In fact, they arrived in bundles at United States (and other countries’) ports and were de-bugged, stained, and decorated in the local Chinatowns, usually by children. The glass beads and bangles, coins, and tassels could be bought separately in some of the shops, and the design