

BRIDGING THE PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH FOOD HERITAGE AMONG PERANAKAN CHINESE OF THE STRAITS OF MALACCA¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ritual role of specific types of food and drink amongst the Peranakan Chinese of the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia. Food, in this context, is not merely for consumption but functions also as ritual apparatuses. These rituals, performed by the caretaker of a Peranakan Chinese family, invoke the unseen spiritual realm during a ritual event. The Peranakan Chinese community acknowledges the significance of specific food and drink as essential to these ceremonial proceedings. Food and drink function as a bridge between the realms of the seen and the unseen, and signify a metaphysical link between ritual practitioners and the supernatural world. The Peranakan Chinese, or commonly known as the Baba-Nyonyas of the Straits of Malacca, are descendants of 15th -17th century Chinese immigrants from the Indonesian archipelago and British Malaya who adopted Nusantara customs and assimilated into local communities. Food and drinks offered to the ancestors and spirits form a major community-wide series of offerings performed a few times a year by family members who continue to maintain the tradition. Typically, the rituals coincide with events of the Chinese calendar such as Chinese New Year and the Hungry Ghost Festival. These series of rituals involve every household of the Peranakan Chinese community.

Keywords: traditional food, invoke, bridge, unseen spiritual, Peranakan Chinese, Baba-Nyonya, Straits of Malacca

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