

Promoting Peranakan Heritage Motifs through Typography

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ABSTRACT

Typography is a visual language that appears in various forms, such as printed media, packaging, and digital screens. Typography designs vary in texture, x-height, posture, weight, width, colour etc depending on the intended tone of voice. This study focuses on the Peranakan heritage motifs in Melaka, exploring their potential use in branding the heritage through typography. Visual assessments of available items—such as packaging design and other promotion items—along with a search for typefaces on websites, reveal that the use of Peranakan motifs in typography is still quite limited. We argue that incorporating Peranakan identity into typography can enhance its aesthetic appeal, making it suitable for branding or other decorative design purposes. To reflect this identity in typography, the students are tasked in creating a custom typeface inspired by Peranakan heritage. The 5 keys of principle of designs (balance, harmony, contrast, rhythm and emphasis) has been used to analysing several Peranakan heritage items from Melaka, such as woodcarvings, tiles, clothing, beading and paintings. The selected motifs from these items are then extracted for application in typography. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the branding of Peranakan heritage, offering new opportunities for promoting the culture through typography.

Keyword: Peranakan Heritage, Motifs, Identity, Branding, Typography

INTRODUCTION

Language, culture, and identity are fundamental in shaping how individuals relate to their place of settlement and heritage (Ge & Xiong, 2025). Language, in particular, functions as a vessel for tradition and heritage, serving as an important identity marker. For instance, a Chinese individual who speaks fluent Malay but not their ancestral tongue is often associated with the Baba Nyonya, also known as the Peranakan (Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, n.d.). Peranakan culture—a hybrid blending Chinese and Malay influences—is vividly expressed in cuisine (kuih-muih), traditional dress (kebaya), and heritage architecture (Peranakan Museum, n.d.). Its designs and motifs are rich in visual symbolism and can be applied innovatively in typeface design to narrate cultural heritage more engagingly (Gumulya, 2023).

Typography is a compelling form of visual communication that transcends mere functionality. It conveys cultural meaning, evokes emotion, and can amplify identity through thoughtful design (Hecks, 2025). Whether conveyed through free handwriting, sculpture, or digital media—on print or screen—typography is a widespread tool. Significantly, it holds unique potential for promoting cultural identity, enabling communities to preserve and share their heritage through design (Ge & Xiong, 2025).

Problem Statement

Despite its vibrant cultural heritage, the representation of Peranakan identity in modern design remains limited (Huang et al., 2024). Souvenirs and promotional materials—such as posters, flyers, and merchandise—rarely incorporate traditional motifs that reflect Peranakan identity; instead, they rely on generic, widely used typefaces that lack cultural distinctiveness (Ahmad et al, 2019). Consequently, the unique visual voice of Peranakan culture is underrepresented in contemporary design practice. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how Peranakan motifs can be adapted into typography to promote cultural identity through design.

Objectives

1. To investigate the integration of Peranakan motifs into typographic design.
2. To promote and preserve Peranakan heritage by employing typography as a medium of cultural expression.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION & METHODOLOGY

The typography artworks were designed to embody and reflect the identity of Peranakan heritage. Motifs were carefully extracted from diverse elements of Peranakan material culture in Melaka, including embroidery, ceramic tiles, textiles, and other decorative designs. These motifs were then integrated into typeface creations that reflect the personality and overall aesthetic of each font. Different motifs were applied to different fonts, with each design conveying a distinct tone of voice through its typographic presentation.

Prior to their implementation, the motifs were analyzed using established design principles—balance, harmony, contrast, rhythm, and emphasis (Lidwell et al., 2010). This analysis guided the process of simplifying and adapting the motifs, ensuring their aesthetic qualities were preserved while making them suitable for typographic application. As a result, each font represents a unique visual personality and communicative function.

The practical component of this study involved 37 students who were tasked with selecting Peranakan motifs and applying them to their own font designs. Through this process, the students successfully demonstrated the potential of cultural motifs in typography. The resulting typefaces highlight opportunities not only for cultural preservation but also for commercialization and branding within contemporary design contexts..

Potential Findings and Commercialisation

The analysis of Peranakan motifs through the principles of design revealed several key characteristics:

- **Balance** – Motifs are often presented in symmetrical arrangements, with repetition evident in floral, faunal, or geometric shapes.
- **Harmony** – Achieved through the consistent repetition of motifs, with a dominant use of pastel colour palettes alongside brighter tones such as red and cobalt blue.
- **Contrast** – Created by combining fine lines with solid shapes, set against bold or soft colour backgrounds.
- **Rhythm** – Established through the recurring use of floral, faunal, or geometric forms, generating a sense of visual flow.
- **Emphasis** – Expressed through the presence of a central motif serving as the focal point, supported by smaller surrounding motifs.

Three samples were randomly selected from the 37 typography artworks designed by students and tested across three different platforms - digital screen, print and sculptural applications. The outcomes demonstrated that these typefaces can be effectively arranged and applied not only as typographic artworks but also across diverse media formats. This adaptability highlights their potential for both cultural promotion and commercialization, offering opportunities to showcase and preserve Peranakan heritage in contemporary contexts.

Figure 1 Typeface inspired by Peranakan tile design (digital screen)

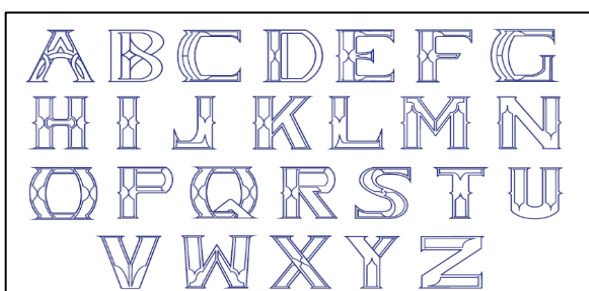


Figure 2 Typeface inspired by Peranakan textile batik design (print on paper)

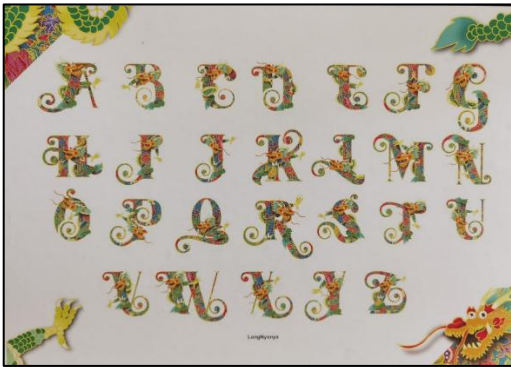
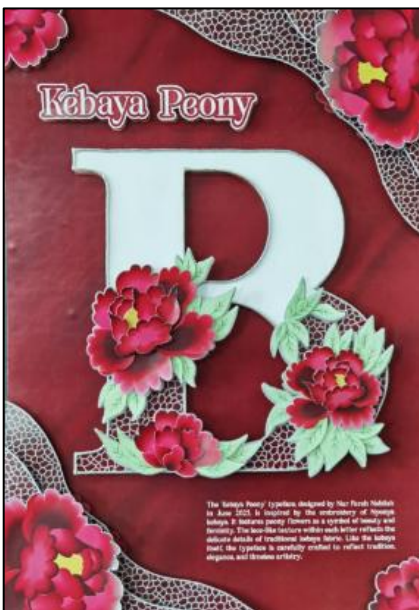


Figure 3 Typeface inspired by Peranakan baju kebaya design (paper sculpture)



NOVELTY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the novelty of using typography as a medium to promote Peranakan heritage, an approach that has been rarely explored in previous research. The typefaces created demonstrate that Peranakan heritage can be preserved in visual communication while retaining its aesthetic value. By adapting cultural literacy into typographic form, the designs provide a distinctive means of expressing cultural identity and offer a potential pathway for preserving heritage within the Southeast Asian context.

Future collaborations are recommended between students, academics, design professionals, and cultural practitioners such as Peranakan artisans, historians, and community members. Such partnerships would ensure the authenticity of design interpretations and safeguard cultural value when applied to typography. Furthermore, the integration of Peranakan-inspired typography in exhibitions, campaigns, and branding initiatives could enhance both the visibility and engagement of Peranakan identity, positioning it as a meaningful contemporary expression in design.

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