

# The Symbolic Images Reflecting Peranakan Culture in Drama Series of the Little Nyonya

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## Abstract

This study employed qualitative content analysis to explore the representation of Peranakan cultural identity through costumes in “The Little Nyonya.” The research aimed to identify and categorize key garments, styles, and accessories in the series, while analyzing how character attire reflects cultural identity, social status, and personality traits. Data was drawn from selected episodes, supported by scholarly resources on Peranakan culture and costume design. The sample included prominent characters, such as Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang, Chen Sheng, and Chen Xi, and significant scenes like weddings, family gatherings, and business meetings. The analysis involved categorization, coding, and thematic exploration, with results visualized through tables and graphics.

The findings reveal that costumes in “The Little Nyonya” act as cultural artifacts, embodying Peranakan heritage and identity. Iconic garments, such as Kebayas, Sun Yat Sen-style shirts, and Western suits, highlight the interplay of tradition and modernity, reflecting the cultural hybridity of Peranakan identity. Costumes and accessories also delineate social hierarchies, with intricate designs and colors signifying wealth and status, while reflecting characters' personalities and societal roles. These insights have applications in education, media production, and heritage tourism, fostering cultural awareness and authenticity. Future research could explore audience reception, comparative media analyses, and the globalization of Peranakan attire, further enriching the understanding of cultural preservation and hybrid identity evolution.

**Keywords:** Peranakan dress culture; The Little Nyonya; Cultural identity; Social status; Cultural heritage

## Introduction

Peranakan culture, a vibrant fusion of Chinese and indigenous Malay elements, represents a cornerstone of Southeast Asian heritage. While its influence extends across cuisine, architecture, and traditional attire, Peranakan clothing stands out as a profound visual emblem of cultural identity and social dynamics (Poomduang et al., 2021). Renowned for its intricate materials, styles, and patterns, this attire encapsulates the community's traditions, beliefs, and aesthetic values, serving as a crucial marker of Peranakan identity.

Media representations, such as the television series The Little Nyonya, have showcased this unique heritage through character costumes that intricately blend Chinese and Malay influences. Set in 1930s Malacca, the series explores the cultural and social challenges faced by the Peranakan community during World War II. Despite the series' widespread acclaim and its significant role in fostering cultural appreciation, scholarly investigations into the depiction of Peranakan attire on television remain scarce. Although prior studies by

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Nugroho (2022), Neo, Ngo, and Heng (2019), and Lee (2012) have examined various dimensions of Peranakan culture, the narrative functions and cultural symbolism of attire within television contexts remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address this research gap by systematically identifying and categorizing the key garments, styles, and accessories featured in *The Little Nyonya*. It examines the cultural significance of these elements within the Peranakan community and investigates how the characters' costume choices operate as narrative tools, reflecting cultural identity and individual personality. Through an in-depth analysis of the costumes, this research underscores the complexities of representing Peranakan culture in media, offering new insights into the intersection of cultural heritage and visual storytelling.

## Research Objectives

1. To identify and categorize key garments, styles, and accessories in “*The Little Nyonya*,” elucidating their cultural significance within the Peranakan community.
2. To analyze how character attire reflects cultural identity, social status, and personality traits, providing insights into the nuanced representation of Peranakan dress culture in media.

## Literature Reviews

### The History of Peranakan Attire

Peranakan attire embodies a fusion of cultural influences, integrating Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western styles. Its evolution from the 16th century illustrates the community's adaptive identity amidst sociopolitical changes.

From the 16th to 19th centuries, early Peranakan clothing featured the Baju Panjang, a blouse over a Batik Sarong, crafted from cotton, satin, or silk, adorned with vibrant motifs reflecting local Malay aesthetics (Krungkaeo, 2020; Lee, 2012). This period showcased influences from Javanese and Malay batik patterns, emphasizing regional interactions.

As Peranakan culture matured, the early 20th century introduced the Kebaya, an intricately embroidered blouse that symbolizes elegance and cultural pride (Neo, 2019; Krungkaeo, 2020). In contrast to the loose Baju Panjang, the tailored Kebaya indicated a preference for formal attire, complemented by brightly patterned sarongs that mirrored evolving aesthetics.

By the mid-20th century, post-World War II, Peranakan fashion integrated Western influences, with white lace Kebayas paired with floral sarongs becoming prevalent, blending traditional and Western styles (Lee, 2012). This period epitomized cultural hybridity, where attire reflected continuity and adaptation through external influences.

In contemporary society, Peranakan attire persists in evolving forms of color, pattern, and material, showcasing tradition and personal identity. Traditional elements remain integral during cultural events, festivals, and family ceremonies, preserving the community's heritage.

### About "The Little Nyonya"

According to Wichaijedchan (2021), "The Little Nyonya" offers an insightful exploration of the Peranakan community. The series delves into Peranakan identity amidst social and political changes in Malacca from the 1930s to the 1960s. Besides its entertainment value, "The Little Nyonya" is acclaimed for its accurate portrayal of Peranakan culture. It highlights the community's distinct language, social customs, rituals, and aesthetics through vibrant kebayas, intricate beadwork, and delectable cuisine.

This depiction has revitalized interest in the community's heritage and prompted discussions on cultural preservation and identity today. Scholars are investigating the series' potential as a tool for understanding the Peranakan community. For instance, Nookaew and Chaisingkananont (2023) analyze the evolution of women's roles and marriage customs through female characters across generations. Additionally, Kurniawan et al. (2022) regard "The Little Nyonya" as a significant historical resource for studying life in Malacca and Singapore during the depicted era.

### Theories and Concepts

Cultural hybridity exemplifies the integration of Chinese, Malay, and Western elements, particularly in Peranakan attire. This cultural convergence is analyzable via Burke's five-dimensional framework, which includes objects, terminology, situations, responses, and outcomes (Burke, 2009, as cited in Porfido, 2012), facilitating a nuanced comprehension of cultural expressions through clothing.

Furthermore, based on Stuart Hall's constructionist view, cultural representation theory posits that attire symbolizes identity and cultural lineage (Hall, 1997). An illustrative case is "The Little Nyonya," where costume design is pivotal in representing Peranakan cultural identity.

Additionally, attire serves as a nonverbal communication medium, following Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, which investigates how character costumes indicate their social roles and identities, enriching the narrative and cultural framework. Collectively, these theories offer an in-depth perspective on the role of dress in cultural interactions and representations.

## Research Methodology

This research utilized *qualitative content analysis* to explore the representation of Peranakan cultural identity through costumes in The Little Nyonya. The study focused on the symbolic significance of visual elements within the series, examining their role as nonverbal communicative tools and cultural representations.

**Source of Data:** Primary data was obtained from selected episodes of The Little Nyonya, while secondary data comprised scholarly articles, books, and online resources on Peranakan culture, history, and costume design. These sources provided essential cultural context and theoretical frameworks for the analysis.

**Population and Sampling:** A *purposive sampling* approach was adopted to select characters and scenes that aligned with the research objectives:

**Characters:** Prominent figures such as Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang, Chen Sheng, and Chen Xi were chosen for their significance in representing cultural and social dynamics.

**Scenes:** Key events, including weddings, family gatherings, and business meetings, were selected to offer insights into costume use across various cultural and social contexts.

**Data Collection:** This involved a systematic process to ensure comprehensive and accurate analysis: *Repeated Viewing*: Episodes were reviewed multiple times to document costume details with precision.

**Data Recording Forms:** Costumes were categorized based on type, color, pattern, material, and accessories for thorough analysis.

**Supplementary Research:** Academic literature on Peranakan culture and costume theory was reviewed to deepen the understanding of cultural context and significance.

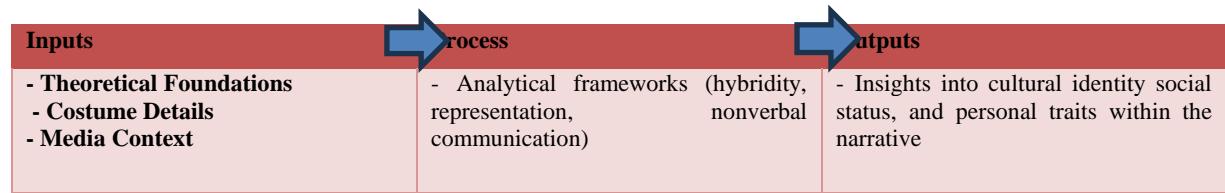
**Data Analysis:** The collected data was subjected to a detailed analysis, involving:

**Categorization:** Costumes were classified according to their type, color, patterns, and materials.

**Coding and Organization:** Spreadsheet tools were utilized to identify trends and patterns across the dataset.

**Thematic Analysis:** Relationships between costume elements and aspects such as cultural identity, social status, and personality traits were explored. Findings were presented visually through tables and graphics, offering a clear representation of trends and insights.

According to research methodology can show as *conceptual framework*:



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## Research Results

### 1. To identify and categorize key garments, styles, and accessories in “The Little Nyonya,” elucidating their cultural significance within the Peranakan community.

#### Costume and Style

“The Little Nyonya” revealed various costumes that embodied the Peranakan identity, reflected Chinese heritage, and incorporated Western influences. These costumes were meticulously crafted for character portrayal and fulfilled various roles, including family gatherings, wedding ceremonies, and business meetings, as delineated in Table 1.

The significant findings indicated that Kebayas and Peranakan-style shirts were prevalent as traditional garments representing Peranakan culture and were appropriate for formal and informal occasions. Sun Yat Sen-style shirts and Chinese-style blouses were utilized in particular contexts, demonstrating the influence of Chinese culture. Furthermore, suits were favored for corporate events, exemplifying the Western influence on formal wear and the characters' adaptation to contemporary standards, as presented in Table 2.

Additionally, the characters' choices of color and pattern encapsulate their personalities, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 1** Characters' Costumes and Styles in the Various Episodes and Situations

Episode	Situation	Character	Costume	Pattern	Color	Decoration
2	Family gathering	Huang Juxiang	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Light pink	Traditional embroidery
3	Family gathering	Chen Sheng	Sun Yat Sen style shirt	Plain	White	None
5	Wedding ceremony	Huang Juxiang	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Light pink	Traditional embroidery
17	Business meeting	Chen Sheng, Chen Xi	Suit	Plain	Coffee, Light Blue	None
19	Ceremony	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Light orange	Traditional embroidery
20	Ceremony	Chen Sheng	Peranakan style shirt	Floral	Red and black	None
23	Wedding (special ritual)	Yamamoto Yueniang	Chinese style blouse	Plain	White	None
24	Wedding ceremony	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Red and gold	Traditional embroidery
33	Wedding (purpose moment)	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Light yellow	Traditional embroidery
34	Family gathering	Yamamoto Yueniang (old)	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral and Peacock	Light green	Traditional embroidery

**Table 2** Costume Choices Reflecting Cultural Identity of Characters

Significant	Episode	Situation	Character	Costume
Peranakan Culture	2	Family gathering	Huang Juxiang	Kebaya (blouse)
	5	Wedding ceremony	Huang Juxiang	Kebaya (blouse)
	19	Ceremony	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)
	20	Ceremony	Chen Sheng	Peranakan style shirt
	24	Wedding ceremony	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)

Significant	Episode	Situation	Character	Costume
	33	Wedding (purpose moment)	Yamamoto Yueniang	Kebaya (blouse)
	34	Family gathering	Yamamoto Yueniang (old)	Kebaya (blouse)
Chinese culture	3	Family gathering	Chen Sheng	Sun Yat Sen style shirt
	23	Wedding (special ritual)	Yamamoto Yueniang	Chinese style blouse
Western culture	17	Business meeting	Chen Sheng Chen Xi	Suit

**Table 3:** Characters' Costume Choices Reflecting Personality

Personality	Character	Costume	Pattern	Color
Gentle and sweet	Huang Juxiang	Kebaya (Blouse)	Floral	Light pink
	Yamamoto Yueniang		Floral	Light orange, light yellow
	Yamamoto Yueniang (old)		Floral and peacock	Light green
	Chen Xi	Suit	Plain	Light blue
Confident	Chen Sheng	Peranakan style shirt	Floral	Red and black

### Accessories

The deliberate application of accessories in "The Little Nyonya" fulfills multiple significant roles: they function as identifiers of personal identity, emblems of cultural heritage, and indicators of societal stratification, as demonstrated in Table 4. For example, the gold embellishments that Huang Juxiang and Yamamoto Yueniang adorned signify their affluence and social prominence within Peranakan society. Simultaneously, the floral hair ornaments worn by Yamamoto Yueniang express a notion of femininity and refinement. Conversely, the timepieces Chen Sheng and Chen Xi displayed epitomize their contemporary and cultured personas.

Furthermore, the interplay of costumes and accessories can act as potent representations of social standing, reflecting social class and hierarchy transitions, as illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 4** Characters' Accessories

Jewelry/Accessory	Description	Characters	Suitability to Role
Earrings	Made of gold, small (square, oval shapes)	Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context
Necklace	Made of gold, oval-shaped pendant	Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context
Bracelet	Made of gold, line pattern	Huang Juxiang	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context
Hair Accessories	Real flowers & gold (small pink flowers, large gold rounds with red flowers)	Yamamoto Yueniang	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context
Watch	Silver & leather (silver watch, black leather strap)	Chen Sheng, Chen Xi	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context
Ring	Gold with diamond pendant	Yamamoto Yueniang (old)	Reflects social status & personality, fits scene context

**Table 5** Characters' Costumes and Accessories Combination Reflecting Social Status

Character	Episode	Situation	Costume	Pattern	Accessories	Status
Huang Juxiang	2	Family gathering	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Small size of gold earring and middle size of gold oval shape pendant necklace	Middle class
Chen Sheng	3	Family gathering	Sun Sen Yat style shirt	Plain	Medium size of silver watch with black leather strap	Upper class

Character	Episode	Situation	Costume	Pattern	Accessories	Status
Huang Juxiang	5	Wedding ceremony	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Middle size of gold oval shape pendant necklace, small size of gold earring and big size of gold bracelet	Upper class
Chen Sheng	17	Business meeting	Suit	Plain	Medium size of silver watch with black leather strap	Upper class
Chen Xi	17	Business meeting	Suit	Plain	none	Upper class
Yamamoto Yueniang	19	Ceremony	Kebaya (blouse)	Floral	Small size of gold earring	Middle class

In "The Little Nyonya," individuals' socio-economic standing is manifested through their garments and adornments, thereby differentiating between the middle and upper classes of society. The characters Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang, and Chen Sheng represent the middle class during familial and matrimonial ceremonies. Conversely, Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang, Chen Sheng, and Chen Xi exemplify the upper class at pivotal occasions such as nuptial celebrations and corporate gatherings.

Additionally, during wedding ceremonies, which are celebratory events in Peranakan culture, characters embellish themselves with prosperous accessories. Huang Juxiang is adorned with a gold pendant necklace, earrings, and an expansive bracelet, whereas Yamamoto Yueniang showcases a medium-sized gold pendant accompanied by a substantial bracelet. The accessory preferences of Cheng Shen and Chen Xi fluctuate according to the specific event.

Furthermore, Yamamoto Yueniang's selection of accessories illustrates her transition from the middle class to the upper class; her subsequent extravagant choices, including a diamond ring, underscore her elevation into higher societal levels.

In summary, in "The Little Nyonya," the costumes and accessories worn by characters symbolize their social status. They can reflect their manner of costume selection. The analysis emphasizes how clothing choices serve as a narrative device to explore shifts in social class throughout the story.

## 2. To analyze how character attire reflects cultural identity, social status, and personality traits, providing insights into the nuanced representation of Peranakan dress culture in media.

### Analysis of Characters' Costumes Reflecting Cultural Identity

"The Little Nyonya" effectively employs traditional garments to illustrate the cultural richness of the Peranakan community. This examination focuses on how significant attire, including Kebaya, Sun Yat Sen-style shirts, and suits, conveys cultural importance and influences character interpretation. This study utilizes lenses of cultural representation and hybridity research to investigate these costumes' narrative impact and cultural representation.

#### 1 Kebaya (blouse)



**Figure 2** Huang Juxiang (left) and Yamamoto Yueniang (right)

Source: *The Little Nyonya* 小娘惹, 2008.

The Kebaya (blouse) embodies cultural significance for Peranakan women, symbolizing identity and femininity. C. O. K. Neo (2019) and Krungkaeo (2020) illustrate that the embroidery and lace details on Kebaya blouses signify social status and personal taste. Complemented by batik sarongs, these garments merge Malay and Chinese elements, showcasing cultural heritage. Characters such as Huang Juxiang and Yamamoto Yueniang frequently don Kebaya, highlighting its importance in cultural representation and daily life (Figure 2).

Hall (1997) posits that symbols and signs influence representation. The Kebaya's intricate designs and vibrant colors symbolize the confluence of Chinese and Malay cultures, shaping perceptions of Peranakan identity. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) asserts that clothing is a tool for self-presentation, allowing individuals to convey desired traits. In the series, the Kebayas' soft hues suggest gentleness, while bold shades project confidence, emphasizing the impact of attire on the wearer's persona.

#### 2 Sun Yat Sen-style shirts



**Figure 3** Cheng Shen with Sun Yat Sen-style shirt

Source: *The Little Nyonya* 小娘惹, 2008.

The Sun Yat Sen-style shirt, or Zhongshan suit, is a significant emblem of modernity and cultural identity. It is named after Sun Yat-sen, a pivotal figure in establishing the Republic of China (Strukova, 2023) and represents more than mere clothing. Characters like Chen Sheng use this shirt to express their dedication to traditional Chinese values and modernity (Figure 3). This correlates with Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, whereby clothing shapes perceptions and communicates particular social messages. Consequently, the Sun Yat Sen-style shirt is an indexical sign of historical consciousness and cultural identity, illustrating Peranakan society's blend of traditional and contemporary elements.

### 3 Suit

The suit has evolved significantly since the 15th century, mirroring shifts in social norms and stylistic preferences. Historically, suits showcased intricate designs and vibrant colors, symbolizing the wearer's social standing and affluence (Schemes et al., 2009). In "The Little Nyonya," characters like Cheng Shen and Chen Xi utilize suits to signify modernity, professionalism, and authority (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** Cheng Shen (left) and Chen Xi (right) Source: *The Little Nyonya* 小娘惹, 2008.

Hall's (1997) constructionist perspective underscores the cultural influence on meaning, indicating that suits embody modernity and a departure from traditional Peranakan attire in the series. The transition from ornate suits to contemporary professional wear exemplifies evolving social norms and aesthetic preferences. Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory elucidates clothing's role in shaping perceptions. Thus, suits serve as a medium for characters to convey competence and modern professional standards, juxtaposed with the traditional Peranakan clothing depicted in the series.

Clothed in "The Little Nyonya," costumes function on multiple levels, acting as signs and signifiers within a semiotic framework (Barthes, 1983). Each element, from the color and fabric to the intricate designs, carries cultural meanings that inform the audience's understanding of the characters and their social contexts. For instance, the vibrant colors and rich embroidery on Kebaya blouses signify aesthetics, festivity, cultural pride, and, potentially, the wearer's social status. This approach aligns with Hall's (1997) concept of representation, where cultural symbols like clothing construct meaning.

The series further exemplifies cultural hybridity (Burke, 2009, as cited in Porfido, 2012) through its portrayal of dress. The Kebaya itself is a fusion of Malay and Chinese influences, reflecting the Peranakan community's unique heritage. Similarly, the characters' use of traditional and modern garments, like Sun Yat-sen shirts alongside suits, showcases the ongoing evolution and blending of cultural elements within the Peranakan identity.

### Critical Analysis

While "The Little Nyonya" effectively employs costumes to illustrate Peranakan culture, critical considerations remain. The series aims for historical fidelity, yet dramatic demands may prompt selective portrayal. Specific attire may be exaggerated or idealized to enhance visual storytelling, possibly straying from authentic daily wear. Ang (2006) posits that such selective representation might neglect less visually appealing yet equally important social or cultural elements. For example, the black veil worn during weddings is inappropriate for everyday use.

Integrating contemporary fashion trends into traditional garments can enhance viewer engagement. However, these fusion risks compromising cultural authenticity. A more sophisticated representation featuring a broader array of traditional attire, even if less visually appealing, could yield a more equitable view of Peranakan clothing (Barnard, 2002).

Additionally, there exists a risk of reinforcing cultural stereotypes through costume choices. While traditional garments are pivotal to Peranakan identity, an exclusive focus on these may need to be clarified for the community's variety and dynamism. Incorporating a diverse range of professions, social strata, and deviations from customary dress could furnish a more intricate depiction of the Peranakan populace (Butler, 1990). This is exemplified by the distinction between employer and employee in the series.

By recognizing these limitations, future analyses of "The Little Nyonya" and similar media can progress beyond mere aesthetic appreciation of cultural attire. A deeper exploration of the intricate relationships between costume, identity, and historical accuracy may cultivate a richer comprehension of the cultural narratives inherent in visual elements. Jenkins (1992) underscores the necessity of assessing audience reception of the series, which is vital for grasping its influence on cultural preservation and identity formation.

Analyzing significant costumes in "The Little Nyonya" reveals their cultural significance and how they represent the Peranakan community. The concepts of cultural representation and hybridity highlight how these elements convey complex narratives, adding depth and authenticity to the series. However, challenges arise in maintaining authenticity against dramatic embellishments and avoiding cultural stereotypes. Future research could focus on the evolving portrayal of cultural identities in media to deepen our understanding of diverse cultural representations.

### Analysis of Characters' Costumes Reflecting Social Status

"The Little Nyonya" costumes signify the characters' social status. Costume and accessory choices signify social and economic standings, aligning with cultural representation and self-presentation theories. These costumes serve as a visual language, elucidating social hierarchies through thoughtful design and accessory selection. This section examines the use of attire in depicting characters' social status, mainly focusing on middle-class and upper-class representations through Goffman's self-presentation theory (1959) regarding frontstage. The result of the theory applied: Huang Juxiang's frontstage during the family gathering was middle class, and during the wedding ceremony, was upper class; Yamamoto Yueniang's frontstage during ceremonies evolved with age: middle class in youth, upper class in adulthood; Chen Sheng's appearance was upper class during the business meetings but more middle class during the family gatherings; Chen Xi during the business meeting's frontstage was upper class (Goffman, 1959).

In summary, Goffman's theory (1959) highlights the significance of characters' costumes in representing their social status. The series effectively illustrates a frontstage perspective that aligns with Goffman's framework (1959). Additionally, the wedding ceremony in Peranakan culture serves as an essential celebration, emphasizing the role of accessories as a central element of Peranakan identity (Hall, 1997).

### **Critical Analysis**

Firstly, Barnard (2002) highlights the importance of balancing historical accuracy and engaging storytelling when analyzing clothing in media. This calls for a deeper exploration of the historical and social factors influencing attire, such as significant historical events, social movements, and religious beliefs. While "The Little Nyonya" offers a glimpse into Peranakan dress culture, a more comprehensive investigation could shed light on how attire has evolved in response to modernization and globalization. Examining how contemporary Peranakans incorporate traditional elements into their modern clothing would be precious.

Secondly, recognizing the audience's role in interpreting costumes is vital (Riquet & Heusser, 2019; Aiello & Parry, 2019, as cited in Bleiker, 2020). Riquet and Heusser (2019) examine how contemporary visual culture shapes identities, while Aiello and Parry (2019, as cited in Bleiker, 2020) highlight the persuasive power of visuals. Bellman (1978) emphasizes the importance of cultural context in visual analysis, suggesting that audiences interpret visuals through their cultural lenses. This is particularly relevant in "The Little Nyonya," where specific colors or patterns may hold cultural meanings for viewers familiar with Peranakan traditions. Thus, audience interpretation of visual elements is crucial for analyzing "The Little Nyonya."

In conclusion, "The Little Nyonya" effectively employs costume design and accessories to delineate social class differences. Costume choices reflect the modesty of middle-class characters and the lavishness of upper-class counterparts, enhancing character development and narrative depth. The theoretical analysis highlights the complex relationship between clothing and social status within the series.

### **Analysis of Characters' Costumes Reflecting Personality**

The representation of personality traits via costumes in "The Little Nyonya" serves as a significant mechanism for illustrating character distinctiveness. The selection of colors and patterns in the attire aids viewers in comprehending the characters' personalities more effectively, which can be elucidated through Goffman's Nonverbal Communication theories.

#### **1 Gentle and Sweet Personality**

Characters such as Huang Juxiang, Yamamoto Yueniang (both adult and old versions), and Chen Xi exhibit a gentle demeanor through their costume selections (Figure 7). Their ensembles predominantly feature light hues with intricate floral or simple patterns, which underscore their inherent grace and warmth (Goffman, 1959).

Expanding on Goffman's (1959) nonverbal communication framework, these sartorial choices can be perceived as intentional signals conveying personality traits (Goffman, 1959). The light colors and floral motifs donned by Huang Juxiang and Yamamoto Yueniang (both adult and old versions) function as nonverbal indicators (Goffman, 1959) that evoke impressions of sweetness and accessibility, consistent with their gentle and amiable dispositions. Furthermore, Chen Xi opted for light colors complemented by a plain design.



**Figure 7** Huang Juxiang (left), Yamamoto Yueniang (middle), and Chen Xi (right)  
Source: *The Little Nyonya* 小娘惹, 2008.

## 2 Confident Personality

For individuals like Chen Sheng, the selection of vivid hues like red and black with floral motifs underscores their assertiveness and radiates vibrancy and confidence (Goffman, 1959) (Figure 8). Chen Sheng's clothing can be analyzed via Goffman's (1959) notion of frontstage, which pertains to the conscious presentation of self to others, where attire plays a pivotal role. His Peranakan style shirt, characterized by bold colors and floral designs, serves not merely as a personal fashion choice but as a deliberate mechanism to project a confident and assertive persona (Goffman, 1959). By choosing striking colors and floral elements, he enhances his visibility and influences how others perceive him.



**Figure 8** Chen Sheng's red Peranakan style shirt with black floral patterns  
Source: *The Little Nyonya* 小娘惹, 2008.

## Critical Analysis

In analyzing the discourse mentioned above, it is imperative to acknowledge certain inherent constraints. The visual allure of the show may prioritize costume selections as reflections of character attributes (Barnard, 2002). While these selections effectively represent strength and determination, they may only reflect a limited spectrum of daily garments worn by similarly situated characters of the era. Furthermore, particular costume selections may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes regarding the characters' personas. For instance, linking vibrant hues to steadfast assurance may reduce the complexity of character representation.

In investigating Peranakan culture, one must consider existing constraints. Craik (2003) underscores the necessity of examining the impact of social class and gender on Peranakan attire. Analyzing whether clothing selections signify an individual's profession or societal position and exploring differing sartorial norms for men and women could enhance our comprehension of Peranakan culture and its sartorial manifestations.

Notwithstanding these limitations, they scrutinize the characters' costumes in "The Little Nyonya" through the frameworks mentioned above, which augments our understanding of how costume design influences character development. Their apparel serves as powerful nonverbal cues, reflecting intrinsic characteristics and enhancing the narrative's depth.

Moreover, while recognizing the necessity for further investigation into Peranakan social and gender dynamics in attire, this analysis illuminates the capacity of media to portray cultural identities and their intricacies. "The Little Nyonya" is a pertinent case study, exemplifying how costume design is pivotal in depicting cultural subtleties and deepening the audience's insight into the Peranakan community.

## Discussion

The costumes in "The Little Nyonya" transcend aesthetics, functioning as cultural artifacts that preserve and convey Peranakan heritage. Through curated colors, patterns, and styles, the series enriches its narrative while reflecting characters' personality traits. Gentle tones and floral patterns signify warmth and modesty, while bold hues convey confidence and authority, offering audiences intuitive insights into characters' motivations, values, and social standings.

This study aimed to identify and categorize key garments, styles, and accessories in The Little Nyonya and analyze how these elements reflect cultural identity, social status, and personality traits. The series portrays cultural hybridity by blending Malay, Chinese, and Western influences, aligning with Stuart Hall's (1997) cultural representation theory, which highlights symbols like traditional attire in constructing meaning. Costumes such as floral Kebayas and tailored suits deepen the depiction of Peranakan heritage while reflecting Burke's (2009) concept of cultural hybridity. The integration of Western fashion demonstrates the adaptive identity of the Peranakan community, harmonizing tradition with modernity.

Costumes also resonate with Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, illustrating how attire communicates roles and impressions. Characters like Huang Juxiang and Yamamoto Yueniang, dressed in intricate Kebayas, exude gentleness and cultural ideals, while Chen Sheng's assertive attire reflects confidence and influence. Richly adorned garments distinguish upper-class characters, symbolizing wealth and privilege, and visually narrating societal hierarchies without explicit dialogue.

Beyond narrative depth, the series preserves Peranakan cultural heritage by authentically recreating traditional attire, bridging historical practices with contemporary appreciation. By embedding traditional costumes in a modern media context, "The Little Nyonya" fosters renewed interest in Peranakan aesthetics.

In conclusion, The Little Nyonya demonstrates the power of costume design as a storytelling mechanism, seamlessly integrating cultural representation, character development, and social critique. By blending traditional and contemporary elements, the series celebrates the richness of Peranakan identity, highlighting the role of visual media in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a deeper understanding of multicultural identities.

## Summary, Suggestions and Future Research

This research investigates the symbolism inherent in Peranakan culture as expressed through costume design in "The Little Nyonya." A comprehensive analysis of character apparel, such as Kebayas, Sun Yat Sen shirts, and Western suits, reveals how these elements articulate complex meanings of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and personal characteristics. Each garment—its hues, motifs, and embellishments—functions as a narrative device, embodying Peranakan identity and heritage that amalgamate Malay, Chinese, and Western influences. So, the costumes in The Little Nyonya significantly reflect Peranakan cultural identity through Kebayas, Sun Yat Sen shirts, and Western suits.

Furthermore, this research used qualitative content analysis; the research scrutinizes the characters' clothing selections in pivotal scenes like familial gatherings, weddings, and business engagements, illuminating the connections between specific designs and cultural values within the Peranakan community. The findings indicate that the traditional Kebaya signifies grace, femininity, and social rank, while the Sun Yat Sen shirt reflects historical awareness and a commitment to Chinese heritage. In contrast, Western suits symbolize modernity and social advancement, demonstrating the characters' navigation of evolving identities within their cultural context.

Additionally, the television series employs costume as a significant medium for illustrating individual and societal dynamics, especially "The Little Nyonya," highlighting how visual storytelling can enhance cultural understanding and appreciation of historical identity. Finally, this research underscores the vital role of costume in media for preserving and highlighting the intricacies of cultural heritage, offering a profound insight into the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity in Peranakan existence.

For suggestions, the findings from "The Little Nyonya" present significant opportunities for practical application and scholarly exploration. These insights can serve as educational tools to foster cultural awareness and heritage conservation, particularly by integrating media portrayals into cultural studies curricula and museum exhibitions. Costume designers and media producers may leverage these findings to enhance the cultural authenticity of historical dramas and films, ensuring accurate and respectful representations of multicultural identities. Additionally, the tourism and cultural events industries can capitalize on the appeal of Peranakan garments to promote heritage tourism through exhibitions and festivals.

Future research could examine audience reception to better understand diverse interpretations of Peranakan attire, comparing perspectives from regions with strong Peranakan communities, such as Singapore and Malaysia, to those from areas with less prominent Peranakan populations, like China and Indonesia. Comparative analyses across media formats—such as films, literature, and museum displays—may further illuminate how Peranakan culture is portrayed and preserved. Gender-focused studies could explore how traditional garments like Kebayas reflect or challenge gender norms, including representations of masculinity in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Additionally, research on globalization's influence on Peranakan fashion could assess whether contemporary adaptations uphold cultural integrity or contribute to its dilution, while examining the role of designers in balancing cultural preservation with global market demands.

Finally, longitudinal studies could trace the evolving portrayal of Peranakan culture in media, identifying shifts in authenticity and cultural sensitivity. Such investigations would offer deeper insights into how hybrid identities are represented and preserved within the context of globalization and changing cultural narratives.

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