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Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements

Hwei-fen Cheah

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Intricate, meticulously crafted, and visually distinctive, Nyonya beadwork occupies a significant role in the cultural imaginary of the Peranakan Chinese, the acculturated descendants of Chinese migrants to the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago.
As an activity, beadwork was once an important part of a Peranakan Chinese girl's set of skills. As an object, carefully crafted Nyonya beadwork was used at weddings and other celebratory occasions, touching the lives of Peranakan men and women, young and old. In this way, Nyonya beadwork became entwined within the wider relationships of gender, generation, and social hierarchy in Peranakan society. The Peranakans also incorporated into their beadwork styles and motifs that reflected their changing ideals, aspirations, and lifestyles. Inscribed into the history of Nyonya beadwork is a narrative of the Peranakan Chinese community's cultural transformations.

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