WHITHER, THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION?

by Maureen Lim

In considering the direction our Association should take, the main objective must, understandably, be the preservation of our Peranakan heritage.

However, I hope that it will not be our ONLY concern.

Able writers have produced several books on different aspects of our culture, and done admirable research into their particular fields.

By the same token, the Association can and should play a bigger role - that of getting members to be enthusiastic and to support organised activities, such as talks, visits to places of interest, or even dance classes which might attract some younger members.

The continued success of any activity or class depends partly on social interaction. When people enjoy themselves, they keep coming.

Here's my personal experience: I once joined a dance class at a community centre. Most of the others communicated with each other in Mandarin. I had nothing in common with them and felt like a fish out of water. I finished one course, but did not continue.

I do understand the difficult task facing the Committee. But they know the members' profile and what would be most "popular". Would a membership survey be useful? Should there be a "member-get-member" drive? For the larger the "base", the more well-attended the programmes, and therefore, the greater their chances of success. Target young people to join.

Part of the problem is that before a person joins he usually wants to know what the Association has to offer. It's the old "which comes first - the chicken or the egg" situation.

Before I place these issues in the good hands of the Committee may I leave them with two parting thoughts.

Firstly, the Association should not be self-limiting and restrict itself only to the Peranakans. It should be enough if someone is sufficiently interested in the culture to want to be part of it.

Secondly, if we are overly-concerned with our Peranakan Past we may be left with only the past, but no future.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS FOR 1995/1996

At the Annual General Meeting held on 25th March 1995 at the RELC Bougainvillea Room the following office bearers were elected:

PRESIDENT  
Dr. George Tay

1ST VICE-PRESIDENT  
Mr. David Ong

2ND VICE-PRESIDENT  
Mr. Lee Kip Lee

HON. SECRETARY  
Mrs. Lim Geok Huay

ASST. HON. SECRETARY  
Ms. Yeo Seok Yan

HON. TREASURER  
Dr. Irene Lim

COMMITTEE MEMBERS  
Mrs. Sally Chan  
Mr. Alan Koh  
Mr. Peter Wec  
Mrs. Helen Tan  
Mr. Thomas Tan  
Mr. Peter Lee
NEW MEMBERS

We bid welcome to the following 20 new members:-

Ms Sherianne Cheah Li-Fen
Mr David Cheah Synn-Wei
Ms Chi Gek Lan
Mrs Maggie Foong
Mrs Ginny Holstad
Mr Kenneth Khoo Wu Ming
Mrs Maureen Koh-Lim Mei Hwa
Mr Richard Lee Peng Boon
Mr John Lee Peng Cheong
Mr Lim Hock Chwee
Mr Ong Seng Lee
Mr Dominic Quek Teck Loong
Mr Michael Tan Eng Hoon
Mr Teo Hwa Seng
Mrs Lilian Wong-Gan Lee Lian
Ms Pauline Yap Ah Moi
Mrs Aileen Yeo Ai Lin
Ms Monica Yeo
Mr Godfrey Yong
Mrs Grace Denholm Young

OUR FIRST COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECT RAISED $7260

We would like to thank members and friends through whose generous support we succeeded in selling tickets worth $7260 for the opening night of The Gunong Sayang Association's production of MANIS MANIS PAIT in aid of The National Kidney Foundation.

Our special thanks are due to our Hon. Secretary Mrs. Lim Geok Huay without whose tireless effort we would not have been able to achieve our target.

FELIX CHIA'S BABA PLAY STAGED DURING THE 1995 FESTIVAL OF ASEAN PERFORMING ARTS

by Peter Lee

The Felix Chia Troupe presented a Baba play written by Felix Chia entitled SIADERK BERADERK at The World Trade Centre Auditorium from 11 to 14 June. Directed by Johnson Choo, the play entertained the audience with its share of colourful characters, colourful language, interesting plot and creative stage effects.

The humorous plot, which is full of surprises, revolves around the lives and conflicting relationship between two eccentric half-sisters played by Mabel Lee (the invalid Nya Besar) and Rosalind Yapp (the fiery Nya Chik). Their uncle and guardian Hong Toh (Tony Quek) and their doctor Tony Cheong (Winston Tan) try to mediate between the bickering sisters and their Cantonese maids (Margaret Lau de Silva and Hyacinth Tan) and Hainanese cook (Kelvin Tan).

When the invalid Nya Besar reveals that she can in fact walk, and had deceived her younger sister so as to spite her for having stolen a suitor, their relationship takes a turn for the worse. The situation ends tragically with the death of both sisters.

However, the surprising twist at the end reveals that the whole affair had been a dream and perverse fantasy of Hong Toh's, who turns out to be the real invalid, and who also had stood to inherit their wealth.

All the characters were played with great aplomb, notably Tony Quek as the good-humoured uncle and guardian, Rosalind Yapp whose rapid repartee brought out the fiery eccentricity of Nya Chik, and Mabel Lee who played out the elder sister's manipulation of sympathy with great effect.

There were many interesting multi-media stage effects. On large video screens were projected images of babas & nyonas and certain crucial "flashback" scenes were enacted in the form of filmed segments. Although the transition from stage acting to video was not successfully resolved, the effort to develop Peranakan drama in this manner is laudable.

"We hoped these changes would appeal to more young people," said playwright Felix Chia, who was well-satisfied with the response and turnout despite a rather unbalanced and unfavourable review in the papers. The auditorium was full very evening, and included many younger people among the babas and nyonas, which vindicates Chia's admirable efforts.

PRESENTATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

We would like to thank Mr. Anthony Teo for the gift of old group photographs of previous committees which he kindly presented to the Association at the last Annual General Meeting.
LETTER TO THE EDITOR
MORE RECOLLECTIONS OF
THE BANGSAWAN
by
Mr. Wee Kim Wee

"I have read through the latest issue of your NEWSLETTER No.2/95 and want you to know that there is nothing that you and your co-editors need to be ashamed of.

The NEWSLETTER is filled with newsy and interesting topics. The interesting feature is the one on MY MEMORIES OF THE PERANAKAN BANGSAWAN THEATRE by K.T.Koh.

It brings back memories of the good old days. For your and the writer's information, the Malay Community is trying hard to revive the Bangsawan and, in fact, has done so in the past year. Their latest effort is to bring the Bangsawan to China this year.

For the sake of jogging K.T. Koh's memory a little further, the two famous stories produced at the Star Opera were JULU JULI BINTANG TIGA and the JULU JULI BINTANG TUJOH.

It is surprising that K.T. Koh could remember the term given to the musical interludes as "extra turns", which I am sure was used only in Singapore and/or Malaysia. I do not think any one else in the world will know what "extra turn" means!

Tijah's sister, Maimoon, was the "star" of the "extra turns", and among the songs she sang were titillating Hindustani melodies which went down very well with the non-Indian audiences. The "extra turns" were in fact as much enjoyed as the main story by the audience.

Another popular story was ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES.

Many interesting points raised by K.T. Koh were not known to me. Among them were the full name of Khairudin (known to us then as K. Dean) and that he hailed from Hongkong, although I knew that he could speak a smattering of Cantonese. Gossip then had it that he was half-Cantonese.

Many embok embok fell head over heels for Khairudin's charm, and, of course, the babas and enches also fell similarly for Tijah."

A LEAF FROM THE PAGES OF HISTORY
contributed by
Cynthia Hoefer

"Kumpulan Peranakan Singapura presents TIDAK BERDOSA for The Red Cross Crippled Children's Home & Cheshire Home for Chronic Invalids on 7th December and 8th December 1957 at The Singapore Badminton Hall at 8.30 p.m.

The Kumpulan is founded by an enthusiastic group of ambitious young men who are all local-born, from all walks of life, who feel intensely the stigma, unjustly said and thought by many that the Peranakan is fast falling into the world of "tidak apas" and oblivion.

With this initial effort at a survival of a culture and art dear to the Peranakans, we hope to kill many birds with one stone.

Director Ong Thye Watt
Written by Ong Chwee Kim
Music by Besar Lim and his Band

PROGRAMME OF EXTRA TURNS

Extra "Tabu" by Henry Tan.

Extra Songs by Walter Koh - Tari Sapu Tangan

Dondang Sayang by Gwee, Ong Chwee Kim.

One Day When We Were Young by Alfred Thong.
Cha-Cha Cha by Francis Lee.
Kronchong Jacatra by Charlie Tan"

DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE HERITAGE OF SINGAPORE'S PERFORMING ARTS
by
Lee Kip Lee

The event, organised by the National Archives of Singapore, was held at The National Museum on Saturday 22 April 1995.

In a talk at the National Museum Lecture Theatre, presented by The Gunong Sayang Association, Mr. William Gwee Thian Hock gave a masterly exposition on DONDANG SAYANG BABA PERANAKAN.
DEMONSTRATIONS (continued)

He led us through the nuances of Dondang Sayang to enable us to appreciate the skills required in this impromptu musical banter which Ms Sally Gan and Messrs William Tan and G.T. Lye so ably demonstrated with their quick-witted responses to each other’s praises and taunts to the accompaniment of music by the Band Dondang Irama.

Later on in the afternoon, The Eurasian Association staged an outdoor EURASIAN FOLK DANCE AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCE at The National Museum Grounds.

Members of the Association’s Dance Troupe, outfitted in colourful costumes, performed a medley of Dutch and Portuguese dances.

There was also an enactment of a Eurasian wedding party with all the guests elegantly dressed to the nines - the ladies with wide-brimmed hats and the gentlemen with natty suits.

GROWING UP IN A PERANAKAN HOUSEHOLD
A CHILDHOOD REMEMBERED

by
Maureen Lim

I was an only child for seven years, so week-ends would find me heading for my maternal grandmother’s house facing the sea (which, alas, has today been reclaimed) and separated from it by a narrow, pedestrian walkway known as Marine Parade.

The house was actually two semi-detached units standing in a single large compound. On the second level, an open verandah, which surrounded it, became a stage on which we paraded, dressed up as characters from English fairy tales and Walt Disney cartoons.

From this vantage point we had a first class view of the beach where the film crew of Loke Wan Tho’s Cathay Keris Studios, with their vans parked right outside our front gates, were on location shooting scenes for their Malay language movies. We were ever so excited when we thought we identified the smiling, mustachioed, wavy-haired hero as P. Ramlee, and more so when we went to the cinema and recognised our own stretch of the beach on the screen!

But it was the joy of living by the seaside which enchanted us most. Of happy days spent learning how to swim by clinging on to two old coconuts or a black motor car tyre tube; of searching for “remsi” beds on the sand with our feet; of walking to the edge of the sandbank at low tide digging for “kepah” and “sput isap pantat.”

Besides friends, there were also assorted relatives who visited the house. A great aunt was affectionately known as “Ee Poh Pisang” because she would inevitably arrive with a comb of bananas. Bestowing of nicknames, more often than not complimentary ones, was a common practice in the Peranakan community. I remember “Bibik Puteh,” “Bibik Taik Lalat,” “Bibik Mata Juling,” “Si Bopeng,” “Si Buta,” “Si Kaywat”.

But of all these old ladies none stood out so outstandingly in my childhood as my grandmother. I can still picture her, in true “bibik” fashion, with a “sireh” tucked in her mouth. On a small blackwood table, commanding pride of place in the dining hall, sat her silver “sireh” box holding its required number of miniature silver pots with their tiny lids and really tiny spoons. It was such a treat for me to take out the “daun sireh” (sireh leaf) from the box and put on it just the correct mixture of “kapor” (lime paste), tobacco and betel nut before folding it for her.

We children had our special occasions as, on “sembayang days”, when the ancestral altar table groaned under the weight of food offerings. A flood of memories rush through my mind - small “mangkoks” of rice wine, lighted joss sticks, and gnawing on sticks of sugar cane whilst waiting for the spirits of our great grandparents to “finish their meal”. That moment would be indicated by the result of the toss of two well-worn one cent coins.

"FACE TO FAITH"
POEMS BY
AILEEN LAU GUEK LIN

Published by
Pagesetters Services Pte. Ltd.
Price $10
from Karong Catholic Bk Ctr.

A review
by Lee Kip Lee

This moving book of poems was written by Aileen Lau Guek Lin during a two-year courageous fight against cancer. She died on 10 April 1994 at the age of forty four.

Despite the severity of her illness and the discomfort it caused she was able to put into verse her diverse thoughts on dying, (DYING
THOUGHTS) pain, (GO AWAY PAIN) even the suffering of others (as in ETHNIC CLEANSING and MOSTAR BRIDGE), nostalgic moments (MOON FESTIVAL), her radiation treatment (FLAKY PASTRY), her father (DEAR OLD DAD) and giving a humourous dimension to her suffering (THE NONYA'S LAMENT written in Baba Malay).

As the “Friends of Aileen” wrote in their Foreword to the book:

“Aileen was always proud of her Peranakan heritage. She was an active researcher on her mother tongue, Baba Malay. Her dissertation for her master’s degree in Linguistics and English Language Teaching at the University of York was entitled LANGUAGE DEATH WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE BABA MALAY OF SINGAPORE.”

Aileen was an active member of our Association. She was planning the Singapore Baba Convention in 1993 when she was stricken ill, despite which she still took an active interest in the event.

A BIBIK’S WISDOM

Kemarein saya pi tengok doktor - Ta’k apa pasal - regular check up sahja.
Itu doktor bilang saya:

“Bibik, you musn’t eat fatty pork
Like kong bak or sum chien,
A lot of your Nonya food
Is very bad for the health.”

Aiyee! Skarang punya budak tied
Mo perentina kita orang tua!
Dia orang sendri ta’k tau bawak diri,
Main sakit sana lah, situ lah.

Dia orang lah ta’k tau makan betol-betol.
Apal sah makan kita luh-oh kookbok-ooombok?
Kita punya nekek moyen makan sama kita
Poon panjang panjang umoh, ta’k sakit situ sini

Doktor chakap: “All your Nonya dishes
Are high in cholesterol -
Very bad - can lead to death.”

“Aiyee! Doktor!” saya jawab dia,
“What for pantang this, pantang that?
If now Bibik kojit also never mind.
After all, Bibik already 83!”

We thank the publishers, Pagesetters Services Pte. Ltd. for permitting us to reproduce the above extract. Mail order copies at $11-00 + GST are obtainable from Mr. George Wong - Tel.2706521
RECIPE (continued)

Ingredients

1 half-ripe papaya - approx 1 kilo - cut into serving pieces.
100 gram onions*
20 pepper seeds*
1 or 2 red chillies - for colour*
8 Buah Keras*
10 gram blachan*

*Pound together

2 pieces salted ikan kurau bones or a handful of dried prawns (pounded)

Method

Put water into saucepan, add pounded ingredients together with the salted fish bones or dried prawns. Bring to the boil and allow to simmer for some time.

Add the cut papayas and after 3-5 minutes remove saucepan from fire and serve garnished with kemangi leaves (if available).

OPTIONAL: A handful of fresh peeled prawns can also be added just before the papayas are put in.

As to "Orang Bek Bek", it was a snobbish, derogatory term, apparently used only in our family, and applied to outsiders from whom we wished to distance ourselves simply because they were not one of us. At times they were referred to as "orang tepi tepi".

Enquiries made amongst my Peranakan friends revealed that they had never heard of this phrase.

If readers can throw any light on the origin of these two mysteries please write in to tell us.

MORE GEMS FROM "MAS SEPULOH"

Reproduced by kind permission of Mr. William Gwee Thian Hock

AU BAN (Hokkien word) - Selfish
Jadi satu orang jangan mau au ban selalu pi makan lauk sayor kat rumah datok tapi tak pernah kasi tek yan. (You must not be selfish and always partake in the free vegetarian meals at the temple, and yet not make any monetary contributions.)

BUKAN MAIN - Very
Dia bukan pun bercapa kaya tapi bukan main sombong lagi. (Although he is not that rich, he is very snobbish.)

CHINA GERK Newly-arrived Chinese; a non-Baba local Chinese
Ni betol mia China gerk, satu patah Melayu tak tau. (This person does not know any Malay. He is truly like the new arrivals from China.)

HOW DO YOU DO? KUEH KOCHI KUEH DADU. A jocular exchange of greetings among Babas.
Dia likiat sair, bila orang tanya dia "How do you do?", chepat sair dia jawab "Kueh kochi kueh dadu." (He is very witty and is quick to retort with "kueh kochi kuey dadu" whenever people ask him how he is.)

WASI Money
Dia sua tak wasi barulah tau tuduk rumah. (He will only stay at home when he has run out of money)
MEALTME PERTUAS AND THINGS NYONYAS DO WITH FOOD

(These extracts of a chapter from BABA FOLK BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITION by Cheo Kim Ban & Muriel Speeden have been reproduced with the kind permission of Mr. Cheo Kim Ban)

To the Babas, the importance of food lies not only in the pleasure it gives, but also in its symbolism. Some of their most important beliefs and superstitions surround the preparation and consumption of food.

Many older nyonyas still firmly believe that food simmered for a long time over a charcoal fire, or curries and heavily-spiced dishes cooked in earthenware pots, taste better. Some still use two types of oil for cooking – pork lard for frying vegetables, and home-processed coconut oil for frying fish – convinced that this gives better fragrance and taste.

The Babas are also strict about the type of food to be offered on different occasions, especially to differentiate between happy and sad events, or between altar offerings for the dead and for the gods.

Generally, cakes prepared for the Lunar New Year are also offered to ancestors on New Year's Eve, but must not be offered for Cheng Beng, or for the seventh month or for funerals.

Guests at weddings and birthdays are usually offered pineapple tarts, kueh rempah udang, kueh lapis, ondeh ondeh, kueh dadar, and apom bkuah. Cakes offered for ancestor worship during Cheng Beng and the seventh month are brown kueh dodol, kueh wajek, kueh ku hitam and kueh kochee.

Cakes offered at funerals are dodol and wajek made with white sugar, white kueh ku and black kueh ku.

In table manners the Babas are as punctilious and superstitious as in any other daily ritual. During meals, it is considered bad luck to prop one's chin on one's hands, for this posture, elders say, is usually associated with the arrival of bad news.

At meal times never sit at the corner of the table, as Babas believe this will make people hate you. Also frowned upon is the habit of some people of moving from one part of the table to another. This means that they will keep changing marriage partners.

All these beliefs can also be classified as pertuas, or age-old wisdom which have been handed down through generations by word of mouth. The origins, of some are obscure. For example, some Babas believe that to bring down a fever you must drink the fresh juice from a young green coconut as it comes, without adding ice to it. And to counter the "heat" of durian, drink water, with a pinch of salt, out of the shell of the durian you have just eaten.

Babas also believe that diabetes can be caused by drinking coffee or tea with ice, or eating mangosteens with sugar.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION

The history of the Peranakan Association goes back to its origins when as the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) it was formed on 17 August 1900 with Mr. Tan Jik Kim as its first president, and with a membership list of over 800 Singapore names.

One of its pristine objectives was “to afford facilities for the discussion of all questions relating to the social and moral welfare” of the community.

The Association attracted the leading lights of the Peranakan society and it did not take long before a branch of the SCBA was established in October of the same year in Malacca, the land of the forefathers of the members. Penang followed suit in 1920.

The Association’s interest in public affairs was evident when, at an Annual General Meeting on 13 December 1916, a resolution “that the government should promote higher education by endowing scholarships or preferably starting a technical school” was forwarded to the government by Dr. Lim Boon Keng who received the standard innocuous reply that “it is the intention of government, as soon as conditions admit, to inaugurate a system of higher education in the Colony.”

On 31 August 1931 the SCBA petitioned the Governor Sir Cecil Clementi for the appointment of a Chinese member to the Executive Council which
HISTORY (continued)

request though not immediately acceded to, did eventually lead to the appointment of SCBA member Wee Swee Teow to the Executive Council in 1933. The Petition was jointly signed by Dr Lim Han Hoe, Mr. Heah Joo Seang and Mr. Tan Cheng Lock as Presidents of the SCBA Singapore, SCBA Penang and SCBA Malacca respectively. In it they also called for the nomination of one elected representative from each of their associations to the Legislative Council.

By 1949 the membership of the SCBA Singapore had risen to 1039 (Today's membership stands at over 400)

With the emergence of Singapore as an independent state the name of the SCBA Singapore was changed to the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association on 11 December 1964 before finally becoming The Peranakan Association on 23 February 1966.

Since the first Baba Convention held in Penang in 1988, this annual event, hosted in rotation by Penang, Malacca and Singapore, has been a feature eagerly anticipated by members. This year's convention will be held in Malacca in November.

Finally, a history of the present-day Peranakan Association will not be complete without paying tribute to our Honorary Life President, Mr. T.W. Ong whose dedication to and love of the Association has enabled it to thrive during his term of office from 1950 to 1990 until this day.

GILDING THE PHOENIX - The Straits Chinese and their Jewellery
BY EDMOND CHIN
published by the National Museum

During the hundred years between 1850 and 1950, Insular and Peninsular Southeast Asia was the site of the birth, growth and decline of a unique community - that of the Straits Chinese or Peranakans. During that time, the group found themselves at the nexus of Chinese, Malay, European and Indian worlds, with Chinese migrating to the cosmopolitan environment in which they found themselves.

The story of the Peranakans and their art is told against an examination of their most valuable possessions - the incredible jewels which they commissioned for everyday and ceremonial use. The ethnic origins of Peranakan jewels are compared and contrasted. Straits Chinese pieces of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European inspiration are examined showing how different techniques and motifs were borrowed and refined - sometimes transcending the parent cultures from which they came.

As the first comprehensive study of this subject, this book is the permanent record of an exhibition of the Straits Chinese jewels held in 1993 by the National Museum. Containing more than 300 masterpieces of the jewellers' art displayed in their context of costume, furniture and archival material, it reveals in the splendour of a lost lifestyle and rediscovers a disappearing chapter of this region's design history.

THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION DINNER TALK
Dr Cheah Jin Seng
Professor of Medicine at the National University of Singapore, and an avid collector and connoisseur of Straits Chinese ceramics will be presenting a talk on

Straits Chinese Porcelain (Nyonya Ware)
A Collector's Experience

at the Bougainvillea Room, RELC Building
30 Orange Grove Road (next to Shangri-La Hotel)
Date: Friday 28 JULY 1995
Time: 7.30 pm
Price: $24 per person including a Chinese banquet dinner

For reservations please contact Mrs Lim Geok Huay
Tel: 2550704/2564863