## THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

**JUNE 1996** 

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## New Man at the Helm Lee Kip Lee elected as new President

A report by Anthony Oei



George Tay hands over leadership to Lee Kip Lee. From left, David Ong, Lee Kip Lee, Irene Lim and George Tay.

Lee Kip Lee has taken over as President of The Peranakan Association, succeeding long-serving George Tay.

Lee's election, at the Annual General Meeting on 30 March, was unanimous. The vote reflected members' endorsement of his capability to lead the Association to greater heights.

Lee Kip Lee brings his wealth of experience in the management of the Association, having served in various capacities including that of Vice-President, since 1990. He is also a sixth-generation Peranakan whose family has been in this region since 1776, and which has had long ties with the Association. His granduncle Lee Keng Liat was the founder of the Malacca branch of the Straits Chinese British Association. Another granduncle, Koh San Hin was President of SCBA for many years from 1913, while his grandfather Lee Keng Kiat, father Lee Chim Huk and uncle Lee Chim Tuan were all members of the Association in Singapore. Since his retirement from his family business, Lee Kip Lee has concentrated

on Association activities, and has written his memoirs.

But ever modest, the mild-mannered Lee said that while he was honoured by the appointment to the office, he would find it difficult to fit into George Tay's shoes. He would nonetheless do his best to serve members' interests. He asked for their continued support to implement the Association's programme of activities.

George Tay stepped down, as he put it, to inject fresh blood into the Management of the Association. His leadership will certainly be missed. He had served the Association with distinction for many years and under his Presidency, many new activities were initiated. The Association will no doubt continue to benefit from his experience and advice.

The new management team is strong. They comprise a group of people from different walks of life dedicated to the cause of the Association. Supporting the new man at the helm are David Ong, First Vice President, who is a director of a property company,

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The Perandon Association Newsletter is distributed free to members. and Thomas Tan, Second Vice President, who is also a company director. Both have served on the committee for some time.

Retaining her position as Honorary Secretary is Lim Geok Huay whose work in the committee since 1990, has been an invaluable contribution to the Association. Yeo Seok Yan, a teacher, also retains her post as Assistant Honorary Secretary. Peter Wee, well-known in the Peranakan community for promoting the culture, was voted into the committee again, but this time as Honorary Treasurer.

The committee members reelected are Sally Chan, Alan Koh, Peter Lee, Irene Lim and Helen Tan. Sally Chan is a well-respected figure in Singapore's social and charity circles. She is at present in the stockbroking business. Alan Koh is a director of several companies in the public relations and entertainment businesses. Peter Lee is a writer and editor. Irene Lim is an established radiologist and a well-known stage actress. Helen Tan has been on the committee since 1990 and with her years of experience, is an important link in the transition from the old to new committees. Christopher Ng, a specialist in charge of Straits Chinese works of art at Christie's Singapore, is a newly elected member of the committee. The new committee will hold office for a period of two years.

The Annual General Meeting proceeded smoothly (members will be notified of the proceedings in the minutes to the meeting), with more than fifty members attending. At the end of the meeting, members of the committee presented a crystal decanter to George Tay on behalf of the Association, as a token of gratitude for his dedication and leadership.



George Tay presides over the opening of the AGM. From left, Yeo Seok Yan, Sally Chan, Lee Kip Lee, David Ong, George Tay, Lim Geok Huay, Irene Lim and Alan Koh.



Members at the AGM.

## May Gathering

A record 160 people turned up for our May dinner talk, The World of Yoke Tua — Traditional Family Herbal Prescriptions, held at the Pin Hsiang Restaurant in the RELC Building on 8 May 1996.

The evening began with a Chinese dinner at 7.30pm, when members had the opportunity to mingle and meet each other. This was followed at about 9.00pm with an introduction by Kenneth Cheo on the subject of *yoke tua*, traditional family herbal

prescriptions, which were written in Chinese on small pieces of white cloth. Mr Cheo recalled how these prescriptions, handed down from generation to generation, were jealously guarded by families, who often left out one ingredient from the prescriptions shown to the pharmacist so that the he would not be able to copy them (the missing ingredient was obtained from another pharmacist). Members were reminded about such medications as *obat poot*, a powder for sore throat that was blown from a tube directly into the throat. *Yoke tuas* were able to cure a whole range of illnesses and discomforts, and notes written in Baba Malay about their cures were often written on a corner of the pieces of cloth.

After Mr Cheo's introduction, Mr Richard Eu Jr, Managing Director of Eu Yan Sang Holdings, took over the rostrum to explain the principles and properties of Chinese herbal medicine, and introduced a variety of herbs and medicines to the audience. He also related the history of the company and how the company had been steered by his family for four generations. After his talk, more than half an hour was spent answering the questions of the inquisitive and curious audience, when many myths were dispelled and many misconceptions set right. The evening drew to a close before 11.00pm, and the audience felt happy at spending a perfectly therapeutic evening.



## Baba Wedding at Sentosa

Sentosa was the venue for a series of wedding shows, held at the atrium of the Images of Singapore Museum from 24 March to 5 May 1996. On the Sunday of 5 May 1996, an elaborate Peranakan wedding was reenacted, organised by Peter Wee of Katong Antique House with the help of a group of performers and musicians from Malacca and the Gunong Sayang Association.



## SLAVE CONCUBINES, SLAVES AND DEBT SLAVERY

We like to remember our past as the good old days, the golden age of the Peranakans. However this time our new member Rosalind Lim turns the other side of the coin, recalling the oppression and cruelty that went hand in hand with the glory.



From left, Rosalind Lim, Choo Neo, her stepmother, and her second and third sisters.

This one was bought locally and was thirteen years old. She was quite big for her age and before Grandfather could take her, she was found to be with child. My uncle (Grandfather's eldest son) had beaten him to it. Poor girl. What a thrashing she had — not only from Grandmother but also from my auntie. My auntie's anger knew no bounds. If not for the intervention of Grandmother, she would have beaten her to death. In any case, she had intended the slave girl to lose her child. However, Grandmother advised her that "since the rice was already cooked" ("beras sudah jadi nasik"), she should accept the situation.

My mother too, had a slave, but we were not allowed to treat her as such. Choo Neo was only nine when she came to us. Mother insisted that we treat her well, although she was supposed to have been pawned to Mother.

Her parents were very poor and destitute and needed to borrow some money. As security she was left with us on the understanding that she would be redeemed in a couple of years. It was a case of debt slavery which in that era was quite rampant.

Choo Neo was the eldest of eight children. My mother would not have accepted her and would have given her parents the money they needed. However, her parents insisted that Choo Neo be left with us, as it meant that they would then have one mouth less to feed.

Mother assured Choo Neo's parents that their daughter would never be treated as a slave. For a girl from the kampong, she was very intelligent and hardworking. She was really a great help to Mother and was with us for about three years.

After the death of my mother she was returned to her parents, although the debt was never paid. At the age of sixteen she was again sold to a businessman as his concubine. She died at a very young age after having given birth to a boy and a girl.

What a life — a life of one big struggle for survival. Not only the well-to-do Chinese families had slaves and slave-concubines, the Babas had them as well. They used to have native girls from the neighbouring islands to work as *babus*, who were later taken on as *goondeks*. For the more jealous nyonyas, they preferred to have *ah neoks*. These were young boys from poor families, usually of Hainanese descent. They were a very faithful community and would stay with a family for a long time.

Now with the passing of time and the progress of Singapore into a more humane and gracious society, the keeping of slaves and concubines are never heard of.

hildren of today do not know much about slave-concubines, slaves and debt slavery. However there may still be elderly people who are aware of this obsolete practice, or families may even have living examples in their midst. We are now living in an affluent society and most of us have either forgotten or feel reluctant to talk about the olden days, the harsh days of struggle and survival, and for some, the ugly and inhuman practices of that time.

My grandfather had a slave. She was sold to Grandfather. She was only seven when she was smuggled out from China by some relatives. Poor girl! At that tender age she had to be at the beck and call of Grandmother, who was deaf. There were many a time when she was beaten and had her ears tweaked by Grandmother for not answering her call. Being deaf, Grandmother could not hear her.

She was really ill-treated, and on top of it all when she reached puberty, she was taken by Grandfather to be his concubine. She was not given a bed or a room for herself, but had to sleep in the same room with Grandfather and Grandmother, on the floor. When she gave birth, the children where not allowed to acknowledge her as mother. They had to call her by name.

Grandfather was an opium smoker, and though he was not that very old, he looked very frail. In the old days it was believed that to gain back his health and vitality, he needed to have young virgins as concubines. So after the first slave had become a mother of two, Grandmother bought another slavegirl for him.

# CHENG BENG RITUALS OVER A CENTURY OF TRADITION FOR AN OLD MALACCA FAMILY

In the ancestral home of Tun Dato' Sir Tan Cheng Lock on Heeren Street in Malacca, Cheng Beng rituals have been carried out annually for over a hundred years. Peter Lee reports.

In 1875, Tan Choon Bock, the grandfather of Tun Dato' Sir Tan Cheng Lock, acquired the property on 111 Heeren Street in Malacca and made it his home. Since that time the Tan family have been holding the ancestral ceremonies at Cheng Beng annually — a tradition spanning one hundred and twenty-one years.

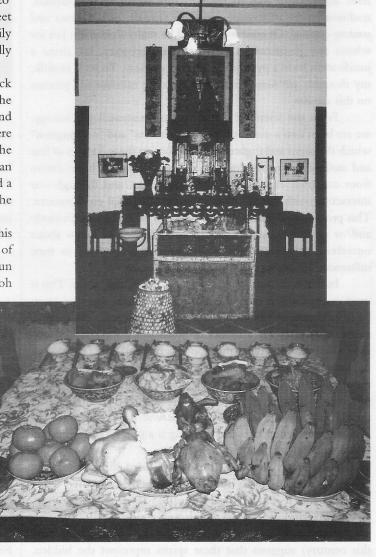
The family's history, as is well known, reaches further back than that. The founding ancestor, Tan Hay, left China in the 1770s to settle in Malacca. Evidence of his presence can be found in temple inscriptions at Cheng Hoon Teng dating to 1795, where he is listed as a donor. His grave is also faithfully maintained in the family burial compound to this day. Tan Hay's grandson Tan Choon Bock expanded the family fortune when he established a shipping concern that eventually merged with others to form the Straits Steamship Company.

The ancestral altar that he built remains unchanged to this day, having been looked after in turn by Tan Keong Ann, son of Tan Choon Bock, and then successively by Keong Ann's son Tun Dato' Sir Tan Cheng Lock, Tun Tan Siew Sin, and now by Toh Puan Catherine Tan, her daughter Siok Choo and son-in-law Walter Cheah.

The altar is situated in the third hall of the house. Above the altar is a portrait of Tan Hay's wife, Lee Chye Neo. It is an unusual tradition in the older Malaccan families to place the portrait of the first female ancestor above the altar, perhaps indicating links to the matriarchal cultures of the Malay peninsula. On the main altar table, there is the ancestral shrine containing the spirit tablets. Apart from the usual accessories such as flower-filled vases, oil lamps, joss-stick holder and a censer, eight filled wine cups and a bowl of water containing a knotted bunch of scallions are also placed on the table for this ritual. At a corner of the table is a framed time table of birth and death dates (beng kee, see kee) of the ancestors.

On the lower square offering table is an arrangement of four bowls of food (one each of chicken curry, itek tim, babi pongtay, and chapchye), eight bowls of rice (one for each ancestor) and eight cups of tea, with the necessary utensils, a dish of oranges and bananas, a dish of kueh, and another with the go seng or five types of food, namely, waxed duck, boiled belly pork, boiled chicken, dried cuttlefish and dried noodles. Most of the porcelain used are of the blue-and-white variety. An antique silk embroidered valance decorates the front of the table. At two ends of the table are two bronze candlestands, and on one side, a porcelain hand basin and a stand, as well as a keranjang (basket) containing silver paper ingots. All these preparations facilitate the proper and respectful offering of a feast to the departed souls of the ancestors.

At the start of the ceremony, the candles are lit and the proper prostrations made before the altar with joss sticks. The ancestors are then invited to partake of the offerings. Very often,



certain favourite foods of the ancestors are also included. According to the family, there used to be eight bowls of food as opposed to four, a result of a simplification of the procedures through the years.

After a respectful amount of time (forty-five minutes to an hour), the *keranjang* is taken out to the front door where the paper ingots are burnt in a metal "basket" burner. After the ingots have burned, the water in the bowl containing the scallions, to which a bit of the food, wine and tea from the offering have been added, is poured over the embers, and the knot of scallions is waved in a circular motion around the burner to prevent roving spirits from stealing the food and offerings. This marks the end of the ceremony. The annual reenactment of these ceremonies in Malacca prove the continuity of our heritage, which we must do our utmost to preserve.

## LETTERS

#### The Psychology of Adat

With reference to Baba Kenneth Cheo's address to the 8th Baba Convention published in the March issue of our Newsletter, I would like to enter into the discussion on the relevance of adat from the perspective of existential psychology. I have understood adat to refer to our world view, customs, traditions, rites of passage, manners, rituals, pertua-pertua and pantang-pantang. Of course there will be many Peranakan Jati for whom any justification of adat is unnecessary, let alone a justification from a pyschological point of view. To such kinfolk, my thoughts are meant only to add to the number of opinions on this subject.

From the scientific perspective of existential psychology, we are born into a world of "meaninglessness" and "nothingness" which threatens and frightens us. To contain these feelings of fear and anxiety, we create "meanings" about life, which we derive from our own experiences, through others, and through our interaction with our spiritual, cultural and social environment. This process of acquiring "meaning" can take place consciously and/or unconsciously. From this we obtain our views about ourselves, others and the world around us, which in turn influences our feelings, thoughts and behaviour.

In this way, our *adat* still presents "meanings" to us. This is most evident in our funeral traditions and rituals. They prove to be helpful during bereavement. Our *adat-adat* offer mourners a structure of grief and a model of behaviour during such times. *Adat* sanctions the full expression of grief and this provides an opportunity for catharsis (an outlet for our emotions) for all mourners. The laying out of the body at the wake also allows mourners to face their loss and to draw support from members of their social and family network. *Tua ha berat, tua ha biru* and *tua ha ringgan* remind mourners that grieving is a process of readjusting to life without the departed.

As we are on the brink of the third millenium, adat represents to us a link to how our ancestors viewed their living environment. It was a world populated by semangat-semangat, penunguh-penunguh, datok-datok and hantu-hantu. Jungian psychology (a school of psychology founded by Carl Jung early this century) suggests that these spirits represent the hidden, subconscious aspects of our personality and the uncontrollable forces of nature. The various adat-adat that honour these spirits represent our ancestors' efforts to understand and control the uncontrollable in their own selves, in their living environment and in nature.

I feel *adat* still can be relevant to babas and nyonyas in the third millenium. But we have to continue to understand and preserve our *adat* as much as our *adat* has protected us, preserved our way of life and provided us with "meanings".

Victor Gabriel Singapore

Victor Gabriel is a member of our Association as well as an associate member of the Australian Psychological Society, an affiliate member of the Singapore Psychological Society, and is of both Peranakan and Sephardi ancestry.

## ARTS

### Christie's Sale: A Success



Christie's sale of Straits Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art held on 31 March 1996 achieved a total of \$480,682, with 72.85% of the 234 lots sold. The highlights of the

sale were lot 855, a rare and important pair of mustard green *kamchengs* which sold for \$43,700 (estimate \$40,000 — \$60,000), and lot 907, a rare gold and diamond single *kerosang*, dated about 1920, which was auctioned for \$18,400. The market seems to have stabilised; prices achieved were mostly within the estimates. "We are very pleased with the sale results, and with the wide collection of Straits Chinese ceramics and works of art, which included many rare pieces, and which were well received by local and regional buyers," said Christopher Ng of Christie's.

## Felix Chia's Rempah Lemak

Felix Chia's play about four golden girls filled the auditorium of the Jubilee Hall for four nights from 6 to 10 May 1996. The story revolves round the camaraderie of four women (played by Mabel Lee, Margaret De Silva, Rosalind Yapp and Jessie Cheang), their comic antics and attempts to set up a marriage agency. The actresses delighted the audience with their banter and colourful innuendos. But their performances were weighed down by a tenuous plot. Amid all the banter, the depth of the different characters seemed to have been compromised somewhat. which was not helped by the static staging. This effort compared poorly to the playwright's previous effort, Si Adek Beradek, staged last June, which was complex, dark and textured, examining the love-hate relationship of two eccentric, competitive sisters from a family of declining fortune. An admirable effort nonetheless, but Peter Lee Felix Chia can definitely do better.

### GSA PLAY Kalu Jodoh Tak Mana Lari

Gunong Sayang Association launches a new play at the WTC Auditorium from 28 August to 8 September 1996. Playwright Baba William Gwee Thian Hock has written a love story spanning 3 generations, from the 1940s to the 1960s and right up to the present. It promises to be an evening of drama, music, song and dance. The play will also for the first time feature English translations of the Baba patois, projected onto screens flanking the stage. More details will be announced!

## **New Members**

The number of members has swelled to a total of 647! The Peranakan Association is very proud to welcome the following sixty new members:

Dr Diana Chee Ms Theresa Chee Swee Gek Miss Jennifer Chen Ling Ling Mdm Cheng Guat Cheng Ms Irene Chew Lian Neo Mr William Chia Phee Poh Mdm Chua Ji Nio Mdm Shirley Gan Ms Evelyn Gill nee Ang Mr Glen Goei Mr Patrick Goh Yong Meng Miss Sally Goh Swee Geok Miss Vivien Goh Mr Henry Gwee Thian Lye Mrs Howe Siew Heng Mrs Laura Hwang Mr Edward Kang Cheng Lim Mdm Pauline Khoo Bee Keow Mr Peter Khoo Boon Inn Dr Koh Cheng Geok Mr Lawrence Lee Boon Ann Miss Lilian Lee Miss Lee Wai Cheng Ms Anne Lim Siew Tiang Mr George Lim Mrs Lilian Lim Mdm Marilyn Lim Eng Kim Mrs Rosalind Lim San Neo Miss Sally Lim Mr Lim Sean Teck Mrs Caroline Mok Mr Ng Kheng Hiang Mr Ronald Ng Miss Josephine Oh Poh Tee Mr Eric Po Boon Liang Ms Bebe Seet Chwee Bee Mdm Margaret Seet Ms Shia Ai Lee Ms Rosy Soo Gek Lian Mrs Aileen Tan Mr Andrew Tan Mr Darren Tan Tsu Jin Mrs Irene Tan Yoke Nee Mdm Jenny Tan Lay Tah Mrs Lena Tan Mrs Mabel Tan Mr Marc Tan Tiang Wen Mrs Millicent Tan Miss Nancy Tan Chiew Peng Mdm Helen Teo Ah Buay Miss Jasmine Teo Lu Yin Mr Robert Teo Hock Kee Miss Vannie Toh Mr Wee Ang Whatt Ms Gloria Wee Gek Neo Mr James Wee Boon Cheng Miss Jenny Wee Chye Lian Ms Nancy Wee Kim Neo Mrs Rosalind Wee Kim Kee Miss Shirley Wee Gwek Eng

## Noticeboard

#### Member-get-member DRIVE

We can only truly preserve our heritage if we make a concerted effort to strengthen our numbers and recognise ourselves as an important part of Singapore's multicultural society! Extra membership application forms accompany this newsletter and all members are encouraged to recruit more people, Peranakan or otherwise, into our Association.

## Membership Card

Members who have not paid for their membership cards are kindly reminded to send \$2.00 and two photographs for that purpose. The membership card will allow you to get discounts at various restaurants and shops.

## Tombola!!

Get ready for the Association's first tombola night on 27 July 1996 at Boom Boom Room! Members are advised to brush up on their Baba number calls — perempuan gemok (8), tiang goal (11), jaudi tua (90), etc. You can refer to Felix Chia's The Babas, page 150, for a reference on the game. Circulars will be sent out nearer the date.

## 96th Anniversary Annual Dinner & Dance

This year's theme, *Peranakan Rhapsody: An Evening of Song*, will be a nostalgic event featuring songs from the golden age. Relive the romance of the pre-war years in our tribute to the music of that era. The event will be held at the Ballroom of the Sheraton Towers Hotel on Saturday, 16 November 1996. Prices will be \$68 or \$98 per person, with a maximum of twelve people a table. Members are also invited to buy donation tables for above \$980 a table. As there will only be a limited number of tables, please book early to avoid disappointment. Please call the Honorary Secretary Mrs Lim Geok Huay for enquiries (Tel: 2550704).

## 9th Baba Convention

The 9th Baba Convention, organised jointly by The Peranakan Association, The Gunong Sayang Association and The National Museum, will be held from 15 to 16 November 1996. More details will be announced in the next issue of the newsletter.

## **PROMOTIONS**

Discounts for members, on presentation of membership cards, are available in the following shops and restaurants:

#### RESTAURANTS

#### Baba Inn & Lounge

103 Frankel Avenue Singapore 458225 Tel: 4452404

Peranakan Inn & Lounge 210 East Coast Road

Singapore 428909 Tel: 4406195

10% discount to all members in these long-established restaurants run by Bob Seah, one of the pioneers of the Peranakan restaurant.

#### Fairway Garden

300 Orchard Road Eatz Food Court, #B2-01 The Promenade Singapore 238861 3 Telok Kurau Road Singapore 423757 Tel: 3486669 10% discount for food purchases above \$25. Fairway Garden, the best of healthy, wholesome home-style vegetarian food.

#### Guan Hoe Soon 214 Joo Chiat Road

Singapore 427482 Tel: 3442761 10% discount for their array of all-time Peranakan favourites. Guan Hoe Soon have been the caterers for the Association's

annual dinners for many years.

#### Kagura Yakitori

360 Orchard Road #02-09/10 International Building Singapore 238869 Tel: 7380911 10% discount for members whenever they patronise this Japanese restaurant specialising in yakitori. (Other foods are also available.)

#### **SPORTSWEAR**

#### Canterbury of New Zealand

160 Orchard Road #02-16 Orchard Point Singapore 238842 Tel: 7329489 Discount of 15% for their full range of authentic rugbywear, fashion jerseys and accessories. Also, a 10% discount for Kasco products, a complete line of top quality golf equipment and accessories.

#### Prosimmon Golf Centre

101 Thomson Road #01-80 United Square Singapore 307591 Tel: 2564863

One of Australia's top custom-made golf clubs. A 15% discount for a full-set of clubs, free gift, and free club testing and fitting.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY SERVICES

#### Image Presentation

Blk 1093 Lower Delta Road #06-13 Tiong Bahru Industrial Estate Singapore 169204 Tel: 2761778

10% discount for portraits. Please call for appointment. They have laboratories and studio, and a range of photographic services.

#### **BEAUTY THERAPY**

#### Bella Donna

402 Orchard Road #03-18 Delfi Orchard Singapore 238876 Tel: 2350662

Producers of one of the finest aromatic essential oils. Now offering a 30% discount for foot massage therapy in a relaxing environment. Please call for appointment.

## LEARN THE MAGIC OF MANEK MANEK

Keep the tradition alive! Enrol in The Peranakan Association's Nyonya Beadwork class run by Bibik Bebe Seet!

#### Learn how to:

- · identify and buy different beads
- obtain patterns and transfer them to fabric
  - set up a pidangan (frame)
  - · embroider the beads properly
  - · finish the beadwork and tidy up
- make a pair of open-toe slippers, sandals or shoes (beginners)
  - make a pair of kasot tutup (intermediate)
- make a pair of gentleman's slippers or a lady's purse (advanced 1)
  - make a pair of sulam timbul sandals or shoes (advanced 2)

#### BEGINNERS COURSE

STARTING WEDNESDAY, 17 JULY 1996

Duration: 3 months, 2 hours a week Time: 2.30 — 4.30 pm every Wednesday

Fees: \$280 inclusive of one pidangan (frame)

Venue: Katong Antique House, 208 East Coast Road, Singapore 428907 For more enquiries, call Peter Wee, Tel: 3458544

Class limited to 10 people only