

# THE PERANAKAN

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION

JANUARY - MARCH 1999

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## *Rumah Baba*

LAUNCHED FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE BOOK *RUMAH BABA — Life in a Peranakan House*.

The date was Sunday 29th November 1998; the time — 10.15 am. The guest-of-honour was Mrs Eng-Lee Seok Chee, a member of the National Heritage Board. Mr Lee Kip Lee, our Association President, was invited to speak while the Museum was represented by Board member Professor Cheah Jin Seng.

The programme included recognising and presenting gifts to those who had contributed to the event, namely Mr Peter Wee, coordinator for the fair and consultant for the exhibition, Ms Genevieve Peng for helping to coordinate the fair, Mr Herbie Lim and Mr Felix Chia for their literary contributions to the book.

The programme ended with a performance by members of the Association's Youth Group — a stylised dance depicting the Peranakan community's cultural beginnings.

Later in the morning, the writers, Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, went onstage to talk about some interesting features of their book.

Jennifer, formerly of the Singapore History Museum, had worked with our Association for the Baba Convention in 1996. One of the highlights of that convention was the as-authentic-as-possible exhibition *Rumah Baba — Life in a Peranakan House*, established on the second level of the Singapore History Museum. As this may not be a permanent exhibition, the book was conceived as a complement to it, and, more importantly, as a lasting record of our unique culture.

When she was given the task in 1996, she knew the work had to be not only factually correct but also acceptable to Peranakans.

Peter Lee is our Association's committee member and chairman of its Research and Information subcommittee. He volunteered his services for the book on behalf of the Peranakan Association.

For Peter, the 'house' had to come alive - 'it had to articulate a lifestyle'. He told the rapt audience that 'the culture



appears static when porcelain is seen in show-cases, and beaded panels are displayed in frames. We forget that all these had a life!

It is not surprising then, that the accounts of the first person, making them vivid and personal; and the photos 'show families doing things casually at home'.

Peter found that the biggest challenge was sourcing for these photos. But his efforts were well rewarded, as he turned up rare photos of relatives. In his own words, 'very fulfilling'.

Indeed, the sepia-toned photos (some with forgotten peaked and scalloped edges) work well with the accounts and are a good read. But don't just take my word for it. Find out for yourselves.

While all this serious business was going on, a mini-fair was in full swing outside. All the marks of a Peranakan gathering were present — delicious home-cooked food, kebayas in their usual vibrant hues, all set against a backdrop of Peranakan architecture.

It was a full day of activities. The afternoon included a skit by Gunong Sayang Association, a sculpture workshop for the children, and a Peranakan Food Culture by Mrs Vivian Lian.

Like I said before, what a month that was!

Maureen Lim

The Peranakan Association, Singapore, established 1900.  
website: [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

# 'MY GRANDMOTHER COULD DRINK ANYBODY UNDER THE TABLE'

A review of the book

*Rumah Baba — Life in a Peranakan House*

**H**istory is replete with illustrious Peranakans, people of power, wealth and full of character.

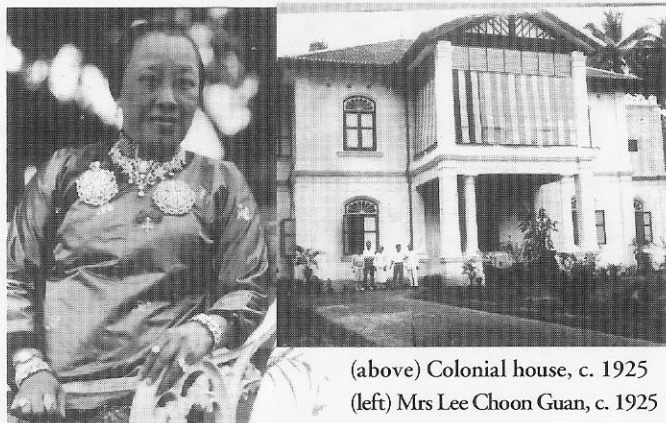
For example, Tan Keong Saik, who hailed from an old Malacca family, founded a line of steamships in Singapore that eventually became part of the Straits Steamship Company. He was a great philanthropist and one of the earliest advocates of education for Chinese girls in non-Christian homes. His name is perpetuated in Keong Saik Road in Chinatown.

Lee Choon Guan, also from an established Malacca family, made his fortune in property, trading and finance, and similarly became a benefactor to society. Choon Guan Street in Chinatown is a memorial to him.

By marriage, the two eminent Babas were related, and into the family fold came Lim Nee Soon, a Singapore rubber and pineapple pioneer and his son, Lim Chong Pang, after whom Nee Soon Road (now Yishun) and Chong Pang Road were named.

Lee Choon Guan was Tan Keong Saik's son-in-law who married his daughter, Teck Neo. Their daughter, Poh Neo, married Lim Chong Pang.

Poh Neo was an old-fashioned Nyonya who did not like giving birth in a hospital. So all her four children were



(above) Colonial house, c. 1925

(left) Mrs Lee Choon Guan, c. 1925

born at home called Mandalay Villa in Katong. One of the children is Herbie Lim Eng Kwan, a multi-talented entrepreneur well-known for his Jackie's Bowl and one-time Chairman of the Singapore Tourism Board. But Lee Poh Neo's mother Tan Teck Neo was something else. She was one of those who rose above the restrictions imposed on Peranakan ladies in the days of yore.

The ebullient Teck Neo made her mark in society all right. She involved herself in the work of numerous charity organisations, including the British Red Cross, and founded the Chinese Women's Association in 1915. For all these, she earned the title of Member of the Order of the British Empire conferred by King George V. She even had a chat with him and Queen Mary at the royal garden party in Buckingham Palace following the investiture ceremony.

Teck Neo had a penchant for the lifestyle of the English and Mandalay Villa, where she lived, was the scene of fashionable social revelries. It was customary for her to have her four o'clock tea in the verandah, 'sun downers' at six o'clock, formal black-tie dinners for friends in high places and dancing evenings.

'My grandmother could drink anybody under the table in any one night and stay on the dance floor all night,' recalls grandson Herbie Lim, recounting this tale of his celebrated ancestors in *Rumah Baba, Life in a Peranakan House*, a new Peranakan book by Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen.

Herbie Lim's contribution, *Mandalay Villa*, is just one of the many exotic episodes in the book published by Singapore History Museum, with Cheryl-Ann Low as contributing editor. It is a veritable treasure trove of Peranakan lifestyles, customs and traditions of the past, with full illustrations portraying the exuberance, colour and intricacy of Peranakan art.

With detailed descriptions, the authors take us on an eye-opening journey to the reception hall, ancestral hall, bridal chamber, living and dining rooms and the kitchen of a Peranakan house, and tell us the significance of each to the Babas and Nyonyas in bygone days. There is also a section in which noted Baba author Felix Chia relates his happy days at No. 60 Emerald Hill Road.

A replica of all these halls can be seen at the Singapore History Museum's *Rumah Baba* section, opened in November 1996 during the 9th Baba Convention in Singapore. The book deserves a place in the library of all Peranakans and admirers of the unique culture for their own edification and that of their descendants. The Singapore History Museum and Select Books have it, and all for only \$30 a copy.

*Anthony Oei*

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# PERANAKAN

— The Youth Group —

## Personal Glimpses 1998 Diary of a Peranakan Youth

**FEBRUARY** I attended my first youth group meeting this month. It's great to meet a group of young Peranakans who are passionate about their heritage, and who want to learn more about their unique culture. We've decided to call ourselves 'Peranakan — the youth group!' We must recruit enough young people to contribute to the culture, even as we live and work in modern Singapore.

**APRIL** The inaugural youth page appeared in *The Peranakan*. We introduced ourselves, and defined the group's objectives. We especially want to encourage existing young members to participate in events organised by the Association, and to recruit new members.

**JUNE** The youth hosted *Boom Baba Boom* to officially launch 'Peranakan' and the Association's website, which we set up. The committee spent weeks preparing for this event, making announcements in the newsletter, and personally inviting the 150 youth members by telephone. We were rather disappointed at the youths' attendance, but were really encouraged by the elders. They readily supported the event, and everyone enjoyed the lively Peranakan quiz, the very *sedap* buffet dinner, the catchy music, and the dancing. We must persevere, and persuade the younger members to participate in Association events. Once they have found their own *kakis*, they will become more involved, and more comfortable with the older members.

**JULY and AUGUST** The group is slowly growing in number. We meet regularly for *makan* sessions, which reflect the cosmopolitan tastes of young Peranakans. We've enjoyed Italian food, seafood, fish head curries, Peranakan food, all accompanied by wine, tea and liberal dashes of laughter. Other fun-filled events included learning to *tumbok rempah*, cooking Nyonya food, and playing beach volleyball at Sentosa.

**SEPTEMBER** We had a swingin' good time at the social dance classes which we organised. We've finally learnt the basics of the cha-cha and waltz. The class had a good mix of members, young and old, and I've made several new friends. The youth have decided to stage a dance and a song item for the D&D. A big *Kam Siah* to Baba Richard Tan and Dance Circle Studios for their help in this project. Most of us have no formal dance training, so everyone had to work doubly hard to learn the steps.

**OCTOBER** Dance rehearsals have gone well, the tailor has started work on our costumes, and our group of dancers really *belenkat macham kueh-ee!* Despite our hectic work schedules, we all looked forward to the twice-weekly rehearsals. The singers have been diligently practising too.

**NOVEMBER** We are very grateful to Uncle Kip and his committee for all their support and encouragement. Uncle Peter Wee has donated some lovely vintage *kebaya* and *baju panjang* for our performance. *Terimah kasih banyak-banyak* to our elders. The D&D marked our debut, together



with Babacapella. How thrilling it is to see months of hard work come to fruition! The youth's interpretation of *Chrita Dulu Kala* premiered before a very appreciative audience. The book-launch of *Rumah Baba — Life in a Peranakan House* at the National Museum provided another opportunity to perform our dance.

**DECEMBER** The whole group helped with last minute packing and preparations for the Malacca trip. We were treated to Peranakan hospitality the moment we boarded the Malacca-bound bus, where everyone happily shared biscuits, sweets, drinks and laughter. We performed *Chrita Dulu Kala* on the second day of the Peranakan Convention, and we also enjoyed watching the other items performed by our Malacca friends. The dancing was spontaneous, and the jolly mood of the elders enticed all of us onto the dance floor. The food in Malacca was most memorable— from Peranakan delights, to the delicious breakfast items, to the late-night suppers that we had, to the *kueh-kueh* that we could not resist bringing back to Singapore. *Boleh tak gemok?*

**CHRISTMAS** The youth group is getting more invitations than we ever imagined. We have been invited to perform, to tea, to socialise, to comment on the youths' role in the Peranakan culture. We want to recruit more young people into the fold, as we have great plans for 1999, and hope to contribute much to Peranakan society.

*Mari lah*, join us if you are young (below 40), or young at heart. If you would like to be kept informed of the youth group's activities, please give your email address, or your contact number to Isaac Chan, Email: anakbaba @singnet.com.sg, Telephone: 731 4502 (o).

## PUT ON YOUR BOOGIE SHOES & GROOVE ON DOWN TO THE STUDIO!!

### Peranakan Youth Performers!

**WANTED:** Singers, Actors, Dancers & Musicians! We are looking for members of all ages who are interested in joining our performance group. Starting March 1999, free training in traditional and modern styles will be provided to groom a group of Peranakan youth, to perform at this year's Dinner & Dance, and the Baba Convention (Nov '99). Stage experience is NOT necessary, but would be a bonus. Do your part to revitalise the Peranakan heritage! **JOIN US !** For more info, contact Isaac at anakbaba@singnet.com.sg or call 731 4502 (o).

## 308 NEW MEMBERS BOOST STRENGTH TO OVER 1,200 Good News unveiled at our Annual D & D

Attracted by the activities of the Peranakan Association as a heritage society, 308 admirers of the culture signed up in 1998, boosting the membership strength to 1,235.

'This is a record enrolment figure especially when we consider that the total membership for 1992 was only 342,' said President Lee Kip Lee in his message for the Association's 98th Anniversary Annual Dinner & Dance at the Grand Hyatt on 21 November 1998.

Many of the new members were among the 600 or so guests at the Dinner & Dance which carried the theme *Sulam-Sulam Peranakan* or Peranakan Embroidery. Indeed, Peranakan art, embroidery, fashion, song and dance filled the night, graced by the presence of Dr and Mrs Wee Kim Wee.

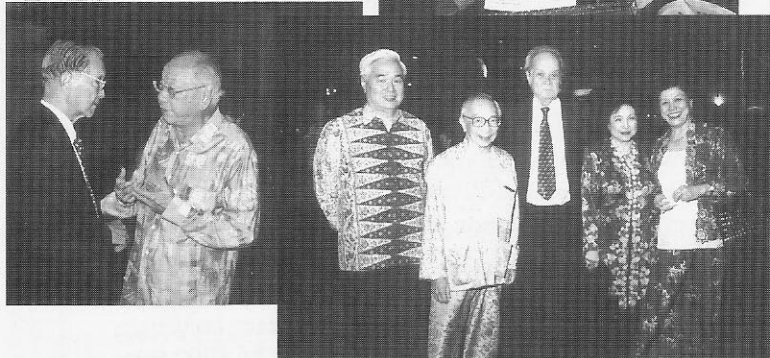
As always, the Nyonyas projected a delightful sight in their *sarong kebaya* and for the first time, the Babas came in batik, instead of lounge suits, enhancing the Peranakanness of the occasion.

President Lee himself was dressed *macham baba dulu kala pakay baju lok chuan bila pi orang chia*. Roughly translated, it meant the Chinese tunic and trousers worn to formal occasions by the Babas of old.

It was also the night when the Youth Group's new dance and a *cappella* groups made their debut with Peranakan song and dance favourites. Their offerings enlivened the evening's entertainment which featured the Dendang Irama Band, the latest fashion collection from Miss Joaquim's Singapore, and of course, the incomparable pair of G T Lye and Sally Gan. The New Notes Band sent the agile to the dance floor.

The annual Dinner & Dance is a major event of the Association which is dedicated to preserving and revitalising the Peranakan culture and traditions through cultural, social and literary activities.

Anthony Oei





## THE YOUTH PLAY THEIR ROLE TO KEEP THE CULTURE ALIVE 11th Baba Convention, Melaka

Malacca was the appropriate venue for the 11th Baba & Nyonya Convention '98 for two reasons. One, the topic was *The Baba and Nyonya in the Eyes of the Youth* and two, this peaceful Malaysian state is the birthplace of the Peranakan culture and is still the bedrock of it.

The delegates of well over 100 participants from Singapore, Malacca and Penang heard views on who and what the Babas and Nyonyas are, at the three-day event starting on 5th December organised by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. These deliberations were necessary for charting the future of the unique culture. It is a vital issue as the continued existence of this singular heritage created and left as a legacy by our ancestors depends on the youth.

What are their perceptions? This can be answered by the good attendance of over 20 young Peranakans from Singapore, Malacca and Penang at the convention, and their comments. And going by what the youth in Singapore and the two Malaysian states are doing to keep the culture alive, the prospects seem bright.

The Youth Group in Singapore has some 300 members. 'The youth perceive it as something to latch on to. 'It's a new culture for them,' said leader Isaac Chan. His group organises activities tailored to their needs and recently formed dance and *a cappella* groups. There is even a website covering a wide scope of matters pertaining to the Peranakan culture.

'The culture is charming and I like the traditions,' said Cyndy Lim who joined recently brought in by good friend Jocelyn Yeo

Penang is setting up a youth group. Said leader Lim Beng Soon: 'The interest among the youth is great. They feel the culture is important to them. What they need is a catalyst to get them going! That is where his youth group comes in.

Beng Soon has ambitious plans for the future, and these mean more than just cultural programmes. 'It is important that we also get them involved in civic events, to make them civic conscious,' he said. 'We should reach out to, and forge a link with, other countries as well, such as Indonesia, to bring the fraternity closer!'

The Malacca Youth Section, though by tradition already a strong force, continues to recruit new members. Leader Daniel Ang explained: 'Those in the 25 - 30 age group try to establish their careers, understandably enough. Some find work in Malacca, others have to go to other states. So obviously we have to step up our recruitment drive to maintain our numbers.'

And in Malacca, they start very young indeed. This was evident at the gala Dinner and Dance on Saturday night which also marked the 98th Anniversary of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. There, taking part in the colourful song and dance items, were children as young as three years old,

As Daniel put it: 'It is our way of getting them interested and nurturing them. Yes, the culture is alive and well in Malacca. The youth participate in our programmes and observe the traditions, although some will not take part in the religious practices, like ancestral worship, because they

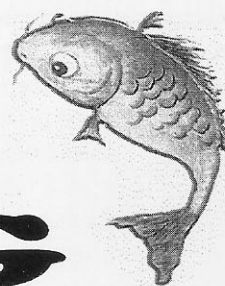
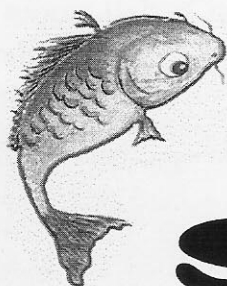
follow other religions. This is something we cannot interfere with.'

These are valuable views and feedback. The Associations in Singapore and the Malaysian states are taking note of the youth's needs and aspirations to pave the way for the emergence of a modern Peranakan community.

Anthony Oei



# The FIRST PERANAKAN



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## FOOD & CRAFT FAIR RAISES OVER \$68,000

The Peranakan Association raised over \$68,000 from its first-ever Food & Craft Fair at Great World City on 14th November 1998 for the Apex Harmony Lodge Building Fund.

The money would certainly boost this charity fund, thanks to all the Nyonyas who rolled up their sleeves in their kitchens cooking up those mouth-watering Peranakan dishes for sale, and all the Babas who played their part behind the scenes to make the occasion a big success.

All the 12 food stalls, eight craft stalls and two jumble sale stalls were well-patronised, against the background of a musical item called Musicathon rendering Peranakan hits.

An illustrious Nyonya contributing to the success of the food stalls was Mrs Wee Kim Wee who came with Dr Wee to grace the event. Mrs Wee proved to be excellent at Peranakan cuisine. Her *nasi ulam* was snapped up within minutes of its appearance. The other favourites, too, like *mee siam*, *poh piah*, *laksa* and *onde-onde*, were sold out within an hour.

Those who could, quickly replenished their offerings. The others who could not had to turn way disappointed customers. The organisers must have been wishing that they had conducted a market research to assess the demand.

The patrons came in droves, comprising not only Association members, their relatives and friends, but also shoppers at the City who came by, attracted by the hive of activity going on and the delicious table fare. It testified to the popularity of Peranakan cuisine.

The craft stalls were well-stocked with various kinds of quaint Peranakan creations like *kasut manek*, jewellery, embroidered *kebaya* and toys, inducing those eager to have them to buy for themselves and/or as gifts.

It was all a labour of love for a good cause. The Apex Harmony Lodge is Singapore's first home for senile dementia patients. This is being built at Pasir Ris and will take in its first 210 residential patients and 50 day-care patients when ready in April 1999. The worthy project is the brainchild of Dr Oon Chiew Seng, the present Chairman, who was delighted by the success of the fund-raising effort.

The Association will present the cheque to Dr Oon at a special ceremony on 30 January.

Anthony Oei



# The Peranakan Performing Arts in Singapore Moving into the next Millenium

At the recent Baba Convention, Baba Richard Tan Swee Guan presented a paper on his perceptions of Peranakan performing arts. Here is a transcript of his talk.

## From the Past

Since the turn of this century, our Peranakan forefathers had been most instrumental in adapting the Malay *bangsawan* (Malay Opera) into what we call the *Wayang Peranakan*. The dialogue in a *bangsawan* performance was spiced with songs and pantuns. The Babas enjoyed the *bangsawan* theatre especially for the *dondang sayang*, *keronchong* and *pantuns*. With the formation of numerous performing groups, such as the Wales Minstrels, Merrilads Musical Party, Oleh Oleh Party, and Kumpulan Peranakan Singapura, staging musical shows, music, song, dance and drama became a part of our vibrant culture.

Aside from some adaptation of Chinese classics, the *Wayang Peranakan* themes often centre around the family. Domestic squabbles, matriarchal domination and young love are spun in a web of intrigue with surprising twists and turns of the plot, and finally concluding with a happy ending. With our local humour and the quick wit of the performers injecting more comedy and drama, the Peranakan stories and characters often mirror and amplified the real life off stage.

*Tidak Berdosa, Rusia, Kaseh Ibu Tiri, Nyai Dasima*, and *Naseb Si Buta* are some of the popular plays. Often, they are also launched as part of a charity drive or fund raising event or even staged for a local deity's birthday celebration.

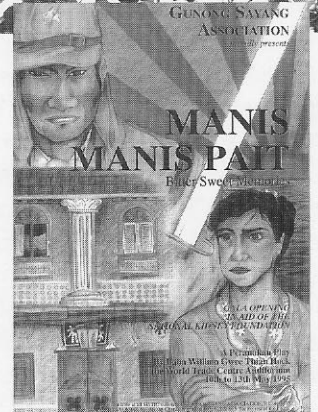
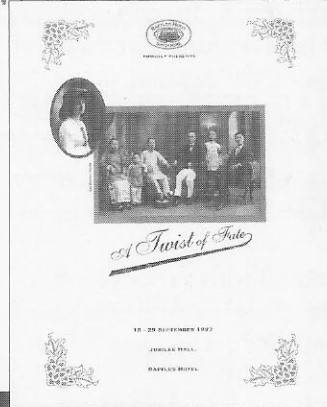
In the 1980s, the *Wayang Peranakan* was revived. With the staging of *Pileh Menantu*, many more new plays were commissioned for the local Festival of Arts and the Asian Performing Arts Festival. Plays written by Baba Felix Chia, Baba Henry Tan and Baba William Gwee became an annual reunion for many of our Peranakan families and friends who come out in full force to enjoy an evening of culture and nostalgia.

An English and even Mandarin version of Stella Kor's Peranakan play *Emily of Emerald Hill* has also attracted non-Peranakans to better appreciate our Peranakan way of life. This unique one-woman play was a milestone in Peranakan Theatre. Incorporating simple modern theatrics, with the use of slide projections and an interactive 'talk to the audience' style brought the audience closer into the living room of the Peranakan home.

## The Present

Today, the *Wayang Peranakan* is still alive and well. In fact, a new play by Gunong Sayang Association is right now being planned for the 1999 Singapore Arts Festival.

Recent staging of *Wayang Peranakan* took on more adventurous and interesting innovations. Drawing from a his-



(top) The Merrilads performing *The Stepmother* in aid of the China Relief Fund, c. 1938  
(above) Programme covers for *Twist of Fate* (1997) and *Manis Manis Pait* (1995)  
(left) The perANAKAN dancers (1998)

torical angle, commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Second World War, *Manis Manis Pait* depicted the struggles of a Peranakan family during the Japanese Occupation. Instead of the usual *extra turns*, *Kalu Jodoh Tak Mana Lari* and *Bulan Pernama* introduced the Broadway musical way of presentation with specially written songs performed in a seamless musical-theatre style linking one scene to the next. Even the stage had revolving sets and platforms with elaborate Peranakan décor intact.

Other local theatre groups, inspired by our culture and heritage have taken this even further out and closer to the West-End genre. Today, there are musicals like Dick Lee's and Glenn Goei's *Kampong Amber* for the opening of the 1995 Arts Festival. Just last month, Singapore Repertory Theatre



repeated its run of *A Twist of Fate*; a specially commissioned Peranakan-inspired musical for the 110th Anniversary of Raffles Hotel. There are plans to open this musical in London in the near future. This is testimony that our *Wayang Peranakan* is no longer restricted only to the Peranakan speaking actors/audience, but now, it has a wider appeal to theatre enthusiasts from all walks of life.

However, over the last few years, elements of our *Wayang Peranakan* heritage and culture have also expanded into other media and non Peranakans have also attempted to interpret and portray our *Bibiks* in a different light. With the popularity of GT Lye and Kenny Chan as the matriarchal icons of the *Bibik*, this role model has found its way into television drama series, TV and radio commercials for food products and the travel trade. While some comedy sitcoms have painted a positive image, others have been critically panned and their shows short-lived. Other cultural and national events have also recognised our heritage. This is evident in our National Day Parades, where Peranakans have been featured in the historical and cultural segments of the Mass Displays. Even the Annual Chingay Street parades (1995) won the GSA contingent the Best Performing Ethnic Group Award.

The *Wayang Peranakan* is not the only arena promoting our dynamic culture and keeping our 'Jolly colours' alive. Aside from a voluntary group of *Bibiks* who love to sing, an ensemble of singers and dancers from Gunong Sayang Association, The Peranakan Association has recently assembled a young and diligent cast of Youth members who together formed a singing group, calling themselves *Babacappella*; and a dance troupe with the name, *perANAKan*. A cacophony of polished voices in harmony and a body of new age dancers rediscovering their roots already show potential to grow into a fully-fledged Youth Wing that will innovate and transport our heritage into the next millenium.

## The Future

So, where do we go from here? Like all newly born 'babies' our young Babas and Nyonyas, must continue to be nurtured and guided by their seniors, and creative/cultural leaders. This may come through in a series of interactive sessions that will give the young a glimpse into our elders' past, sharing memories of their roots and heritage; conversing more frequently in our own lingo; opening up their young minds to a culturally rich legacy of customs, traditions and engaging in activities that will further bond and pass on the spirit of Peranakans. The Youth must also be encouraged by being given a platform to allow them to express and share their creative aspirations. Opportunities abound for them. Let's not underestimate their potential to brave on. As the world shrinks, becoming smaller and closer, at the touch of a button, they will be able to easily 'connect' with their Malacca and Penang counterparts. Perhaps, future Baba and Nyonya Conventions can include more Youth related/interactive activities.

With the very recent launch of the Peranakan website, [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg), the IT possibilities of the Chat line and Email facilities are endless. Perhaps, this is one of the vital links into our future, one that will connect all active and passive Peranakans young and old.

## PERSONALITIES BEHIND *PERANAKAN STREET NAMES*

### BOON KENG ROAD

Boon Keng Road commences at Serangoon Road, opposite Towner Road, and runs through the Kallang Industrial Estate, and ends up, after crossing the Kallang River, as Upper Boon Keng Road.

Dr Lim Boon Keng was born in Singapore in 1869. He began his English education at the Government Cross Street School. From there he went to Raffles Institution where he attracted the attention of the Principal, Mr Hullett (after whom Hullett Road in Emerald Hill Road is named) with whose encouragement he succeeded in doing so well in his school examination that in 1887 he became the first Straits Chinese to be awarded the prestigious Queen's Scholarship (equivalent to today's President's Scholarship).

He then proceeded to Edinburgh University from where he graduated in 1892 with a medical degree. He was one of the founders of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School and also of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) - the forerunner of The Peranakan Association - of which he became the President from 1904-1906. He was a Justice of The Peace, a Municipal Commissioner, a member of the Legislative Council, co-editor of The Straits Chinese Magazine and President of Amoy University.

At a Committee Meeting of the SCBA held in 1917, Dr Lim was appointed to present to the Government a Resolution 'that in their (the Committee's) opinion the time has now arrived when the Government should promote higher education by endowing scholarships or preferably by starting a technical school'.

During the period of the overthrow of the Manchu Dynasty he agitated, in the face of much opposition, for Chinese men to snip off their 'pigtales' or *touchangs* (queues) in favour of the Western hair crop because he 'realised that long hair was unnecessary, unhygienic and disgraceful to the Chinese; it represented an era of subjugation'.

He was one of the founders and also chairman of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation Ltd and the Overseas Assurance Corp Ltd. During the Occupation he was forced by the Japanese to head the Oversea Chinese Association set up to raise \$50 million as a 'gift' to the Japanese Military Government. He died in 1957.

### KHEAM HOCK ROAD

One end of Kheam Hock Road is at Dunearn Road from where it crosses Lornie Road at the other end to join Sime Road.

Tan Kheam Hock was born in Penang 1862 and came to Singapore in 1889 at the age of 27 to join a syndicate which held the monopoly of the Opium and Spirit Farms. After two years he left them to become a labour contractor to the Tanjong Pagar Dock Co. (now the Port of Singapore Authority) employing about 1,000 workers. He was a Justice of The Peace, a Municipal Commissioner, a member of the Committee of the Straits Chinese British Association, of the Chinese Advisory Board and of the Council of King Edward VII Medical School. He died in 1922.

*Lee Kip Lee*

# The Romantic Master of Dondang Sayang

## Gwee Peng Kwee

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer reminisces on her personal encounters with an artistic genius

I met the late Mr Gwee Peng Kwee during the twilight of his life. He was 81 years old, trapped with weakened limbs and dimming eyesight but his mind was brilliant with memories of his youth, his passion for music and dance, and most of all, his superlative gift of composing *dondang sayang* verses.

It started with an interview I had with a notable Baba on Peranakan Chinese New Year customs for the then Straits Times Section Two. Mr Gwee challenged one point on the *nasi kunyit* tradition which was mentioned in the feature by writing me a letter. This led me to question him further on subjects of Peranakan interest as he was already renowned among the Babas and Nyonyas as the doyen of *dondang sayang* singers.

I would, over a period of three years and armed with a tape recorder, attend to his summons as I focussed on the early carefree days of minstrel groups, Peranakan drama groups, and his wit and mastery of the Malay language that epitomised a great *dondang sayang* bard.

Not many of my generation would have had the opportunity of witnessing a *dondang sayang* session. Musicians and singers are normally assembled in a circle while the non-participants follow every *pantun* or verse along the perimeter. The set-up is casual with audiences moving in and out with food and drinks and children scrambling at the adults' feet.

First, there is the unmistakeable lead-to strain of the violin, a pause, and the opening couplet by a singer, male or female, followed by the musical accompaniment of a gong and a couple of *rebanas* (side drums).

This refrain offers the singer a moment to refine the composition of the remaining two lines which hold the substance of the verse. There is clapping and exclamation of appreciation or mock disdain all round as the words are fully comprehended.

Then someone takes up the challenge of the verse and signals to the others his readiness to banter verse with verse, always in keeping with the theme offered. Sometimes a *pantun* is directed to an individual to test his mettle. Compliments or sarcasm are given in metaphors that the young or initiated might not catch.

This poetic banter can go on for hours, the tension and laughter made all the more merry with *stengahs* of whisky or mugs of beer to clear the throat and loosen the tongue. Sometimes the subject matter can be ribald when not in mixed company. At other times, as Gwee recounted, there were tears and singing as when he brought a group together for his brother's funeral in 1972.

The subject of the *pantun* can be on love, *budi* (virtue) and death. Silver and gold, the sun and moon, trees, fruits, birds, animals and food are metaphors used in the *pantun*.

Gwee's early entry into the esteemable group of *pantun* singers was memorable. In fact it was a downright humiliation. The taunt came like a slingshot.



Mr Gwee Peng Kwee (with microphone), c. 1980s. Another great *dondang sayang* expert Mr William Tan is seated on his left.

*Mabok daun, buah nya tak'da,  
Buak ka-semak, di ramai-nya indah.*

(Full of leaves but no fruits,  
You are an encumbrance to the beautiful garden)  
Quick on the mark, young Gwee thought up his repartee.  
*Ini tahun tak berbuah,  
Lain tahun berbuah lagi.*

(If I don't bear fruit this year, I'll flower next year,  
And when I flower, then there will be fruits)

His biggest move into the world of *dondang sayang* came when Gwee moved to Carpmal Road in Katong, heartland of the Peranakans. The Gunong Sayang Association was just a few doors away from his house which he had not realised. Standing by a telephone post, he heard the familiar voices of his uncle and cousin who spotted him and promptly invited him to a party.

'The next day, there was a satay party. I enjoyed the satay and after that we sat around and listened. I had heard *dondang sayang* before but I had never sung a *pantun*. Sure, I knew a few *pantuns*, every Baba has a few in his repertoire. My uncle gave me a few verses which I memorised a few minutes later. After a while I beat them hollow. I learned quick!

At the age of 40 Gwee joined the Gunong Sayang Association. He was the youngest *pantun*-singing member out of a handful of old-timers.

'You must have a good command of the Malay language — its proverbs, idioms and expressions. I ate, slept and dreamt *dondang sayang*. I learned my Malay through the unabridged dictionary by R.O. Winstedt. From there I formed my *pantuns*,' Gwee recalled.

*Chempedak di-luar pagar,  
Ambil galar tolong jolok-kan;  
Saya budak baru belajar,  
kalau salah, tolong tunjuk-kan.*



(The chempedak fruit is outside the fence,  
 Bring me the bamboo pole, help pull down the fruit;  
 I am a boy who is still learning,  
 If I am wrong please show me the way)  
*Budak-budak di-luar pagar,  
 Ambil galah, jolok kelapa,  
 Budak-budak baru belajar,  
 Kalau salah, tak ' kenapa.*  
 (Children outside the fence,  
 Take the bamboo pole and pluck the coconut;  
 Newcomers are just learning,  
 Nevermind if they falter)  
 Challenges soon came his way.

'I was at a wedding party with the *dondang sayang* players and I was invited to sing. A Malay gentleman agreed to start the singing and another from the party must reply. He directed himself at me: "*Encik nyanyi dulu. Saya jawab.*"

'I was struck, I blushed. The music was playing and the audience urged me to reply. It was shameful. The Malay gentleman was asking:

*Baba pandeh, saya tanya:  
 Bulan berjalan, mana kaki-nya?*  
 (Baba is clever, so I ask of you:  
 The moon moves but where are its legs?)

'I answered:

The moon moves not a length of padi,  
 The clouds move, the world revolves;  
 The moon moves through the power of God  
 The snake crawls, where are his feet?

So profound an answer was given that soon Gwee's formidable reputation as a stylish *pantun* composer grew.

During the peak of *pantun* singing, competition was rife with contests held in Malacca and Singapore. Gwee was equally proud to say that he had coached some Malay singers with his original work. Occasionally, he sent a few verses to the local radio station for broadcasting. Later, he viewed with disdain the decline of *dondang sayang* as he watched prepared *pantuns* sung by singers for the televised *dondang sayang* programmes.

Mr Gwee passed away in 1986 leaving behind about 7,000 handwritten *pantuns*, most of which were his own compositions, in specially bound volumes. The majority of the verses have not been published. •



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# NEW MEMBERS

We welcome aboard the following 160 new members whose addition increases our roll to 1235 members.

## Ordinary Members

Ms Ang Li Ling Angeline  
 Ms Ang Seck Hong Jennifer  
 Mr Ang Soon Guan Francis  
 Mrs Bong-Tan Gek Neo Shirley  
 Ms Chan Soo Ling Christina  
 Mr Chia Geoff Cheng Yun  
 Mr Chua Kiat Hoo  
 Dr Fong Poh Him  
 Mr Gan Benjamin  
 Mdm Gan Kwee Lin Nancy  
 Mrs Gan Lilian  
 Mr Goh Gerard  
 Mr Goh Leang Huwe  
 Ms Ho Chui Lin Cindy  
 Mr Kam Chee Wei Jonathan  
 Ms Kang Su Ping Nadine  
 Mr Albert Koh Thiam Chye  
 Mr Lauw Yong Sheng Erwin  
 Mdm Lee Amy  
 Mrs Lee Pamela  
 Ms Lee Siang Choo Patricia  
 Mdm Lim Chai Hoon Irene  
 Mdm Lim Chay Khiang Lily  
 Ms Lim Cyndy  
 Mdm Lim Julie  
 Mdm Lim Puay Neo Maureen  
 Ms Low May Ling Adeline  
 Mr Ng Kim Song  
 Ms Ong Cindy  
 Ms Ong Linda  
 Mdm Ong Rosy  
 Mr Ooi Joo Aik  
 Ms Pan Helen  
 Mr Phuah Swee Guan Stephen  
 Mr Ren Ziming Alex  
 Mdm Sng Ai Hiong Lily  
 Mr Tan Boon Leng Benjamin  
 Ms Tan Choo Neo  
 Ms Tan Do Bee Doreen  
 Ms Tan Gracie  
 Ms Tan Swee Lan Jen  
 Ms Tan Lay Choo  
 Mr Tay Leong Heng  
 Ms Tan Li Pyng Ruth  
 Mdm Tan May Elizabeth  
 Mdm Tan Rosalind Margaret  
 Mr Tan Tian Chye  
 Mr Tan Wei-Rong  
 Ms Teo Lian Choo Irene  
 Dr Tsakok Maureen  
 Ms Wee Bee Lian June  
 Ms Wee Foh Neo Grace  
 Mr Wee Mervin  
 Mdm Yeoh Gay

## Associate Member

Mr Lim Hai Ching

# NOTICEBOARD

## OBITUARIES

We extend our deepest sympathy to the families of the following late members on their recent bereavement.

Mr Roland Yap Thiam Huat  
Mr Lee Hock Ley  
Mr Wilson Tan

Mr Roland Yap, who passed away in December at the age of 38 years after a very short illness, was an active member of the association and had been an important player in the dinner-and-dance and social subcommittees in the last few years. Many tombola nights would not have been possible if not for Roland's help. He was by profession a florist and he was also the Honorary Secretary of Gunong Sayang Association. He will be sorely missed by the many committee and subcommittee members who had got to know him well. Good-bye Roland! May you rest in peace.

## A CHINESE NEW YEAR NIGHT TIGER TAVERN

Thursday 25th February 1999  
7 to 10.30 pm

Once again, we shall celebrate Chinese New Year at the Tiger Tavern with beer, stout, soft drinks and tit-bitss kindly provided without charge by Asia Pacific Breweries.

Buses, parked in front of the United Overseas Bank will leave United Square, 101 Thomson, at 6.30 pm to transport you to and from the Tiger Tavern. There will be a buffet dinner as well as a band to liven the occasion. As the capacity in the Tavern is limited to 100 persons reservations will be accepted on a first-come-first-served basis and each member may invite one guest only. Members \$18, Guests \$25. For reservations please call Mrs Lim Geok Huay - Tel 2550704.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING Saturday 27 March 1999

The Annual General Meeting of the Association will be held on Saturday 27 March 1999 at the Bougainvillea Room, RELC Building, Orange Grove Road at 2.30 pm. Please call the Honorary Secretary to inform her of your attendance.

**Dr Jürgen Rudolph's**  
**RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES**  
**THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE BABAS IN SINGAPORE**  
**Special offer for Association members**

Members of the Association may obtain copies of the book from Hemisphere Publication Services. Contact Ms Lee Gek at Tel. 7415166/Fax 7429356. Special Price for members \$90.64 (\$88.00 + 3% GST).

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Thursday 25th February  
**Chinese New Year at Tiger Tavern**  
Tiger Tavern 7 - 10 pm

Saturday 27th March  
**AGM**  
Bougainvillea Room, RELC Building, 2.30 pm

Sunday 11th April  
**Bowling**  
Jackie's Bowl, Upper East Coast Road, 2.30 pm

17th April  
**Talk by Associate Professor Catherine Tay**  
'Know Your Legal Rights'  
Rose Room I/II, York Hotel. 2 - 5 pm

## Rare Recipes CALLING ALL MEMBERS!

If you have any rare or unusual recipes to share, please send them in to The Peranakan Association, marked 'Rare Recipes'. Please also include any interesting anecdotes or memories you may have about eating the particular dish. These recipes will be compiled for a potential publication.

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