

THE PERANAKAN

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION

JANUARY - MARCH 2000

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THE 12TH BABA CONVENTION *a celebration of living traditions*

The three-day programme of the 12th Baba Convention, organised jointly by The Peranakan Association and Gunong Sayang Association and supported by the National Heritage Board, started on a high note with a gala event. The Association's 99th Anniversary and Dinner & Dance held on 19th November 1999 was a sellout. About 720 Babas and Nyonyas from Singapore, Malacca and Penang jammed the Mandarin Orchard ballroom to enjoy an evening of fun and fellowship in a function aptly billed *Our Life*. Highlights included music by the Danny Koh Big Band, songs by The Peranakan Voices, a spectacular dance pageant by the Association's Youth Group and songs and skits by our very own G T Lye, William Tan and Sally Gan, and Malacca's Cedric Tan.

The theme complemented those of the three events that followed in the next two days. These were the Convention's seminar at the RELC auditorium, the *Malam Laujiat* at the Singapore Island Country Club, and the Food and Craft Fair at the Singapore History Museum.

At the RELC auditorium on the morning of 20th November, the convention seminar *Living Traditions — Celebrating the Peranakan Lifestyle* was literally bursting with life as the speakers dramatised their workshop-style, interactive presentations of Baba and Nyonya dress, food, patois and customs and traditions to convey the message more forcefully.

In a Peranakan living room setting, beadwork specialist and committee member Bebe Seet-Wong began the seminar by hosting a Peranakan dress workshop. Delegates were shown how to wear the *sarong kebaya*, *baju lokchuan* and how to comb the various types of *sanggul*. Delegates Michael Cheah from Penang and Thomas Tan from Malacca shared with the audience their expertise in the sartorial styles of their hometowns. The session ended with a fashion show of contemporary versions of the *sarong kebaya* from Miss Joaquim's, modelled by about eleven young Baba and Nyonya volunteers.

Nyonya food columnist Sylvia Tan presided over the next session called the Rare Recipes Exchange. Recipes from three delegates — for *Curry Ikan* (from Penang's Mrs Oon Suan See), *Teehee Char Rebong* from Singapore's Mrs Molly Seah) and *Udang Chow* (from Malacca's Mr Robert Chan) — were discussed. Mrs Seah, Mr & Mrs Chan and Mrs Oon joined Sylvia on stage. It was a humorous and lively session. Many delegates spent the session scribbling notes, especially when Mrs Judy Chan shared her recipe for *tho-eh* (fermented glutinous rice and shrimp paste).

The last two sessions, a Baba patois debate, and



Customs and Traditions Revisited, were hosted by actor and natural comic Lee Yong Ming whose guests were William Tan from Singapore, Elaine Ang, Chan Leong Hin, and Robert Seet from Malacca, Dr Lim Beng Soon and Dr Yeoh Guat Hong from Penang. The sessions were conducted like talk shows and brought the house down with their hilarious banter and anecdotes, much of which was conducted in Baba Malay. Delegates received factsheets for each session which provided information on the various topics.

Commented Dato' Khoo Keat Siew, President of the State Chinese Association of Penang: "It is refreshing to know that the organisers are adopting an innovative and informal approach to draw upon the knowledge and talents of the participants. Undoubtedly the conventions in the past have been structured along academic lines and the departure from the formal and stiff forums which (continued on pg 7)

Editorial

Selamat Tahun Bahru. We wish you a Very Happy New Year of the Dragon.

At the dawn of our hundredth year it is timely to reflect on all our activities over the last few years. As a heritage society whose mission is "to preserve and revitalise the Peranakan culture and traditions through cultural, social and literary activities," the Association has reached out in several directions to re-articulate and bring together the community, and to work with the National Heritage Board to promote our traditions.

We have held several successful dinners at which speakers deliver talks on Peranakan topics. Our speakers have included authors Kenneth Cheo, Ong Poh Neo and Jürgen Rudolph. We have organised the Baba Convention once every three years, in rotation with our sister associations in Malacca and Penang and sent a large group of delegates to the conventions held there. We also have had many social evenings and afternoons where members have the opportunity to *berbual* with each other. To cater to the younger set, our very energetic Youth Group, by communicating with each other by e-mail and mobile phones, manage to arrange gatherings to meet new members of their own age group. They have also formed their own dance group as well as the Babacappella Singers who made their very successful debuts at our 1998 Annual Dinner & Dance.

To enable them to delve into the richness of their Baba heritage they persuaded some of the older members to demonstrate to them the art of making the Malacca *kueh-tair* as

well as to show them how to make *bunga rampay*, and how to *asap kan* homes with *kemenyan*, *kayu cendana* and *stangee*. They even held a *How to Play Chongkak* session.

We have also caught the public's eye by our more serious activities. It began at the 9th Baba Convention in 1996 when we assisted the National Heritage Board to set up the *Rumah Baba - Life in a Peranakan House* exhibition at the Singapore History Museum.

In 1997, through funding provided by The National Computer Board as well as a donation of \$7,500 from the Lee Foundation made through the Association, we supported the website *Peranakan Culture in Perspective* (www.peranakan.com.sg) created by Greenhouse Multimedia. In 1998 we set up our own website (www.peranakan.com.sg).

Two outstanding events occurred in November 1998. The first was the Association's Musicathon, Food & Craft Fair which raised \$68,500 for The Apex Harmony Lodge, a home for sufferers of senile dementia. The second was the Association's sponsorship and launching of the book *Rumah Baba - Life in a Peranakan House* jointly written by Peter Lee our Editor and Jennifer Chen, a member.

Last year there was a magnificent response by members to an appeal, made in *The Peranakan*, for contributions to The National Heritage Board to enable them to purchase 180 historically important old Peranakan photographs. Within one month donations totalling \$17,000 were received.

Then there was the publication of the bumper issue of *The Peranakan* which was distributed free to every one of the 720 members and friends at the Annual Dinner & Dance. Whereas, in the past, we had to collect discarded copies of the newsletter left behind after the dinner, last year nearly every person took his or her copy home to keep as a souvenir.

As a result of all these activities there was a greater awareness of the Peranakan presence in Singapore with calls made to our members to participate in discussions on Peranakan matters in *The Living Room* of Radio FM 93.8; to be interviewed for documentaries aired on Channel 8 and Premier 12; and to be invited to give talks at The Tower Club, Club 200 and The Chinese Women's Association.

Our fabulous Peranakan Youth Dancers have performed in a GSA play as an *extra turn*; and were at the 11th Baba Convention in Malacca, the 12th Baba Convention in Singapore and also at the Substation's *Annual Forum for the Arts*.

With such coverage by the media, new memberships as well as interest in the Association have increased.

Let us hope that potential new members, when asked about their families or when researching their family trees, will be proud to be Peranakan or even part-Peranakan, and to stand up to be counted as belonging to a truly unique community — one that, in the tradition of our forefathers, will continue to leave its mark on society.

Lee Kip Lee

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The editorial committee
(seated from left)
Shia Ailee,
Lee Kip Lee,
Maureen Lim
(standing from left)
Anthony Oei,
Peter Lee
(absent) Lim Geok Huay

PERANAKAN

The Youth Group

As we crossed into the New Year, the Youth Group took time to reflect upon its activities in the past twelve months. We referred constantly to the objectives which we had laid out, and we are pleased to report progress in every aspect.

The Youth Group was formed to encourage existing younger members (age 45 and below) to participate more actively in the Association's events. Our initial committee comprised only 6 members. This has grown to 12 members, with subcommittees to cater to the educational, performance and social aspects of our culture. Everyone has shown great commitment and creativity in planning our programmes. Attendance at these Youth-events has exceeded our expectations, and many new friendships have developed from them.

Another objective is to create awareness of the Peranakan culture, and to recruit new members into the Peranakan Association. Our Dance Group has performed at the Arts Festival, at Substation's *Forum for the Arts*, and at Dick Lee's *Mad Chinaman* concert. Ample opportunities are provided for Babas, Nyonyas and non-Peranakans to meet through these performances, through our Internet electronic newsletter, and through our biannual new members' get together. We extend our thanks to Mrs Lim Geok Huay for her diligence in updating our Youth contact list.

We also aim to foster a sense of identity between all Association members, young and old. We realise that our elders are a valuable source of interesting information, so we organise sessions where they can pass on their wealth of knowledge to us youngsters. We have learnt much about long-forgotten crafts, skills and games.

Peranakan Road Show 2000

To broaden our children's horizons and to preserve our heritage, we have embarked on a **school outreach project**. Discussions are still under way, but we would like to bring a slice of Peranakan life to the schools and Institutes of Technical Education. We hope to package a lively and interesting "Peranakan Road Show," featuring history, slides, costumes, dance and other interesting aspects of our culture. There will also be infosheets, demonstrations and games.

We need people to help with scripts and demonstrations, to be speakers or coordinators. We would like a larger team of people (any age group) so that we can roster an ongoing tour in the later half of the year.

If you would like more information, please contact Heather Ong <haichuan@cyberway.com.sg>, or Isaac Chan Tel.: 7314502 (O).

March 4, Saturday GET TOGETHER DINNER, Don Noodle Café, #01-16 Tanglin Mall, at 7 pm.

Come to this informal dinner, welcome new youth group members, and meet other Baba and Nyonya. Chat over good,



The Youth Group dancers at the 99th Anniversary Dinner & Dance, 21st November 1998

cheap food and we'll just split the bill at the end. Drag some friends along and meet us.

March 25, Peranakan Moonshine, Katong Antique House, 220A East Coast Road. 2 to 5 pm. Cost: \$12 (members), \$15 (guests) inclusive of refreshments. Call Raena at 9798 6097 to book your place.

Explore the origins of the various *pantang* (taboos) that surround the preparation of fermented food like *tapai*, *samsu*, and *chinchalok*. Tap into the Baba's wealth of knowledge, and be amused by all that trivia.*

Heather Ong

A weekend of living traditions

It was a weekend to end all weekends for The Peranakan Association in 1999 as it brought to life the Baba and Nyonya traditions at the 99th Dinner and Dance, the 12th Baba Convention and the Food & Craft Fair in November.

"Life" was the central theme. It served as a reminder that the Peranakan community in Singapore is alive and well and that we still have "living traditions".

The shine and glitter recaptured in these pages tell all.



99th Anniversary
Dinner & Dance
19th November
1999





Malam Laujiat
20th November
1999



Food & Craft
Fair
21st November
1999



12th Baba
Convention
Seminar
20th November
1999



I VAN to be *Emily*



Ivan Heng Plays Emily of Emerald Hill 26th April - 10th May 2000
Members can enjoy the privilege of a 10% discount

After sellout runs in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong, Ivan Heng finally brings his stellar performance of Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* to Singapore. Directed by the renowned Krishen Jit of Malaysia, Heng's performance first moved audiences in Kuala Lumpur where *Emily* played from 6th to 17th October 1999. He won rave reviews. The *Malay Mail* said Heng's *Emily* "was mercurial, funny, cunning, conniving, pathetic, but instantly likeable," while a radio station called him "the quintessential Peranakan Nyonya." Heng then took *Emily* to Hong Kong's City Festival for a five-night run from 20th to 25th January this year. One magazine reviewer called it "undoubtedly one of the best performances I have ever seen," and the *South China Morning Post* said it was a "funny, camp, and occasionally touching performance, quite deserving of its full house."



Emily is about a formidable woman who begins life as an abandoned child but by sheer wit, cunning and willpower, emerges as a society matron *par excellence*, but at a cost. Audiences can expect a soundtrack courtesy of Fred Astaire and a hilarious interactive segment during the interval. Ivan Heng is a multiple award-winning actor and director. As Song Liling in *M Butterfly* he toured Singapore, Canada and India. His performance of *Journey West* toured 17 cities and won awards. Most recently he directed and co-wrote *Ah Kong's Birthday Party*, Singapore's longest running play. Heng's portrayal of *Emily* pays homage to a long tradition of female impersonation in Peranakan *bangsawan* and plays. This production launches Heng's new theatre company, Wild Rice, which will take inspiration from Singapore and "new Asia." Produced by Shaksfin Asia, *Emily* will be held at Jubilee Hall, Raffles Hotel, from 26th April to 10th May. As an official supporter of the show, The Peranakan Association has been given the privilege of a 10% discount for its members. Simply present your membership card to obtain your discount when making purchases. Tickets at \$35 and \$45 are available at Sistic outlets or by telephone booking (Tel. 348 5555).•

sayang a unique beadwork project



The Industrial and Service Co-operative Society Ltd (ISCOS) was founded in 1989 to help ex-prisoners and ex-drug addicts to reintegrate into society through work rehabilitation. Its board of trustees include senior government

officials, and its successful projects include setting up companies like Mister Mover and Mister Clean.

One of their latest ventures, set up in June 1999 is a pilot beadwork project with the Changi Women's Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre. The pioneer batch of women prisoners have produced many impressive pieces in the form of shoe plates, which are either made into *kasut* under the *Sayang* label or framed as works of art. ISCOS is looking for an experienced beading instructor to cope with the new production team who can work part-time or full-time (fees are negotiable). If you are interested in this position or in the shoes, please contact Frances Chia at Tel. 5474800 or you can e-mail her at frances@iscos.org.sg. •

internet news

A wonderful new website was recently launched on the subject of Peranakan porcelain. *The Phoenix & The Peony* (www.nyonyaporcelain.com) is detailed and informative with many illustrations. The site is divided into categories on the history of the Peranakans, an introduction to the porcelain, definitions, motifs, colours, and a catalogue of the various shapes and vessels. The collaborators of this excellent effort include Association member and ceramics collector Dr Lye Wai Choong, who gave a talk to the Association on ceramics a couple of years ago. Some of the pieces from his collection are on display at the *Rumah Baba* exhibition at the Singapore History Museum. •

Grandparent of The Year 1999 Pageant Mrs Sally Chan Invited to Judge

Mrs Sally Chan, representing the Association, was invited to judge the Grandparent of The Year contest organised by *Senior Life* magazine, held at the Mandarin Hotel on Sunday 28th November 1999. •

Remembering Chia Hood Theam

(1863-1936)

Chia Hood Theam's father, Chia Leong Chuan, first came from Amoy in the early 1850s to seek his fortune in Singapore. Chia Hood Theam was born in 1863 and educated in an English language school. After he completed his studies he joined the Mercantile Bank of India as a trainee. Eventually as a man of great clout he was promoted to the position of compradore. As the Chinese head of the bank he was the link between the British bankers and the local community. It was part of his job to assess the creditworthiness of locals seeking loans.

In the early years, the family lived in Neil Road and when he made his fortune, he bought his first mansion in Killiney Road which was called *Rosedale*, where most of my family were born, and where we spent our childhood and adult life. Last year when my nephew Professor Leonard Tan came back from Canada to visit us, he brought up the idea of getting all the descendants of Chia Hood Theam for a reunion dinner, and fixed the date on 12th February 2000.

We formed a working group to round up as many people as we could for the dinner and booked the Garden Hotel in Balmoral Road. The response was very successful and we were pleased to see so many families turning up. Some had come from England and other countries of Europe, America, Australia, Hong Kong and even Sarawak. All in all there were four generations totalling about 200 members of the family. Most unfortunately, Leonard was not able to come as the airline could not confirm his return flight.

Among those present, the oldest granddaughter of Chia Hood Theam was my eldest sister Elsie Chia Sek Neo, age 89. The oldest surviving grandson of Chia Hood Theam is Siow Sian Chye. It was a pity that he was not able to make it to the Reunion as he is in poor health. What can be expected when one is 93.

Chia Chin Siang

(This event was featured in a *Sunday Times* article on 13th February 2000. At least 28 descendants of Chia Hood Theam are currently members of the Association, and many are or have been members of our main and subcommittees, including Raena Cheong, Philip Chia, Alan Koh, Maureen Koh, David Ong, Heather Ong & Violet Ong.)



Descendants of Chia Hood Theam who are members of The Peranakan Association at the Chia family reunion.



Mr & Mrs Chia Hood Theam and family outside Rosedale, 9th Oct. 1921

CONVENTION

(continued from front page) characterised our previous conventions will hopefully achieve the desired results of the organisers."

In the evening, delegates danced the night away at *Malam Laujiat*. Entertainment was provided by Malacca delegates who formed an informal choir and sang a few songs, and a group of Penang ladies who performed traditional dances. Our own youth group danced with a dazzling Saloma impersonator who mimed a wonderful 1960s Malay hit.

The highlight of the next day was a well-attended Peranakan food and craft fair organised by the Association's fund-raising committee. About 29 stores sold *sarong* and *kebaya*, beadwork items, handicraft, and food ranging from *poh-piah* and *nasi ulam* to *laksa* and pre-prepared *rempah*. Music was provided by the Dendang Irama band, and many Babas and Nyonyas spent the afternoon dancing the *joget*. After lunch, the Asian Civilisations Museum invited all delegates to view their exhibition of Southeast Asian jewellery, which included some outstanding Peranakan items. The Penang and Malacca delegates returned to their hometowns in the late afternoon.

Confident of the future, President Lee said at the end of the convention: "Even as we so quickly come to the end of our programme, we all look forward to better things to come for our respective associations and our Peranakan community in the new millennium."

Baba Convention Committee

Lee Kip Lee (*Chairman*), Ann Chiang (*Alternate Chairperson*), Maureen Lim (*Hon. Secretary*), Lim Geok Huay (*Coordinator*), Yeo Seok Yan (*Treasurer*), Thomas Tan (*Asst. Treasurer*), Alan Koh (*Annual D & D*), Peter Lee (*Seminar*) Maureen Lim (*Malam Laujiat*), Peter Wee (*Food & Craft Fair*), Philip Chia (*Hospitality & Transport*), Desmond Sim & John Lee (*Publications & Publicity*), Richard Tan (*Entertainment*), Sally Gan, William Tan (*GSA Coordinators*).

Dinner & Dance Committee

Alan Koh (*Chairman*), Isaac Chan, Raena Cheong, Philip Chia, Ruby R. Ng-Ong, Violet Ong, Irene Ooi, Bebe Seet-Wong, Helen Tan, Peter Wee.

Food & Craft Fair Committee

Peter Wee (*Chairman*), Marlene Foo (*Vice-Chairman*), Irene Ooi (*Treasurer*), Thomas Tan (*Asst. Treasurer*), Shia Ailee (*Secretary*), Helen Tan (*PR*), Bebe Seet-Wong (*Crafts Logistics*), David Ong (*Advisor*), Betty Mariette, Sally Chan, Giam Cheng Han, Alan Koh.*

Anthony Oei and Peter Lee

NOTICEBOARD

Heritage Appeal List of Donors

We regret that the following names were inadvertently left out of the list of donors published in the last issue of *The Peranakan* and apologise for the omission:

Mr Loh Cheok Leng
Ms Angeline Teo

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AGM TO BE HELD ON SATURDAY 18 MARCH 2000

The Annual General Meeting of The Peranakan Association will be held on Saturday 18th March 2000 at 2.30 pm at Room 507, RELC Building, Orange Grove Road.

Obituaries

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

Mr Patrick Goh Yong Meng
Mr John David

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome aboard the following 36 new members whose addition increases our roll to 1390 members.

Ordinary Members

Ms Chan Siew Kem
Mdam Chia Ai Ngin Rosalind
Ms Chia Hsien Lin Jennifer
Ms Chia Gek Lian Nora
Ms Chua Eng Ong Lilian
Mr Chua Wei Kuan Gerard
Mrs Fang Ai Lian nee Ho
Ms Geh Poh Gaik June
Mr Goh Kheng Chong
Mdm Hwee Mun Heng
Ms Lau Kah-Loon Luna
Mr Lee Chin Tuan Travis
Mr Lee Chun Tuan Jarrod Julian
Ms Lee Gladys
Mdm Leow Po Chong
Mr Lim Fung Symn Francis
Ms Lim Hui Yen Joyce
Mr Lim Kim Kok Victor
Mr Lim Kim Tung John
Mdm Lim Swee Hiang Lilian
Mr Mui Fan Cheang Peter
Ms Ngan Keat Wun Katherine
Ms Ong Teck Hong Janice
Mr Ooi Lai Hin Gavin
Dr Ooi Lai Hock
Ms Peh Siew Lee Sylvia
Mdm Poh Kim Neo
Ms Poh Li Lian Pamphylia
Mr Salman A Salam
Mdm Song Beng Lian
Ms Tan Adele
Mdm Tan Chwee Neo
Mdm Tan Kim Kee
Ms Tan S G Eleanor
Mrs Toh Kai Chiang
Ms Wee Beng Choo Sally
Ms Wee Hong Choo Janet
Mr Wong Franklin
Mr Yeo Piak Kwa
Assoc Professor Yeoh Oon Chye •