

the peranakan

april – june 2003

quarterly newsletter of the peranakan association www.peranakan.org.sg



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SINGAPORE



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editorial

NOREEN CHAN

If you had been in the vicinity of the Orchard MRT station over the weekend of 12-13 July, you may have dropped in at the *Singapore Rojak*, a colourful multi-cultural event organised by the Central CDC interracial confidence circles. As its name suggests, the aim was to promote cultural awareness of Singapore's main ethnic communities, not just the diversity but also the many aspects we have in common. There were food stalls, performances and 'cultural tents', and for the first time, a Peranakan tent joined the usual Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian ones.

In our section there were also beautiful displays of Peranakan furniture and porcelain, with a centerpiece showing a typical birthday spread with the all-important *mee sua* in syrup, symbolising a long life filled with sweetness, accompanied by the obligatory *telor merah* or red eggs. Stalls displayed *sarongs*, *kebaya*s, accessories and traditional arts and crafts such as *kasut manek* (beaded slippers). There were opportunities for children of all ages to play games like five stones, *kuti kuti* and *chongkak*.

The event was important in showing people that Peranakan culture isn't just about the food, or furniture or clothes, although those are unique and important characteristics in themselves. It is hoped that visitors realized that the images of Peranakans are not merely confined to museum showpieces or characters in a stage play, but that they are also a living, breathing community enjoying life to the full. Yes we do dress like that, yes we do indeed play *cherki* and sew *kasut manek*, and yes we do actually speak like that.

There has never been a better time to be a Baba or Nonya. Interest in Peranakan culture has been growing over the past few years and the Internet has allowed Peranakans from all over the world to interact via e-groups. We should feel immensely lucky to possess a heritage that has drawn on multiple cultures - Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, Indian, English, Dutch and Portuguese, for example - to create something truly unique.

Researching for articles for this newsletter has taught us a great deal about aspects of Peranakan culture, and the more we learn, the more we realise how little we know. For example, this issue features the Nonya rice dumpling or *kueh chang babi*, which is distinguished from its traditional Chinese relative by its sweetness, use of *ketumbar* (ground roasted coriander seeds) and wrapping of *pandan* leaves. Although everyone knows what Nonya *kueh chang* should look and taste like, no one has been able to tell how it evolved into its present form.

We are always on the look out for subjects which readers will find informative and entertaining. If you have any ideas, or would like to write for the newsletter, please contact the editors.

Meanwhile, let's continue to celebrate our Peranakan culture while we look forward to two major events later this year, the Association's Annual Dinner and Dance to be held Friday 31 October 2003 at The Shangri-La Hotel and the 16th Baba Convention to be held in Penang in November 2003. ©©

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Published by

The Peranakan Association
 Raffles City, PO Box 1640
 Singapore 911755, Tel: 6255 0704

Designed by

Equinox Art & Design

Printed by

Fontcraft Printing (S) Pte Ltd
 10 Kaki Bukit Road 1 #01-09
 Singapore 416175

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MITA(P) 151/08/2002

103RD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

GROWING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

ANTHONY OEI

THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION HELD ITS 103RD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ON 23 MARCH. ALL MATTERS IN THE AGENDA WERE DEALT WITH EXPEDITIOUSLY, WITH MEMBERS PRESENT GIVING THEIR UNANIMOUS APPROVAL.

the AGM marked the culmination of an eventful year of social and cultural activities, and the beginning of what is to come in 2003.

As President Lee Kip Lee put it aptly in his annual address to the gathering, 'we have again had a successful year.'

INDEED, THE EVENTS ORGANISED FOR MEMBERS ARE WORTH RECAPPING:

- The overwhelmingly successful hilarious *Bibiks Behind Bars*, performed to full houses first at the Marine Parade Community Centre and then at Kallang Theatre where the illustrious guests were President and Mrs S R Nathan, and Dr and Mrs Wee Kim Wee.

- The 15th Baba Convention in Singapore, which gave us the golden opportunity to meet and interact with our counterparts not only from Malaysia but also, for the first time, those from Phuket, Thailand.

- Chinese New Year celebrations which created positive vibes to last the year ahead.

- The Peranakan Voices entertaining all and sundry at the Ikebana International Convention



Members at the AGM

Centre, the Tower Club, Republic Plaza, at a riverside event organised by the Singapore Tourism Board and World Express, at the Asian Civilisations Museum's *Museum Festival* and at *Pesta Peranakan*.

- Collaboration in *Pesta Peranakan*, held as part of Singapore Food Festival 2002, that gave us the channel to acquaint Singaporeans with our rich culture, food, handicraft, music, skits and dances.

- *Nyonya & Baba Go West!* arranged for members to keep them in tune with the line-dancing craze.

- A cast of our actors starring in an 8-part TV series, *The Ways of the Matriarch*, which had



FROM LEFT Committee members Rita Bertrand-Tan, Peter Lee, Khoo Poh Neo, Thomas Tan, Lee Kip Lee, Lim Geok Huay, Alan Koh, Peter Wee
NOT IN PICTURE Isaac Chan, Gavin Ooi, Bebe Seet, Richard Tan



Lee Kip Lee delivers his report

elements of drama, comedy, reality TV and cooking demonstrations, telecast over ArtsCentral.

- A Peranakan Roadshow presented at the invitation of Cedar Girls Secondary School on Racial Harmony Day, which enabled us to give the students an insight into all things Peranakan.

- Last but not least, our 102nd Anniversary and Annual Dinner & Dance, the event of the year which drew a huge attendance of over 780.

Special mention must be made of the Youth Group. They played a significant role in the success of the Association's 2002 social and cultural programmes through the many events they organised.

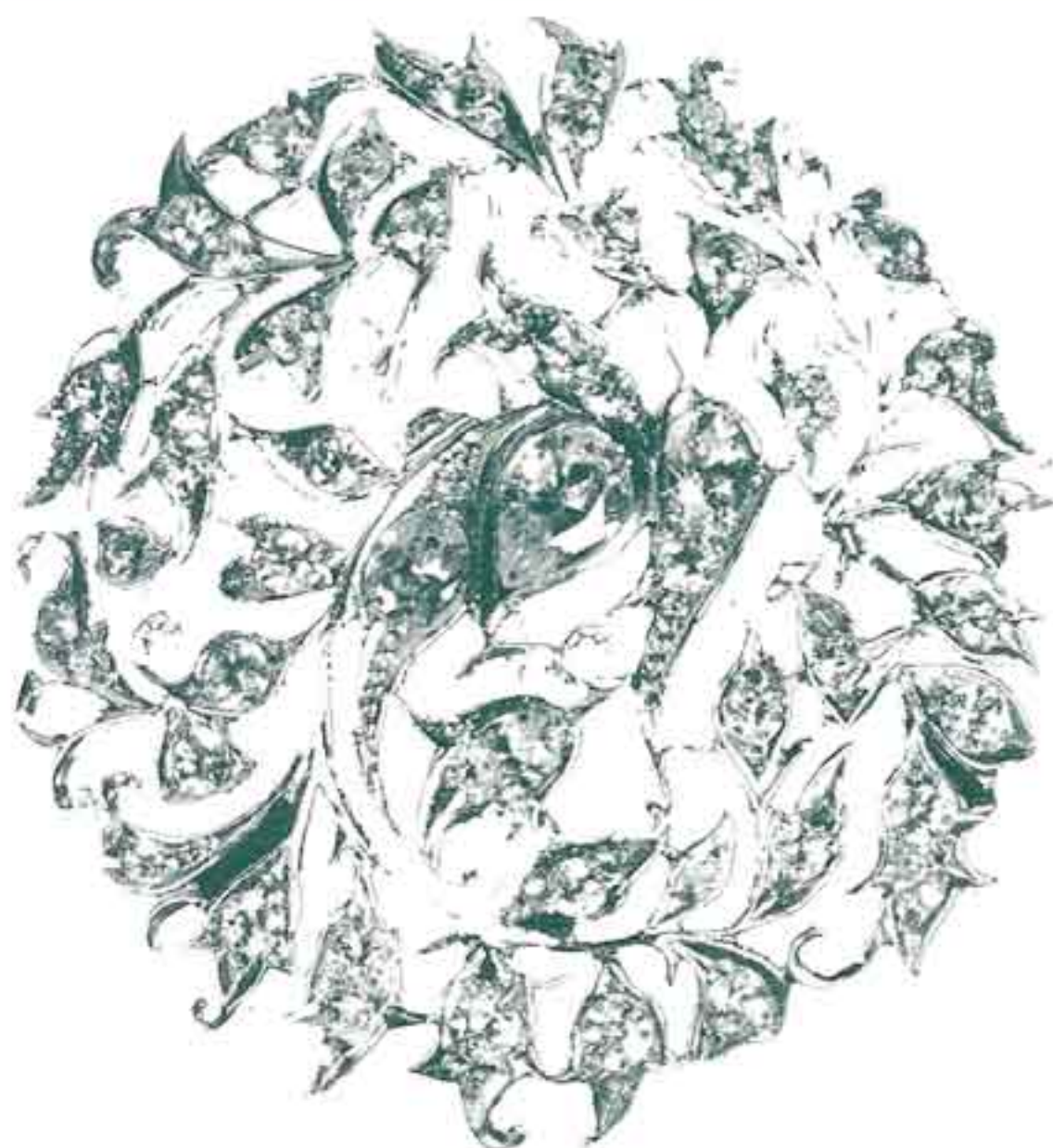
The Group is well up in information technology. It runs a free yahoogroups service. This has proved to be a wonderful vehicle for the 160 subscribers to update themselves through the Internet on what's happening in the Peranakan world, and to engage in lively discussions on the food, language and even the future of the clan in Singapore and other parts of the world.

President Lee thanked all concerned for their strong support and quality work produced during the past year, particularly the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Cultural Development Group, the Dinner and Dance Committee and the Editorial Committee of *The Peranakan*.

Keep in constant touch with the Association for more are in store in 2003, beyond the Annual Dinner & Dance in October and the 16th Baba Convention in Penang in November.

We are growing from strength from strength. There is no better proof of this than our swelling membership, now past the 1,700-mark. ☺☺

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NONYA KUEH CHANG

NOT JUST ANOTHER RICE DUMPLING
A SPECIAL 3-PART FEATURE BY NOREEN CHAN



this year, the Rice Dumpling Festival or Duan Wu Jie will fall on 4 June 2003. It is better known as the Dragon Boat Festival, after the popular tradition (which dates as far back as the Tang Dynasty) of competitions featuring long rowing boats decorated like dragons.

The legend behind this festival dates back to the Warring States period in ancient China, about 2300 years ago. A poet and statesman named Qu Yuan lived in the Kingdom of Chu and was well known for his honesty and integrity. According to one version of this legend, jealous court officials convinced the Emperor that Qu Yuan was corrupt and he was banished from the kingdom. In protest, or perhaps in despair, at the corrupt state of the government, he is said to have drowned himself in the Mei Lo river on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

Local villagers and fishermen who witnessed this act tried desperately to save him but failed. They threw rice dumplings into the water so that fishes would not eat his body. From then on, the anniversary of his death was commemorated by making rice dumplings wrapped in silk or leaves.

Our forefathers, who came largely from southern China, brought many of their customs with them, including that of the Dumpling Festival. But over the course of time, the traditional Chinese dumpling evolved into the

Peranakan version that we know and love.

Now that *kueh chang* are available year round, they have lost some of their special significance. But in the days when every family made their own, the weeks leading up to the fifth lunar month were occupied with preparing the ingredients and making the *kueh chang*. One of the most important tasks was to sort through the *pulot* (glutinous rice) to remove the *beras* or rice grains that would spoil the even consistency of the *kueh chang*. In my family, it was common for the annual preparations to go through 4 *gantang* of *pulot*; one *gantang* was approximately 6 katis (about 3.5kg) and would make about 65 *bijik* of *kueh chang babi*.

There are, in fact, different versions of *chang* made by different dialect groups; the Hainanese are said to wrap theirs in banana leaves, for example. Although bamboo leaves are most common, lotus leaves are sometimes used, especially for the larger dumplings, which tend to be shaped like pillows.

WHAT MAKES THE NONYA KUEH CHANG SPECIAL?

For a start, the name. The traditional Chinese rice dumpling is known as *bak chang*, or *zhongzi*, whereas Peranakans call theirs *kueh chang*, a typically Peranakan combination of two Hokkien



words. Strictly speaking, this should be qualified as *kueh chang babi* or *kueh chang abu*, the latter being the plain version usually eaten sliced with gula melaka.

Kueh chang babi has other characteristics, which are unique and very different from its Chinese cousin. While the latter is salty and has ingredients like mushrooms, chestnuts, dried shrimp and salted egg, the Peranakan version is sweet – from sugar as well as candied winter melon – and flavoured with roasted ground *ketumbar* (coriander seeds). In fact, many Peranakans complain that commercial versions are not sweet enough.

Another distinguishing feature is the use of large pandan leaves to wrap the *kueh chang*, rather than bamboo leaves; this imparts additional fragrance. Finally, the *kueh chang* can be recognised by patches of blue colour in the *pulot* or glutinous rice, obtained from *bunga telang* or blue pea flower. This probably derives from the Peranakans' love of decoration, rather than any special significance.

THE PERFECT KUEH CHANG BABI

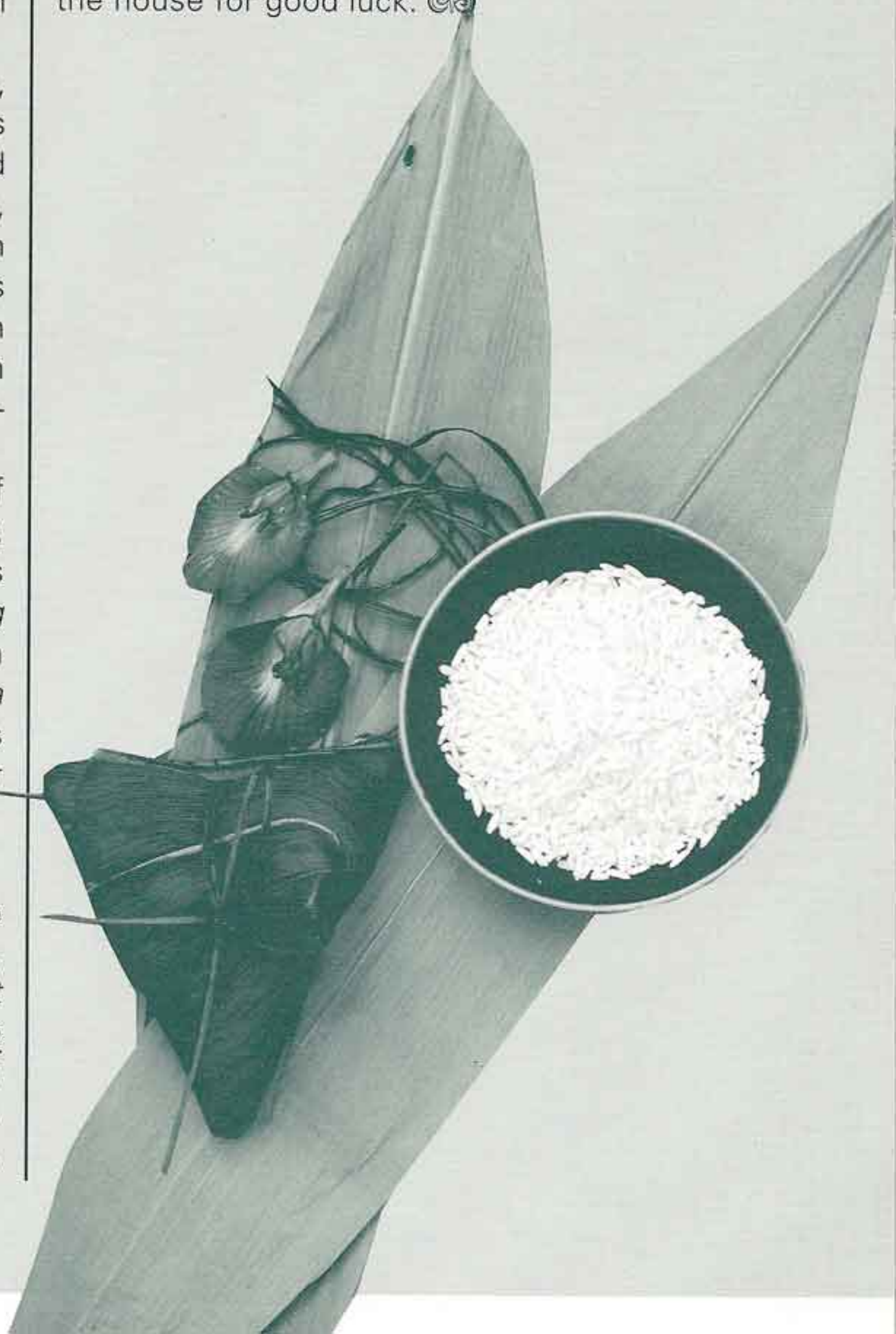
How does one judge a good *kueh chang*? The *kueh chang* should be a uniform pyramidal shape, with corners that are *tajam* (pointed). The *pulot* on the outside should have a firm texture; if the *pulot* had not been *pelay bresi* (picked through properly to get rid of the rice grains or *beras*), the consistency will be uneven, almost gritty,

described as *berati* (uncooked). It should be fragrant with *ketumbar*, and the filling should be moist, not too chunky, savoury and yet sweet.

A WORD ABOUT KUEH CHANG ABU

Kueh Chang Abu is so-called because it is made with alkaline water derived from *kapor* or lime, boiled with water to make *ayer abu*. An overnight soaking imparts the characteristic yellow colour to the *pulot*, which is then prepared in the usual way, wrapped with bamboo leaves. It is also known as *kee chang* and is usually smaller than its meat-filled relation. It is eaten sliced (easiest done with a string) and dipped into *gula melaka* or *kaya*.

Peranakan families who practise the traditional forms of worship will place both *kueh chang babi* and *kueh chang abu* on their altars on the 5th morning of the 5th lunar month. Some families take one *kueh chang abu*, cut off the corners and throw them at the four corners of the house for good luck. ©©





THE TASTE TEST

NOTHING BEATS THE TASTE OF HOME MADE FARE, BUT NOWADAYS FEW FAMILIES HAVE NEITHER THE TIME NOR INCLINATION TO MAKE THEIR OWN *KUEH CHANG BABI*. HOW DID COMMERCIAL VERSIONS FARE IN OUR TASTE TEST? READ ON AND FIND OUT!



Several eager volunteers gathered one Saturday afternoon to compare *kueh chang babi* from several outlets. The candidates were rated on three categories:

APPEARANCE Was the *kueh chang* uniform in shape with nice pointed corners? Was the filling evenly distributed? Was the filling finely diced and compact?

TASTE Was the *pulot* tasty and of smooth texture? Was the filling sufficiently fragrant and sweet?

Authenticity bonus points were awarded if the *kueh chang* was wrapped with pandan leaves, tied with *tali kueh chang*, or had blue colouring.

A maximum of 21 points could be awarded. In addition, testers were asked to vote on their favourite and to give comments.

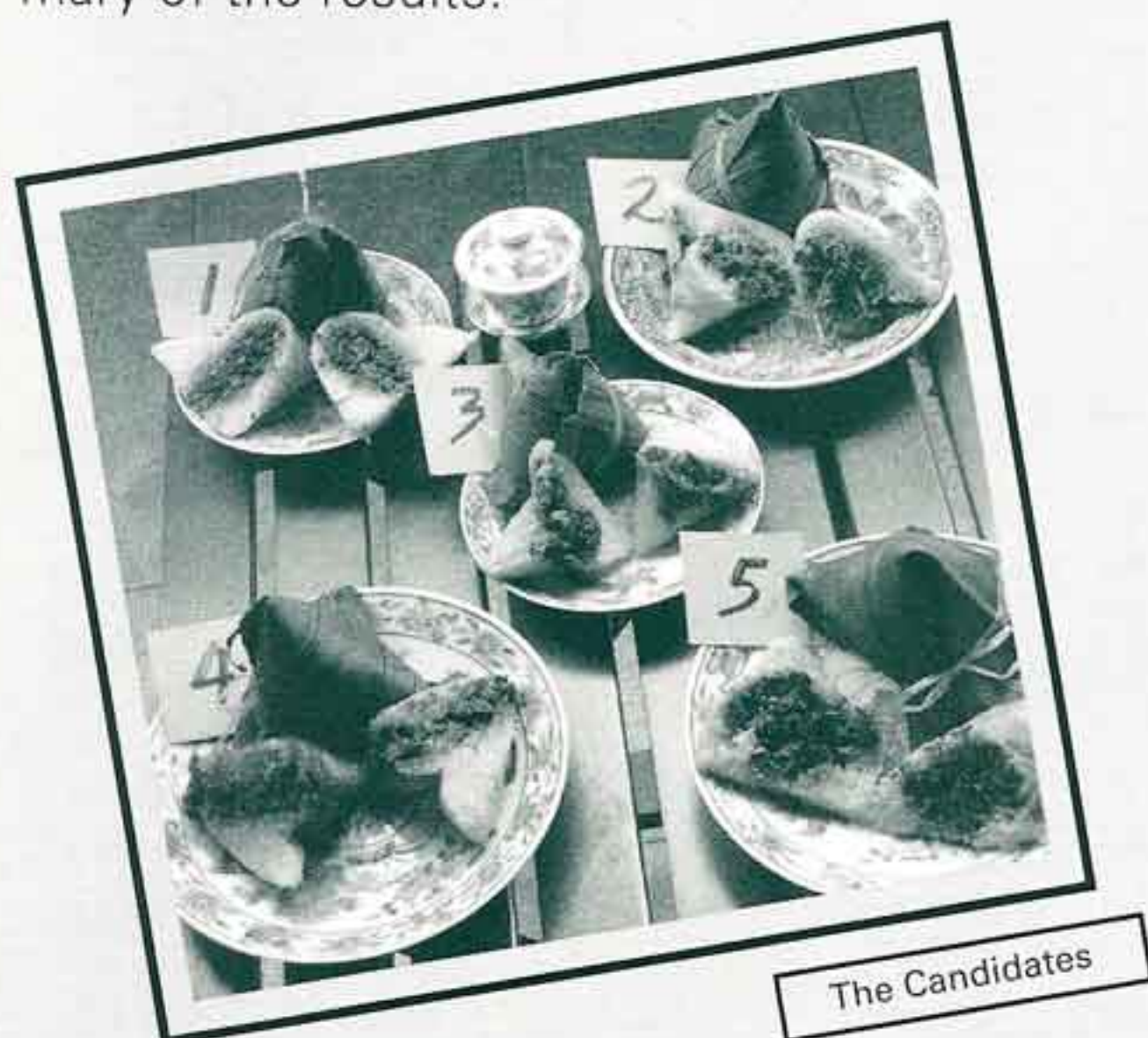
We purchased *kueh chang* from five outlets. Four are well known for selling Nonya *chang*, the

fifth is better known for its Cantonese style *chang* but also sells a Nonya version.



THE RESULTS

None of the *kueh chang* tested was tied with *tali kueh chang* nor had blue colouring, but all used pandan leaves. Two used bamboo leaves in the inside and pandan on the outside. A summary of the results:



KIM CHOO, 60 Joo Chiat Place. \$1.30 each.



This scored highly for appearance and taste. The panel found the *pulot* the tastiest of the lot and although several commented that although the filling was a little hard, it was fragrant and sweet.

UNCLE HARRY'S KUEH STALL. \$1.30 each. Near Ceylon Road (just before the Katong Laksa 'War Zone')



Scored moderately well for appearance. The panel found the filling tasty and the sweetest of all compared, but it was very chunky and rather dry.

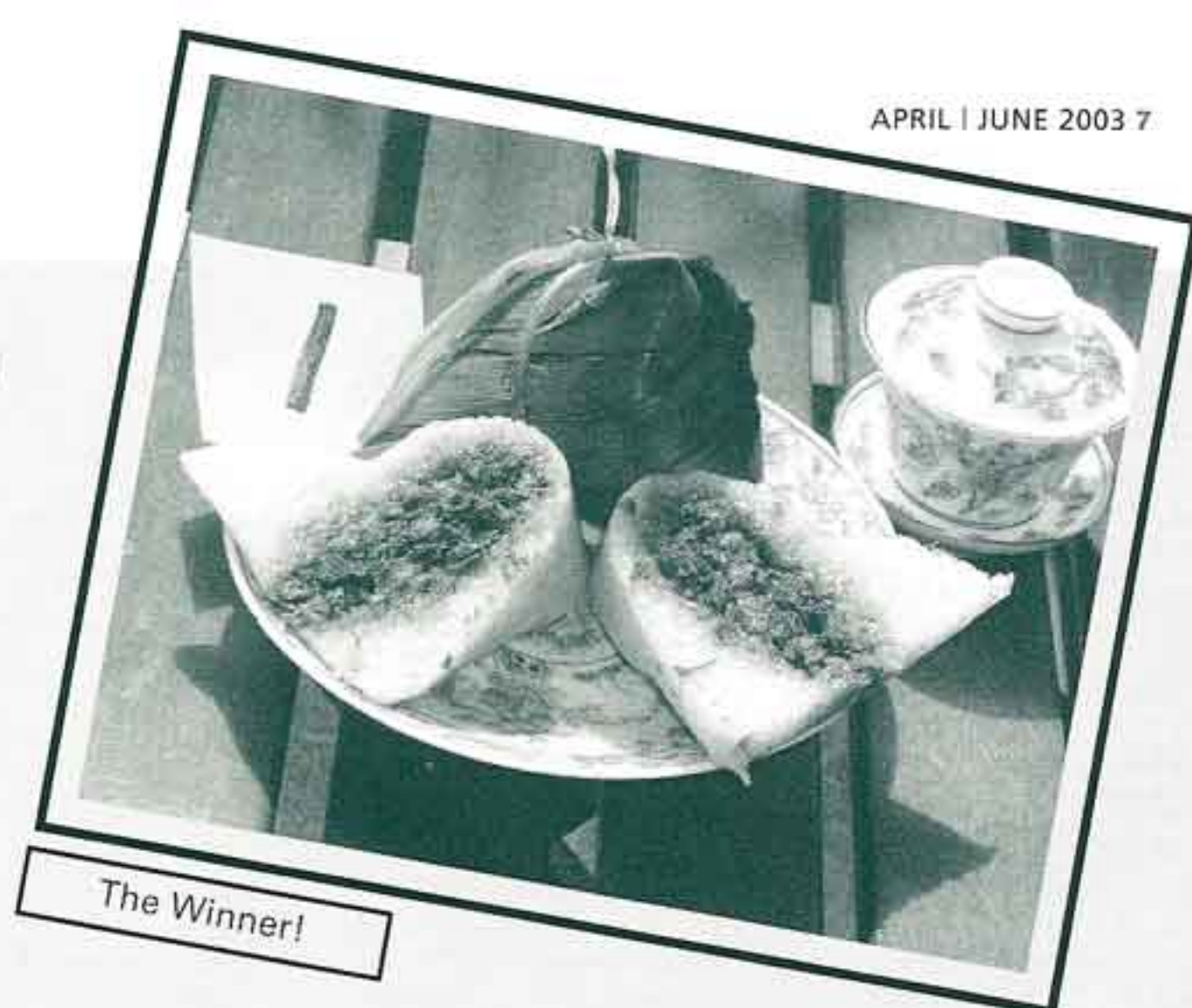
KATONG RICE DUMPLING, several branches. \$1 each. (Also sells vegetarian *kueh chang* made with gluten)



This was the cheapest and smallest of all the dumplings tested and scored moderately well for taste. However, the panel found the shape to be lopsided and the filling scanty and unevenly distributed.



DAUN PANDAN, several branches. \$1.30 each. The filling was generous, compact and



attractive. But the panel were less enthusiastic about the taste, as the *pulot* was bland and there was no *ketumbar* fragrance.

HONG KEE DUMPLINGS, Hong Lim Food Centre, Blk 531A #02-38. \$1.60 each.

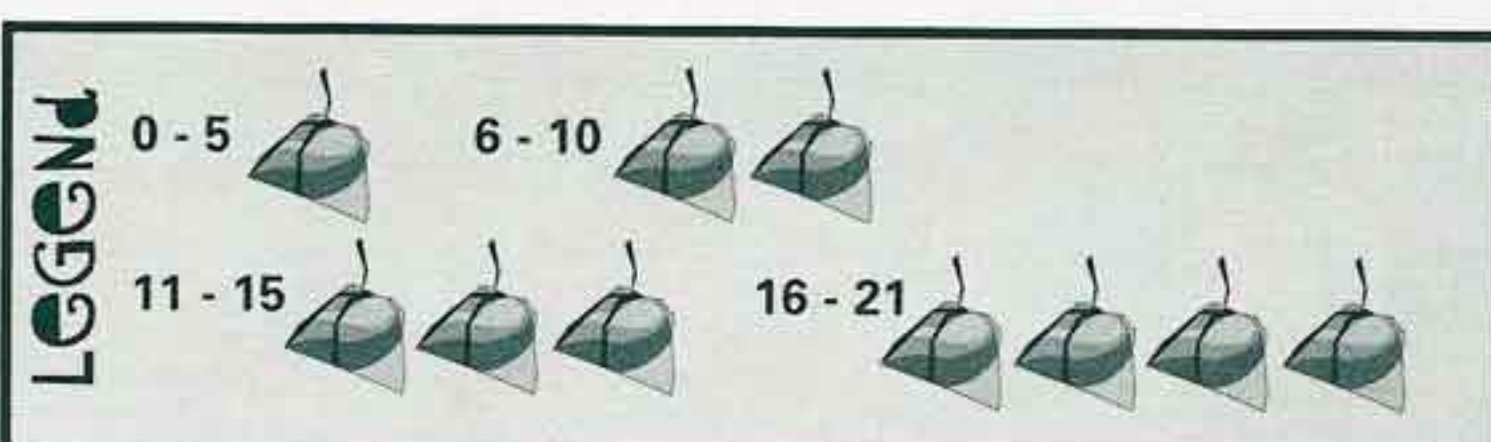


The largest and most expensive of the lot. This outlet is famous for its Cantonese style dumplings which it has been selling for decades. The Nonya *chang*, although generous in quantity of filling, scored poorly on taste. The filling tasted of five spice powder and was not at all sweet.

Conclusion

The panel were unanimous in its decision about the best *kueh chang* tested that day. In a straw poll done some time before the testing, many Peranakans I asked said they bought their *kueh chang* from Kim Choo (also known as 'the Joo Chiat stall'), and our panel's experience seems to bear this out. Kim Choo raises the price of the *kueh chang* as the festival approaches, and if you wait until the last minute be prepared to pay almost double (\$2.50) the usual price. A version wrapped with bamboo leaves is cheaper.

The tasting was not meant to be a comprehensive coverage of all available *kueh chang* outlets in Singapore, and the opinions expressed are those of our panel of Peranakan tasters. Rather, it shows that there is quite a wide variation between outlets in the quality of their Nonya *chang*, and there have been alterations, probably to suit the majority taste. However, we as Peranakans need to guard against further changes or the Nonya *kueh chang* will lose those unique qualities that make it so deservedly popular. ☺☺



RECIPES



Noreen Chan's grandparents Elsie Chia & Tan Jin Hoe, c. 1930s

In contrast to well-known dishes like *ayam buah keluak*, recipes for *kueh chang babi* do not feature prominently in cookbooks of Peranakan cuisine. However, I found recipes in Mrs Leong Yee Soo's *Singaporean Cooking Vol. 2*, Cecilia Tan's *Penang Nyonya Cuisine* and Tan Gek Suan's *At a Nonya's Table*.

There are of course variations between recipes, for example, whether one steams the *pulot* first. Pre-cooking make the *pulot* slightly sticky and easier to handle. The recipes are similar in various respects, including flavouring the *pulot* with salt (and often lard as well), the use of candied winter melon, and boiling the pork before dicing (this makes it easier to cut, the stock can also be used to flavour the filling).

FAMILY RECIPE

The following is taken from my grandmother Elsie Chia's personal recipe book, hence the eccentric spelling. I have tried to translate it as best as I can. The instructions have left out some details, such as boiling the pork before cutting, and how to fold the pandan leaf.

When I asked my grandmother for the secret to successful *kueh chang babi*, she said it was 'practice and steady hands'. If you did not assemble it properly and secure tightly, during boiling the *kueh chang* would *ruboh* (fall apart, be demolished), and the *pulot* and pork would all fall out.

KUEH CHANG BABI (65 BIJIK)

1 gantang pulut (6 katis) suda pelay bresi. Pargi chuchi rendam kan sekejup. Di kalu mau makan kan bunga telang teris kan di tungok bia kring. Bunga telang tumbok, ambil ayer nya no. 1,2,3. Semua mendidi kan, kasi sedjok, baru rendam kan pulut yang kring. Ambil kukus-san, masok pulut poeti, chuay di atas ayer mendidi barang 2 hrs. Ankat saling di pasoh baru pulut beru pulak kukus. Tarok garem, ayer sedjok, lada dan minyak babi sedikit, aros bia rata dan chukop nya. Yang beru poon sama atoran nya baru ikat. Reboos 1 hrs, ayer bia mendidi betol di kalu pulot mentah reboos 3 hrs. Bela ikat, pulut nya tekan sedikit bara kernyal, tengah tarok babi kueh, pulut lagi baru ikat.

1 gantang (about 3.5kg) *pulot* or glutinous rice, picked through and cleaned. In the morning, wash and soak for a while. If *bunga telang* or blue pea flower is used, rinse and spread out on a colander to dry. Pound the flowers, add water and press to release the blue colour. Repeat this process twice to extract as much blue colour as you can. Boil briefly, cool and then soak one third of the *pulot* with the blue water before drying. (*The blue colour will become more intense after cooking*)

Take a steamer, put in the plain *pulot*, and steam over boiling water for two hours. Remove to a clean

container, then steam the blue *pulot*. When done, add salt, pepper and a little lard, to taste. Do this to the plain and blue *pulot* separately, before preparing and tying the *kueh chang*. Boil the *chang* for one and a half hours, if the *pulot* has not been pre-cooked boil for three and a half hours. When tying, first firmly press a layer of *pulot*, in the centre put the pork filling, then cover with more *pulot* before tying.

BABI KUEH (THE PORK FILLING)

- 6 katis esee babi sama sedikit minyak, reboos abis potong kechil²
- (4 katis esee, 2 katis sumchean)
- 1 and a half kati tungkuah potong kechil
- 30 spoons (2 and a half cups) gula pasir
- Garem 2 and a half tablespoons
- 12 tablespoons (1 and a half cup) Ketumbar goreng halus
- Towcheo toombok 6 tablespoon
- Bawang putih toombok 4 tablespoon
- Ini bekin 1 gantang (6 katis) pulot

Bela potong esee babi, minyak nya tepe kan abis potong kechil jugak. Tarok minyak babi di kual, goring minyak babi, angkat. Tumis bawang putih, suda garing masok towcheo, suda wangi masok babi, garem, kasi mendidi bia kring masok tungkuah, kertoomba goring, gula, sedikit taoyew. Sudah chukop rasa nya, bela kring angkat. Ini bekin satu hari lebay dolu, mau ikat gempal satu².

Six katis (about 3.5kg of pork, two thirds lean meat, one third belly pork) finely diced. Trim off the fat and dice. Fry the lard in a *kuali*, then remove. With the remaining oil fry four tablespoons of pounded garlic, then add in six tablespoons of pounded *taucheo* (preserved soya beans), when fragrant add the pork and two and a half tablespoons of salt. Cook until almost dry, then add one and a half kati (about 900g) diced candied winter melon, one and a half cups of pounded roasted *ketumbar* (coriander seed), two and a half cups sugar and a little dark soya sauce for colour. Stir well and continue to cook until dry. This can be made a day in advance. Before tying, separate into small mounds. ☺



Steven Ong

BAJU KEBAYA

*for embroidered kebaya and
modern cheongsam*

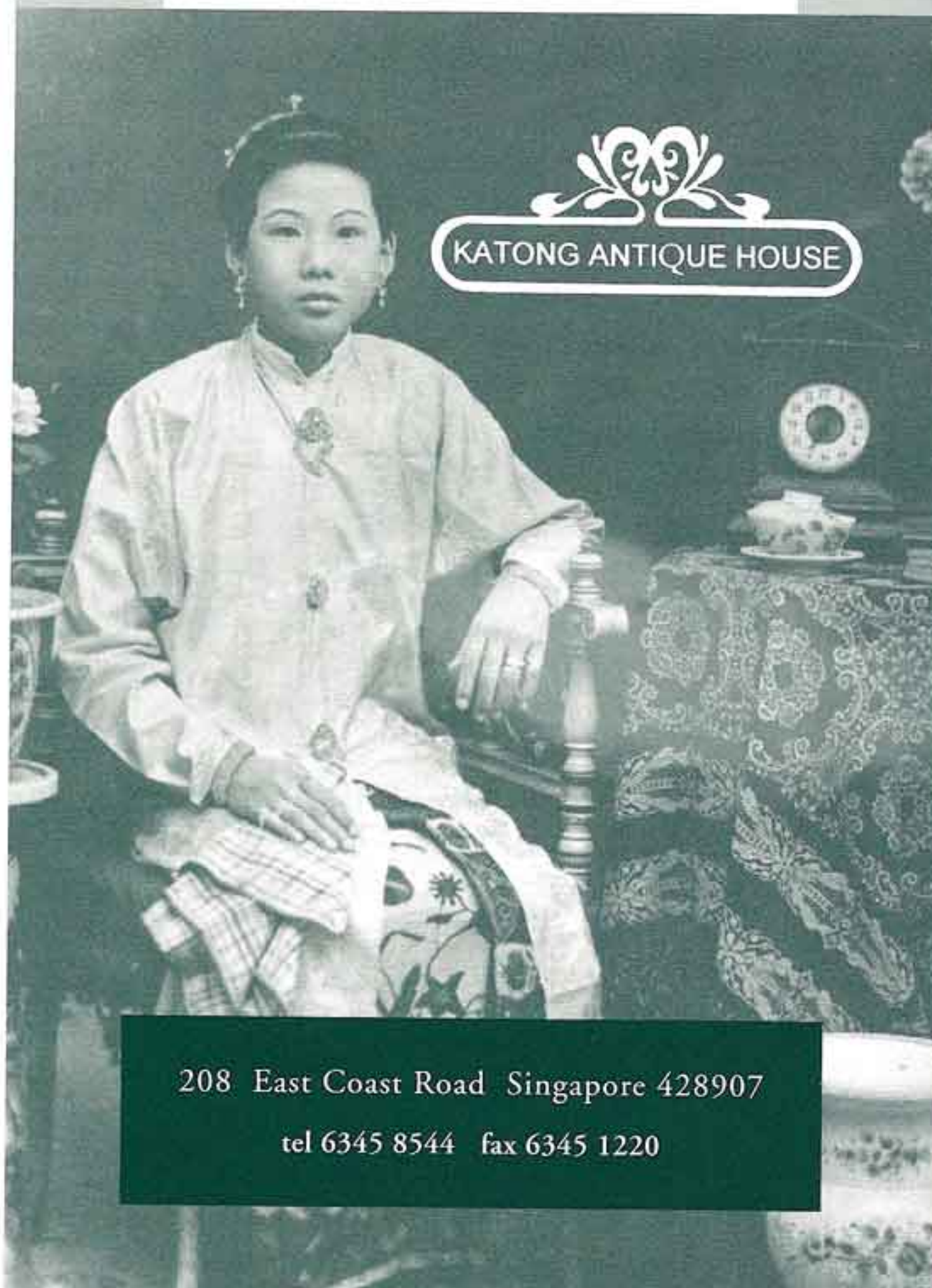
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KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



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perANAKan - THE YOUTH GROUP



Have you ever coveted a beautiful pair of *kasut manek*, or gazed admiringly at an exquisite, beaded panel in the museum? Have you wondered whether you could muster the patience and commitment needed to complete your own beaded item?

Seventeen people answered **'YES'**, and gathered at Katong Antique House on 24 May, to find out if they had the aptitude to embark on this creative hobby.

Baba Peter Wee began with the history of Peranakan beadwork. Sewing *manek* items for daily use was a true expression of the culture of that time, as it was the Nyonya's very own handiwork, reflecting her interests, tastes and creative flair. Perhaps the missionary teachers first introduced cross-stitch in schools, and many books on cross-stitch were later imported from Europe. These pattern books formed the basis of most Peranakan beadwork designs. The Nyonyas' favourite motifs included Western-style flowers, birds, insects, and ladies in period dresses; dogs, swans, Snow White's seven dwarfs and even Betty Boop have also appeared on beaded shoes, bags, belts and bolster ends. Older work used tiny, faceted, Rocaille beads (*manek potong*), which were imported from Czechoslovakia (known as Bohemia in the old days). These antique beads, in a vast array of colours, were sold by the strands, and are much sought after by collectors today.

As we viewed the antique pieces, we marvelled at the exquisite workmanship and tiny beads. Though time, humidity and silverfish (enemies of the cotton thread used for sewing the beads) had ravaged some of these precious items, the scintillating effect of the *manek potong* was still evident.

Pidangans (frames) were then set up for participants to try their hands at beading a simple design. Some first-timers found it easy and enjoy-



PETER WEE INTRODUCES SOME TREASURES OF BEADWORK (TOP), MEMBERS TRY THEIR HANDS AT BEADING (ABOVE)

able, while others struggled and even shed blood (needle pricks), sweat (the recent hot weather) and tears (eye-strain!) in the process.

What did participants learn from their introduction to beadwork?

'I knew it would be hard work, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to complete a whole project', admitted Charlene.

'A-lah, kepala sakit, sair, the beads are so small! I'll stick to cooking!' proclaimed Tony.

'It's really interesting, but one needs a lot of patience, and time to pursue this hobby', said Maggie.

The afternoon ended with refreshments like homemade *pengat* and *kueh bengkar*, which we enjoyed while browsing among the *kasut manek* and artifacts in the shop.

We hope to encourage new beadwork enthusiasts from this group, so a list of teachers was provided, and some have been inspired to enroll in the next available beadwork course. We wish them all the best on this enjoyable journey, and hope that they will experience the joy of creating personal heirlooms using just beads, needles and thread. ☺

BABABOOKS

Peranakan Jipun?

THE PREWAR JAPANESE COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE - PICTURE AND RECORD
NEW BOOK BY THE JAPANESE ASSOCIATION, SINGAPORE

LEE KIP LEE



THIS EXCELLENT BOOK, COMPILED BY THE HERITAGE COMMITTEE OF THE JAPANESE ASSOCIATION AND WRITTEN IN JAPANESE AND ENGLISH, TAKES ITS READERS THROUGH A DISCOVERY TRIP OF THE HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE COMMUNITY IN PREWAR SINGAPORE FROM 1862 TO 1941.

It contains rare photographs obtained from Japanese sources illustrating the community's activities with rare photographs of previously-unseen social events such as club nights, funerals, outings to Katong Park and Alkaff Gardens; of Malay Street and Hylam Street where Japanese brothels flourished from 1877 until 1920 when the *karayuki-sans* whose numbers reached a peak of up to 1,500, were banned from practising their trade and deported; of the founding of the well-known drapery store Echigoya; of Little Japan along Middle Road (or *Chuo Dori* as they called it) with pictures of the fronts of Japanese stores; and of the *gudang* (Malay word for a shop or large store) area in the town in the vicinity of Collyer Quay where the large Japanese firms - MSK, MBK, OSK, ISK - had their offices.

There is even a photograph of a pretty, svelte, unidentified Annie Yeo, Singapore's champion woman swimmer of the 1930s shaking hands with a member of Japan's Olympic women's swimming team. There are also some photos of a Japanese lady in a *sarong kebaya*. In addition there is a reproduction of a 1930 advertisement in the Anglo-Chinese School magazine by a dentist K. Tsutada (ACS Old Boy.)

This invaluable publication is available at The Japanese Association, 120 Adam Road, Singapore 289899 or at Kinokuniya in both the English and Japanese Sections, and costs S\$41.20.

POETRY

DESMOND SIM INAUGURATES A WHOLE NEW SECTION IN **THE PERANAKAN** WITH HIS POEMS FIRST PUBLISHED IN *PLACES WHERE I'VE BEEN* (1993)

kueh belanda

the fragile wafer
hot from the mould
is folded with delicate fingers.
each roll perfectly consistent
from the practice of years;
each bite, a memory that lingers

what heart beats behind
the hand-beaten batter,
what patience faces the open heat
for fifty years to
turn out these fragile reminders,
these letters from her wellspring
of love.

achar

no other bottle ever capped
has the colour, taste,
sweetness, sourness,
tangy mouth-watering crunchiness,
the flavour, the swooning savouriness,
the freshness, the minute
pounding, grinding tastiness,
the *agak-agak* preciseness –
and in addition to the above,
the labouring, sweating hand of love
in the unwritten recipe
that beats all others near and far
of mother's homemade achar.

Glorifying the Nyonya Kebaya

CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER

Seldom has so much attention been poured onto the *Nyonya Kebaya*. A sumptuous coffee-table book, an exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, a fashion show and a weekend symposium are only some of the efforts to place the embroidered blouse on the pedestal.

Malaysian culture and tradition overall. How we perceive our own heritage can either ensure it lives on or leave it lying in oblivion, to be slowly forgotten,' she said.

Panelists Cedric Tan from the Nyonya-Baba Cultural Promotion Troupe of Melaka, Jerome Kogan, researcher-writer of the book written by Datin Seri Endon, J. Chan,



Snapshots of the Symposium and Datin Seri Endon Mahmood addressing delegates

Such passion ignited Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of the deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and a collector of Nyonya kebayas to glorify this 'benchmark of identity'. The symposium entitled *The Nyonya Kebaya: Facets of Interest*, was organised by Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia, a cultural and social organisation.

It also prompted me and some others from The Peranakan Association to join the gathering of over 120 people to see and hear more of this garment, which is not humble, mind you, after what had been described and evaluated on it.

It is firstly, about heritage, culture and history. The *kebaya* speaks of the melodic fusion of cultures — Malay, Chinese, and European — in the garment's form, embroidery, design motifs, materials (cloths and threads) and in the technology employed (the Singer sewing machine), and its evolution today into a costume that defines the Peranakan identity.

The symposium commenced with a keynote address by Datin Seri Endon who wants to revive the garment and promote it to the world. 'This is just the start in creating a new, positive, forward-looking mindset towards

set designer, and Peter Wee from Katong Antique House of Singapore who loaned his batiks, spoke about their experiences with the kebaya.

Most telling was Kogan who admitted that researching the origin of the Peranakan culture was like piecing together a 'jigsaw puzzles with holes'. This new kid on the block from Sabah had never met a Baba in his life! It was through scant written documentation, conjecture and speculation that he came to understand the cloudy history of Nyonya origins. What came clear to Kogan was the amalgamation of cultures that epitomises all things Peranakan including the *kebaya*, the selectiveness in their choice of colour, pattern and decoration, whether in their dressing or for their homes. The Nyonya only wants 'the best,' he concluded.

Architect J. Chan who designed the installations for the exhibition found the *kebaya* 'intellectually challenging.' He likened the blouse to a piece of architecture on a modest scale. When one examines the seams, cut and stitches, they are like live joints that express engineering solutions, he said.



Display of Datin Seri Endon's collection of *sarong kebaya*

The shape of the *kebaya* remains similar whatever its sizes, he noted. With the delicacy of the fabric, the garment's stitches are designed to move and stretch. Cut close to the body, it is a testimony to thermal dynamics or air-conditioning. How's that? The *voile* saps perspiration and because of its thinness, evaporates quickly thus helping to cool down the body. While Chan revelled in the ingenuity of the garment's construction and embroidery with professional terms like 'an example of instructive architecture' with regard to where the floral patterns and lacework are placed, and amused the audience with his allusions to the seductiveness and curves of the *kebaya*.

Well-known stalwart of Peranakan culture Cedric Tan embarked on the journey of the *kebaya* using a slide presentation and a stream of dainty Nyonya models in variations of the costume. Tan, who catalogued the personal collection of Datin Seri Endon, talked first about the earliest earthy-toned *baju panjang* and woven, checked *kain celeh* or *kain Bugis* sarong, which was worn in the late 19th century.

With the establishment of trade, imported damask silk, white organza and embroidered voile brought colour and variety to the *baju panjang*. It is interesting to note that the Lasem batiks from northern Java which are coloured with natural vegetable dyes soon lost their popularity with the introduction of the colourful synthetic dyes from the West, which created a whole new type of batik sarong in a wide spectrum of both pale and strong colours.

An embroidered lilac fluted *kebaya* cropped at the waist is attributed to the Thai costume. Dressed on a charming model with a batik sarong from Pekalongan (north coast of Java), beaded slippers, anklets (for the unmarried) and a ceremonial handkerchief, this was the

attire of the Penang Nyonyas in the mid-20th century. Another form of *kebaya* is the *kebaya Bandung* or *kebaya Kota Bharu*, which was influenced by the popularity of songs from Indonesia, notably by the singer Anekke Gronloh from Holland. It is an all-lace close-fitted blouse with front panels matching the batik sarong and is worn with modern high-heeled mules.

But the *sarong-kebaya* as a set prevails to this day. While the *kebayas* in blue-green shades worn during *tua ha* or mourning periods and matched with the 'darker-toned' batiks are no longer adopted, the pastel and candy-coloured Swiss *voile* and *rubia* fabrics are transformed into marvels of meticulous handwork.

The princess line that follows the contour of the body is enhanced with fine 'ketok lobang' or embroidered, 'punch hole' seams. Another version of the blouse is cut without the extra panels but has the obligatory shawl collar that closes together in front and pinned with the three-piece kerosang brooch.

French or Swiss lace brought another element of sophistication to the *baju kebaya* after the war. The *kebaya rendah* is also a feat of tailoring as the lace is cut and appliquéd along the border of the blouse, then further trimmed with colourful embroidery.

According to Tan, the Nyonya's eye for detail and perfection is manifest in the undergarment that is clearly seen through the delicate fabric. The camisole is significantly dressed up with crocheted or tacked lace. 'Layering beauty with beauty,' he concluded.

Since there is growing appreciation of vintage and antique Nyonya *kebayas*, how does one place its valuation? This sensitive subject was discussed by Peter Wee, our Association's first vice-president,

garnering 20 years of experience from dealers, collectors and home-owners.

'The decision is from the inner part of the person. The more you know, the more you evaluate. One piece becomes more beautiful, then you see another more beautiful, until it becomes a museum piece and it becomes harder to give up,' he explained.

That is why buying and selling becomes an adventure, recounted this passionate collector. Wee gets his items from households, from people who walked into his Katong shop with things under their arms or a family who wanted to dispose of an estate of a recently-deceased family member or relative.

'It could be things from garden pots to furniture, porcelain, books, textiles, jewellery, kitchen ware.' Some of these he sells to fellow collectors, some end up in antique shops that sell them commercially.

Peter finds that sometimes he will have to pay a price from collectors for pieces that he likes. It is the means to complete the Peranakan Story, as he put it. To him it is the fulfillment of giving to the culture, to future generations, what he has assembled into a 'treasure chest' or *tanda mata*.

'I always remind collectors of the value of the item and not its sale price,' he stressed. 'One does not disclose sale price, it is the privacy between buyer and seller. It is the culture.'

But to put a price is something that Peter has become adept at. He cited the necessity for evaluation in dollars and cents a fully beaded tablecloth for a 25 square-foot tabletop that a family donated to the museum here. An evaluation was insisted by a museum for insurance sake. It was duly placed at \$50,000 years ago.

Using a few models from Cedric Tan's presentation, Peter went on to analyse garment after garment and an estimate of their worth. A *kain celeh* that is a genuine antique made with natural dyes can fetch between \$800 to \$1,500. A good, antique *baju panjang* goes for \$200.

Foremost in mind when putting value is the irreplaceability of the garment. Once it is considered a museum piece there is almost no price to it because it cannot be replaced. White *kebaya*s with elaborate embroidery fetch more than those with colours, according to Peter.

A basic explanation is that it is more difficult for the tailor to sew white on white and the eyes get tired easily. A simple *kebaya* can go for \$800. A lace *kebaya*

and batik ensemble can be sold for between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

As a general rule for batik, a sarong that was handed from your mother that is more than 30 years would be considered a vintage piece. A batik that is 80 years and above is deemed antique, he said. Those nuggets of information got the audience to mentally re-examine the faded glories in their family's armchairs.

After a lively question and answer session, the symposium paused for a simple lunch at the National Art Gallery's homely store-cum-café. Fellow delegates included Madame Kim from Penang who was promptly declared a National Treasure for her skill with *sulam* or embroidery. The sprightly lady in her 70s generously offered to teach embroidery in a four-month basic course.

Her handiwork was included in the exhibition in the same building as she modestly identified them to interested parties. Indeed, there was a variety of fanciful motifs including *geisha* girls, Spanish dancers and cuddly animals to delight everyone.

One facet of the flamboyant *kebaya*, the embroidery, is being projected for marketing. Prototypes of bed linens and tableware were displayed alongside tea and dinner services with designs of a

profusion of petals and leaves inspired by *kebaya* motifs.

After the break, everyone was eager to hear what future the *kebaya* has.

Bill Keith, president of MODA (Malaysian Official Designers' Association), is trying to invigorate the young designers to interpret the *kebaya* design and motifs as fashion and spoke about *Future directions for the Nyonya Kebaya*. Among the suggestions for the *kebaya* to have any contemporary relevance was to use different fabrics such as lycra.

A fashion design competition based on the *kebaya* was launched for students of fashion associations and institutions in Malaysia with cash prizes awarded. The Grand Finals was held in mid-April. With all the grand schemes for the *kebaya*, Datin Endon seems serious in her drive to claim the *kebaya* as Malaysia's contribution to the fashion world.

'There is no reason why the Nyonya *kebaya* can't be the inspiration for a whole new international fashion trend. It's perfectly possible that we may one day see it, whether in its old form or in a new form, on the catwalks of Paris, Milan, London and New York,' she said and threw the challenge to any worthy local designer. ☺



Cynthia Wee-Hoefer (centre), Peter Wee (second from right) Betty Mariette (right), among others at the symposium



PHUKET

INTERLUDE

CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER

LAST APRIL, I MADE A SHORT VISIT TO PHUKET AND AMONG OTHER THINGS I WANTED TO MEET UP WITH OUR THAI BABA HOKKIENS WHO HAD ATTENDED THE 15TH BABA CONVENTION IN SINGAPORE IN NOVEMBER. INTRIGUED BY THIS COMMUNITY OF HOKKIEN CHINESE WHOSE MEN ARE CALLED BABA AND LADIES ARE KNOWN AS AJARN, I MADE AN APPOINTMENT TO MEET THEIR LEADERS.

Dr. Prasit Koysiripong who is the chief executive officer of the Phuket Provincial Administration Organisation and who led the team of delegates here was kind enough to receive my friends and me in his office.

His message to our Peranakans in Malaysia and Singapore is that the Phuket Babas do not have the mix of Malay and Chinese cultures that we have. In other words, the Phuket Babas are proud of their

More snapshots of the Phuket Cultural Centre, showing many artefacts connected with Peranakan Culture





Snapshots of the Phuket Cultural Centre headed by Pranee Sakulpipatana, seated on the right in the photo on extreme left. Cynthia Wee-Hoefer is seated next to her.

Hokkien dialect and ancestral culture. They continue the tradition of ancestral worship and though professed Buddhists, they also worship the gods of the Taoist pantheon. Interestingly, the other immigrant Chinese groups elsewhere in Thailand do not refer themselves as Babas.

As we progressed into the day, the apparent connection between the Phuket Babas and the Penang Babas (and by association, to the Malacca and Singapore counterparts) became clear.

During lunch in a modest restaurant run by Dr. Prasit's sister, we met his mother who is dressed in a short-sleeved lace blouse and Indonesian batik sarong.

The meal was similar to the fare of a Peranakan household – a delicious pork dish like a cross between *tauyu bak* and *babi pongteh*, fried meat balls like our *ngo hiang* and fried kangkong which the Thais mistakenly call 'morning glory'.

But it was the dessert bought by Khun Pranee that floored me. There was the *kueh koh swee* in miniature and some other tapioca-based sweet pastry that provided a link. I was later to taste more Nyonya-style cakes made by the older Thai ladies that are pretty in presentation and colour. The fried Hokkien yellow noodles like those prepared in a Peranakan home was also a highlight of the food-tasting bought from a stall late afternoon.

The most tangible attribute to the Phuket Babas is the Phuket Cultural Centre headed by the dynamic Khun Pranee. Housed in a former school dormitory in a leafy area outside of Phuket town, it is certainly not a place one can casually drop in as a tourist.

A slideshow and explanation by Ajarn Pranee traced the historic beginnings of the Chinese immigrants working the tin mines, the introduction

of the mine-sweeper, the steamships plying Phuket-Penang-Singapore by the British, and the wealth generated for the local Chinese. The displays are heroic attempts to document the trade and development of the Phuket Chinese community.

The section on the costumes of the ladies and the collection of photographs testified to the strong bond between the Penang and Phuket groups. This is because most Phuket Chinese families sent their children to schools in Penang, and inter-marriages naturally occurred.

During our day together with Ajarn Pranee, she invited us to her home to look through her *baju sulam* or *kebaya* tops and old batiks. The embroidered *kebaya* was tailored in Phuket town and as vibrant in colour and floral motifs as those found in Singapore, Malacca or Penang. Tailored at almost half the price!

The batik is classic Pekalongan though the present-day versions imported from Indonesia are not of the most refined hand-made quality. My Thai friend who has an eye for exceptional things, buys from the trusty Basharrahil Brothers in Arab Street, the same supplier that my late mother and aunts favoured.

The modern Thai ladies have adopted the batik *sarong* as their own costume but matched with fitting lace blouses in solid shades. The Singaporean or Malaccan Nyonyas will be equally comfortable in this costume.

Such was my interlude in Phuket. I am looking forward to the next Baba Convention in Penang in December. Word has it that a 150-member Phuket team may cook their Thai Baba cuisine for the participants as possible co-hosts of the event. Can't wait! ☺☺

NOTICEBOARD

NEW MEMBERS

The Association welcomes the following 13 life members whose addition increases our roll to 1,715 members:

Ms Chan Lee Heang Rita
 Ms Chan Lee Koon Audrey
 Ms Goei Magdeline
 Ms Heng Rosalind
 Ms Law Chaery Veronica
 Ms Lim Li Kok
 Mr Russell R Miller
 Mdm Ong Suan Neo Dolly
 Mr Ong Thiam Hee Edward
 Mr Tay Teck Guan Patrick
 Prof. Dr (Mrs) Wong Hok Neo Lily
 Ms Wong Wei Har
 Ms Wong Yuet May Genieve

LAUNCH OF **EXHIBITS ALIVE** **@ ACM ARMENIAN STREET**

NEW PERANAKAN AUDIO GUIDE FOR
 PERANAKAN LEGACY GALLERIES

The function will be held at
THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM
 at **39 ARMENIAN STREET**
 on **THURSDAY 31 JULY 2003 at 7.15 pm**
 For further information please contact
JUNIPER CHUA or **CHRONOS KWOK**
 at 9839910.

The Peranakan Association is proud to have been involved in developing the script and assisting in the voice recordings in this wireless application system which transmits pre-programmed information about the exhibits to the visitors' headphones as they approach the exhibits

Return of the Dinner Talk, Really!

The eminent Professor Wang Gungwu

After postponement due to the SARS outbreak, Professor Wang Gungwu's highly anticipated talk to the Association will finally take place this September.

Professor Wang Gungwu, Director of the East Asian Institute and faculty Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science and Distinguished Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies who is renowned for his work on the Chinese *diaspora* in Southeast Asia, has graciously agreed to present a talk on *The Peranakans of Southeast Asia*.

Wednesday 3 September 2003 7.30 pm to 10.30 pm

Pin Hsiang Restaurant

Level 2, RELC, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 258352

\$26 (members) **\$32** (non-members)

Please call our Hon. Secretary, Mrs Lim Geok Huay for reservations, Telephone 6255 0704

OBITUARY

The Peranakan Association extends its deepest condolences to the families of the following members on their recent bereavement:

- Mrs Howe Siew Heng • Ms Chee Swee Gek Theresa •
- Mrs Mabel Chan •



THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE