

# the peranakan

quarterly newsletter of the peranakan association [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

july-september 2003



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

## Stage Sisters

**The earliest women in  
Wayang Peranakan?**

**PLUS:**

- Buluan Tuju Rites
- Felix Chia on Chakapan Tersilap

The  
"JUM  
Teenagers

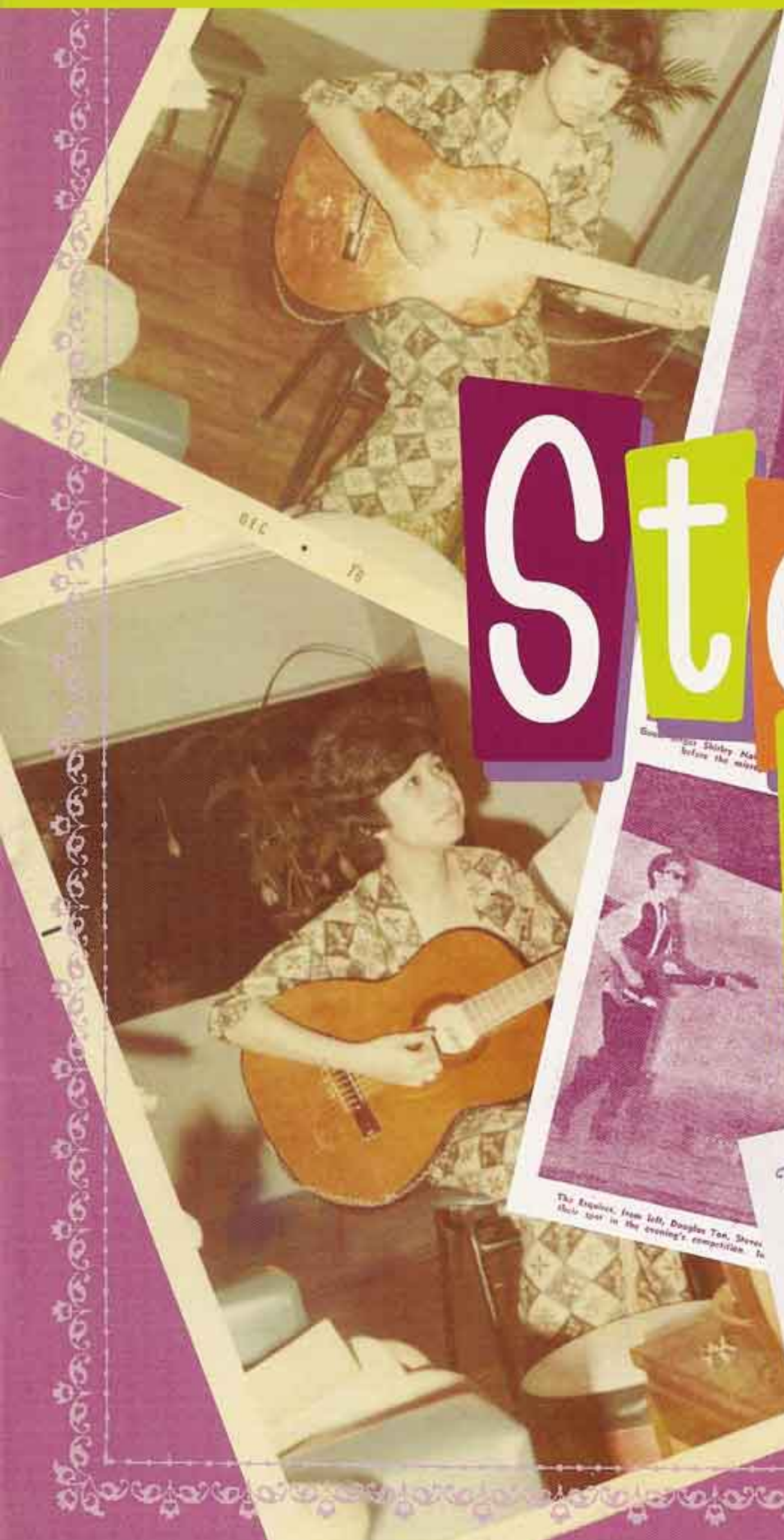
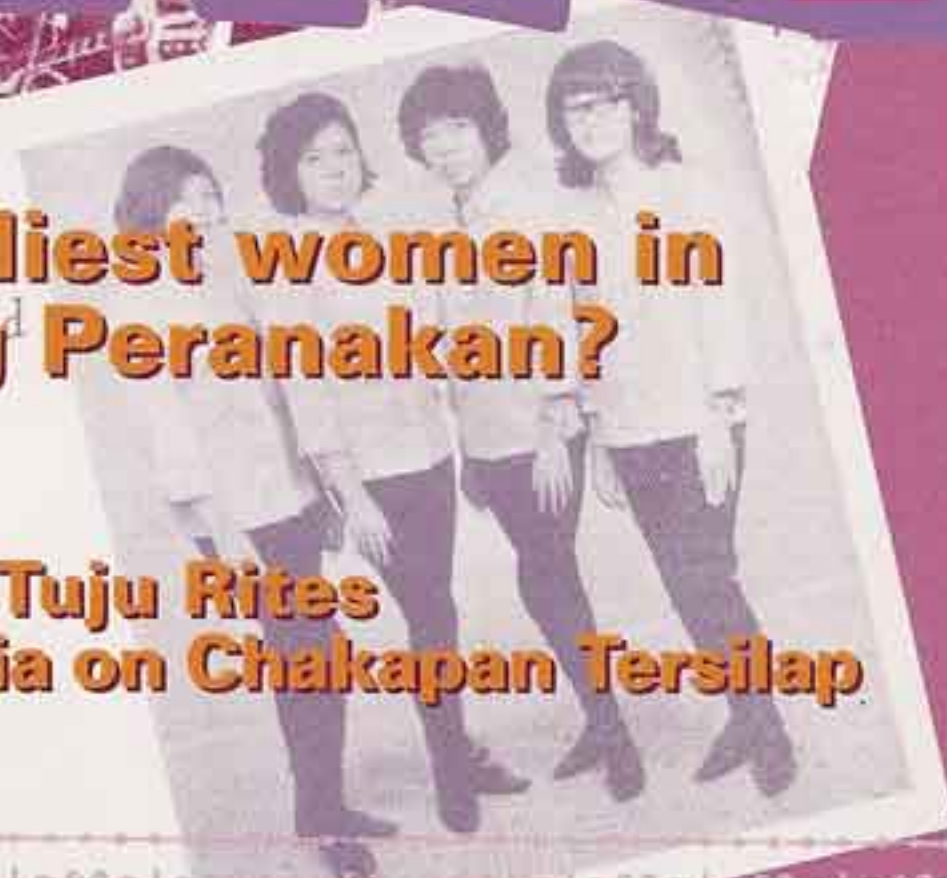
Lead  
Boss  
Rhythm  
Drum  
SHIRLEY  
ROSSANA ONG  
IRENE OYE

**HOUSING BOARD**

SINGAPORE'S National Theatre was jammed with spectators to watch the finals of the Housing and Development Board's talentime, held to mark the completion of its first five-year programme. On stage, a total of 18 finalists, selected from 200 entries by process of elimination, competed for the honours. Adding a more professional touch to the proceedings were several of Singapore's top artists and groups who appeared as guest stars. The winners of the contest received their prizes from The Minister for National Development, Date Lim Kim San, who attended the show.

**Talentime**

Radio Weekly, August 1963







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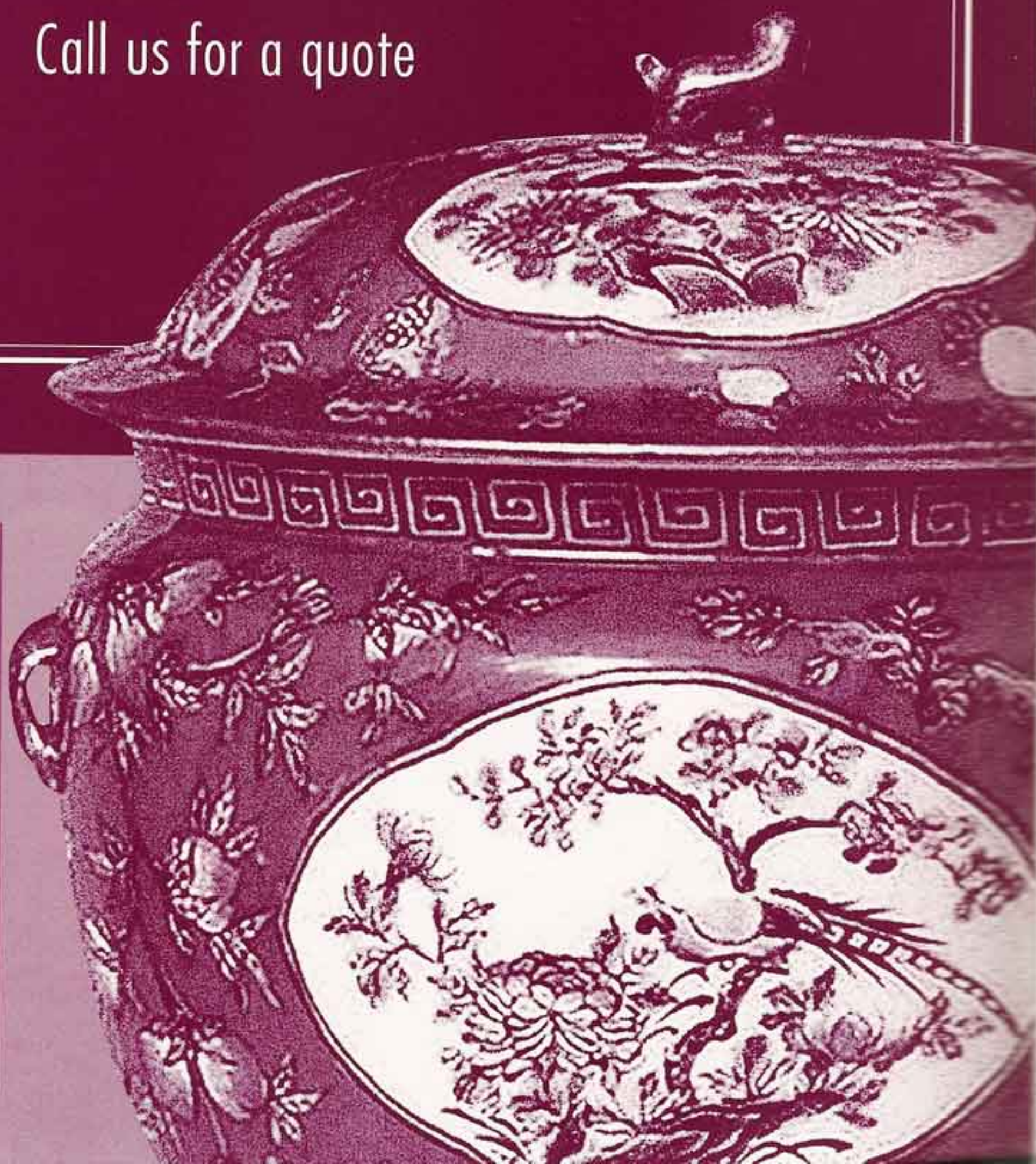
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## Identity: A September Snapshot

The main articles in this issue of our Newsletter feature a little history of Peranakan theatre, as in our story on *Stage Sisters* as well as the influence of traditional Chinese beliefs and traditions on the Peranakan lifestyle, as in the article on the Seventh Moon or *Bulan Tuju* practices.

The influence of the arts and our traditional beliefs as Peranakans cannot be overlooked as they affect our culture and our spirit as a people.

But what is our culture today and how are we as Peranakans evolving? Those of us who have watched typical Peranakan plays, sketches and television cooking shows are often treated with insights into how the grand matriarch would give instructions to servants, husband and daughters-in-law in words which are a good deal less than terms of endearment.

But just how typical is this in the Peranakan home of today? I think not very typical, to the extent that non-Peranakans may even get a wrong impression of the actual scenario in our homes. What we see may have been the case, *lebeh kurang*, in the 1930s, but the modern Peranakan matriarch as depicted in our plays and shows would indeed be a rare find and perhaps a valuable one too, at least on account of her scarcity, if not for anything else.

The contemporary matriarch probably dotes on her daughters-in-law and spends all her free time on making *kueh* for her grandchildren and if she does not have the energy to do that she would go down to one of the shops in Katong to get them a fresh stock of their favourite *kuehs*. All she would then say would be that those made by her in her younger days were a lot more *halus, chantek or sedap*; nothing of those strong admonitions and threats to life and limb of the young ladies.

But if we are undergoing a cultural evolution, then are we conscious of the processes of change within and around us? Perhaps we have evolved to the extent that the young Peranakan has to learn how to speak the patois rather than speak it as a mother-tongue, naturally and fluently, as we older ones used to. Has our patois also, with the Chinese dialects, been set aside as a result of Government policies? How about the other hallmarks of the Peranakan culture like our cuisine, our dress, our porcelains and our architecture? Are these evolving too? Do we see them evolve and manifest themselves in 21st century versions? Or like the matriarch in our plays and shows, time too has stood still for them.

I am glad that our younger members have seen it fit not only to preserve, but also to foster modern versions of all of our Peranakan hallmarks. I rejoice in this because it shows that there are still young Peranakans who value, cherish and celebrate our culture, often in a contemporary form which in the process of evolution, preserves the Peranakan culture while opening it to other influences which ensures the survival of our well-loved traditions.

Perhaps the heirloom the older Peranakans can leave to the younger ones is not only in the material realm but also in terms of a living legacy of the past, from parents to children and grandchildren, all done very simply through the day to day experiences of ordinary people living very ordinary lives. 🍵

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### For Advertising rates please contact

Rita Bertrand Tan, 9633 9122  
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## STAGE SISTERS

# Stage Sisters

## The "JUMPING JEANS" Teenagers Girls Band

Lead Vocalist  
CASSANDRA ONG

Music  
SHIRLEY LEE

Keyboards  
ROSSANA ONG

Drummers  
WENE LEE



Jumping Jeans in a 1965 advertisement

**I**n his search for the earliest female *Wayang Peranakan* performers, Peter Lee 'finds' two sisters — Dolly and Rosanna Ong — *anak wayang* of the 1960s, and daughters of well-known actor and comedian, the late Ong Thye Watt.

It all started during preparations for *Bibiks Behind Bars*, when I began to explore the history of *Wayang Peranakan* for last September's issue of *The Peranakan*. The main focus of course, was to trace the 'genealogy' of the female impersonators (please see 'Boltz Reversals', *The Peranakan*, July-September 2002, p. 34). However another equally interesting question arose: when did real women begin to take to the stage? Conversations with veteran actor Baba William Tan drew up some names: Daisy Chan and Nancy

Kow, who had small roles in the Peranakan Dramatic Party's production of *Kehidupan Si Buda* in 1958. But the history of women in *Wayang Peranakan* seems only to have really begun with Wee Lak Noy (Mrs Mah), Mrs Tan Poh Loo, Sally Gan, the late Sally Teo, Mrs Evelyn Shaw, Caroline Tan, Cynthia Wee, Margaret Lau, Mrs Tan Chuan Hong, Marie Theresa Lau in *Felix Chia's High Merantau* in 1981.

One day, soon after the excitement of our Association's production had died down, I received an envelope from a member and avid Association supporter, Dr Jenny Soon, who had read that issue of the newsletter and managed to dig up some old *Wayang Peranakan* programmes that she thought I would find interesting. What treasures they were! These were the souvenirs of the productions of *Tidak Berdosa* at the Singapore Badminton Hall (1957), *Sifu Darah* at the Happy World Stadium (1958), *Merivesal* at the National Theatre (1965), and *Malam Peranakan* at the Victoria Theatre (1968). I am proud to say, all events were held for charity.

One programme in particular caught my eye for a remarkable and unusual phenomenon. The number of females in the list of performers outnumbered that of the males! After *Bibiks Behind Bars*, that may seem like 'So what?' But back in the 1950s and 1960s Nyanyan just did not



Cast of *Menyesal*, 1965

appear on stage. *Menyesal*, directed by Seow Peck Swee of the Nyonya dan Baba Group, had three main actors: Ong Thye Watt as Towkay Bak Pow, Richard Chua as Baba Beng Chye and Loh Keng Hong as Nyonya Lam. Amazingly, it also had four actresses: Cassandra Ong as Irene, Rose Goh as Nyonya Guat, Rosanna Ong as Nya Chit and a little girl, Patricia Pang, as Ruby.

Even more remarkable was an advertisement in the programme, which showed the same Cassandra and Rosanna Ong, together with two others, Shirley and Irene Lye, as members of a band — The Jumping Jeans! I was bowled over by the fact that not only had I possibly come across a souvenir programme with the earliest Nyonya performers, but the earliest Nyonya performers who were part of an all-girl teenage band! The history of women in Peranakan theatre seems to have been launched with a bang!

On the evening of the day I received the envelope, I attended a post-15th Baba Convention dinner hosted by its chairman, Cynthia Wee-Hoefer. A chance conversation with Cynthia's sister, Celia, who cooked the delicious meal that evening, led to her mentioning that she had known, in particular, one actor mentioned in my article — Ong Thye Watt — and that she was still in contact

with some of his daughters: the very same Cassandra and Rosanna Ong!

Soon after phone numbers were exchanged and meetings arranged, and the sisters told me the wonderful story of how they came to take part in Peranakan theatre.

My first discovery was that Cassandra was the stage name of Dolly Ong. And the two sisters were the second and third of five siblings, the three others being Sally, Irene and Ruby. Their father, Ong Thye Watt, was well known

in the theatre circle during the 1950s and 1960s for his roles as the 'Ah Sim' or Cantonese *amah* in *Wayang Peranakan*. He was also an active director of such productions at that time.

The Ong patriarch, who was born in 1914, began his musical career as a guitarist and violinist with



Silver Star Minstrels, 1930s

Baba musical groups such as the Oleh Oleh party (formed 1932), Silver Star Minstrels, Springdale and the UCMA (United Chinese Musical Association). He joined the Straits Times as an administration officer when he met former President of Singapore Wee Kim Wee, who was then a journalist. They became life-long friends. In 1938 he married Oon Jin Neo, the aunt of Ronnie Oon, former national badminton player.

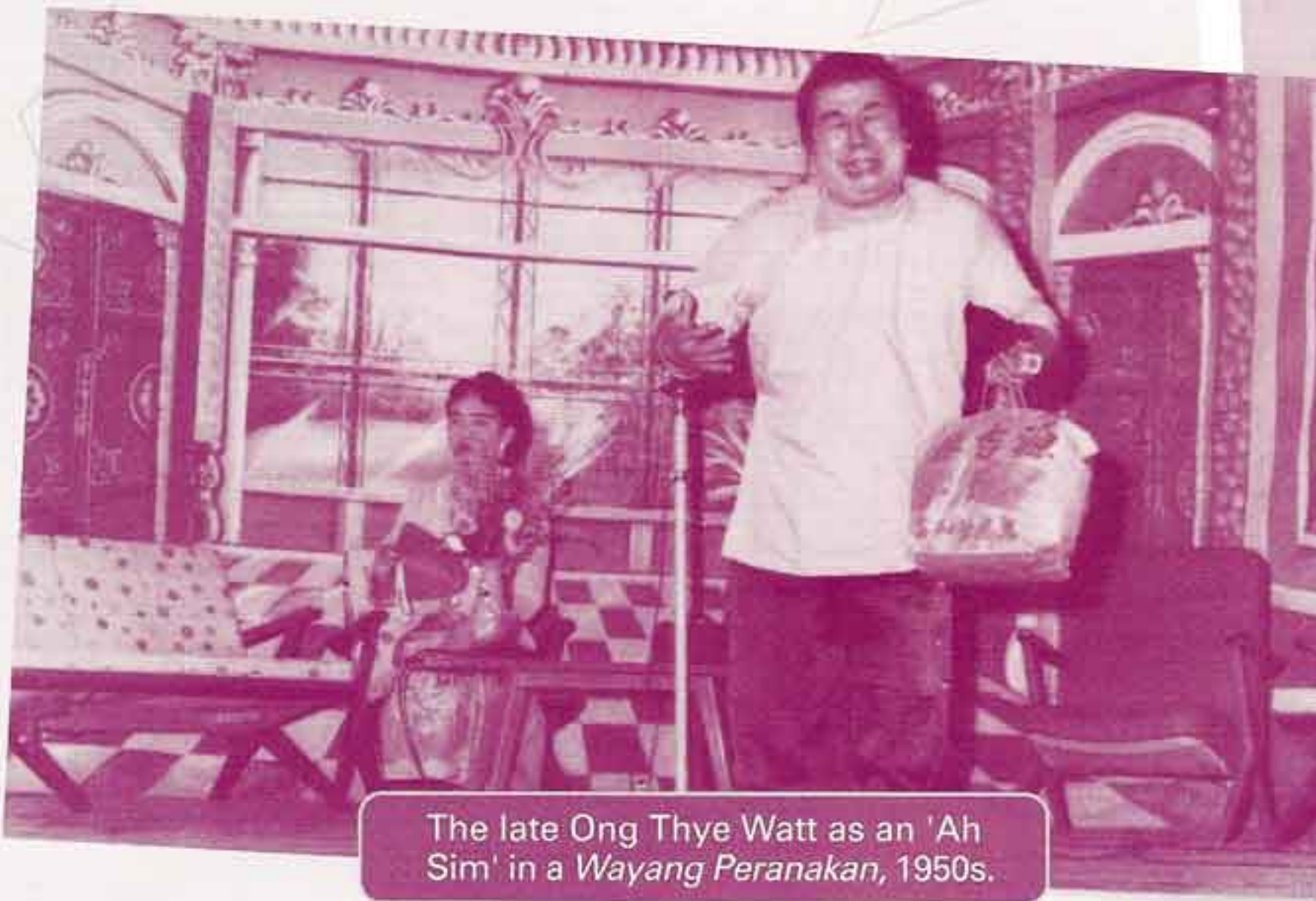


After the war he joined the British Army and worked at the Ordnance Depot as a chief clerk. The Ong family lived in Langsat Road in Joo Chiat and later moved to Princess Elizabeth Estate in Upper Bukit Timah, and later to Commonwealth Crescent. It was also during this period that he discovered his natural talent for acting, appearing on stage for the first time in 1947. In a 1981 article, he reminisced about stage life: 'The shows survived on sponsorship from various local companies and the proceeds normally went to charity. The hall was ventilated only by pedestal fans, which stood at the side-aisles. Normally an overture would precede the main play, which was sub-divided into several short scenes. When the scenario had to be changed, as in the Chinese *wayang*, a singer or group would come out and sing, maybe dance to some contemporary music. This was to allow the actors to change backstage. And these actors received 30 cents each as transport allowance. Some came by bicycle and

But it was only in the 1950s that Ong Thye Watt began to introduce his children to the theatre. 'We followed dad to performances, and helped as ushers and programme sellers,' remembers Rosanna. There were many children around, the families of other performers. Their first forays on stage were usually at the 'extra turns' (intervals between scene changes).



The late Ong Thye Watt, 1981



The late Ong Thye Watt as an 'Ah Sim' in a *Wayang Peranakan*, 1950s.

saved the allowance to buy a packet of *mee* home after the show.' (*Singapore Post*, 3 July 1981.)

Ong Thye Watt excelled in the role of the 'Ah Sim' or 'Ah Sum', which had become a stereotype in *Wayang Peranakan*. The faithful, meddlesome, comical Cantonese *amah* in her white top and black silk trousers was a fixture of many productions. The tradition is carried on today by Chee Hood Siong of Malacca, and in Singapore, by Sally Gan and most recently Jessie Cheang in *Bibiks Behind Bars*.



Dolly Ong, 1960s

But they soon got their first starring roles in *Menyesal*. In the mid-1960s it was increasingly difficult to find male actors willing to take up women's roles. The doyen of the stage, William Tan, had already stopped acting after a long illness. 'He was really beautiful; he was prettier than us!' says Dolly. The veteran actor Ong Guan Bock, who was *the* star of the *wayang* before

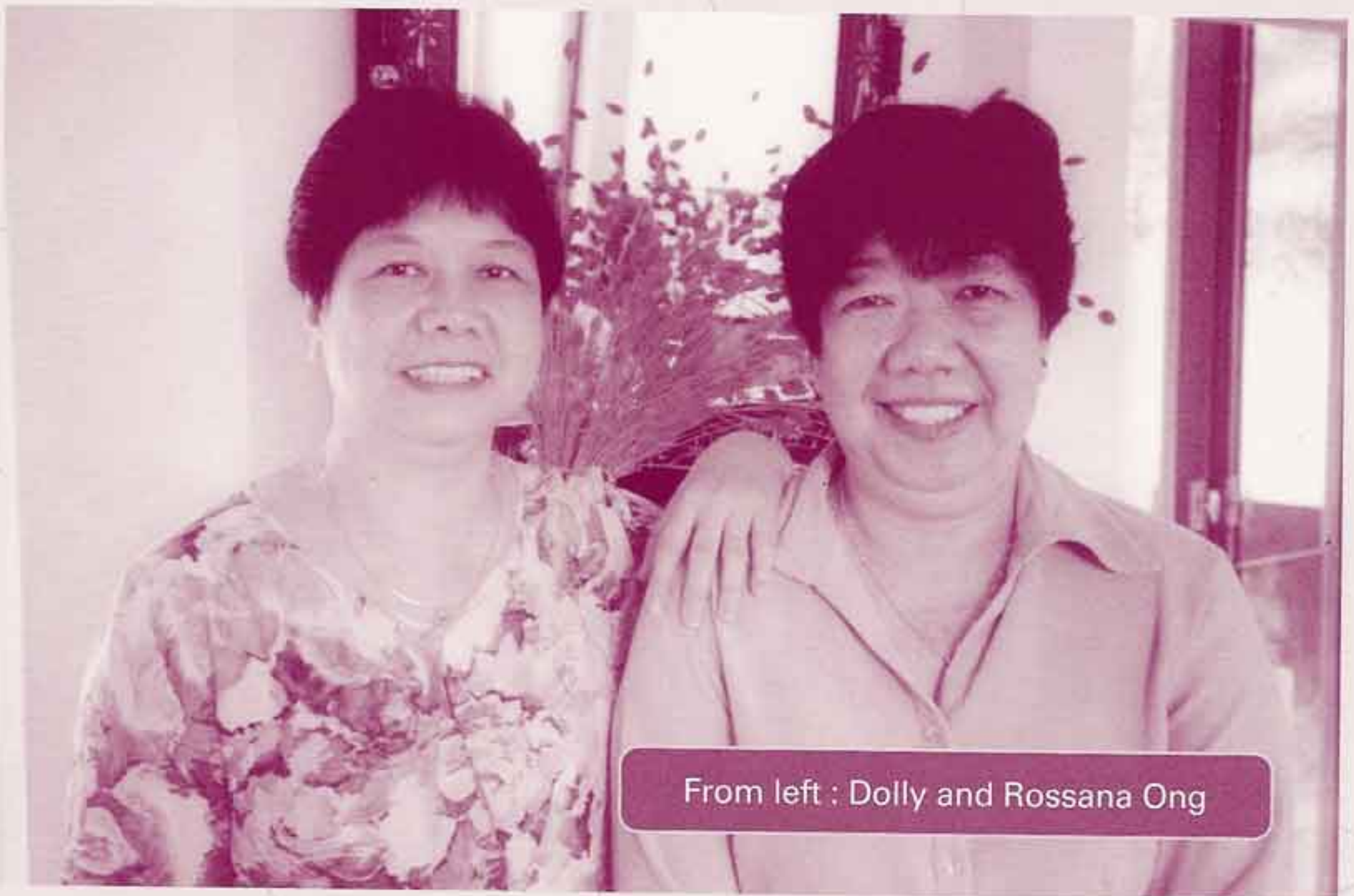


William Tan, had also retired from the stage. Times were changing as well as public perception and demand. New performers had to be found. Naturally they were recruited from within the family network. It thus became a big family affair, involving stage manager Walter Lye and his children Raymond, Irene and Shirley, director Seow Peck Swee and his children Ronnie, Bonnie and Arthur, and of course Ong Thye Watt and his two daughters. 'We had umpteen rehearsals which were held in various homes,' recalls Rosanna. Some rehearsal were also held in Bukit Rose, the residence of The Peranakan Association president at that time, T.W. Ong. 'It was fun. It was easy! Dad was always there to correct us. We practised 6 months for one night's show!' adds Dolly.

Apart from rehearsing for the play, the girls also formed their own band for the extra-turns. *Wayang Peranakan* went modern! The Jumping Jeans were Rosanna on rhythm guitar, Dolly on lead guitar, Shirley Lye on bass and her sister Irene on drums. They had no instruments and had to borrow them from the boys in the group, who had formed their own band, The Checkers. Dolly was the most ardently musical of the two sisters, and had been taught the guitar by her father from the age of 10. In *Menyesal* she had her own solo, 'Silver Threads and Golden Needles'. Dolly was a singing prodigy and took part in talent competitions including those held in her school. She earned the epithet 'The Connie Francis of Bukit Panjang High'. Her stage name

was inspired by a visit to a British warship, the destroyer HMS Cassandra, which stopped in Singapore en route to Borneo at the end of 1964.

Sadly the lifespan of the band was all too brief, and the Ong sisters also never managed to continue their interests in *Wayang Peranakan*. Real life took over. Rosanna served in the army for many years and is now a semi-retired insurance agent and Dolly, who has been in the clerical field for a long time, is a senior secretary with Sembawang Corporation. But that sparkle and *joie de vivre* of people who love to be on stage has never left them. Both sisters are bubbly



From left : Dolly and Rosanna Ong

and chatty, clearly affectionate with each other, and excited to remember their musical past. This spirit is definitely inherited from their father. 'He always looked at the lighter side of life, and never worried about tomorrow. Mother was the disciplinarian,' says Rosanna. 'He was a natural comedian and could sit down at a table and make everyone laugh,' adds Dolly. Rosanna sums it up with a wide smile tinged with nostalgia, 'He was a very nice dad.'



BULAN TUJU

# BULAN TUJU

## SEVENTH MOON RITUALS



It's that time of the year. Noreen Chan waxes lyrical on feasting with our ancestors, the festival of seven celestial sisters, and unseen audiences...

**T**he seventh lunar month, *chit guek* or *bulan tuju*, is also known as the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, and has its roots in Buddhism, with influences from Confucianism, Taoism and traditional Chinese religious practices. It is believed that the gates of Hell are opened to allow its 'residents' to freely roam the earth for thirty days.

From the time of Confucius, it was customary for children to show respect for their deceased parents by going through an appropriate mourning period. Moreover, it was believed that the spirits of the departed continued to require the basic necessities such as food, money and shelter. According to Buddhist tradition, those deprived of such comforts would become hungry ghosts, causing mischief when let loose on the world of the living. This is why people make offerings during the seventh moon to propitiate these wandering spirits. It is also considered bad luck to begin a new business venture, get married or move house during this time.



## Getai and Wayang 'Commercial' Rituals

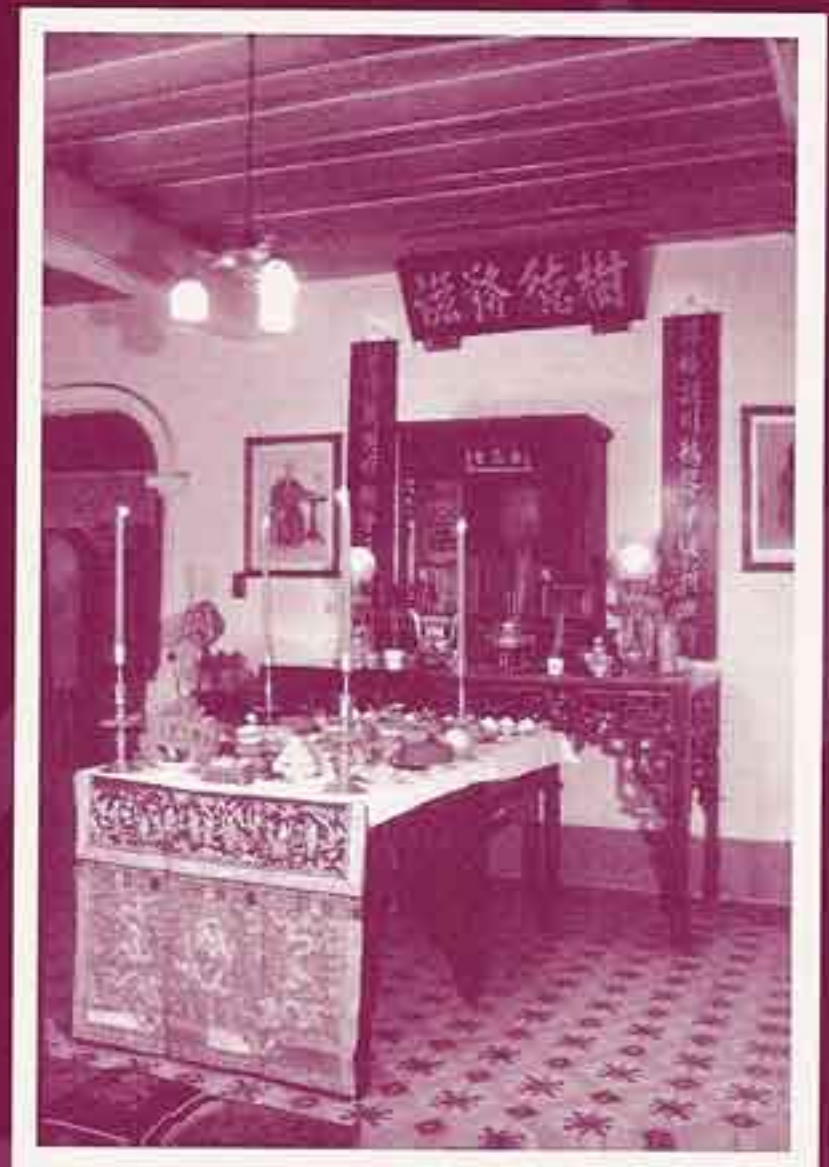
The popular face of the Hungry Ghosts Festival in Singapore must be the *getai* (literally song stage). These mushroom all over the island during the month, and feature a string of flamboyantly dressed performers belting out top hits late into the night. *Getai* performers — some as young as in their teens — travel from venue to venue each night, and successful ones can make several thousand dollars during the season. These *getai* have overshadowed the more traditional performances of Chinese opera or *wayang*, and puppet shows, which were usually sponsored by temples, clan associations or businesses to entertain the public, living or otherwise. Seasoned performers will tell you that even when the chairs were empty, the show would still go on for their unseen audience.

The other, very colourful and noisy, feature of this time of year is the *lelong* or charity auction. Businesses commonly club together to sponsor prayers and offerings to appease the hungry ghosts. Large quantities of rice and other dry goods, and cooked food, especially roast suckling pig, would be offered and later distributed to the needy, but not before the auctioneer had stirred up the boisterous crowd with his call for bids for 'lucky' items. 🍀

## Family Rituals

At the beginning, middle and end of the month, families would light candles and joss sticks outside their doors and burn offerings of paper and clothes for the *melekat* or hungry ghosts. In addition, it was essential to pray for one's ancestors. The main duty of honouring the ancestors fell to the sons, usually the eldest, and this custom continued to be practised among many Peranakan families long after they had settled in Nanyang.

Ancestor worship demanded that an altar be maintained with the ancestral tablets, known as *rumah abu*. Wealthy families were able to house the *rumah abu* literally in a separate house, with its own caretaker. Important prayers would be held at least twice a year, during Cheng Beng (which usually falls on April 5th, 105 days after the Winter Solstice or *Tang Chek*), the seventh lunar month and sometimes the death anniversary or *see kee*. It was customary to honour the *nenek moyang* (or ancestors) on the 14th day of the seventh month with no fewer than twelve dishes, but nowadays four is the more usual number. In my grandmother's time, a typical selection might include:





## BULAN TUJU

1. *Pongteh Babi*
2. *Pongteh Ayam*
3. *Chap Chye Anchor*
4. *Chap Chye Bulat* (similar to ordinary *chap chye*, except that a small head of cabbage or *kobis* is left whole)
5. *Char Bek* (kidneys cooked with ginger)
6. *Hati Babi* (minced liver and pork balls, flavoured with coriander and wrapped in caul)
7. *Pong Tauhu*
8. *Kaki Babi* (pig knuckle)
9. *Purut Babi* (pig stomach)
10. *Sarang Burong* (literally, 'bird's nest' — shredded pork skin cooked with garlic)
11. *Char Tee Hee* (pig lung, usually finely sliced and cooked with shredded bamboo shoots)
12. *Babi Tauyu* (belly pork cooked with soya sauce)

This would have been in addition to the *sam seng* — a whole chicken, duck and piece of pork — and *achar*, fried fish and a prawn dish like *udang goreng asam*. A table would be set up with all these foods, fruit, a small stand with rock sugar, and settings with rice and often wine or tea. Of course, only the blue and white porcelain was used, as these were prayers for the deceased (blue was considered an appropriately sombre colour).

In addition to food and prayer, offerings of paper money and clothes would be burnt for the ancestors. The traditional money is the silver paper or *kretas perak* (gold paper or *kretas mas* is only for deities), and the 'clothes', sheets of white paper with pictures of clothes printed on it, banded with red. Nowadays, these paper offerings have moved with the times. It is now possible to give a wide variety of 'Hell bank notes' currency, and for the upwardly mobile, even a Hell passport, air ticket, cheque book and credit card! 🐼

## The Seven Sisters



The little practised custom of praying to the Seven Sisters dates back several centuries. According to legend, a poor farmer married the youngest of the seven daughters of the Jade Emperor. There are variations to this tale, but all tell of the Jade Emperor's anger at this liaison, as his daughter had neglected her duties of helping her sisters to weave the tapestry of the night sky. He therefore ordered that the couple were to meet only once a year, on the 7th night of the 7th moon, and they still do so, on a bridge of magpies across the celestial river of the Milky Way.

This festival, also named for the star-crossed lovers the Cowherd and the Weaving maid, is celebrated more frequently in Taiwan — where the Seven Sisters are thought to protect children — and in Hong Kong, where arts and crafts like weaving, sewing and tapestry are highlighted. I recall my

Cantonese *amah* would buy a new comb, powder and other cosmetics, to place on the altar on that night. She told me that by doing this, unmarried ladies hoped to become as beautiful as the heavenly sisters.

And so the seventh lunar month is a heady mix of wandering ghosts and eternal love, the nights a time of *wayang* and *getai* performers in their glittering best on a brightly lit stage, as well as the glowing collections of burning candles and joss sticks dotting the streets. And in traditional Peranakan homes, a mouth-watering spread of dishes for all the family, dead and living, to share. When the *nenek moyang* eat well, so do we. 🐼



# Chakapan Tersilap

## — Misquoted Baba Sayings

*Felix Chia re-examines some famous Baba Malay idioms and suggests some humorous alternatives of his own...*

*Here is a collection of Baba Malay sayings deliberately and deliciously 'decapitated' by me. It is hoped that the English translation will also raise a chuckle, just as the 'native' quotations will, I am certain, bring about laughter among those who speak and understand the unique patois of the Babas. I say this because the essence is always embedded in the original tongue, and translations often fall short of complete appreciation of the meaning. However, be that as it may, I shall endeavour not to short-change the non-speakers of Baba Malay by trying to make them laugh just as heartily.*

Most Babas, if not all, are supreme fatalists. Often is heard, 'Janji sa-chupak, tak sa-gantang.' The simplistic meaning is, of course, 'Fate'. I prefer to translate in depth as it is more illuminating. Dissecting the saying, the old and the wise of yesteryears cautioned the naive that if one is allotted in life a *chupak*, a measure of capacity about the contents of half a coconut shell, then no one should expect a *gantang* which is four times that of a *chupak*. So in a nutshell it simply meant 'Fate'.

Consider my other side of the saying. 'Kalu tak ah kledek, makan lah ubi kayu!' If there is no sweet potato, then satisfy yourself with tapioca!

'Loyar Burok!' someone will cry. The meaning is far from 'Ugly Lawyer.' It is meant to be a compliment, as another will add, 'Kalu loyar tak burok, apa macham mo menang case?' The compliment is that if the lawyer is not *burok*, how is he to win the case? *Burok* simply means to be as talkative as can be, long-winded and decisively cut and thrust.

Would it not be fun to see 'Loyar Burok kawin Dokto Chantek'? The ugly lawyer marries the pretty doctor.

In describing a place that is deserted and is in the middle of nowhere, one can hear, 'Ala! Jin buang anak mia tumpat!'



The exclamation means 'Oh! The place where genies abandoned their babies.' I wonder if it were true that genies abandoned their babies. If so, how then did future genies come about?

A more appropriate saying would be '*jin piara anak mia tumpat*' or 'the place where genies raise their young'. This would make better sense, as a deserted place in the middle of nowhere is an ideal location to keep away the inquisitive and prying eyes of the humans.

Two feisty Nonyas were confronting and quarrelling with each other. One shouted, '*Lu pikay gua takot lu yah?*' 'You think I'm afraid of you, eh?' She then continued, '*Lu chilli, gua bawang!*' 'You're chilli, I'm onion!' The utterances were typical tirades that imply one is a match for the other, as both the chilli and the onion are equally pungent and are capable of 'burning' the tongue.

I see the reverse of the coin in the saying. Tsk...tsk...Nonyas. Why show off that you are a match to the other? Surely in the busy confines of the kitchen, there are spices galore. Why then should you both not make use of the chilli and onion to fry a tasty dish of *ikan goreng chilli bawang*? Indeed many a Baba and Nonya must have been drooling over fish fried in chilli and onion, and not forgetting a pinch of salt for enhanced taste. '*Goreng lah ikan chilli bawang.*'

'*Lu ada chay it, Gua ada chap goh!*' is a rebuke for revenge. That is to say that do what you want on the first day of the month (*chay it*) and I'll have my day on the 15th (*chap goh*).

The first and last days of the month must have inspired this quotation. But to wait fourteen days for revenge is somewhat risky after you have made known your intention to get even!

A witty Baba while dining at a *pok piah* party reminded his host not to apply too

much chilli in his roll. '*Lida gua nanti bertandak,*' he cried out. 'My tongue will dance.' I was wondering though whether his tongue would perform either the Lindy Hop or the Line Dance. Perhaps both, I thought to myself. A note about the *pok piah*: I know that this delicious fare is generally termed *popiah*. This, in fact, is the pronunciation of Chinese stall holders, which had been spelt as such. Babas, I am sure, will emphasise the 'k'.

The same witty one once remarked, '*pok piah terlanjang*', when he saw the filling being wrapped in salad and eaten without the skin. A conservative Nonya in the midst corrected him and said, '*pok piah jantan lah!*' The good lady preferred the description 'male *pok piah*' to 'naked *pok piah*'.

'*N'koh gua sama gua sudah asam kelat,*' said a friend to me. 'My elder brother is very peeved with me.' As *asam* besides being the word for tamarind is also the term for 'sour', and *kelat* means astringent taste or astringent behaviour, the combination of the two keywords conjure up a definitive feeling of sheer peevishness. It could well breach the ceiling of utter disgust.

'*Rupa dia macham Si Goma!*' I used to hear elders say. 'His looks are those of Si Goma!' Who or what Si Goma was I could not tell. But I remember that there was a Malay movie that had a character by that name, and he must have been very ugly. Hence the audience applied the name to those whom they disliked or were angry with.

I would have preferred 'Si Goma in a coma!'

The next thing could be the talk among well informed Babas and Nonyas. One of the trio - two Babas and a Nonya recalled what an elder said about a very tasty and special fare. '*Wah! Moyang kueh bakol!*' expressed the supreme satisfaction of a



delicious dish. The first Baba opined that this saying could have two different meanings — ‘Ancestor cake in a basket’ is its word for word translation. The cake in a basket is in reality the Lunar New Year cake, or *nian-gao* in Mandarin. Made of glutinous rice and brown sugar and packed in leaves in the shape of a basket, it is an offering for worship throughout the fifteen days of the celebration of the Lunar New Year. For want of a better term, the Babas called it *kueh bakol*.

The first meaning, continued the speaker, ‘could stand for *ancestor of the basket cake*.’ The nuance behind it is similar to labelling it ‘The Mother of Basket Cakes’.

The second Baba reasoned that as Babas are notoriously known for their bad pronunciation of Chinese words, maintained that the word *moyang* could well be *ngoh hiang*, a sort of fried sausage dished out by the Teochews. As such, he thought, could it be that if one eats the fried sausage with the *kueh bakol*, could it not produce ‘the Mother of Delicious Feasting’? The Nonya agreed with him, but the first Baba insisted that his meaning was the correct one.

I, the second Baba, promised myself that when the *kueh bakol* is around again, I would like to try and eat it with *ngoh hiang*! May the good lord help me if things should go wrong.

I would now like to review the sayings I had written in *The Babas* and in *Ala Sayang*. Very much like what I have written earlier about the original quotes being bland, here too I feel the sayings must be peppered with spice and all things nice, by presenting them with alternative and hopefully hilarious meanings.

*Semot kaki panjang* or ‘long legged ant’ is not the Nonya’s observation of the insects’ DNA. The saying or criticism simply means that one is perhaps too fond of outings.

If the above is accepted, perhaps ‘*semot kaki pendek*’ or ‘short legged ant’ should describe home stickers — or to be up to date — people who are quarantined at home.

*Jalan kaki, jalan duit*. Go out and your money goes out with you — an astute observation that you will spend when you go out.

This I believe should correctly refer only to the *semot kaki panjang*.

‘*Poket demam!*’ A Baba in financial distress might just utter these words of despair. He was declaring that his pocket had a fever.

I suppose it was better, for if he himself had a body temperature of 38°C, Tan Tock Seng Hospital would be waiting for him.

Nonyas are witty and feisty and are fond of innuendos. A classic example is when they call a baby boy *pisang* — banana. His sister would be labelled the *apong balek* or a folded pancake.

I wonder what the *pisang* will be named when he grows up and turns out to be a transvestite. Perhaps he will be known as a *pisang apong balek*!

A pregnant woman would be called *Si pukol tumbol* by a Nonya — ‘the drummer’ that is. Others might label her *Si perot bisol* — ‘the one with a boil on the stomach’.

Would it not be fun to surmise that the drummer has a boil on her stomach? *Si pukol tumbol ada bisol kat perot dia*.

Now that I have had my say I hope to *jumpa lagi* (see you again). If not, I sincerely hope that readers enjoyed reading through the distorted Baba Malay sayings just as I enjoyed writing them. 🍷



## perANAKan — the Youth Group

# AYER LIOH MELLELEH — DROOL!



**During the past few months, the members of the Youth Group centered their thoughts and discussions on food.** HEATHER ONG

**T**hrough our Internet forum in yahoo-groups, 16 people arranged to meet, makan and spend an afternoon in July with other young Babas and Nonyas. Some were active members of The Peranakan Association, others were new members attending their first event, and a few were Peranakans who had found us while surfing the Internet. We welcome everyone who is interested in the culture, and had to convince a shy gentleman over the phone that we were a nice bunch of people, that we would NOT dress in *sarong kebaya* for a casual meal, and that we would speak to him in English or Singlish, not just Baba patois!

We had a value-for-money meal at Rice Table Indonesian Restaurant, and then adjourned to a nearby food-court to continue with dessert and coffee. It was simple fare, elevated to lofty heights by the enjoyable company of new and old Peranakan friends.

If smell could be sent via email, the aroma of Nonya food would permeate the households of our Peranakan yahoogroups subscribers!

Teacher Ban Huat asked for information about

*nasi lemak*, as he wanted his students to undertake a project on the subject. Baba Cedric had us drooling when he described the fragrant nasi, the *sambal udang* with *petai*, and the fried chicken or fish that would accompany a normal daily meal. For festive occasions however, additional dishes might include *sambal serunding* (fried coconut) or *sambal jantung pisang* (banana blossom). In the twelfth day ceremony of a Peranakan wedding, once the elders were satisfied with proof of the bride's virginity, everyone would happily partake of a *nasi lemak* meal, served *tok panjang* style.

A Penang Baba living in the United Kingdom started another thread. He had recently opened a Malaysian-Peranakan restaurant in Kent, and requested information about the various aromatic *daun* used in our cooking. Respondents gave examples of their favourite ingredients, like *daun kadok* (used for *nasi ulam* and Penang steamed *otak-otak*), *puchok kunyit* (for making *udang masak nenas*), *daun kenchoe* (for Indonesian *gado-gado*) and even *bunga kantan*.

Baba Christopher then wrote about the Penang-style Peranakan food that he grew up eating. He



## perANAKan — the Youth Group



mentioned *lor bak* (*ngo hiang*), *kiam chai ark* (*itek tim*), *hey yar kay* (*chinchalok*) and many types of *gulai*. He agreed that either northern or southern, Peranakan food was definitely *sedap*!

Terence is from Melaka but works here. We Singaporean foodies put him to shame, when we could rattle off our favourite Nonya restaurants from Jonker Street to Ujong Pasir, whereas he could only name one. To counter the teasing, he said that when he's back in Melaka, he seldom ventures out, as nothing beats his mum's home cooking.

'Can anyone please tell me how to conduct the Peranakan wedding tea ceremony?' A young Nonya needed this information for her coming nuptials, so Ba Cedric gave step-by-step instructions on how to introduce a spouse to a Peranakan family, starting with the preparation of the longan and red date tea, to the order in which the elders were to be served, to how gifts and *ang-pows* were to be presented, and he ended with good wishes for the bride-to-be.

Cedric summed up the sentiments surrounding the Peranakan love affair with their food, 'The tedious

preparation of *nasi lemak* and its accompaniments is a perfect opportunity for family members to meet, interact, share, learn, have fun, and to EAT together.'

Though younger Peranakans are separated physically, and are unable to meet as often as we would like to, we should still regard each other as 'family', and strive to achieve the communal spirit mentioned above. The yahogroups forum is thus an excellent means for Peranakans all over the world to keep in touch and share information. Each can then draw upon these resources, assume the role of Peranakan ambassador, and use every opportunity to create awareness of our unique culture.

Get connected to the yahogroups. Receive updates on our next *makan* session, teaching session or share information that is of interest to young Peranakans. Send an email from your account to [peranakan-subscribe@yahoo.com](mailto:peranakan-subscribe@yahoo.com) 📧



## EVENTS

# exhibits ALIVE!

- **New Audio Guide launched at the Asian Civilisations Museum's *Peranakan Legacy* galleries**
- **Association's many volunteers bring Guide to life**

On 31 July, the ACM's new audio guide was launched after many months of preparation. The project, initiated by the ACM and the Singapore Tourism Board, was supported by sound technology specialist Sennheisser and The Peranakan Association.

Raffles The Plaza provided a sumptuous Peranakan buffet from their Plaza Market Cafe that won approval all-round from our typically hard-to-please 'my mother's version's best' crowd. The launch was brought to life by our Association's choir, Peranakan Voices, with their colourful costumes and melodies, and by Francis Hogan's *dondang sayang* performance.

ACM director Dr Kenson Kwok welcomed guests and introduced the museum's new product, while congratulatory messages were made by Sennheiser managing director S F Ho and guest of honour Association



Dr Kenson Kwok & guest

president, Lee Kip Lee, who presented tokens of appreciation to all volunteers.

The aim of the project was to introduce memories, voices and sound, and thereby another experiential dimension, to Museum visitors. The concept was developed by the museum's Randall Ee with the help of the Association's Peter Lee, who wrote the script and found the 'voices'. All Association contributors were volunteers who readily gave their time and talent for their heritage.



G T Lye receiving a token of appreciation from Lee Kip Lee

The technology is also a cutting edge. Visitors, wearing headphones and carrying a compact

receiver set, experience the sound recordings triggered by sensors as they enter each exhibition zone. It is user friendly and does not



The Peranakan Voices & Francis Hogan

require pressing any keys. The sound also stops the second you move out of the zone, restarts if you revisit it, or starts anew if you enter a new zone.



Neo Swee Lin & Jalyn Han

Actors Neo Swee Lin and Jalyn Han provide the lead voices for the English and Mandarin versions of this production. Both are ideal choices as apart from being actors of great depth and talent, they have performed as the lead in Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (Neo in the English production and Han in the Mandarin version). Others who lent their voices and shared their memories are doyen of the Peranakan theatre G T Lye, actor Tony Quek, museum curator Randall Ee, and Malacca Baba Charles Chua.

Visit the *Peranakan Legacy* gallery and laugh, cry and reminisce about our heirlooms, not simply as object, but as things that were, and sometimes still are, part and parcel of our lives. Look out for the wonderful stories about the museum's bridal bed, G T Lye's revelations about *makan sireh*, and other tales behind the many Peranakan treasures. 🌸



# SINGAPORE ROJAK!

## The Peranakans join Singapore's family of communities

Richard Tan

A Racial Harmony Day festival organised by the Central Singapore CDC aptly titled *Singapore Rojak!* for the first time featured a Peranakan Pavilion side by side the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian Pavilions! (And yes! We have been pushing hard for a unique Singaporean community identity!)

At this event, held from 12 to 13 July 2003, there was also a racial fusion pavilion showcasing cross-cultural diversity in harmony! This event showed how our local cultures have always existed side by side in harmony with some influences crossing over from one community to another. Food and merchandise were available for the public, with proceeds going to the Interracial Harmony Fund.

At our Peranakan Pavilion, we featured some of these similarities and highlighted some of the diffused differences in our culture. The pavilion was not another museum display but a showcase of related things and way of life. The entrance was painstakingly decorated to look like the facade of a *Rumah Baba*, but inside this tent-like pavilion were household things and handicrafts; games and craft demonstrations for the public to see as well as try out.



Welcoming Guest-Of-Honour His Excellency President S R Nathan

Our performing troupe of Babas & Nyonyas welcomed Guest-Of-Honour His Excellency President S R Nathan at 5pm on the first day with showers of *bunga rampay*, with the grand bridal *payong* plus two very young *anak Peranakan* to greet him.

The Association's Peranakan Voices

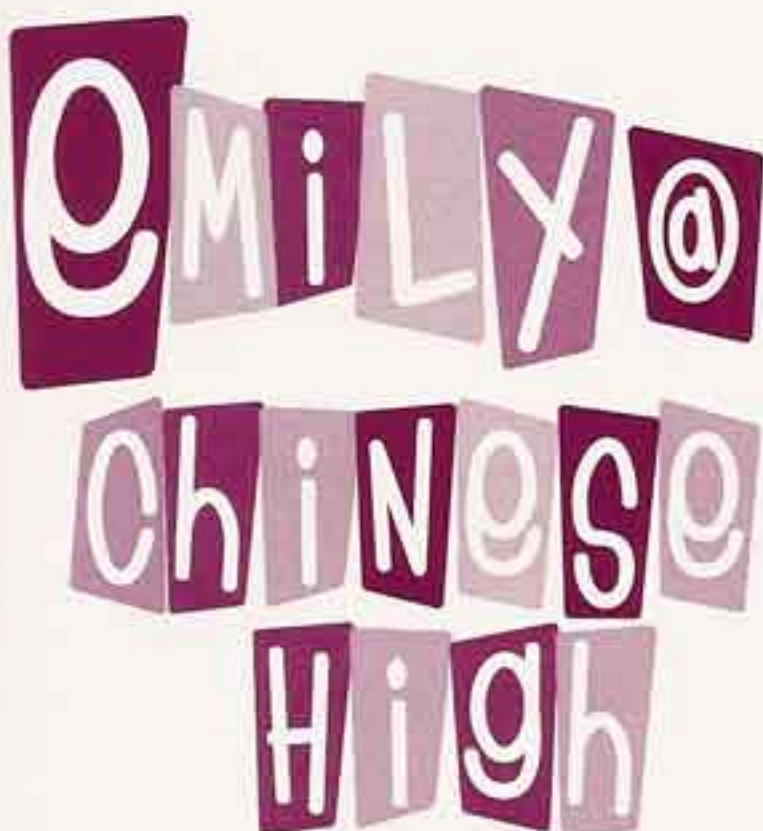
performed a thirty-minute repertoire of songs on the Rainbow stage at 7:30pm culminating in a mini *joget* session for everyone.

Bibik Frances (Francis Hogan), Nyonya Sally Gan and Nyonya Alicia moved about the grounds interacting with the public with their campy and light-hearted comic antics throughout the afternoon.



Peranakan Voices performing

Of course, I am only highlighting the Peranakan aspects of the event. There were a lot more to see and do at the other pavilions too! 🌸



Clarinda Choh

Singapore's favourite Peranakan matriarch played to a packed Drama Centre in The Chinese High School on 4 and 5 July 2003. Stella Kon's classic monologue, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, once again brought forth the familiar issues of familial values, customs, joys and struggles while re-living the cultural heritage many lament has been eroded by the influences of modernisation. Directed by Chin San Sooi and performed by Pearly Chua, Emily came alive for the students, families and staff of Chinese High.\* The playwright herself was in attendance on both nights and the artistic and cultural energy was enhanced by a vibrant exchange between Stella, San Sooi and Pearly with the audience after the performances. Peranakan garb and food aside, it is heartwarming to see the flow of arts and culture in confluence with education. 🌸

\*Chin San Sooi directed the first production of *Emily* in Seremban way back in 1984, and Pearly Chua has played *Emily* countless times since 1990.





*Steven Ong*

BAJU KEBAYA

*for embroidered kebaya and  
modern cheongsam*

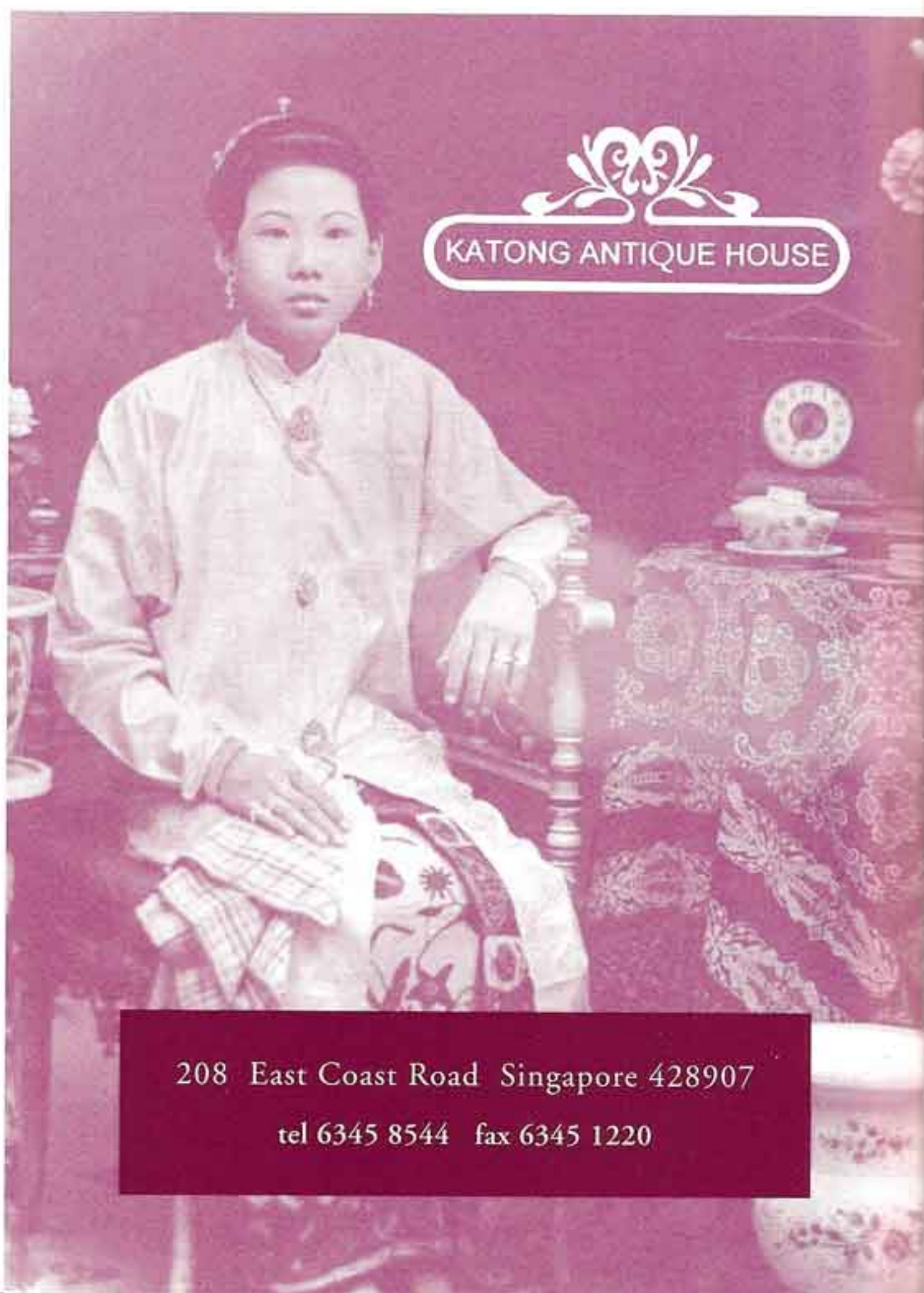
Steven Ong

Telephone 02-036-140 3080 Mobile 02-012-351 8049

Email [sjbong@hotmail.com](mailto:sjbong@hotmail.com)

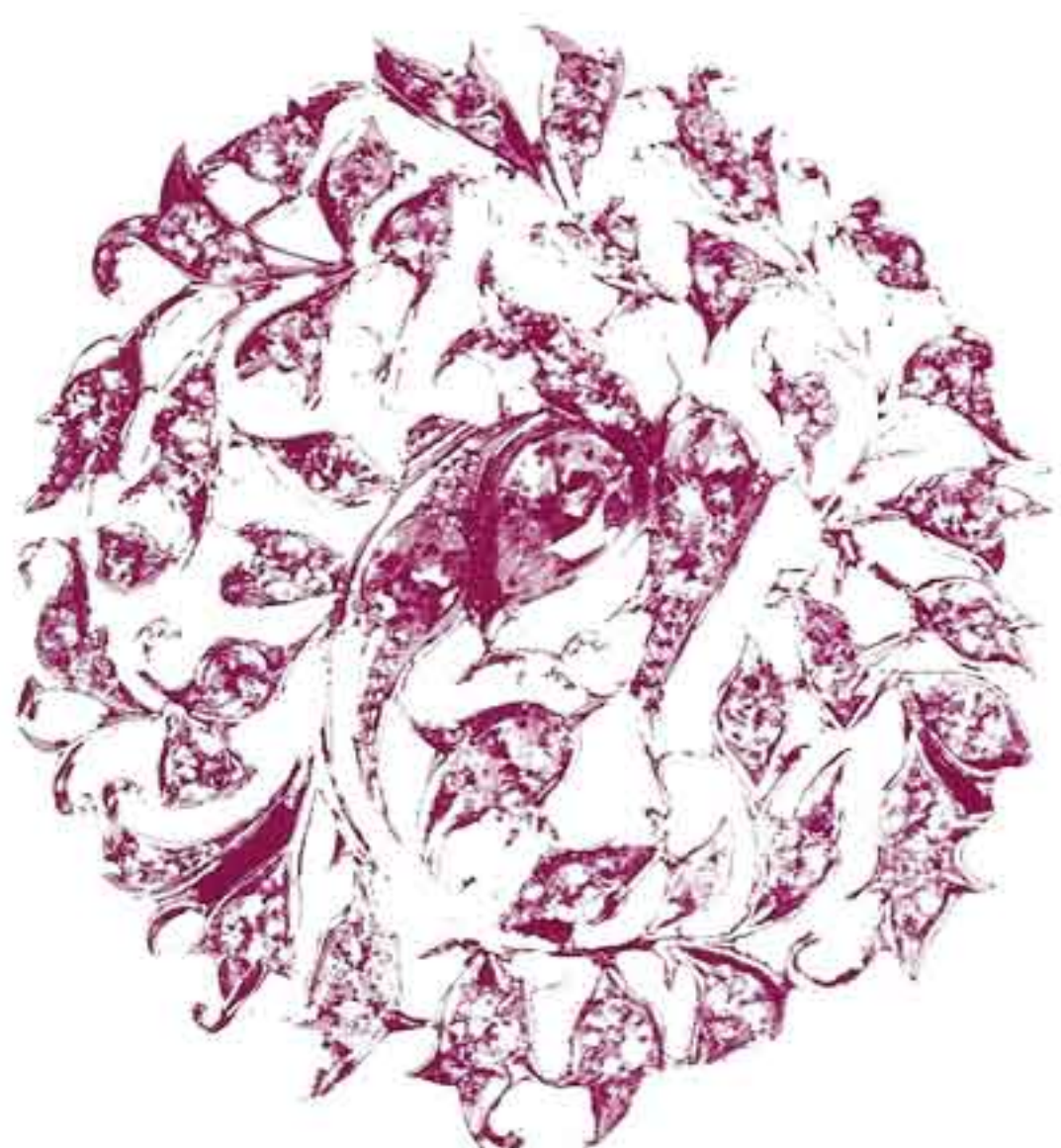


KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



208 East Coast Road Singapore 428907

tel 6345 8544 fax 6345 1220



50 East Coast Road

#02-122

Century Roxy Park Hotel

Shopping Centre

Singapore 428769

(opposite Parkway Parade)

tel 6344 3323



## NOTICEBOARD

**New Members**

We welcome the following three members whose addition increases our membership roll to 1,718.

Miss Chan Mei Lik  
Mrs Chu Teck Suan Wilna  
Mr Tan Chin Kwang Johnson

**16<sup>TH</sup> BABA CONVENTION**  
**A Celebration of Peranakan Networks**  
**— The Phuket Connection**  
**5 – 7 December 2003 in Penang**

The Hon. Secretary of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang has announced the theme and dates for the upcoming 16<sup>th</sup> Baba Convention. Please look out for more details, which will be announced in due course.

**The Berlian Ball**

A brilliant evening of baubles, bangles, Babas and Bibiks!

**The Peranakan Association's 103<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary and Dinner & Dance**

Hosted by Baba Tony Quek and Nyonya Margaret Lim.

Music by The Melodians — the roving Malaccan Peranakan Minstrels!

And jewellery (real or costume) by YOU!  
7 pm, Friday 31 October 2003

Island Ballroom

Shangri-la Hotel

Tickets at \$800 (standard table), \$1,200 (premium table) \$1,500 and above (patron's table)

Please call the Hon. Secretary at 62550704 for reservations!

**Gunong Sayang Association's New Play!****Kipas Chendana — The Sandalwood Fan**

8 pm, 25 -27 September 2003, Victoria Theatre

Tickets \$26, \$36 and \$46 available through SISTIC

A tale of two Peranakan households and their attempts to arrange a marriage between a son from one family and daughter from the other. But the boy is already engaged to someone else without his family knowing. Help is sought from matchmaker Bibik Manchong. But can she save the day?

Director and scriptwriter G T Lye performs two roles: Bibik Manchong and Ah Huay the maidservant. Other members of the cast are: Sally Gan, Frederick Soh, Lee Yong Ming, Mabel Lee, Terry Lim, K T, Maureen Lim, Audrey Tan, Ameline Goh and Kevin Aeria. This show includes a lavish enactment of the twelfth day wedding procession complete with *seroni*. The cast will be available for photographs with the audience from 6.30 - 7.30 pm.

**OCTOBER IN MALACCA 3 – 5 October 2003**

**A food tour to celebrate the Malacca Association's 103<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary**

Join the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka's 103<sup>rd</sup> anniversary dinner Malam Baba Nyonya (4 October) and lunch at the Baba Nyonya Food Fair (5 October) at their clubhouse. Proceeds go to their Education Fund, which provides financial aid to member's children.

Price: S\$268 (members) and \$288 (non-members)

Package includes • All meals (2 breakfasts, 3 lunches, 2 dinners) • Coach transport  
• Travel guide • 2 nights at Hotel Equatorial

Coach leaves 7.30 am 3 October 2003. Pick up point: Newton Circus Food Centre Car Park

For enquiries, please contact our Vice President Peter Wee at 63458544, or Hon. Secretary Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 62550704





THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE