

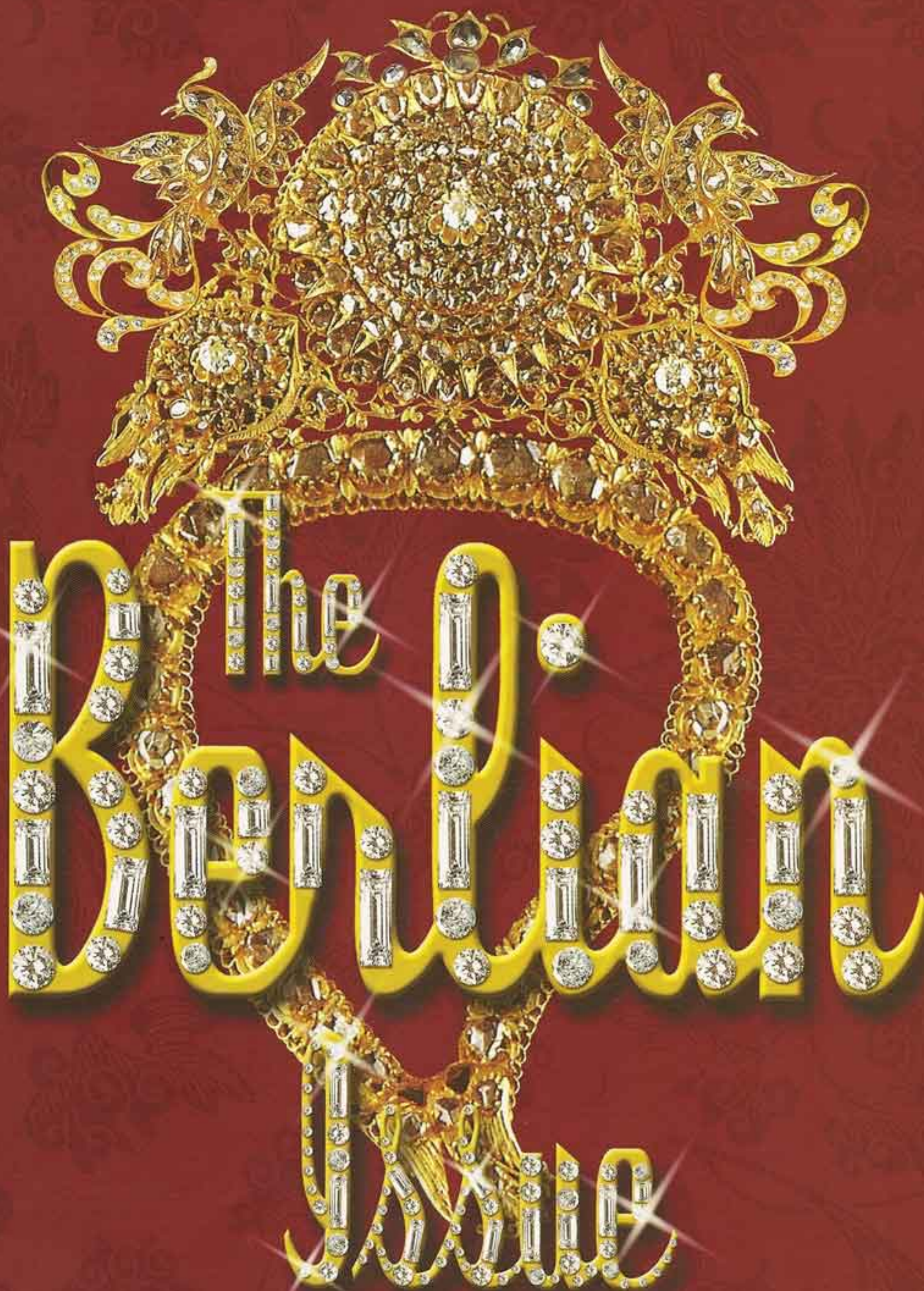
the
peranakan

october-december 2003

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



THE
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All about Baubles, Bangles, Babas and Bibiks



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editorial

DAVID ONG

Bibiks and Berlian

This issue of our newsletter has several articles on Peranakan jewellery, in keeping with the theme of our Annual Dinner & Dance to be held on 31 October 2003. We have called the occasion *Berlian Ball* to give it more than just a little glitter but perhaps what we really want to do, deep in our hearts, is to properly describe our beloved Bibiks and Nonyas as the brilliant gems that bring the sparkle to our dull and sometimes even insipid lives.

You see, a *berlian* is the Peranakan word that describes diamonds that were in the old days, cut in such a fashion to maximise the light reflecting qualities of the gem. They would be the most coveted of all gems among a Peranakan lady's collection. The Peranakan *intan*, on the other hand, is a rough cut diamond which could perhaps be best described as being a more subtle or subdued beauty.

Berlians and *intans* became popular during the late 19th Century and were variations of European style diamond cuts. But as the old song goes, whatever the cut, diamonds have since time immemorial, been a girl's and therefore, the Peranakan Bibiks' and Nonyas' best friend.


The jewels owned by the Peranakans were set in true hybrid fashion and reflected a whole mosaic of cultural influences which had had their impact on the local Peranakan culture and lifestyle.

I guess if one had been privileged enough to be invited to a so-called *Berlian Ball* in the 1920s, one should not be surprised to see Peranakan ladies in all their finery, bedecked with *berlians* set in a hybridised Malay style gold surround with Chinese motifs, or designed and set according to the prevailing fashion of Victorian England and even Holland, reflecting also, the influence of Indonesian jewellery. This hybridisation process also included the influences of jewellery from China, the Straits Settlements and the northern Malay states, all of which were more often than not, put together by Indian jewellery craftsmen.

Whatever the influence or style, the essence of it all was the unique hybridisation of the jewellery settings, cuts and designs. This feature of her jewellery was what distinguished the Peranakan lady from the ladies of other races and cultures.

The hybridised jewellery of the Peranakan ladies and most of her finery were typical of the Peranakan people and their lifestyles. They represented an extremely piquant smorgasbord of cultural influences from a host of cultures that had influenced their food, their language, their dress, their music, their dinnerware and even, their religious beliefs.

Perhaps, no other group of people could possibly be more Singaporean than the Peranakans. I am sure that Stamford Raffles would certainly have been very proud and maybe even amused, to see the evolution of the cultures of the early *sinkeh* settlers in his 'emporium', who had come from China, India, Malaya, Indonesia, and the European nations as they existed then, now hybridised and assimilated in the lives of the 21st Century Singaporean Peranakans.

Continuing with *berlians*, I hope many of our members and their friends will be able to join us at our *Berlian Ball* and show our people that good times or bad times, the Peranakans will always have that 30 carat sparkle in our lives. And speaking of having lives with sparkle, please also support a worthy cause by grabbing a few tickets for yourselves and your friends for the musical revue ***Bibiks Go Broadway*** to be held at the NUS Cultural Centre Hall on 21 and 22 November 2003 in aid of the Dover Park Hospice. Please see the advertisement in this issue for more details. Have lots of fun and help put some sparkle in the lives of the terminally ill. 

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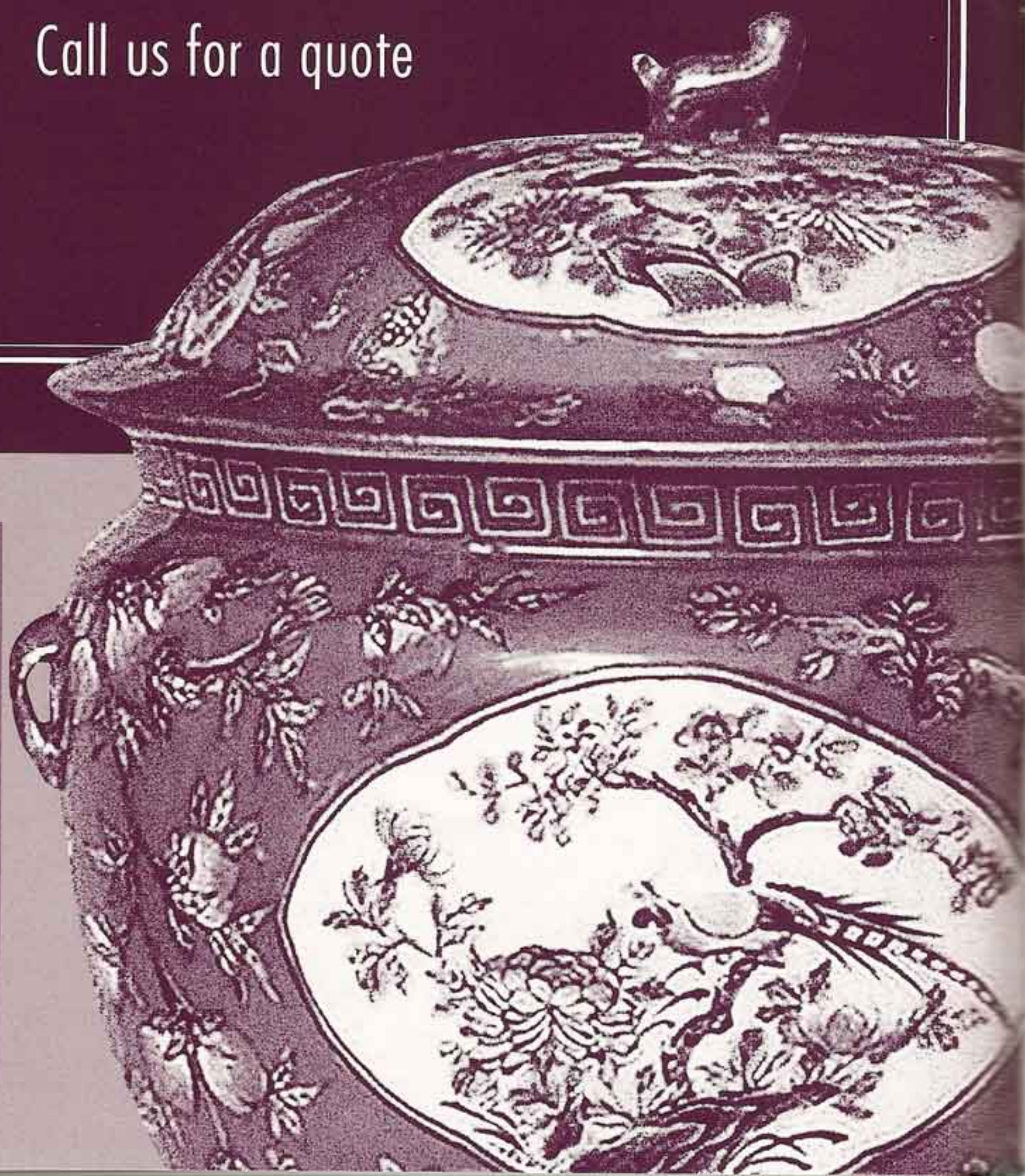
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Diamonds are forever... sometimes

MAUREEN LIM

There they are, the ancestors, solemn and studio-posed in sepia-toned photographs. There is grandfather, in suit 'n tie, and there is grandmother, attired more traditionally. And there are the hairpins, kerosang, bracelets (both wrists), gelang kaki (both ankles) and chin-chin (nearly all the fingers!).



Baba and Nonya, 1920s

Acknowledgements: The Editorial Committee thanks the various private collectors who have graciously allowed their jewels to be photographed

But hopes of 'chope-ing' any jewelled heirlooms are soon dashed. Like those who wore them, they are no longer with us.

Even before the Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, some women, like Madam Josephine Tan, 89, had already sold their gold and diamond accessories for a noble cause — to raise money for the China Relief Fund. This was part of the local Chinese population's endeavours to send money to the mainland Chinese in their fight against the invading Japanese Forces. Other groups, like The Merrilads, staged productions for the same purpose.

When it looked like Singapore too was to fall to the Japanese, many families hid jewellery, documents and other valuables in all sorts of places — under staircases, in attics, in secret compartments of cupboards, and even in holes dug next to some significant tree, hoping against hope that they be retrieved at some safer time (and that the tree would still be standing!). Then, when Singapore was Syonan, homes were emptied of



Madam Josephine Tan, 2003



*Penang Nonya
resplendent in
diamonds, 1930s*



*Gold central
kerosang with
berlians*



*A true-blue matriarch
in her baju panjang
and kerosangs*



*A magnificent gold kerosang serong
with intans and a berlian*



A young Nonya wearing kerosang tuaha, 1910s

owners as people either fled or were forcibly relocated into camps. The looters moved in and valuables were lost. One such house was Mr. Peter Wee's family home in Waterloo Street.

The Japanese Military government arbitrarily imposed a 'tax' of fifty million dollars (thankfully in banana notes) to be raised by the local population for the Japanese war effort. It was, I am told, very systematically done, with each dialect group directed to collect from its members. The Straits Chinese community was not spared. My maternal grandmother, a widow with young children, sold some of her best pieces of jewellery as her 'contribution' from the extended family.

In those harsh and perilous times, jewellery could make the difference between life and death. My mother, Mrs. K.T. Koh, 82, says, 'I ate all her jewellery. A whole diamond *kerosang* set paid for only a tin of milk powder for me, and piece by piece was given up for food at black-market prices'. From my aunt, Mrs. Theresa Ong Keong Hee, 77, comes this first-hand account:

'The British Military expected the Japanese forces to land on the beaches. So our family was advised to vacate the home in Marine Parade to our *rumah abu* at Thomson Road. I was still a teenager then, so I owned no significant jewellery to speak of. But my mother must have carried it,



A kebaya-clad Nonya, 1950s

as many did, on her person, because I was given a few pieces upon my marriage two years later. Our sense of security in the Thomson Road house was misplaced and short-lived. Little did we know that RAF planes were supposedly hidden in nearby MacRitchie Reservoir. I remember that day clearly. Out of the blue, the alarming wail of sirens filled the air. Japanese bomber planes had come to destroy those British planes. The family members and servants who happened to be on the ground floor dashed for the air-raid shelter built into the hill slope beside the main house. But I was upstairs and could only dive under the bed. My uncle, who dived in after me, received a shrapnel injury to his back. When the smoke cleared, half our house was destroyed, and with it, my eldest sister's wedding jewellery.'

Nonya Mabel Tan, 86, of Dunbar Walk sewed a cloth belt with pouches to hold her diamond *kerosang*, earrings and other items. This she tied securely around her waist, where it remained undetected despite the forced march under Japanese orders from Tembeling Road to the concentration camp in Telok Kurau School. Widowed during the Japanese Occupation, she eventually parted with some items to buy a home for herself and her family.

What she will never part with though is a pair of truly impressive diamond earrings. They dangle and move with each turn of the head, throwing off light from the rows of large diamonds. Not surprisingly, the sheer value and the glamorous style earn pieces like these the term *anting-anting kemantain* (bride's earrings). This particular pair has been worn by her daughter, grand-daughters and nieces on their wedding days. Her great grand-daughters are next in line.

But after the Occupation years, a significant amount of family jewellery changed hands to start businesses, rebuild careers or just to live — painful but necessary decisions. Clearly, when life deals some hard knocks, having some convertible assets does help to cushion the blows and is one reason to stash away some sparklers. I knew there had to be a moral somewhere. 🍀



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YOUR CULTURE



TO TREASURE AND LOVE 2003 Acrylic on canvas 18 x 122 cm

MY ART



DOUBLE HAPPINESS 2003 Acrylic on canvas 18 x 122 cm

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"Tung's Baba and Nonya series concentrates on a culture that has gradually disappeared in the 1950s, or much earlier. It is not his intention to resurrect but to draw attention to a rich part of our past heritage. If this exhibition can stimulate Singaporeans, young and old, to find out more about Peranakan culture he would have achieved his aim."

BABA & NONYA - DOUBLE HAPPINESS, Chia Wai Hon

"Using the superrealistic style, Tung's representation is unique and direct. Objects magically come alive in the arrangement, the textile background hinted with shadows as though they were not entirely flat; the crinkles on piping on a purse or the lining of a kasok manek (slipper) showing them as real, time worn items, invested with ownership and life....."

AT THE HEART OF TUNG YUE NANG, Bridget Tracy Tan

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TRUE OR FALSE?

So, you young Nonyas out there
who are now eager to own a slice of the past,
you who are making those hunting forays to Melaka to
'build up' your heritage jewellery collection,
can you tell the old from the new,
the real from the fake?

Maureen Lim asks Peter Wee of Katong Antique House
for some pointers.

1. Run your fingers gently over that brooch or bracelet, especially those pointed leaf-tips, to feel if they scratch. The newer copy could have sharp or rough edges. Pieces that have been worn over time will be smooth, even on both sides.

2. Turn it over and examine the frame holding the *intan* or *berlian*. The 'openwork' will reveal the stones fairly clearly. A replica will show much more solid metal on the underside because it is from a mould.



*The reverse of a genuine
kerosang bintang*

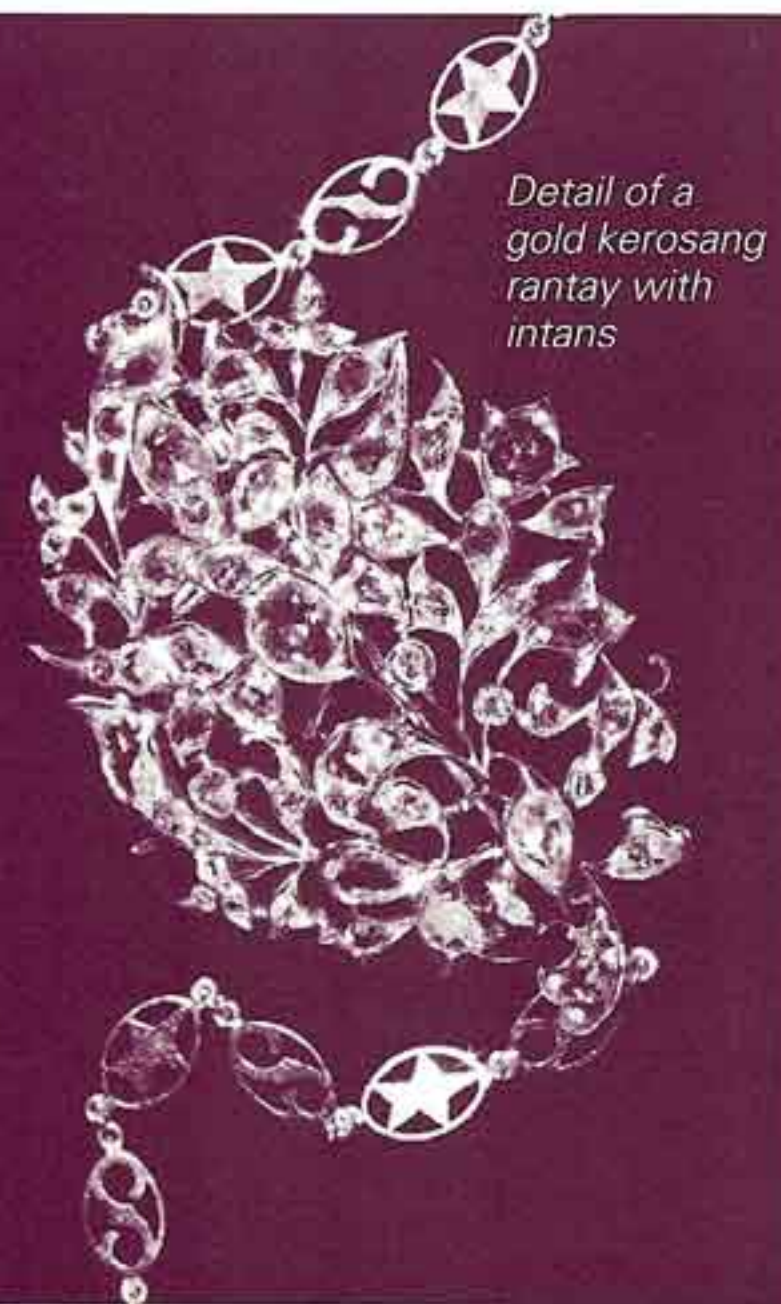
3. Still looking at the underside, you may notice that the openings that allow you to examine the stones from the bottom are neat and regular. Such fine workmanship is indicative of an article made on special order by the jewellers of yore who took pride in their handcrafted pieces. The same openings in newer items tend to be tiny, uneven and with ragged edges.



A gold kerosang in the shape of a spider with large intans



A gold kerosang in the shape of a buddha-hand citron with large intans



Detail of a gold kerosang rantay with intans

4. If there are *intan* or pearls, they tend to be flat and small, even miniscule. Unlike diamonds, which are still available in any size, large intans are rare except in old pieces from some well-to-do nonya. So if you are lucky enough to find one, grab it!

5. Examine the details, the exquisiteness and intricacy. These accessories were not mere ornaments, but works of art. To some extent, they indicate the period. For example, some of the earliest pieces came from Indonesia, so the designs exhibit only flora and fauna. After World War II, the Sinhalese jeweller came into his own, often working from the home of the Straits Chinese lady, who would sit beside him indicating her design preferences. At various times, certain motifs — flowers, ribbons, birds, butterflies, or bees - were in fashion. This helps in dating a particular article.

Peter Wee recommends some reading material on the subject - *Gilding the Phoenix* by Edmond Chin and *Straits Chinese Silver* by Ho Wing Meng. But in the end, you need 'XO' (experience and opportunity, lah) to acquire an educated touch and a discerning eye for the real thing. That done, there is this problem of the price! Don't despair. There are well-crafted copies that are well within the average budget, and as long as they look nearly as good, wear them with panache. Better still, flaunt 'em.

It's the singer, dear, not the song. ♪

Jewellery Glossary

anting-anting earrings

anting anting ikat bunga tanjong

diamond cluster earrings (a central diamond surrounded by smaller diamonds)

anting-anting kemantain SEE

anting-anting olek

anting-anting krabu diamond stud earrings

anting-anting olek pendant earrings (especially for weddings)

anting-anting panjang drop earrings

butang baju pendek/dalam collar stud (for the *baju dalam*)

batu gem

batu ceylon paste

batu delima ruby

batu yakob paste used as a substitute for *intan*

berlian brilliant-cut diamond

berlian pontianak old mine cut diamond from the Pontianak mines in Kalimantan

chiam mah (Penang) hairpin

chinchin ring

chinchin belah rotan 10-carat gold ring band

chinchin buah kana marquise shaped ring

chinchin ikat bunga tanjong

diamond cluster ring

chinchin kahwen wedding ring

chinchin mata satu solitaire ring

chinchin mata tiga ring with three diamonds

chinchin wajek lozenge-shaped ring

chuchuk sanggul hairpin

chuchuk sanggul tiga batang

set of three hairpins

gelang bangle

gelang kaki anklet

gelang rantay chain bracelet

gelang tangan bracelet, bangle

intan diamond chiffres; rose-cut diamonds

kerosang brooch used to fasten the *baju panjang* or *kebaya* (worn as a set of three brooches)

kerosang ati-ati (Malacca) same as *kerosang serong*, however the central *kerosang* is usually of a floral or insect shape

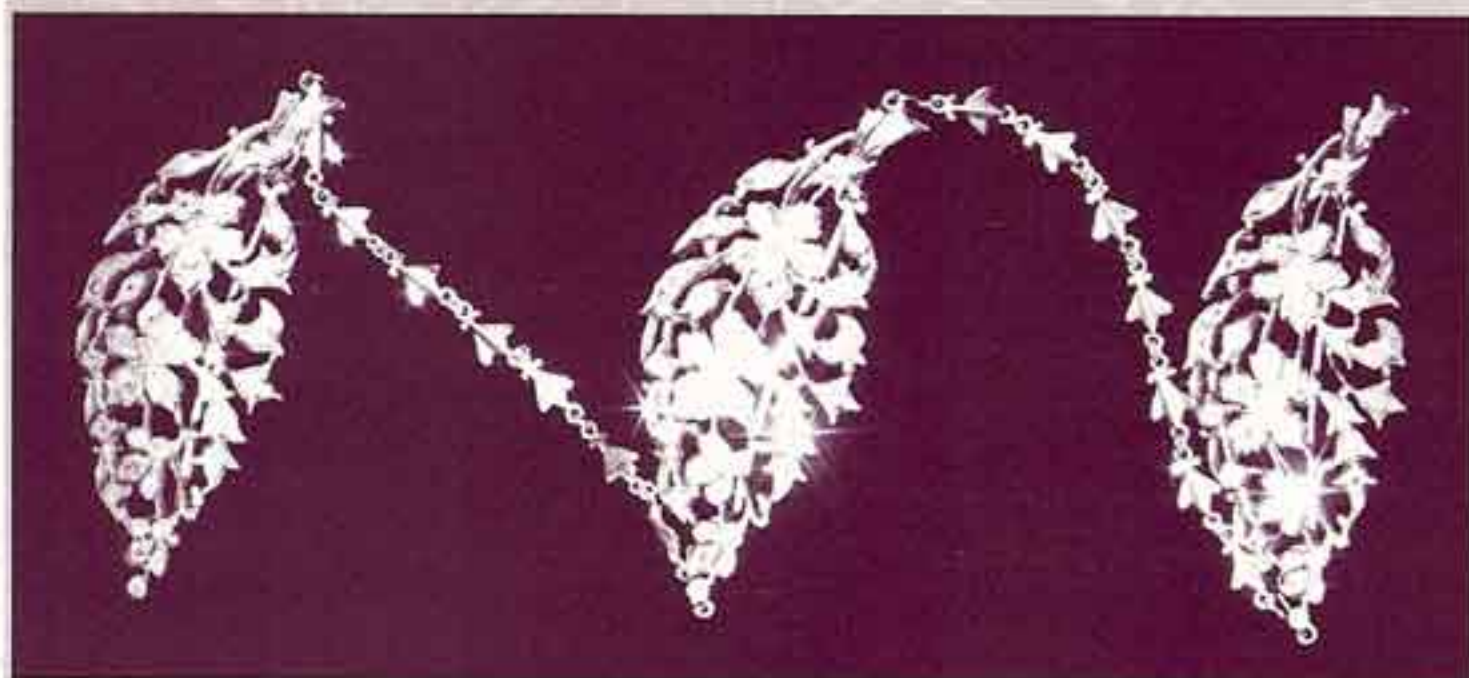
kerosang bintang star-shaped *kerosang*

kerosang bulat round *kerosang*, worn with the *kerosang serong*, or with a middle *kerosang* in the shape of an insect, or of a lozenge with floral motifs

kerosang ibu the largest *kerosang* in a set, worn as the topmost brooch

kerosang mentiara pearl *kerosang* set in silver for mourning SEE *kerosang tuaha*

kerosang perak silver *kerosang*, SEE *kerosang tuaha*



Gold *kerosang rantay* with *berlians*



Gold kerosang bintang with intans



A pair of anting-anting ikat bunga tanjong in gold with berlians

kerosang rantay leaf or lozenge shaped kerosang connected to each other by a fine chain

kerosang serong a paisley-shaped kerosang worn as a kerosang ibu, together with two kerosang bulat kerosang toh (Penang) SEE kerosang serong

kerosang tuaha silver kerosang with pearls worn during mourning periods

kor tua (Penang) belt

kor tua tau (Penang) belt buckle

korek kuping hairpin in the shape of an ear-pick

anak korek kuping the two smaller hairpins of the set of three used by a Nyonya

ibu korek kuping the largest of the set of three hairpins used by a Nyonya

krabu earstuds

lian (Penang) chain

liantay (Penang) necklace

chewlian (Penang) bracelet

kopi lian (Penang) long, gold bead necklace

loket pendant

mas gold

mas merah gold that has been stained red, a Malay technique often seen in early Nonya jewellery and plated wedding objects

mas paun gold from melted coins

mas sepuloh 24 carat gold
chelop mas gold-plated

pak sian wedding headband with the design of Eight Immortals

perak silver

pending belt buckle

rantay chain

sanggol kemantain bridal crown made with chuchuk sanggol



Silver kerosang tuaha with pearls

suan puay
(Penang) SEE intan

suasa gold alloy

subang (Penang) earrings

sunting earrings

tali pinggang belt
kepala tali pinggang belt buckle

warna ayer chempaka a term describing the pale yellow or cape diamonds favoured by the Peranakans

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Dreams of Silver, Dreams of Gold

**A Beginner's Guide to
Peranakan Jewellery**

NOREEN CHAN



Noreen Chan

It starts innocently enough. You decide to dress in the traditional manner of a Peranakan lady, and manage to acquire the *kebaya* and *sarong*. Perhaps you have also obtained a pair of beaded slippers. But the outfit is far from complete. That is only the beginning, the very first step into a journey of discovery and happy hunting that, for some at least, may turn into a glittering obsession.

I speak, of course, of Peranakan jewellery, which, like the culture, has absorbed different influences to produce a style that has become distinctive in its own right. While we may not be able to aspire to the eye-popping examples featured in Edmond Chin's book *Gilding The Phoenix – The Straits Chinese and Their Jewellery*, there are many other less ostentatious pieces, which are within the reach of the beginner.

This article is written from the perspective of young Nonyas like myself and my friends, younger working adults without the benefit of inheritance, wedding gifts or unlimited budget. We are not serious collectors, just serious admirers who buy pieces to wear and enjoy. How does one go about acquiring Peranakan jewellery? What pieces should one buy? How to

achieve the look without breaking the bank? If these and other questions have vexed you, read on...



Contemporary Nonyas at our Association's Centennial Celebrations, 2000

1 : Don't be shy or intimidated. No one expects you to get it right first time round. Why wait until your wedding day? Practice makes perfect! A collection of jewellery is a project that will evolve with your own personal sense of style. The important thing is to get started.



Gold kerosang bintang with intars



Gold kerosang serong with intans

phoenix or *qilin* (Chinese unicorn). The belt itself is commonly made up of rows of links and rosettes; the wider the belt, the higher the price. From their belts, Nonyas could suspend silver mesh purses or belt hooks for money or keys respectively, discreetly hidden from view.

Kerosang

The origin of the *kerosang* is not clear, but has been in use since the 19th century at least. Used to fasten the blouse, these brooches come in sets of three. There are two main types of *kerosang*, the *kerosang serong* and *kerosang rantay*.

The *kerosang serong* (slanted) set consists of three separate brooches used to fasten the *baju panjang*. The topmost brooch, called the *ibu* (mother), is the largest and shaped like a heart, or paisley leaf (some say peach) pattern, its tip curved to the left. The other two brooches are smaller and often circular (Penang-style *kerosang* may feature star shapes), although sometimes the middle brooch may have an additional bird or insect decoration.

Kerosang rantay, as its name suggests, has decorative chains connecting the brooches. Designed for the 'newer' style of *kebaya* with its lacy voile and form-fitting cut, it has a slimmer shape and features motifs of leaves, flowers and insects. The phoenix in flight against a floral background is common in the larger pieces.

Much of the vintage and antique jewellery is set with *intan* or rose-cut diamonds (also called *suan puay*).

2: Get the Basics. Must-Haves to start off:

Belt

The silver belt (also known as *tali kendek* or *tali pinggang*) is essential, particularly if you fold and tie your sarong in the traditional way. The buckle or *pending* is usually oval (ogival) or rectangular in shape, and features motifs like the

As the *intan* stones came in slightly different sizes, the *kerosang*, although similar in size and shape, are never identical, as the jeweler would have to alter the settings slightly.

3. Other accessories. To complete the look, gradually acquire the rest:

Hairpin

If you have long hair, it is very charming to be able to *naik sanggul* or put it up into a chignon. The Penang style uses five pins to secure the *sanggul* and the Melaka and Singapore style, three (*sanggul tiga batang*). Some of these hairpins are shaped like earpicks and called *korek kuping*.

Necklace, Pendant, Earring, Bracelet, Ring

These can be added to your collection as you go along, according to taste and, importantly, your budget.

4. Ask your family You never know until you try. There may be forgotten gems hidden away in someone's dusty collection that can be borrowed, sometimes for very long term! These have the added value of a family history. Many older *intan* pieces were sold or put away when they became unfashionable (especially after the war), in favour of more modern styles set in diamonds, jade or semi-precious stones. It may also be possible to find some pearl and silver jewellery which was specially used for *tuaha* or mourning.

5. Keep in mind costume jewellery. Affordable faux *kerosang* and belts can be found at shops in Joo Chiat Complex and some shops

that sell *kebaya*s, like Sinaran Collection (Tel: 67370302) and Eunice Creations (Tel: 67358028). Prices start at under \$20.

6. Antique or Vintage Jewellery. Apart from shops specialising in such items, other sources include



Gold kerosang rantay with intans

auctions, pawn shops and occasionally, Bibiks who are selling their own jewellery. The worry is always whether you are getting a genuine piece. It is better to go with someone who is experienced, or to go to only reputable sources. If you feel uncomfortable about buying a particular piece, especially if it is very



Modern gold-plated pendant with Swarovski crystals, from Rumah Bebe

expensive or you are overseas, it is better to walk away. However, once you have established a relationship with a dealer, he may keep you informed whenever new pieces come in.

7. Don't forget reproductions.

There are modern versions of old jewellery, often with crystals or zirconia. A few years ago, **Risis** (www.risis.com.sg) launched a line of Peranakan inspired jewellery and desk accessories. The *kerosang* are sold in sets of three, or individually to be worn as brooches. **Impressions Jewellery** (64426280, 64421484) located on the second level of Siglap Centre, has a range of reproduction Peranakan-style jewellery, including *korek kuping* hairpins. Other shops worth checking out nearby are **House of Cheongsam** for the beaded shoes, and **Terang Bulan** for the *kebaya* and *sarongs*. **Foundation Jewellers** (Tel: 67326141), a family-run business which started out in Joo Chiat but which has moved to the Holiday Inn Park View, still retains the services of a craftsman who makes

Peranakan style jewellery. Now in his seventies, he turns out pendants, *kerosang*, rings and earrings combining modern materials with age-old techniques. However, like many an artisan, he is publicity-shy and did not wish to be photographed or interviewed. The pieces he makes come in yellow or white gold and are set with diamonds; range is very limited as one might expect. The newly opened **Rumah Bebe** (Tel: 62478781) also has some delicate gold-plated pieces with crystals.

8. Involve your friends. Friends are an important source of advice and support. They can encourage you when you feel frustrated and restrain you from impulse buys. You can shop and browse together, as well as share, buy or sell pieces among yourselves.

9. Be creative. Find new ways to show off your jewellery. For example, a *kerosang* can be pinned across a jacket or shawl and *gelang kaki* (anklet) can be worn as a dramatic armband.

10. Most important of all...have fun! ♡



Bebe Seet, the ultimate modern Nonya

Pantun Berlian

*Hatiku sedeli bertambah pilu, Bila terkenang zaman dahulu
Nama yang baik terbuang lalu, Kerana berlian berchahaya biru*



*Semol api menjadi anai, Sarangnya ada di-pokok hutan
Seberapa seri intan di-chanai, Berlian juga jadi sebutan*

GJ Lye

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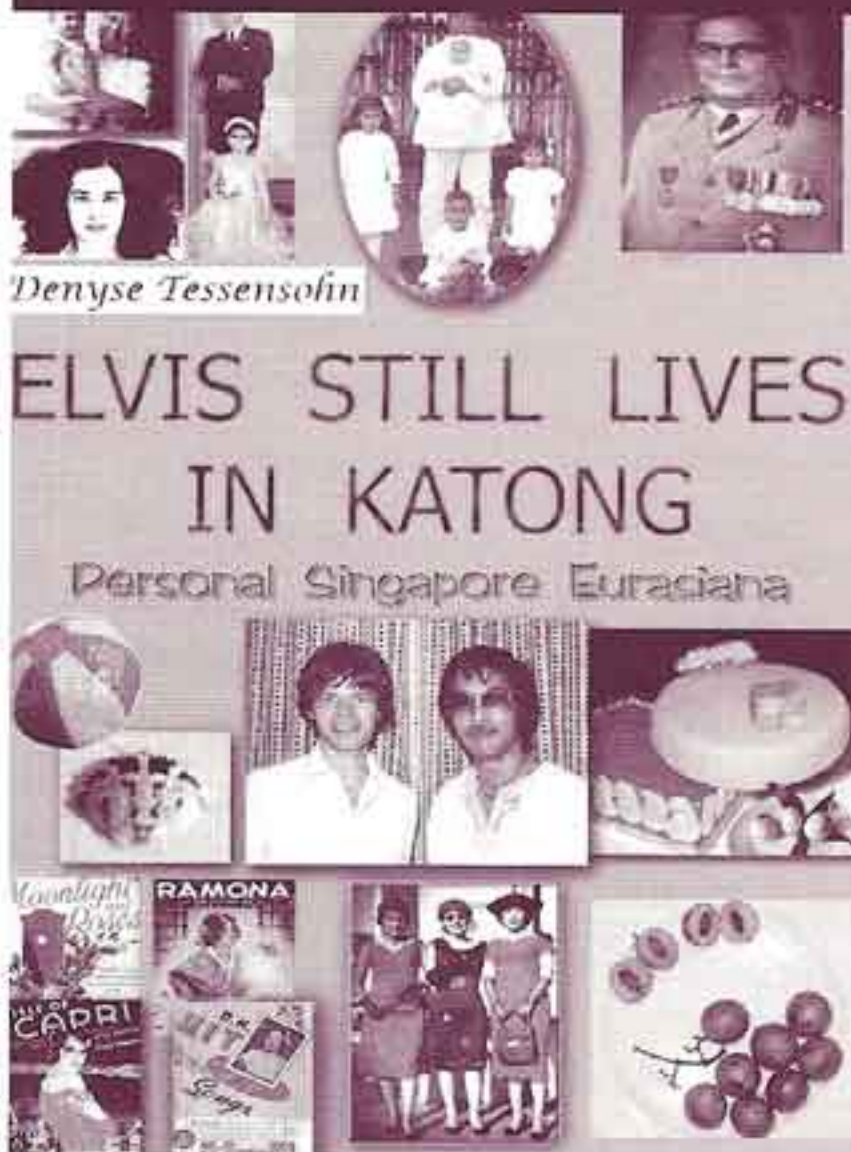
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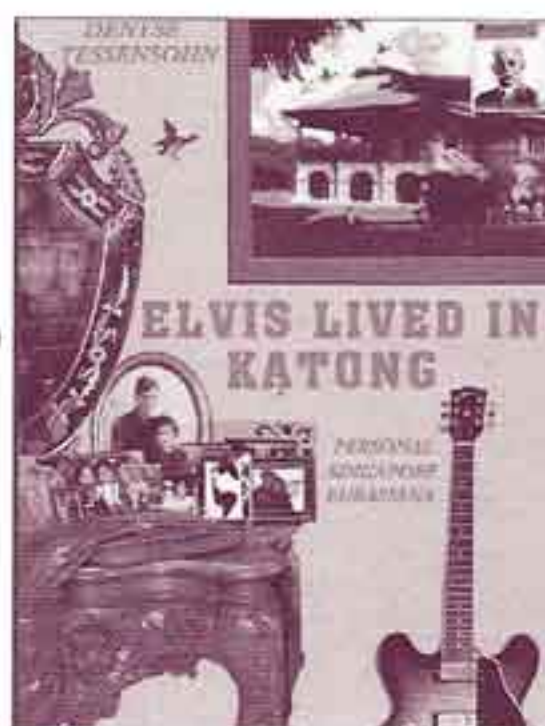
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Living Treasure

Lim Foon Yan keeps the Peranakan jewellery tradition alive

PETER LEE

In Joan Chee's critically acclaimed series *Trail of the Phoenix*, a jewellery shop was featured as one of the few surviving torch bearers of traditional Peranakan jewellery. **Foundation Jewellers** began as Hai Suan Goldsmith, which was established by the late Mr Kwan Chan Yew in the late 1970s. Born in Canton, Mr Kwan worked at a goldsmith's shop in North Bridge Road for many years before setting up his own establishment. 'At that time we ran a very successful business catering to Peranakan and Chinese customers from the area and to loyal customers who followed my father from North Bridge Road,' explains his son Thomis Kwan, who runs Foundation together with several family members. When the row of shophouses where Hai Suan was located was gazetted for demolition in 1988, the family business moved to its present location in Holiday Inn Parkview.

Soon after, a customer walked in and enquired if some old Peranakan jewellery could be repaired. The younger Kwan showed the jewels to his goldsmith Mr Lim Foon Yan, who easily made the repairs. Although the company had made Peranakan jewellery in the early years, the demand for more modern styles left little time for the production of the old fashioned jewels. The *Si Fu* (master craftsman) Mr Lim, who is Khek, honed his skills under a master craftsman from a North Bridge Road jeweller. 'There were eight or nine people learning from this master but only a couple persevered to perfect the technique,' says Kwan. 'Most of them gave up; too much effort for poor returns.'



The *Si Fu*
(master craftsman)
Mr Lim

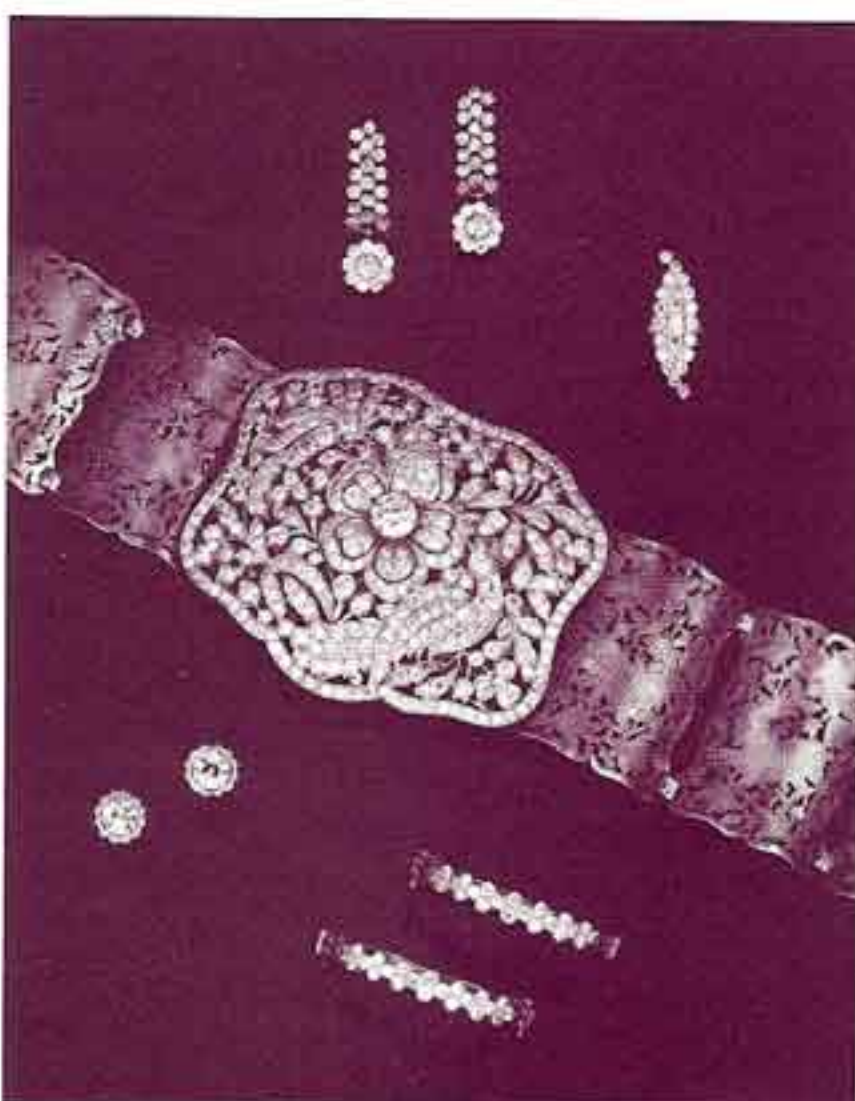


The customer who had her jewels repaired was so pleased with the results that she placed an order for a few new pieces. Foundation then resumed making Peranakan jewels on commission only, and Kwan began to learn about the intricate and difficult workmanship involved in the process from Master Lim. The design is first sketched and then transferred onto a flat sheet of gold which is sawed out. This flat, openworked

piece of gold is then bent and twisted and shaped to create the sense of depth and three dimensions, and after the diamonds are chosen and positioned, the gold is carved to create fine bevels and curves before the stones are set. The

backs also have to be carefully sawn to allow as much light as possible for the stones and to reduce its weight so as not to make the delicate *kebaya* sag. 'To create a beautiful gem and to give the various designs flair are things you cannot teach; its intuition and imagination,' Kwan enthuses. Weeks would be spent just to make one jewel.

Now a wide range of designs are available, and adapted for the modern Nyonya or Singapore woman — pendants, earrings, *kerosangs* in yellow or white gold. *Kerosangs* have been adapted for pendants and worn with trendy cord necklaces. 'I brought some of these jewels to Hong Kong to see if there were people who could make them for me, but they all said they couldn't. This is what we can proudly call our own Singapore jewellery; it is really an art!' 🌸



Auction Sparkle

A treasure trove of Peranakan Jewels at Christie's Hong Kong

On 28 October 2003 Christie's will auction eleven lots of Peranakan items at their Magnificent Jewellery sale in Hong Kong. Belonging to a group of 'southeast Asian collectors', these eleven pieces comprise four pairs of *anting-anting ikat bunga tanjong*, a pair of *anting-anting panjang*, a pair of diamond *gelang tangan* for a baby, a *chinchin buah kana*, a gold and diamond *korek kuping*, a diamond *loket*, an unusual *kerosang rantay* set with *intans* and a most magnificent gold *tali pinggang* with a diamond studded *pending* (featuring a five carat brilliant). 🌸

EVENTS

Of Nyongas' Cooking and Babas' Sweet Appetite

Penang Nyonya food and cooking

In conjunction with the upcoming 16th Baba Convention in Penang, Baba Christopher Lim sheds light on the Peranakan cuisine of his hometown. Incorporating influences from around the region and beyond, Nyonya food as we call it, demands perfection, coordination and years of experience.

*Pinang merah Tanjong Penaga,
Berbaju panjang sanggol Nyonya,
Chara Peranakan, Nenek Moyang kita,
Masak memasak hiburan hati semua.
(Baba Christopher Lim)*

It is in one of these family kitchens in Penang that I grew up. Coming from a sixth generation Baba family, my time was spent in the company of my great grandmother, grandmother and mother, seeing it 'live' how these ladies and the rest of the family, in a spirit of togetherness, preparing the food and *kuehs* while catching up with each other and other cousins on the latest. It brings about in me a sense of pride and happiness. For me, the different celebrations of food have always equated with joy and family unity. It is from my elders too, that I was taught orally the many myths, family roots, culture and traditions as well as taboos about our way of life.

'Into one we all are gathered'

In order to appreciate the food of the Penang Baba Nyonya community, I would like to share with you the development and roots of my people. When Penang was founded in 1786 by Captain Francis Light, its deep waters made it a perfect natural harbour and it soon became a major port of call under the British East India Company. Owing to trade, it attracted people from around the region. From Burmese, Siamese and Indians to Arabs, Jews and Armenians; from Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos to Bataks, Achehnese, Bugis and Javanese, they came, and while some settled and made it their home, others moved on.

The Baba and Nyonya community of Penang came about when the Chinese migrants started intermarrying with local women and adopting the cultures, food and lifestyle from the other races. Particularly from the Burmese, Siamese, Malay and Indonesian community, as well as from earlier Chinese families who had already settled in Penang before the arrival

of Captain Light, together with the migration of some Peranakan families from Malacca, Medan, Junk Ceylon (Phuket) and Kuala Kedah, these people formed the new generation of Straits Chinese. Another feature that makes us unique is that we speak our own brand of Hokkien with inclusion of Malay and English words. That is why our food has a mix of Malay, Hokkien and English names.

The golden era of the Baba and Nyonya (late 19th till early 20th Century) saw the children of the Straits Chinese in Penang studying in mission schools or privately tutored by English ladies, while some were even sent off to boarding schools in England and in Calcutta, India. In stately English-style villas, affluent Baba families lived regal lifestyles with Chinese and English guest halls, and the European influence extended to cooking. From the West we came out with our own style of Chicken / Pork Chop, *Roti Babi*, Potato Chop and others complementing it with our own version of Lea and Perrin's *ang mor tau ewe* (Worcestershire sauce).

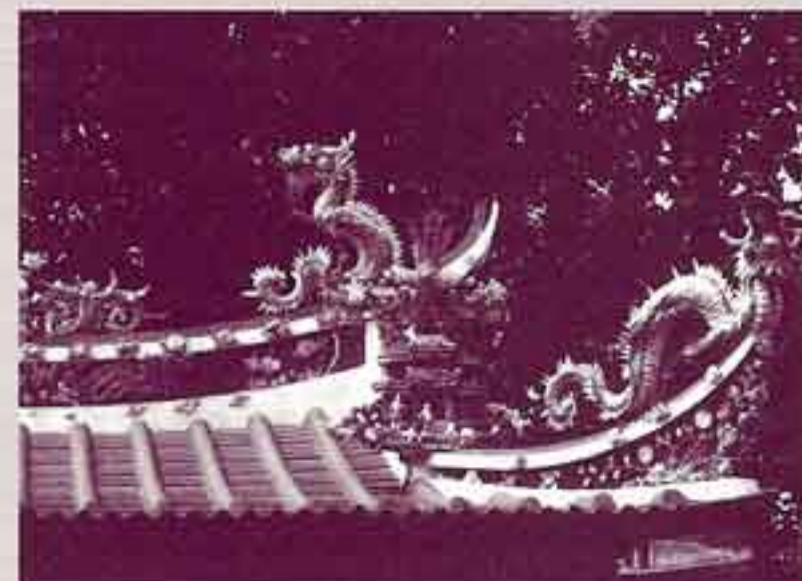
A showcase of perfection and love - The food of Penang Babas and Nyongas

Now that we have seen in a brief manner how the Northern Babas and Nyongas developed, I would like to share with you all the different dishes and mouth-watering desserts and *kuehs*. From the different ingredients to the common dishes and the rare ones, I will also share with you all where to go for good Nyonya food when you head up North for the Convention in December.

DISHES

Gulai Tumis Tow Tay Buah Keluak

Basically the ingredients for the *rempah* of this dish are the same as that for *masak ayam buah keluak*, except for the inclusion of the *bunga kantan* (ginger torch flower) and *daun kesom* (polygonum or laksa leaf),



Ornate roof of a Chinese temple



Mansion on 'Millionaire's Row'

which we call *chen hong*. It takes skill to *tumis* the *rempah* till *pechah minyak* and then tamarind water is added followed by the rest. This dish is a perfect combination of sweet, sour and spicy. The *buah keluak* is rarely added nowadays due to scarcity and because only a few Baba families know how to appreciate it.

Jiew Hoo Cha

A stir-fry dish incorporating vegetables like turnips, Chinese mushroom, carrots, cabbage, pork belly and cuttlefish (*jiew hoo*). The ingredients are finely sliced into matchsticks and fried with onions and fermented soya bean paste (*taucheo*). It is eaten with *sambal belachan* and wrapped like a bag with salad leaves.

Phee' Hoo Char

Another stir-fry dish using vegetables like turnips, carrots, Chinese mushroom, pork belly and fried dried sole (*phee' hoo*). The unique feature of this dish is that the vegetables are cut into shapes of flowers and leaves, and the onions are not diced but cut into cubes. Fermented soya bean is also added in this dish and eaten with *sambal belachan*.



Typical hawker stalls on the streets of Penang

Lor Bak

Similar to *ngor hiang* in Singapore, *lor bak* in Penang has strips of pork, shallots, turnips and other ingredients to enhance the taste. It is carefully wrapped with soya bean skin, after which it is deep fried and enjoyed with home made chili sauce enhanced with toasted sesame seeds.

Hong Bak

This dish uses pork belly, the different onions, lots of coriander and is fused with *kenchur* roots or, as we call it, *chekor* roots. Something like *babi chin*.

Curry Kapitan

Of colonial Indian origin, this dish has two variations: one Indian Muslim and the other Nyonya. The Nyonya one has a fried onion topping on it.

Otak-Otak

The Penang version of this dish is steamed and before the fish mixture is placed on the banana leaf, it is laid with two to three pieces of *daun kadok* or *sireh hutan* leaves to bring out the aroma.

Hoo / Nooi / Kiam Hoo Masak Belanda

For this dish one can use fried small fish or eggs or even fried salted fish as the base and the sauce is made up of fried shallots and ginger merged together with a combination of *belachan* and tamarind water poured on top of it.

Perot Ikan / Masam Pedas

For this dish the *rempah* is the same as that for *gulai tumis*. Instead of sautéing it, just add the *rempah* in a pot of boiling tamarind water and slowly add prawns, preserved fish stomach, brinjals and pineapple

slices, then the different herbs like *daun kadok*, *kenchur* leaves, *daun limau purut*, *daun kesom* and others.

For *masam pedas*, instead of adding in the finely sliced ingredients and pickled fish stomach and prawns, just add in the *rempah* in the boiling tamarind water, then add pieces of *ikan kekek* or prawns and then slices of pineapple.

Achat — The different achars in Penang

For a traditional home pre-wedding dinner in Penang, one of the required dishes for the family *tok panjang* is the *achat*. The most common *achat* found is that of *achat awak* like what is also common in Singapore. However our version is

drier and fused with crushed peanuts and sesame seeds. Then we also have the fish *achat*, salted fish *achat*, *achat keat lar* (lime *achat*) and the mango *achat* using the Burmese style of preparation, among others.



Gulai Tumis Tow Tay Buah Keluak

Kerabu — Nyonya salads

Kerabus are ear studs in Baba Malay but for us here, *kerabu* only means salad. We have many types of *kerabu* and some come in dry form while others are wet. However, all tend to use *sambal belachan*, which binds all the ingredients together. We use vegetables and herbs like lemon grass, black fungus, shallots, green mango, pineapple, lime and *chabai burong*, combined with chicken meat, chicken feet or coconut milk. So we have salads like *kerabu mango*, *kerabu bok nee*, *kerabu keh kah*, *kerabu ong lai*, etc. Babas and Nyonyas of old also



Nyonya kueh

like to take fresh herbs like *daun bergahgah* with *sambal belachan* in their meals.

Nyonya Kueh and Desserts

In Penang we have a wide range of mouth watering Nyonya *kuehs* cut in diamond shapes. With names like *pulot inti*, *pulot tai-tai* eaten with *kaya*, *bee koh*, *kueh lapis* (in Penang we only use red and white for the inner slices and orange for the top slice), *thor tau kueh* – (made from turnip and eaten with crushed peanuts), *kueh talam*, *serimuka* (same as *kueh salat*), *kueh benggang* baked or steamed and presented in either purple or white or the baked version in golden brown, *onde-onde* and lots more.

Our desserts are: *pengat pisang*, which we cook on Chap Goh Meh to bid goodbye to the Lunar New Year celebrations. We have *bee koh moi* (*bubor pulot hitam*), *lek tau moi* (green beans broth boiled with sago and coconut milk), *sago moi* (sago broth cooked with sweet potato and topped with coconut milk). We also have *chendol* and *thai bak* as well as *pulot mango* or *pulot durian* eaten with coconut milk and *gula melaka*.

The disappearing Dishes

Now please allow me to share with you some of the disappearing dishes and these are hard to come by now. They are dishes like the Anglo-Indian fish *molee*, a dish of white pomfret cooked with lots of *kunyit* and rich in coconut milk; *too kuah kean*, the same dish called *hati babi* (grilled pork liver balls) in Singapore. Local Nyonya restaurants do not make this dish anymore. Brinjal or pineapple *petcharee* is also hard to come by nowadays. Sometimes they are sold in Indian Muslim rice stalls but they are slightly different.

My friends, there are so many other dishes from the common to the rare ones but space does not permit me to share with you all of it. However, I am very happy to have been given this opportunity to share with you all *sedikit sebanyak* about my people and its glorious food. I would be very glad to know that after this sharing it would increase your knowledge as well as give you a good appetite for Penang Nyonya food. 🍽️

Nyonya Food in Penang

Nyonya Secrets Restaurant

Service Road off Burmah Road, Penang (Serves home-cooked Nyonya food in a friendly and tranquil setting)

Hot Wok Restaurant

Plaza Gurney, Gurney Drive, Penang

(Food is great and the decoration compliments it. Very practical in Penang's latest Shopping Mall)

Sin Kheang Aun

Lorong Chulia off Chulia Street, Penang (like Singapore's Guan Hoe Soon Restaurant, this Hainanese restaurant in a traditional *kopitiam* setting serves very good Nyonya food)

Senior Citizen's Association,

Jalan Ramanathan, Pulau Tikus, Penang (Located behind the old villa, it is a good place for old fashion chicken chop, roti babi, choon piath and mee sua^h tow)

Penang Food in Singapore

• For those unable to wait until the convention in December, the following are some of the restaurants in Singapore which feature Penang food:

Princess Terrace Restaurant

Copthorne King's Hotel

Tel: 67330011

Open daily 11.30am – 2.30pm, 6.30 – 10.00pm

Price \$30 nett (lunch and dinner)

Pleasing palates for decades, this buffet spread is always crowded at lunchtimes. Popular choices include the Penang style *char kway teow*, *laksa asam*, prawn mee soup, *satay* and pig stomach soup with *pek kuay*.

Nonya Bong Kitchen

432 Balestier Road #01-434,

Public Mansion, S 329813 Tel: 62513788

Open daily from 11.30am – 10.00 pm

Partners Jeffrey Chia and SP Cheah promise the authentic Penang home-cooked taste in their *ikan gulai*, *enche kabin* (fried chicken with special sauce), *babi toh huay*, *curry kapitan*, *otak otak*, *achar* fish and *ayam buah keluak*. Takeaway and catering services available.

(compiled by Noreen Chan)

Penang! Penang!

11 Mosque Street, S 059451, Tel: 62250791

217 East Coast Road #01-00, S 428915

Open 11.00 am – 3.00pm, 6.00 – 9.00pm.

Closed Mondays.

Serves Penang favourites like *char kway teow*, mango *kerabu*, *kway teow t'ng*, *Hokkien hay mee*, *mee sua kow* and Penang food products, including spice mixes. Catering for private functions available.

Penang Place

6 International Business Park (off Boon Lay Way),

#01-05 Atrium, S 609918 Tel: 68999446

Open 11.30am – 2.00pm, 6.30 – 9.30pm.

Closed on Sundays

Prices \$14.80 (lunch) and \$18.40 (dinner) Convenient for those living and working in the western part of Singapore, this value-for-money buffet features more than 20 Penang dishes like *lor bak*, *gulai kiam hu kut*, *jiu hu char* and *choon piath*, as well as desserts. A la carte service available. No pork or lard is used.



Rumah Bebe
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a House*

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Email: bebeset@pacific.net.sg

A Peranakan Christmas at Tangs

Tangs, known for its rich Christmas spirit, will bring a whole new experience to Yuletide shopping this year. Launching on 14 November 2003, it will be A Time for Sayang-Sayang at Tangs The Christmas Store. This year's theme is inspired by the colourful and rich Peranakan culture. Shoppers will feel as if they are entering into a Peranakan home. Christmas garlands and sparkling fairy lights will juxtapose beautifully with more than 3,000 feather phoenixes, twinkling peonies, wood carvings, batik-wrapped pillars and beaded ornaments inspired by the Peranakan beaded slippers.

CHRISTMAS REWARDS!

It's the season for gift-giving, and Tangs has lined up some attractive gifts for our shoppers. From 14 Nov to 24 Dec, every \$50 purchase will earn 1 stamp.

- Collect 10 stamps to redeem a Collectible Tingkat.
- Collect 24 stamps to redeem a Slow Cooker.
- Collect 50 stamps to redeem a 16-Bottle Wine Chiller.

HOLIDAY LUCKY DRAW

Spend a minimum of \$100 nett in a single receipt from 14 Nov - 24 Dec at Tangs to win these great prizes at our 6 weekly draws and 1 grand draw:

Weekly Draw: 6 Weekly Prizes - 4D/3N at The Andaman, Langkawi (worth \$2,100 each)

Grand Draw:

1st Prize - 2 return air tickets to Switzerland by Air France + 6D/5N stay at The Novotel Geneve Centre, Geneve (worth \$9,800)

2nd Prize - 2 return air tickets to Korea by Asiana Airline + 6D/5N stay at The Lotte World Theme Park (worth \$8,360)

3rd Prize - 2 return air tickets to New Zealand by Air New Zealand + 6D/5N stay at Crowne Plaza (worth \$7,300)

5 Consolation Prizes - 4D/3N stay at The Ramada Renaissance Hotel, Malacca (worth \$800 each)

PERANAKAN CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT!

There'll be activities galore at the main entrance stage, from performance by the Association's **Peranakan Voices** who will croon carols with a twist, to live bands and children's fashion shows. There will also be a preview performance by the cast from **Bibiks Go Broadway**, and tickets to this musical can be purchased from 8 October - 20 November at Tangs Ladies Department on Level 2.

CHARITY THIS CHRISTMAS

As always, Tangs remembers those in need during the holiday season. This year, fund raising will be for Dover Park Hospice. Shoppers are encouraged to donate a minimum of \$1 for the Tangs Christmas shopping bag with all proceeds going to Dover Park Hospice.

CHRISTMAS SERVICES

After choosing the perfect Christmas gifts from Tangs, have them beautifully wrapped with their colourful festive wrapping paper and personalised with the matching gift tag. This service is free with a minimum \$80 purchase. ❧

Relaunch of a classic— Mrs Lee's Cookbook

The late Mrs Lee Chin Koon first published *Mrs Lee's Cookbook* in 1974 at the age of 67. Mrs Lee was widely considered the doyenne of Nonya cuisine and her orange-coloured cookbook is a kitchen stalwart in many Singaporean homes.

With more than 50 years of cooking experience, Mrs Lee wrote the cookbook so that her grandchildren and future generations of Peranakans would retain the art of Nonya cuisine.

Shermay Lee, her granddaughter is relaunching the cookbook 29 years later. An investment banker-turned-chef and 6th generation Peranakan, she has revised the cookbook to make it more accessible without losing its character and soul. The relaunched edition is fully illustrated and has been expanded with practical new sections such as:

- a comprehensive glossary of ingredients
- a glossary of basic kitchen equipment
- step-by-step illustrations of basic food preparation
- list of key ingredients to start a Nonya kitchen
- tips and advice on how to entertain the Nonya way
- tips on healthier versions and Nonya secrets revealed.

Dr Wee Kim Wee, a prominent Baba and cousin of Mrs Lee Chin Koon, has also written the foreword as he did 29 years ago for the original version. There are also personal anecdotes and tips from Shermay who started cooking at the age of 5 with her grandmother.

Autographed cookbooks and Nonya cooking demonstrations based on the recipe are available at:

Shermay's Cooking School
Chip Bee Gardens
Blk 43 Jalan Merah Saga #03-64
S278115. Tel: 6479 8442
Email: shermaycs@yahoo.com.sg

Classes are daily and priced at \$40 (weekdays) and \$50 (weekends).

Cookbooks are also available at all major bookstores: Times, MPH, Borders, Kinokuniya and Barang Barang. Prices: Hard cover S\$47.50+GST; Soft cover S\$37.50+GST. 🍷



NOTICEBOARD

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following 14 members whose addition increases our membership roll to 1731.

Ms Alvin Phyllis
Mrs Boon Kim Wah Goldaline
Mrs Chan Chin Guek Claire
Mrs Eu Joan
Ms Kwik Carrie
Mrs Lee Chin Geok Jennifer
Ms Lee Swee Eng
Ms Lim Chin Bee
Mdm Lim Seok Loon Irene
Prof. Ma Seen Soon
Ms Pang Hsu Lyin Lynette
Mrs Seow Joo Mee
Mr Stephane Soh
Mdm Tan Bee Lian Irene

Obituary

MIKE GORRIE

We extend our deepest sympathy to the family of Mr Mike Gorrie on their bereavement.

Mr Mike Gorrie, who passed away on 14 September 2003, was private secretary to Governor Franklin Gimson from 1949 to 1951. He was also for many years with the Straits Steamship Company. Born in Rawalpindi, Gorrie was a son of a Scottish missionary, and was fiercely proud of his Scottish heritage, and was an active member of the St Andrew's Society. He was also an active member of long standing and a very staunch supporter of The Peranakan Association. He would always carry in his briefcase our membership application forms which he would distribute to any potential members he met in his laudable effort to encourage Peranakans to join our Association. We shall miss his affable presence at our functions, which he unfailingly supported (he attended our dinner talk as recently as 3 September), and his letters of appreciation and congratulations after the events. 🍷

15th Baba Convention on VCD and DVD

Watch the entertaining and absorbing video footage of the Convention as well as shots of the event-filled gathering! Excerpts include:

• **We Peranakans** — our lifestyle • **A Salute to the Peranakans** — interviews with outstanding Peranakans • **Peranakan Tapestry** — a play by Desmond Sim • **Peranakan Expressions** — a talk show by Margaret Chan • **Peranakan Festival** — food and craft fair plus wedding pageant at the ACM. **VCD \$25, DVD \$35**. Please call Mrs Lim Geok Huay to get your copies. 🍷

BERLIAN BALL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Organising Committee would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their support:

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The Golden Girlz of Katong
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Dance Circle Studio Dancers
Babacappella

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Committee members: John Lee, Lim Geok Huay,
Gavin Ooi, Tony Quek, Edmon Neoh-Khoo,
Christine Ong

Volunteers: Isaac Chan,
Heather Ong, Rita Bertrand Tan, Noreen Chan,
Angeline Kong, Caroline Shum, Judy Lim, Timothy Lim,
Philip Chia, Jeannie Sim

A Celebration of Peranakan Networks — The Phuket Connection

16th Baba Convention in Penang 5-7 December 2003

Jointly organised by the Penang and Phuket
Associations

Friday 5 December

7.30 pm Welcome Dinner at the
Association Clubhouse

Saturday 6 December

9.30am-4.30pm Convention Opening and
Seminar at Cititel
Seminar topics: A Celebration of Peranakan Net
works
The Phuket Connection
The Malacca Connection
8.00pm Convention Dinner at Cititel

Sunday 7 December

9.00am Visit to Khoo Kongsi
12.30pm Farewell lunch at Association
Clubhouse

3D2N package:

Twin sharing S\$535 (member) and S\$555 (guest)
Single S\$580 (member) and S\$600 (guest)

Includes:

- Return airfare on SQ (inclusive of all airport taxes)
- 2-way coach transfers between airport and Cititel, Penang
- Hotel accommodation at Cititel, Penang
- 2 breakfasts at Cititel
- All meals and programmes as stated in the above itinerary

For bookings please contact Mrs Lim Geok Huay
at 62550704



Good Luck Berlian Ang Pao for Sale

\$5 for 1 pack of 10
\$10 for 3 packs of 10
To order please
contact Bebe Seet
Tel: 62478781

BIBIKS GO BROADWAY? Is that possible?

Presenting a musical comedy revue filled with familiar old tunes and fun, newly composed songs that will keep your feet a tapping, hearts pounding and hands all clapping!

The stellar cast includes the superb Ivan Heng, a host of superstar über-Bibiks Kenny Chan, Chee Hood Siong, Francis Hogan and Georgie Lee, with special guest star Sally Gan! This show will also introduce The Golden Girlz of Katong — Jessie Cheang, Alicia Ang, Irene Ooi and Irene Lim. The script, lyrics, choreography and direction are by Baba Richard Tan, who dreamed up the whole project to raise funds for Dover Park Hospice, which looked after his grandmother during her recent illness. Bibik Babes Conde composed many of the songs and trained the singers.



What better way to create a humorous tale than to make two camps of Katong Bibiks vie for top position in performing a musical number for charity? Watch the humorous foibles, interferences, intrigues and antics of these groups of women, and enjoy their take on Broadway tunes and familiar references to old Katong. Look out also for someone, somehow, somewhere, making a rather grand entrance... 🎭

*Bibiks Go Broadway 21 – 22 November 2003.
Please check advertisement in this issue for details.*

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BIBIKS GO BROADWAY

A PERANAKAN MUSICAL COMEDY REVUE (IN PATIOS & ENGLISH)

A Rib-tickling,
**Heart-
warming**
retro-revue of
**music, dance
& laughter**



Introducing
**The Golden
Girlz Of Katong**
"never
too old,
always
young at
heart"

STARRING IVAN HENG AND KENNY CHAN
FROM MALACCA HOOD SIONG AND FERN LOO SINGAPORE MATRIARCHS FRANCIS HOGAN AND GEORGIE LEE
GUEST STARRING TONY QUEK AND RITA BERTRAND TAN
FEATURING THE GOLDEN GIRLZ OF KATONG JESSIE CHEANG, ALICIA ANG, IRENE OOI, IRENE LIM
THE PERANAKAN VOICES AND THE BABA-BAND
SCRIPT, LYRICS, SHOW AND DANCE DIRECTION BABA RICHARD TAN
CHORAL DIRECTION & MUSIC ARRANGEMENT BABES CONDE BAND CONDUCTOR & MUSIC ARRANGEMENT BABA DAMIEN LIM

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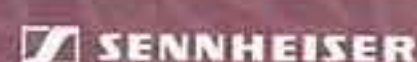


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Sound:



Make-Up:



University Cultural Centre Hall

Showtimes: 21 & 22 Nov 2003, 8pm; Tickets @ \$40, \$60 & \$80; \$120 with dinner

Matinee: 22 Nov 2003, 2.30pm; Tickets @ \$30, \$50 & \$70

Tickets available from 8 Oct 2003 at Hard Rock Café & Tangs, Ladies Department on Level 2

For immediate booking, call Pene Ng at 6355 8200 or visit www.doverpark.org.sg

All proceeds from ticket sales and related activities go towards Dover Park Hospice for its operational upkeep. Dedicated to patients with advanced incurable illness, Dover Park Hospice is a charity organization founded in 1992 to provide purpose-built facilities for the comfort of 40 residential patients. Visit www.doverpark.org.sg for more information. All donations are welcome and eligible for double tax exemption.

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