

the  
**peranakan**

january-march 2004

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



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

a **new** show  
at the ACM

**EPSON: the past  
remastered**

16th Baba

Convention: nyonya

**networks**

Desmond Sim  
paints

**history**

Wang Gungwu's

**global  
peranakans**

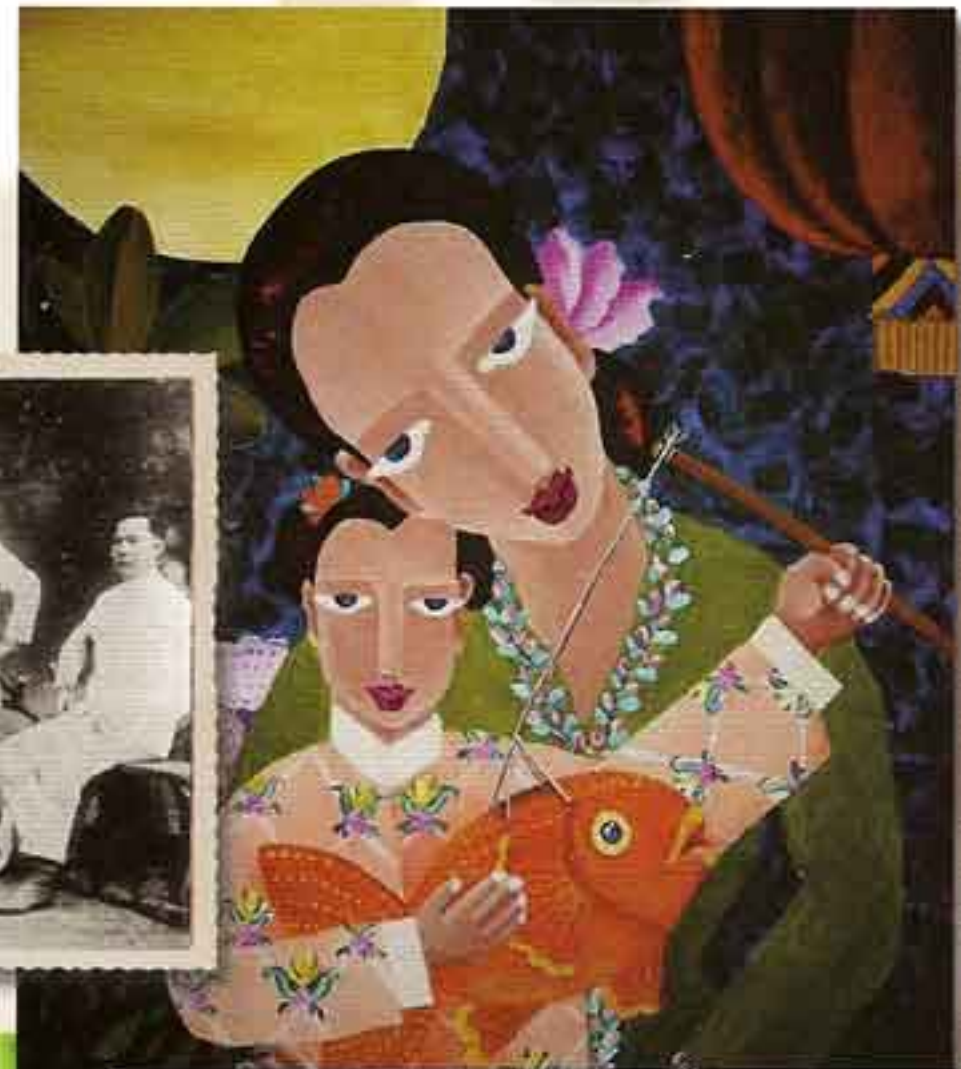
Robert Yeo

**interrogates**

**photographs**

Youth Group's

**Flower Power**







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# editorial

PETER LEE

## Slow Culture

In 1986 an organisation called Slow Food was founded in Italy. The name itself says a lot about the aims of the group: to counter Fast Food. Three years later it became an international movement. There is even a Slow Food group in Singapore. With the globalisation of standardised products and services, the group felt that small communities, restaurants and cafes were under threat. People are giving up their pasta for burger, skipping the local café for Starbucks.

This terrifying trend of course does not stop at food culture. Every aspect of our lives is now endangered. From music, literature, entertainment, fashion, lifestyle we are bombarded by marketing. Global industries are dictating what is fashionable. Funnily enough in Singapore, slow food if anything is alive and kicking. We haven't forgotten what is *nasi ulam*, where to buy good *belachan*, what makes a good *chendol*. Our hawker centres are all filled with vendors selling traditional food. The rate at which Hainanese and Hokkien is spoken may be decreasing rapidly, but we all still know chicken rice, curry pork chops and prawn *mee*, and where to get them! It isn't uncommon (although not very common) to hear of families taking hours to prepare meals, and enjoying them slowly.

The Peranakan Association is a cultural version of Slow Food. For years we have been advocating the beauty, grace and dignity of supporting and undertaking endeavours that do not make great commercial sense; that requires a lot of time to create, that we do purely for the love of it. We encourage our ladies and gentlemen to dress in a manner that is not 'fashionable', that supports dying cottage industries in Indonesia, and rare handicraft shops in Singapore. We persuade our members to sing and perform the songs of old, as a labour of love without financial gain. We encourage our members to remove all internet 'telescopes', international magazines, cable TV, and stop for awhile to look at what is around us, our community, our language our traditions, our kindred spirits in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. These aspects of culture are much more endangered than food. Its as though in language, dress, culture, we have all 'switched to Fast Food'. When you think about it that way, isn't it alarming? 🐼

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# Pure Sparkle!

*October's Berlian Ball lights up  
Singapore's social calendar*

CHRISTINE ONG



*In celebration of our 103<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary, the Berlian Ball  
was enjoyed by more than 800 members, friends and distinguished guests  
at the Island Ballroom of the Shangri-La hotel on 31 October 2003.*



*The Peranakan Voices glow on stage*



*HE President SR Nathan, Mrs Nathan and the committee of  
The Peranakan Association*

Our guests included His Excellency President S R Nathan and First Lady Mrs Nathan, minister George Yeo and Mrs Yeo, Mr Lee Seng Gee and his wife Della Lee, the Indonesian Ambassador, Mr Mochamad Slamet Hidayat and his wife Mrs Kartini Hidayat and Indonesian Charge D'Affaires Mr Eddi S Hariyadhi and his wife. Also seen were a sprinkling of high government officials present in their personal capacities, business tycoons and socially prominent individuals, not to mention the stalwarts of our annual event — the generations of families, and the interesting, colourful variety of Peranakans and supporters.

As always, the ladies dressed to the nines in their beautiful *sarong kebayas*, and in tandem with the *berlian* theme, they flaunted their glittering

diamond and *intan* jewellery. This year's event also included exhibits and sales of all things Peranakan at the large foyer of the ballroom — jewellery, confectioneries, books, handicrafts and paintings.

We sincerely apologise to our supporter Mr Steven Ong, for incorrectly acknowledging his company. Mr Ong, formerly of Ang Eng, has now established his own business with an eponymous business name, and continues to create custom-made *kebayas*.

Our thanks also to the many sponsors who supported us, and to the performers and guest artistes: Tony Quek, Margaret Lim, Francis Hogan, Richard Tan, Kelvin KT Tan, The Golden Girlz of Katong, the Peranakan Voices, Dance Circle Studio Dancers and Babacappella. 🌸





*Dr & Mrs Tony Tan welcomed by Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Dr James Khoo and Mr Peter Wee*



*The dance floor remained crowded throughout the evening*



*President Nathan & Mrs Nathan visit exhibits and stalls at the ballroom foyer*



*Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee and Ong Poh Neo welcome Indonesian Charge D'Affaires Mr Eddi Hariyadi and Mrs Hariyadi*



*Joget on the dance floor*



*Dondang Sayang doyen Baba William Tan entertains*



# A new show at the ACM

MAUREEN LIM

*There was a buzz in Armenian Street on the evening of 15 January 2004. As dusk fell, the Asian Civilisations Museum once again played host to some very recognisable personalities. The event: The official opening of *The Gilded Age*, a display of photos depicting Peranakans in the early 20th century.*

Thanks to history aficionados, and the enthusiasm of people in different fields all working together, the 20th century has again been saved for the 21st century and hopefully preserved for the next. This new gallery could not have come about if not for the \$17,000 collected from our generous PA members to purchase nearly 180 photographs, and other old photographs from Lee Hin Ming of the Lee Brothers Photo Studio, and from the collection of the NHB museums. Add to this the input of the digital technology of Epson Singapore, and we have the new gallery. In the words of Randall Ee, Assistant Curator of the ACM, these enlarged prints allow us 'to discover new secrets from old photos like details on textiles and jewellery that would otherwise not be easily seen.'

The guest of honour was Mrs Lim Siok Peng, chief executive officer of The National Heritage Board. Besides our Peranakan Association President, Lee Kip Lee, and his committee, the invitation list of more than 200 guests included officers from the National Heritage Board, the Director of The ACM, VIPs from Epson Singapore, foreign ambassadors and representatives from statutory organisations.

Our PA singers were there to infuse gaiety, colour and sound into the evening. And did they! The Nonyas in *kebaya* — in those traditional in-your-face colour



combinations — really made their presence felt. As a prelude to the official programme, our Association's singers set the mood as they swung into lively renditions of golden oldies and familiar Malay folk songs. It was, after all, a most Peranakan event.

The formal part began with the welcome speech by Denis Low, a Board member of the ACM. He was followed by Lee Kip Lee, who commended Randall Ee for the thoughtful display of photographs and the insightful accompanying explanations. Mr Lee ended his address with the observation that 'The Peranakan Association has always forged strong ties with the National Heritage Board and its institutions,' and will continue 'to



*Francis Hogan sings dondang sayang*



## SPEECH BY MRS LIM SIOK PENG, CEO OF NHB, AT THE OPENING OF THE GILDED AGE

Tonight's exhibition, *The Gilded Age* comes hot on the heels of the last Peranakan display *Tok Panjang* which opened just two months ago in November last year. This milestone event is reminiscent of the way individuals, community and corporate sponsors have come forward to contribute towards the National Heritage Board's effort to promote heritage. For example, between July 2002 to September 2003, our private sector benefactors contributed up to \$11 million in cash and kind in support of our heritage efforts and we are grateful to every single one of them.

This photo exhibition focuses on people – in the galleries you will find portraits and family groups – of couples, children, siblings and extended families. It reminds us of the importance of kindred hearts and minds and that we all need each other so that we can share our lives, hopes and aspirations.

Tonight, let me share my aspirations for the ACM. Since the setting up of the Peranakan galleries within these premises in December 2002, we have been struggling to outline the development plans for this museum while focusing our energies and resources on building up the new Empress Place flagship. With the establishment of the new ACM at Empress Place in March last year, the need is for this building to carve a niche of its own – attracting its own audience and developing unique programmes.

We have been very encouraged by the positive feedback from both local and overseas visitors on the Peranakan galleries. More importantly, it has been the support of collectors, sister agencies like the Singapore Tourism Board and the Peranakan community that have provided the impetus for us to raise the benchmark for this Museum.

The NHB aspires to build the ACM Armenian Street into the best Peranakan Museum housing the best in Peranakan material culture. We want to build a strong and comprehensive collection to provide a vibrant permanent exhibition while at the same time, to make new inroads as we send out travelling Peranakan exhibitions. We are looking to transform the museum building into a dedicated Peranakan museum, with focussed displays integrated with engaging interactives, a Peranakan eatery, improved educational spaces and an expanded museum shop. This will involve revamping the existing galleries over the next five years, step by step, to minimise disruption to our visitors.

Why the Peranakan culture, some may ask? When you examine the Peranakan heritage along with its rich history, development, people and culture you see a casebook study of what makes Singapore a multi-racial society. Its story is a classic example of how our forefathers uprooted themselves from their homes, carved out a livelihood in foreign lands and then sought to root themselves and their future generations in this part of the world. And in the process of doing so thus forged a unique culture. A museum on the Peranakan heritage is therefore an eminently good way to promote greater understanding and appreciation of the cultural and heritage similarities between different ethnic groups. Such appreciation is an essential step in fostering social cohesion and rootedness in Singapore.

However, building a new museum is not an easy task. It takes a great deal of effort, resources and sheer determination to orchestrate a team to achieve this feat. But what has seen us through over the last two ACM building projects was the participation and encouragement from our supporters and stakeholders – in short, people who shared this same passion.

Similarly, tonight we are surrounded by friends like the Peranakan Association who share our passion for heritage and believe in our cause. We are backed by like-minded corporations such as Epson Singapore who have heeded our call and came forward to make this exhibition and tonight possible. My thanks and gratitude to all of you.

At the same time, I would like to make a bold appeal to you – our friends, collectors, corporations, sister agencies to join hands with us, over the next few years, in supporting our bid to build a world class Peranakan museum – one that Singapore can be proud of as we seek to make our mark in the cultural scene of Singapore and of the world. Your support is key to making this a reality.

identify concrete and creative ways to build mutually satisfying relationships in preserving our nation's heritage.'

As the guest-of-honour, Mrs Lim Siok Peng was unable to be present, her speech was given by Dr Kenson Kwok, the Director of the ACM.

Then followed an exchange of gifts between Lee Kip Lee, representing The

Peranakan Association, and a representative of Epson Singapore.

This done, the guests were invited to view the photographic display, and they were not disappointed. Thanks to the people at Epson, the larger-than-life figures from the past, resplendent in their finery, looked down from their gilt frames onto the faces of the present. Their attire





was truly an eclectic mix of Chinese, Malay and British influences. The little girl in a *baju panjang* wears a Chinese-styled pendant; her tiny feet are encased in embroidered slippers. The young boy wears the *baju lok chuan*, but surprise, surprise! He sports a straw hat as well. This is the whimsy, this is the charm; and yes, for some of us, this is the nostalgia. This is what arrests the viewer, this peek into the past, this vicarious return to a stately and favoured lifestyle. 'This is how the Peranakans in the early 20th century wish to be remembered – poised and in their full glory.' (Not my words. I quote

from the media release.)

Go see for yourself. And while you're there, you can treat yourself to another exhibition titled *Tok Panjang – the Peranakan Dining Experience*. It recreates a Peranakan dining room laid out with porcelain and silverware for a formal meal. The highlight is the 'surname' table service (a distinct type of porcelain with a surname inscribed on each vessel) from the Mariette Collection that once belonged to the family of Kapitan Yap Ah Loy. It was commissioned for his wedding in 1865 to his Melaka bride, Nonya Kok Kang Keow. 🍷



The Gilded Age, and Tok Panjang – the Peranakan Dining Experience, The Asian Civilisations Museum, Armenian Street, Monday 1pm–7pm, Tues–Sunday 9am–7pm, Friday 9am–9pm (free after 7 pm). Charges: Adults \$3.00; Students and Seniors \$1.50. Both exhibitions until 31 Dec. 2004.



# *Nyonya Networks*

## *16th Baba Convention in Penang*

CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER PICTURES COURTESY OF RONNI PINSLER

If there was one thing that enlivened the hosts and guests of the 16<sup>th</sup> Baba Convention in Penang last December, it must have been the promise of good food. So with great expectations, the gathering of Babas, Nyonyas and Arjans (Phuket ladies) from Penang, Malacca, Singapore and Phuket swarmed the narrow corridor of the Ballroom at Cititel Hotel to enjoy the promised flavours of Penang and Thai food.

The welcome dinner on Friday 5 December marked the entry of the Phuket Babas who



Association representatives from Phuket, Singapore, Penang and Malacca

numbered 320 as co-hosts of the annual get-together. Their offering was a Thai *laksa* noodle and a *tom yam* soup with a heap of fresh herbs and leafy sprouts. The dessert was a delightful spread of cakes (some in the form of miniature chilis, brinjals and pumpkins) and jellies. The Penang spread was made up of the island's well-known dishes and sweets catered by the hotel.

The ballroom was overwhelmingly crowded but the charming Thais made up with a traditional welcome dance and a solemn toast to the King of Thailand in honour of his birthday.

The opening ceremony the following day was graced by important guests including the dynamic Dato' Kee Phaik Cheen, the State EXCO member of Penang. Dato' Kee's singular message to the assembled group was: 'Find the missing partner

from Batavia (Jakarta) in the network of Peranakans.' She also encouraged all to highlight to the world the unique cross-cultural features of the community. Dato' Kee also proudly announced that her mother's family came from Batavia.

'Not just Sino-Malay Peranakans or Straits-born Peranakans but the Peranakan Jawi from Aceh/Sumatra, or the Peranakan Mamak Hindus who came and assimilated and evolved, the Eurasians are also Peranakans,' she said, linking all these communities with Malay culture. She urged all groups to look for their roots and do what the Chinese Babas are doing including setting up a cultural museum.

Dato' Kee lent weight to the launch of the cookbook *Nonya Flavours: A Complete Guide to Penang Straits Chinese Cuisine* published jointly by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang and Star Publishing Berhad.

From then on, the sprightly Ajarn Pranee Sakulpipatana led some light-hearted banter. The underlying message by the Phuket Babas to the



Dato' Khoo signs the guest book at the Chung Mansion

Penang co-hosts was 'Let's renew our long-lost courtship.' In his speech, Dato' Khoo Keat Siew, organising chairman, said that the Phuket connection was 'pregnant with meaning' which led to humorous topics such as the eligible bachelors of Penang romancing the forlorn brides of Phuket.



It was even suggested that the Lunar New Year Chap Go Mei celebrations should be transformed by the Penang state government to a local equivalent of Valentine's night, to get the Thais and Penangites together!

All these innuendos seemed so appropriate as the theme of the Convention was *The Peranakan Network: The Malacca and Singapore Connection and The Phuket and Penang Connection*. However it might as well have been 'Connection interruptus':

Neil Khor Jin Keong, a young Baba, gave a very thorough and interesting insight into 'Peranakan Networks: An Overview' which traced the local histories, natural resources, material culture, and the economic and political development of Penang and the Peranakan Chinese.

We hear of the systematic controls imposed by the British such as trade revenue taxes on the autonomous immigrant population, the central function of dialect-based temples, the suppression of secret societies and the banishment law, the accumulation of wealth by the Straits Chinese with the opening of mines and spice estates inland, the English-educated Chinese who took on municipality roles and gained privileges to trade in Sumatra. The whole sum evolved into the modern, educated politically-conscious Peranakans.

Yet, Khor failed to highlight the extent of the influence of the elite Penang Peranakans on their northern and southern neighbours. That should have tilted the angle towards the current topic.

After lunch, Peter Wee from The Peranakan Association Singapore was lined up to talk on the

Malacca and Singapore link but apart from proclaiming the Peranakans to be beautiful flowering hybrids that generational change and time gelled together to the we are today, it was a let-down.

His preamble on the household intricacies and nicety of manners and customs drew appreciative response from young and old. An example — the wearing of pearl jewellery was strictly a mourning feature but has become a fashionable item. It was all nice and good but how this culture migrated to Singapore from Malacca was what we would have liked to know.

It was only with the third speaker that we got close to the theme — the sources of the Phuket connection. Dr. Banjerd Tantivit, a retired medical doctor who is a third-generation Hokkien from Phuket, was sent to Chung Ling High School in Penang by his father. Later, he completed his medical studies in England and the USA. In 'Hokkien Chinese in Phuket – A Celebration of the Phuket-Penang Relationship', a book prepared by the Thai delegates and distributed free, Dr. Banjerd had recounted a brief history of his family roots.

At the age of seven, he arrived in Penang with his doting grandmother on the luxurious SS Matang, which plied between Phuket and Penang. During the Second World War, he was in Penang and managed to move from town to the remote countryside of Ong Lai Sua which is known for its pineapple.

Returning to Penang after 50 years' absence, he noted that everything had changed. In Phuket town, he said, they have similar houses (whose style is dubbed 'Sino-Portuguese architecture') as most of

the building contractors were from Penang.

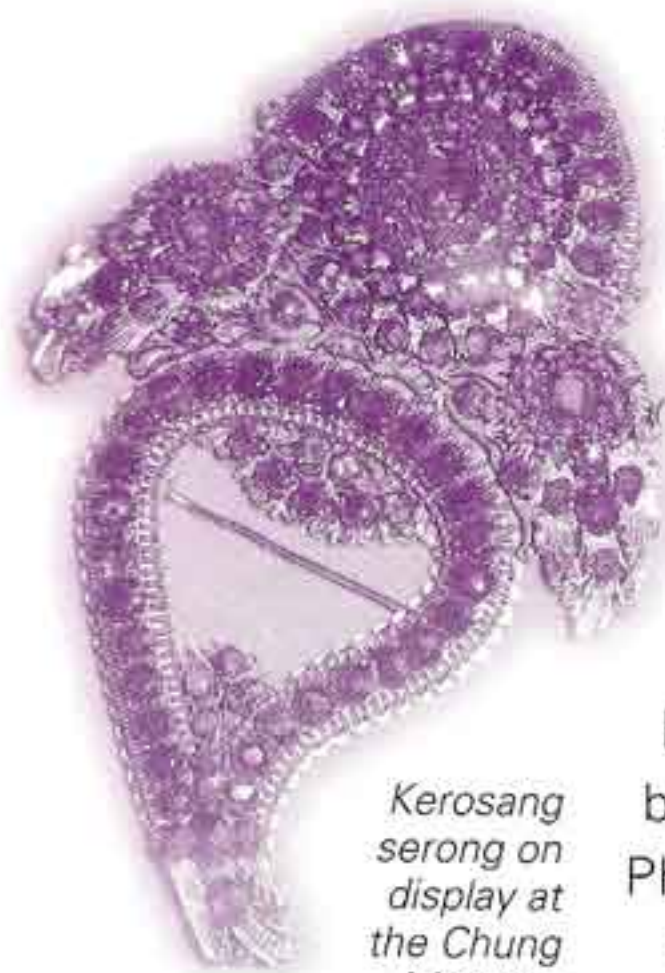
Dr. Banjerd is now keen to re-ignite cultural and trade links with the Betel-nut island.

Assistant Professor of Rajabhat Institute Phuket, Ajarn



Khoo Kongsi





*Kerosang  
serong on  
display at  
the Chung  
Mansion*

Pranee, researched the Phuket-Penang relationship, which was based on the loading of tin ore and para rubber sheets for export through Penang port. This was the time of King Rama V (1867-1910) when three-masted Chinese junks served the area. Even 200 years ago under Captain Francis Light, Penang had been a beacon for the Chinese established in Phuket.

The Q & A that followed was comically explosive when one lady researcher from Kuala Lumpur became intent on knowing how the *sarong* and underwear figured in a young bride's wedding night. Based on what she heard, she wondered if it was true that a *sarong* was associated with womanhood.

Another lady delegate from Singapore wondered how a bride-to-be was prepared by her mother on sexual matters, apart from the rigorous training in the kitchen and crafts. While some older members squirmed at the taboo subjects, others were fairly amused by the rash of comment and conjecture.



*Delegates at the seminar*

That evening, the convention dinner was embellished with entertainment by the participating associations, culminating in the cutting of the 83<sup>rd</sup> anniversary cake of the State Chinese Association.

Sunday morning saw the early departure of the Thai group. The rest of us had the pleasure of a private tour of the Chung Kheng Kwee Mansion and Museum. The mansion, which formerly belonged to Chung, a Hakka tycoon of yore, was in

a poor state when Peter Soon and his wife bought it. The beautifully restored mansion houses a world-class collection of Chinese embroidered silk panels, furniture, antiques and artifacts. The Soons have also restored the adjacent ancestral temple and are maintaining the tablets of the ancestors of the Chung family. This new Penang Baba Museum will no doubt be an attraction for visitors.

Next stop was the Khoo Kongsu clan temple, which was magnificent in size and detail. It even had a magnificent traditional Chinese opera stage. Dato' Khoo Keat Siew was generous in allowing this unexpected stop that opened our eyes to the rich heritage of Penang.

After the farewell lunch at the Association's premises, and last-minute shopping, the delegates made their cordial *Selamat Jalan*. The next Convention will be hosted by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka.



*Tour of the Chung Mansion*



*Strong showing  
by Youth Group  
members at the  
convention,  
resplendant in their  
traditional dress*



# Epitome of Peranakan Grandeur

## A New Penang House Museum

ONG POH NEO

As the bus snaked its way along the Heritage Trail of Georgetown one lazy Sunday morning, the delegates of The Peranakan Association Singapore, relaxed after vigorously celebrating the Penang Baba Convention, pondered in murmurs in a desultory fashion.

'See a house...What house, ah? Where are we going?...Soon's... Don't know, lah...Soon, not far...Not soon, the house belongs to a Mr Soon... Oh, siapa dia? Don't know...Got food or not?...No, that's after...Never mind, just go and see lah...'

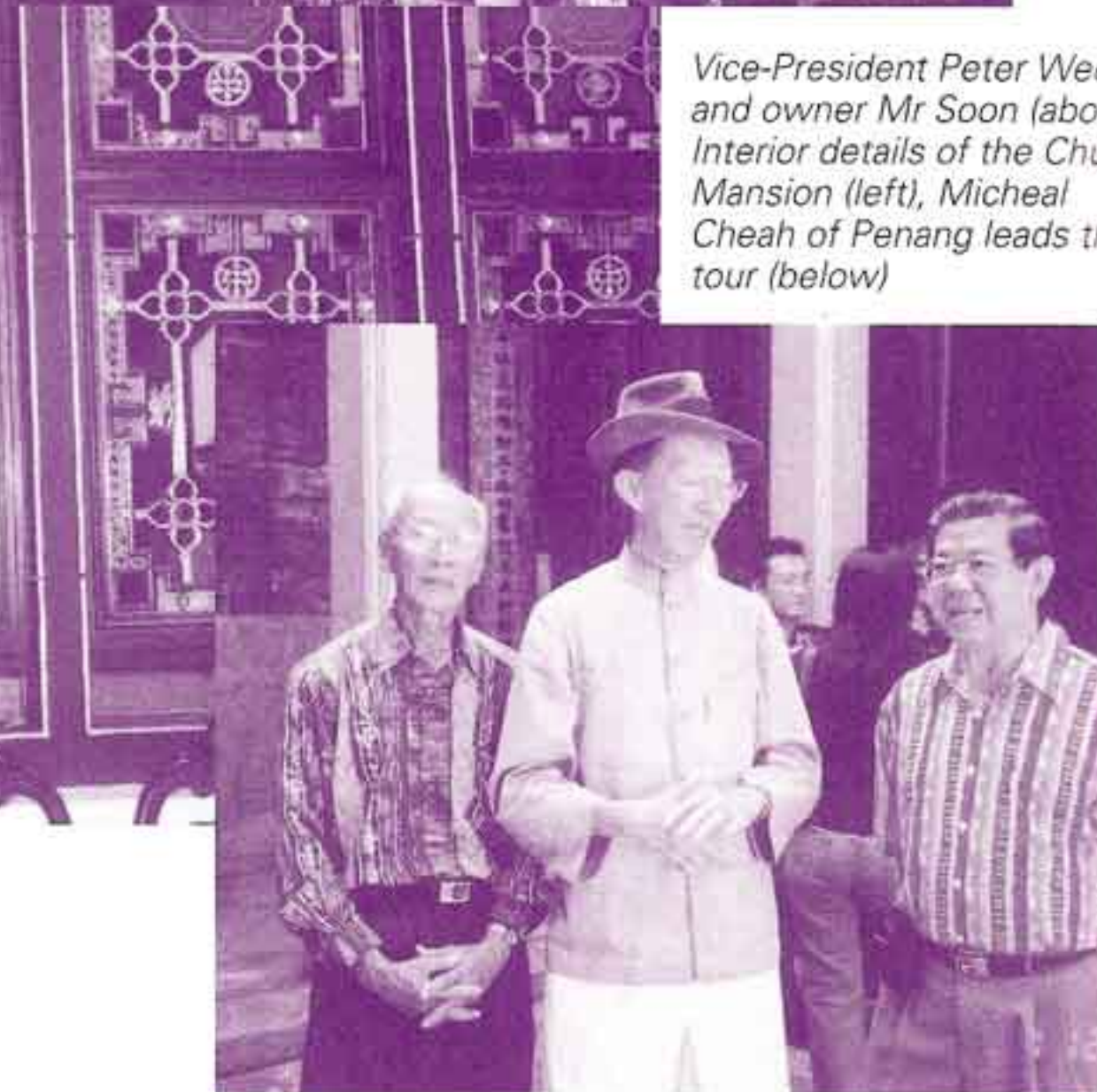
In the darkened interior of the bus where the window curtains were closed to shield the bright Penang morning and where the mainly tired Babas and Bibiks stretched out, oblivious to sight and sound outside, it was no wonder that when we finally arrived, we had no idea which street we were on nor were we aware of what the house looked like from the outside.

Blinking in the bright sunlight, we stepped over the threshold. Penang, then, in incipient slumber, suffered a convulsive jerk, transporting us back into early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was an overdose which we all happily succumbed to.

The detached house had undergone a RM4 million restoration. A youthful looking middle-aged couple with two teenaged children



Vice-President Peter Wee and owner Mr Soon (above) Interior details of the Chung Mansion (left), Micheal Cheah of Penang leads the tour (below)



greeted us. The Soon family had generously opened the house, which was slated to be a future private museum, to members of the association for a private preview. It was perhaps unfortunate that we numbered close to 50 and worse still, the guide conducting the house tour could not be heard beyond the immediate ring of visitors round him even in the hushed atmosphere of the house so that soon we were milling all over the very large, two-storeyed house. Singaporean Peranakans had finally woken up.

The owner, Mr Soon, a passionate collector of Peranakan craft and artefacts, had reputedly needed a place to house his vast and extensive collection, or correctly, a part of his col-



lection. The purchase of the premises which comprised both a house and an adjoining *rumah abu/kiah keh* styled as a Chinese ancestral temple was apparently a conditional purchase. He was bound to conserve, preserve and restore the temple to its former glory and also, maintain it. The former ancestral home of Kapitan Chung Keng Kwee (1829 – 1901), it had housed three generations before Mr Soon rescued it and it is now a house reborn in its majestic splendour.

The house is spectacular, and its beautiful antique English and Scottish wrought ironwork around the impressive, spacious air-well, its carved intricate woodwork, timber floorboards and stair treads, soaring ceilings, all painstakingly restored, are splendours of the ornate architectural Peranakan style, a house which cannot be found in Singapore. This house, what we today call a bungalow, is a successful attempt at recreating the grandeur of Peranakan culture at its height, an attempt similar to another well-publicised project — the successful Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, dubbed 'La Maison Bleu' ('The Blue Mansion'), the highly acclaimed winner of the UNESCO Conservation Award 2000.

Unlike the Blue Mansion, however, this house, which is smaller, and of course newer with a few rather disconcerting gold painted carved trellis carvings which deadened the old lustre of wood, highlights the otherwise lav-

ish interior furnishing. Viewing was made difficult because in addition to the overall eclectic effect typical of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, popularly known in Penang as Straits Settlements architecture, the house is literally cluttered and adorned in virtually every nook and corner with 'things'. Huge silk framed embroidered panels in mint

condition, adorn the walls. Sizeable pieces of Peranakan jewellery displayed in locked cabinets had some nonyas drooling. Cameras clicked in the rooms, large furniture items, some housing other Peranakan artefacts

lined all four walls. Bearing in mind that that was why the owners had bought and restored the house for, it was nevertheless, a mind-sapping, (lasting approximately 45 min – 1 hour) tour for many, so much so that when we finally arrived next door at the temple, many managed to master only a cursory interest in its

still beautiful original, unadorned state, its all-pervading aura of faded glory going largely unnoticed. Hopefully, that will remain intact after the planned restoration of the temple.

Whatever it was, done or not done, the Soon family has achieved in its commitment and profound love for all things Peranakan, a stunning display of Peranakan culture at its dizzying heights. 🌸



Interior details of the Chung rumah abu



Vice-President Thomas Tan & Mrs Tan at the ancestral temple



# Painting History

*In his new exhibition Sayang, Desmond Sim opens wider the dusty, forgotten tradition of Peranakan painting.*

PETER LEE

Is there such a thing as Peranakan Art? Do we have a painting tradition? Spying into the *rumah abus* of Malacca, Penang and Singapore, paintings are certainly not in short supply, although they are mainly portraits executed by non-Peranakans. The oldest ones seem to be Chinese-style ancestral portraits in watercolour on paper or silk, of rather grim looking men and women in Ming or Qing period costume. Then there are the many 'naïve' Western-style portraits by Chinese artists, representing the Chinese artisan's pioneering attempts to deal with perspective and *chiaroscuro* (shadow and light).

Chronologically, these were followed by realistic portraits in oils by artists, many of whom we still know nothing about. The most recognisable names that keep popping up are Low Kway Song and Low Kway Soo, two Baba brothers who were well known portraitists in the early twentieth century. Their subjects include prominent Peranakans such as Tan Jiak Kim, Oei Tiong Ham and Tan Cheng Lock. Both brothers are credited in local art histories as being modern art pioneers, and their works include accomplished, academic-style paintings such as *Lynx* (1921) and *Thai Temple* (1923). The Low brothers belonged to possibly the earliest Western art group in Singapore, the Amateur Drawing Association, which was founded in 1909 by a group of Babas including Dr Lim Boon Keng. It is also interesting to note that Low Kway Song's son, the late Lucky Low, was for a brief period a committee member of The Peranakan Association.

But sadly, there is a huge gap of more than fifty years between these works and those of the next Peranakan artist, Martin Loh, whose expressive paintings in the 1990s captured the imagination of many Singaporeans. Depicting domestic Peranakan scenes and exploring the relationships between family members, lovers and friends, Loh's colourful works on paper captured the sense of



*Birdie 2000*

nostalgia that many Peranakans were feeling in the 1980s and 1990s for the halcyon days when life seemed both simpler and grander.

*Sayang* is Sim's 6th exhibition but first solo show. Held from 5 to 15 February at Utterly Art's Space 21, Tanjong Pagar, in conjunction with Valentine's Day, the exhibition explored the various nuances of the word *sayang* — from the love between parent and child, as a term of endearment between lovers, and as an expression of regret, especially over something wasteful, unfinished or unexpectedly coming to an end. His first exhibition was held jointly in 1992 with Martin Loh, with

whom he had been sharing an apartment since the last 1980s. 'We were experimenting, sketching and painting a year before that,' Sim explains. In 1996, he moved to his own apartment in Tiong Bahru.

The artistic connection between the two artists is still evident in their works, especially in subject matter. Where Loh's works are more fluid, multicoloured and pictorially dense, Sim, however, has come into his own with eye-catching canvases in luminous colours that echo the spirit of art deco portraiture. The emphasis is on fields of colour and pattern, which resonates with the traditional Asian method of creating pictures. One sees this especially in southeast Asian paintings and textiles.

Half the 19 paintings have been sold, and a gallery in the UK is looking at taking the paintings over to London for another show.

Sim is, as we all know, an award-winning playwright. Painting has been a relatively recent serious preoccupation, although he had learnt pencil drawing from a Chinese painting teacher when he was about 9 years old. While in the army Sim developed his interest in art and graphic design by attending part-time courses. During university holi-






Mid-Autumn Mother and Daughter

days in the early 1980s he produced collages that were exhibited at bistros and cafes, selling quite a few of them.

On why he has ventured into this field, he explains: 'Just because there has not been a history of Peranakan painting, doesn't mean there can never be such a tradition. The Peranakan culture in southeast Asia was a totally re-constructed one. Our forefathers came as labourers, traders, businessmen...fighting for survival, fleeing starvation. All the beautiful porcelain, furniture, refinement, all came later. All were recreated in the image of a China they remembered. We can create art, culture and beauty in the image that we remember, appreciate and love. If there was no history in Peranakan painting...then we will make one.'

Watch out for his November exhibition at the same venue — *Nativity Nonyas*, which is timed for the Christmas season. This show will present icon-like images of figures in Peranakan costume. These 'Madonnas in kebayas' will be Sim's take on Renaissance Christian imagery, which depicted biblical stories in contemporary and indigenous settings and costumes. 



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## perANAKan — the youth group

# Flower Power

HEATHER ONG

Last August, a group met Baba Peter Wee at Katong Antique House to learn more about Peranakan ceramics. We marveled at the unusual colour glazes that characterised these *pingan mangkok Shanghai*, and saw the repeated pattern of beautiful stylised peonies, phoenix and the Eight Buddhist symbols. I am sure the Peranakans in Singapore at that time had never seen a fresh peony, but that did not stop them from embracing this big, showy, flower motif, and ordering whole sets of peony-decorated crockery, *kamchongs*, spittoons and other porcelain items from China.

We learnt about the history and classification of nonyaware, and gingerly handled the fine antique pieces on display. This session has whetted the appetite of some young Peranakans, who now regularly scour shops for their next find.

We also had fun dressing up in our *kebaya*s for the Association's annual dinner & dance. The colourful parade of fine *rubiah*, embroidered with peonies, chrysanthemums, daisies or fantasy flowers was indeed a visual treat. The *batik sarongs*, with contrasting flower motifs, were equally stunning, and let us not forget the *kasut manek*, adorned with floral designs, some painstakingly stitched by the Nonyas themselves. The theme of the dinner was *The Berlian Ball*, and we were not disappointed by the dazzling display. Brilliant gems glittered amidst the flower & leaf settings, typical of Peranakan *kerosangs*, earrings and necklaces.

The gentlemen were also not spared this desire to outdo each other! *Baju lok chuan* were tailored in damask silk, Chinese silk or raw silk. Some had subtle floral motifs or Chinese symbols of longevity on the fabric, and this drew comments on our yahoogroups forum. Some



Bunga Sukudangan



Proud to be Peranakan, at the Berlian Ball

Babas were adamant that the outfit made the wearer look effeminate, and that the *baju lok chuan* with *kasut manek* was inappropriate attire for formal occasions. After an exchange of views, it was agreed that individual expression and the ability to change with the times were impor-

tant to the development of the culture. Though previously only used at home or for one's wedding, a Baba can now proudly wear his *baju lok chuan* in a stiffer fabric, or even a Chinese style shirt with modern trousers, with a neat cut, and still look masculine indeed.

In December, a group of us attended the Baba Convention held in Penang. We saw the grandeur and profusion of floral designs in the newly restored Kapitan Chung Keng Kwee Mansion. There were intricately carved and gilded flowers, leaves and animals on the teak panels, European curlicue flowers in wrought iron on the railings, and even delicate Chinese flowers etched on the window glass. We gasped at the many Peranakan and Western artifacts, often decorated with favourite flower designs, which were on display in this soon-to-be-open museum.

On the Internet forum, several members joined a discussion about Peranakan flowers and plants. Baba Cedric from Malacca was a fount



of knowledge, and he explained the significance of the banana-yam-lemongrass pot placed under the bridal bed. These plants propagated easily, and therefore symbolised the wish for the young couple to have many children.

He also mentioned the flowers not commonly seen nowadays. *Bunga sukudangan* (also called *kerak nasi*, *bunga getah*) is a fragrant white flower growing on a vine, that the Nonyas used to encircle their *sanggul*. *Bunga tonkeng* is a pale yellow flower, with subtle scent, that can be eaten in omelettes or sprinkled in soup. It can also be used to decorate the *sanggul talipon*.

The *bunga siantan* (ixora) symbolises purity, and is paired with spring onions for a cleansing ritual during the traditional wedding *cheo tau*. This combination is also used for the *sambut taon* prayer, where it is placed in a bowl of rice, freshly cooked for the reunion dinner. The *bunga sundal malam* (tuberose) and *chempaka* are used especially for adorning the altar for prayers.

We have indeed learnt much from our participation in these activities. We will be meeting for *makan*, to explore the Peranakan patois, to

learn the basics of *cherki* during the next few months. Keep connected by joining our Internet forum. Send an email from your account to <peranakan-subscribe@yahoogroups.com> Come and join us on this fulfilling journey to discover more of our rich culture. 🌸

### Introduction to Peranakan Patois

Fun-filled introductory session, with role playing and explanation of common phrases & vocabulary.

Suitable for beginners & those with rudimentary knowledge of Malay.

Date: Saturday April 17

Time: 2pm to 5pm

Place: The Eurasian Community House, 139 Ceylon Road

Price: \$18.00 per person, inclusive of materials, instruction by Baba Tony Quek, & refreshments

RSVP & enquiries: email [youth@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:youth@peranakan.org.sg)

Places are limited.

## INTERROGATING PHOTOGRAPHS

Singapore's celebrated poet, *Robert Yeo*, looks hard at an old family photograph.

Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977) writes, 'Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself — a portrait kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed as long as photographs get taken and are cherished.' (p. 8)

This photograph was given to me by my late uncle Yeo Koon Leng, first cousin of my late father Koon Yam. It is a black and white copy of which the original is probably lost.

There are four brothers posing for what is obviously a studio shot. From left to right are Teck Hock, Teck Kee, Teck Joon and Teck Chye. The studied pose indicates a well-lit interior, which enabled the photographer to shoot a picture that he was finally satisfied with. Two brothers are seated and two standing and this is probably by design, both hierarchical and aesthetic. Teck



Hock, the eldest, and Teck Chye, who is next in age, are seated, and they flank their two younger brothers who stand in the middle. This arrangement also makes a harmonious pose as the two brothers in the middle are shorter and if I look at the seated and standing postures, and especially

at the faces, I notice a smooth arc from left to right and another arc where their feet are. The arcs are sort of parallel. The one on top is slightly more curved than the bottom one.

All four are in full pose from head to toe. Three brothers, from left to right, look straight at the camera while the second brother looks away. I wonder what he is thinking of?

All four are dressed up but the age of the photo shows only Teck Hock in detail. He sits with reasonable comfort on an antique chair whose armrest is too low for him to place his hands on



and so he is forced to put both hands on his laps. Bareheaded, he wears his grey Chinese *baju* unbuttoned over what is probably a white short-sleeved shirt. His trousers are white and he wears dark-coloured socks in black slip-on shoes without laces. And in his right hand, he holds an unlit cigar between the index and second fingers.

His mode of dress stands out because his *baju* is unbuttoned. Why? It goes against the grain of the formality of the occasion. But what is the occasion? More of this later.

The relatively poor quality of the photo does not enable scrutiny of the dresses of the other three brothers except to note that they are all in white long-sleeved shirts and white trousers. Untucked, the shirts of three brothers cover their trousers and conceal whatever belts they wear.

Teck Kee is the only one to wear what looks like a vaudeville hat while the rest are bareheaded.

He looks odd in his hat.

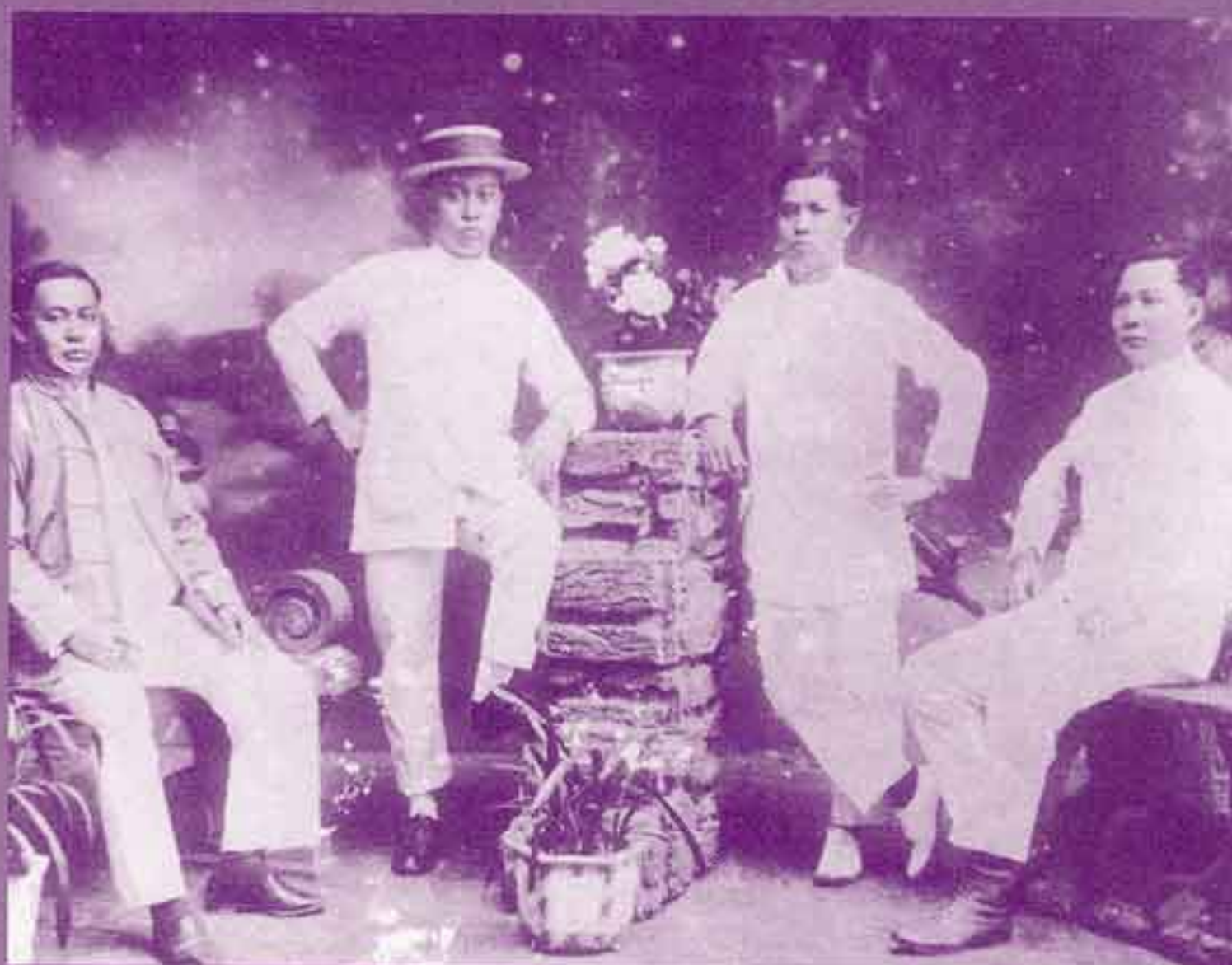
White socks and black-laced shoes complete his attire. He stands a little stiffly with his right hand against his waist, his left arm on top of the tiered flower stand and his left foot against the second tier. His whole body tilts slightly to the left, almost leaning against the flower stand.

Teck Joon is the mirror image of his brother, his right arm on top of the flower stand and his left hand against his waist. The difference is that he stands comfortably erect, right leg with knee bent slightly crossing over the straight left leg and with black socks and white shoes.

Teck Chye, the brother who looks away from the camera, has his right arm slightly curled over the armrest of his antique chair on to his lap while his left hand is spread out on his lap. His shoes are laced and rise to his ankles.

When was this photograph taken? The only indicator is the age of the men who look to be between forty and fifty. I don't know when my grandfather Teck Hock was born but he died on January 10, 1954, according to the inscription on his tombstone and this photo looks like it was taken around 1930.

What is the occasion? I can only guess. Perhaps a birthday of one of the brothers. Or, to remember the visit to Singapore of one or two brothers. Teck Hock and Teck Kee lived in



Singapore while Teck Chye lived in Seremban, the capital of Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, while Teck Joon lived in Tangkak, a small town just south of Malacca on the road to Kuala Lumpur. Teck Chye's family later moved to Kuala Lumpur.

I would like to believe the latter, as the visits of the Malayan (it was Malaya then) brothers would celebrate brotherliness and cement bonds that survive a trauma decades ago in Sarawak. According to my late grandaunt whom I called Chimpo, the wife of Teck Joon, there were four Chinese brothers who grew up in a town in Sarawak. One of them agreed to marry a local girl, native to Sarawak, but failed to turn up on the agreed wedding day. The family of the abandoned bride was enraged and engaged a *bomoh*, a Malay medicine man, to put a curse on the Yeo brothers. They barely escaped with their lives and that episode accounted for them ending up in Singapore, with two brothers deciding to stay and raise families on the island while the other two families decided to go to Malaya.

How close were the brothers and their descendants? It is a question that will perhaps be answered in another article.

But at this stage, Sontag is worth quoting again: 'As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialise, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives.' (p.9)





# Kueh

a young Nonya, Charlene Khoo, rediscovers her roots

A friend of my father's paid us a visit some time ago. From spiritually rejuvenating trips to the Lake District, to how he cleverly won over a lethargic and cynical lecture group, there was never a moment of boredom while Professor Monheim spoke. But what left us utterly and completely enraptured were the stories he told of his hometown: the mysterious and wonderfully exotic Land of the Nile: Egypt. While I was still reeling from the magic of Cairo's rich history and visions of 'cous-cous and cousins', the conversation—inevitably, I suppose—took a turn when the professor locked his intelligent blue gaze on mine and asked in accented vowels, 'And what can you tell me about yourself, young lady?' As I searched for an answer, my parents leapt in to describe the intricacies of my father's Chinese heritage and my mother's Chinese-Peranakan lineage.

The earliest memories I have of my Peranakan identity are the colourful, aromatic *nonya kuehs* (cakes or desserts): masterful and mouth-watering creations of my grandmother, an artist in her own right. Of course, at the age of five or six, all that mattered was the incomparable experience of eating those delights. *Onde onde*: a concoction of gooey gelatinous dough of a curious green shade, oozing a saccharine syrupy surprise on the first bite; *apom berkua*: little perforated pancakes drenched in a molasses-like banana sauce; and a personal favourite, *kueh ko swee*: its dull, bland-looking brown exterior, deceptive of the sensory treats that await you upon sinking your teeth into that soft center. The balance of sweetness complemented by a generous scattering of coconut shavings was pure perfection to my six-year-old taste buds. The smells and sights of tray upon tray of shockingly coloured desserts were such a prominent fixture of my childhood that its uniqueness was lost on me as I grew older.

When I was eleven, the school held its annual funfair and each class needed to set up a food or games stall. Immediately, the image of my grandmother's *kueh ko swee* cakes being sold by the dozen came to mind, and, eager to play a part in chalking up a contribution to my class's earnings, I

offered my assistance. The day of the fair came. All around us, shimmering jelly castles and pink clouds of cotton candy ensnared the imaginations and appetites of paying customers, while the lumpy, nondescript *brownness* of my class's offerings was a sorry, sorry sight. By the end of the day, my pride was in tatters. The painful emptiness of our money-tin, the accusing glares of my classmates, and most of all, the pathetic tower of uneaten, unwanted *kueh ko swee* that remained sorrowfully on its tray—each was a jarring reminder of my dashed hopes.



Charlene Khoo and her grandmother, Chee Lak Neo

Perhaps it may have been then that I began the desperate attempt to shape myself to fit in the mould of the 'everyteen'. Chuppachupp lollipops? I love them too! Purple Swatch watch? I have the same one. Spice Girls? Our heroes! Frayed jeans? High-five!! While I was happily losing myself in the beguiling world of pop culture, any mention of all things 'Chinese' began to be met with a hearty 'Ewwwww!' In time I outgrew the childish denials, but never again did I regain that relish I once had for my heritage. Instead, the antagonism simply subsided into a state of apathy. Am I Chinese? Of course. Why? How? Search me.


As I sat watching Professor Monheim's eyes light up while old photographs of our ancestral homes in Malacca and China were retrieved and proudly displayed, I was struck by how my culture, my *Chinese* heritage, had him as enthralled as we were by his. The realisation that someone considered my



culture fascinating while I'd blissfully—even deliberately—refused to embrace its uniqueness, shocked me. I thought of the many talks I'd attended by American college admissions officers. Listening to them wax lyrical about their country and home, made me wonder, could I ever speak in such glowing terms about my country, my heritage and my culture? I discovered that I *wanted* to. As my mother and father unearthed manuscripts and albums detailing our family history, the old embarrassment of my childhood gave way to the resurfacing of memories not willingly destroyed, but simply hidden. As my parents dusted off the photos, I dusted off my

memories and the love for my heritage that had simply been concealed, and not discarded.

We stumbled on a Chinese poem in one of the old records and urged by the professor, I, haltingly at first, began to read it, my confidence growing as my eyes moved over the familiar characters. The look of appreciation in Professor Monheim's eyes at the end of it was my reward, and what it meant to me, I doubt even he will ever know.

I visited my grandmother the other day and told her I'd missed eating her *kueh ko swee*. I hadn't had the craving for years, but I suddenly longed for its sweetness once again. 

## The Past Remastered

### Peranakan Photographs at EPSON Imaging Gallery

*Epson, in association with the ACM and National Archives of Singapore, unveiled a photographic exhibition open to the public entitled Classical Photography of Baba and Nyonya, from 2 November 2003 to the end of January 2004, which showcased over 30 digitally remastered Peranakan photographs at epSITE, the Epson Imaging Gallery, located at Wheelock Place in Orchard Road.*



'The photography exhibition is an excellent example of the synergy between tradition and innovation, where technology adds value to history,' said Mr Tan Haur, Manager for epSITE. The exhibition showcased Epson's premium quality photo output using its latest range of professional inkjet printers.

Many images were from The Peranakan Association collection. Epson digitally remastered the photographs (in laymen's terms they cleaned up the dirt and spots and uneven tones of the old photos). The exhibition was divided into two phases, allowing Epson to refresh the display for viewers. The first phase focussed on family values with portraits of young children and couples. From 16 December 2003 onwards, wedding portraits were featured. Epson was also a sponsor of *The Gilded Age: Photos of Peranakans from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century*, jointly organised by ACM and NAS.



# Global Peranakans

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer reports on a talk delivered by Professor Wang Gungwu to members of the Association.



The congregation of Babas and Nyonyas who attended the dinner talk in September by Professor Wang was there to understand more about the Peranakans in South-east Asia. Having just made the connection with the Phuket Babas, many were curious about what the esteemed professor, Director of the East Asian Institute, had

to share about the regional network of overseas Chinese. Instead, the talk embarked them on a journey to the wider area of 'The Peranakans in the Global Setting', examining the Peranakan experience in the context of Chinese and Global history.

The professor first introduced an interesting idea: the concept of being Peranakan is 'in the imagination'. The word *peranakan* is intriguing to Prof. Wang. Being born in Surabaya, Indonesia, he himself qualifies as '*anak Surabaya*' or the less than salubrious term *Peranakan Cina*. He also differentiated between the terms *peranakan* ('local born') and *orang asli* (native). In the term *peranakan* there is the component of the root word *anak* (child) as well as the idea of locality. Despite this, the overriding point of Peranakan identity is still an insistence on being Chinese, he emphasised.

Professor Wang then touched on the issue of cultural choices made by the Chinese from the earliest period. The men who moved away from their hometown or village, did so for commercial reasons. There was no such thing as a migrant, the word did not exist in the Chinese language, said Prof. Wang. While the men waited for the trading ships that plied between China and the country they landed in, they took the women of the country as wives. But formally, home was always China.

However, some men had families inside and outside of China. In sufficient numbers, such families in time formed communities. At first small, they flourished and enlarged to bigger communities. Many of them have disappeared or integrated with the plural societies of their adopted country. Trading which often happened in the river ports grew so that eventually there were communities based on maritime trade.

With the rise and fall of trade in the different ports, there was considerable movement of Peranakans within the region. Thus communities of Babas or Peranakans were formed outside of certain boundaries. One was the boundary of country. The early Peranakans did not pay much attention to the idea of the colonial polity or the

concept of the modern nation state as they were primarily preoccupied with trading, and maintained their own regional commercial networks with strong kinship links.

Even under such circumstances, the Peranakans managed to maintain many aspects of their Chinese identity. By picking spouses from members of the same community, the Peranakans increasingly diluted the native component of their ancestry. It was also fully acceptable for a China-born man to marry a Nyonya.

Women are the key to the transmission of homemaking values and the environment of home, according to the professor. The Nyonyas in the audience surely heartened to this fact as most of the staples of the culture – the cuisine, the costume, the rites and customs – were vigorously observed in a Peranakan Chinese household.

Over time and with colonisation by the Dutch and the British, increasingly concrete boundaries were created for the overseas Chinese. Rising nationalism in China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century fomented a new kind of political awareness that reverberated among the overseas Chinese. In the face of this phenomenon, the overseas Chinese began to define themselves within the framework of the modern concept of Race. Prof. Wang went on to explain that the idea of Race was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached its most terrifying point with the Jewish Holocaust carried out by the Nazis in Germany.

Racial discrimination became stronger among the Babas and Chinese, said the speaker. Is this when the terms *singkek* or (China-born Chinese) and *baba siow* ('crazy Baba') became current? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the politics of race and identity became more extreme, heightening the issue of who was Chinese and who was not.

The invention of the passport created the ultimate boundary. Tensions built up and all kinds of minorities had to make nationality choices. Despite this, the Peranakans insisted against all odds that they were by race Chinese – a particular kind of Chinese even though they did not speak Chinese, he said.

Towards the end of the decolonisation process when nationalities were reshaped, new strategies or choices were opened to the Peranakan. Whether you like it or not, you were able to vote with your feet, the professor explained. Peranakans are still adapting to these changes with migration and re-articulation of identity. He touched on some forces that will shape such changes: the growing impact of China and global language choices. For example, the language of many Peranakans in Singapore today is in fact English.

Returning to the concept that being Peranakan lies in the imagination, he had this to say:

'It doesn't really matter how you relate to being Peranakan, it is how you want to present yourself.' 🐉

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Read more about overseas Chinese topics by Prof. Wang Gungwu published by International Publishing. 2003 Titles: '*Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese*', '*Bind Us In Time: Nation and Civilisation in Asia*', '*Only Connect: Sino-Malay Encounters*', '*The Nanhai Trade: Early Chinese Trade in the South China Sea*', '*Ideas Won't Keep: The Struggle for China's Future*', '*To Act Is to Know: Chinese Dilemmas*'.



# NOTICEBOARD

## NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following 20 members whose addition increases our membership roll to 1751.

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Miss Chua Ai Lin  
Mrs Foo Theresa  
Mr Hogan Francis  
Mrs Khong Susannah  
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**AGM  
THE 104TH  
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION  
WILL BE HELD ON  
SATURDAY 27 MARCH 2004  
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who is preparing a second part to her 1994 publication

***Brown & Gold***

## The Peranakan Association's Dinner Talk

Friday 23 April 2004

7.30-10.30pm

Pin Hsiang Restaurant  
Level 2, RELC, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 258352

### Why Does 'Identity' Matter at All?

Reflections on 'Peranakan', 'Chinese', and other Identities

**Kwok Kian-Woon**

*Associate Professor*

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Nanyang Technological University

In this talk, Professor Kwok will share some thoughts and generate discussion by raising — and attempting to answer — a number of basic questions about 'identity' in general and about 'Peranakan' and 'Chinese' identities in particular. For example: What do people mean by 'identity'? Why, when, where, how, and for whom does 'identity' matter? What does it mean to go through an 'identity crisis'? What goes into the making of identities: family, language, education, class, religion, etc? What is the relationship between 'ethnic' and 'national' identity? Is there a 'politics of identity'? How can we speak of 'hybrid' and 'multiple' identities? Indeed, in the face of globalisation, how do people go about 'picking and choosing' in the supermarket of identities? What is the impact of technological advancement — especially the Information Revolution — on a person's or group's sense of identity? And, finally, should we do some fundamental rethinking about 'identity' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world that has been symbolically ushered in by the events of September 11, 2001? In particular, what kind of rethinking do we need in the context of Singapore and Southeast Asia? And what might be the role of Peranakans in stimulating and contributing to such rethinking?

**\$26 members, \$32 non-members.**

*For reservations, please call our Hon. Secretary Mrs Lim Geok Huay, Tel: 6255 0704*





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