

the peranakan

july-september 2004

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



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SINGAPORE



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editorial PETER LEE

The Season of Kim Chuah and Kueh Bulan Lapan

July to September is an interesting quarter of the year, encompassing two important traditional seasons, the seventh month (16 August to 13 September) when according to Chinese tradition, the gates of hell open and spirits roam free, and the eighth month (14 September to 14 October), during which the traditional mid-autumn festival culminates on the fifteenth day (28 September). We Peranakans used to spend the earlier month appeasing the spirits of the deceased, and then gorging ourselves with rich and heavy moon cakes. Strangely enough, we may have our own version of *kueh chang* eaten during the fifth month, but there isn't really a specifically Nyonya *kueh bulan lapan*.

Peranakans always seemed to have bought them from Cantonese establishments. Before the war, many people used to buy mooncakes from the Empress Hotel on Victoria Street. Our First Vice President Peter Wee, who lived nearby, remembers, 'A huge billboard with Chinese characters and an image of a celestial deity was displayed outside the hotel. Mooncakes were sold at the long counter that took up the whole frontage of the hotel. Each time you bought a mooncake you'd get a little biscuit in the shape of a pig that was packed into a tiny basket. The back lane was full of *hamtankong* or salted egg jars, where they would be cracking eggs and saving only the yolks for the mooncakes.' Another favourite place was the old Southern Hotel where the Yue Hwa department store now is.

Nowadays, the sky's the limit in terms of the variations in filling, pastry skin and presentation boxes, which seem to be getting more and more lavish. I have just seen one presented by a private club that is a two-tiered painted wooden box packed into a beautiful wooden tray with a big loop handle.

The traditional lanterns have also transformed somewhat. They were originally made of translucent paper and fashioned into the shape of a *keong teng* (palace lantern) with moveable parts and tassels. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was all animal shapes – horses, dragons, tigers and others of the Chinese horoscope – as well as cars, aeroplanes etc. They had thin wire frames and were covered in thin red plastic painted with decorative motifs. Nowadays one is more likely to see Nemo, Beauty and the Beast and Mickey Mouse.

Before things get too carried away in the Disney direction, perhaps one day we can begin to articulate our own ideas for our own lanterns. And isn't it rather curious that Nyonyas never made their own mooncakes? I did speculate for awhile that perhaps the method of cooking was alien to the traditional Nyonya kitchen, but have since been corrected. Of course there are many Nyonya *kuehs* that are baked in an oven. So why did the Nyonya never choose to adapt this much-enjoyed festive confectionary? If anyone knows the answer to this, or has a recipe for a Nyonya *kueh bulan lapan*, please do share it with us. 🐉

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Singapore Heritage Festival

Hooked on Heritage CLEMENT H S TAN

The publicity blurb for the inaugural Singapore Heritage Festival said, 'Get Hooked on Heritage'. Judging by the constant stream of crowds, especially during the weekends, everyone was 'hooked'.

The event was held between 16 and 25 July 2004 at the atrium of Tower Two, Suntec City. Although the Association was not an official participant, the Peranakan flavour was very much evident in the display and beadwork demonstration by Rumah Bebe and a *sarong kebaya* fashion show and dialogue session by Katong Antique House.

Different groups performed on stage. It was heartening to see our local school children taking part in this inaugural event. Apart from local performers who presented, among other things, traditional marriage rituals (Chinese, Eurasian, Malay and Indian), troupes from Malaysia and Indonesia also made an impressive contribution. 🌸



Our kebaya models were the epitome of peranakan elegance

Song & Dance @ the ACM ONG POH NEO

Saturday, 23 July 2004: Forget Andy Williams at the Indoor Stadium. Saturday night live was reserved for Peranakan Song & Dance at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Die-hard members, guests and supporters were heralded by songs from the Peranakan Voices, including a hearty choral rendition of *Bengawan Solo*. A student group and other young dancers took to the floor with feisty numbers, energising the languid ambience set by the veteran Peranakans present.

Peranakan Voices returned with a vengeance. Charged by the youthful dynamism, they sang more songs with gusto. Not to be outdone, nonya Heather Ong was all grace and elegance in a dance solo to the delightful *keronchong* melody, *Madu dan Racun* (Honey and Poison). Our thanks

go to Mohammed Shah Johari, who secured the young performers and choreographed most of the dances, including Heather's.

The convivial mood heightened as performers and audience alike spontaneously gravitated to the dance floor, urged on by MC Gilbert Chia's boyish appeals. Led by Francis Chia, veterans Arthur D'Castro and Kelynn Saw strummed 'oldies' on the guitars. Shirley Tay belted out a couple of pop numbers. By the time the party ended at 9 pm, the boisterous mood generated was a throwback to a typical Peranakan cultural-cum-social event, so popular in the 50's and 60's heydays.

That evening, I was sure even Andy Williams could not muster the same heartwarming sense of camaraderie. 🌸

Telling the Peranakan story

CLEMENT H S TAN

Tourist guides, taxi guides, hoteliers, tour operators and travel agents -- they listened rapt as Baba Peter Wee brought them down memory lane into the world of the Peranakans, so that they too could tell the same stories to tourists visiting Singapore.



Our unique culture on show at Tourism Court: the bibik in baju panjang, complete with the sangol nyonya and tiga batang korek kuping

The trades were attending a four-day seminar held from 27 – 30 July at the Singapore Tourism Board's Tourism Court, to promote Singapore's unique multiracial culture, arts and architecture. Peter told of our hybrid customs, dress, cuisine, language and origin, to the strains of sonorous *seronee* and catchy *joget* tunes. Just as hybrid was how he related them, in his champor lingo of English, Malay, Baba Patois and mispronounced Chinese. He almost brought the house down with laughter, confessing that the infamous Keong Saik Road was named after his great grandfather!

Bebe Seet traced nyonya fashion, from the days of the *baju panjang* ensemble made of *kain cheleh* in muted colours to the *kebaya rendah* and the richly embroidered *kebaya* of today. Baba Eric Tay spoke on the role of motifs in Peranakan artifacts and culture.

Of course, food was a highlight. St Francis Enterprise served morsels of delectable curry chicken from True Blue Cuisine at breaktime. Makeshift stalls hawking all things Peranakan rang in brisk sales, especially of *kueh tair* and *kueh chang babi*. 🍵

Campur cultures

Japanese docents (museum guides), all volunteers, provide their services at the Singapore History Museum, the Asian Civilization Museums, and the Singapore Art Museum. Six of the guides have formed a Peranakan study group to learn more about the Peranakan heritage. They relate on their progress and what's common between Peranakan and Japanese cultures.

"Unfortunately, there aren't any books on Peranakans published in Japanese. We conduct our studies by translating English texts into Japanese. The knowledge we can gain from written material is quite limited. Besides, as this is a self-study group, we don't have instructors to guide us.

To get actual contacts with Peranakan culture, we occasionally plan events to meet Peranakans. Some of our members attend nonya cooking or beading classes to familiarise ourselves with the culture. Giving lectures on Peranakans to our museum co-workers, compiling Japanese textbooks for our new docent trainees are among our major tasks as well.

You may wonder why a group of Japanese like us is fascinated by Peranakan culture. When we first learned about Peranakans, we were thrilled. We thought that we had found a culture indigenous to Singapore. Peranakan culture is a great mixture of Chinese, Malay and European heritage. We have never encountered such a unique blend of cultures before. In no time, we were enchanted by this splendid culture.



(from left) Akiko Ohira, Naomi Ishimura, Keiko Tanaka, Yukiko Kunitake, Atsuko Takahashi, Megumi Saibe

Most of the museum visitors from Japan aren't familiar with the notion of 'Peranakan'. It is our mission to be armed with well-rounded knowledge to justly convey the charm of the enchanting world of Peranakans.

As we learn more about Peranakan culture and customs, we found out that there are similarities between Peranakans and Japanese. For example, just like modern (mid 19th century) and post-war (mid 20th century) Japan did, Peranakans also assimilated foreign elements into their lives. Often times, Japan is criticised for its lack of originality, mimicking and adopting foreign cultures too readily. At times, this labeling makes us feel ashamed of our own culture. However, observing how Peranakan people proudly conserve their culture of a mixed descent, we feel very much encouraged. We realise that we should also take pride in our 'campur' culture the way Peranakans do.

The more we learn, the more interesting facts we discover. We seek great pleasure in this never-ending journey of learning. And this is what drives us to explore further and deeper into the world of Peranakans. 🍵

Ode to Education: One Man's Legacy

MRS S M PECK

Methodist missionary Mrs Emma Shellabear, who served with husband William in Malacca, had a mission. To educate local girls. Trudging narrow streets, knocking on unwilling doors, she coaxed parents to let their daughters be schooled. One important door opened - Tan Keong Keng's - and history was made. On 1 June, 1904, the Methodist Girls' School opened at Tan's house, 122 Heeren Street.*

On Saturday 3 July 2004, Tan Keong Keng's descendants' met in Malacca to join the centenary celebrations of the Methodist Girls Secondary School and dedicate the restored Shellabear Building in the school campus. The anniversary dinner that evening was attended by 1,500 alumni, supporters, former and current teachers, and students. The most senior alumnus was 92-year old Madam Aishah.

The Tan clan gathered at the school the next day for a special reunion. Food took second place as the Malaysian

Live Worthily

It was John Bunyan who reminded us

*Life is real and life is earnest
and the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest
all's not spoken of the soul.*

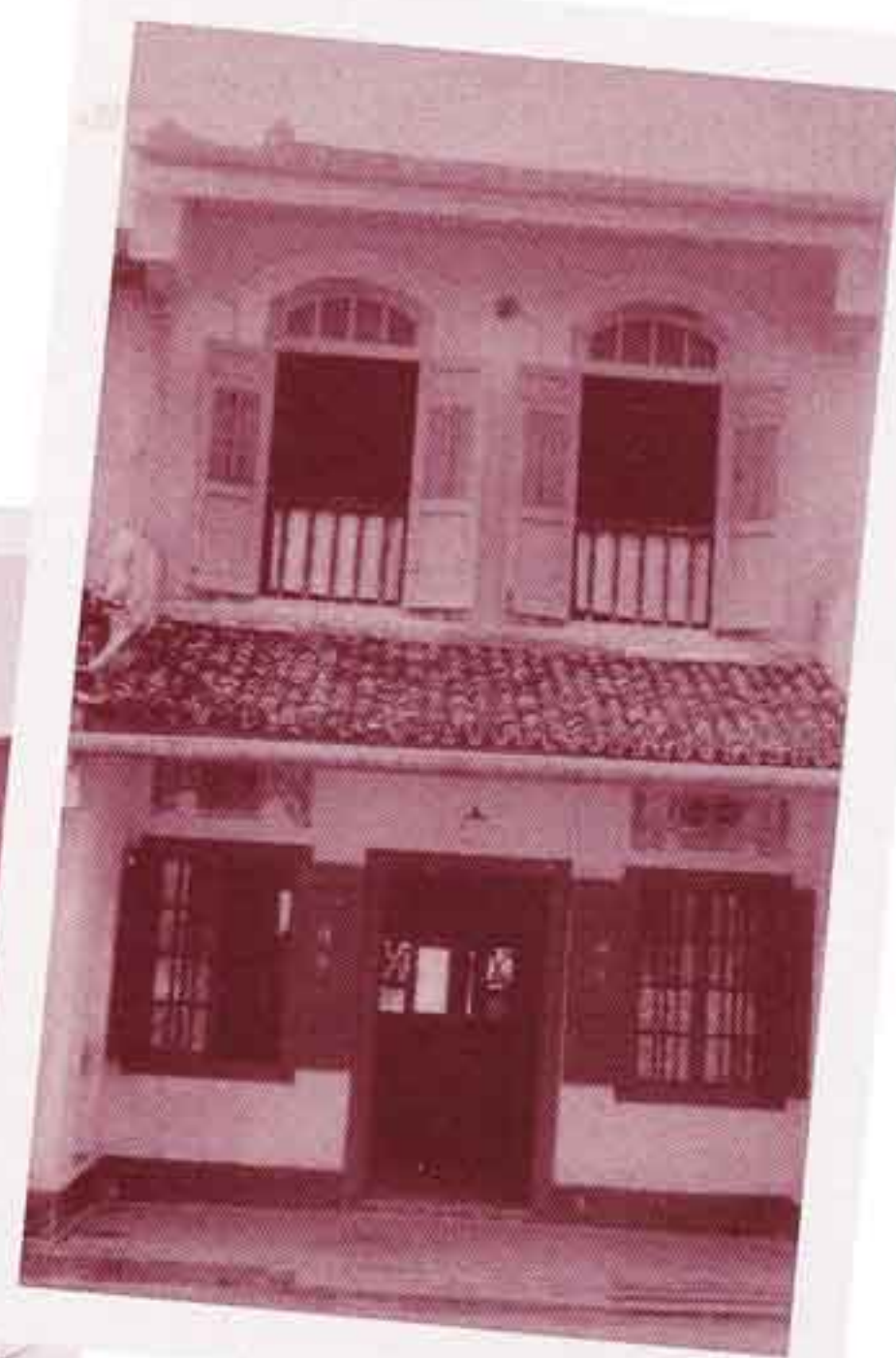
*Lives of great men all remind us
we can make our lives sublime;
And departing, leave behind us
footprints on the sands of time.*

and Singaporean namesakes Chew, Tan, Seet, Lee, Wee, Cheo and more, traced their "pangkat" and marriage connections. So, the young man was uncle to Dr Chew Chin Hin! Running like a thread through the happy and chatty buzz was the sense of pride that they were all descendants of Tan Keong Keng, who continue to leave behind more footprints befitting his legacy. 🐼

** Tan Keong Keng (d.1915) was the eldest son of Malacca shipping tycoon Tan Choon Bock. He was also the uncle of Tun Tan Cheng Lock.*



(Left) Rededication of the Shellabear Block.
(right) 122 Heeren Street, 1904.
(below) Singaporean and Malaysian descendants of Tan Keong Keng, July 2004.



Photographs courtesy of Felix Seet

Kebaya beauties

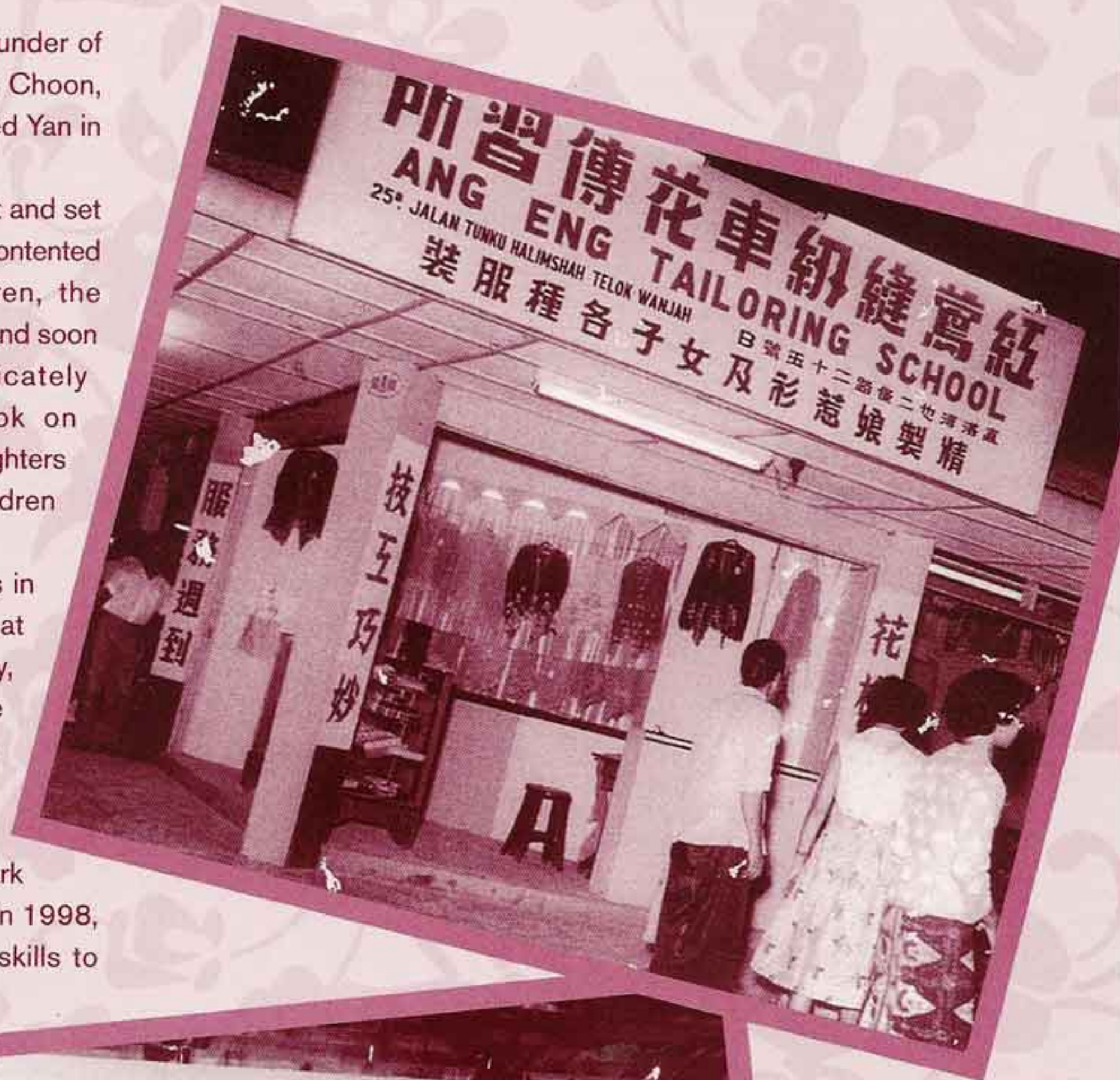
Ang Eng. In Hokkien dialect it means the red cardinal bird. To nonyas it represents the beauty of women wearing kebayas made by Ang Eng.

TEY LIU PHENG PENNY

It all started in 1924 when the founder of 'Ang Eng', the late Madam Lim Wah Choon, was born in a kampong (village) called Yan in the Malaysian state of Kedah.

She married a dried food merchant and set up family in the city of Alor Setar. Not contented with just looking after her children, the seamstress started a small business and soon became renowned for her delicately embroidered kebayas. She took on apprentices and also trained her daughters to pick up the skills while other children were going to school.

Lim's kebayas have many owners in Singapore and once went on show at the National Museum in 1988. Today, five of her seven children carry on the business of kebaya-making under the 'Ang Eng' banner, at several outlets in Kuala Lumpur -- Amcorp Mall, Sungei Wang Plaza and Ampang Park Shopping Centre. She passed away in 1998, thankfully leaving behind precious skills to succeeding generations. 🌸



(above) The original Ang Eng shop, Kuala Lumpur, 1960s
(left) Madam Lim Wah Choon (seated) and some family members

Treasures of the sea – Gerago, blachan and more

NOREEN CHAN

Peranakan cooking without belachan? Almost unthinkable. Our beloved lauk rempah, so many of our well-loved dishes, are as familiar and comforting as the cadences of our Baba patois. Yet few have given more than a passing thought as to where belachan comes from.

Belachan, or salted shrimp paste, is used in some form or another throughout Southeast Asia. Indonesians know it as *trassi*. The Thai version is called *krap*. Its reach is probably wider than most are aware. In Goa a shrimp chutney is called *balchao* and in Macao a similar condiment is known as *balichao*, which is of course *belachan*.

Its manufacture is a thriving cottage industry in Malaysia. Malacca *belachan* is sold as discs, and is of a lighter colour than the Penang version which comes in rectangular blocks.

Its distinctive odour is, well, hard to miss. Some would go so far as to call it a stink, but added to cooking, or roasted and pounded with chillies and *daun limau perut* into *sambal*

Making *belachan* is simple, but hard work. *Gerago* is pounded and dried, mixed with salt, dried again then pounded once more before being shaped into balls or discs. In my old family home an extra-large mortar was fixed into a depression dug in the ground, and metre-long pestles called *antan* were used to do the pounding. 🦐

CHINCHALOK

This relish of fermented *gerago*, with its distinctive piquancy, is a delicacy synonymous with Malaysian cuisine. Home-made for generations, it is now commercially produced and stocked in local supermarkets.

My Koh Poh's recipe

Mix two bowls cooled, cooked rice to one and three-quarter bowls salt. Then add one part of this rice-and-salt mixture to 3 parts *gerago*. A little *angkak* (red colouring available from Chinese medicine shops) can be added to get the light pinkish tint.

Store in well-sterilised jars. The easiest way to sterilise is to swirl a little brandy or rice wine around the bottle and pour out. Seal tight and allow to ferment in a cool place, away from direct sunlight. As the *chinchalok* matures, it produces carbon dioxide which causes the contents to rise up; gentle shaking or inverting a couple of times will redistribute the gas. Don't fill the jars too full; the fermenting process has been known to blow the tops right off!

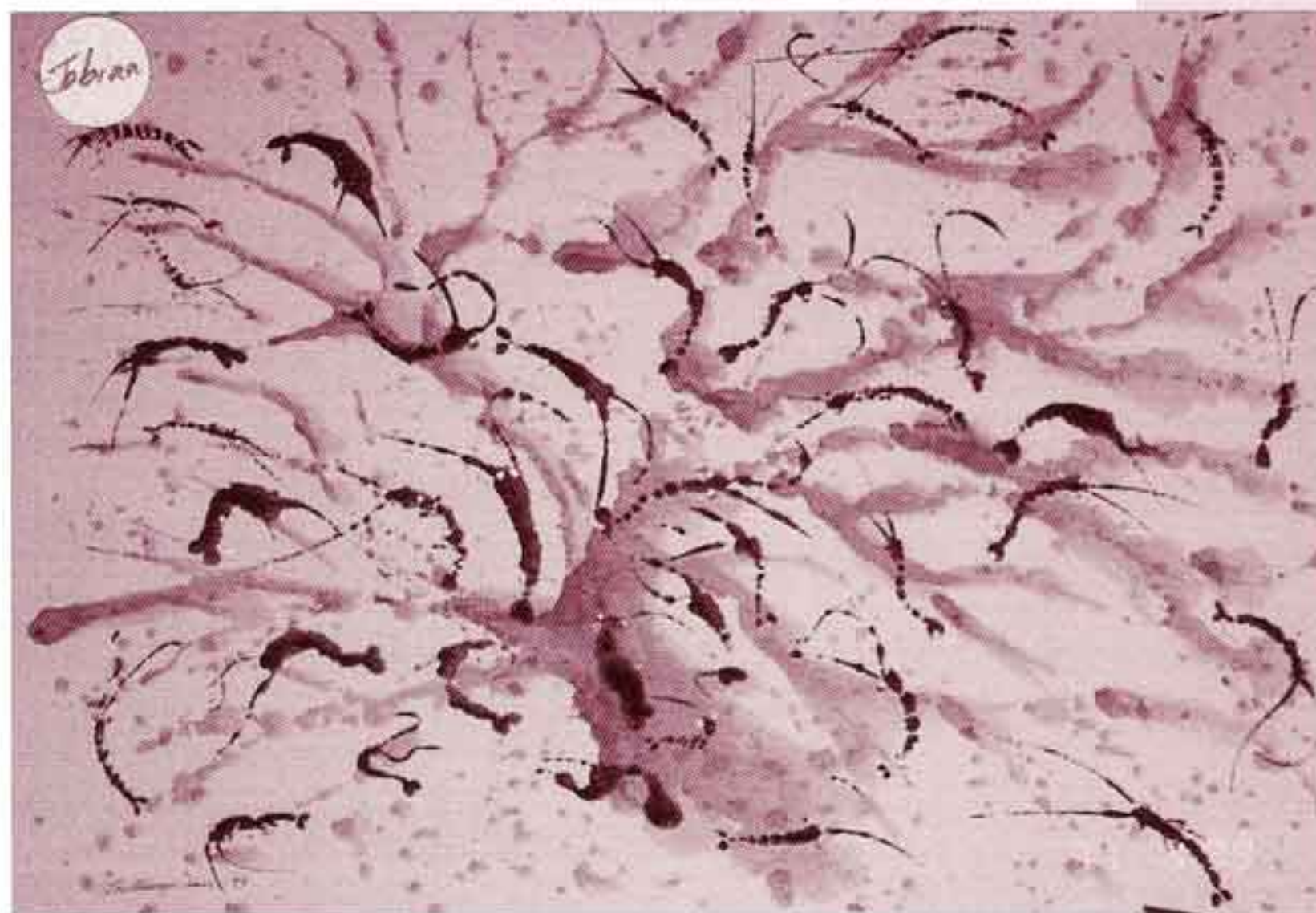
The *chinchalok* is ready to eat after a minimum of five days, and will keep for weeks in the refrigerator. Serve garnished with finely-sliced *bawang merah*, chillies and julienned ginger, with lime halves to squeeze for the tang. Enjoy the *chinchalok* with fried fish and piping hot rice.

TOH HUAY

A fast-disappearing delicacy, this is a deep red paste made from ground *gerago*, to which is added uncooked rice (*beras*) that has been dry-fried over low heat until golden then ground fine. Salt, *angkak* and brandy are added and the mixture left to mature. It can be kept for months.

Marinate belly pork and/or chicken pieces with some *toh huay* paste. Saute more paste and minced garlic, add bruised *seray* (lemon grass) and *daun limau perut*.

Add sliced onions to intensify the flavour. Put in the meat, stir well and cover with water. Sprinkle salt and sugar to taste. Garnish with whole red and green chillies.



'Dancing Shrimp' by Baba artist Anthony Tan.

belachan, it is transformed. Afficionados declare that hot rice and fragrant *sambal belachan* are all they need for a satisfying meal. *Belachan* has also found its way into a tasty marinade for fried chicken (*har cheong kai*).

The primary ingredient in *belachan* is the *gerago* or krill, tiny shrimp fished off the Malacca Straits for generations by the Cristang or Serani fishing community. So closely were the Seranis associated with this minute crustacean that they were sometimes nicknamed *gerago*, a term Rex Shelly alluded to in his book "The Shrimp People".

The bulk of *gerago* is processed into *belachan* and the pickled condiment known as *chinchalok*. A small amount is turned into *toh huay*. *Gerago* can be mixed with flour and made into fritters, called *hay piah* or *pikkadel* (a Cristang term). In its dried form *gerago* is a topping for *mee rebus*.

JOIN THE YOUTHS!

HEATHER ONG

'Ayam' is not just a feathered fowl, harbouring the dreaded bird flu, but a common term in the game of cherki.

A cozy group gathered in July to learn to play this favourite Peranakan pastime. Soon, the mind-boggling geometric patterns, plus words like 'kandang', 'yeo', and 'kow merah' began to make sense. After going through the basics of cherki, we managed to complete a few practice games.

Then seasoned player Auntie Jane arrived and upped the stakes for everyone. We were kept on our toes, as her sharp eyes and agile mind came up with numerous permutations to ensure a winning hand. Our intense finger-numbing-hand-cramping session was rewarded with a sumptuous tea spread. But after a few mouthfuls, everyone was eager to resume their game! At the end of the session, contact details were exchanged, and I hear that some have already met to 'bukak tok'.

We are glad that each event brings fresh faces into the Youth Group. As 'senior' Peranakan youths get married or move overseas, the process of renewal and replacement must continue. If you are young, or young at heart, do join the Youth Group's activities. Most of us are working adults, aged between 20 and 40, and we are the ones who benefit most from the group's support & motivation to juggle career, family, friends and our own Peranakan heritage.

The Internet yahoogroups forum is a great place to start.

You will enjoy the posted messages, which come fast and furious, especially when it is about topics close to our hearts-food, our Peranakan identity, or our traditions. Send an email from your account to peranakan-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

The Association also welcomes fresh talent to our choir and dance group. Do join us as we try new eating-places, learn about our material culture of ceramics, sarongs and beadwork; and our traditions and our patois.

We hope to drum up enough interest to expand into keep-fit groups, hiking groups or even to start our own trendy classes of yoga or pilates. For these, we look to response and sustained support from you.

Come join us!

Contact Heather for more information.

<youth@peranakan.org.sg>



Blooming pantun-pantun

CYNTHIA-WEE HOEFER

A most unlikely group has initiated a *pantun-pantun* and flora session.

And the Nature Society of Singapore had such good response to its first session in May that a second followed in July, with a promise of more to come.

At its Sunflower base in Geylang, perfumed by the ambient scent of herbs and spices, the society leaders explain the symbolism of plants in *pantuns*, which are Malay verses recited or sung with musical accompaniment.

Members and guests read and interpret the *pantuns*, essentially rhyming couplets with each line containing 6 to 10 syllables. The last session ended with a merry sing-along and refreshing nangkas. 🌺

Pantuns make liberal use of plants, flowers or fruits as metaphors to relate life's experiences and learnings. Pantun sing-alongs and repartees became popular in pre-war Peranakan culture, where they were heartily bandied at home, during weddings, festive celebrations or get-togethers, including wakes. The ability to repartee was a much-admired skill.

Find out on the next pantun meet:

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Fax: 67410671
Email: nss@nss.org.sg
Website: www.nss.org.sg

NOTICEBOARD

Congratulations!

Anamah elected to UN women's body

The Peranakan Association congratulates Mrs Anamah Tan, our Hon Secretary from 1974 to 1981, on her election to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Cedaw), which defines women's rights and ensures their enforcement.

Anamah is the first Singaporean to win a seat on the prestigious UN body. It is a fitting tribute to a local pioneer in the women's rights movement. She has led women's organisations locally and internationally, including the International Council of Women, the world's oldest global women's group. Anamah also pushed for the formation of a Family Court in Singapore, and was instrumental in showing cause for the amendment of the Women's Charter in 1996. 🐾



Remaking a Classic: GSA's Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih

PETER LEE

There seems a trend in local theatre to reprise successful productions. Most recently we have seen the reappearance of Michael Chiang's *Private Parts* after many years. As for GSA, it will be almost two decades since they performed *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih*, which was their very first *Wayang Peranakan* (1985).

The new versions will feature GT Lye's reworking of Henry Tan's original script. It will be set in the 1960s with new songs by GT, dazzling costumes and lavish sets. The most delicious aspect of all is to hear pure Peranakan dialogue, spoken the way it should be.

The tale involves a family squabble between two brothers, precipitated by the rivalry between their wives. Originally living under one roof, the brothers fly the coop, leaving their parents forlorn. Only some family friends are able to patch things back at a Chinese New Year gathering, and the show ends with reconciliation between the feuding sisters-in-law.

Look out for GSA's stalwart and accomplished cast, including Terry Lim and Frederick Soh as the brothers, GT Lye as their mother Bibik Yin Tee, and GT's protégé KT, who plays one of the boys' wife. Other cast members include Frederick Tan, Christina Soh, Ameline Goh, Maureen Lim, Mabel Lee, Eddie Lim and Irene Ong.

Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih, Victoria Theatre, 8pm, 17-19 September 2004. Tickets \$27, \$37, \$47

Peranakan Association 104th Anniversary Dinner & Dance

Be part of the Association's colourful festival highlighting Indonesia's influence on the Peranakan culture. Come to the Peranakan Party of the Year and do the Java Jive, Bali Boogie or Sumatra Swing!

Even if you can't dance, join us to celebrate our 104th Anniversary Dinner & Dance on Wednesday, 10 November 2004, 7.00 pm at the Mandarin Ballroom of the Meritus Mandarin Singapore. Tickets are at \$80 per person or \$800 per table of 10 persons. Premium tables go for \$1,200 and donation tables are at \$1,500.

Book early! Send a crossed cheque payable to 'The Peranakan Association' and include a note with your name, address, contact tel nos, the number of seat(s) or table(s) required, the cheque amount and number, and post to:

Dinner & Dance Organising Committee

The Peranakan Association
101 Thomson Road
#01-98/99 United Square
Singapore 307591

For further details, please contact
tel: 65-62550704 or fax: 65-63536801.

JAVA JIVE

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following 11 members:

Mrs Celeste Ann Basapa nee Phillips

Ms Cecilia Cheah Wie Nie

Ms Carmela Cheng

Mr Jon Chua Wey Sun

Mr Joseph Grimberg

Ms May Hui

Mr Ponnosamy Kalastree

Ms Calisa Lee Yoke Foong

Ms Ann Tay Aun Mei

Mr Michael Wee Kheng Siang

Mr Douglas Yap

We are now 1,763 strong!

OBITUARY

Our deepest condolences to the families of the following members:

Mr Christopher Khoo Kim Eng

Mrs Jenny Ma

ERRATUM

In our article 'Annual General Meeting 2004', April-June 2004, the details of Thomas Tan's terms of office as a committee member were inaccurately stated. Thomas served as a committee member from 1994 to 1996 and as Second Vice President from 1996 to 1998, and again from 2000 to 2004. We thank Thomas again for his long service and our apologies for the error.

17th Baba Convention, Malacca 10 -12 December, 2004

Sign up for the 17th Baba Convention, organised by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. The theme this year is 'Towards the Preservation of our Heritage - Look, Listen and Move a la Peranakan.'

Price:

Twin/Triple Sharing - S\$218.00 per person

Single Room - \$278.00 per person

The prices include breakfast. Transport is by a 36-seater bus.

Call the Hon. Secretary at 6255-0704 or fax to The Peranakan Association at 6353-6801 for details and to register for the trip. Please book early as reservations will be accepted on a first-come-first-served basis

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