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october-december 2004

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



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editorial

Java Jive!

In our endeavours to strengthen our ties with our brothers and sisters in the region, we have had great success in maintaining contact with Peranakans in Malaysia and Thailand. At our Baba Convention in 2002 we welcomed, for the first time, representatives from Phuket. We are still in the midst of our search for similar organisations in Indonesia.

It's been a hectic year for our Association. Time just zips past. We celebrate as we strengthen our Indonesian connections with *Java Jive!* for this year's Annual Dinner and Dance. To coincide with the D&D theme, *The Peranakan* pays tribute to our community's very ancient links to Indonesia. From our language and our food to the way we dress, our art and our music, Indonesia has been, and still is, part of our lives. This issue is a love letter to the people, country and culture of the Indonesian islands.

With all the noise and distraction and sensory bombardment of life in the present, we invite you to sit back, relax and experience the subtle, graceful rhythms of a gentler way of life.

Peter Lee

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Romancing Indonesia

BY PETER LEE

Although the current media tend to emphasise political and economic turmoil, in the Peranakan psyche Indonesia has for a long time represented something very romantic and nostalgic.

Names of cities and towns recall images of refinement and elegance — Bandung, Betawi, Bogor, Solo, Brastagi and Padang, among them. We remember through song, some far away bridge in Surabaya called the *Jembatan Merah* (Red Bridge). Pekalongan, Lasem and Kedungwuni immediately conjure up a sense of the finest batiks.

But underlying such romantic notions are links that are actually much more profoundly important, on levels related to many facets of life, such as origins, blood ties, language, lifestyle, cuisine, clothes, music and commerce.

Batavia was founded in 1619 by the Dutch and soon after a sizeable Chinese community developed. Malacca, a smaller Dutch outpost (taken over from the Portuguese in 1641), was always closely connected with big sister Batavia. Merchants from Amoy (Xiamen) and Chuan

Chew (Quanzhou) plied the trade routes to and around the Malay archipelago. The oldest Malacca families trace their ancestry to Malacca from the 17th and 18th centuries. There is no direct evidence for a connection to the Chinese community in Batavia. Still, the links are very subtly present.

It is a known fact that most of the Chinese traders from Singapore, Malacca and Penang in the 19th century conducted business all over the Indonesian archipelago — from towns such as Asahan, Medan, Padang and Palembang in Sumatra, to the ports of Riau and various stops along the Javanese coast, such as Cirebon, Gresik, Semarang and Surabaya. There is even a temple in Makassar in Sulawesi with donations from Kim Seng & Co (the firm of Baba tycoon Tan Kim Seng) dated to the 1860s.

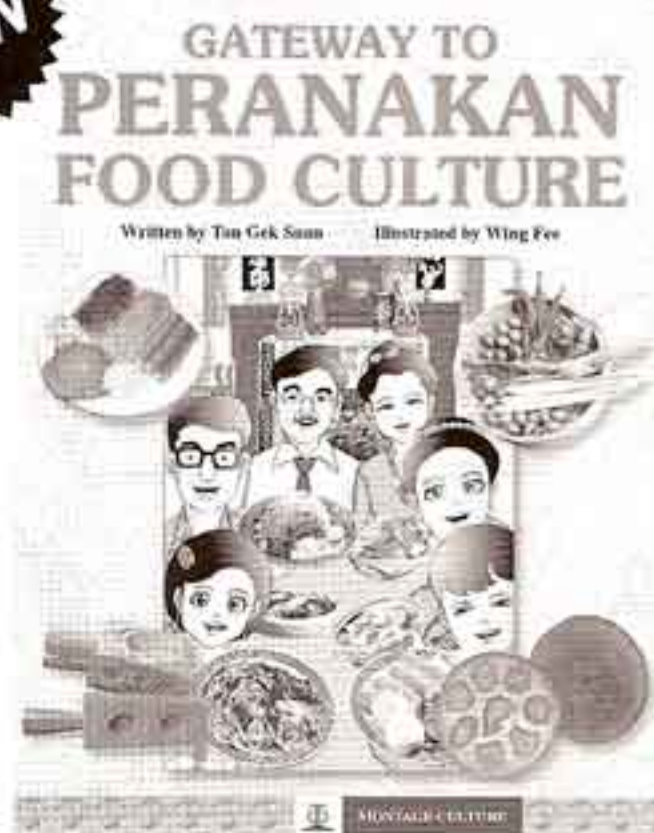
(See page 4: *The Archipelago Connection*)



Like so many cities and towns in Java, Bogor evokes romantic impressions of Indonesia.

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The Archipelago Connection

By PETER LEE

At the turn of the century, when cosmopolitan Batavian culture was at its peak, Indonesian influence had its most enduring impact on the Peranakan culture.

Kinship through language

Hints of our Indonesian links may be found in language. The most significant example may lie in the similarity of pronunciation of Chinese kinship titles, which are the same in Baba Malay and in the language of the Chinese in Java. For example, one's father's younger brother and sister-in-law are addressed the same way in Baba Malay and in the Malay or Javanese spoken by Indonesians of Peranakan Chinese descent — *N'chek* and *N'chim*. In standard Hokkien, these are pronounced *Ah chek* and *Ah Chim*. Suffixes beginning with an 'N' seem present in many Javanese words, and the pronunciation of these kinship titles may indicate a Javanese-Chinese origin rather than a Malaccan one.



From Batavia, the colonial capital, originated the *keronchong* and the *stamboel*, which became the rage among Peranakans in Singapore.

Striking similarities

There are sprinklings of Javanese words in Baba Malay, which are not common in standard Peninsular Malay. A few examples:

Baba Malay	Javanese	Malay	English
changkir	cangkir	cawan	cup
kepiting	kepiting	ketam	crab
kachoak	kacuak	lipas	cockroach
kodok	kodok	katak	frog

Music...

The most pervasive Batavian influence was perhaps of music. From the colonial capital, new popular musical and dramatic forms were emerging, among them, *keronchong* and the *stamboel*. Peranakans in Singapore embraced these with open arms, and till today remain exceedingly popular among the older folks.

With its combination of Western and Javanese influences — viola, flute, cello etc played in a characteristically Javanese polyrhythmic fashion — the music has a multicultural spirit and a delicate romanticism that appealed, and continues to appeal, to Peranakan taste.

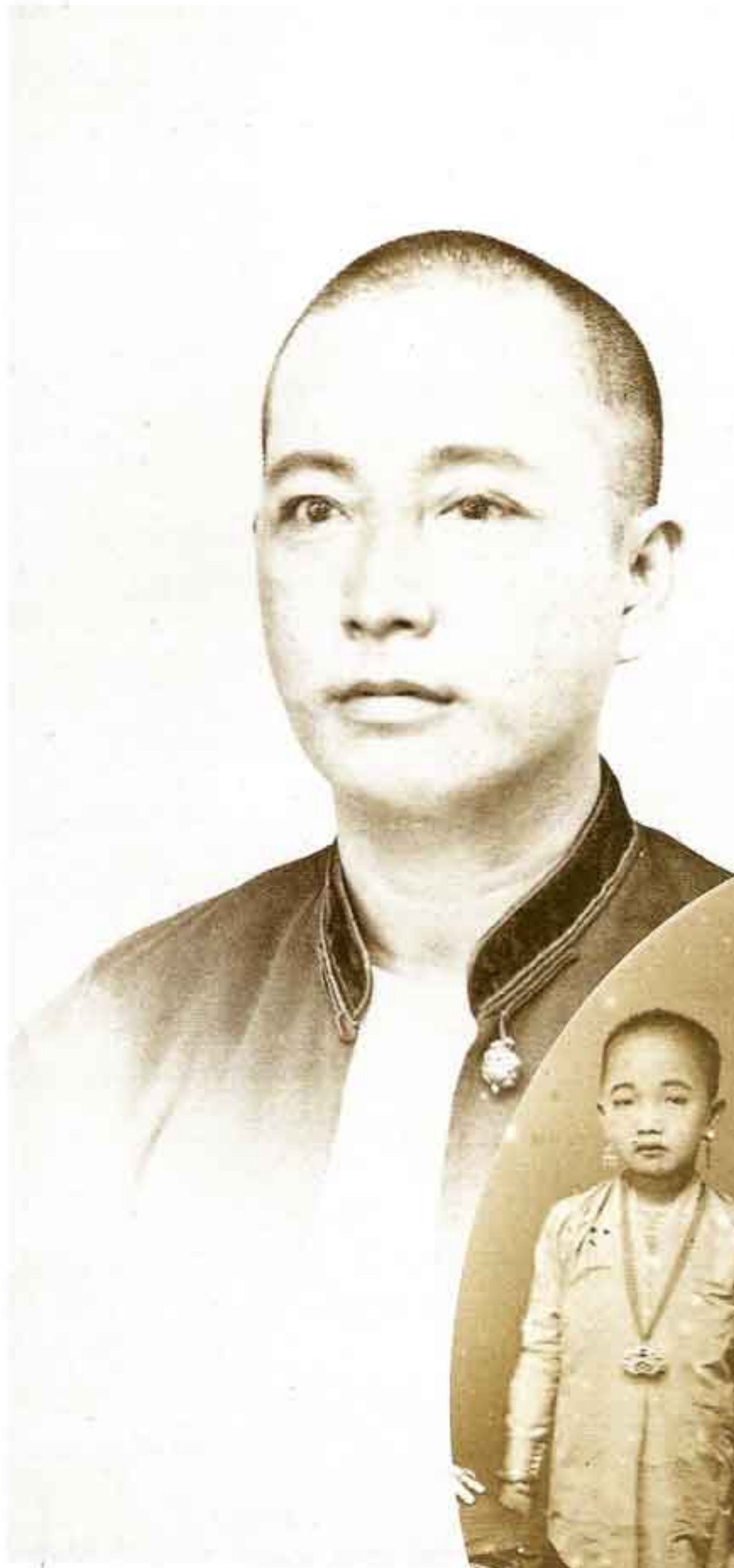
A good Peranakan worth his or her *belachan* will know *Bengawan Solo*, as well as the fact that one can *dayung sampan* all the way to Singapura.

Food...

What about the delights of other senses? Perhaps with smell, it is not scents and fragrance that a Peranakan nowadays associates with Indonesia, but rather the almost transcendental aroma of *ayam buah keluak*! Noreen Chan examines the *keluak* phenomenon on page 13. Cuisine apart, some scents I do associate with Peranakans and with Indonesia are those of sandalwood and camphor, especially when one examines an old batik or *kebaya*. Bunches of sandalwood roots are often used as insect deterrents for old batiks in Indonesia, while some Singapore Peranakan families store their revered textiles in camphorwood chests.

And Dress

As for textiles, they appeal both to the eye and to touch. Nothing beats the smoothness of fine cotton batik. The Peranakans have been in love with Indonesian batik since



Nyonya (right) and Baba (above) from Surabaya, Indonesia, 1860s. Marriages were common between the Chinese settlers and native Javanese women. Dutch traditions were adopted too, and the stronger the Dutch influence, the more respectable was a Baba family.



at least the mid 19th century. In the costume of the Nyonyas, one sees from early photographs of the 1860s the transition from the rather staid checks of *kain chaylay*, to the floral exuberance of batik cloth from the town of Lasem in Java's north coast. Till today *batek lasom* is synonymous with the batiks of the highest quality. By the turn of the century Pekalongan had begun to overtake Lasem as the favoured source of batik cloth among the Peranakans. Up to today the flowery, intricate cloths from Pekalongan and its suburb Kedungwuni are as popular as ever. (See page 7.)

In the 1920s the Nyonyas, being of a rather conservative nature, finally caught up with the fashion for lacy *kebayas*, which in Indonesia, had been worn by Dutch and Eurasian women in Indonesia at least

since the late 18th century. The frumpy

baju panjang was wholeheartedly abandoned by all except the most

severely conservative women, in

favour of these sensuous,

almost transparent voile

blouses embellished with lace or embroidery. And in

typically Peranakan style,

the Nyonyas have steadfastly clung on to

this way of dressing,

which is now seeing

a major revival in

Malaysia and Indonesia,

especially with the

publication of Datin Seri

Endon Mahmood's book,

The Nyonya Kebaya.

The Peranakans have

embraced the best of

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these assets and qualities. With the

ease of travel and Indonesia's relative

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we all going to do about it? 🌸

'The Peranakans have embraced the best of Indonesia, and always celebrated these assets and qualities. With the ease of travel and Indonesia's relative proximity, there is no reason why these connections cannot be maintained, and why our dialogue with the cultures of Indonesia cannot continue to flourish in creative directions. What are we all going to do about it?'

Oey are Family

BY PETER LEE

The Oey clan of Kedungwuni perseveres in producing perhaps the finest batiks in Indonesia



The handwritten trademarks found on individual batik pieces.

Among batik collectors, the name Oey Soe Tjoen (pronounced Wee Soo Choon) is synonymous with the epitome of batik made by Peranakan Chinese ateliers in Java. Oey (1901-1975) married Kwee Tjoen Giok (1905-1998), more famously known as Netty Kwee, in 1925 and soon after established their workshop. Both came from batik producing families in the north coast of Java, although the work was then mainly of the *chap* or stamped variety. It is not clear how the couple developed a workshop capable of producing such fine quality, but by the 1930s their textiles were so acclaimed and popular that the famous Lies van Zuylen, who had dominated the top end of the batik market since the late 19th century, began to imitate the Oey style.

Dutch Batikmakers

The floral variety of batiks, known as *buketan* (after the Dutch pronunciation for bouquet), was developed by a group of enterprising Dutch Eurasian batik-makers after the mid-19th century, and wholeheartedly adopted by the Chinese Peranakans in the early 20th century, and by the 1930s became *de rigueur* as the only type of batik *sarong* worn by Nyonyas throughout the Straits Settlements. European batik scholars tend to denigrate the creativity of the Chinese workshops, quite often considering them to be nothing more than competent imitators. The wide variety of their innovative elements is largely unrecognised.

Oey took the *buketan* style to a new level with the most

intricate patterns. In the grandest pieces, there is an absence of empty space. Quite often a magnifying glass is required to examine the variety of dots and patterns that fill space. The Chinese batik ateliers expressed quality through the refinement of dots used to create pattern. The more dots applied, the finer the cloth.

Sumptuous chromatics

In the early 20th century, many of the Chinese workshops were happy to use the newly available chemical dyes imported by companies such as Farbwerke Hoechst from Frankfurt, Germany. In fact these workshops probably spearheaded the development of this new media, which also revolutionised the chromatic possibilities of batik. The same critical scholars refer to the Chinese use of colour as 'gaudy' although they may also be seen as very modern and free. Altogether, these chromatic expressions, with the refinement of the hand-drawn designs, create a sumptuous and ostentatious form of decoration epitomised by what is often referred to as *tanahan semarangan* (Semarang-style backgrounds).

One trademark that Oey developed was his flamboyantly large butterflies depicted from the top showing the full span of both wings, rather than from the sides or 'profile', with only one full wing visible, as they had been in most batiks at that time. Positioned at the upper edge of the cloth, the butterflies were often hidden beneath the lacy *kebaya*s worn by



(Top) The entrance to the Oey atelier.
(Bottom) Istianti Setiono and her daughter Widiyanti Wijaya

the Nyonyas, which in a sense expresses a kind of sublime luxuriousness.

The Oey Atelier

Kedungwuni is a village about 15 minutes inland from the centre of Pekalongan, which is about two hours' drive west of Semarang. It has a long, straight high street, or *jalan raya*, flanked by rows of shophouses. The renowned Oey atelier is hidden behind a rather nondescript facade marked by a tiny sign, 'Batik Art'.

The workshop is now run by Oey's daughter-in-law Istianti Setiono (otherwise Lie Tjien Nio), a slim, simply attired, genteel and soft-spoken woman who used to be a university lecturer. In 1971 Ibu Istianti married Oey's son Oey Kam Long, also known as Muliadi Wijaya, and immediately joined the family business.

Work in the Oey atelier has always been clearly divided into waxing and dyeing. Overseeing the waxing process seems to have been the women's responsibility and passed from Netty Kwee to her daughter-in-law. Ibu Istianti apprenticed under her mother-in-law for the first 10 years and learnt all the processes from the waxing to the art of matching colours.

The mixing of the dyes and the soaking of the cloths in the dye-filled wooden troughs was the job of the men and likewise passed from the elder Oey to his son. Ibu Istianti, and perhaps I should say the world as well, is fortunate to have her 28-year-old daughter Oey Kiem Liem (Widiati Wijaya) assist with the batiks (her two sons, are however, not interested in the family business). Since her father's death in 2002, Widiati has been in charge of the dyeing process. Shy, petite and reserved, her passion, seriousness and commitment are clearly seen in the way she has taken on this responsibility.

The processes of waxing and dyeing are too elaborate to describe here. Some aspects are worth noting. Ibu Istianti takes sometimes up to four hours to check a finished waxed cloth. Errors are marked with little paper stickers, then returned to the waxer for corrections. As all cloths stained with streaks of colours that have unintentionally seeped through cracks in the wax are rejected without exception, this part of the process is extremely vital. Another unacceptable flaw is the seepage or crossover of one colour into another colour field. So if the pink dye of a flower inadvertently stains the background because of careless waxing, the piece is rejected. Interestingly, one acceptable 'flaw' is a small hole caused by the *chanting* (or waxing 'pen') piercing the cloth. These are considered natural parts of the hand-drawn batik process.

Art of waxing

Waxing is also a specialised art. Only the most senior employees are allowed to do the intricate dotting, usually young girls from Kedungwuni, who leave as soon as they get married. Aware of their market value, quite often they job-hop among the workshops in Kedungwuni and Pekalongan. One result is the uniformity in the decoration of the *tanahan* or backgrounds of the batiks among the workshops. Unfortunately the sublimely fine drawing of the old pieces has yet to be matched in the pieces produced today. In fact, this is one way to distinguish an old piece from a new one.

Another interesting fact is that pine resin (*gondo*) is added

to the beeswax (*malam tawon*) to make the consistency suitable for applying the finest dots in the designs. Only beeswax is used and not paraffin wax. Another surprising ingredient in the wax is beef fat or suet (*kendal*). The mixing of the powders for the dyes is a family secret not taught to any of the workers, and is now done only by Widiati. Two kinds of chemical dyes are used: naphthol and anthrasol. Anthrasol is a photo-chemical dye requiring sunlight to fix the colours and is used especially for shades of blue.

Days are allocated for specific tasks, such as dyeing, sketching, boiling the wax off, washing, etc. All in all it can take from six months to a year to create a fine piece in the Oey Soe Tjoen atelier. The workshop produces about three or four pieces a month, retailing at a fixed price of Rp. 4 million (about S\$800).

Tourist customers

However, most of the production has always been custom-ordered. Since the Bali bombing and the drop in tourism, the family does have a few cloths in stock. Tourists have been their chief market, and it is rather sad that there is little interest among Indonesians, partly because the batiks are not marketed in the main cities.

Cousins

A few doors away is the atelier of another family member, Liem Po Hien. Grandfather Liem Giok Kwie (d. 1959) was the brother-in-law of Oey Soe Tjoen. The Liem house is actually the ancestral house of the Oey family.

Liem's hand-drawn or tulis batiks are remi-niscent of his brother-in-law's, although they have less of that astounding perfectionism of Oey's pieces. Liem Ping Wie (1916-1998) and his wife Tjoa Swie Hoa, who also produced her own cloths under the signature '*Sri Rezeki*', took over his father's business. The 86-year old Ibu, a feisty wiry matriarch, is



Batiks from the workshops of Oey Soe Tjoen (top), Oey Bie Gwan (centre) and Liem Ping Wie (bottom)



(Left) Liem Po Hien (left) with her mother and sister (Right) Oey Bie Gwan



now of course retired, leaving the running of the business to the sixth of her seven children, 40-year-old Po Hien, a portly affable woman. Like in the Oey household, the continuation of the business depends on the women.

To survive in the current economic situation, Ibu Po Hien has had to venture into more commercially viable avenues, and produces contemporary batiks in silk and silk gauze with natural dyes. However she is still determined to produce the fine traditional *buketan* batiks on cotton, which as a tribute to her father, she continues to mark 'Liem Ping Wie'. In 2003, Ibu Po Hien won the second prize in the national batik competition organised by the Yayasan Batik Indonesia. She produces a couple of fine *tulis* batiks in the traditional Peranakan taste every month, selling them for about Rp. 1.5 million (\$300).

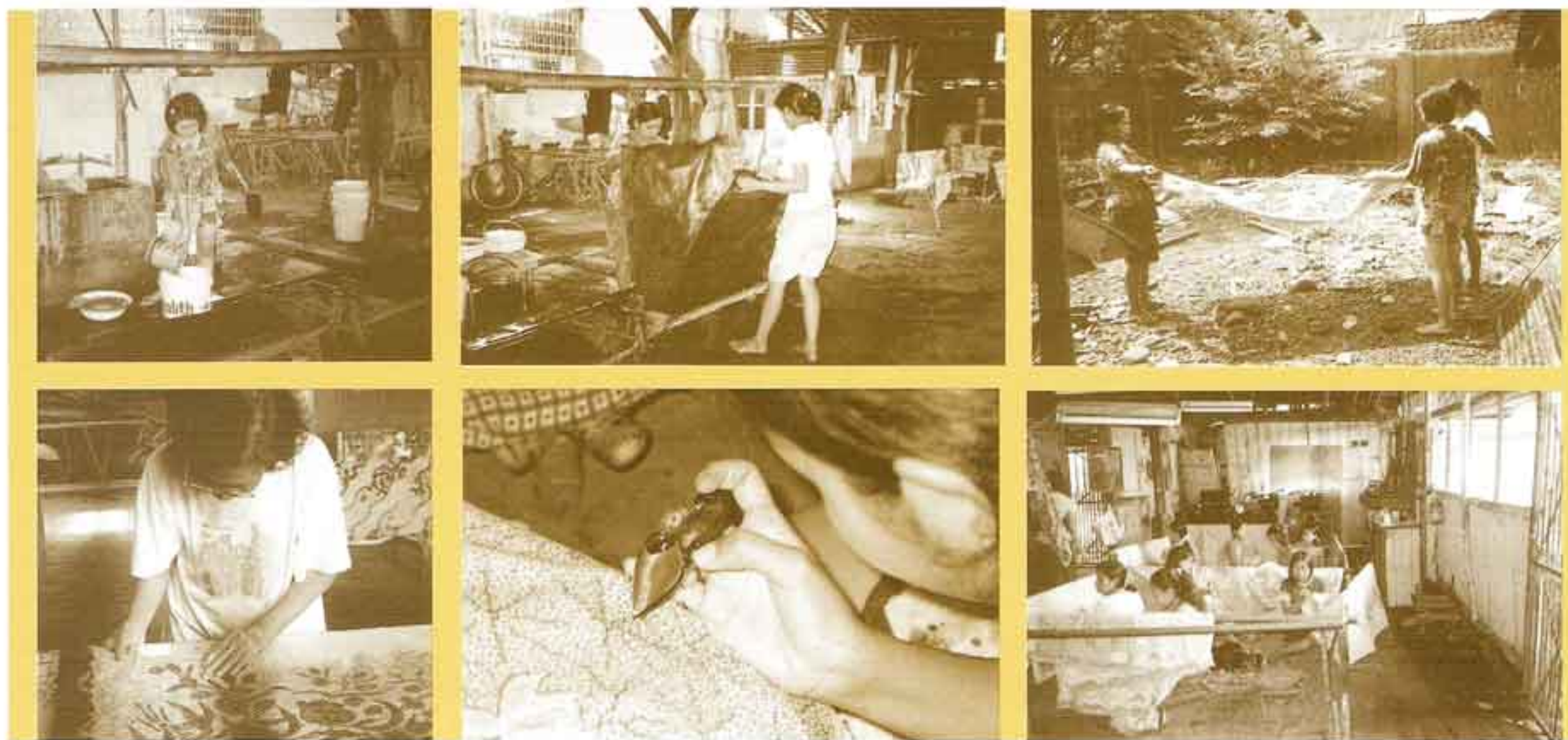
Oey Bie Gwan is another relative producing fine batik *tulis* along the *jalan raya* in Kedungwuni. His father, Oey Mho Tjoe (1902-1990) was a first cousin of Oey Soe Tjoen, and produced extremely fine batiks in the same 'family style' until his retirement in 1970. Oey Bie Gwan, a sprightly septuagenarian Baba, handles all aspects of production by himself. He used to oversee another family business in tanning leather, and was even once a goldsmith. In about 1960 his father retired from batik making, and it was only about 10 years later, that, tiring of the stress and difficulties

of the leather industry, he decided to take over his father's batik workshop. 'I became more at peace making batik,' he says. At the peak he used to produce up to 30 pieces a year but this has dropped to about 10 to 15, and like his cousins, patrons are usually tourists or collectors. Oey retails his pieces for about Rp. 2 million (\$400).

The future

Without the help of his four children who have no interest in continuing the business, keeping the tradition is a grueling task. 'Batik is an art. You must have *jiwa* (spirit) to do this,' he explains. Oey maintains his stamina by practicing *qigong*. What will happen when he decides to retire? He says ruefully, '*Habis.*' Finished.

At least the future is more promising at the workshops of his cousins. Liem Po Hien has been reviving some less common designs from the past, based on the many batik books that have recently been published. Ibu Istianti is now collaborating with her daughter on new designs and experimenting with such styles as the *Hokkoku* (Japanese-inspired batiks). As frail and delicate as the two Oey women may seem, they have determination of steel. Despite all the obstacles, Ibu Istianti declares, 'I must go on with this work.' 🌟



Various stages of production at the Oey Soe Tjoen workshop.

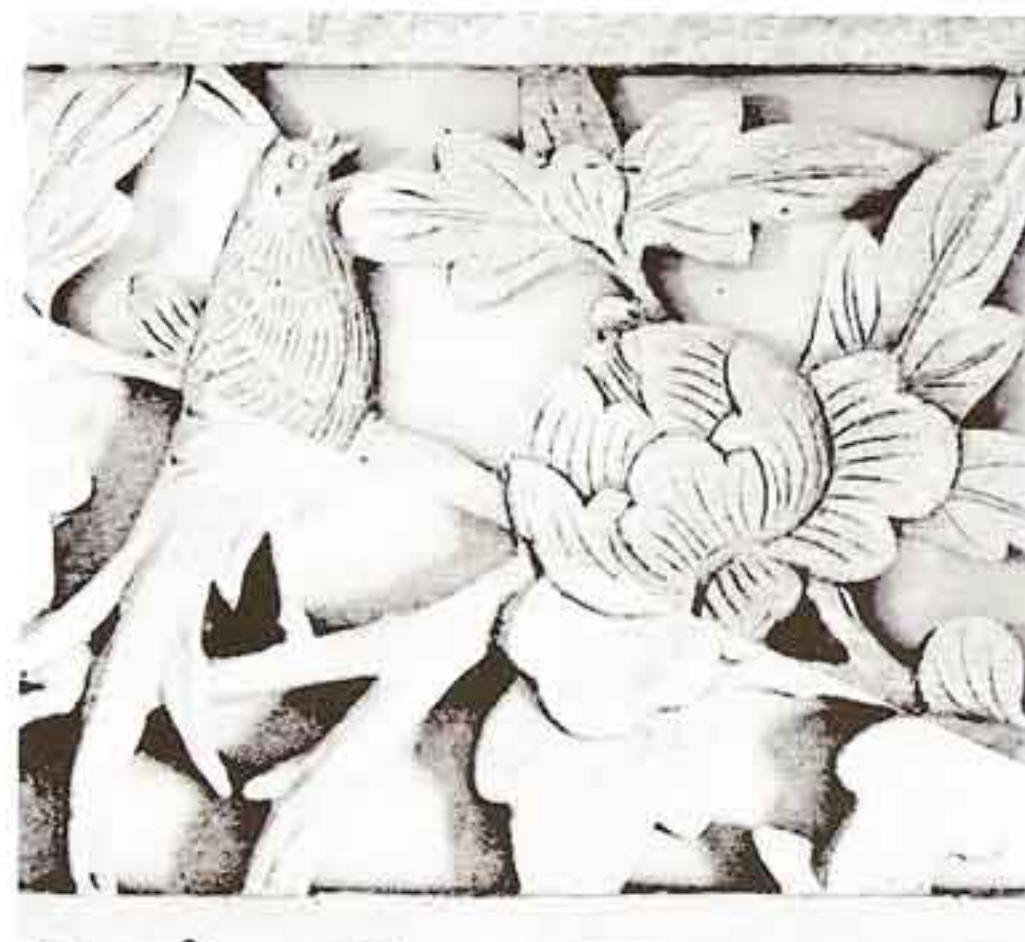


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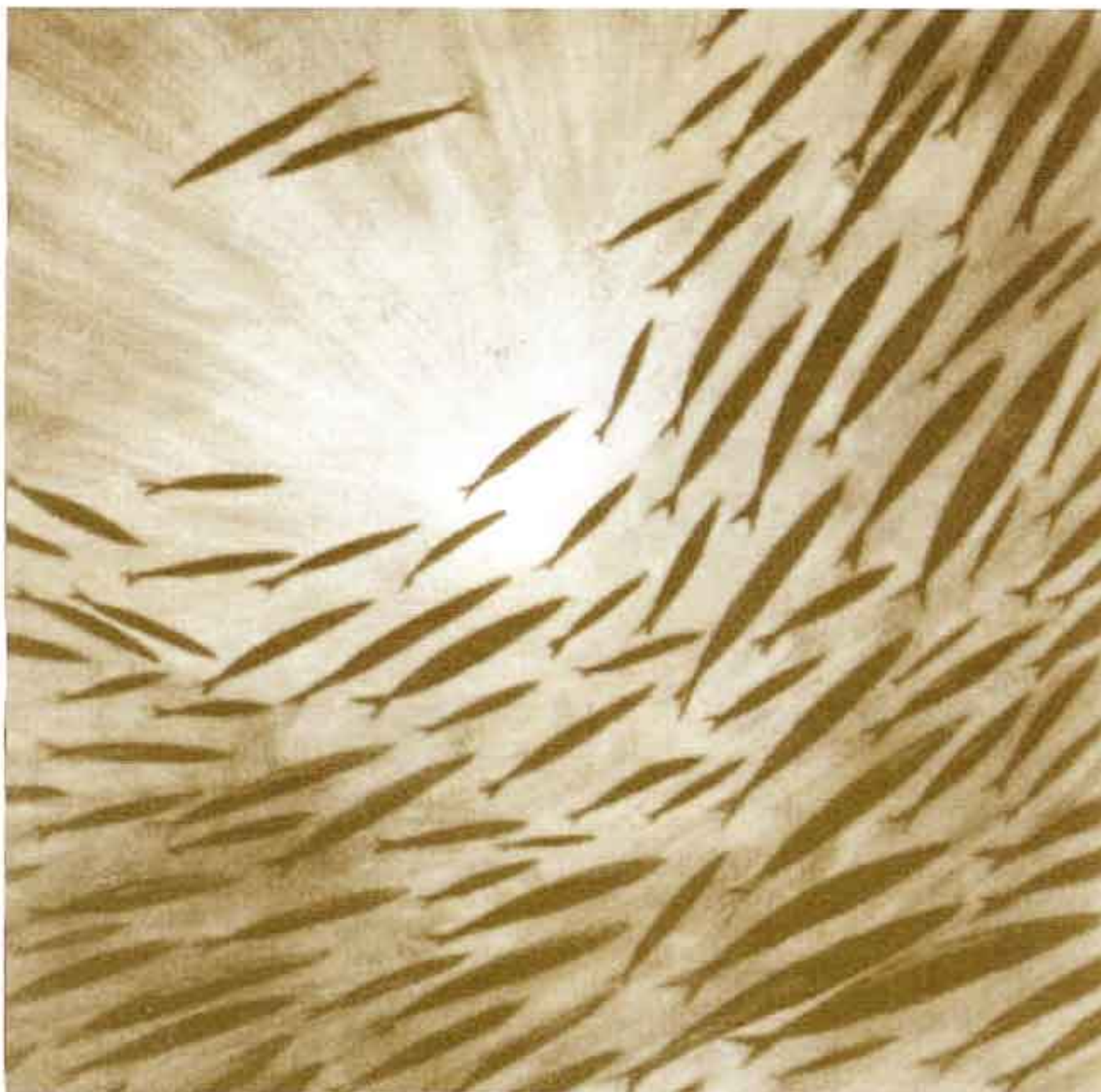
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THE CALL OF THE RIAUS

BY LINDA CHEE

Inspired to devote himself to art by the beauty beneath the Riau waters, Baba artist Anthony Tan remains ruled by his passion for the sea.



Anthony's largely lyrical style is expressed in a vibrant palette of colour.

Living in a *kelong* is today a rare opportunity for many. Anthony not only lived in one, he owned two *kelongs* at one time. "I became very interested in Indonesian fine art when I went to Jakarta during the 90s to do advertising and promotions work. What I saw of the early Javanese culture, lifestyle, intricate crafts blew me. That got me started in painting."

Anthony also made local friends who shared his love for the sea. Almost every weekend, they went on deep sea diving and fishing trips to the Riaus islands, often staying in *kelongs* run by the sea folks. He loved the life of the fisherfolk and the harvest of the sea – snappers, leather jackets, *tua pek kongs*, *garoupa*, *bilis*, *gerago*, *gong gong*, and the like – so freshly cooked right after!

By 1995, Anthony was inspired to set up a business by the sea. The idea of *kelong* living was irresistible. "I hired a few strong hands to put up the structures off Bintan and advertised my *kelongs* for holiday and fishing trips." It was logical to offer commercial fishing trips and branch out into sea sports like diving. In between caring for guests, Anthony found time to sketch and paint. He was fascinated by the rich underwater landscapes, teeming with life and movement. Diving into moonlit waters was especially magical. "The sea opened my vision of what I really wanted to do."

The influences stayed. He decided to bring his passion for the sea to land, to communicate through painting. "I started with fishes and things like the lifestyle of the sea nomads. Then I built on to more abstract art, using colours of the sea that stayed in my mind."

Anthony also drew inspiration from the colours of his childhood in Kampung Amber and Joo Chiat, mingling with the Malay community during his school days, going

fishing and swimming off Changi Point. A Malay fisherman took a liking to him when he was 10 and taught him how to fish and dive without support, whenever they met at Bedok jetty in those days, of course, playing truant from school.

Where language was concerned, Anthony was no fish out of water. His Peranakan roots drew from his father, a

Penang Baba who settled in Singapore before World War II. Mother was from Rangoon, Burma, and well reputed as a midwife in those days.

Chari makan called, and he packed up his *kelong* business to work in Jakarta. Since returning to Singapore, Anthony has developed his own style. His debut exhibition, *Songs of the Sea*, was held at the *Alliance Francaise* in 1998. Today, his works are collected by individuals and corporations including

The Four Seasons Maldives, The Fullerton, Raffles Marina, United Overseas Bank, Crowne Plaza Sydney, The Tung Lok Group and Qian Hu Corporation. He is building up a portfolio for another exhibition soon.

Life as an artist in Singapore has not been without its struggles. Still, he persists, as this is "my life passion". In between commissions, teaching art to the young and adults and giving talks, Anthony finds time to paint for the church. "It is work for God. That is rewarding enough." His works can be seen in the Church of St. Anthony at Woodlands Avenue 1 where he worships.

Anthony is amused when asked about his inspirations over the years. "I catch fish for my cat, Smokey, to eat. My wife cooks *assam pedas*. *Keronchong* music. The flavours of Indonesian *bumbu (rempah)*, the beauty and tensions of the sea, like winds, storms, tempests, the anger ... All these inspire me." 🙏

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'MY SUBJECT IS THE SEA AND ITS ELEMENTS,
HOW IT MOVES, WHAT'S IN AND AROUND IT.
THE GRAVITY IS DEFIED, LIGHT IS FRACTURED. ALMOST EVERYTHING
SHIFTS, MOVES CONSTANTLY, BUT WITH A RHYTHM. SOCIAL
LIFESTYLES ARE MOULDED BY THE ELEMENTS, BOTH ABOVE AND
BELOW THE OCEAN'S SURFACE.' – ANTHONY TAN



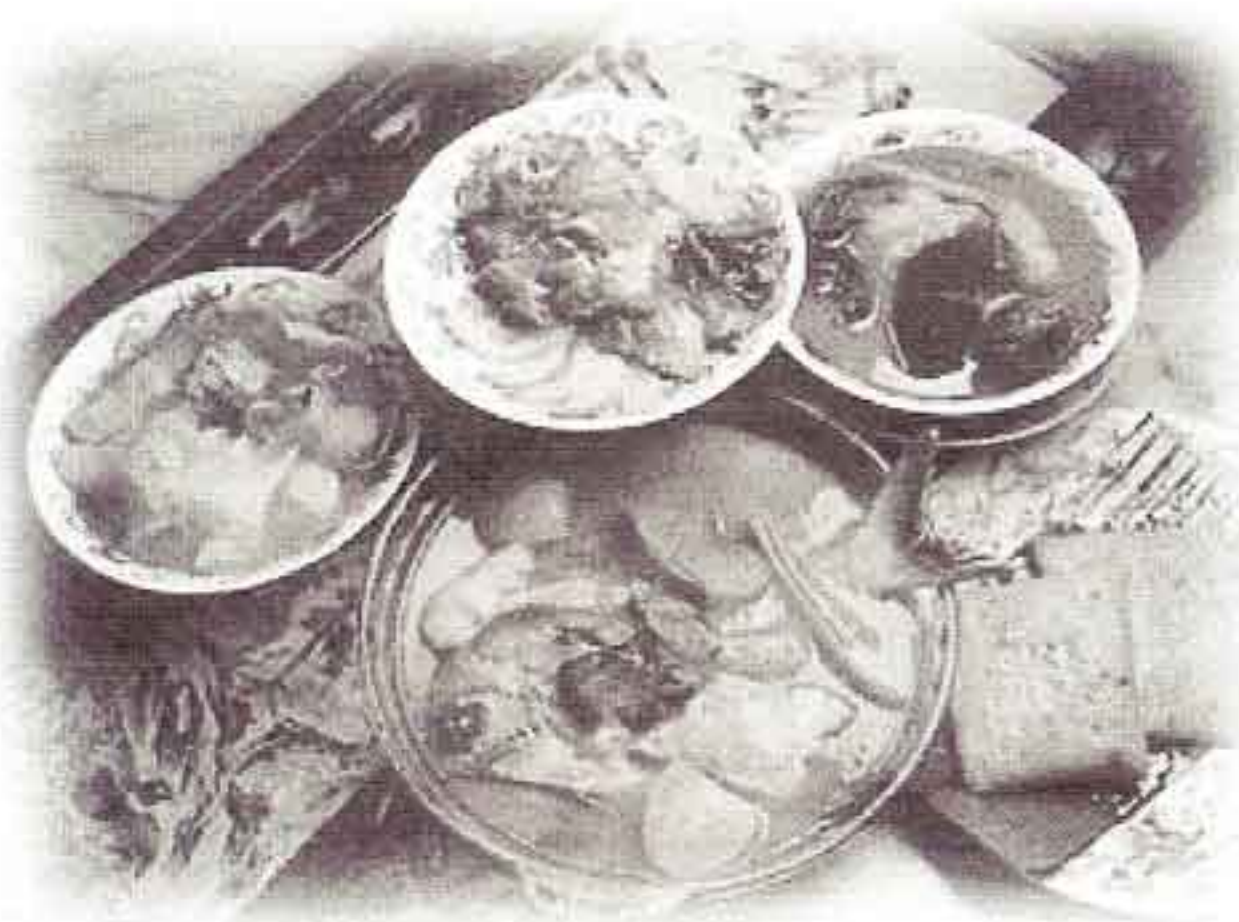
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* Restaurant located at **214, Joo Chiat Road. S 427482**
Since 1953

DALAM DAPUR

BUAH KELUAK

Black Gold of the Archipelago

BY NOREEN CHAN

Mention Peranakan cuisine and ayam buah keluak immediately springs to mind. This most characteristic lauk rempah represents a happy fusion of cultures and reminds us of our culinary links to Indonesia.

No one has been able to tell me how *ayam buah keluak* evolved to its present form. In Java, *keluak* is used to make *rawon*, almost as an afterthought to add interest and colour rather than as the dominant theme.

For the uninitiated, *rawon* is a thin spicy beef stew, eaten with rice, newly sprouted *taugeh* (bean sprouts), salted eggs, *keropok udang* and *kerepek belinjo*. The *rempah* or spice mixture contains dried chilli, *bawang merah* (shallots), *bawang putih* (garlic), *buah keras* (candlenuts), *ketumbar* (coriander), *kunyit* (tumeric), ginger, as well as *serai* (lemon grass), *lengkuas* (galangal) and *daun limau perut* (kaffir lime leaf). This combination may look familiar to those who have cooked *ayam buah keluak*, but any similarity ends there.

Somehow, during the journey across the sea, *buah keluak* evolved in form. Peranakans rarely used beef in their cooking, usually preferring chicken, but often pork ribs and sometimes, just pork. Pork ribs add sweetness and body to the already rich flavour. The *rempah* contains chilli, *bawang merah*, *bawang putih*, *belachan* – the quartet known as *rempah titek* – as well as *serai*, *lengkuas*, *kunyit* and *assam* (tamarind).

Many recipes call for the nut meat to be *korek* (dug out), mixed with the *rempah* (and minced meat as an option), and stuffed back into the shells. Others insist that the kernels be left untouched, so as not to 'dilute' the taste. But one thing is clear, connoisseurs head straight for the precious dark nuts, some boasting of being able to eat 10 at a go!

A lesser known variation on the old standard is *sambal*

buah keluak, which saves the diner from having to *korek* like a miner.

SAMBAL BUAH KERLUAK (Grandma Elsie's original recipe)

Bua kerluak korek esee yang baik, toombok bia halus.

1/2 klapa, daun pisang, oudang, babi di chingchang halus.

Rumpah titek : Bua kras, chili, b. merah, blachan sedikit. Toombok halus, champoh oudang, babi abis mendidi kan sama santan entjer, suda masok bua kerluak, garem, gula; suda chupok tuang santan kental angkat sedjok

kan. Moonkoos satu satu sama daon pisang batu, abis panggang atau chuay.

Eccentric spelling aside, notice the similiarity to *ayam buah keluak*, except that the *rempah* and *keluak* meat are cooked with *santan* (coconut milk). Wrapping the mixture in banana leaf turns this into a luxurious form of *otak*. *Pisang batu* leaves are preferred because they do not darken when steamed.

Not used to *agak agak*? Try this version:

SAMBAL BUAH KELUAK

25-30 nuts *buah keluak*, meat removed and finely pounded

50g finely minced pork

50g finely minced prawns

6 *buah keras*

16 *bawang merah*

2 fresh chillies

1 marble-sized *belachan*

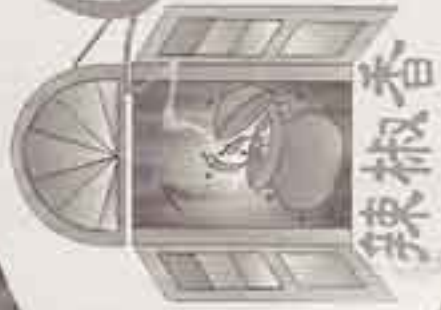
1 coconut – *pati* (no. 1 milk only)



Buah keluak as we know it before processing.

Chilli Padi

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Awards Winner Restaurant



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No. 11 Joo Chiat Place #01-03 Singapore 427744

Restaurant Opening Hours

11.00pm - 2.30pm | 5.30pm - 10.00pm

Last Order : 9.30pm

For Reservations, Please Call 6275 1002

Chilli Padi Nonya Catering

Tel: 6247 9551

Fax: 6247 9536

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on
20th November 2001
for exceptional culinary skills in
Caring & Serving Fish Head
Nonya Egg Shaped Pudding

FOOD
AWARDS
2001



Taste Of Nonya
Traditional Peranakan Food



Look for the kepayang tree at the Botanical Gardens.



The enigmatic fruit with its pale brown skin.



Split open exposing pulpy yellow segments.

Saute the *rempah* until fragrant, add pounded *keluak*, pork and prawns. Mix well, add $1\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt, 1-2 tsp sugar to taste. When almost cooked, add coconut milk. Wrap portions of the mixture in banana leaves and steam. I prefer to grill for the delicious smoky flavour. 10 minutes on each side is ample. For busy cooks, short-cut with ready-made buah keluak rempah mix available commercially.

Buah keluak, when served, is not the most attractive. Someone once said it reminded him of black shoe polish! It may be an acquired taste, but for those in the know, this nut is gustatory gold. 🌟

Poison arrows

Buah *keluak* is known in Indonesia as *kluwek* or *kluwak*. It is the fruit of the *kepayang* tree (*Pangium edule*), native to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The nuts grow in large clusters, surrounded by a covering which splits when the ripe fruit falls to the ground. The kernel or nut meat is white when immature but beware, they contain a chemical related to prussic acid which is poisonous. Ground raw kernels have been used to coat arrows to hunt small birds and animals. Fortunately, the toxin can be neutralized by soaking the nuts in water and burying in earth and ash. By the time the mature, 'seasoned' nuts reach the market, they look like large, rounded brazil nuts with slightly bitter-tasting black kernels.

Preparing keluak

- Choose nuts heavy for their size.
- You don't have to soak the nuts for three days. Overnight will do. If you are in a hurry, soak half an hour in warm water.
- The nuts should be cracked open across the widest part. I find a pair of pliers works well.
- The nut meat freezes well and the shells can be washed and stored for later use.

Memories of an Indonesian immigrant

BY ANTHONY OEI

I believe I am one of the few who lived under three different colonial masters. I was born in Indonesia ruled by the Dutch for three centuries. During World War II, the Japanese replaced the Dutch. After the war, we migrated to Singapore, run by the British until Singapore's independence.

We had moved to Singapore for an English education and a better life. Our father, John Oei, had been a clerk at the British Consulate in Jakarta. Our mother, Houw Pang Nio, hailed from Cianjur, a tiny town near Bandung. Her father was a sundry shop owner from China and her mother, a Javanese Chinese from Solo. There were five boys in the family. James the eldest and I were born in Jakarta and my three younger brothers Benny, Eddie and Francis in Bogor. Before the Japanese invasion, we moved to Sukabumi, a pleasant town about 40 km east.

When the war ended, Indonesia was restive with the independence struggle raging against the Dutch. Allied forces were deployed to help with Dutch maintain law and order. Armed convoys patrolled the streets.

The British Consulate arranged our transport to Singapore. The journey came in two stages: Sukabumi-Bogor-Jakarta and Jakarta-Singapore. The first leg was a thrilling experience. We travelled in a military convoy, with soldiers armed to the teeth. The Consulate had decided this was the safest means of conveyance for us. For added safety in case of an ambush, they put us in the convoy's ambulance!

In Bogor, we were taken to a holding centre for Dutch nationals wanting to escape to Holland, to await a connection to Jakarta. The camp was heavily guarded by Indian soldiers of the Allied forces. We felt like prisoners-of-war.

A couple of days later, a military truck delivered us at the doorstep of our friend's house, a happy ending to this unique travel experience. We sojourned in the capital for several months before setting off again, this time by sea on a Dutch vessel named *Maatsuycker*, to enter a strange land and a new life. My first impression of Singapore was a Chinese city. We became Singapore citizens in 1957 with the passing of the Citizenship Bill that year. Two more brothers came, Adrian and Matthew, making us the Magnificent Seven. I wish I had a sister.

I have no complaints about life in Singapore. I worked as

a journalist and have written two books. I met my wife Teresa (a Singapore Peranakan), have three children and three grandchildren, and my own home. My only regret is losing touch with my Indonesian relatives, although two of my cousins, Elsie and Peter, are here, and with Sundanese (my mother tongue) and Bahasa Indonesia.

I have been back once (in 1988) when I took my wife and daughters Charmaine, Michelle and Dawn, and my mother (my father had died), on a voyage of rediscovery. I showed my family Jakarta, Bogor and Sukabumi where I had lived and played, and my mother's birthplace, Cianjur,

as well as Puncak, Bandung and Bali.

Jakarta had progressed everywhere, although many well-known old places like Glodok remained. To my chagrin, house No.10 Jalan Mangga Dua where I was born, and its surroundings, had been replaced with commercial buildings.

No luck either in Bogor. I could not even find the road of my old house, Gang Edward. Western names had been

removed from the streets after independence, and replaced with local names or of the freedom fighters. But I was glad that many familiar landmarks, like the famous Botanical Garden and St Mary's Church where I used to worship, were still there. At my request, the young parish priest retrieved from the church archives my Bogor-born brothers' baptism certificates! Then we were off to Cianjur. My mother was happy to see her birthplace again. It was my first time there. With the help of passers-by, we found her old house-cum-sundry shop called Toko Solo, now owned by a Chinese family selling *jamu*.

My fondest memories though, were of Sukabumi where I had my most glorious childhood, my slice of heaven. We lived in the village of Sukamantri. To my utter joy, the old bungalow at 1843 Jalan Sukamantri, which we had rented from the *lurah* (village head) still existed. And glory be! The occupant was my childhood chum, Achmad Rifai, the *lurah's* eldest son and now the village head. The house had a new facade, but otherwise looked the same as 40 years before.

Although our visit was unannounced, Achmad welcomed us with open arms. What a fabulous reunion! He remembered my mother and me very well. I introduced my family while



Wife Teresa and I at the railway bridge in Sukamantri. As a boy, I used to swim in the river below with my brothers and friends. The vast countryside was our playground.



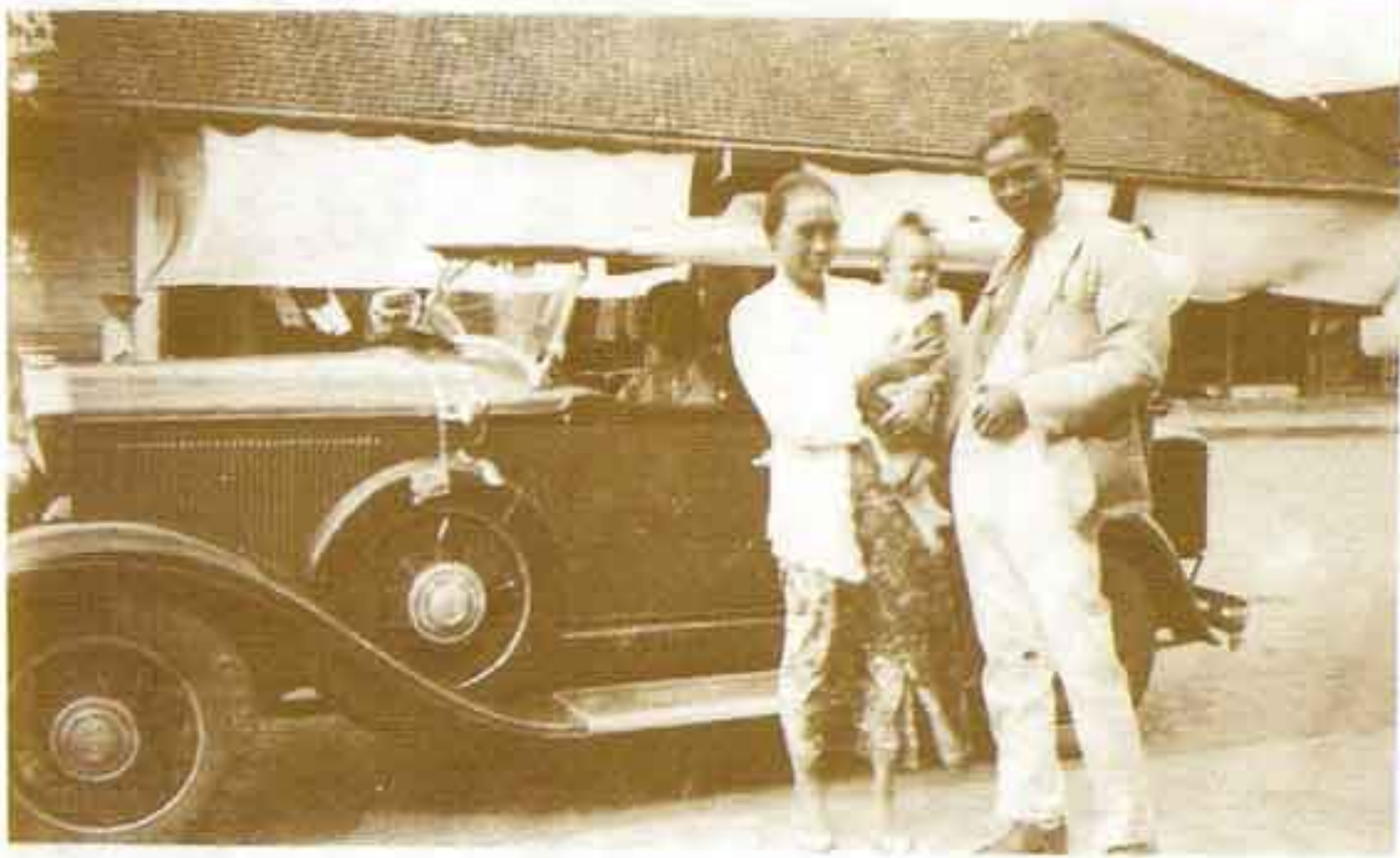
Left: Recalling old times with Achmad (right) in front of my old house in Sukamantri. On the left is Achmad's friend whom I had never met before.

Below: From right to left: My mother and daughters Michelle, Charmaine and Dawn in Cianjur, my mother's birthplace. We found her old house-cum-sundry shop called Toko Solo.



Left: My parents with eldest brother James as a baby in Jakarta (circa 1931).

Below: Java Parade (from right) James, me and Benny, with our father holding fourth brother Eddie in Bogor (circa 1941).



far as the eye could see into the distant hills and mountains, and the river flowing beneath a bridge of the Jakarta-Surabaya railway line. Sometimes there were flash floods, making the river treacherous.

he introduced his. Over Sukabumi coffee, we laughed as we swapped tales. He asked about my father whom he still addressed as Tuan John, and my brothers. We had been a highly respected family in the village. They called our mother Nyonya and my brothers and me *neng*, for example *neng Tony*.

We Oei boys had had marvellous times with Achmad and his siblings and other village children, all rattling in Sundanese. He said most of them had left the village, He remembered me as being *anak yang paling nakal*, and I remembered the *cewek yang cantik sekali* whom I fancied. If I had not migrated to Singapore...

Life was tough during the Japanese occupation, but we reared poultry so there was no lack of protein for our meals. We even dabbled in entrepreneurship, selling surplus eggs and more eggs bought from village farms. Every day had been a playing holiday for us siblings. There was no English-language school then and our father scorned other language-stream schools. Our playground had been the vast countryside of padi fields, fruit orchards, vegetable gardens and forests stretching as



one's roots.

But hey, I am a loyal Singaporean, OK? I only hope that I have been a worthy immigrant from Indonesia. *Apa yang terjadi kalauku tidak pindah ke-Singapura?*

On this nostalgic journey, Achmad accompanied me and my family to see our "playground" again. We recalled our youthful exuberance which sometimes extended to stealing fruit and vegetables, and the angry farmer who chased us brandishing a *golok* (parang) for stealing his mangoes. And you say today's *anak-anak nakal banget!*

Thanks for the memories, Achmad, I still hold an affection for the land of my birth. It is a beautiful country. At the next available opportunity, I will take my wife to other cities I have not been, like Semarang, Solo, Yogyakarta and Surabaya. I remind her that one must keep



Dapur Babah (*The Baba Kitchen*)

BY LUCIENNE ANHAR

Between the VOC period and the 1900s, the 'best-of' of the three cuisine cultures – Chinese, Javanese and Dutch – was blended to create dishes that have evolved across generations into a unique Babah cuisine. The rituals and recipes were not the ambitious creations of world-famous gourmet chefs, but more the results of experiments of the Nyonya wives as well as their house-cooks and maids, known as Bedinde.



The bedinde were the unsung culinary heroes of Peranakan cuisine in Indonesia.

The *Bedinde* commonly ate within the comfort of the kitchen, many of which had a unique character. Some of the *Bedindes* took on the religions of *Khong Hu Tju* and Taoism. In these kitchens, they normally kept a statue of their own Kitchen Goddess Protector. On Thursday evenings, they burnt incense and offered fragrant fresh flowers, praying for their safety and well-being. Their belief and the "presence" of their Goddess Protector gave them significant self-confidence, which in turn was believed to show in the deliciousness of their Babah dishes.

This Babah kitchen, the food created in it and the homey, motherly rituals inspired the creation of *Dapur Babah* restaurant by Mr Anhar Setjadibrata, the owner/designer of Tugu Hotels and Exotic Spas. Anhar's *Dapur Babah*, which just opened in mid-October, records the history of a socially prominent Babah family in Java, the Oei's, and their *Bedindes*, who had never been acknowledged for their culinary achievements until now.

The Oei's were well-known as art and food lovers. Their lineage included famous billionaires

such as Oei Tambah Sia and Oei Tiong Ham at the end of the 19th century. For Hotel Tugu Bali, Hotel Tugu Malang, and Hotel Tugu Blitar, the lives of *Bedindes* are no less important than the lives of the Babah families themselves, which are already much told by history.

Dapur Babah is dedicated to *Djebrak*, *Su*, and *Mbok Mun* for their homey Babah fried rice, *Sampir* for her famous *Fuyonghai tofu*, *Cik Hwa* for *lodeh kacang tolo* and *cecek*, *Ncik Djien* for *bubur taoco*, *Mak Kwi* for *lemper* and *bluder*. Daily *Babah* menu featured rice with chicken and egg in yellow sauce, *bandeng garang asem* (Javanese fish in hot and sour soup), macaroni cake, potato croquette with black bean sauce.

In Anhar's *Dapur Babah*, the so-unique Babah traditions of tea and coffee drinking are presented as well. The coffee and tea blends drunk by old Babah families have been prepared specially for *Dapur Babah*, which aims to revive every aspect of this old Babah culture. The utensils used in presenting the tea and coffee are antiques originating from Babah families in Java.

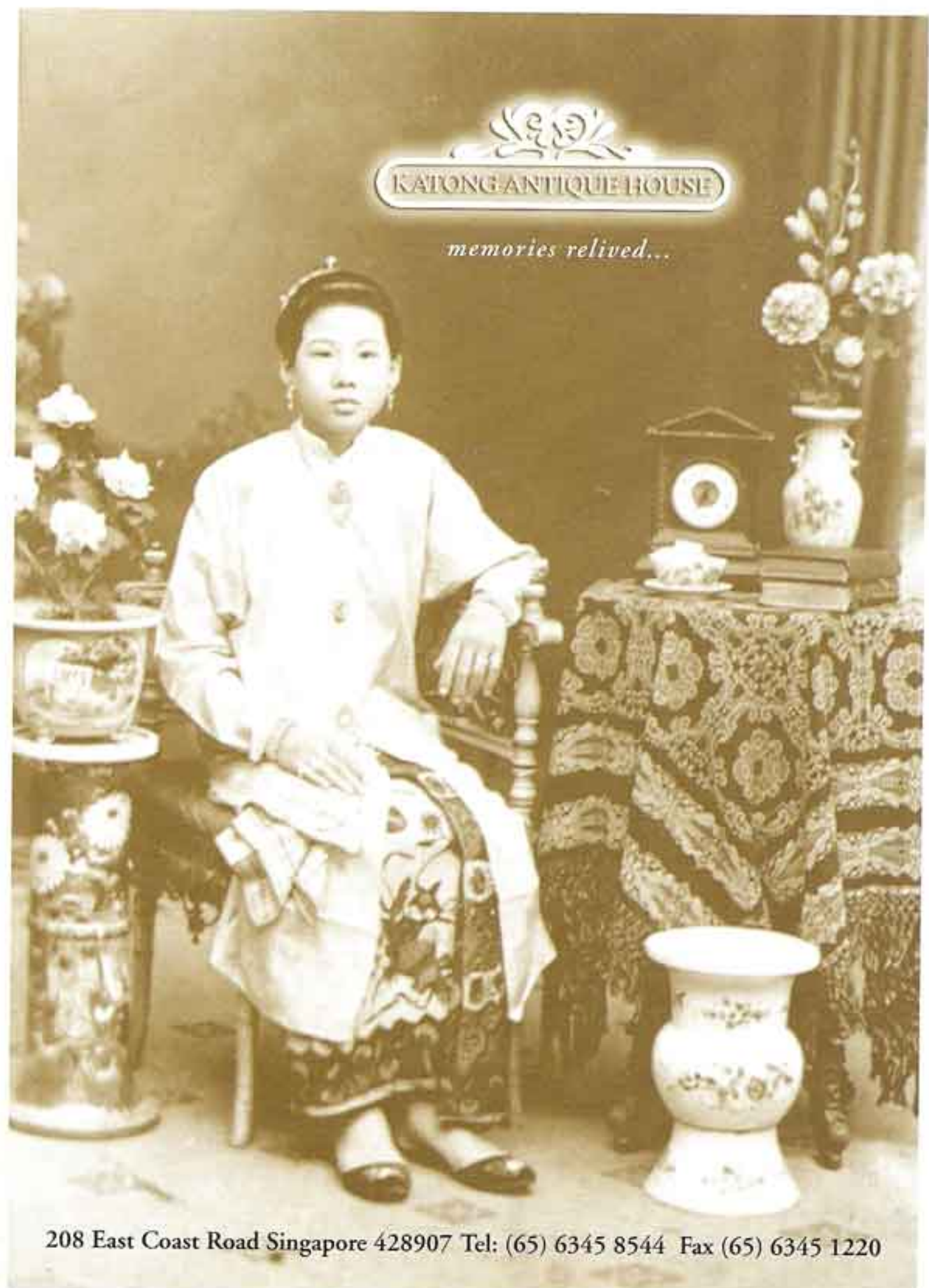
Even the configuration of the restaurant matters: At the front of *Dapur Babah* is a tea and coffee bar, possibly where the housemasters used to live and entertain their family friends and guests. It is elegantly decorated with the photos of the Babah families; a giant black and white painted photo of a concubine of Oei Tiong Ham, named Angela Oei Tiong Ham; the photos of the *Nyas* (the wives), the mistresses and other family members.

The decor includes a bulky 17th century VOC emblem, a room divider from the Ming Dynasty, and tables and chairs made of swanci wood. The rear of *Dapur Babah* is a semi-open terrace inspired by the Oei kitchen, complete with a kitchen Goddess Protector. ㊦

Dapur Babah is located close to Monas, at Jalan Veteran I no. 18, Central Jakarta.



The authentic setting and decor.



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Nyonya Restaurants Abroad

BY CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER

When abroad, look for Peranakan food! This is the cry of Singaporeans and Malaysians who, when sated on steaks and salads, hunger for spicy laksa lemak or other local treats. Mark your palmtops with these three eating spots in the United States and Indonesia.

NEW YORK

Nyonya Malaysian Cuisine

194 Grand Street, New York, NY 10013

Tel: 212-3343669

On a recent trip to New York, I called on resident Andrew Lee for dinner. A truly hospitable friend, he suggested **Nyonya** restaurant which is "not as classy as the other one called Penang, but recommendable." Andrew, a packaging designer for companies such as Estee Lauder, is the youngest son of the president of our association and brother of our editor Peter.

I was early and secured a table for six as it was on a first-come first-served basis, meals to be paid in cash. While waiting at the crammed entrance, I surveyed the restaurant. There was not even an attempt at decoration. I won't even try to describe the *rojak* of bamboo and exposed brick wall clashing with wallpaper.

The Malaysian owner was not present. He needn't be at the rate the tables were filled up at the next available space. All the bustle under the watchful eye of a Malaysian-sounding cashier manning an old-fashioned cash register.

When we were finally assembled, we immediately placed our orders for drinks above the din. There were soya bean with grass jelly, soya bean milk, fresh coconut drink, Malaysian ice tea and coffee and the assorted fruit juices.

Desserts included *pulut hitam*, *buboh chacha*, *chendol*, ginkgo nuts with barley and ABC (shaved ice with red bean, corn, palm seeds, jelly and red rose syrup) or ice *kachang* to us. Hmm, promising.

The smell of *sambal tumis* and grilled satay mingled with the aroma of fried garlic and *taucheo*. The Hainanese chicken rice was fragrant and creamy. The *roti canai* came as a double and was thankfully not oily. The baby oyster omelette was a treat with lots of oysters though not fried with the starch batter. The seafood *tom yam* soup had the expected hot and sour flavour. Alas, neither

the *asam* fish head nor the chicken feet with Chinese mushroom were available.

The menu lists 37 seafood dishes, 18 for fried noodles, 14 for noodles in soup and 21 for appetizers alone. Another 71 were under assorted headings. Not counting the beverages and desserts. Nyonya restaurant might as well be called Kitchens of Southeast Asia.

To each his own *sedap*!

Other Malaysian or peranakan restaurants listed in New York City:

- **Baba** Malaysian 53 Bayard St. in Chinatown
- **Penang** 109 Spring Street
- **Penang Malaysian** 240 Columbus Ave., Corner of 71st St. NY, NY 10023 Tel: 212-7698889
- **Penang** 1596 Second Avenue.

LOS ANGELES

Nonya Peranakan Restaurant

61 N. Raymond Ave. (corner of Raymond Ave and Union St)

Old Town Pasadena

(626) 583-8398

Los Angeles' first Peranakan restaurant and bar was started by restaurateur Simon Tong with executive chef Tony Pat. Sample appetizers are *udang popiah* served with sweet, spicy chili-lime sauce; *bergadil ikan jagong* (salmon-corn croquettes) *Lab kai* is spicy seasoned ground chicken served with soybean sauce in lettuce cups.

Main dishes listed include *ikan panggang* in turmeric and tamarind-spiced marinade grilled in banana leaves and served with pickled vegetables, *udang goreng asam* and *gulai ikan*, which is halibut in a spicy, silky coconut sauce with roasted mixed vegetables. Others: *ayam selaseh*, stir-fried chicken with fresh basil; nonya soya chicken stir-fried with lemongrass, ginger and spring onions; and *itik petis*, which is sliced sauteed duck breast drizzled with black shrimp paste sauce.

Lembu lengkuas and *lembu daun limau perut* also

appear on the menu. Salads include mangga ikan, salad *kacang panjang* and asparagus lightly dressed with lime and garlic vinaigrette. Also available: nonya fried rice, *mee goreng* and *hokkien mee*.

(Information excerpted from a review by Debra Jorgensen in a local US newspaper).

JAKARTA

Kedai Tiga Nyonya,

Jalan MT Haryono Kav 8,
South Jakarta.

The two-storey **Kedai Tiga Nyonya**, with a Batavian Peranakan setting, serves ethnic Chinese Peranakan food (a mix of Chinese food and Indonesian food, with its own distinctive taste).

The decor is reminiscent of the 1900s. On one floor, the walls are decorated with lotus and tiger frescoes and reproductions of antique photographs. Another floor has an antique door, Chinese-style cabinets and octagonal tables. An altar table doubles up to display antique jars containing cream cakes, *kerupuk* and other snacks. Lamps are stylishly encased in bird cages.

House specialties include the *Ikan Bakar 3 Nyonya*, a very tasty grilled mackerel served with *sambel petis* (a chili paste) and *dabu-dabu*. The *Asam Asam Iga* is a refreshing beef soup, guaranteed to make your tongue dance. *Soka Salad Mangga* is a salad with crab topping. Dessert includes banana (*pisang gencet*, *pisang baker*).

**Readers, why don't you share
your discoveries of good nyonya
eateries away from home
with us. Your contributions
are most welcomed!
Send your articles to
enquiries@peranakan.org.sg**

NATIVITY NONYAS Desmond Sim Takes On Icons

BY PETER LEE

Desmond Sim draws from the visual vocabulary of both the High Renaissance and Chinese iconography to articulate his own sense of Peranakan and Singaporean history and identity in his new show, *Nativity Nonyas & Other Uncommon Icons* at Utterly Art from 18 to 28 November. This type of appropriation, although not new (Vietnamese modern master Le Pho's versions of *ao dai* clad Madonnas, and Jimmy Ong's deity-like figures and titles come to mind), is nevertheless part of an ongoing and relevant dialogue in Singapore and the region, on the power of ubiquitous symbols in a diverse, confusing world. Drawing on the language of the past, he makes exuberant statements about contemporary life in Singapore, and the constant friction between tradition and modernity. Sim examines these local and global issues with irony, humour, colour and pathos.

Utterly Art is at 208, South Bridge Road, #02-01, Singapore 058757.
Tel: 6226 2605. Email: utterlyart@pacific.net.sg



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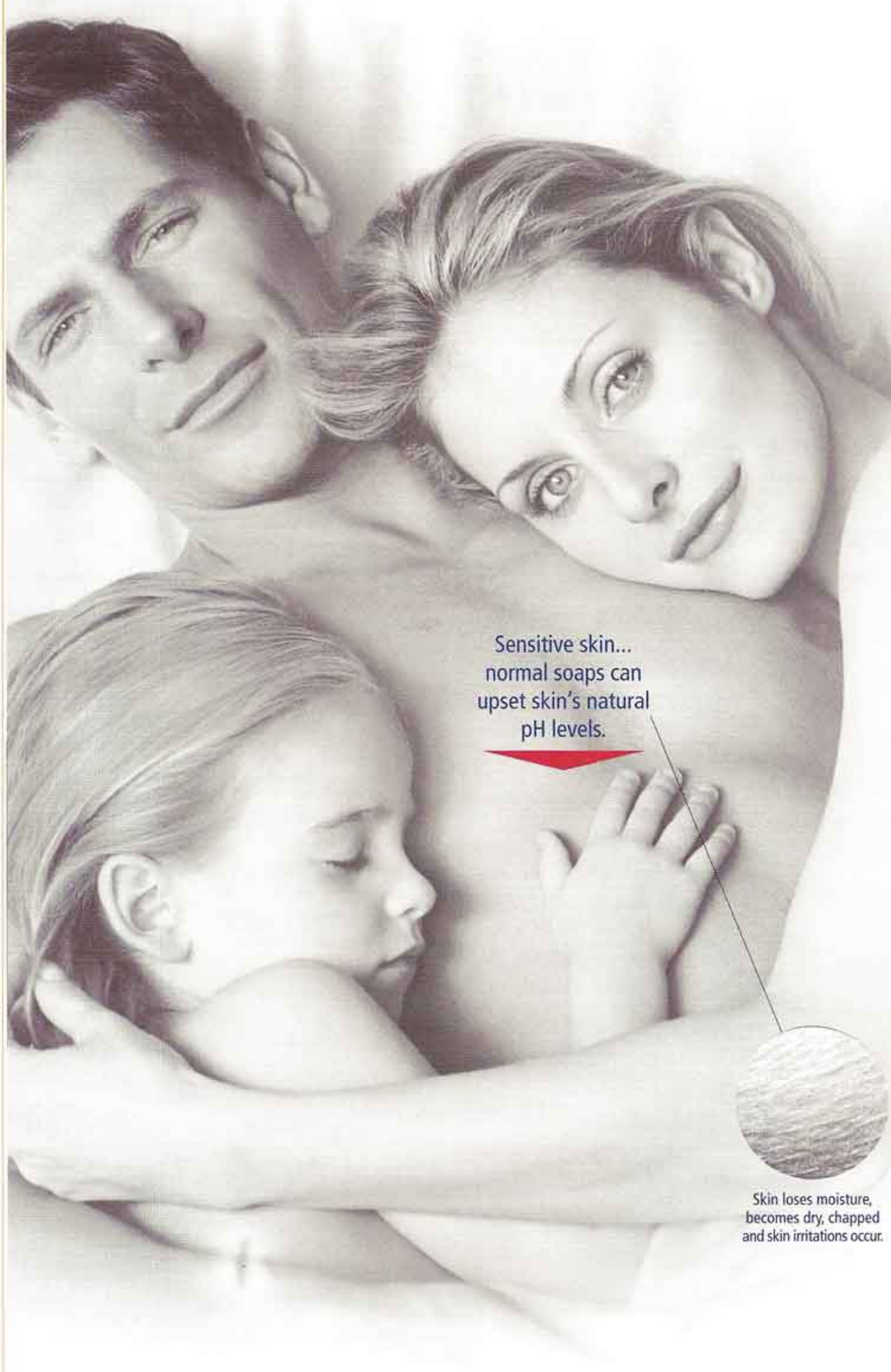
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DUNMAN VIEW



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From the landscaped poolside, cosy interiors to the comprehensive recreational facilities, Dunman View makes a wonderful home to rest, relax and rejuvenate. Take a dip in the swimming pool or sweat it out in the steam room after a busy day. Dunman View has a comprehensive selection of facilities for the young and old: a jacuzzi, children's play area, a multi-purpose hall, a gymnasium and a home theatre room. Each home is built with quality finishes and fittings that present the perfect balance of quality, aesthetics and functionality. The dual tower development has 148 units of two-, three-, and four-bedroom apartments.

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Visit Dunman View showflat at the junction of Dunman Road and Haig Road. Open daily from 9 am to 6 pm. Call 6747 3423 for more information.

Models at
Peranakan
Splendour

PASAR BABA

The Peranakan marketplace

BY PETER LEE

Rumah Bebe
facade (left)
and front hall
(below).

Rumah Bebe marked its first anniversary in September 2004. Its previous incarnation, Bebe's Niche, first opened in 1999 and became popular with a new breed of Nyonyas who became fascinated with owner Bebe Seet's presentation of fine, contemporary sarong kebaya and her exquisite beadwork. The opening last year on 29 September coincided with one of the travel industry's biggest international events, the PATA convention. Over one hundred delegates visited the shop. In April, Bebe, celebrated 10 years of her active promotion of beadwork with a month-long series of talks and cooking demonstrations at her new premises. Bebe spoke on her beads, Eric Tay shared his expertise on Nyonya porcelain, and cookbook writer Tan Gek Suan demonstrated some classic recipes. These events were well attended by not only guests but also by the public.

At the moment Bebe has to deal with sometimes up to 80 visitors a day, who tour the shop and house. Rumah Bebe is set up as a traditional Peranakan house. Some highlights include a magnificent carved brown and gold 'wall screen' separating the front hall from the back, as well as a wonderful boudoir laid out with embroidery, beadwork and lace.

Tours of Rumah Bebe are free, and for a small fee of \$6, longan tea and Nyonya kueh will be served (with at least a day's notice). Beadwork classes are priced at \$250 to \$300 for four lessons over three months.

On 23 October, **Katong Antique House** and Apex Club of Singapore (Radin Mas) presented Peranakan Splendour to raise funds for the many welfare centres run by Apex. The charity dinner at the Singapore Swimming Club was well attended and the audiences were spellbound by the fashion show of rare sarong kebaya, and entertainment by the Peranakan Rhapsody choir and the Baba Band. A new book was also launched that evening, *Timeless Peranakan Legacy*, showcasing the sarong kebaya collection of Katong Antique House. Volunteers from Apex Club put the book together. A set of 36 postcards was also launched, presenting a glorious spectrum of Peranakan material culture from the Katong Antique House collection. 🌟

KRIS DECOR

(supplier of pretty Nyonya porcelains)

Christine Ong



(fine repros from China)

295 Bedok South Avenue 3, Bedok Court.
Tel: 6449 9632 Fax: 6448 2326

NOTICEBOARD

NEW MEMBERS WELCOME!

Life members

1. Mr Alex Chen
2. Mrs Maggie Koh Nee Wee
3. Mr Lee Hock Soon
Christopher

Associate members

1. Mr Ong Sek Pek
2. Mr Lambert Yeo

*The Peranakan Association
is now 1,768-strong.
We encourage you to invite
family and friends to join, and
we hope that more young
Peranakans will come forward
to further the interests of our
heritage and culture.*

Festive Greetings

Warmest wishes
from *The Peranakan*
to all members,
friends and associates
for the festive season
and all the best for the
New Year of the
Rooster

D&D acknowledgements

Java Jive Dinner & Dance Organising Committee:

Chairman: Bebe Seet

Members: John Lee, Lim Geok Huay, Edmond Neoh-Khoo,
Christine Ong, Gavin Ooi, Alvin Yapp & Monica Yeo-Alsagoff

Guest singers: Francis Hogan, Terry Lim, William Tan

MCs: Alvin Yapp & Ann Tay

Volunteers: Philip Chia, Mark Koh, Jessie Chia, Jacky Pereira

Corsages: Stephanie Tan

Skit

Script: Gavin Ooi

Director: Gilbert Yap

Performers: Francis Hogan, Gilbert Yap,

Mabel Long, Mark Koh, Irene Ooi

The Peranakan Voices: Anne Chia, Francis Chia,

Peggy Chua, Arthur D1Castro,

Patrick Huang, Albert Koh, Angeline Kong, Shirley Kua,

Karen Lim, Mabel Long, Patrick Ng, Ruby Ng, Veronica Ong,

Irene Ooi, Irene Poh, Rinchen Sangpo, Kelvyn Saw,

Gina Sim, Shirley Tay, Gilbert Yap

Guest Vocal group: Vocaluptious

Music Band: Melodians

Traditional Keronchong Band: Setya Hati Band, Jogjakarta

The Peranakan Association thanks

all organisations, members and friends for supporting this event
all volunteers and guest performers for making the evening a
success and the following sponsors for their generous prizes:

Ang Eng Baju Kebaya

AsiaPac Books

Bellissima Nails Pte Ltd

BIN house Indonesian Creation

The Blue Ginger

Business Tourism and Travel

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Emirates Airlines

Estee Lauder

Eucerin

House of Cheongsam

Mrs Janet Liok

Katong Antique House

The Link

Missy B

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THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE