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YEAR
OF THE
Roost

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EDITORIAL

Year of the Rooster

The new year begins with a huge flurry of Peranakan events, and what better proof of the revival of interest in our culture! We have four museum and gallery exhibitions in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and a theatre production just for the first three months of the year! What a wonderful way to welcome the Year of the Rooster. (Please see *what's on* in the back page).

This year we will host the 18th Baba Convention in Singapore, and the association's committee is working hard to prepare an exciting programme of events in several areas of culture, art and entertainment. More details will be announced in due course.

Recently a very knowledgeable member of our association has corrected a fallacy presented in the newsletter on a botanical matter. In the article 'Oey are family' (october-december 2004), the dried roots used to scent batiks and keep insects at bay are described as being derived from the sandalwood tree. This kind reader has informed us it is in fact from a species of grass that looks like *lallang* called *vetiveria zizanioides*. The scent vetiver is extracted from this plant. She also informs us that it is used extensively in Thailand and other places for erosion control because the root system is wide and deep. The Malay and Javanese name is *narwastu* (the Javanese also call it *narasetu*).

With regard to the article on *buah keluak* in the same issue, she has kindly pointed out that there is another fine specimen of the tree in the gateway of the Singapore History Museum at the corner next to the Wesley Methodist Church.

In 'Treasures of the sea — gerago, blachan and more' (July-September 2004), *gerago* is described as krill, which is corroborated by the new Eurasian heritage dictionary. However, our informed member explains that *udang geragau* (as it is spelt in Malay) is in fact not the same as krill, which is a general term for about eighty five species of open-ocean shrimp-like crustaceans, commonly found in the Antarctic. Our *grago* is caught in the Straits of Malacca, and according to R.O. Winstedt's old *An Unabridged Malay-English dictionary*, belongs to the *mysis* family of shrimp.

This issue, we present to you a typically Peranakan medley of topics — from Robert Yeo's insight into old photographs, and Noreen Chan's revelations of some unusual family recipes, to reports of the Peranakan events of the year (our Gala Annual Dinner and the Baba Convention in Malacca last november and december). We also hope you enjoy the cover image, which is a detail of a rather untypical *kain panjang* with repeated motifs of roosters (courtesy of Mrs Elizabeth Lee).

Perhaps it would be appropriate to end here with a new *pantun* written by an esteemed and younger Malaccan member of our association, Baba Cedric Tan.

*Angkim buah kat mangkok lemo
Jangan lupa pisang tebu
Sohjah tangan jari sepuluh
Kasi selamat taon baru*

*Gantung teng pasang chye kee
Samboi taon kat tengah pintu
Mintak tuan allah murahkan jerki
Panjangkan umur sehat slalu*

*Hidopkan bara bakair stanggi
Pasang lilin lagu seroni
Sedara sobat berkumpul lagi
Makan minom bersuka hati*

The Peranakan wishes all members and readers a happy and healthy Rooster New Year!

Peter Lee

CONTENTS

2	So Little Time!
6	Interrogating Photographs
10	Jolly Jolly Java Jive!
12	Bibik Sue
14	Dalam Dapur
16	Baba Convention
17	Noticeboard

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Yo Nonya!

SO LITTLE TIME!

Our youth soulsearch for a future

Heather Ong

***Yahoogroups Forum
Members: 241***

***Created:
Sep 18, 2000***

Yahoo!

Yo!

Babas and nyonyas of our generation now lead extremely stressful lives, typical of most young Singaporean workers. Project deadlines, after-hours-career-related continuing education classes,

family commitments, friends, exercise and entertainment all clamour for our time and attention. It is no wonder, then, that few actually find the time to attend the activities organised specially for Peranakan youth.

Fortunately, the yahoogroups forum has proven to be a popular way for us to “meet” in cyberspace. I notice that many of the messages are posted late at night or even in the wee hours of the morning. Perhaps it’s only then that we can snatch a moment to discuss issues, ask for advice, or voice our thoughts, hopes and fears about our beloved Peranakan culture.

In recent months, the focus of discussion has shifted from favourite food places to soul-searching issues relating to our identity, our language and our past. Active participants in the forum include Peter, Cedric, Noreen, Norman & Cai. Read the gist of some stimulating exchanges on the next page.

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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.

Just who is a Peranakan?

Hi,

Just a tempat for cakap-lah, sharing of best places to makan, and whatever else you might want to write.

Tapi just don't be too nakal that's all ! ;P

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/peranakan>

Is he or she the product of a mixed marriage between Chinese and Malays?

"No!" We discovered our roots and happily acknowledge that the Peranakan culture drew its influence from a diverse range of cultures. Hundreds of years ago, the great trade & commerce routes spanned from China and Japan to Africa. People of all races met along the regional trading posts and the Peranakan culture preserved much of the lost heritage & memory.

Being a Peranakan is also more than just the physical heritage. One has to practise the culture and etiquette, and in today's context, adapt the old ways to be relevant to our generation.

Our history therefore, is not written in black or white but in wonderful shades of grey. There is no one

specific definition, nor one particular way of life, nor should we make too much distinction between Peranakan *jati* & Peranakan *chelop*. We are a mixed race anyway, so who is 'pure mixed-race' and who is 'mixed mixed-race'? We should be proud to carry the sum of so many cultures, and welcome those who make an effort to learn our ways, our rites and who want to use the characteristic female name "Neo".

This brought us to another thread of discussion: Why do so many Peranakan women have names ending with *Neo*? Peter found out that the suffix *Neo* for girls' names was common in *Fujian* and in overseas *Hokkien* communities from the early 18th century. The Mandarin equivalent is "*niang*", and can mean girl, lady, mother or mother-in-law. It was a common name, especially among the peasant and farming

The beloved '*nyonya*' has its origin in the Portuguese word '*Dona*', meaning lady. '*Embok*' is Javanese, and '*Bibik*' originated from Indian/Persian language.

classes, as the more literary Hokkiens would have chosen flowery and poetic names for their daughters.

The importance of males in the Chinese culture meant that girls were generally excluded from the generational first names that were given to the boys. So, for us overseas Chinese, names ending with *Neo* became the norm because it was probably the simplest way to name a girl. Some were given four character names to denote gentility, like my great grandmother, Tan Teck Kee Neo.

A name like that conjures up the image of a stern matriarch, and in her photograph, she indeed poses with legs apart under her *sarong*, her steely gaze direct at the camera. Why did she not smile?

Almost no one in the old sepia photographs smiled. In the context of East or West, smiles were not often seen in traditional portraiture. For ordinary Peranakans, taking a photograph was a rare treat, to mark a very special occasion. Important events were celebrated with great solemnity, respect and dignity, so brides & grooms, parents and children were reminded not to smile, lest they appear frivolous. In later years, a genuine, heartfelt, soft smile or '*senyum*' was permitted, but definitely not the silly grin of '*sengeh macham kerang busok*' (grinning like a rotten cockle). The Lee Brothers Studio was well known for its photography. Parents would bring their children there for solo shots, which could be

used for matchmaking purposes; friends would gather for a group shot, and families could capture each new addition to the fold.

Amateur photography became a fashionable hobby among some young Peranakan men. They would set up their own darkrooms at home, and splurge on good cameras like Rolleiflex. When commercial 'Brownie cameras' became readily available, many Peranakans were finally able to take their own pictures and snapshots.

For young people who are short of time, I would suggest a visit to the Asian Civilisations Museum at Armenian Street for a crash course in our culture. Read the panel texts, or join the free docent-guided tour, which touches on the history, material culture, and photographs of the Peranakans. It would certainly be a worthwhile visit if it makes you realise that our culture urgently needs active, dynamic young people in order to survive beyond the museum walls.

Do join us as we learn more about our heritage and ourselves. Look out for youth-oriented events in the coming months and share your thoughts with other young Peranakans.

Keep connected by sending an email to:
<peranakan-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>

INTERROGATING PHOTOGRAPHS

*Poet-writer Robert Yeo probes the truths
behind a formal family photograph.*

I acquired this photograph (right) from my maternal third aunt, *Sar Ee* in Hokkien, in one of my New Year visits in the late 1990s. She knew of my interest in old photographs that reveal family history and I asked to see as many of them as she had. She was a little hesitant, fearing, I suppose, that I would stumble on photographs that would divulge more than she was prepared for: aspects of the family she came from, of which she is the third daughter, or bits of her own family history (she, her husband and their four children) which are best concealed from a curious nephew, especially a nephew whom she vaguely knows is some sort of writer.

She brought out two albums containing about 50 photographs, all in black and white or sepia. The one that immediately caught my attention is the one I am now interrogating.

She is sixth from the left and her name is Oon Geok Lian. Left to right, she is the only daughter standing of the four daughters of the matriach, who is my maternal grandmother. And there are two men standing behind. Left to right are my other aunts, *Tua Ee* (eldest aunt), *Ee Chik* (youngest aunt), their mother, *Sar Ee* and my mother, the second daughter. And the man on the right I recognize as their brother, my uncle therefore, an only son that the Japanese took.

But the man standing next to him was not known to me.

Who is he? I asked.

Eh? *Sar Ee* said, in surprise. Obviously she had not set eyes on this photo for some time. Who is he? She repeated my question. She turned to her husband and asked him. He looked and could not tell.

She peered again and then it came to her. Oh yes, he is, what's his name, *KB*.

But who is this *KB*?, I asked.

Oh, she said slowly, in the grip of difficult recall, he was the person who was interested in your *Tua Ee* but...

What happened? I persisted.

But she found out that he had a mistress and she dropped him, she said.

They must have been on very good terms for him to appear in an intimate family portrait, I said.

Yes, they were, she replied. Your aunt was very sad and disappointed, she pined and you know what happened. Back to the picture. It is a photo of the family of Oon Ee Thiam, my maternal grandfather who lived for many years in Haig Road, but he is absent. His wife, though, is not, and her maiden name was Tan Guat Kee. On the extreme left is their eldest daughter, Joon Lian, more commonly known as Daisy, next Poh Lian, the fourth and youngest daughter who goes by the name Diana (*Bongsu* to the family), then *KB*, Tan Guat Kee, Hock Ann whose English name was Victor, Geok Lian the third daughter who only has her Chinese name but is Molek to the family, and finally Kim Lian, Nancy, the second daughter.

Nancy is my mother.

You know what happened, my *Sar Ee* had said earlier. As I write now, 5 November 2004 at 7.00 pm, the three sisters Nancy, Geok Lian and Diana, are still very much around. In their eighties, the sisters have longevity on their side – except for Aunty Daisy. What happened was that, after the romantic disappointment with *KB*, she was involved with another man. He was an intellectually brilliant person, a scholar who studied in England and was noticed by Tan Cheng Lock, Tan Guat Kee's eldest brother and Daisy's uncle.

Yes, none other than the great man of Malacca, Dato Sir Tan Cheng Lock and my mother's uncle. I will return to him.

As my mother remembers, and her story is corroborated by her sisters, this bright scholar was taken into one of the companies owned by Dato Tan on the understanding that he was eventually to marry Daisy. Apparently, he had a mind of his own, refused the order that went with the job, quit and left Daisy romantically bereft. To this day, the three sisters



maintain that this second disappointment led to the depression which set in and led eventually to her developing breast cancer and dying from it when she was only forty.

Aunt Daisy was well-educated, had a good job as a senior clerk in Qantas, was patrician and independent-minded. That she was the first born, had the equivalent of 'O' levels and secure employment, contributed to her independence. It may also have led to her rejection of KB. In the photo, she is seen as tall and slim, physical attributes which are accentuated by the long cheongsam she wears, her ramrod-straight sitting posture and the length of the cheongsam almost covering her legs. The long collar hides her neck and there is an austere beauty on her face, an austereness that is less apparent in the portrait photo of her. Very likely, the latter picture was taken earlier and the collar of her long cheongsam covers her partially to set off a slightly sharp chin. The formality of Daisy's cheongsam contrasts with the samfoos of her sisters.

This is obviously a studio shot. I am not able to put a date to it nor identify the studio. This pose, this arrangement of the sitting and standing positions with the women in front and the men behind, points to a simplicity of symmetry in a relatively uncluttered interior with a floral carpet, European armchairs and a curtain behind. The seven persons are

dressed in three ways, Nonya, Chinese and Western. At the centre is the mother in *sarong kebaya*, with a set of three *kerosangs* to pin down her *baju* and give her a slim appearance tapering down to her *kasut manek* slippers. Of her daughters, Daisy wears a formal cheongsam while the three daughters wear samfoos. There is another difference – why is Daisy's hair permed but not her sisters? The men sport Western suits, presumably white or light-coloured, with ties.

Except for KB, who is on the verge of a smile, the rest are all unsmiling. It calls for an explanation and I think it may have to do with the absent father. He was supposed to come for this important family event but was either called away or had a row with his wife the previous night or the same day and decided to stay away. If this is true, it would account for the unsmiling faces, and together with his absence, cloud what could have been the perfect family portrait.

In the family photo, Diana, 10 years younger, sits next to her on a double sofa seat with both hands on the side of the antique chair where her mother sits. To the right of the photo stands Geok Lian, also with her hands on the side of the chairs. Nancy sits on a single sofa chair. They make up the front row with their mother. It is worth noticing that their bodies are slightly tilted and they look at the camera at a slight angle,

unlike the men, who make up the second row behind them and who face the camera directly.

The Japanese conquered Singapore on 15 February 1942 and surrendered on 12 September 1945. My uncle Victor was killed during that period, and as I was born on 27 January 1940, I might have glimpsed him as a baby but do not remember him at all. A member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, he was among the first to be rounded up by the Japanese. Auntie Diana remembers that he was given three days, along with other volunteers, to report to the Japanese, and he chose to go on the third day and never returned. Some who went on the first and second days survived but not those who went on the third day. My mother's cousin, Lee Kip Lee, President of the Peranakan Association, who lived in Amber Road, was a great friend of Victor.

The brutality of the Japanese, who occupied Singapore for three and a half years, dealt a double blow to the Oon family of Haig Road by removing not only a member of the family but one who was an only son.

For years, I have wondered how the survivors felt, especially the parents. Did it contribute to the deterioration of the relationship of Grandpa and Grandma? My memory of him was that of a loving, cheerful man but I also heard stories of his infidelity which were legendary. It is said that he learnt his Cantonese horizontally. He apparently had a succession of mistresses, mostly Cantonese.

Auntie Diana told me a story of how she was once dragged by her mother to a house when her father had stayed with one of his many women. Grandma brought the empty *tengkat* which had originally contained food her husband's mistress had sent to her, went to the gate of the offending mistress, yelled at her and her own husband, pointing repeatedly to their youngest daughter, "Can you see, you spineless husband and your prostitute woman, what you are doing? You can see me here, with our daughter, pity her. Who is taking care of us? Not you, you useless lump, all you know is to take care of your shameless women instead of your own family. You only have one family but how many worthless whores do you have? And who is feeding your family? Tell your slut here is the empty *tengkat*. I cursed the food and threw it away. Tell her I don't need this kind of kindness. I can take care of myself. And if your sundal female ever becomes a mother, she can learn what it's like to cook for her husband while he fiddles."

And with that she left the tiered tray of food on the ground while the commotion brought the neighbours out to see what the trouble was about.

Grandpa smoked opium too and one of my earliest surviving memory of him was of him holding me tight like a bolster while he smoked. It must have been in one of the dens in the row of terrace houses opposite the old Roxy cinema in East Coast Road. My second brother Andrew was his favourite bolster. He was unawed by relationship or reputation. That he had married one of the daughters of perhaps the

most prominent *Baba* Chinese family did not impress him. Nor the fact that his brother-in-law, Tan Cheng Lock, was a man of growing political importance and a leader, later to be President of the Malayan Chinese Association.

Tan Cheng Lock provided him with a job in Sime Darby which involved handling company money. But his appetites led him to embezzle money for which he was prosecuted and imprisoned for several years. His family visited him in Outram Prison and my mother remembers that even there, he asked for his opium supply. Presumably the prison authorities were lenient enough to allow him his indulgence.

Perhaps absence, with all its connotations, may sum up an aspect of the life of my grandmother, the second sister of Tan Cheng Lock. In a loving biography of her father, the late Alice Scott-Ross write about him and his sisters:

"Of course, his duty which was expected of him by his parents was to get his sisters married off before he could ever envisage his own marriage. The eldest, of the three girls, who was radiantly lovely was married through a matchmaker to a salaried clerk in a British firm called 'Brinkmann & Co. Ltd' in Singapore. My father was not quite yet established in his rubber-producing industry. Consequently, his first sister's marriage was the best that could be arranged at the time. At that period, to be married into a well-to-do family, both parties must be equally financially well-established. Subsequently followed the marriage of his second sister. But the third sister was the luckiest of the three as she married well, into a wealthy family in Singapore, because by that time my father had been better established, and he was looked upon with more esteem."

Alice Scott-Ross
"Tun Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan, 1990"

What else could she have added about the "second sister", her maternal aunt? That she did not marry well, did not marry money. Undoubtedly, Scott-Ross's bare statement, "Subsequently, followed the marriage of the second sister" sharply contrasts with the detailed approval of the marriages of her two sisters. It tells us as much about the author as it does of her subject; and maybe, she knew of the scandalous ways of her second aunt and did not want to say any more.

One more conclusion may be drawn from this account and that is the undeniable filial responsibility showed by Cheng Lock towards his sisters. This quality in private life, together with his public, political life, is a shining testimony to the greatness of the man. I know that the Haig Road house in which my grandma stayed belonged to him and she stayed there with her family all her life, until her death. In historical Malacca, a major road is named after him, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, and in that road is preserved in mint condition the house he inhabited with his family, including his son, the former long-standing Malaysian Minister for Finance, Tan Siew Sin. The house is a family shrine and a beacon to the enduring legacy of the Peranakan Chinese in Malacca and Singapore.

Robert Yeo welcomes feedback. He can be contacted at robertyeo61@yahoo.com.sg



Jolly-Jolly Java Jive!

Anthony Oei

Our social functions are always jolly and well-attended. The 104th Anniversary and Annual Dinner & Dance at the Meritus Mandarin Ballroom on 10 November 2004 was no exception, with the full house of 740 members and friends enjoying themselves, and colourful batiks, alluring kebayas exuding charm and glamour unique to the Peranakans.

It was truly multi-cultural. The merry evening, graced by President S R Nathan and Mrs Nathan, featured guests from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Jewish community and Singapore's Melaka Chitty community.

"This always makes me feel that our annual event is less a gala dinner than a big, wonderful family reunion," Peranakan Association President Lee Kip Lee was moved to enthuse in his welcome address. He was "incredibly thrilled to see so many people in one room dressed in Peranakan attire, especially the ladies, resplendent in sarong kebayas."

Our premier event of the year was particularly special. It was the night when we reached out and paid tribute to Indonesia for its social and cultural contributions to Singapore. The theme of this Peranakan tribute to Indonesia, *Java Jive!* "encapsulated a rhythmic impression of Indonesia", President Lee explained, and set the tone for the evening's jollity.

Java Jive!, he said, broke new ground in our ongoing pursuit to widen our cultural horizon, in line with the focus "to document and promote our heritage, to

celebrate the great sense of brotherhood we share with so many other communities, and to explore the possibilities of developing new ideas out of this rich store of heritage."

There were compelling reasons for remembering Indonesia. Our connection dates back about 700 years, according to recent archaeological findings. We owe the Peranakans from Java and Sumatra for their significant influence in our lifestyle, dressing, language, music and cuisine.

President Lee put it aptly: "With the distracting blare of global media it is perhaps timely to remind ourselves of the richness and poetry around us and that is part of us. This evening we thus pay tribute to a wonderful country of majestic landscapes, diverse cultures and refined art. Our tribute is a celebration of the senses. This evening we invite you to enjoy the sight, sound, scent, feel and taste of Indonesia."

Needless to say, the glittering ballroom was filled with the soothing strains of *keroncong* music orchestrated by The *Setia Hati* Band from Yogyakarta, and haunting Indonesian folk songs crooned by the band's female vocalists. It was certainly sweet music to the ears and to those of Indonesian origin who have made Singapore their home; it also stirred nostalgia.

Our very own Peranakan Voices and the Melodians from Malacca delivered worthy contributions to the



revelry, pulsating the air with hot Peranakan numbers that kept the evening's tempo up the scales. Guest artistes Christopher Lee, Terry Lim, the Vocaluptuous, Francis Hogan, Gilbert Yap, Irene Ooi, Shirley Tay and Mark Koh further boosted everyone's spirits with their sparkling and humorous performances.

And as is the norm, the dance floor trembled under the multitude of *batik* shirts and *sarong kebaya*s jiving and gyrating to their hearts' content throughout the evening.

Nor can the quality and quantity of the food be faulted. It is an accepted fact, President Lee pointed out in his speech, that preparing genuine Peranakan cuisine is not everyone's forte, and it is therefore not easy to find a hotel that could satisfy our discerning taste buds. But the Meritus Mandarin's chefs managed to acquit themselves well. Actually, it was no surprise, not with Consultant Chef Jolly Wee giving them the finer points of our unique culinary art.

The Organising Committee, the entertainers, musicians, chefs, donors, supporters and others who made the evening's event another jolly and successful party richly deserved our applause.

Beyond *Java Jive!* there was another cause for celebration. This was President Lee's appointment as an honorary member of the Indonesia-Singapore Friendship Association. He had accepted the honour at the invitation of Mr Mochamad S Hidayat, the Indonesian Ambassador to Singapore. The development is certainly significant for it is another breakthrough in our social and cultural link with Indonesia.

In all modesty, one might add that the appointment reflects the Peranakan Association's good standing in the community and the recognition earned for its role in cementing social and cultural relations with the various communities through its many activities.

President Lee's report card says it all: "Over the years, we have made great strides together with our supporters such as the National Heritage Board and the Singapore Tourism Board, in achieving these aims, especially in the museum context and in the performing arts. We have all together helped to make the culture more visible and understood, so much so that now the Peranakan theme is increasingly common in various media (print, television, stage)."

The evening's celebration was also an occasion to remember our progenitors. He said: "Yet with the honour of receiving so much attention for our cultural heritage, what we are actually most proud of are the achievements of our forefathers in the pioneering development of Singapore (in commerce, philanthropy, education and politics) and which continue to inspire us. These are the most priceless and motivating aspects of our heritage."

Members and friends can expect more jolly times in 2005 with "exciting plans" in the pipeline. A major event to note in the diary is the 18th Baba Convention in Singapore at end-2005, which the Association will host.

Already, the Organising Committee members are cracking their brains to ensure that the coming gatherings of the clan are as jolly-jolly as *Java Jive!*

"She's a nyonya! This is a lady who really loves our culture. She has dedicated a lot of her time studying the Baba culture and spreading what she has learnt to younger docents and museum visitors. Her interest has certainly gone beyond the museum to the wider Peranakan community. I would like to say that she has been an inspiration to me and many others."

Randall Se, Assistant Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum

"You take and you must give back."

This is the motto that Briton Sue Williams tries to live by, and how! In the 22 years she lived in Singapore, Sue also did much to advance international awareness of Peranakan culture, researching and then training all nationalities of docents to guide the streams of visitors to our local museums.

Japanese, Europeans, Indians, Americans and over the years, an increasing number of Singaporeans came under her wing to become volunteer docents with the Friends of the Museum. By the time she returned to the UK last November, she had accumulated 4 boxfuls of cuttings and research papers to assist in guiding. "The Friends was my real interest. In the early 80's it was very difficult for expat wives to work. So we had to make a life for ourselves while our husbands were travelling."

Sue had little problem. After cutting her teeth in various study groups with the Friends, she undertook the 6-month training to become a docent in the old National Museum in 1990. "At that time there was one Straits Chinese gallery, rather dark and dreary, but featuring the same wedding bed which is now resplendent in Armenian Street - a good place to tell visitors about the fascinating rituals of an old-fashioned Peranakan wedding."

"In the early '90s the landmark exhibition 'Gilding the Phoenix', curated by Edmond Chin, gave us a fabulous display of *nyonya* costume and jewellery to guide. I also attended my first annual Peranakan convention at the National Museum with 3 other expat wives. That really got me going and I decided to focus on researching Peranakan culture so that I could pass it on to the annual intake of new trainees."

Sue recalled that when the Asian Civilisations Museum opened in 1997 at Armenian Street, the overall theme was Chinese history and culture with some exciting collections from Hong Kong. Three years later however, the whole of the second floor was given over to 'The Peranakan Legacy' to mark the centenary of the Peranakan Association. "It was at that opening that the President, Lee Kip Lee, invited me to become an honorary member of the Association" said Sue proudly.

"What fascinates me is that the Peranakans are a mixture. The Straits culture came about because of trade and people trying to intermingle with another population. The Peranakans are part of the Chinese diaspora and the whole point of the diaspora is that identity has to keep on changing."

Like the Charles Dickens character Topsy, who 'just grewed', the Peranakans grow by reinventing themselves all the time. They will survive because they move with the times, reconstructing their identity," Sue firmly believes.

At her last lecture in November, she finished off as usual with a story about *manek potong*. "They are made from long glass tubes, cut into tiny beads and put into drums with sand to be polished. A small percentage come out of the drums not perfectly rounded, that is faceted. It is these faceted beads which give the sparkle to the fine pieces of *nyonya* embroidery. I like to think the Peranakans add a similar glitter to the Singaporean tapestry because they are such vibrant people. They are not simply Chinese, they love to sing and dance," she said with a smile.

BIBIK SUE



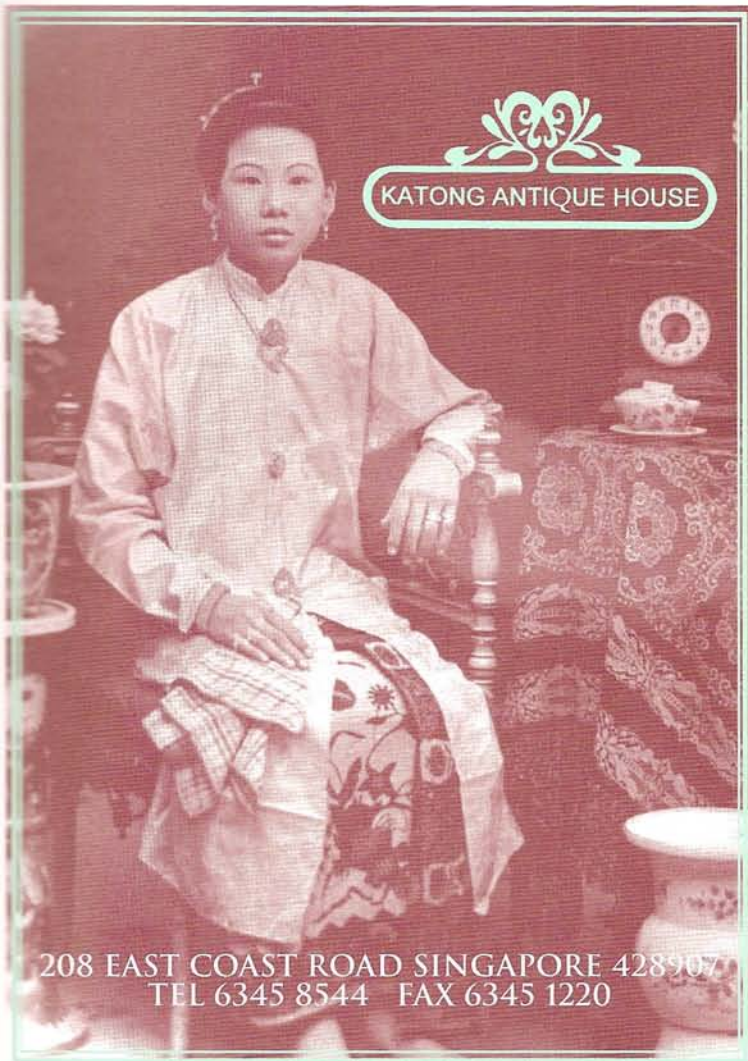
Sue receiving her "Friend of the Arts" award in 1999.



Sue (3rd from left) and docent Friends at a textile exhibition opening at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Armenian Street.

When her husband passed away suddenly in 2001, Sue stayed on a visit pass for 3 more years continuing to lecture and mentor docent trainees. Last November her younger son, Peter, now 30, moved to work in London and Sue is now beginning a new life in Norwich. "The nice part of being a Friend is that I have friends all over the world."

Sue can be contacted at misu@pacific.net.sg



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Mak Spylan

DALAM DAPUR

Potluck with a difference

Noreen Chan

Chinese New Year is a time for the family to gather – sometimes from different countries – to celebrate the values that bind us. Gone are the days when the *patriach* or *matriach*'s home could rally a small army of servants and helpers to whip up the festive dishes that would make up the *tok panjang*. There seems to be an increasing trend towards having the reunion dinner in restaurants or, if held at home, a good compromise is to have it potluck, where each family member contributes a specialty dish.

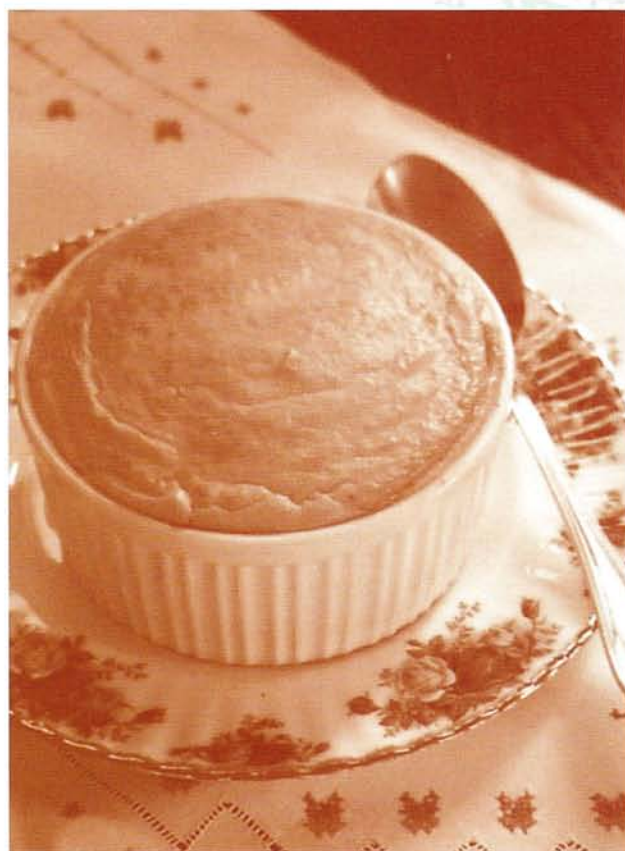
Some months ago, to celebrate the visit of my mother's cousin Uncle CL from Hawaii, we threw a potluck party. The theme was very specific. Every dish had to be *lauk dulu kala*, that is, an old family recipe. The happy occasion saw four generations catching up on old times, looking through photograph albums and tucking into a grand spread.

The menu featured family favourites like chicken curry, curry devil, *ayam tomato* (chicken braised in tomato soup), "crocodile" or *bergedel panggang* (a kind of minced pork meatloaf), a potato-topped chicken pie called *pastal*, *ayam rempah goring*, and *kachang boncis masak lemak* (French bean salad enriched with coconut milk).

With the dishes came many stories; at least half of the recipes were from my late great-grandaunt, whom we called Ee Poh Choh. She was called Lim Imm Neo, but her true name is unknown, for you see, she was sold to my great-great-grandfather Lim Tua Tow. He used to travel to China for business and to visit his home village, and on return from one of these trips he brought this girl, probably eight or nine years old, as a companion for his own daughter.

She grew up in a house on Neil Road, where my own grandmother was born and where she spent her early years. I was told that her pet name of Ham Seow came from the fragrant flower which grew in the garden. Although her life was not easy, she was adopted into the family and especially after the untimely death of my *Tua Ee*, she took care of the five orphaned children and remained with the family until she herself passed away at a ripe old age. Poh Choh Ham was a very good cook and her memory is preserved in the recipes that have passed down the generations.

So the next time you cook, or tuck into, an old family favourite, try to learn about who this dish is associated with, and what he/she was like. By cooking and enjoying the food, a new generation is carrying on the culinary traditions; by understanding the history and the stories of the people who were involved, we imbibe not just flavours and sensations, but the rich and complex taste tapestry of a thousand memories.



Mak Spylan's excellent Pastel - A true "East meets West" dish.

Recipes

Ayam Tomato (from a recipe of Poh Cho Ham Seow)

This recipe dates back from pre-war days, when my great-grandfather Chia Keng Tye used to go bird-shooting with his friends in the Sennett estate area. His friend Mr KH Tan liked to prepare snipe by wrapping the small birds in ham and cabbage, and braising them in tomato soup. It was soon adapted for chicken.

To make this dish, braise chicken pieces, pieces of ham and cabbage in Heinz Cream of Tomato soup (the brand is very specific, no other will give the same flavour).

Pastal (from a recipe by my grandmother's maternal grandmother, also known as Mak Spylan as she lived in Blair Road, near Sepoy Lines)

This is a true "East meets West" dish, where a chicken stew rich with the fragrance of the spice islands is topped with mashed potato. I suspect, but cannot confirm, that it has a Dutch-Indonesian origin. My great-great-grandmother's family was from Indonesia.

1 chicken, 1 kati potatoes, few leaves cabbage (optional), 4 eggs (2 separated, 2 hard boiled), 1 small tin button mushrooms, cup green peas, 3 oz butter, 1 oz tang hoon (glass noodles) soak in cold water, 6 oz carrots diced.

Rempah : 1 tsp pepper, 8 bawang merah or 2 big onions pound fine.

Spice bag : 2 cloves, 1 small piece nutmeg, 1 star anise, 2 cardamom, 1 cinnamon stick.

Method

Boil chicken in water with spice bag until tender, separate the flesh and cut into small pieces. Pound the bones and put back into the stock, strain.

Boil and mash the potatoes with 1 oz of butter and 2 egg whites, tsp grated nutmeg and pepper.

Fry rempah till brown, pour in the stock, add 2 tsp salt (or to taste), pinch sugar and a little soya sauce for colour, let boil. Add meat, cabbage leaves (if using), tang hoon, mushrooms, carrots and peas. A little cornflour can be added to thicken the stock.

When done, put in a pie dish and arrange the hard boiled egg on top, cut into pieces. Cover evenly with mashed potatoes, and spread a mixture of butter and 2 beaten egg yolks on top. Bake in oven 400-500°F (about 200°C)

Bergedel Panggang or "Crocodile" (an Ong family favourite from a recipe by Poh Cho Ham Seow)

Butter the inside of a Pyrex dish. Soak a slice of bread in water and squeeze dry. Mix together (as for a meatloaf) 300g minced pork, 2 tablespoons butter, bread, ground onions, teaspoon ground cinnamon, salt and pepper to taste. Press evenly into the baking dish, brush the top with butter and beaten egg and bake in moderate oven until done (the top will be golden and the meat slightly pulled away from the sides).

Add a dash of Worcestershire sauce and accompany with a cucumber salad. To make the salad, peel cucumber and slice very finely. Add salt to draw out the water. Squeeze dry and mix with finely sliced onions, vinegar and sugar. Ideal for picnics.

Kachang Boncis Masak Lemak (from a recipe by my grandmother Mdm Elsie Chia)

French beans (*kachang boncis*), sliced on the diagonal

Coconut cream

Bawang putih (garlic), finely sliced

Bawang merah (shallots), finely sliced

Serai (lemon grass) sliced

Belachan, mixed to a paste

Prawns (small)

Taukwa, diced, lightly fried and set aside

Fry the garlic and shallots until crisp, set aside.

Tumis the serai and belachan sampay wangi, masak beans, balek balek, [sauté the lemongrass and belachan until fragrant, add the beans, stir well] add prawns and a little water. Simmer until done. When almost cooked, add coconut milk and half the fried ingredients. Just before serving, scatter the other half on top as garnish. Can be prepared a few hours ahead of time and served cold as a salad.



The 17th Baba Convention, Malacca

Chan Eng Thai

The 17th Baba Convention was held in Malacca, the birth place of the Peranakan community, from 10 to 12 December 2004.

The Peranakan Association of Singapore was represented by about a 100-strong delegation led by our President Lee Kip Lee, his two Vice-Presidents, Ong Poh Neo and Peter Wee, and our erstwhile secretary Lim Geok Huay.

My journey to the Convention began

on 10 December morning when my family and I got "champak" with our bags at the Second Link to fend for ourselves, amidst the confusion of who were to board the first or second bus. However, as the saying goes:-

*"Pokok serunai tanam di Melaka
Jerneh di bawak ke Singapura,
Kalau rezeki mesti ada,
Kita pasti sampai ke sana,"*

And so we negotiated a ride with an Indian bus driver who dropped us at the doorstep of the convention hotel, City Bayview. It looked like a casualty of the Iraqi conflict, all boarded up to the third level. Delegates were ushered in from a "belakang" entrance serviced by a single lift!

The welcome dinner at Pay Teck Hall was a respite. The *Baba Melaka* hospitality was beyond the norm; the delicious cuisine was typical *lauk orang chiah*, replete with *babi panggang*. What else to cap a fine evening but *ronggeng* and *joget*, of course!

The next morning, Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Ali Rustam officially opened the convention by declaring that the Peranakan culture would become an ongoing feature in Melaka because of its appeal to tourism. While happy to hear this, delegates expressed the need for an impetus and sustained pace to developing the Peranakan culture in order to remain relevant to the community itself.

Melaka's Kenny Chan spoke on the significance of the Cheng Beng Festival and Michael Cheah talked about the *Kueh Bulan* Festival of the Penang Babas. Our own Thomas Tan moderated the Peranakan Association's video, "We Peranakans", which earned rapturous applause.

And so, the journey of the Peranakan continues:

*"Sungei Huang Ho di Negri Cina
Umbak tolak kapal ke negri Melaka,
Bibik Baba di seluru durnia,
Bersatu padu semangat bersama"*

The next Baba Convention will be held in Singapore, in November 2005.



WHAT'S ON

Peranakan II - The Humble Form

28 January to 6 February 2005

NAFA Gallery, Bencoolen Street

The World of The Peranakan — Baba Nyonya Heritage of Southeast Asia

4 February – 3 April 2005

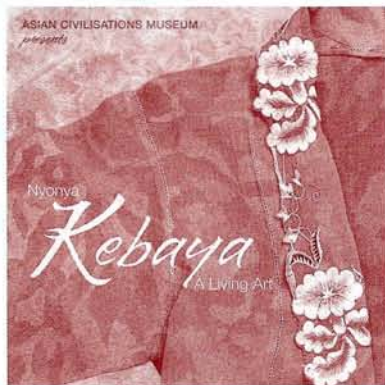
Gallery 2, Department of Museums and Antiquities, Jalan Damansara, Kuala Lumpur

Telephone: +603 2282 6255. Website: www.jma.gov.my

This exhibition examines the rich and diversified material cultures of the Baba & Nyonya and the social and cultural impact on Malaysian society.

Programme includes a symposium on 3 February with papers presented by Neil Khor, Seah Bee Leng, Myra Sidharta, Leo Suryadinata, Tan Chee Beng, Ding Choo Ming.

Twenty one Singapore artists examine and interpret the Peranakan heritage through photography, sculpture, painting, installation. A vibrant, provocative and unconventional exploration of a heritage that is being increasingly seen as Singaporean.



Nyonya Kebaya A Living Art

9 March to 29 May 2005

ACM Empress Place

Datin Paduka Seri Endon Mahmood's collection of exquisite kebayas will finally be shown in Singapore at the ACM at Empress Place (NB: NOT at Armenian Street) after its long run in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu. The gala opening on 26 April will be graced by the presence of Datin Paduka Seri Endon and Ms Ho Ching.

Programme include:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 17 & 18 March | Baba & Nyonya Children's Camp |
| 19 March | Baba & Nyonya Family Day |
| 1 April | Tour of exhibition conducted by Peter Wee. \$10 per participant. Limited to 15 participants only. 7-8pm |
| 13 April | 'Tracing Five Centuries of an Early International Style'. A talk by Association Committee Member Peter Lee. 7-8.30pm |
| 24 April | ACM Open House. Food & Craft Fair |
| 11 May | 'From My Mother's Wardrobe — Peranakan Women's Adornment'. A talk by Peter Wee, Association First Vice President. 7-8.30pm |

Egg-stra Baba - A Peranakan Easter

New Paintings by Desmond Sim

17 March to 3 April 2005

Utterly Art, Level 2, 208 South Bridge Road

Telephone: 62262605

Desmond Sim in his inimitable fashion explores all the symbolism and associations of the egg in Peranakan culture - from its presence in birthday mee sua, to Easter, and childhood fascinations with hatching eggs.

Bibiks in Parliament

18 to 20 March 2005

Chambers, The Arts House, \$38 & \$28.

Telephone: 6332 6919

The Arts House celebrates its first anniversary and part of the festival includes this inaugural production by The Main Wayang Company, Singapore's newest Peranakan theatre group. A montage of original skits, songs, dances and a fashion show, this production will showcase Peranakan culture with all its exuberance and dilemmas of today. Main Wayang is the brainchild of our former committee member in charge of cultural development, Baba Richard Tan.

NOTICEBOARD

New Members

Welcome!

1. Mrs Chang-Pang Jenny
2. Ms Ch'ng Kim See
3. Mr Hartung Richard L
4. Mrs Ng Joo Ee
5. Mr Okkie Tanupradja
6. Ms Teh Guek Ngor Engelin
7. Ms Sharon Wee

Deceased:

1. Mr Wee Kok Beng William
2. Mr Khoo Teng Soon (T.S.Khoo)

Fellow Peranakan and veteran newspaperman T S Khoo was legendary for his sharp news sense and was once a one-man newspaper production house after the Second World War! The ACS alumni is best remembered not only for his journalistic achievements but also for his generous, gregarious nature.

The Peranakan Association is now 1,773 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.

Annual General Meeting

The 105th AGM of The Peranakan Association
2.30 pm, Saturday 19 March 2005
Room 603, level 6
RELC Building
30 Orange Grove Road
Singapore 258352.



THE
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